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Oral history interview with Frederick
Schwankovsky, 1965 March 1

Contact Information

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

Transcript

Interview

BH: BETTY LOCHRIE HOAG

FS: FREDERICK SCHWANKOWSKY

BH: This is Betty Lochrie Hoag on March the first, 1965, about to leave for Laguna Beach. I have an appointment this afternoon with an old gentleman who was part of the first commission set up there to start the Federal Arts Project. As there are two or three things that may be hard to explain in front of him, I thought I would put it on the tape first. One is his name which is very difficult to spell so I'll give it to you now. His last name is Schwankovsky and that is S-c-h-w-a-n-k-o-v-s-k-y. And his first names are Frederick (F-r-e-d-e-r-i-c-k), John (J-o-h-n), de (small d-e) St. (capital S, small t-period) Vrain (capital V-r-a-i-n). When I called him for an appointment, he welcomed me to come down; said he was eager to have me see his studio and his paintings. And he thought he should tell me that he is about eighty and that he is almost completely blind. The other thing that he wanted to tell me is that his studio and home has recently been made an historical spot and that he will tell me about it when I get there. [Mr. Schwankovsky is telling about a book he wrote on Metaphysics]

FS: ". . . which had been translated a couple of times, about putting God back into the schools."

BH: Oh, really?

FS: Yeah, I don't know whether I could find a copy for you or not.

BH: I hope you can.

FS: But I took a stand. Ah, the faculty, the whole faculty . . . I lined up against the whole faculty. There were a little over a hundred in the high school faculty where I was, very fine school by the way, which is blackface, 90% now, I guess.

BH: This was Los Angeles?

FS: Yes. Anyhow, this teacher said, "Well, if we haven't done anything else, we've taught them to think." And I said, "I don't believe you have." The only kind of thinking that is truly thinking is metaphysical thinking." "What do you mean by that, Mr. Schwankovsky?" they asked. And I started out to tell them and . . . they all had more degrees than I, and formal education of the best, but they didn't know what metaphysics was.

BH: Well, that was a rather big order to have to explain to them from the beginning if they didn't know!

FS: Well, I wrote it out and then we afterwards got it published in a couple places.

BH: This is Betty Lochrie Hoag on March 1st, 1965, interviewing Mr. Frederick John de St. Vrain Schwankovsky in his home in Laguna Beach. I'm probably not saying that right, do you pronounce . . . ?

FS: That's right, that's correct. Very good, very good.

BH: Mr. Schwankovsky is a very find artist, a painter, a lecturer, an editor, and a writer. You are one of the leading artists in California so I'm very happy to have the opportunity to talk to you.

FS: That's exaggerating, but that's all right.

BH: I certainly am not, because I interviewed Mr. Tolegian the other day and he just told me that the next thing I had to do was to come and see you. And also Mrs. Ropp in Desert Hot Springs told me that.

FS: Oh, sure. Oh, for heaven's sakes! Did she have something good to say about me?

BH: She did, indeed she did.

FS: Well, good for her!

BH: I stumbled across her at the Desert, and that was what she told me.

FS: She and I once had a terrible fight. She gave a good account of me?

BH: She spoke beautifully of you. But before we start talking about the Project, I'd like to ask you a little about your life. When were you born and where?

FS: Born in Detroit, Michigan, January 21, 1885, and most of the time lived at 52 Alfred Street. I was born on Madison Avenue but they moved almost immediately. Later on, my father built a home in Grosse Pointe Farms and we lived there part of the time, and later all of the time. And it's a beautiful place on the shores of the Lake, and I had all the advantages of horseback and boating and all those things. I really was a very fortunate young man. And then finally, my dad sort of broke up with the company that he had in Detroit and went to Wanamaker's to run their piano department. And then he went to Gimble Brothers to run theirs. Wanamaker's was in New York and Gimble Brothers I think was in Philadelphia. Well, I sort of followed him around and studied; I studied at the Philadelphia Academy of the Fine Arts, then later in New York I studied at the Art Students' League.

BH: Excuse me, Mr. Schwankovsky, did you say that he was selling pianos?

FS: Yes.

BH: Was he a musician himself?

FS: Well, yes, he was. He was a singer but he could show a piano off. But he wasn't a pianist.

BH: I just wondered if there were any artists or artistic people in your family?

FS: Oh yes, my mother was a good pianist. And then of course when I married, my wife was really a splendid pianist.

BH: How young were you when you first started at art school?

FS: Well, my first lessons were private lessons in Detroit from some woman called Gesserie. I imagine she's been gone a long time, but I didn't have any good lessons in art, except correspondence, until I got to Philadelphia and the Academy of Fine Arts. And I don't know how old I was then, probably in my early twenties. Then I went to the Art Students' League in New York where I just missed getting a scholarship. I got "first honorable mention" and my good friend got the scholarship. But I was interested in illustration and I've always been interested in figure drawing. You'll see some of them around here when we get time to look at them. And I like still-life; still-life to me is the "chamber music of art."

BH: That's a nice way to put it.

FS: And it has all the charm of a small space. In many ways you can be more scholarly in still-life as to your techniques and your interpretations of things than you can be in a landscape or portrait. Portraits have to be dated. People like my wife over there, with her hat on, you see. [He indicates her portrait.] That's a hat that may never come back into style again. And hair-dos and everything change, men's costumes, everything changes through the years. A landscape is apt to be dated, too, to a great extent by the type of architecture. And the way that . . . Well, this village used to be completely deferent than it is now.

BH: California certainly changes all the time.

FS: Oh, yes. So I like still-life as a sort of, ah . . . I said it before. But at any rate I also like illustration. And I like pen-and-ink work but I didn't follow that up. I did a lot of magazine illustration, not of the best, ah, for the best magazines, but for little magazines.

BH: Do you remember the names of any of them?

FS: No. "Cosmopolitan," but it's gone, I think even that magazine is gone; it was a New York magazine.

BH: I remember it.

FS: Well, no. My illustration was for making a living, but it never amounted to much. Then, when I came out West . . . I got a chance to come out West to Los Angeles. I landed here without ever having interviewed any of the Board of Education. I had no collegiate standing at all. The trouble with collegiate art students is that they usually can't draw and paint; at least they couldn't in those days. And they had to have somebody out here who really knew something about it, especially stage art. So when I got out here, I was hailed and encouraged and given the maximum, the ten year maximum tenure, which, you know, was a very exceptional thing for them to do.

BH: Now was this at Manual Arts High School?

FS: Yes, Manual Arts High School.

BH: When was this . . . what? In the Twenties? Do you remember?

FS: No, I'm afraid I don't but you might find it in my book.

BH: We'll have to start subtracting backward.

FS: I don't know. I was . . . When we came out here, just about the time of the first World War In fact, I was, ah, my wife and I and our one child went over to the park and appeared before the Board. You know, the

BH: What kind of board was it?

FS: Wait a minute, let me Where they get soldiers, bring soldiers in . . . what do you call it?

BH: Oh, I know what you mean and I can't think of the word either.

FS: Yeah. Well, anyway

BH: Enlistments?

FS: Yeah.

BH: Enlistment center?

FS: Yes. Not only did we have a child with us but my wife was just very pregnant, sticking out with another then.

BH: That automatically disqualified you.

FS: And then I was a schoolteacher and they needed them, you know. So I was left out of the War, which I guess was a good thing because I don't know that I'd have been a very good soldier. Maybe I would have, but at any rate I went on with my teaching. And we had great successes putting on Gilbert and Sullivan operas, and doing it well.

BH: Oh, really!

FS: I mean the music department was wonderful and we had a full sized stage, 40 feet wide with flies and everything, until after the earthquake that ruined it and

BH: You mean the building was demolished?

FS: Well, it was condemned and torn down. After that we had an usual lecture platform and you couldn't do much on that. We did wonderful things at Manual Arts High School with art, with acting, and singing and music, orchestra and staging -- very good staging.

BH: Do you think that any of the students whom you trained there went into the movie industry and applied what they learned?

FS: Oh, yes, yes. We had a big banquet a few years ago and some of them who attended were people like Walt Disney. They got very good with animation and things like that. Some of them, one of them was a camera man, although he didn't need to draw for that, but he'd gotten his art ideas at Manual Arts. And oh, yes, a lot of them did, naturally, being located here.

BH: Was Disney one of your students?

FS: Oh, no, Disney's probably, ah, he's not old, but no, no. He's a genius, by the way, in my opinion.

BH: Oh, in mine too. I think he's wonderful.

FS: As I say, some of my students had the honor of working with him. I think it is an honor. So that was part of it. Being near Hollywood, we had lots of talent, young girls, you know, who became singers and actresses and young men who succeeded because they had opportunities, being so near the motion picture industry.

BH: Well, I'm ashamed to say that I didn't know . . . didn't realize that Manual Arts included anything that didn't have to do especially with the hands. I supposed it was just a craftsmanship school.

FS: No, it was a full-sized high school with everything. And it did have a good manual arts department, that is, shops and printing shops. We printed the books for the Board of Education in many cases. And they had very fine equipment. but they taught everything that any high school teaches. And they had one of the biggest art departments I think any high school ever had. I had 7 art teachers (including myself) who did nothing but art.

BH: Good Heavens!

FS: Yes. And, you see, I didn't let them do anything but art! I was very, well, kind of ferocious about that because I realized that art in a high school is overwhelmed. In fact, all teachers anywhere in a high school are overwhelmed by minutiae and regimentation and taking care of the crowds at lunchtime, or watching the playground, or doing things like that. And I fought to have my art teachers so that they could remain artists. My idea was that the high school art teachers ought to remain or become artists if they weren't already. And I had one woman, a very fine ceramist -- I'll show you some of her work in the kitchen -- she did nothing but ceramics. I had another woman who did nothing but art metal. And then I had women who were devoted to design, dress design, and things like that for girls. And I taught the life-drawing and I was I had a very interesting experience. See, I came out of art school so I had models pose like this girl you can see back here [indicates a nude]. This girl was one of our models and I said I'm sure that [Jackson] Pollack saw that picture.

BH: Oh really?

FS: Yeah. See, that was all she had one.

BH: Little panties?

FS: Little panties. And that was shocking because even the college didn't do that. There was one of the other high schools that did, too, but

BH: You were considered very risqué for having nude models?

FS: I fought that thing through and I found that it had a very beneficial effect on the boys and girls. And I made good at it. I had fights over it, I mean. You know, I remember one time in the . . . the boys' Vice-principal (who was a fine person but rather, oh, "stuffy" I guess you'd call him) came up and he walked into my studio where the class was working. Here was a woman posing with nothing on above the waist. And he looked at her, and he was the type of man who would be shocked by anything like this. So he said, "Mr. Schwankovsky, has this been passed on?" And I said, "Oh, yes sir, I passed on it myself." And he said, "Oh no, no, no, no. Tut, tut, tut!" So he dashed down and set up the girls' Vice principal. Well, she came up and she was a much bigger person than he, and she knew "Swannie." Everybody called me "Swannie."

BH: Oh, did they?

FS: She knew "Swannie" couldn't be very well repressed, that he'd spring up again. So she said, "Well, I don't know. I think you'd better be a little more careful, don't you?" And I said, "Well, maybe." So she said, I'm going to have to send up Dr. Wilson." He was the Principal. And I said, "OK." So Dr. Wilson came up and he was a very fine man. He had a German educational background, Heidelberg or something. And he said, "Mr. Schwankovsky, I think you're kind of going overboard a little bit here." I said, "Doc, if you'll just keep your office help out of here, we'll never have any trouble." But then I would go back to putting a brassiere on the girl for a month or two until it was all forgotten, and then the brassiere would come off again. Oh, I fought my way! And the stories kept coming back to me from, say, the librarian, about how the art students respected the medical books and other books with nude bodies in them. Things like that. And how improved their point-of-view was. And the parents. I never had any complaints from the parents.

BH: Well, that's unusual. Isn't that fine. I'm glad to know that.

FS: Well, the parents, ah, two things. The parents liked two things that I did. One was that I introduced their children to the human body as an artistic thing, not nasty or dirty or anything. And the second was that I introduced them to religion.

BH: Really?

FS: Yes. We had a rule in Los Angeles that any teacher that was caught really teaching religion Boy, I'm telling you, the payroll could all be held up and everything! So what I did was to teach it as Art History. And I had started with ancient art, ah, sometimes, well, Egyptian usually. And went from the Egyptian to the early Christian, and the Romanesque, and the Gothic, and skipped off and did the Oriental. And every time I came to these things Now, when I came to the Oriental I told them about reincarnation and most of them had never heard of it before. And, just between you and me, we never will understand the inequalities of peoples' fortunes - - the apparently blatant injustice that is done people. We never can understand it if we're looking at half the

circle. And also, you never can understand inheritance and the characters of people if you're taking into account inheritance and environment and heredity but if you're not taking into account the actual personality that has come back after many experiences.

BH: Of this individual?

FS: Of this individual. the permanent individual. And so our Western civilization is floundering. They don't get anywhere with these understandings. And the poor preachers are trying to say that the ways of God or Providence are past "finding out": they are all right, especially when you only take half the dirt and leave the other half out.

BH: Not looking at the other half?

FS: They don't dare to.

BH: Well, it's amazing that you were able to give this to the children in high school.

FS: Yes. I went into a drugstore across the street one day to get a soda, and the girl sodajerker was one of the girls from the school. She said, "Hello, Swannie. You know, I've been going back to church since you talked to me in Art History. I said, "Yes?" What church do you go to?" She said, "Oh, I'm a Roman Catholic. I never worked at it, but I'm going back now."

BH: Isn't that wonderful!

FS: So I never affected their loyalty to any particular church.

BH: You didn't influence them by anything you felt.

FS: Then I had a young Negro who took up Yoga and became very dignified and very self-respecting and very, very interesting.

BH: Was he an artist, too?

FS: Oh, yes. They were all art students.

BH: Because of the way they developed, you certainly must feel too that the most interesting art students you had, because of the way they turned out, were Manuel Tolegian and Jackson Pollock who were friends.

FS: Yes, and then there was another one, a friend of theirs, I'll think of his name in a minute. It was a Jewish name and he changed it a little because he didn't like it.

BH: Oh, yes. He's in New York painting now, isn't he?

FS: Yes, I'll think of it in a minute. [It was Philip Guston, then named Philip Gordstein.] Yes, those three were interesting. They started one of the early revolts against school rules which are now becoming more common in colleges and everywhere else.

BH: You mean against the curriculum itself?

FS: Yes, against the way the school was being run. And they got fired, they got fired out of the school on account of it.

BH: For Heaven's sake!

FS: Oh, yes.

BH: All three of them?

FS: Yes. There was another one who was a big tall fellow. He didn't . . . he wasn't particularly an artist, I've forgotten him completely. Tolegian knows who he was, or at least could remember his name, I guess.

BH: I brought you a print of one of Mr. Tolegian's pictures. I thought you would enjoy seeing it. He'd just gotten them from the printers. He's going to sell "art prints" of these large 'scapes.

FS: Yes, I know that one.

BH: Oh, do you? Isn't it beautiful?

FS: Yes. Are you gonna . . . do you need this for yourself?

BH: I do because he gave it to the Archives. I have to send it back to Detroit for their collection. But I didn't mail it today. I thought I'd show it to you. But that's such a far cry from Jackson Pollock's work!

FS: Did I tell you I think I started Jackson Pollock in that? We were having . . . It starts in Laguna really. We were having this little house next door belongs to me and was the first place . . . we got it for a week-end cottage. And we had one of our local painters come in here to work on it. The floor was just rough boards but he painted the floor and then he splattered it . . . you know, with another color. Then I went up to Manual Arts to paint scenery. The kids did the actual work, of course. I had painted scenery in New York, but not this way. And while I was painting scenery in Manual Arts I would paint a blue sky, grade it, the kids would do it of course, grade it from blue down to a lighter blue towards the horizon. And then I would spatter it with a very pale yellow or green or some thing like that -- and have the kids go around and just spatter it.

BH: Pardon me. Was this to get a luminous effect from a distance? Of luminosity?

FS: Yes. You get the luminosity and you get the broken color. So Jackson Pollock . . . Then I also took some watercolors and spread them on paper, and while they were still wet, I dropped alcohol on them. The alcohol makes them spread out, pushes the water away and makes a peculiar halo-like affair. Well, Jackson Pollock may have (now, I'm not saying he did, but he may have) picked up ideas from some of those things. Because, in making his drip and dribble pictures, he just put the stuff on the floor, you see, and then he went around and dribbled and dripped and did all kinds of things like that. You've seen pictures?

BH: Yes. And I saw the motion picture show which showed him working.

FS: Oh, did you?

BH: That showed him doing them.

FS: Oh, I didn't know there was one. I've seen illustrated magazines done in England with pictures of him. But I think maybe he got his ideas started out there, but I wouldn't say for sure that he did.

BH: Did you have boys doing it in your classes just for fun, as an experiment with form?

FS: Oh, just, just an experiment for techniques.

BH: Mr. Tolegian remembers about this. He also told me on the tape about it. How old were the boys at this time, 17? 18?

FS: Oh yes, along there. I never knew. You know, I was . . . my method of teaching was never to try to understand the student too much. I think it's goofy, I think it's absolutely crazy to ask a teacher to try to understand twenty or thirty people. But what you should do is to understand yourself and create an atmosphere in which they can grow.

BH: Mm-m-m. Interesting approach.

FS: Yes, and that's the only thing I could do. I'm not subjective enough. I wouldn't be interested in: Who's your dad? Who's your mother? Is your father, is your mother a drunkard, and so forth. I wouldn't care. I mean, I couldn't, and paint pictures and be all the rest of the things at the same time. And teachers who try to do that, as I see it now, are being victimized. They cease to be personalities, and that is what they should be, a personality. Would you ask this extreme, say Jesus, to come in and know all about your ancestors and everything else, or would you expect Him to exude a certain feeling and power that He has? Now teachers do have power if they'll be free to use it. I have a daughter who's a wonder. She's working with exceptional children now. Are they doing much with exceptional children back East?

BH: Not that I know of.

FS: Well, they're beginning it out here and it is terrific. It's terrific. My daughter, Betty, is coming down Saturday and they're going to take a movie on the 18th, I think, for the Archives of the Los Angeles County Schools, about Old Laguna. I don't know where else they're going to go, but this is one place. I've already made arrangements. By the way, there's a model of this place, a wonderful model of this place, on display downtown. It would be too late to see it today. Do you live around here someplace?

BH: No. When we get through taping, I'm going back to Los Angeles.

FS: How soon, I mean. Today?

BH: Oh yes, in another half hour.

FS: But I mean you're not coming down again?

BH: I will be back later, yes.

FS: Well, I was going to say I could plan that if you came down during the banking day. It is at the Laguna Beach Federal Savings Association. And they have a model of this place done to scale. Inside are the artists with their paintings, little figures about this high [indicates an inch].

BH: Well, how fascinating!

FS: And Betty's coming down to see about having a movie taken up in that and I think they can move the camera up close, you know, and get the people inside to a certain extent, the little toys. It's been very carefully done.

BH: Well, does your daughter work for the Board of Education in Los Angeles?

FS: Oh, yes. She's a teacher in schools. But she has almost created her own job. She goes around to the classes and by the kind of thing she says she draws out the exceptional minds.

BH: Is she a psychiatrist or an artist, or both?

FS: She's just a school teacher. But she has an immense faculty in that respect, and she's much respected for it. And so far not getting much extra money for it, but

BH: That'll come.

FS: That'll come. She's a remarkable person.

BH: Mr. Schwankovsky, does she have a married name?

FS: Yes, Betty Duncan.

BH: I just wanted to write it down because it would be interesting if I meet her. Why, ah, excuse me.

FS: She's divorced, but that's her name.

BH: Tell me about this house. You've referred to it a couple of times and you still haven't told me about why it's an historical monument.

FS: Oh, yes. Well the place was down where the Laguna Beach Hotel now is. You passed that.

BH: Oh yes.

FS: That's where it used to be.

BH: On the highway?

FS: Ah, yes. And it was built by a Mr. Yoch (Y-o-c-h, I guess it is) and it was just up to the doors. Those doors that you see back there [indicating] just taking the stage and that's all. It was empty. It was used as . . . in the early days of Laguna, it was used as the town hall, as a church and

BH: Kind of general meeting house?

FS: It was the only big meeting place they had.

BH: Isn't that interesting.

FS: And so they, ah . . . Couprin went to Yoch and said, "We need a place to have art shows. Could we use this?" And he said yes. So they took the windows out and put them up on top, up there [he indicates ceiling], you can just barely see the place where they put them. They made a skylight out of the windows and had no windows in the place whatever. They covered the walls with burlap and had their art shows in here. Then later

BH: Pardon me. Was that the Laguna Beach Art Association that was behind this?

FS: This was the birthplace of the Laguna Beach Art Association. So then later they were going to build . . . they built a new hotel and they were going to tear this down. And one of our members put up a small sum of money

and we wired Harold McCormick, you know, the wealthy person who makes the farm instruments and implements, Harold McCormick. He probably died long ago. At any rate, he was interested in a little art theatre, so we wired him. And he said, "Have it moved." And so my wife phoned me from here and said, "Well, we own this lot. It was empty. What do you think, Eddy, about putting a place, a big building on the lot next door? And they can use it for a little art theatre." I said, "Well, I'll do it on the basis of a 5-year arrangement. And after that something else has got to be arranged." And she said, "All right, I'll tell them." So it was moved up the street. Now here's an interesting thing: There was no back end on it at the time, just the front end. And while it was moving up the street (slowly of course) they put on a play, and the people walked behind it and watched the play!

BH: Oh what fun!

FS: Yes, That was Old Laguna. People walked behind it to watch the play. That was here in Laguna and Wayne Moore was director. He's a difficult person and nobody could get along with him, but he did put on plays and he was a good director. I mean he could teach people to act but he couldn't act himself. But he could teach people to act. Any rate, we got the building up here and it stood on the timbers without being fixed up for quite awhile until the neighbors began to complain. In the meantime, we were living next door in this little place. And finally they got some money together, some more money, and they began adding this back end and putting a foundation under it -- things like that. It's a very wonderful old place.

BH: It's a beautiful place; it has great charm.

FS: And these are the old slates you see. Of course, on top of them there had to be a good roof, but these are the old slates.

BH: Now Mr. McCormick didn't offer to pay for any of the doing of this?

FS: Well, he paid for having it moved up here, but I don't think we ever asked him for any more. The rest was gotten together by some people who were in the Little Art Theatre. He may have, I don't remember. And anyhow, different people put in small sums, including me. And mine were very small! And so it became a Little Art Theatre and we put on a few shows. And then came the earthquake and the earthquake shook down one of the high schools in Long Beach completely.

BH: This was in '33, wasn't it?

FS: You'll have to look it up somewhere; probably was. At any rate, they passed a new building code which said we couldn't have more than a couple of dozen people in this place because it isn't the right standard building material. And so they had to abandon it. Also, the Depression came at the same time, so the people who were backing it up backed out. And we said, "What do you want us to do with the building?" "Well, I don't know. Well you can have it if you want it." But they didn't want it; there wasn't anyplace to put it. So we finally said . . . we got bids on tearing it down, and that would have been expensive. And then Nellie, my wife (who was a brilliant woman) got a builder and they devised this arrangement: put the windows back in, and this door which is the door of the old Laguna Beach Hotel.

BH: It is?

FS: Yes, we bought it for fifty cents.

BH: Beautiful paneling! It's a lovely old door.

FS: And then we got these great big chandeliers and things like that. Nellie and I went up to what they call a "wrecking place" in Los Angeles and we picked up a lot of things, like that balustrade across there.

BH: You found that in such a place?

FS: Yeah.

BH: Well, that's amazing!

FS: Well, they have those places; they keep nice things in those places. This [indicates paneling] was torn down from some big apartment house, you see. And that balustrade I think was from some city hall or something. And then those doors into the kitchen -- I don't know whether they're closed or opened . . .

BH: The red ones?

FS: Yeah. They were the doors in a little hotel someplace. And then this one, this is a very cute window up there. Men who know about such things look at that and said, "Oh, I never saw anything like that before!"

BH: Well, I never did either. Interesting panes, yes.

FS: Everything's antique here, including me!

BH: Well, if you're an antique, I love antiques; this is wonderful. You know, you mentioned the Laguna Beach Art Association and, of course, one of the reasons I was asked to interview you was because of the Federal Arts Projects. And I know that many of the members of the Art Association, including you, were active on the first committees here. For instance, I have, er, had a friend who died last year whom you probably knew, Mrs. Webb?

FS: Oh, yes, yes. Let me tell you about Mrs. Webb. Mrs. Webb, you knew . . . you knew her well enough to know she was a great big fat woman who had to move around in a wheel chair. You knew that?

BH: Yes. I saw her 2 years ago.

FS: She became my student years ago and at that time she was living on the old age pension. she published her own pictures. The last time I heard of her, her income was over \$500,000 [a year].

BH: Bless her heart. Well, do you know, she was my mother's second-grade art teacher in Montana?

FS: I'll be!

BH: My mother's first art teacher in the second grade and my mother is still painting in Montana. They called Mrs. Webb "Vonnie," didn't they?

FS: Vonnie, did they?

BH: Yes. She told me when I was here that she had had her little stand with her paintings at the Laguna Festival every year since they began, which is quite a record. You probably had paintings in it from the beginning of it, too, didn't you?

FS: Well, I had some. And I was the director of the "Pageant of the Masters" after the War.

BH: Oh really?

FS: I resuscitated the "Pageant of the Masters" after the War.

BH: I didn't know they had had it before that.

FS: Yes.

BH: For goodness sake!

FS: But, you see, during the War no assemblies were allowed anywhere around here. No lights could be on or anything. So this stuff, [all the prop material] was packed away. And afterwards they got me to become director, and I pulled it out and had to repaint a lot of it and rebuild it, invent new stages, and things. My wife and I worked our heads off to get it put on. And it'll tell in the book there someplace what year that was, but we'll look that up later. Anyhow, it was revived after the War. Then from then on, other people took it. Nobody ever gets along with the Board more than one year at a time.

BH: Well, it must be a tremendous amount of work, for one thing.

FS: Oh, it was terrible! And almost all of it was then done for nothing, you know. I got a thousand dollars and spent more than that just fussing around with it. But now they get pretty well paid; it's gone up a lot. At any rate, my wife and I helped. We picked out characters for the plays and had a lot of fun.

BH: Incidentally, I haven't asked you. Was your wife an artist, too?

FS: She was a very fine pianist, singer, too.

BH: Wonderful combination, with you and your painting!

FS: Yes, that is true. And she was very psychic. She and I got an early start on positive knowledge of the continuation of life, and that is a great thing. It's the most important thing that can be discovered. What's the matter with people, you see, is that they're living a dog's life. They think they die and that's the end of it. Or else they have a vague idea maybe there's something there. Or else they have a horror story like they do in the old medieval religion. The truth of the matter is that there is a lot of knowledge about life after death now, but they ignore it. And preachers have to ignore it. How about this man down the street, if he tried to spring on those polite, bored parishioners of his something that they wouldn't accept, they'd say, "Go away and we'll get

another man who doesn't believe in it."

BH: I know you've done a lot of writing on metaphysics. You also have been an art critic.

FS: Yes, I wrote quite a lot of art criticisms.

BH: One of the ones I wanted to ask you about was quite interesting. It was in an old "California Arts and Architecture" magazine of 1935, talking about Leo Katz's mural for the Frank Wiggen Trade School.

FS: Oh, he didn't like me for that!

BH: For the article you wrote? I thought you were very sympathetic to him.

FS: I was, but I told him that, you see, he was so sadistic in the way he handled that thing.

BH: Was he?

FS: Oh, yes, a sadistic Jew. And I have nothing against Jews as such, but he had this, he hated . . . he thought the American woman was dominating men. And one of the figures in the painting is a woman, you know, stabbing a man in the back with a big knife.

BH: Oh, I saw that.

FS: Did you see that?

BH: I certainly did, yes.

FS: Well, that's his philosophy, that's what the American woman does; she stabs the man in the neck with a big knife. And I didn't like that. I said, "No, that's a sadistic point of view." And he thought I was . . . oh, he was one of those persons who thought that if you said anything against the picture it was because you were being paid. He said to me just this way: "Of course you know which side your bread is buttered on; you want to get along with the Board of Education." So that's the type he was. He was a bitter man. That's the trouble with him.

BH: Well, you were defending him in this article because he had been called a Communist, and you said he was perhaps an idealist and a radical, but not necessarily a Communist radical. In any event, the mural was taken down, wasn't it? They didn't leave it up at all.

FS: Yes, yes. Well, it was too nasty. How would you like to go into school everyday, go into your school everyday and see a woman stabbing a man in the throat with a big knife?

BH: What gave me the creeps was not only the bad side showing evil but the part that was supposed to be the good side, which had an extremely unpleasant-looking, voluptuous woman with two youngsters below who were in the movie industry and it wasn't very pleasant.

FS: No. Oh well. Katz had a terrific opinion of himself. And he gave lectures to the art teachers, and he thought of himself as an oracle. And really, he was a well-informed person, but he had a very bad vent in his nature.

BH: I don't know what's happened to him. I've tried to find most of the artists who have done murals and most of them I've located, but I haven't gotten a lead on him at all. He seems to have disappeared. I thought one of the other articles you wrote was very interesting, especially because of the subject, what you had been lecturing about. It was Tay Hambidge's "Dynamic Symmetry." I remember reading about it that same time and thinking it was just fascinating.

FS: It is fascinating. Well, I'm glad you found some of my stuff.

BH: Oh, I had a wonderful time going to the library looking up these things to see what you have done.

FS: I used to write for the "South Coast News" a lot when we were having a big fight down here about Modernistic Art. And we had an experience here that was years and years ago. Don't think that I'm entirely opposed to the Modernists if I speak this way, but I was opposed to the kind we had then. They came in, they infiltrated, and they finally took the place over by voting. And then they threw everybody out except people like Cuprill who were au courant, whom they couldn't legally. So they put in all of these other . . . this other kind of painting and the personnel were terrible. The president of the Art Association was a playboy with a reputation for being something else, which we won't talk about. And, oh, the man in charge of the gallery was intoxicated much of the time. And then they had these terrible pictures. And they had a dive down the street (an artists' studio it had been before) where they had some more of those paintings, where young people got intoxicated and were driving around and getting killed. It was bad. We put them out of town. I had a big fight at that time.

The Mayor and the editor of the paper and I all ganged up on the bunch, and the citizens got aroused, and we put them all out at one time -- by one big vote.

BH: Isn't that interesting? I had no record of that.

FS: Oh, it was a terrific fight. And it was the only time anybody ever won over the Modernists (who were usually Communists). It was the only victory along this coast. Every place else it was bad. Los Angeles was just prostrate, and so was San Diego.

BH: Well, actually your disagreement was more political than with their painting though, wasn't it? I mean their influence from the philosophy they had as a result of their morals?

FS: In the first place, they were not only atheists and drunkards and homosexuals; you can't just get all het up and admire people like that! And they were almost entirely of that type and they were dregs of humanity. So it may not be that way now. That was at the beginning; that was 20 years ago. I have friends who are painting modernistically and they're perfectly nice people now. But that isn't the way it was then; these were a really militant bunch of deviationists.

BH: I thought you made one of the best criticisms of a lot of modern painting long before then. In fact, it was January of 1933 and when you wrote in one of the magazines where you said that the new art forms which require no preparation, and then you went on and broke it down. Not because they didn't want to create something fine, but because they hadn't gotten in an worked to learn any basic rules of art.

FS: They'd never learned anything. The only things they can make are ugly things. Now I can make . . . I can teach somebody in a week to make ugly faces; in fact it wouldn't take that long. But to make a good-looking face requires very, very careful training; you have to know something about anatomy.

BH: It was interesting to me to put it together with another article in which you'd written about encouraging "individuality in the artist." You brought this up in talking about your high school students. And you certainly got results, being able to have your students turn out as diverse as they did! Incidentally I've thought of the name of that other boy at the school. It Was Philip Guston, wasn't it? He was Phillip Goldstein, I think, at that time?

FS: Goldstein, yes. He didn't like that name so he called himself Guston, and he's in New York. I wrote him once but he didn't answer.

BH: I believe he's in New Jersey. I wonder if you had the right address?

FS: Yes, I did, Woodstock, New Jersey.

BH: Yes, that's right.

FS: I've been there many years ago. I had spent the most uncomfortable night of my life sleeping on hay in a barn there when I was just in high school. But Guston never answered me, so maybe he didn't get it, or maybe he's that kind. I don't know anything about it.

BH: He and (I believe) Fletcher Martin are near there. Martin also used to be out there.

FS: Fletcher Martin?

BH: I believe so. Two other students of yours I'm quite sure mentioned you. One was Don Totten; do you remember him from the school?

FS: Don Cotten.

BH: Totten, Totten with a "T."

FS: No.

BH: Well, he was active in the Project and then the other one was Al King, Albert King.

FS: Nope.

BH: He was responsible for all the mosaics on the Long Beach Auditorium during the Project.

FS: Oh yes, those are wonderful!

BH: I'm sure he was one of your students because

FS: Could be, I don't know. Well, I just didn't keep in touch; I'm not the right type. I could have kept in touch and had a long list, but I lost touch.

BH: Well you couldn't be expected to when you were so busy.

FS: Well, that's not the way I'm built; I just couldn't keep interested in things like that. I have lots of shortcomings and that's one of them.

BH: Well, I know, as far as your own painting goes, you've certainly been active. All the different "Who's Who's" list you as active in many things. "Laguna Beach Art Association for life, and Southwest Art Association, an Honorary President." Now why did they give you that, do you remember?

FS: Well, I was the first president at "Southwest; " I was the Founding President. They should have put it in "Founding President."

BH: Central California Art Association?

FS: I guess it was after that they had a President, but they made me their Honorary President. I guess, something like that. Anyway, I started it.

BH: "Central California Art Association" and "Society of Western Artists" . . .

FS: Well, that's quite . . . the "Society of Western Artists" is quite a big society. It's mostly in San Francisco.

BH: Oh, I see. Have you exhibited much up there?

FS: No, no.

BH: They're just claiming you as their own because you're from California, right?

FS: What happened was that they had a branch in Fresno, and I was president of the branch there but I got up to San Francisco a couple of times but I never exactly exhibited in San Francisco.

BH: Well, that's strange.

FS: Nothing much to do with that.

BH: One of the "Who's Who's" said that you have work in the "Mission Beach Art Galleries." Are those paintings?

FS: Well, I don't know if they're still there or not -- yes, paintings of movie stars. And what happened was one of the biggest hurry-up projects I ever did. They were semi-commercial. There was a dance hall down there and, I don't know, it may still be there, which

BH: In Los Angeles, you mean?

FS: No, in Mission Beach.

BH: Mission Beach. Oh.

FS: And they had 24 pillars, square pillars. And they wanted to call it the "Gallery of the Stars," so they had me paint a picture of 24 different movie stars. It's in the book there someplace, 24 different stars. I wouldn't be able to tell you their names now, although I guess I will remember some of them. They were semi-commercial affairs, and I knocked them out in a hurry. But they seemed to be very successful. And they might still be there, but I imagine they're gone long ago. The owner was going to sell them, auction them off, or something, when he got through with them.

BH: When I go through there, drive through there the next time, I'll have to stop and find out.

FS: If you can find out if they are still there, I'd like to know.

BH: Oh, I'd let you know, of course. Then I'm sure the Manual Arts High School . . . I'm sure they own some of your paintings. But I wondered if you've done any murals there, or have you done any mural work at all, Mr. Schwankovsky?

FS: Actually nothing worth mentioning, no. I did know but it must be gone long ago. It was for USO; what is it called now?

BH: WPA?

FS: No, a place where they entertain the soldiers, what do they call it?

BH: Those were the USO Centers.

FS: Well, they had a stage and there was a big stage. Don't go down hunting for it because it's probably gone long ago. There was a big space there and I made a painting in watercolor of -- Casablanca was the name of the place.

BH: In Africa?

FS: Yes, it was supposed to look like Casablanca. It did. I had some buildings and things in the background and then I had a whole lot of seagulls flying all over the place which looked very nice. I was over in that part of the world once, and it's true that the seagulls just crowd around the sewage thrown off the ships.

BH: Were you on a painting trip there?

FS: Well, this was before I really began painting. My family, my father and mother and sisters and I, we took a little trip. I didn't do any painting; this was before I got into that. I only tried to.

BH: I wanted to ask if you remember anything about when the Federal Art Project was started in Laguna Beach. I know you were on the first committee; I read that.

FS: Was I?

BH: You've probably forgotten about it then. So many people have.

FS: Federal Arts

BH: If I tell you some of the names of people who were at Laguna Beach at the same time, you might remember. One was Clarence Hinkle who later went to Santa Barbara.

FS: Oh, yes.

BH: He's dead now, I believe. He was on that committee. And Norman Chamberlin.

FS: Norman Chamberlin? He lived up Thalia here, with his wife.

BH: Oh, really? The same street you are on. Well, I'm not sure of the other names, I mean, of names of anyone else who helped to start it here.

FS: I didn't know they did. Well, I didn't get into that; I was so busy with my school up in Los Angeles. I came down only on weekends. I was bringing up a family of 4 kids and interested in my family, and I just couldn't spread myself out so thin.

BH: Well, most of those first commissions, as far as I can see, were composed of the leading artists who sort of gave moral support to them and often gave the government a painting to get it started. I think that was about all that happened. so it was probably true with you if you were so busy.

FS: Yes, I don't remember anything about it.

BH: Mrs. Ropp mentioned an artist named Leonard Kaplan here in Laguna Beach. Do you know anything about him?

FS: Yes, but in his business he mostly deals in what they call "ancient art" and he's right down the street here.

BH: He was on the Project and I wanted to talk to him next time I come here.

FS: Yes, he's just straight down Thalia Street, too; Well, I'd have to show you where. It's right near the liquor store. There's a sign up; it says "Ancient Art, Kaplan."

BH: Oh, well I'll look for it. You have such a beautiful philosophy I wanted to be sure to read this plaque to the tape while we have it on.

FS: Oh, that's good. I'm glad you're going to include it.

BH: That's awfully nice. I want to be sure my tape isn't running out. "The universe is exactly and precisely as it should be, always was, and always will be. Included in that very rightness is the human dissatisfaction that urges us to make efforts and experiments indispensable to our spiritual progress. Those forces we commonly attribute

to the devil teach and bless us in the disguise of evil, while various forms of happiness and satisfaction tempt us deeper into life and cheer us onward. During many lives the individual struggles with what seems to him an enemy world and makes many determined efforts to alter it. But when, under the expert tutelage of incarnation, the consciousness has expanded sufficiently, the individual comes to share in nature's happy secrets. Hostility to the cosmos and mankind now melts away. The soul, quiet at last of the noise that fear, anger and inquisitiveness made in it, hears more and more clearly a song of ravishing sweetness. And the burden of the song is: 'The universe is exactly as it should be, always was and always will be.' Ultimately there can be no sweeter song than that." That is very beautiful. It is rather like the Indian eternal wheel, isn't it? You're bringing out the idea again and again.

FS: Yes, but the idea is not just "coming out again" as in the eternal wheel. I get the impression from the eternal wheel theory that the thing is repeating itself but it doesn't. It's a spiral, not a wheel.

BH: Because it's going . . . ?

FS: It's getting better all the time, as nearly as I can find out, I've been very interested in the "Betty Books."

BH: The what?

FS: The "Betty" Books.

BH: Betty?

FS: Betty.

BH: I don't know about them.

FS: Well, they're written by Stuart Edward White.

BH: Oh, I know of him.

FS: And they purport to give extensive information about the life beyond the grave. One of the things they bring out is And there's another book (which is hard to find) called "Our unseen Guest," by Joan and Darby; and they were prominent people and didn't want their names known.

BH: They're obviously pseudonyms?

FS: Yes. Anyhow, the whole story is that we go on living. And in this world we accumulate quantity of experience. And in the next world we transmute that quantity into quality and move up a step. [END OF TAPE PART I OF FREDERICK SCHWANKOVSKY] [PART II]

BH: This is Betty Lochrie Hoag on March the first, 1965, continuing my interview with Mr. Schwankowsky in Laguna Beach. ----- I don't know if there are any more questions I wanted to ask you. Let's see, I know that you have lectured at all kinds of clubs on art.

FS: I've lectured also on theosophy. And I lectured in a Liberal Catholic Church in Hollywood one time, several times.

BH: I didn't know there was such a thing.

FS: I'll tell you what it is, and it's very interesting. There's a branch something like it down here. It's ah, . . . they use the exact Roman Catholic procedures, but they are theosophists and believe in reincarnation. Of course, the Catholics did originally, too. And they believe in this symbolism of color business that I have in my book. I gave a lecture on color in the Church itself, standing up on the pulpit, on color one time many years ago. They are really super-liberal and yet not sloppy at all. They're wonderful people. But it is too far away from me; I'll never get up there anymore. We had one down here called "The American Catholic Church" and the bishop there, Bishop Waddley, was the first one to bring a positive proof I don't want to bore you with this thing if you're not interested. Is that going? It's going, well, that's all right, let it go.

BH: We can cut out anything you don't want on it.

FS: Oh, I don't care. But he brought back positive proof of my wife . . . of her being around [for her death]., And he was clairvoyant enough to do that, so I'm grateful to him for it, but I don't care for the ritual. I don't care for the Roman Catholic ritual, too fancy for me. But at any rate all those things were tremendously interesting to me and my wife and my mother (she was my mother, it's an interesting fact that that woman - - - if you can call her a woman now. . . .

BH: Your mother, you mean?

FS: Yes. She's no longer my mother, you see what I mean? So I call her Julie St. Vrain Jennings. She was from a rather aristocratic side of the family, French. This is the coat . . . that's the coat of arms up there. {He indicates it on the wall.} See, the black one? I carved that myself.

BH: Oh, that is where the St. Vrain part of your name comes from? Is that how you pronounce it?

FS: Yes. Well, probably shouldn't be in there but I like to feature it.

BH: The other, the Schwankovsky, is probably German, isn't it, or Polish?

FS: German-Polish, German-Polish.

BH: Mr. Schwankovsky is going to let us microfilm this book he's written about the use and power of color, a treatise for artists and laymen which I'm sure will be very interesting.

FS: Oh, thank you a lot. I'm more than happy to have you have it.

BH: I'll certainly take good care of it, they say, over my dead body. So many of the artists let me borrow their things.

FS: Well, don't worry too much about it.

BH: Indeed, I do because I know what it means to you.

FS: Well, I've been trying to find another one. If I ever find one, I'll offer a good price for it. The only woman I know in town who has one is ill and hard to deal with. She can't find it and won't look or let anyone else. Nobody else can look.

BH: Well, we don't want to bother her. If you have photographs of your paintings we could borrow for microfilming, I'd like to do that too. Would you rather that I came next time I am down?

FS: Yes, because I didn't know what this was about; I can find them. I have them, in fact, some good ones, I mean good clear ones.

BH: Especially anything that has to do with the Project Period.

FS: And also pictures the directing of the Pageant and things like that, if you want them. Yes, I'll get this stuff together, now that I know what it's about.

BH: Well, I won't be back for about 2 weeks because I'm going to go out to Desert Hot Springs and Santa Barbara to see some artists, and it takes me about a week to get a trip planned.

FS: Santa Barbara is a lovely place!

BH: Yes, very beautiful and I'm hoping in fact to see, isn't it Mr. Chamberlin, who was up there? The man who used to be here?

FS: Oh yes, I met him down here.

BH: These people move around. And I have to keep a very extensive cross-reference.

FS: I don't know anybody in Santa Barbara. I used to go up there to see my daughter when she lived there some years ago but usually did not stay, even stay overnight. I don't know anything about it except it's a very beautiful spot.

BH: I'm not going to read about you from the "Who's Who of the West" because copies can be found in any library. I just want to mention it on the tape, and then any future research student can go anyplace and get it. But I want it on record that there is a quite extensive biography about you in "Who's Who of the West."

FS: The page number's right there.

BH: That is page 700 of Volume 9, 1965 to 1966. Let's see if there's anything that they've mentioned which we haven't. Oh, your wife's maiden name was McWilliams, Julie McWilliams.

FS: No, that's my mother's maiden name.

BH: Oh, is it? Yes, I'm reading it wrong, you're right. No, they have it right. He name is Nellie May Goucher.

FS: Spelled the same as Goucher College, but I don't think they're related.

BH: Oh, really? Well, here's something I didn't have. You were Editor of the "Meadow Lake Club Bulletin" in 1953. What was that?

FS: Just a little mountain club. Mention it if you wish, but it has nothing to do with art. I did help to shape up Meadow Lakes Club.

BH: That's an important thing so it certainly should be in the record.

FS: Well, I can probably find the "Bulletin" too, someplace. I'll look around. I'm happy to have something done with these things, you know. It'll all be forgotten soon enough anyway. Ultimately it's not too important because we all go on.

BH: Well, I think it's wonderful when records can be placed where they will be used by people.

FS: Yes, yes. My dad had a fine business in Detroit for a long time. And Detroit was a cute little city forty years ago. I don't know anything about it now, but I imagine it's a booming metropolis.

BH: I have never been there but I imagine it must be from what we read about it. Mr. Schwankovsky, thank you so much for this interview. I have enjoyed it and enjoyed meeting you. And I'm looking forward to seeing your paintings soon. My husband's coming soon so we may be able to do that before I leave.

FS: I loved doing it. [END OF TAPE PART II ON SCHWANKOVSKY]