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Oral history interview with Merton D.
Simpson, 1968 November

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Transcript

Interview

AM: AL MURRAY

MS: MERTON SIMPSON

AM: The idea is really, you know, observations on life and art, your essential experience and not necessarily a technical discussion of how experience gets into art but really a juxtaposition, that is, the sensibility of an artist operating on experience. You're talking about your childhood, you're talking about other things and I'll try to lead with questions but you're supposed to do most of the talking. It's not a dialogue. It's really a merged monologue and you'll do the talking as much as possible. Okay?

MS: You want to talk about Charleston [South Carolina], I guess?

AM: Yes.

MS: I was born in Charleston in 1928. And I grew up mainly around musicians pretty much because since I was about eight or nine years old I've always been interested in music. I got involved quite a bit with the Jenkins Orphanage of Charleston. A lot of good musicians came out of that group. That's the old Diamond Jenkins home, people like Cat Anderson, Pinkett, Freddy Green Basie, these are all alumni of Jenkins. Like I said, it was a home for sort of delinquent boys but everybody wanted to go there just because it was such a good place to get involved with music. Charleston was at that time a kind of musical center for jazz. Very much in the sense that we think of a place like Kansas City with Basie and that kind of fellow. Along with the jazz thing and the music bit I got involved in painting; I was always sketching, doing cartoons, the Mickey Mouse and the Dick Tracy bit. Oh, one thing I should mention is that I spent most of my early childhood in a hospital.

AM: Oh, yes?

MS: I got diphtheria when there was no cure for it.

AM: How old were you then?

MS: I guess I was about six and from about six till about nine I guess I was in and out of hospitals. And right after that when I got rid of the diphtheria I got rheumatic fever which lasted for another couple of years. The finally I got cured completely. So from about, say, the first grade to the fifth grade I had no schooling. I started school actually in about the fifth grade. Of course I was tutored all along by my sisters and brothers. I have three older brothers and four sisters. So I came from a large family and was always surrounded by enough people to give me some comfort when I was in this hospitalized period. Then I guess after that it was just a question of back and forth between painting and the jazz kind of thing. I was always sort of torn between the two. Finally when I was about fourteen I decided that I just wanted to be a painter; and the jazz thing took sort of a back seat but only in the sense that painting was much more important at the time for me.

AM: Well, the matter of music is far easier to guess how you came to be interested in it because you were surrounded by it. But to become interested in art in Charleston I would imagine would be due to a slightly different series of influences.

MS: Yes. Yes.

AM: Were you saying that when you were hospitalized you began to look at pictures?

MS: Yes. I got involved with sketching and doodling from the funny papers and such. And this led to a much more serious interest in art and I started copying things from magazines and art journals. I did a series of things by people like Reynolds -- or academic religious pictures by artists such as --well, not Michelangelo, but people in that school, lesser-known people because I would get hold of books borrowed from the Charleston library and they never had really the top things but always sort of second-grade people. But they were helpful enough in that they were a stepping stone in my getting interested in painting other things.

AM: What about the Sunday School cards that came along with the comics on Sunday? And these were brightly colored?

MS: Right. This was the part of the thing I did also, you know, sort of took liberties with them and blew them up, tried to abstract things from them -- flirting with abstractions. Of course, the person who helped me most in Charleston as far as art is concerned was William Halsey. At that time he was the man who headed the art gallery there. He was also a very fine painter, aside from being a decent human being. He sort of took me under his wing, so to speak, and taught me a bit about drawing, constructing a picture, mixing paints, and the general sort of things needed to be an artist. This went on for I think about four or five years. I'd go to his into a few shows, local shows, shows in Atlanta and places like that. He was very encouraging.

AM: How old were you at that time?

MS: Oh, I was about thirteen years old then.

AM: From about thirteen to about eighteen?

MS: Yes. I finally left Charleston and came here in 1948. But all during the time I was in Charleston I was pretty much working with him and in the Gibbes Gallery. I worked in the gallery for a while.

AM: What was the nature of the Gibbes Gallery?

MS: Well, it was like a city-run gallery; actually more a museum than a gallery. Had local shows. And had a pretty good permanent collection. And had art classes. Of course at that time Negroes weren't all owed to go to classes there. But I went mainly because I was working at the gallery and I guess I was the one they took in to say that "we have one in" something of that kind. I guess it was just a question of circumstances. Of course with Bill Halsey, as I said, he was always a very open-minded person and I was in and out of his home as much as I was in my own home at the time. [Machine turned off.]

MS: Charleston again.

AM: You were talking about the gallery.

MS: Yes. The Gibbes Gallery because that was the only gallery in Charleston of any consequence with the exception of Kyra Kuhar, a French woman who had a bookshop and gave part of the space to some local painters.

AM: A French woman, you say?

MS: Yes. She was an old friend in Charleston and pretty much an artistic live wire. Oh, one I should also mention in Charleston who was very helpful -- Jean Fleming. She was a portraitist. I got to know her through Edward Johnson who was a frame maker in Charleston then. I worked for him for a short time, and he showed one of my little portraits to Mrs. Fleming. She got interested and actually did a portrait of me as a demonstration of technique. And from that one sitting I got quite a bit from her. She was one of these people who could do magic and was very good at imparting techniques. She didn't say much but what she would demonstrate by just a stroke of the brush she would do in such a way that you would be able to sort of imitate, emulate what you might do.

AM: Well, after you were involved in the comic strip type thing and the religious thing what were your interests? What did your paintings look like as you remember them?

MS: Oh, they were quite bold actually. Sort of bright, flat colors kind of thing, heavy black outlines, very much in the direction of stained glass windows. I've still got some of those early things. Bill Halsey just showed one to someone who came here from the North Carolina Museum last week -- they're in the process now of setting up a book on Negro painters in which I'm being included. He just asked me yesterday if I'd be willing to do a show there. I said, "Certainly." Because he was sort of intrigued with this "Confrontation" idea that I'm involved in now. In fact he's coming in today again to take some more pictures. He spent a day with me the day before yesterday and part of yesterday shooting and taking notes. Also doing the tape bit. He's just a young man. He's running the North Carolina Museum now, but he's so enthusiastic about what's happening to Negroes in the arts that I would think he'd be almost better placed in Harlem in a way for his own good. But at least he's getting things done. He's getting involved with Negro

colleges and trying to push them into showing and doing things and not being timid or afraid to approach the big museum in town, because you can understand very well that there's been such a ban on -- or sort of a working group against -- Negroes painting in the South that I can understand the reluctance now of some painters to try to show even. But the city of Charleston has learned a lot since I lived there. I was home just about three months ago when my mother passed and there were such fantastic changes it's not the same city. There has always been a large element of decent people in Charleston but things to me so much better how in many areas, not just in physical areas. In the Police Department we have captains, detectives, lieutenants, and this kind of thing. It's the kind of thing you expect to find in a place like New York, not in Charleston. But it's there and it's honest. You find it here and it's a little bit hypocritical. I've always maintained that when the so-called education bit does really develop it's in a place like Charleston where it will be much more real, before it happens up North. Because, as you know, there is no haven as such in this country for Negroes. I don't think there ever will be. I don't want to get off on this sort of tangent.

AM: Well, what is interesting is the fact that you left Charleston a long time ago but you really didn't sever your relationships.

MS: No, no. I don't think I could ever really.

AM: A lot of times in the case of a number of people, a number of Negroes who have come North from the South their interests in the North are quite different from what their interests were in the South.

MS: Yes.

AM: When they've gone to school and they've studied certain things, and found so many opportunities, as it were, in the North they tend to minimize what they actually did when they were in the South, the actual beginnings. You seem to have maintained connections. Have those connections always been there?

MS: Yes. Oh, yes. I think it's only natural to do this. Especially in my case. If you've got friends, roots, connections I think you want to develop them. You know, like I said, Bill Halsey is still in Charleston. Blewer is still there, many of my teachers are still there who were very helpful in the sort of rough days when I was sick. You know, it's just hard to forget. It's like the family, you know. We've been a closely knit one ever since I can remember.

AM: What was junior high school and high school like?

MS: Well, I don't remember junior high school but I can remember a lot about high school. As I said, even in junior high school I had the medical problem. But high school was fine. I was in the school band and did a lot of painting.

AM: What was your instrument?

MS: Saxophone; tenor sax, clarinet, flute.

AM: A reed man.

MS: Yes, pretty much. In fact I'm going to have a chance to play at this benefit tomorrow night. We're doing this Biafra bit. Roland Harman, Danny Moore, Davis on bass. They're a pretty good group of guys.

AM: Tomorrow?

MS: Yes. I wish you could make that.

AM: So in high school you were in the band?

MS: Oh, yes.

AM: And were you in the orchestra?

MS: Yes. Yes. In fact we had a band that played concerts against the Citizens Band in Charleston and we won, you know.

AM: What years were these, roughly?

MS: Oh, well, I came out of high school in 1948, so figure back five years.

AM: By that time there was another quite famous South Carolina musician who was pretty popular at that time, Dizzy Gillespie.

MS: Oh, yes, yes.

AM: There was, I suppose, a certain amount of identification with him?

MS: Yes. Kansas City too.

AM: Right. And insofar as your school activities were concerned there was some, let's say, official interest in you art on the part of your teachers?

MS: Oh, yes. Certainly.

AM: Doing posters?

MS: The whole works, yes. You know there was always some little article in the paper about a prize in Atlanta, a little prize in a North Carolina show or something, as far as Philadelphia. In fact it got so that in the Atlanta show I won the prize for three years so automatically they finally decided it wasn't the place to show because, you know, painters were beginning to say it's an all-Negro show, we don't want to start showing in an all-Negro show. So I stopped doing that. Now we're getting back to that. We still have all-Negro shows. I don't know.

AM: How did you feel at that time about your identity as a painter? In other words, what did you identify with?

MS: Well, at the time, you know, I didn't think at all great. I just painted and wanted to show the pictures. I didn't think a thing about doing it with one group or another, you know. I just didn't give it any thought. Of course now I have sort of qualms about all-Negro shows, depending on the reason for the show. If it relates in the sense of what we were trying to do in the Spiral group -- for instance, were trying to find whether we had something in common as Negro painters -- then I think this can be a valid thing. But if you're painting in a particular direction, say, you're painting -- I don't quite know how to put this -- for instance, if you're, say, a man working from Ghana and you're doing a show on Ghanaian art or something, that I think is all right. But just to have an all-Negro show today I think is not the thing to do. Not that I see any reason against it politically; it's just that I think you're sort of putting your self in too much of a niche. You know, if you're going to paint, paint and show, but don't worry about fitting into any one group, or any particular groups as such. Paint them and show them.

AM: In other words, if there was an exhibition and they were saying American Painters Under 40, there would be no particular reason for dividing Negroes, Jews, Puerto Ricans and what not?

MS: No. I think it would be silly.

AM: Anglo-Saxons, Protestants, Catholics and whatnot. It would be ridiculous.

MS: Exactly.

AM: Because you wouldn't be showing American painting or painting by Americans under 40 -- they would be included in the various groups, a spectrum.

MS: Exactly. That's what I'm trying to say.

AM: Meanwhile when you were in Charleston and in highschool or during that period in your life what about your brothers and sisters? What were they doing? And what was your relationship to them>

MS: Well, like I said we were a sort of closely knit family. Two of my sisters are now teaching school. Let's say six of us went to college. Six of us are married now: two are not married. My oldest brother is at the Post Office in Charleston. As I said, two of my sisters are teaching school.

AM: In South Carolina?

MS: Yes. Two of the girls are just housewives. Another brother is in the taxi dispatching business. The fourth brother is in the furniture business jobbing again. My father is retired now.

He was with the City Water Board, meter inspection in Charleston and I believe was the first Negro to have this job. My mother was just a housewife aside from being an extremely fine mother.

AM: What colleges did you attend?

MS: Well, I went to Cooper and N.Y.U. A funny thing happened: I came up to take the test for Cooper and excelled in the art part but sort of flunked everything in the special math test they had. So I took another test that same week for NYU and got it with a partial scholarship thing. And I went to NYU. But the next year I took the Cooper test, passed it with flying colors and went to Cooper at night and NYU during the day, just before going into the service. I came back out. Went back to NYU and got my paper so to speak. By the way, during the NYU days was when I met Woodruff. He was one of my teachers there.

AM: Hale Woodruff?

MS: Yes. I got a lot from him. He's an excellent teacher aside from being a good painter. I believe he's retired now. The NYU days were real good days. That's the time I became involved with Baziotis, met Motherwell, it was the active period of the New York School expressionistic days. NYU was the heart of it, that whole area.

AM: What years would this cover?

MS: Oh, 1949 to 1951 actually. I went into the service in 1951.

AM: What branch of the service?

MS: Air Force.

AM: You were in the Air Force?!

MS: Yes. Yes. That was an interesting experience, by the way. The first thing I did when I went through my sort of basic training up at -- what's the base upstate near Syracuse? I can't think of the name now. But I did a portrait of my Base Commander at the time who was General Howell, I think. And he saw the portrait and liked it and assigned me to Special Service. Well, actually I wanted to go into the band but they said they needed a painter on the base and they give me the band as sort of sideline thing. I was assigned as official Air Force artist. That was my job. That was it. I did a portrait of General Twining who was at that time the Chief of Staff. When he saw the painting he suggested that I do one of Eisenhower what at that time was General Eisenhower. He arranged a sitting with him out at Scottsdale. So I went to Scottsdale to do the General to find that he was in Colorado. So I got a plane and went to Colorado Springs and had a session with him and did some sketches. From the sketches I did a portrait which finally ended up with him. He gave me a hundred bucks, which was a lot for a GI. I got a nice letter from him a week later when he got the portrait. About a year after doing that it was Colonel Hoey who I believe was at Scottsdale and he got me to do another portrait, this time of General Howell for the Scottsdale Museum or something. They have a special Air Force museum. I did this. After I painted this portrait they asked me whether I wanted to take a commission or continue sort of working this way. I said what I'd like to do is go home because my mother was not well and I could do much more for her being out than in. So a few weeks later, I was being processed and got out. And that's how I got out of the Air Force. So I sort of painted my way out I guess more or less.

AM: How long a period was that? How long were you in the Air Force?

MS: Well, I was supposed to be in for four years because when I went in I took the officers training bit and passed it actually for the Army. But after passing it for Army the Air Force refused to release me for the simple reason that I was doing these portraits. I wasn't doing anything for the country as such except painting these portraits. So they refused to give me a release for the Army. When this happened I refused on the other hand to go ahead and go through the Air Force Candidate School because you had to sign up for an extra hitch if you did that. And I didn't want this, you know. What I wanted to do was to get out. I didn't like the service even though I didn't do anything but paint and play jazz. But the idea, just the regimentation was just too much; even without having it thinking of it was just too much. Because as I said, I had it much easier than most guys who were in the service. Even guys that should have had it, at least guys who were in the service. Even guys that should have had it, at least guys that followed me, I saw PhDs sort of doing menial labor. The service is a funny thing,

you know. If you're lucky you get into lucky things. If you're not, you've had it, in other words. Of course I don't know what it's like now. But at that time that was the case. I was just lucky enough to always get the easy assignments. I was lucky enough to get into the band, I was lucky enough to get this portrait assignment, the Air Force Artist sort of thing, with three stripes and the chance to take a commission if I wanted it. This was a period of two-and-a-half years. I got a year off because of my mother's condition, keeping in touch with the reserves, which I was allowed to do in Charleston, sort of work, and then went back in for six months, completed the first part of my hitch, and got a discharge without any reserve attached to it, which there should have been. But during that time when I was doing portraits in the Army I did a lot of my regular work. I think my best paintings to date were things I did in the Army. The painting that Sweeney bought from me was one that I did when I was on the base, a large abstraction. This is the thing that's reproduced in the American Painters catalogue in 1954. But all in all it was a pretty good experience in the service. Not in a military sense but in the sense I guess working with people and what happens not because one deserves it but because of circumstances. I would like to have gone to Europe, though, because I had a chance to go but couldn't because of the portraits and the general who wants my so-called talent around. We played at parties for them, too -- there was a jazz combo on the base and we played for all the officers' parties and that kind of thing. But it was a worthwhile experience.

AM: Yes. When you look back the different things come together.

MS: Yes, sure.

AM: Now this was right after NYU?

MS: Yes.

AM: Or did it interrupt NYU?

MS: Well, it interrupted and then I went back to NYU.

AM: And you were involved with painters who were very much in the public consciousness at the time.

MS: Yes. It's so funny, they were all sort of interested in techniques. I remember even Sam Adler who was working in encaustics, they'd all come around me -- I was a student at the time -- they'd come around for me to show them how to do things with wax. Well, I got these wax things by working in the frame shop. I worked in the frame shop for a long time even when I was going to school; I was going to school at night and in the daytime I worked four hours in the frame shop.

AM: Where was that?

MS: Beverly's Frame Shop in New York.

AM: Where is that located?

MS: It was at Second Avenue at 52nd Street at the time. Now I believe it's up in the Seventies. But this place was like a college. Everybody came in for frames, people from Hans Hofmann on down to Max Weber, or on up, either way you want to say it. Oh, Maurice Sterne used to come in and he used to see my little wax things. It was so funny, I'd be working on a gold leaf frame and he'd do a painting at the same time. In fact the painting that the Guggenheim took is a gold leaf painting. In fact he painted while we worked. If you could see that painting some time. It has a sort of fresco-like quality with a golden sense like a rubbed golden wall or something. It had even some magical textures. I remember one day in school at Cooper Union I had this painting up in class and all the kids sort of were intrigued with the medium. And old Schutz, a teacher of mine at the time, who was German and taught at Cooper, was very good. He said to the class, "The hell with the technique, what about the aesthetics?" They were all getting so involved in what I did in the technique because they would copy the technique but not make the picture like I did or that Schutz claimed that I did in the class. One thing about the teachers at Cooper, they were all extremely encouraging. And I think this was good. They did it just enough to make you work. They didn't overdo it, though. But it was effective, especially in my case. I learned quite a bit.

AM: Then I suppose one of the next periods as we might call it so far as my conception goes, would be involved in your actually getting to Europe?

MS: Yes.

AM: How long did it take you to get to Europe after your NYU period? NYU and Cooper Union.

MS: My first trip to Europe I believe was in 1959. I went actually not to paint as such but to see sort of African sculpture museums. While working in the Frame Shop I got involved with the collecting of African sculpture. Actually my collecting of it started I believe at NYU. I had seen pieces of Julius Carl Clark. And I saw one or two pieces that Woodruff had in his apartment. And I had seen a few pieces that Robeson had at the time; he had a few dogas that were exhibited in a few shows around town. I was so taken with them, with the forms, you know -- people talked about Picasso, Miro, and I used to say, "What about African sculpture," which these people sort of got this idea from. But they would never say sculpture, they would always say the Picasso, the Miro, the this, and the that, without getting to the source of this whole bit. But like I said, the first trip to Europe was in 1959 and then probably the next one was in 1963, and then 1965 probably, and since then just about every year. But now it's to the point where I spend at least eight months of the year in Europe and four months here; it's a sort of ratio of seven-five; eight-four. And I guess the reason I spend more time in Europe is just that I'm more comfortable there. This is not strictly a racial kind of country although this is certainly a part of it. You know, I'm free to paint and I spend more time on it. I have as much time to paint here as I do there. It's just that I'm more at ease in Europe and I feel more like working there than I do here. And since I want to paint I might as well spend as much time as I can there, and that's why I do it. Pretty soon I think it will be even more time there, ten months there and two months here. I never intend to give up my citizenship because I'm still an American and I think I always will be. I have no interest in denying that.

AM: Well, your interest in African sculpture came to be quite an important thing.

MS: Oh, yes. Well, I'll tell you a little bit about that. Actually I collected seriously for about seven years before going into the business end of it. And the business part came up when I had to help my mother and my father, help by sending a couple of kids, brothers and two sisters through college. I also found that by setting myself up in this business I could give myself more time for painting as opposed to working, say, eight hours a day in the frame shop, or teaching. You know I like teaching if I can teach kids. But I wouldn't teach, say, beyond twelve, it sort of stops there for me. I like teaching from, say, about four years to twelve. Beyond that it's too much work. I find kids in the age range of four to twelve fascinating; they teach you, more than you attempt to teach them. That's why I enjoy doing that. I did that in Charleston for a couple of years. And a year here at the Center. But like I said, the business then came up because of economics pretty much. I wanted to help the family, take care of my two boys, and give myself more time to work. When I'm in town I'm here in the gallery, oh, Saturdays mainly. But the other times I work on my painting. I don't have to be here as such. It's set up now so that I can stay away for six or eight months every year and not worry about coming back because I have someone very competent running the place for me. I come back when I'm anxious to see how things are. I'm free for painting now and it's almost an ideal setup for me.

AM: What connection do you see or have you been able to discover between the new politically inspired interests in things African and the interest in African art which painters which you have known have, and which you yourself as a painter have?

MS: Well, with this new thing, this new interest or awareness of Africa, African art my question is this: how sincere is the whole thing. How much of it is real? how much of it is just plain old chauvinistic tendencies? how much of it is just so much rubbish, so to speak? I have no doubt that there is a large element amongst black people who are seriously interested in Africa, African art and African culture as such, but so much of it to me is just hopping on the band wagon, sort of becoming part of the thing, it's the thing to do, to think black, to be black, and sort of be a brother, so to speak. A large part of this is mal-placed and mal-guided sort of political frustrations. Another part of it I guess is just that people are sort of wandering or swimming around not knowing what to hold on to and this seems to be the thing that's most available or most feasible at the moment. So they latch on to this and sort of use it. I mean they talk about a Rap Brown or a Stokely Carmichael. I frankly feel that these people in their shouting have a certain amount of sincerity. I mean I think it's a case of sort of asking for the hundred dollar bill to get fifty. And when they say "Kill whitey" I don't think they mean it literally. I think they mean kill the thing that's bad in whitey and sort of cultivate the thing that's good in him. I think they're trying to say help mankind. I've always had a belief in these people and I think even in their sort of wrongdoing, because in any kind of expression or expressions of this type there's bound to be some of it that's wrong or crude or unfair, I believe that there's a balance. I think there's a

reason for the Stokey's and the Rap's. And I think that without them this country would be lost. Once again I've gone off on a tangent.

AM: Yes. Well, those are political implications which are of course of fundamental importance. What is your reaction to, let's say, the quality of the aesthetic response that's involved in this? As you said, a certain amount of it is band wagon hopping. That's in a political sense. Too, it also may be in an aesthetic sense.

MS: Yes. Sure.

AM: What do you see there, and have you had time to think about it at all in terms of younger painters?

MS: Well, for example, a few years ago I had a couple of kids working in my studio, one named Maurice Phillips and the other one being Gerard Anderson. By the way, that's a painting there by Maurice. Not one of his better things, but he's certainly been influenced in a real way by African sculpture, African painting and African masks. This is a young man that is close to being a genius. He can dance. He can pick up a guitar and play it. If he picks up a saxophone he plays it. He's one of these multi-talented people. But there are so many others -- I don't know -- I wouldn't call them optimistic but I think they get involved because they think it's the thing to do. I believe in time that something real will come from this whole movement, or series of movements. As far as the blacks or whites races really appreciating African sculpture for what it is I think we've all got a long way to go. Because, as we know, there are few Negroes who buy African art for very obvious reasons. The sculpture now of any consequence is a little bit on the expensive side. You can buy a decent piece for a few hundred dollars. But that's more the exception. You can buy a real piece for instance for twenty dollars, a gold weight, or a small miniature mask sometimes. But to really get involved in the sculpture, to collect it, is a thing that's beyond most Negroes. But even those that can afford it don't buy, and when they do buy they buy the wrong kinds of things, with the exception of someone like Ralph Ellison who has a pretty good collection. And Robeson I know still has his collection of dakotas. I don't know of any Negroes who collect as such. And Morgan has some things in Chicago.

AM: What do you see as basic aesthetic prerequisites for the study, an actual practical involvement with African art as such?

MS: Well, I don't think you need to have any pre-training. I mean you would sort of approach it the same way you would approach any work of art. I mean in contemporary things, for instance, oh, Duncan Williams, for example, most of them don't know that much about what they're looking at, they know whether they like a thing, whether they're responsive to it or not. I think you can do this same thing with African sculpture. I don't think you necessarily have to be a student of African art to really appreciate it. Most of these things, no matter how important or unimportant they are, are basically well-constructed things, well-realized, beautifully balanced, and in a number of cases really masterpieces. I mean it would be this in any culture not just an African sort of context.

AM: Is it true that the average person, not only in our time but for a long time, has a more or less conventional conception of what art is and tends to think about it in terms of representation, in terms of images? That many people who've come to develop and interest in art, in African art, have had a sort of revolution of taste? I'm talking about other painters who have become interested in abstraction and what not: a person might look at a mask and see certain things in it, but isn't there a problem that the average person has to realize that it is art? In other words, isn't there a certain degree of sophistication in taste necessary especially for a conventional person?

MS: Yes.

AM: To see whether it's art?

MS: Yes. I know there is a tendency to sort of associate the african mask with the jungle or the Tarzan movie or voodoo ceremonies and sort of overlook the artistic involvement. But I think this is changing with museum exhibitions and the amount of books being written on African art, the amount of television being given over to it now. It's getting to be the thing again. I get any number of calls now from television people, from schools, this group, that group, women's clubs, wanting lectures on African art. It's rather tricky I know. Especially for Negroes to sort of -- I don't think this is as much for African Negroes because I know most Africans, with the exception of the few that are involved in the dealing end, don't really like the mask. I mean someone as famous

or as well-versed in art as Ben Wundel, he thinks of these things as sort of black magic still. And this I found incredible, you know.

AM: Well, this is what I was getting at when I was talking about prerequisites. One prerequisite which it seems to me anyway that seems to be missing in some of the current black experience pronouncements is an interest in art, the prerequisite is an interest in art and that is in an abstract or in a critical sense which implies museums and things like that. To me, at any rate, it's perfectly natural that many Africans would not regard what we call African art as art.

MS: Yes.

AM: It is not involved, it is ritual. It is connected with ritual.

MS: Yes. Sure.

AM: It seems to me also that many Negroes, U.S. Negroes are not interested; come to African sculpture or to these objects from Africa with no critical context or no aesthetic context. If they try to make what unfortunately is a racial identification with them they end up with ritual. The prerequisite I was thinking of was, as a painter what is your reaction to the absence of that type of preparation for dealing with it as a piece of art?

MS: Yes, I see what you're saying.

AM: It's fairly easy for a person who's been through school to look on your wall and look at those two masks; with the aid of either Picasso or Paul Klee he can make a frame. But a person who has not been involved with certain classic problems of Klee or Braque or Picasso or what not, there's got to be some other prerequisites to fulfill.

MS: Yes. It's a problem of context with a certain amount of artists. Yes.

AM: I was just suggesting that perhaps you might have been aware of some things like that being operative, or in the absence of that type of involvement, operative in the development of Negro interest in art.

MS: Well, it's beginning to take shape but it's more the exception now than anything else and I think it will be a while yet but it's work that has to be done. That's why I've been hounding Harlem to try to get some sort of Harlem museum set up, a place for seminars, a place for showing masks, for having lectures and for getting kids really sort of involved in it and then later bringing it up to the adults because I think it's much more important to have the kids do it first and then start it with the adults. I think a lot can be done with it in the sense of racial pride and the feeling that you do come from some place and you do have a heritage etc., and it's not just sort of a happening more or less which is dropped there in front of people.

AM: Did you find that your interest in African sculpture was stimulated more in Europe or in the northern part of the United States or in the South?

MS: Oh, it would be very difficult for me to say just where the greatest amount of my interrelation or sort of involvements came from. But I would say that the most sincere collectors I've run across have been in Europe. They really work at it and they really love the objects, I mean they're what one might call dedicated collectors. In the States I find that you have certainly a group of people who do it with sincerity and because they love the objects. But most of the people here who collect and buy do it because it's the thing to do, it's fashionable, it's a good moneymaking thing now. If you buy a good piece today a couple of years later the chances are it's doubled up, you know, in a way it's almost sort of speculation, more like the stock market. And aside from being a conversational piece again, as I say, it's a way for increasing the dollar. I mean we're all sort of worried now about the dollar losing its value, and a piece sitting there is much more constant, and art in general is much more constant when it is art. That's part of its popularity I guess, when you think about it.

AM: You do on balance express some concern about the actual quality of the interest of many people who are associated with the black movement, the movement having to do with black identity which as we said is largely politically inspired.

MS: Yes.

AM: You have some misgivings about the quality of that interest. On the other hand you do

know quite a number of Negro painters of your age and so forth, friends of yours, in fact you're a friend of most of the painters.

MS: Yes.

AM: What about their interest in art, in African art, and how has it influenced their work as you have observed it?

MS: Well, the best example of this I think is our friend Romare Bearden who's been very successful lately with his collage series. He uses very much the African motifs and quite successfully. Romy has been around a hell of a long time and he's been a beautiful painter for a long time. But apparently he finds something quite special with this African collage kind of treatment. He uses his childhood experiences plus his brilliant artistic ability with this means of working on the African theme, sort of type African, as one might put it, and he's come up with one hell of a good expression that's quite beautiful and quite valid. Some people might seem to think that it's too clever, too tricky. I know for a fact that it's just the opposite. Romy is equipped to do this kind of thing. He does it with such command and so swiftly, you might say, that it's almost like magic. And I think that you just couldn't do this unless you were a Romy Bearden or someone of that calibre. I know he's helped me so much with these collages. I mean I see these things and I think my new paintings have sort of grown because of what he's done with the collage. I think if I hadn't seen them I wouldn't be doing as well as I am now with my Confrontation things. I feel very strongly about them, you know. Most people that I've shown them to, people whom I respect, Sweeney and the North Carolina Museum Director I spoke about -- Stanley Marcuson -- think that they're much the best things that I've done. And I certainly think this is true. And again I say thanks to Romy Bearden.

AM: Romy has been working for many, many years with the Dutch masters and with a number of other elements from the great tradition of painting.

MS: Sure.

AM: And this is one of the things which was to be part of -- a young man in Harlem can't come right out from just looking at a magazine ad or from commercial art and latch on to African sculpture and expect to have the same type of aesthetic dimension as Bearden, because he's got Peter de Hooch operating there, Vermeer, and a number of people operating to solve problems which canvases pose.

MS: Yes. Oh, yes. If there's such a thing as a contemporary master Romy certainly is. I mean people talk about painting and they talk about de Kooning and Kline and that. When I talk about painting I talk about Romare Bearden, de Kooning and that. This is my sequence and I think justifiable so.

AM: What about the influence of African art, or the use of it on some of the other Negro painters?

MS: Well, I see a little of it coming through in the work even of Norman.

AM: Norman Lewis?

MS: Yes. Norman is another one who has tremendous talent. He's a real poet. He's just a beautiful painter. Hollingsworth, yes; I always get his name confused with someone else. I think of the cartoonist and I have a tendency to sort of overlap the two. He does sort of totem figures; I mean he did some a year or so ago that were very much influenced by African things and were quite good. I don't know what he's doing now because I haven't seen him lately. But I certainly wish he would have kept on it that direction and really developed what he started. But I don't know too many painters Negro or white who have been too much influenced by the African, except in the sense that the sculpture influenced people like Picasso and the whole Cubist movement. In that sense I mean most of the things that they were working on got something from the kind of structure that sort of goes into good African sculpture. Like Sweeney said to me once that underlying construction even when a piece is first sweet and then the sweetness is on top, but an African piece will never be just sweet. This is one of the things he pointed out to me. And I'm inclined to agree with him.

AM: That's true. This is a very important aspect of such a discussion that the influence of African art on contemporary art is unmistakable.

MS: Certainly.

AM: Whether you talk about de Kooning or anybody else. At the same time when an American Negro painter comes to it one is looking, let's say, for anything special that he might work and this is the sort of thing. I have a feeling that some painters actually have been influenced by Orozco, Siqueiros and Diego Rivera under the mistaken conception that these lines represented by them are African. Do you see what I mean?

MS: Yes.

AM: They're really involved with foreign workers and peasants, they're not as involved with the aesthetic problems which African art is involved with because this is abstract art in the richest sense of the word: whereas they're involved in many instances with representational art in the most proletarian sense of representing peasants and workers. Not that the Mexicans are wholly concerned with that but there are people who have been influenced by them, have come through the Depression, the Federal Projects, the execution of murals and things like that.

MS: Sure.

AM: So this is what I wondered if you have discerned in some of the other black painters any special accents. For example, in Romy Bearden we find an American accent which has an African base, has a Dutch base. All painting that we know has been influenced by the Dutch, by the Italians.

MS: Sure. By the French.

AM: And the French and also the African. So now when it comes out man is who he is where he is. Romy is an American Negro painter so his paintings have an American Negro accent and they have a small discernible African influence. What have you found in the other painters?

MS: I'm trying to think. Well, in a way, in Jake, for instance you certainly get this sort of a feeling --

AM: You mean Jacob Lawrence?

MS: Yes. He gives a feeling that African art is a simplification of this sort of aspect. I can't think of any others that really strike me as having a real tie in with the art as such. I remember younger people's work. I can't think of their names now, that sort of use African motifs. But I don't know how deep this is because I haven't seen enough of it.

AM: But that which you have seen, what is your feeling about it among the younger people who are consciously and deliberately -- ?

MS: Well, I see that they're searching. I don't know how successful they've been in developing it but I certainly think it's been sort of pointing them in a good direction, you know. Now that's coming out of that we'll have to see at a later date. There is one man -- of course he's definitely an African sculptor from Ethiopia, who worked here last year, I mean the year before last. He worked in Paris before that. He's now back home. He's very much sort of African fantasy; that's what he's painting, you know. But then he's Ethiopian, he's an African and he has much more reason for that working out of a cult tradition in a way. But he's infused with that kind of, oh, almost what you might call a cave-like treatment of sort of flat figures, stylized animals running, this, that and the other; but very beautifully done. He sort of ties them into a sort of contemporary statement.

AM: What were your involvements with galleries and so forth in getting started in New York? Now by the time you came to New York you had actually decided that painting was for you?

MS: Yes. When I first came here actually I had one painting with the Saidenberg Gallery. They showed it for a while. I wasn't very interested in showing because I wasn't working as well as I thought I would have liked at the time. But she liked the painting. And she had a chance to sell it. I didn't let her sell it; I said I wanted to keep the picture and I think this sort of upset her a bit so our relationship didn't last too long. After Saidenberg I went to Bertha Schaeffer. I stayed with her for about a year-and-a-half. I had a successful show there. Later I left and went to Jacques Seligmann. After Seligmann I went to John Heller. After Heller I went to Krasner. And after Krasner I decided against galleries for a while because I didn't like what was happening. If you were the top painter then you were pushed. If you weren't then you were sort of slighted. This I

don't think had anything to do with being black or white; it was just a question of the economics of the galleries. Now of course I've been working quite a bit. I will have a show in Paris probably in March. I just had one at Chatham College which went quite well.

AM: Where was that?

MS: Chatham College. That's in Pittsburgh. And I will do this North Carolina thing next year, which should be a good show. They're doing good catalogue on it. We may do it in connection with an African thing they're trying to set up, too, sort of contemporary African sculpture with the old sculpture showing the sort of bastardization, or whatever you want to call it, whatever has happened since the missionary came to Africa. But my thing is whether you show or not I think the important thing is work and I think what is more important than having shows is having your contemporaries see your things. I think this sort of feedback, sort of exchange of ideas -- I think painters are better prepared to tell you whether you're moving in the right direction or not. And I think if you can have this type of contact whether you're exhibiting or not then I think you've a live Painter and you shouldn't worry about having the big exhibitions, this, that, and the other. Because if you're really good in time people will see it and you will get your due, you know. That's what I keep trying to tell painters who come by complaining they don't have a gallery and "nobody takes my work", this, that, and the other. I say, "Don't worry about that. You paint, if they're good you'll sell them and don't worry about getting into a gallery, especially a big gallery. And if it's not a decent gallery it's not worthwhile anyway. So it's better to just show in a group show, if you want to, go into competition -- because I did this for many years -- and don't let a few rejection slips stop you. The more rejections the harder you work. I look at it this way, if they reject my paintings they're the losers. If I leave a canvas it means I'm pleased with it and I think if I'm pleased with it the best judge to decide whether my paintings are right for me. It has to be that first before it can be right for anyone else.

AM: Well, when they stimulate other painters that's one of the highest rewards.

MS: Yes. That's one thing, if you can get this kind of response then I think half your in this regard I'm luckier than a lot of other painters. I really don't depend on my paintings for a living. Last year I made \$30,000 out of my paintings. And I'm sort of pleased with that.

AM: Oh, yes!

MS: And that's without a gallery. Of course if I had a gallery a third of that would have gone to the gallery. And like I said, the galleries don't sell the works you sell the works. I maintain this with few exceptions. That's how it was when -25-

MS: I was with Bertha. She wanted 40% commission and I was doing most of the selling. I had a show. Thirteen paintings were sold and I sold ten. . . And to get 40% on top of that when I was framing my pictures, too! It was just too much. Of course we were friends and we still are friends and we still are friends. Like I said, for a painter the important thing is to make good pictures and having you contemporaries see them. Beyond that if you're good it will happen; if not, then you do something else. That's the answer I think.

AM: Have you felt a cross-feeling of mutual back and forth influence in your interest in painting and you interest in music?

MS: Well, I really don't separate the two as such. I think one helps the other. I haven't done any writing really but now I want to sort of try some things in relationship with what I'm painting now. I have some ideas that I'd like to do with a friend of mine in Paris who's from Ceylon, Stuart do Silva, an excellent pianist who dabbles in painting a little. I've got some ideas I want to sort of do, like I said, not to try to write a painting, or paint a piece of music but to show the relationship between the two things in my sort of psyche, you know. And I think by next year I'll have something to show, maybe do a small thing at the gallery here with a jazz quartet so something doing a number and show a couple of paintings that sort of relate to it, and just see what happens.

AM: The idea of being a jazz musician certainly involves what is called and what I refer to as improvisation; you know, stylization and improvisation are basically the same, improvising and stylizing at the same time.

MS: Yes.

AM: When you take your clarinet or your saxophone and you noodle around with the horns and

so forth there is a great similarity -- .

MS: To executing a passage on canvas.

AM: Well, with your sensibility being -- you're engaged, as it were, in both. It's possible that you don't even think about it, it's so much the same thing.

MS: No, I don't. But I've noticed some people responding to it certainly in that way. Especially the last canvas that just completed last night. While I was in the process of working it a man said it resembled certain passages he had heard somebody play.

AM: That would suggest that there is perhaps an indigenous American basis for an identification with some of the things that have happened in African sculpture or with African art -- which should not be overlooked by people who are very much concerned with establishing identity with Africa because surely what a jazz musician does to a conventional melody is not, let's say, European.

MS: No.

AM: The same thing is true of what an African sculptor, or carver did to a human torso or what he did to cylinders and things like that. Well, some Europeans like to think of it as almost pure aesthetics.

MS: Yes.

AM: The same thing for American Negro music. The solutions have to do with the freest type of aesthetics.

MS: Yes. Someone like Arnold Coleman you might say.

AM: But I mean even in the traditional and conventional thing, when you think of Kansas City style.

MS: Oh, yes, sure. Even in Kansas City style there's certainly tremendous attraction going on, you know. Counterpoint, play horn against horn, different tonalities. Even Old Satch, you don't know what he picks up, abstracts a tune much as he does, and keeping it as simple and as right and as easily digestible as a glass of water might be. When genius is there, it's there.

AM: That's true. What are you thinking about or how do you formulate your direction or your interest as of now insofar as painting it self is concerned?

MS: Well, like I say I'm deeply involved now in this business of sort of black-white confrontation, I the problem of the two American most contrasting segments, I mean the black-white bit, fighting each other, almost sort of killing each other off; not yet, but certainly coming to this. And in trying to paint this kind of thing I begin to see that there's a sickness on both sides. We argue the point that the reason for the sickness on the Negro side is because of the amount of maltreatment they've had from the whites. But I still don't certainly think it justifies our being any worse than they were. I mean because a man been a dog to you don't turn around and become a dog to him if you can help it, you know, and I think unless this is the case and unless this man is willing to be helped I think this American democracy, or so-called democracy, is in for a sort of slow death. Not that it is dead yet but it's certainly coming to that. I think something has to happen. I think things are happening. And I think it's certainly going to come from the young. I don't think just the black young but certainly from the young people of this country. And it's happening all over the world the youth movement changing things and unless this really cultivates or develops itself into a real force then we're in for trouble. That's putting it mildly.

AM: So how do you see, or what do you see the role of the painter as being in a situation, a cultural situation like this where the cultural via the political -- aesthetic aspect of culture which is a broad operational tactic -- within the cultural thing, perhaps just as important as the political thing, is the artistic tactic. That is, it could be a role for a certain type of politician, a role for a certain type of scientist or technician. There's a role for the painter. And it's not to get bills passed or build hospitals or roads or another type thing. What do you visualize your paintings as being able to do?

MS: Well, I would think really there's a hell of a lot a painting can do. But I do see in the things that I'm painting now and enjoy working with I think it's just to point up how ugly this whole

business is this sort of fighting each other and killing off each other. And I've had comments from a number of people, mainly younger people; they think that I see these people killing each other, two, I see two angry faces, but in the picture I see a kind of love thing coming through. Now frankly I tell you these people are seeing more in these pieces that I'm seeing, because I see only the killing side of it. But if by painting these pictures people begin to see this, and it is there somewhere (which I don't see frankly at this point) maybe this in its own time, killing will sort of point out to a few people, wherever people can see them, that a painter in any literal sense can do anything that's going to change things except be honest with himself, paint pictures, and show them. I think this is the case with me. If it is that, if it is happening it's almost without my being aware of it; it's almost a happy accident. Because I'm painting what I think I see: ugly people fighting ugly people. I see wrongness on either side. I just think it's an ugly thing. I want to paint it as that. And I think if people can see it, and frown upon it enough, it might make them think, "Am I really part of this? Then I should want to do something about it." But I think it's almost a process of sort of osmosis. If it is happening I don't know how much of this can be done with paint. But there are these things in my system, these canvases and I'm going to paint it. And when a guy says, "How much longer do you think you can go on painting these heads, these ugly pictures?" I said, "I can go on painting them as long as I feel there's a need for it and I think the need is going to be here for a while and that's it." The moment I stop feeling they're valid them I'll stop painting them. I mean I'm not concerned with painting a style one particular theme. If it's no longer valid as a painting subject thing for me then I'll stop it. That's one of the reasons I think I left Bertha Schaefer because I was selling one type of painting and went into something else and she didn't like that, so we parted ways.

AM: Well, tell me this -- we'll go back and come up to this. What are some of the things, some of the involvements that you have had over the years as a painter? In other words, some of the stages or phases that you've moved through let's say, from the time that you could honestly or with some confidence regard yourself as a painter among painters? At first what were you doing?

MS: Well, I was doing sort of the Charleston type architectural things but very sort of structural, a cross between someone like Feininger and Ryder. Because I've always loved the sort of luminosity and textures of Ryder. But I like the kind of very rigid structure of Feininger. For a long time I was doing a kind of Feininger thing in front of simple structures and then I went into a kind of Ryder landscape, seascape thing. And then once I had a painting in a show up at the Harlem Cultural Club and I got the first prize. But then one of the jury said, "It's a fine painting but it's just too much like Ryder." But this picture was painted before I ever saw Ryder. It was a strange thing. I never knew who Ryder was. But after that time I met Anita Pollitzer whose aunt was actually someone who took care of Ryder and gave him money in the last stages of his life. Then Anita bought the first painting I sold in New York. I remember once she came to Charleston and this same bookshop I told you about, Kyra Kuhar early in this discussion, Kyra Kuhar. She came to see Bill Halsey's paintings. And Kuhar had a few of my things on the floor. It was curious that Anita sort of burst into the gallery and said "These paintings are delightful. This man doesn't belong to Charleston. He belongs to the world." And of course Kuhar thought she was talking about Bill. Actually she was talking about my canvases on the floor. It was awfully flattering to hear this, because this woman was an art critic and she was associated with Stieglitz. In fact she was the person who introduced Georgia O'Keeffe to Alfred Stieglitz. And she got Georgia to be interested in my work finally. They wanted me to get a fellowship one time. And I submitted and I didn't get it. And I found out later I didn't get it because at the time I didn't need it financially, because then I was working at the Frame Shop and I had a pretty good salary. I didn't realize that this was a factor. Apparently because painters who were in the Stieglitz Gallery was doing framing for I ran the frame shop, so they realized that I was financially equipped take care of the necessities of living. But I don't think it was justified. I think we need some special grant. But I've had a lot of fellowships and this kind of thing. I got one I think from the Charleston Cultural Fund. I was the first Negro to have gotten that. They gave me a stipend once and they gave it another time. Like I tried once for the Joe and Emily Lowe thing. I submitted my paintings and they weren't shown to the jury. At that time John E. Marshall was head of Art News and was one of the judges. He came by the next week and he said, "Mert, why didn't you send these paintings up? You certainly would have got first prize. There was not one decent painting in the show." I said, "Look, these are the two paintings I sent. He said, "Well, Mert, we didn't see them." I've had this sort of thing happen three times so I think I'm not one for prizes. But I have won prizes in Atlanta. I won one at the Delgado Museum and things like that. But these fellowship things -- I tried three times and each time sort of three bricks so I just decided they're not the thing for me.

AM: And so in that period we were talking about what your painting was like when you first

started out and moved through -- .

MS: Oh, yes. I went from the Ryderesque kind of thing into a much bolder kind of landscape expression, oh, much like -- it's sort of hard to describe what it would be like -- but it was again flat, maybe a little bit like the best Tamayo kind of thing; but again more rigid, but with a palette certainly like he uses, a very warm palette, pastelly, but beautifully done. I've always been a good colorist. What Buckner said when he wrote a poem for me once that I was able to do magic with color, that was the sort of expression that's usual in school when they take about the school work. And then after the sort of Tamayo-related things went into a complete abstract expressionist stated thing but very textures. And that went on for a few years. And out of that I went again into stylized figures, not realistic but certainly bordering on a kind of, oh, a cross between Modigliani and, oh, maybe someone like Adler because certainly the textures and the kind of palette of Adler was a little bit in the style of Modigliani; nothing like it of course but it's the nearest thing I can think of to give an example. And then into beautifully poetic landscape kind of expression for about five years. Then into the Spiral thing in which I got involved with black and white pictures starting with the Harlem riots which seemed to have motivated it. I did a few figures and just heads and now quite stylized heads. And that's what I'm doing now.

AM: Well, it's only in this particular period that you're in a sense speaking of socio-political content and interest in painting.

MS: Yes.

AM: What sort of content did you refer to before?

MS: Oh, purely an aesthetic one -- making a good picture. That's all I was concerned about. And even now this is my primary concern, Number One. Of course it's already limited by the kind of subject matter. I'm sort of giving my self intentionally this black-white two heads confrontation, for emphasis reasons I think. But within that I allow my self certainly a lot of liberties that one needs to make a good picture. And that's still my prime interest -- to paint a picture. And I think I sort of stress painting because I think an awful lot of people are painting today. And I don't mean necessarily painting with a brush. I mean painting for values, constructive things, development things. Because I don't know any better paintings than bringing in again my favorite painter Romare Bearden. I don't know any better painting than his collages because he has the color, he has the texture, he has everything that one would want on a canvas.

AM: Well, while you were talking, two things came to mind, especially as to content, an aspect in which I want to get your reaction. I'd say that at one time in Italy just about every painter was doing at least a dozen Crucifixions.

MS: Yes.

AM: I remember the paintings. I don't know whether I really believed in that or not. But I do know that certain subject matter became, you know, that they were using them for the rich he could paint. He was painting them on crucifixes, or the Madonna and Child.

MS: Yes.

AM: I wonder what you think about the fact that painters now, let's say, black painters talking about revolution and all this sort of thing, would it be well if they would remember, you know, that what they believe and so forth may or may not have anything to do with the quality of the painting; that the painting of a Civil Rights march or painting a confrontation with the police or come up against the Black Hand, is not really the primary thing that's going to come through?

MS: To me there's absolutely no relationship at all. That's the thing that's very tricky about trying to paint in the way that I'm doing, it's so easy to sort o mislead yourself, you know, I mean without sort of getting into illustration. One has to be careful, as I said before not to be too literal; not trying to do the cop hitting the man on the head. But the first thing I did was just that, a cop hitting a man. After I did it I got afraid of it, i felt it was too much of an illustration. But after looking at it for about a year I found this was half the painting. I could look at this sort of media all along but I got so worried about what you just said about being literal and I had done this cop hitting the man. There was another thing I realize it now that it was, but when I did it I wasn't too sure. I said, what about it? Wondered if -- this is my first reaction whether I'm trying to run and put down this thing that happened? I'll tell you how the thing happened. The first Harlem riot was in 196? what -- 1965? 1966?

AM: 1964.

MS: 1964. I had just gotten back from a trip to Europe. I had forgot the keys of my gallery in my case in Europe. So I took my horn and my two bags and went to Small Paradise. Eric Dixon at the time was playing there and I was going to have him keep my bags for me and I'd sleep with him that night and come back for them in the morning. I got to Small's and unloaded the saxophone case and here comes a cop and "what have you got in the bags" kind of thing. I was trying to tell him -- I showed him my ticket and my passport -- that I had just got in from Europe and I didn't know what was going on. And I couldn't talk to the guy, you know. So after spending the night at Small's and coming home to paint this cop hitting a guy. And for a long time I wasn't sure whether this was just a kind of superficial reaction that I was trying to paint or whether it was something real. And it was. I just looked at this canvas again last night -- I never even finished it because I distrusted it. But now I know that it was the thing that gave birth to this other group of paintings.

AM: The second thing that nurtured to get any response, well, first I mentioned subject matter in certain Italian paintings. Another thing that came to mind as you were talking of course would have to be Goya. Now I can remember pictures of violence, pictures of war and what not. I can also remember even better pictures of naked women.

MS: Yes. Lush ones.

AM: One clothed and one naked and had he never painted pictures of violence and injustice and so forth, depicted the goodness just as much as this other.

MS: Yes, sure.

AM: Now in fact there's a question as to whether, let's say, one of those scenes of execution was as good a painting as any number of other paintings.

MS: Yes.

AM: How does that fit in with one's involvement with the subject matter? Obviously activists are concerned with their feeling as the thing develops things which are useful to them as propaganda and politically. And that's as legitimate as it can be so far as their objectives are concerned. And generally we have nothing against their objectives. But if they're going to destroy painters in the process of getting a bill passed I think I'd try to help them get the bill passed without destroying the painting. It's not necessary. We're trying to fit that in with the problem posed by Goya. We know that these guys will select The Disasters of War, the picture that Goya did. And Victoria ___ let some of them and overlooked The Naked Maja. [Lee--is this Cinq de Maio?] What were supposed to do? Do you follow me?

MS: Yes. Sure.

AM: This is perhaps something else which a painter struggles with when he finds himself involved with subject matter -- .

MS: Yes. In that sort of a predicament.

AM: -- or what otherwise he would regard as his models. Do you see?

MS: Yes.

AM: In other words, in painting does it make any difference to a painter really whether he's painting a saint or a whore?

MS: I don't think it does, really.

AM: Well, that brings up a certain intellectual embarrassment about whether you're painting justice or injustice.

MS: Yes, yes. I don't think it does. Because you can take a loaf of bread and paint it and make it look happy or sad as you can paint a person I think, if you're able to do this kind of thing with your sort of soul more or less, your painting soul. In fact I've seen a sort of happy pair of shoes. I've seen sad pairs of shoes. I've seen Van Gogh paint where they looked sad. I've seen him paint where they looked happy, healthy, alive, bright. And I think this has to do with the amount of conviction and the equipment that the painter has within his particular equipment bag one

might say. I don't think subject matter per se is the important thing.

AM: One come to it perhaps because he is a human being and lives truly.

MS: That's true. And naturally he is guided by certain things, you know, which sort of suggest one type of painting as opposed to another thing suggesting something else.

AM: Do you have any problem that sometimes literate people -- the idea of escape or you get escape and involvement, you get a sort of thing going to have people talk, mostly cocktail lounge talk?

MS: Sure. Sure. Yes.

AM: But sometimes during wartime a painter can see flowers a little more sharply. This is as much a response to war as painting bombs falling on innocent people.

MS: Yes. Sure. Certainly.

AM: I think these are just touching on a few things that many young painters in their haste overlook.

MS: Are overlooking, yes. Well, the world is moving so fast. That's why people want to do things fast. They want to do the trick things. The critic automatic show, do this, do something that you can do sort of on an assembly line. It all has to do with what someone said the other day -- what was it called? -- sickness, but the man said no, not sickness as much as white folks' sickness. I forget who said this. But it was a white fellow who said it. And I thought it was an interesting thing to have him say. And he meant that. And I'm inclined to agree with him. There's very much wrong with this country and since they are the controlling factors or elements in this country and there the big one. The fact that we may be sick, too, doesn't sort of change anything. Because if the disease is there it's spreading and anybody that's in the way is going to catch part of it.

AM: That's right. Well, here's a question: Why does one paint? Why should one paint? Why have you spent so much of your time painting, being involved in painting?

MS: Well, I think the simplest answer and most direct one I can give is that if I didn't paint I don't think I could really make it as a person. Painting to me is as important as my eating habits. I mean I do eat a lot, and I've got to paint a certain amount, I think I paint a lot, not as much as I should I guess, but I paint as much as my inner self will permit at the time. But like I say, it's been sort of my saving grace. People speak of having a balance. It's been the thing that's kept me away from psychiatry, one might say, and also going on a couch of some kind.

AM: But isn't there also another reason that when you go and you look at paintings you want to do a painting?

MS: Oh! Like I said, it's like when I go to a jazz concert and I hear the saxophones I come back and I want to play. It's the same thing with painting. I think good paintings always move me to paint more. That's why I think it's so important keeping in touch with painters. Every time I make a trip to Romy's studio for instance, I come back and I'm just sort of bursting with ambition. A lot of people go there and come away sort of discouraged. They say "he's painting this" then I should stop. But I take just the other side.

AM: Well, that sort of fits in with what Andre' Malraux talks about -- is talking about when he talks about artists' dialogue in effect -- .

MS: Yes. Sure.

AM: I think that this sort of gets to a basic consideration that all artists have and that a person outside the field of art doesn't know, that is, a politician for one doesn't know what bothers the artist, what artists are doing. What a musician is doing. I mean a guy does not pick up his horn and blow about injustice. He picks up his horn and responds to Charlie Parker, Arnie Coleman, Lester Young and those people and through that idiom, medium, or whatever you want to call it, he will then get some emotion and emotion might have some connection with this, but basically that is stimulated by the music.

MS: That's right.

AM: No matter how much a young painter who's really a painter is stimulated by, let's say, the

Civil Rights movement a certain amount of abstract expressionism will be somewhere in the sketch.

MS: That's right. To be sure.

AM: Or a certain amount of Pop and Op. That might be a bigger pitfall, but is likely to reflect art first.

MS: Yes. In fact that's his business. First of all he's an artist and then that other thing is what comes next. [Machine turned off.]

AM: You have pointed out that you have made a number of trips to Paris and now you're very much involved with spending quite a bit of your time there.

MS: Yes. Paris and London, of course.

AM: And Europe.

MS: Yes.

AM: But your base in Europe is Paris.

MS: In Paris, yes.

AM: Now what is Paris like? What is life in Paris like when you're there?

MS: Paris to me is the city as you might say. Aside from its beauty, fine restaurants, lovely people, just good feeling of being there, I mean I can be happy in Paris just sitting in a restaurant reading the paper, I can be as happy there as I can be, say, in a jam session in Harlem. And, by the way, we have great jam sessions in Paris. We -36-

MS: have a little room, we have Segall, we have Buttercups at Sadie's place. To me it's just sort of a dream city.

AM: You participate in the jam sessions as a musician?

MS: Oh, yes! Oh, sure!. For instance, whenever The Duke comes over, or Basie comes over, people like Cat Anderson and Buster Cooper and myself will go off to somewhere where we can play. I remember the last time The Duke came to Paris last year, Paul Gonzalez, Don Byas, Percy Poindexter came in and they played. And in the last number I took Paul's horn and played a couple of choruses of "Body and Soul." He came up to me and said, "Man, you're the first cat that ever took my horn and made it sound better than I did." Again this was an exaggeration. But what he meant was the tone of his horn. Paul is a fantastic saxophonist but he doesn't have much volume; he has to play with a mike. But he's a hell of a musician. Any musician will tell you this; he is the tenor man. But to catch him in a hall without a mike he's hard to hear because with his fantastic tone he does it in such a way that if he's not amplified you just don't get it, you know, unless the place is sort o acoustically equipped. This was the nicest thing anyone could have said to me because this guy I just admire no end. And if there's anything I would ever do other than painting it would be to go on the road with a band for a year. Just be a sideman, you know: to hell with the soloist; I mean that would come; but just sitting in with a group of guys playing arrangements. I would love doing that.

AM: So then you've been involved with music through the years?

MS: Oh, yes.

AM: And very close to the musicians.

MS: Yes. In fact one of my poker-playing partners in town her, Denny Moore, is a very fine trumpet player. He's playing with me tomorrow night. You know we have what we call not poker games but poker marathons. We start on Wednesday night and we end up Thursday evening; just playing hard poker. It's more fun than anything else. We enjoy it. Of course we play seriously. But it's more fun, actually than the game part, we really enjoy doing it. It's a kind of a challenge.

AM: So in Paris you find yourself just as active, if not more active, as a musician than you do in New York?

MS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. As a matter of fact I think I get a chance to do more playing because there's always something going on. Eventually what I'd like to do in Paris is sort of get some sort of club with a friend of mine, Johnny Romero. Johnny Romero is a Puerto Rican Negro who's been in Paris, oh, for I guess the last fifteen-odd years. He has a very fine club called the New Artists right behind a drug store in Saint Germaine. And this is a place where poets and painters and artistically-oriented people meet and just shoot the breeze in bull sessions. I mean, this is where Jimmy Baldwin for instance comes. Or you'd find someone like Peter Delaney occasionally. Or the newest jet set would be there. Johnny is sort of a playboy typed. He writes poetry and paints a bit. And he's always showing me a canvas or something that he's just done. He'll say, "Come, Mert, come and see Simone's work." Simone means his wife who is a very fine painter. Actually Johnny wants me to come by to see his things but he sort of does it under the guise of seeing his wife's things: who is really the pro; but Johnny would rather like to be that, too. He is a guy who has much talent but spends most of his time on his club. And he does that quite well. Fine little place, a nice atmosphere, very easygoing, with drinks and records. I mean there's no live music. But it's quite a nice place and I spend quite a lot of time there just sitting, reflecting, making notes and sketches.

AM: What is your business involvement? How much time does that take and how -- ?

MS: Well, my business involvement -- in Paris I can do all the business I need do in eight hours. And that's a good thing about it. Because I have one or two collectors with whom I work. I have pieces sent to them; they see it; they arrange a check, and that's it. Bam! I buy there. I will make a dinner appointment which starts at about, say, seven in the evening, and have drinks, we'll have dinner, we'll go back to the house till the time that's done. So my days are completely free, you know. I can paint, if I want to, say, fifty hours a week easily, having all the time in the world to do the other things I want to do, the jazz bit, doing the Flea Market, going to museums, the theater, the works. Because any business activity I handle it's merely at dinner or after dinner. With the exception maybe of seeing one or two Africans who've come in with shipment. And that's an early morning thing. They'll call you at seven, and you then meet at eight, and by nine-thirty or ten your finished. Because I don't go through the usual ritual. They'll give you a price of \$8,000 for a piece for which they want \$4,000. So when they give me eight I automatically offer four, and that's it. I don't go through the haggling that most people enjoy going through. This is what I can pay and if they want it they take it. And they know me so they know how to handle me. And I know how to handle them. So we get along. There's no sort of wasting of time. Because I told them I just don't like the game and they're used to doing it and it's a part of their habits. But I don't enjoy it and they know it. And they know that I will pay and so I get a chance to see pieces. It's the same thing here now. There are loads of Africans coming from Paris to sell in New York. So what they'll do now if they've got a great piece, since they know that I will pay as much as the next man, they'll say bam, that's for Mert and they'll put it aside for me. And that's it. Getting back to Paris, I think it's a city for a painter. Especially if you're sort of a romantic. And I'm really one of the romanticists of the old school you might say. I still like sentimental things. I still do enjoy the sweet landscape, or enjoy just sitting down listening to a bit of schmaltz at times. I like to dream, you know. Paris is a city for dreamers I guess. So that's why I enjoy it.

AM: It's also a city of great cuisine.

MS: Ah!!

AM: How has your interest in food been modified by your becoming a part-time Parisian?

MS: Well, I think you can sort of judge that by my waistline that I'm forever fighting. Oh, I think the best food I've had has certainly been in Paris. One thing I'd like to mention though is that the best ribs I've had in Paris have been at a little place called Shaheen's. This is New Orleans? the ex-footballer who's now living in Paris. He's now a French citizen. He's become quite a celebrity over there. He's mad a number of movies, he's a friend of all the stars. He's quite a host. He has this place in the Pigalle area called Shaheens. It's really quite a place. It's the kind of place you'd expect to find in Chicago or in Harlem, for instance, a bit like Wells sort of thing. But really down to earth. Whenever the Duke would come to town or Basie again you'd find Johnny Hodges, Harry Cummings sitting there. And you'd see Johnny ordering his double pork chop and chicken dish, you know, kind of thing; and not one dish, he'd order two. That kind of thing. It's just divine.

AM: That of course is American, and out of the American South.

MS: Yes, sure. That's just what I was going to say. But like I say, good French food there's

nothing like it. I've gotten in a bit of a rut with restaurants. I've got four that I frequent. One is call Weiden which is right off Saint Germain. And I've got La Palette again which is off the Pigalle. And there's one restaurant on Rue de Buci called The Petit Zinc which is just fantastic. I've got my favorite little table when I go and no matter what time of day it is whether it's seven in the evening or two in the morning you can always go there and get just fine cuisine. It's just a delight to sit around and have good wine and good food. It just sort of makes the day seem a little bit easier. But I guess it's a combination of things that make Paris what it is for me, you know. It's a combination of the good wine, the good people, the beautiful buildings, lovely little streets, watching the kids or the street artists doing a mural on the sidewalk and the cops not chasing them, and seeing the guide doing a jam session on the corner and not being bothered. It's a kind of paradise in a way. I'm not saying that Paris is all perfect because there are things there that are not quite what they should be. But it's certainly a place where one can sort of get along and manage without, you might say, driving themselves off the equal sort of limb, so to speak.

AM: So what do you do about the tremendous appetite and food and so forth that you've developed in Paris when you get back to New York?

MS: Well, I can cook, you know. And aside from cooking there are a few good restaurants here that I frequent. One being a little steak casino right down on University Place. I love this place. It's a little bit too bright, too large for my taste but the food is very good, the service is good. There are several other places in the Village that I've gone to, I can't think of the names now. One place that I like is Grandado's at the -- .

AM: Spanish Village.

MS: Yes. It's not as good as it used to be but it's still palatable. I go there. Of course I love good Chinese food and, you know, we can find that in New York. And Paris is full of great Chinese restaurants.

AM: Oh, yes! I remember -- .

MS: Really great ones. And Japanese also.

AM: I recall eating Chinese and Italian food in Paris.

MS: Yes. It's marvelous food. Of course in London I got in the habit of eating Russian food. I found Chaluba. And then a place for vodka. Two tremendous Russian restaurants. And then there's one very good Indian restaurant, the Tondui in Chelsea, which is just marvelous. I think it's probably the best Indian restaurant in the world. You can go there and eat for hours just one dish after the other. It's all delectable.

AM: What about the food from Charleston? What did the Paris cuisine do to that?

MS: Well, you know good home cooking is still good home cooking. And my mother, one of the great cooks, bless her soul. I never ate out much in Charleston. But there are several good restaurants there, one being the Brooks Brothers Restaurant. But, aside from my mother's cooking I don't know too much about Charleston cooking except for the Brooks Brothers. I didn't go for restaurants. But one cuisine doesn't mitigate against another. There's sort of room for all kinds. I have a democratic stomach. It takes all good things.

AM: Some people, for example, used to go to Haynes.

MS: Yes.

AM: And you don't realize how great Southern cooking is until you've enter it elsewhere and then they begin to realize.

MS: Oh, yes. And you talk about chittlin's. Oh, the French just love it. I mean this is the thing. This is really the dish over there. If you're not there early to put in your order you just don't get any. That and the catfish stew he does is fabulous.

AM: Seriously now, about contemporary painting in general. What is happening in art in America specifically, and also in Europe? What role does the American painter play to day? How do you relate yourself to the general trends that one reads about in the critical journals on painting? What do you think about what is going on?

MS: Well, the American scene today for me as far as painting is concerned is one that I'm not really in sympathy with. I don't like the kind of -- I don't know quite how to say this -- it's almost kind of too mechanical, too artificial, sort of a lack of warmth of expression. It's really what might call more sort of a crafts output than a painters, with few exceptions. I mean in the Pop, Op, that whole group. With the exception of someone like Rauschenberg and one or two others I don't think you have anybody of any consequence for me. I mean I've yet to get on to the light painting kind of thing. This is all beautifully done, it's all intelligent, it has to do with electronics and all this kind of thing, physics, even science. But it's not the painting thing somehow. It's up to date, it's modern, and anything else you want to say. It's avant garde, the other word you might use. But for me it's not the painter's bag. I think the thing can be good if you judge it by a different criterion, but if you're going to call it painting, for me it's missing the boat. With few exceptions I just don't think we have any American painters around today, excluding the young people that are coming up. But I mean for the boys in the big station I think maybe you've got a handful of guys that you can count, and the rest are just sort of missing the boat. You've got this group that one top guy paints a certain way, does a certain trick thing. Then they sort of get on the band wagon. This is all right, it will seem all right for a few years maybe because the Establishment sort of sets a standard whether it this, that, or the other. And they make the prizes. They make the creative market kind of. But you see these things come in and in two years they're gone; in a year they're gone. But the guys that are painting the solid pictures, I think that will be the test. The same thing is happening in Paris. I mean Paris is sort of copying what is happening here. They did the Op bit, they did the Pop bit they're doing the light things. But one season they're in and the next season they're out. Of course you've got the solid guys around in Paris, too, the old standbys who paint the pictures. These are the guys that are going to last. And this is the thing. And like I said, I'll keep on in my slow way painting the pictures, I don't care how old-fashioned they might seem. The say abstract expressionism is dead. So what? If I happen to paint a good picture and I'm using that style, I think that's valid. And my idea is to do this canvas, do it well, make it something that you believe in, and when this is done then you've done your job. You can even use a Dada approach if you want if it's done properly. But I think if you're going to start to take a wreck, wrecked automobile fender or this kind of thing and use it as an end in itself for art I just think you're barking up the wrong tree. I mean again with a few exceptions, someone like Armani does this kind of thing. He does it but he never stops there. He'll take the thing and he'll do something with it that'll bring it into another kind of bracket. But this guy, you know, he's one of those sort of freaks that comes along and you take maybe rubbish and do something with it that makes it valid. But, like I said, this is the exception to the rule. I just don't think we've got a dozen exceptions, you know. But we need time. And I think in another 8 or 10 years we'll have again a group of really exciting painters, and it will come out of the younger guys that are working today. I mean younger in the sense of reputation, not necessarily young kinds. Because there are guys doing serious things but they're doing it in a slow way and people don't hear about them because they don't have the audience. Like people ask me why don't I show. I don't show because I haven't found a gallery yet that I want to show with that will hang my work. And I don't believe in showing my own things other than for show. I've put one or two up just to let people see them, let them know I am working. A painter came in here the other day, he was surprised to see that I was still working because someone had told him I had gone into business and stopped. . . Well, what I did, I stopped showing but I didn't stop painting. In the last year-and-a-half I've done forty paintings. Of the forty I've sold twenty-two. And I've got eleven new paintings in Paris and I've got six here. So I mean I'm painting as much as ever; I just don't show. But I do paint. I won't ever stop until I'm gone and then on the other side that'll take care of itself. Well, I don't know, getting back now to what's going on in the contemporary scene I just hope to see something sort of solidified with this crazy black-white problem that we have. Because no matter what you do if people can't live with each other then there is no point in anything. It will just be a slow but sure sort of castration of each other. That's the only way of saying it. And I think the real hope here is the black man. I think it will come from him along with the youth of the other areas. [END OF INTERVIEW]

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