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Oral history interview with Sidney Gordin,
1965 Sept. 2

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Contact Information

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Sidney Gordin on September 2, 1965. The interview was conducted in Provincetown, MA by Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. This is a rough transcription that may include typographical errors.

Interview

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing Sidney Gordin in Provincetown [MA] on September 2, 1965.

Sidney, I think I will start at the beginning and go through the end, as they all said, and find out a little bit about where you were born, family and so on – origins, in other words.

SIDNEY GORDIN: Well, I was born in Russia. I'm the oldest son, first child. And my family, my father and mother, went from Russia, sort of because of poverty, migrated very slowly to this country. That was their intention. So we lived in various places. We lived in Shanghai, for instance, for a few years.

MS. SECKLER: What years would these have been?

MR. GORDIN: Well, I was born in 1918. And we lived in Shanghai – lived in Harbin, which is an Asiatic city; I believe it's Russian now. Then we moved to Shanghai and lived there for a few years. We came to the United States in 1922. So I was about four years old when we came to the United States.

MS. SECKLER: Do you have any recollections of those early years in these exotic places?

MR. GORDIN: Yes.

MS. SECKLER: What kinds of things?

MR. GORDIN: I remember Shanghai. I remember – I even remember my first art experience. I remember it was a party. And my mother – I had a sister who was also born in Shanghai. And my mother had taken my sister and myself to this party. There were a lot of other kids. And the kids were given the calcamamies [phonetic] – not the calcamamies. There was a little – I don't see them anymore. But there was a little thing that kids could do. They would get a notebook, and the paper was all blank. And they could just scribble with a pencil over it, just scribble with a pencil over it, and out would come a picture.

MS. SECKLER: Yes.

MR. GORDIN: And I scribbled, and out came a figure or something, and I was amazed and showed it to my mother and father. And they, of course, were delighted with my achievement [laughs].

But I felt – I must have felt that little bit of encouragement. It might have played its part in directing me towards art in later years.

MS. SECKLER: Maybe.

MR. GORDIN: Anyway, we came to – I remember other things about China. I remember, oh, my father shipped out and left my mother and myself and my sister. And I remember the loneliness of the three of us, my mother waiting for my father. I remember that.

MS. SECKLER: In the city itself?

MR. GORDIN: In Shanghai. It was in the international settlement. I remember that.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative].

MR. GORDIN: I remember the boat trip very well. I remember we landed in Seattle, Washington.

MS. SECKLER: Were you very frightened on the boat trip?

MR. GORDIN: No, I enjoyed it enormously, except for the docking at Seattle, because the boat apparently – the

boat tilted slightly, and there was hysteria that accompanies the whole docking operation. And that frightened me. I remember being terribly frightened and my mother having to, you know – having to soothe me. And then when it was bad weather. That helped, too.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative].

MR. GORDIN: It was foggy. But then in Seattle, we took a train to New York. I remember the train trip. I remember the impression I had of the United States. The thing that surprised me most was the whiteness of the people, such white people. I had never seen white people living in Shanghai.

MS. SECKLER: Wow.

MR. GORDIN: The whiteness was something. It was really quite an exciting trip. It was a very romantic trip because the sounds – like I remember at one point at night, we must have stopped at some huge railroad yard. There were many trains, you know, and being changed. Trains were – steam was coming out.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative].

MR. GORDIN: And trains were hitting each other. They were joining them and taking them apart. It was fabulous. It was like a fantasy. You know, I was absolutely stunned by this whole experience. I must have been about four years old.

MS. SECKLER: You think you couldn't have been a little older than that?

MR. GORDIN: No, I couldn't have been because we got to this country in 1922, and I was born in '18, see?

MS. SECKLER: Yes. Well, memory does probably begin at three, so I suppose that you could have – obviously, you did.

MR. GORDIN: I remember other things, too, about China. I remember when my sister was born. She was three years younger than me. I remember being taken to the hospital and the doctor showing – my father and I went to the hospital. And the doctor showed us a case full of Kewpie dolls. I don't know what that was doing in the hospital. But do you know what Kewpie dolls are?

MS. SECKLER: Yes, sure.

MR. GORDIN: Do you know what Kewpie dolls are? Little dolls with curls and little – they were very popular dolls back in – oh, years and years ago. And saying to me, "That's where babies come from."

[They laugh.]

MR. GORDIN: Of all the silly things.

MS. SECKLER: You came across the United States, and then where did you settle?

MR. GORDIN: Well, my father and mother were both extremely poor. They had absolutely nothing, you know. And they had to start– literally start from scratch. So we looked up some relatives in New Jersey, Passaic, New Jersey, which was just a little– you know, just across the Hudson from New York.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative].

MR. GORDIN: And I stayed with them for awhile. And my sister went to a nursery. My father worked, and my mother worked, gradually, until they could afford to have an apartment, you know, have a place of their own. And little by little, they acquired things. And my father found himself a trade, became a housepainter. And my mother did sewing. And we moved to Brooklyn.

MS. SECKLER: Did you learn to speak some English by this time?

MR. GORDIN: I spoke English in China.

MS. SECKLER: Oh, you did?

MR. GORDIN: Yes. When I was with my relatives, when I was living with my relatives– I don't remember any Chinese words now. But when I was a kid, I did. I used to speak Chinese a little bit. And they used to use me to entertain their friends, you know, speaking Chinese.

MS. SECKLER: But why should you have spoken English? Because you were born in Russia -- no English.

MR. GORDIN: I don't know. I guess because when my mother and father got married, from the very beginning their intention was to come to this country. And in Shanghai, I think English is – at that time was at least the white man's language, not the Chinese language.

MS. SECKLER: I suppose that may be it. Very interesting. So you were in Brooklyn then. And by this time you were five or more, I suppose.

MR. GORDIN: What?

MS. SECKLER: I said in Brooklyn [New York] as a little boy.

MR. GORDIN: Yes.

MS. SECKLER: I guess before you even went to school, you were on your own to some extent there. Or did you start right into school there in Brooklyn? Did you go to school there?

MR. GORDIN: Oh, yes. That's where I started. Well, actually, no. I went to school in Jersey. I went to kindergarten in Jersey. And then in Brooklyn I went to public school.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative].

MR. GORDIN: And to high school, you know, the whole business.

MS. SECKLER: Were you all right? You know, were you the fellow in the class that did the class posters and that sort of thing? Was there any indication of –

MR. GORDIN: Yes. That was it. Oh, there's a funny story about that [laughs]. When I was – in one of my classes in public school – I don't know exactly how old I was, maybe about nine or something, eight – a teacher asked me to do a decoration on the blackboard. And I remember the decoration. It was a turkey for Thanksgiving.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative].

MR. GORDIN: At that time, for some reason, I was the class artist, you know. Apparently, she saw something in me. So I was the class artist. So I did this Thanksgiving decoration. And then I did flying ducks, which was for fall. Or maybe it was the other way around. Maybe I did the flying ducks first, in formation. And you know, then I became – every time something was called for in the way of art, I was the one who was asked to do it until – it turned out there was a boy in another class who was better than me.

[They laugh.]

MR. GORDIN: And that discouraged me. I gave up art when I discovered there was someone better than me.

[They laugh.]

MR. GORDIN: I couldn't take it. No kidding. I gave up art until I got to high school and I was free of him. He went somewhere else, and I went to high school. And I went to – I had decided by the time I got to high school – I had decided maybe I'd like to become an architect. So I went to a technical high school. I went to Brooklyn Technical High School [Brooklyn, NY], a marvelous high school because you're required to take all kinds of shop classes.

Now, the funny thing is that I took shop courses in those years, things that I used years later in my sculpture. You know, no inkling.

MS. SECKLER: I can imagine, yes. It must be marvelous.

MR. GORDIN: I took forge – you know, worked with forge, worked with machine shop, joining, pattern making, all these things, you know.

MS. SECKLER: What did you learn?

MR. GORDIN: Of course, at the time it was forced on me. But the thing that I did most there was make notebooks. I used to be terrific in notebooks. I made the most marvelous notebooks, with drawings. You know, that's how I got back into art. So by the time I got to be a junior in high school, they were just – this is Brooklyn Technical High School, where they had an old factory building in the 1930s, they were just building an expensive new building, mostly with WPA funds. This was a fantastic new building. No high school had that much money go into it.

And the art department got the tower section. And there were studios in that high school that I have never seen since. You know, I have been through art school, through college, through my other artists' studios, my own studio.

[Off the record]

MS. SECKLER: I was just asking if you had been on WPA [Works Progress Administration] and then realized, of course, that you were much too young to have been on it.

MR. GORDIN: Not much too young. I just missed it. Actually, I had some – when I went to Cooper Union art school [The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, New York, NY], I went to day school, but I got to know a lot of the people that went to night school. And some of the night school students were earning a living as WPA artists. They were, you know, WPA artists and studying art besides.

When I went to high school, one of my best, most pleasant experiences was one summer studying at a WPA art school that existed at the Brooklyn Museum [Brooklyn, NY]. This was around 1935–36. It was the first time I worked from a nude model, you know. It was the first time I had teachers who had a warm feeling about them. Funny, in high school the teachers were –

MS. SECKLER: Pedantic?

MR. GORDIN: Well, they – I had a feeling that the subject they were teaching was a job. They were not really involved in it.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative].

MR. GORDIN: And when I went to this WPA art school, I had the feeling that the teaching was a job, that they were really artists. I studied with Ralph Rosenberg, whom I got to know later on. I think he is a very fine painter. And at that time he really kind of confused me and puzzled me and fascinated me. I was, you know, just a kid, and his way of talking about art was a whole new thing to me. After all, I came from a very – art was just something so alien in my background. There was no – I mean, you know, everyone – when you're poor, the problem is to figure out some way of making money, you know, some trade or some profession, you know, making money. And the idea of art, of course, is something completely different. But I didn't know that, you know, until I met – actually, my first idea of things like that was at this art school.

MS. SECKLER: The Brooklyn Museum –

MR. GORDIN: WPA art school.

MS. SECKLER: Under WPA?

MR. GORDIN: Yes.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative].

MR. GORDIN: See, there was a man named Tom Eldred who taught life there. He was a wonderful man, painter. And Warner Drees [phonetic] taught painting there. I don't know if you know him.

MS. SECKLER: I don't remember his name.

MR. GORDIN: Yes, he's a German painter. He's an American painter, but from Germany.

MS. SECKLER: That's interesting because we are doing for the Archives a special research project on WPA. And this is the first time we've heard from someone who was in one of the classes rather than on the projects or teaching. And that you benefited from it, you know, that you didn't get a real start there is kind of an interesting thing from that point of view.

MR. GORDIN: I think a lot of people benefited from it, you know, intangible ways which you can't measure.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative] [affirmative].

MR. GORDIN: It's just one of those – you know, I think it's just one of those things that – I really believe the best things in life are immeasurable. You can't point to them. You know, you can't say, "This is good because so-and-so," or even say what influences you in terms of being very specific about it.

MS. SECKLER: You were there then for how long at the Brooklyn school with Rosenberg?

MR. GORDIN: Oh, just -

MS. SECKLER: Not that it matters how long.

MR. GORDIN: Two summers, two summers, in between high school sessions. I didn't live too far from the Brooklyn Museum, and I used to take a long walk over there. I loved the museum. It was a marvelous place. I used to spend time there doing drawings of African sculpture. You know, crowded - in those days they didn't display their collection very carefully. Things were just crowded in cases, you know.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative].

MR. GORDIN: And you'd have to kind of look through the cases and pick out something you liked, you know.

MS. SECKLER: That was rather precocious to appreciate African Negro sculpture, I think, at that time. Was it? A young boy who had never seen very much?

MR. GORDIN: Not really. It was - well, I was in high school at that time. No, I think it was - people like Rosenberg that made you aware of it. He made me aware of the collection there. And it was through him that I began to, you know, see something in it.

It's true because I didn't really become aware of the Cubists until I was in art school.

MS. SECKLER: Where did you go to art school then?

MR. GORDIN: Cooper Union.

MS. SECKLER: Was that right after you finished high school?

MR. GORDIN: Yes, yes.

MS. SECKLER: You got in on a kind of scholarship thing?

MR. GORDIN: Cooper Union is a non-tuition school.

MS. SECKLER: [Inaudible]

MR. GORDIN: Well, you take a test. They select the highest 100, you know.

MS. SECKLER: Did you think when you went there that you were then training to be a professional - I mean, artist full time, and that was your complete career?

MR. GORDIN: Yes. By that time I quit high school - I didn't quit high school. I actually graduated. By the time I graduated high school, I had decided that I wanted to be an artist. I had also decided that I wanted to be poor.

MS. SECKLER: Your family [inaudible]?

MR. GORDIN: No. My family didn't oppose it and didn't encourage it. At that point, I was independent of them as far as my ideas went. That's another characteristic, I think, of immigrants, peasant immigrant families. I think the children live in an entirely different world, and there's a big gap, you know, especially intellectual gap, you know, cultural gap.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative] [affirmative].

MR. GORDIN: And they never - I never felt any interference from them either way, you know. They didn't encourage me. They didn't - they always liked the idea if I won a prize, you know, or something.

MS. SECKLER: But commercial art didn't occur to you at that point? I mean, as a way of sort of getting some security or something?

MR. GORDIN: Oh, yes. I worked as a commercial artist. In fact, I worked as a commercial artist after I got out of art school. I used to do cartoons for a living for many years.

MS. SECKLER: Well, where were they published?

MR. GORDIN: In all the magazines.

MS. SECKLER: Really?

MR. GORDIN: Yes. I used to do free-lance cartoons.

MS. SECKLER: Well, what kind of magazines?

MR. GORDIN: *Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's* magazine, *Argosy* magazine. I had a few gags bought by *The New Yorker*, but I was never good enough for *The New Yorker*.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative].

MR. GORDIN: There were many, many magazines that buy cartoons. *Boy's Life*, for instance.

MS. SECKLER: Really?

MR. GORDIN: Yes.

MS. SECKLER: While you were at Coopers, did your work begin to take some direction? Were you painting or sculpting?

MR. GORDIN: Painting.

MS. SECKLER: What kind of painting?

MR. GORDIN: I wasn't interested in sculpture at all. Gee, I did - my four years at Cooper Union were very marvelous, exciting, prolific, hardworking years. I did a lot of work there. I really - it was like - well, it was like an eye-opening, you know, going there. It was the first - I discovered abstract art, you know? Right at the very beginning I discovered abstract art. Someone said something about form, and it was like the answer.

MS. SECKLER: You must have been very ready for it. Well, of course, you had -

MR. GORDIN: I must have been. I mean, it hit me. You know, it just kind of - I took to it without even giving it a second - I took to it so strongly that I did nothing but draw and paint.

MS. SECKLER: Was there any particular teachers at Cooper who were important?

MR. GORDIN: Um-hm [affirmative]. Actually, the most important teacher that I had was a woman named Carol Harrison. Did you know her at all?

MS. SECKLER: No, I didn't.

MR. GORDIN: Did you know Wallace Harrison, her husband?

MS. SECKLER: Wallace Harrison?

MR. GORDIN: An English painter. He was a very marvelous teacher. I never quite reached him. That is, I never - by the time I became eligible to study with him, he was fired. He was just too good, you know.

MS. SECKLER: Really?

MR. GORDIN: Yes.

MS. SECKLER: I'm sure I remember that name, and I'll probably remember the work. It seems to me he did patterned things - didn't he? - of some kind, highly patterned geometric work?

MR. GORDIN: No. I would call him a Cubist painter. He was very strongly influenced by the Cubists. He was very - he loved painters like Picasso and Brock and Matisse, you know, Gauguin, and the French school, the whole French school. He had a way - he was a really very exciting man. His wife, of course, was very much involved with his world. She was - she just kind of introduced, you know, some ideas to me about art that hit me very strongly and got me started.

MS. SECKLER: Well, did you begin then when you were drawing from a model or so to treat the figure in Cubist planes and so on? Or was that jumping into more [inaudible]?

MR. GORDIN: Well, I tell you. What she did was present us with the idea of interpreting subject matter, in very simple terms. I mean, for instance, I remember distinctly the first illustration that she showed that class. She showed a Greek head. She says, "Look what this Greek sculptor did with the hair." And it was one of these heads that had a series of geometric curls all around the skull, you know? Then she showed another head, and again, it had a different kind of - taking the idea of hair, and giving it a kind of form, formal treatment, but exquisite.

And then she'd say, "I'd like you to try something with fruit. Take pears or apples, whatever fruit you like. See what you can do with it in terms of form." And that's all it was. You know? It really kind of turned me on. It was a real foundation, in a sense, because that led to other things. Then she tried animals and different subjects, interpreting them formally. Not formally in the sense of - "formally" is such a misleading word. I mean in terms of form.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative]. Yes, yes.

MR. GORDIN: I really got terribly excited by that. It was great. And she was stunned by my work, which was so flattering and so encouraging [laughs].

I mean, I'd come in. I'd come in, and that was very beautiful for a person to react to your work, to something that you've done or you've said, just with pure feeling. I'd bring in something, and her eyes would open wide. She'd - you know? She did it all term long. I'd just keep bringing in these drawings.

And then, of course, I had a lot of trouble with my painting and different instructors. I remember I studied with a man named Byron Thomas. I don't know if you know him. And who else? Morris Kantor. Do you remember Morris Kantor? He was there.

MS. SECKLER: Yes. [Inaudible]

MR. GORDIN: What?

MS. SECKLER: I know who he is.

MR. GORDIN: Well, he and I had lots of trouble. We used to fight all the time.

MS. SECKLER: What was the big difference in your case? He was too expressionist for you at that time?

MR. GORDIN: No.

MS. SECKLER: He would rate you?

MR. GORDIN: By the time I began studying with him, I was involved with rather complicated ideas about art through - you know what happens at an art school. There's an enormous amount of talk. You get to meet other very intelligent and rather, you know, very involved students, very concerned about ideas about art. And you keep arguing. It's a terrific thing. It's unfortunate that it doesn't keep up.

So by the time I got to Kantor's class, I was full of ideas about art. And he didn't like that. He didn't like ideas. He really didn't. He was not an intellectual man about it. He had a feeling. He had a good eye and a feeling about painting. And his way of teaching was to - oh, that used to make me so furious. He'd say, "That yellow is wrong." Or, "Move this form over that way"[laughs].

And I would insist upon a discussion of why, you know, and what - I'd say this was completely insignificant. So we fought all the time. Well, I don't know why I should talk so much about him. Actually, he - I don't know whether - by that time I got more from my classmates, some of my classmates, than I did from any of the teachers.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative]. Were your classmates at that point, most of them, going along with the sort of idea of the formal analysis and, you know, somewhat Cubist ideas? Or were many of them resentful and, you know -

MR. GORDIN: Well, this was in 1938, '39 - 1937, '38, and '39. Now, at that time, if you remember, the prevailing style was social realism, social commentary.

MS. SECKLER: [Inaudible]

MR. GORDIN: Right. Therefore, the Cubist idea was a very wild avant garde idea.

MS. SECKLER: Anti-humanistic and all that?

MR. GORDIN: Well, that came later.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative].

MR. GORDIN: No, that was applied. The anti-humanism was applied to the abstract expressionists when - you see, when the abstract expressionists started getting, you know, successful and they began working - when an

artist began working in that style, then it became the establishment. Social realism was the establishment, and actually French painting, French Cubist painting was the underground movement, in a sense, in this country, you see. And it was against the social realism.

Are you about through?

MS. SECKLER: [Inaudible] So in 1939, would most of the students then have been interested in becoming social realists? And then the bright ones or the more controversial inclined ones were headed toward a more, you know, French art and the idea [inaudible] thing?

MR. GORDIN: Yes. There weren't - actually, it depended on the teacher, you know.

[END OF TRACK 1.]

MS. SECKLER: So, to return to the discussion that we were touching on about the background of ideas that were - the ideas that were prevalent in the period of the very end of the 1930s, when you were in art school in Cooper Union.

MR. GORDIN: Yes. Well, I think to answer your question about whether the students - how the students felt about abstract Cubistic formal art, you have appreciate the fact that the setting, that is, the climate, at least in New York at that time - this was in the late 1930s - was one in which social realism was the dominant school of painting. And I think - I remember, you know, one of the things that I loved to do as a student was go to the galleries. I'd go at least once a week to the galleries. And I remember at that time there were only a handful of galleries that showed people like Clay, Paul Clay, even Picasso, Matisse.

There were no American abstractionists showing. The Americans that were getting all the attention and were selling and getting all the exhibitions were the social realists, either the social realists or the painters of landscapes and still lives.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative]. American scenes.

MR. GORDIN: Yes. So that I - you know, we had the feeling, I had the feeling and a lot of my classmates had the feeling that we were rebels of some kind, even though we were strongly influenced by the - we had discovered the Parisians. The Parisians were simply not - I mean, I remember reading the *Sunday Times* [*The New York Times*]. The big Art Page was an event in the *Sunday Times*. And I remember the editor, Eldon [sic] Alden Jewell.

MS. SECKLER: Yes, Edward.

MR. GORDIN: Edward Alden Jewell.

MS. SECKLER: Yes.

MR. GORDIN: Well, he used to write. He'd write about Picasso, who at that time was - my God, you know, I just loved Picasso and the other students loved Picasso. A lot of these rebels loved Picasso. You had to be a rebel to love Picasso in those days. And I'd read his reviews of some painting by Picasso or show by Picasso, and it would always be the same idea, that Picasso had nothing more but amazing dexterity.

MS. SECKLER: Right.

MR. GORDIN: Amazing ability to manipulate paint, but he had nothing to say.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative]. No heart.

MR. GORDIN: Yes. And this was in 1939, you know. The Modern Museum [Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY] had a fantastic retrospective of Picasso's. Of course, at that time Picasso was absolutely in his prime and had done incredible painting. This was the response on the part of the majority of artists, and even - not just critics, but even artists had this to say about Picasso. They didn't take him seriously. Of course, now, you know, Picasso is something else again.

But the great idea was what you could do, the poetry of form and color, what you could do with form and color, what artists did do, what Matisse did, and what Picasso did. You know, we'd read statements they made, what happens to a space when you introduce a color, or introduce another color, start shifting it around. This was a great - and this is what led to abstract expressionism, you know. I think a lot of the artists - one feeling you had at that time, if you were a rebel, was that no gallery would ever show you. No one would ever buy your work. And so you accepted it, and you were content to just work and not even look for showing or selling. It was a whole different thing from what it is today.

MS. SECKLER: But at some point, of course, they also decided that they wanted to be – to get Picasso and Matisse and the Europeans off their necks, you know.

MR. GORDIN: Yes.

MS. SECKLER: That must have come – or came a little later, or it was a different contingent from the one that you were – anyway, you weren't, of course, yet involved with the group with the club or anything of that kind?

MR. GORDIN: Well, that came –

MS. SECKLER: That was later?

MR. GORDIN: That came in the late 1940s.

MS. SECKLER: That's right. This is still early.

MR. GORDIN: I mean, look –

MS. SECKLER: These were the war years you must be getting into now.

MR. GORDIN: In my opinion, for instance, one of the great influences in American art, of course, was Hans Hofmann, a teacher. I never studied with him. This man Wallace Harrison was similar to him.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative].

MR. GORDIN: Anyways, I felt – and Hans Hofmann is essentially a Cubist painter, derives from Cubism.

MS. SECKLER: Yes, I was always aware of that curious discrepancy, when you hear all these statements about, you know, American –

MR. GORDIN: No, I'm not – don't misunderstand me. I think what happened, the turning one's back on Cubism was a great thing. I mean, a declaration of independence from French painting is really the greatest thing that happened to American art, you know. And people like Pollock – see, there was a ferment in those days. And it was based upon this need – you know what happens. There's a – rebellion is a very natural part of the creative spirit. It is also true that rebels are the most dynamic of people, especially in cultural fields. They eventually become the establishment through their dynamism.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative].

MR. GORDIN: And when they become the establishment, the other rebels have to fight them. So people like Jackson Pollock, who got a lot from the Cubists, then was the kind of the leader in breaking with them.

MS. SECKLER: You first had to absorb it before you could get rid of it, you know. Or to some extent learn it anyway.

MR. GORDIN: You know, Pollock was really in many ways chauvinistic, very chauvinistic. He had this feeling about America and kind of an intense resentment for Europe.

MS. SECKLER: Part of that may have come from Betneck [phonetic] or –

MR. GORDIN: Oh, yes, definitely. I think so, yes.

MS. SECKLER: Well, this period was still, I suppose, about the early 1940s. And that would be the early war years. Were you still basically a painter rather than a sculptor?

MR. GORDIN: Yes, I didn't get interested in sculpture until 1950.

MS. SECKLER: Oh. You had a decade to go yet then. Well, how did your work – after you left Cooper Union, then how did you get yourself launched as a painter? Were you doing some commercial work? Did you keep yourself alive?

MR. GORDIN: Yes. That's when I worked as – I worked in a war plant. I did mechanical drafting for a number of years. And then I began – after the war, I began doing cartoons, freelance cartoons, for a living. And that took care of the financial problem for awhile. Then I got sick of that. And fortunately, I began to teach.

MS. SECKLER: Did you "fortunately"?

MR. GORDIN: "Fortunately." I like teaching, yes.

MS. SECKLER: Good. Where did you begin to teach then?

MR. GORDIN: My first teaching job was in 1953 in Pratt Institute [Brooklyn, NY]. See, by then I had been doing sculpture. Then I taught in the School of Architecture there. I taught three-dimensional design to architecture students.

MS. SECKLER: Well, that's something that was ahead of you. But before we get out of the 1940s, I'm kind of interested in, what was happening in your painting during this time? How was it changing? Did it remain sort of post-Cubist like synthetic Cubism pretty much during that period? How were you handling color [inaudible]?

MR. GORDIN: Well, it's hard to describe. My paintings were - no, as a matter of fact, I did a lot of very emotional painting. Matter of fact, when I came to Provincetown [MA] in 1944, the first year, the summer of 1944, I did a lot of work. And it was very - you could almost call it kind of abstract expressionistic painting, very emotional, you know, very free. And it was like that. The only trouble is that I didn't - I went through kind of a fallow period, you know, where I didn't work too hard. Really, it was sculpture that pulled me out of it.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative]. Was that about the same time, 1944-1945?

MR. GORDIN: No, no. I painted until about 1949-50. And then I got very hot about sculpture. I got interested. I got into sculpture through - I never - I got into sculpture through the process of construction. I never did any carving. But the being able to take metal forms and solder them together in any way very freely - which is really, in many ways, a little like painting, the same kind of freedom as painting, where if you take a brush and start drawing forms, in a way you are doing constructions. You know, you place them very freely on a canvas. And I was doing this with wire and sheet metal.

MS. SECKLER: It all came all very naturally because of your early training.

MR. GORDIN: Yes. And I loved the process. The thing that attracted me to sculpture - one of the things that attracted me to sculpture was the fact that I enjoyed working with my hands, just taking materials and using equipment, you know. I just - what started out as a kind of experiment became very serious work. You know, I just kept doing it.

MS. SECKLER: You were working with wires and metals. And what would they have looked like, one of your early sculptures?

MR. GORDIN: They were geometric. When I started, I was working pretty freely. And it gradually became very severe, very rectangular.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative].

MR. GORDIN: And for about five years, I did rectangular constructions, some of which were quite - I think they were quite successful and very complicated. And then gradually, I worked away back again to freer form.

MS. SECKLER: I seem to remember some geometrically constructed things.

MR. GORDIN: There are some at the HC Gallery [phonetic] now. You don't know my work of that time, do you?

MS. SECKLER: Well, I remember seeing very recto-linear forms and very severe. I would have thought not complicated, but very severe, very classical-looking. It seems to me I have some kind of a memory of something like stainless steel, some material that was very -

MR. GORDIN: Well, I worked in brass quite a bit.

MS. SECKLER: Was that it?

MR. GORDIN: Yes. And then I worked mostly in steel, which I painted either black or sometimes several colors.

MS. SECKLER: Yes, yes. That I do remember.

MR. GORDIN: Working actually, predominantly with linear elements, you know.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative]. How would you start a sculpture? What kind of thing would you have in mind when you began? Did it grow out of manipulation of materials?

[Simultaneous conversation]

MR. GORDIN: Yes. It grew out of the process.

MS. SECKLER: It did?

MR. GORDIN: Yes. It actually grew out of the past, what I did in the past. I'd work on something, and I'd get an idea for something else, which I would then proceed to do, you know. But it was always a general kind of idea. If I wanted to work with – for instance, I did several constructions using rectangles, rectangular sheets, parallel, just parallel to each other. And it was just that idea was something that came from something else. And it was like the only thing I had in mind when I started it.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative].

MR. GORDIN: You seem pretty tired.

MS. SECKLER: I am.

MR. GORDIN: I think you're about to –

MS. SECKLER: It's nothing to do with you, really. I'm just kind of emotionally exhausted. And I don't know. It's hard to –

MR. GORDIN: Why don't we stop?

MS. SECKLER: No. You're doing very well in spite of the fact that I'm tired. And I'm not on the ball, but you are. So we don't have to worry about that. Let's finish this tape because we're getting into the interesting part now, sculpture forms. And I haven't got an idea yet of the scale. As I recall, they weren't very large things at that time.

MR. GORDIN: At that time, some of them were large.

MS. SECKLER: Were they?

MR. GORDIN: Yes. I did some that were six feet high and some that were eight feet high, and of course, a number of smaller ones. Yes, they were large. They got smaller later on. My work changed. I became – you see, in working with these rectangular forms, at some point I became hungry, I guess, for freer forms. So I began cutting out freer shapes and putting them together.

MS. SECKLER: From metal sheets?

MR. GORDIN: Yes, metal sheets, and also with wires. Then I began working flat. I started to go towards painting again. I began to – my first year in Provincetown, 1958, I don't know if you remember. I did a series of linear sculptures that were quite flat. I worked that way for awhile. Then I began to –

MS. SECKLER: Were these wire things in angular relations, like that?

MR. GORDIN: Not angular. They were free-flowing forms.

[Simultaneous conversation]

MR. GORDIN: Some may have had a few angles, yes.

MS. SECKLER: Well, I think I remember, yes. Very wiry and very arabesque-y.

MR. GORDIN: Yes. And I even tried – you know, I experimented. I tried mixing some of the lines with some solid shapes. Then I began forging. I began hammering metal, welding and hammering. And these were flat, but these were solid forms, you know?

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative]. They were the ones almost like coins.

MR. GORDIN: No, that came later.

MS. SECKLER: That came later?

MR. GORDIN: That came when I changed from working with steel to working with bronze, hammering bronze. Then I started painting again. Now I'm doing – I started getting interested in painting, and for awhile I wasn't doing any sculpture.

MS. SECKLER: Just this year you've gone back to painting.

MR. GORDIN: No, no.

MS. SECKLER: Oh, you had earlier?

MR. GORDIN: This is about the third year.

MS. SECKLER: Oh, really?

MR. GORDIN: Yes. But I've gotten – see, what I'm interested now in is color. I began to want color and this free form. And I started doing reliefs. The idea of working with reliefs suited wood better than metal. So I'm working with wood. I think you'd get a better idea if you saw what I have now.

MS. SECKLER: Yes, I'd love to see them.

MR. GORDIN: Well –

MS. SECKLER: Is there something, as you said, at the HCE [phonetic] now?

MR. GORDIN: No. I have a nice piece that's almost finished in my studio here, which I'm leaving here.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative].

MR. GORDIN: Because we're closing up the place. And actually, I started my first three-dimensional piece in a number of years, my first big one, you know, eight-foot column, which is two-by-two square.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative]. It had to be sculpture in metal.

MR. GORDIN: No, this is wood.

MS. SECKLER: Wood?

MR. GORDIN: It's a wooden column. I'm doing a relief in color on four sides of it. You see, it's a four-sided column. And the interplay of painted form and relief form is something that I'm trying to achieve now.

MS. SECKLER: How do you paint them? I mean, this wooden sculpture, what kind of paint are you using?

MR. GORDIN: I'm using Liquitex, the acrylic paint.

MS. SECKLER: Is that permanent? I mean, doesn't that have to be treated in some way to make it actually permanent?

MR. GORDIN: No, no.

MS. SECKLER: [Inaudible]

MR. GORDIN: Sure. I mean, paint is used in canvases.

MS. SECKLER: I know. I don't know why you always think of a three-dimensional thing as if it somehow had to have more permanent surface or it would get banged up or something.

MR. GORDIN: Well, sure. I mean, you know, that is always a problem with sculpture. That's one reason why cast sculpture is so popular because it can take banging up, you know. It weighs so much it can't be moved.

MS. SECKLER: I suppose [inaudible] something like the epoxy paint [inaudible].

MR. GORDIN: Yes. Well, I'm very much involved with process. That is, the process of taking forms and pushing them around, changing them, changing their relationships, changing their color, pushing them around is not only extremely important to me, but the most exciting part of the work.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative].

MR. GORDIN: The finished work is, as far as I'm concerned, the byproduct of this process. You know? And I've been working on a – I'm trying to find a process that allows me to do this, where I can – no matter what form I choose to place in my work, that form can be changed. Either it can be removed, it can be altered, or it can be shifted.

MS. SECKLER: By the audience?

MR. GORDIN: No, by me. By me. I want to look at something and, if I want to change – see, there's one thing about working in this process, this constructivist process that makes it freer than painting. This aspect of it is

freer than painting. You can't take a form on a painting and twist it a little bit or shift it or whatever, you know. It's like - you can do it with collage.

You're suffering, Dorothy.

MS. SECKLER: I'm all right. I'm all right. I'm trying to picture this. What kind of form you could do and make so that you could constantly be moving it around -

MR. GORDIN: Not constantly. You see, look. The point is this. The point is that once you know that you are not stuck with something, once you know that you are free to change it, this does something to your whole attitude, to your whole spirit. I'm talking about myself, just something to me.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative].

MR. GORDIN: The fact that I can take something, put it there, and - you see, in looking - the actual looking at - the visual part of it, looking at the work is the most important part of it. It's the part that should generate the decisions.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative].

MR. GORDIN: And in order to generate those decisions freely, you have to be able to change anything at any time.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative]. Well, are you able to even relatively do that on this wooden several-sided deformed high one that you're working on now?

MR. GORDIN: Oh, yes. Absolutely, completely. Within the limitations of my form that I establish as a base. That is, the four flat sides and the rectangle.

MS. SECKLER: Yes. They are very differently shaped and sized forms that are attached to that surface [inaudible].

MR. GORDIN: They are attached to it. There are also painted forms on it.

MS. SECKLER: Oh, really?

MR. GORDIN: Yes.

MS. SECKLER: Painted right on the background, and some that are colored and then attached, thrown - or some of it is relief?

MR. GORDIN: Some is relief, some is painted, yes.

MS. SECKLER: Is any of this moveable still? I mean, it stops being moveable when you [inaudible].

MR. GORDIN: Yes. I use - yes. I can always remove something. I use screws, so a thing can be unscrewed, you see.

MS. SECKLER: Yes, I would love to see that.

MR. GORDIN: Yes, well -

MS. SECKLER: Now, would these contain more of the curved linear shapes, well, like those of your fairly recent sculpture? Or would it be more geometric?

MR. GORDIN: Well, they are free forms. They are not geometric shapes. But there's a certain precision to them. They have a certain - I like to work with clear, precise form.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative].

MR. GORDIN: That's the character.

MS. SECKLER: What might be the inception of a piece of sculpture for you in this vein? What sort of thing would get you started? Would you be thinking, you know, in terms of something grand? It would be like a monument?

MR. GORDIN: No, nothing like that.

MS. SECKLER: Nothing like that?

MR. GORDIN: Nothing like that.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative].

MR. GORDIN: Scale – the scale of something can excite you, the idea of working with something large. But I don't like the idea of a monument. I mean, for that matter, working small can excite you, you know. But other things excite – but it isn't so much what excites you in terms of the inception. Because the work that I've been doing over the years is pretty constant. I don't really attempt anything radically different from what I've been doing, although there is a development, there is a constant change.

But the excitement comes in the moments that you work. You take a form. You give it a slight change, a color, maybe. And that does something. It's in the details of the inner life of the work, not in some grand idea for a piece that's a kind of general idea, nothing like that. General ideas, or you might call them the basic idea, is still, to me, form and color. You know, that's the language. I'm perfectly happy. This is the way I've committed myself. It's what I've committed myself to, and I'm happy with this commitment. The problem is what I do with a specific piece, the details in a specific piece.

MS. SECKLER: Now, in the ones that I'm very familiar with in recent exhibitions – by the way, we should mention your gallery. And that's – you would rather not? All right.

[They laugh.]

MR. GORDIN: I'll tell you. I would rather – I am with a gallery in San Francisco that I would like to mention. I'm with the Dilexi Gallery in San Francisco [CA].

MS. SECKLER: Yes. All right. Well, the ones that have – where you've been working, is that brass? Is that copper?

MR. GORDIN: The hammered things?

MS. SECKLER: Yes.

MR. GORDIN: Yes. Well, I haven't done those in over three years.

MS. SECKLER: Is it as long as that?

MR. GORDIN: Yes, yes. You haven't seen my work the last few years, have you?

MS. SECKLER: Well, I guess I haven't then, because [inaudible].

MR. GORDIN: I think you have to come over and see my work.

MS. SECKLER: [Inaudible]

MR. GORDIN: Since you're – you know.

MS. SECKLER: Well, where could I see any of it now?

MR. GORDIN: At my place.

MS. SECKLER: You've still got some of it around?

MR. GORDIN: It's around, yes.

MS. SECKLER: Um-hm [affirmative].

MR. GORDIN: I don't know how we're going to do it because –

MS. SECKLER: You're leaving when? Saturday morning.

MR. GORDIN: Saturday morning. And tomorrow is going to be like – you know.

MS. SECKLER: Me, too. I'm packing tomorrow. [Inaudible.]

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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