



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Adolph Gottlieb,
1967 Oct. 25

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

Contact Information

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Adolph Gottlieb on October 25, 1967. The interview took place in New York, and was conducted by Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing Adolph Gottlieb in New York on October 25, 1967.

Mr. Gottlieb, there are two important exhibitions of your work coming up this year. What areas in your painting do these cover? Where will they be?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: The shows that are coming up are going to be at the Whitney Museum of American Art and at the Guggenheim Museum. They will be shown simultaneously, opening February 13, 1968. The Guggenheim exhibition consists of what I call my pictographs. This is a phase of my work that was done roughly between 1941 to about 1952, and actually there will be an overlap. The Guggenheim will show work starting with the work of 1941 and going into as late as say, '54. Then the Whitney show will also overlap and start with work that was done about 1952, more or less up to the present time. Not necessarily 1967 or '68 but certainly as late as 1966.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I would like to talk a little bit about your early life. I understand you were born in New York.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: That's right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I think it might be important to know a little bit about your family and the kind of environment you had. Something in the environment may, after all, have had some bearing on your becoming an artist.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, I don't know that my environment had anything to do with my becoming an artist except perhaps in a negative way. I think a lot of young people (at the time I was young) had a tendency to revolt against middle class values, and they didn't want to go into business. So they got interested in the arts and perhaps this was partly the reason. However, I don't think it matters. I don't think there is any significance, really, in anyone going into the arts for this reason or that. This is a sociological problem. I think what really counts is what you have on the ball and, if you don't have anything on the ball, what's the difference why you went into the arts. You know, there are a million reasons why people go into the arts. I mean, a lot of young women go to art school because it is a place to meet young men. And there are a lot of young men who are incapable of doing anything, and they can get away with a lot by going to art school.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Harold Rosenberg had a theory that an aversion to hard work has something to do with becoming an artist.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, I have an aversion to hard work but I have worked very hard at times at my painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You mentioned a rebellion against going into business and that sort of thing. Were your family in business?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes, my father was in business. He is a typical middle class businessman. When I was in my teens I went into his business for about a year and decided that was not for me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What was there about it that bothered you?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: What bothered me? Well, it bored me. I wasn't interested in it. I was interested in art.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How had that come about? Can you remember the first time that you were aware of wanting to go in a different direction from what would have meant conforming to your family and the environment around you?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, I was a very early, youthful rebel. I found that I was good at art when I was in high school and took as much art work as I could. It was what interested me. I wasn't interested primarily in making money. This didn't seem to me a reasonable goal. I rather despised people who were primarily interested in making money. So I decided I would be able to get along some way or other and do what I wanted to do. And I did that. Finally, it has worked out that I still don't think about money and I am able to sell and make a living with my work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: To come back to your earlier years, even before you were in high school, were you a rebellious type? Were you aware of being rebellious even before you became involved in this particular field?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: I wasn't aware of it. I have been told that many times I was considered a very bad boy when I was a child.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you have a large family or were you an only child?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: No, I was the first son. Then there were two younger sisters and they often tell me I was very spoiled and I was a bad boy. They all think I got over it. But that's just because I make a little money and can support myself. That is considered success.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It's all right to be a rebel if it pays. Were you particularly rebellious against your father or your grandfather . . . ?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Oh no, I don't think it was Freudian. I think it was just a strong urge that I had to be independent, to be willful, to do what I wanted to do when I felt like doing it. Maybe there was a Freudian explanation of it, I don't know.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In your family background, would there have been much exposure to any kind of works of art around you?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Not at all. No, I was brought up with comic strips and the Gibson books on the library table. Charles Henry Gibson. That was the extent of the cultural atmosphere with which I was surrounded.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Where did you begin? By copying any of these things?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Oh sure, I copied Mutt and Jeff.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is something that comes out in many artists in this country. I think it is an important thing.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, I think what it shows is that it doesn't make much difference how you start because you couldn't start on a lower level than that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, in terms of Pop art, it might (laughter) make a great difference. Did your family tend to applaud or oppose your moves in the direction of art?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: I think the best way to put it is that they deplored my being absorbed in art. When I reached, say, the age of 21, they became quite distressed because they felt I wouldn't be able to make a living as an artist and they tried to get me to go into teaching, teaching art. They sent me to an art school where I could take a normal course but then I quit that. I decided I didn't want to teach. So, I guess, I was a problem to my parents.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What kind of schools did you go to before that? Just public schools?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Just public schools. I went to Stuyvesant High School because I thought I wanted to be an engineer but then I discovered that I was more interested in art than in science. So I started going to art schools. I went to a number of different art schools. I also went to art schools in Europe, because I went to Europe.

DOROTHY SECKLER: While you were still in high school, were you also going to art schools?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes, as I recall, I used to go to some Saturday classes while I was in high school. Then I took all the art courses I could take. I was quite good while I was in high school. My best subject. It was what interested me the most.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What kind of things did you do in high school?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, they taught you to make renderings of still life objects, posters and design. It wasn't very interesting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And were you just going to the League for Saturday classes?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes, I went to Saturday classes at the League.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And then, when you finished high school, what was your next step?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, I didn't finish high school -- I left high school but then I came back and finished up. In

the interim I worked for a while in my father's business, and then I decided I didn't like that. So I picked myself up and got a job on a ship; worked my way to Europe. When we got to Europe, I jumped ship and stayed there for a year and a half. I had saved up some money before I went and had my wages for working on the ship. Then, after my money was exhausted, I managed to persuade my parents to give me an allowance so that I could stay over there because I convinced them that it was extremely valuable.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It was great in those days when you could ship out and do that; I think a number of people did. You don't seem to hear of that any more. It seemed to be a very good escape hatch. Where did you wind up in Europe?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, the ship landed in Antwerp. Then I went to Paris, and stayed in Paris for about six months. That was about 1921 and I heard about the inflation in Germany. So I went to Germany where my money carried me much further. I studied in Munich a little while.

DOROTHY SECKLER: With whom did you study there?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: I don't remember his name. I don't think anybody would know of him any more. He was a popular teacher who had a private school. However, I think I should say that I didn't do any very intensive studying in Europe in art schools. The intensive studying that I did was in museums. I spent most of my time while I was there in museums absorbing things. I think it was quite valuable.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What dominant impressions do you have of what you saw in museums in Germany, for instance, and then later in Paris? What actually had the most compelling attraction?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Everything. When I was in Paris I would see the current work being done. For example, there was a great Leger which is now at the Museum of Modern Art and I saw it in Salon d'Autoune in Paris in 1921; it had just been freshly painted and it just bowled me over. The Leger of the three ladies having tea. And then, of course, I saw the new work of the other painters: Matisse, Picasso, and so on. I was tremendously impressed. I took to it all like a duck to water.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And yet you had had no previous acquaintance with modern art?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Very little. Then, of course, I liked everything in the Louvre and every other museum I went to. I couldn't get enough of it. There seemed to be a little problem at the time between modern things and the old things. But that wasn't serious.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When you went to the Louvre, did you find yourself particularly attracted to Egyptian, Mesopotamian or any of that? Or to the classical things?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, I was primarily interested in painting. I was particularly attracted to the great collections in the Louvre like Renaissance painting. Like the early Italian things, early French things. Everything, right up to the Nineteenth Century, which the Louvre at that time had, you know, Ingres, Courbet, Delacroix -- everything.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I suppose the reason I asked, especially about the other, was somewhat racing ahead to the years later when you were to become a collector of primitive art. But, of course, painting would have been the main thing on your mind at that time.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: I didn't start collecting primitive art until 1935.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And in Germany, what did you see, specifically, things by the Expressionists?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: I saw the German Expressionists and, of course, there were wonderful museums in Dresden and in Munich. Berlin had terrific collections. I went to Vienna and saw the museums there.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was there anything in Munich or Vienna comparable to the impact of the Leger on you?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Oh yes, things by Titian and Tintoretto and El Greco.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It must have been an amazing impact from all those directions at once. It must have been hard to absorb so much in terms of finding your own direction.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Oh, I wasn't seriously involved in finding my own direction. After all, I was only, oh, about 18 at the time. There was plenty of time for me to find my direction. There was the whole world I was exploring. And as a result, I have sort of come to the conclusion that the only good art school is a museum. And I like the museums the way they used to be, where you'd see almost everything they had. They wouldn't decide for you what you were supposed to see by just representing a few things and withholding most of their collection.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You feel that this is sort of spoon-feeding the public too much? That if you are really interested you can find your way to what you need?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, I think there is too much concern with education and not enough concern with the people who have some ability to learn. I think the problem is one of learning, not of educating. People should have to make an effort. If they don't make an effort, I don't really care if anybody tries to put things into their minds or not.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Before we get you back to this country, was there anything else of any real importance then? Did you meet other artists abroad that were important in your development?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: I would say no. I think I was fortunate in not having met any important artists. The reason I didn't was, first of all, there was a language difficulty. And then I was a child. There was no reason why any artist who was prominent should have been interested in me, talking to me, having me visit him, or making any sort of contact. I see young artists today who want to meet the well-known, established artists and they can get something from them. What they are really looking for, I suppose, is to make contacts, political contacts. They think it is going to help them in their careers, like when you're in business it's important to know the right people. I never had the idea that it was important to know the right people. I just thought the important thing was to be able to do good work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, I was thinking also of the possibility of meeting other young Americans who were also going to Germany because of the money situation.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Oh, I met young people like that, yes. Sure, I met people of that sort. They were all older than I because I was there at such an early age.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were, as you say, a baby all by yourself.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Almost everyone that I met was considerably older, more mature. I guess this was a good thing for me. But they weren't people who were important in the sense that they helped to form my attitude toward art. That was formed by what I saw in the museums. I was training. I think what I was doing was training my sensibilities.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Why did you come back?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Oh, the money ran out. My family finally decided that, after a year and a half, I was there long enough and I'd better come back to the States and face reality, which was all right. So I came back and continued going to art schools here, a bunch of various art schools. I went to all of them: The League, Educational Alliance, Cooper Union, Parsons. Every one except the National Academy -- I was smart enough in those days to know that the Academy was a dead place. Anyway, I didn't take art school seriously. I just went there because it was a place where you get a model. In fact, at some of the schools, like Educational Alliance, it was free. I could go there and work from a model and I didn't care about instruction.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were supposed to have studied with John Sloan. Was that a similar situation there, or did that make a difference?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: More or less, but I must say that John Sloan had the most valuable influence on me because Sloan was a very liberal guy for his time. For any time. He was interested in Cubism, for example. He had a peculiar attitude. He thought Cubism was an experimental type of art that would provide training to people so that they then could drop it and do something that was more significant. Well, I quickly discovered that Cubism wasn't valuable as a preparation for anything else. It was just an end in itself and a perfectly valid thing. However, as a result of Sloan's interest in everything that was happening in modern art, I became, in New York before I went to Europe, interested and read every book that I could on the subject, went to see whatever was available in New York.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Had you studied with Sloan before you went off to Europe?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes, before I went to Europe.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I see. What kind of work did you do? Of course, you were still young then. Did you return to his class at all afterwards?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes, I returned afterwards for a short time.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you doing Cubist paintings then?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: No, I didn't do Cubist paintings. I suppose you might call it . . . I was somewhat a mild

Expressionist. I don't know how else to describe it. But it was figurative work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You worked from the model and then did you do other compositions besides?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes, that was another thing that was good about Sloan. He tried to get people . . . encouraged them to do things that were not exactly literal and to work from imagination or memory. So he implanted that idea rather early in me. When I came back from Europe, aside from any work that I did in art schools, working from the model, I did other sorts of things. Imaginary compositions, landscapes, figure scenes that I worked up from sketches. Even if I painted a model in a classroom I would try to make it look like something other than just a classroom study.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Sloan's feeling for the more earthy side of the environment I suppose was a good thing in getting away from the ultra refined and precious.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, I didn't think that was such an important distinction. It's true that he was one of the Ashcan School and believed in going directly, so called, to life. However, when I saw what the Cubists were doing with studio painting, and what Cezanne was doing with still life, I didn't express the thought at the time but I could see that the whole idea of the Ashcan School and social realism was purely doctrinaire thinking and that it had nothing to do with the reality of art. I never fell for the theories of social realists of the '30's, for example. I thought that was utter nonsense and I also thought that regionalism was nonsense and that art had to be international and that art could only be produced in large urban centers. This is perfectly clear. This has been true throughout history. So I didn't fall for any of the American schools of those periods.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I suppose you were too young to get into discussions with Sloan with an opposing point of view. You simply took what he had, which was a great deal, apparently, in terms of his interest in Cubism.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes, I took a great deal; I had nothing to offer because I didn't know anything at the time. But then I was guided by my own reactions to the great things I saw.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Could you express in terms of what you felt was the greatness of the things that you were seeing, particularly being done abroad, Leger and Matisse and so on, what was the experience of those? Was there any particular thing about it that made you feel liberated, or what made you feel so affirmative, a sense of belonging to it, and of being able to reject all the regionalism and the other things that were coming along?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: I don't know how to define it. All I can do is try to recall what my sensations were at the time. I can tell you, for example, when the Metropolitan Museum first acquired the still life by Cezanne which they have had for many years. It may have come from the Havemeyer Collection, I'm not sure. When I first saw it I was electrified. I was just stunned looking at it. It fascinated me and I would keep coming back to it. I used to haunt the Met in those days so I would just keep coming back and looking at it. This happened with numerous other paintings like El Greco's, or Rembrandt's or Picasso, whatever it was. Now, as I look back, I can see that my reflexes to art were excellent. When something was really first-rate I reacted to it. I think that, since I seemed to react that way at the start, I had a great deal of confidence in my automatic reaction to a work. I don't know how to explain it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I think that's very good. I thought that it was worth taking a moment or two to think about it. I was thinking back to my own youthful reaction to those things and wondering how different it might have been for someone else. Did you try to paint like Cezanne after being so very excited about him?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes, to a certain extent. I used to study his technique very closely and I certainly was influenced by him. Definitely.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you analyze what you felt? A new concept of space -- was it anything that specific?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes. It was a notion of how to approach the forms of nature in terms of their volumes. I didn't try to do it literally. There are many Cezanne followers who take the idea of the cone, cylinder and the sphere literally and then made a sort of pseudo-Cubist thing. I didn't do that. When it came to doing my own work, I tried to work within the limitations of what I was capable of doing. I wasn't trying to paint a Cezanne masterpiece or anything like that; I just painted the things that interested me and tried to do it as well as I could. I think that what I had been studying in museums started some sort of a standard for me so that I could criticize my own work in terms of a general standard not as to whether I achieved what Cezanne did. I sort of knew that it wasn't for me to try to do what Cezanne did. Cezanne had done it. I had to do something else and I didn't know what. I didn't know what at the time. It was just sort of a vague idea of making good painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would you have been thinking as you composed your own paintings of working with the structure of planes?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: At that time?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: No, it would never have occurred to me. Except that I did recall that I had an instinct to maintain the surface of the painting, keep it flat. And there were a couple of things that happened which I may as well tell you that established the strength of my ego, which I think is very important for an artist. There was one occasion, for example, when I was painting a nude in Sloan's class. He was walking around, going behind every student. I had just finished this and he walked up behind me and said, "Oh, say, that is very good." He said, "You know, even if I came into this class and attempted to paint that nude, I couldn't do it as well." Well, I knew damn well he couldn't. Because I had done a very good thing. In fact, if I still have it, I would consider it good. I remember it.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: I hope you have it.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: I hope so.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Maybe we can photograph it.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: I probably have it in a crate somewhere. But I knew damn well that he couldn't do as well. I had the same thing happen with some other instructors. I would do something in their class like a still life and they would come and say, "Well, I don't know what to say. It's very good." Well, it was damn good. See? So I knew that I had something which always gave me a certain confidence in myself right at the start.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Can you think anything about that particular nude in Sloan's class? How you could characterize what you had done that was outstanding?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, I don't know. It as done in a free style. It could have been like an early Cubist painting. Done with a loaded brush, heavy and pastel, in one sitting, with complete assurance and it had a certain authority. It just happened to come off that way. There it was. I recognized it and he recognized it too.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What was your color like in those days?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Sort of muddy, brown, gray, very subdued.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was this more or less out of Sloan's influence at that time? It was a stark palette.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: I read a book on painting by a fellow named Field. He used to be the first editor of Art News, I think. Hamilton Easter Field. And it gave a lot of information about how to paint and the lectures he gave to his students. From that I learned how to prime a canvas, how to size it and prime it in the traditional way. And he also recommended a palette. He said that you should use the palette that the old masters used. Primarily earth colors. So for many years, in fact, even till now, I use mostly earth colors. I still think that it is quite sound because the greatest colors are these very simple colors. Now you see everybody using cadmium, the most brilliant colors, Dayglo colors. You can get marvelous effects and make terrible paintings with these. I think a lot of young painters fool themselves, you know, with these colors. They think they have something terrific because it is bright. And it is just out of a tube or can. On the other hand, I go along with something like what Delacroix said: "Give me some mud and I'll paint you the skin of a Venus if I can choose the color that goes next to it." And I think that is the important thing -- to be able to control colors and make colors which are dead in themselves come to life. Not to have to depend on fluorescent tubes to produce some kind of light. The light has to come from within, and some sort of inspiration. Not mechanical.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you also painting with a fair amount of impasto at that time with your earth colors? Was it rich and juicy paint and so on?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, to a certain extent. I wasn't particularly involved in what was called metiere painting, like a tachist. Actually, I was more interested in getting a quality of color in which you weren't so much aware of paint. In which, if it was skin, you had a sense of skin; or light, there was a sense of light or whatever. But not to make it "painty." I didn't feel that was a goal that was, you know, worthwhile.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How long did you go on in this way? Where are we now in time?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, now we are in the '30's.

DOROTHY SECKLER: We have jumped an awful lot through the '20's.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: No, I'm wrong. We are in the '20's. And towards the end of the '20's I was supporting myself with part-time jobs, working settlement houses.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Teaching?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Teaching arts and crafts. Then I'd work in summer camps, teaching arts and crafts. I wasn't much good at it but I got by. Then I began exhibiting and one of the first places in which I can recall exhibiting was something called the Opportunity Gallery which was on 56th Street. It had something to do with the Art Alliance. There was something called the Art Alliance and they had this gallery. It was for young painters and every month a different artist who was established would come and be the juror. Some of the artists were like Kuniyoshi, Alexander Brook, and whoever in the '20's was well known. Almost every month I'd submit something which would get in. So this was pretty good for me. Then I got to be known among the younger painters. One of the painters who used to show there was Mark Rothko and Avery. Milton Avery was given a one-man show there.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were any of them sold?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: I sold one. One of them was bought by Steven Bourgeois. That was sort of a feather in my cap.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you get to know Avery and Rothko at that time?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes, I got to know them. That was the point at which I started to become friendly with them.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What was Rothko doing at that point? What did his painting look like?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: It was sort of amorphous kind of landscapes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Not seascapes, but landscapes?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Landscapes. To my recollection. Yes, he had studied with Max Weber and there was a little bit of that influence.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Really amorphous at that point, in the '20's?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Very soft browns?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Soft, very soft.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And Milton, of course, was he in the Matisse stage?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: No, it was before that. It was more, it was a little bit of Matisse. But also the influence of Ryder, and Degas and the paintings were dark, somber, and very brooding. They had a brooding quality. They were very good. Maybe, in a way, I liked them the best. Anyway, getting back to myself, I was teaching at a summer camp and I received a notice asking me to submit some paintings for a competition. One of the jurors was a man who had apparently liked my work. He had selected it for the show and had written about it in some review. I think he used to write for the New Yorker. What the heck was his name? Anyway, I left the camp for a few days, got quite a few paintings together and submitted them. I was a winner in the competition. It was a national competition, an annual thing conducted by the Dudensing Galleries. That was the old Dudensing. And the award was a one-man show. Well, I don't know what they had done previously but this time it was a joint award. The other winner was a fellow named Konrad Cramer from Woodstock. So we both got this award and we were both given one-man shows simultaneously in different parts of the gallery. The shows took place in 1930. Well, my show was very well received. In those days, if you had a one-man show, it was much different than it is today. If you had a one-man show in those days it meant that you were sort of a recognized artist. There were only a few galleries in New York and, since my show was well-received, this seemed to me that I was an artist. Nobody could say I wasn't an artist now.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What kind of painting did you show?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, I had portraits, landscapes. The landscapes, some were imaginary based upon . . . I was interested in T. S. Eliot at the time. It had something to do with poetic themes, lonely figures. One of them was called "Man and the Sea." This nude figure standing on the beach with a very heavy metallic kind of sea. It was very moody sort of painting. They were all sort of moody, with the exception of some that were quite realistic. Like I did one of a South Ferry waiting room, the station with a magazine stand with some people standing around.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Those were done from sketches on the spot?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes, I would make sketches then I would paint. I painted mostly from sketches. I did some

portraits for which friends posed for me. It was pretty well received, but nothing was sold. Then Dudensing Gallery folded and I had no gallery.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This was after the Depression, I gather.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes, right after the Depression. 1930.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you married then?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: No, I wasn't married.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How did you continue to make a living, then? Did you still get some teaching jobs?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Same way. I just kept on part time jobs. I tried all sorts of things: sign painting, retouching photographs, anything.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I remember the period when I did the same thing.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Sure, we all did.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But you didn't get involved with the WPA?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, I did. I was on the WPA for a year. That was in, I think it was 1936.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But there were several years then after your one-man show and before that when you were just going from job to job and still painting pretty much in the same vein.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Pretty much. But then, I guess I would say in the early '30's, I began to be influenced by Milton Avery. In 1932 I got married and we went up to Rockport for the summer. The Averys were there and we used to see an awful lot of them. He was a good 10 years older than I and at that point the difference meant quite a bit. I was influenced by him but I can't say it did me any good because, in a way, it was sort of a weak period. I finally broke away from that and I started going to much better things.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How was his influence evident in what you were doing at that time?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: My subject matter, for one thing. While he was painting a lot of portraits of his wife, I painted my wife. We'd paint scenes of Gloucester Harbor. I got into the habit of working the way he did but that was sort of natural for me because I had always worked from sketches. We'd go out and make sketches of Gloucester Harbor or people on the beach up in Gloucester and then go home and paint them. I also picked up the technique of gouache from him. Gouache on colored paper.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But he was painting oils for his finished paintings at that time, wasn't he?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes, he was. So was I.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was he using a very thin paint?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes, it was thin.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You had been in any case not a thick painter, so it wasn't too much of a change. You had sketched before, too. Was there a difference in attitude towards such a matter because of the contact with Milton? Were his paintings, did they have that naive almost child-like look of seeing something that is without knowledge, without sophistication?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes. He did have that. He was I suppose you might say a sophisticated primitive. I never could really put myself into that position of being a sophisticated primitive. For that reason his outlook didn't really fit me and I had to find myself which took me a little while. I think I started to find myself really. I think I lost myself in Avery. Then I had to find myself again just as I lost my gallery and had to find another gallery. There were cycles like that. But I think I got more into my own when I went to Arizona, worked there for a year in 1937.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Adolph, I wanted to come back to an aspect that we passed over very quickly. And that was the relationship between literary interests and art. You mentioned having been involved with T. S. Eliot at a certain stage in your work in the '20's. How much would you say . . . how important was your involvement with not only literature in itself but the literature of art historians and critics and so on? Roger Fry and those people, too.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, at that time I tried to get hold of everything that was written about art and tried to read as much as I could. The people with whom I was friendly back in the '20's were mostly non-painters who might loosely be termed intellectuals. Their interests were literary, so that I was involved in a great deal of what they were interested in and I think it was valuable for me. It meant that a large part of my youth was spent in reading. Lately I have gotten out of it. I used to read a great deal.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What were some of the things you read? The most memorable experiences.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: I used to read Pound, Eliot and then Joyce, Proust, nineteenth century writers, and the Russians.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That gives a pretty good idea. Apparently you did carry over some of that into your painting, because you mentioned it before that you were thinking about something in T. S. Eliot at the time when you were doing certain paintings. Did that seem to happen very often?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: No, that was a phase I went through. That was just that particular time, around 1929 -- shortly after *The Wasteland* appeared in the old *Dial Magazine*.

DOROTHY SECKLER: *The Wasteland* was certainly a milestone. Was there a tendency in your mind to equate certain ways of working in your painting style, let's say, Cubistically, or break-ups in a certain way with certain things that were being done by people like Joyce and Pound? Particularly Joyce.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: No, I didn't try to make any correlation between what writers were doing, or even what the Cubists were doing and my own work. I had a feeling for most of that period that to blindly follow Picasso or Joyce or whoever would not necessarily lead to finding one's own way. I was struggling to find my own way. I didn't know exactly how to do it but I certainly didn't think that any one way was the best way. In fact I thought the worst way was to model one's self on, let's say, Picasso as some other people did, like Gorky. It was almost impossible for him to shake that off. I was very much aware of this for years that I mustn't let myself be swallowed up by Picasso or Cezanne or anyone else. I really wanted to be just Adolph Gottlieb if I could, for better or for worse. So the problem was to find out who I am.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What ways of investigating who you were were open to you? I mean this was before the period of psychoanalysis or even of surrealism with its automatism and so forth. Was there much searching among your friends and yourself? I suppose there always is among young and intense people in any case.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, I can only say that for myself and in my painting I went through a great deal of self searching and that came to a head in the early '40's. I can give you some idea of it if you want to skip the period, the brief period, when I went West.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I think we should get that in too. We'll come back to the '40's in any case. Let's at least follow you through on what happened to you in the West.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: My first trip was in the middle Thirties. It was 1937. My wife had arthritis. She had been teaching school and the doctor recommended that she take about a year off and go to a very dry climate. So we checked on what the driest place was and made a decision to go to Tucson, Arizona. We went out there and lived in the desert for about nine months. It was very beneficial for my wife's arthritis and practically cleared it up. I produced a great deal of work during this period I was away from the New York scene and started using the material that was at hand. I didn't have any money. Art supplies were expensive. I started using paint from cans that I got from paint stores. I painted the objects that I picked up from the desert, dry pieces of cactus and other things, pieces of bone.

DOROTHY SECKLER: To make a still life?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: I set up a still life.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you see Indian things while you were there?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: I saw some. There's a museum in Tucson of Indian art. But this is almost exclusively art of the Southwest which isn't very exciting -- but it's quite good. There were some things there that were quite good, especially the early things. Curiously, the Indians, just like other cultures, their art seems to disintegrate when they come into contact with our culture. So the earlier the things the better they were. I don't think I was very much influenced by that. Everybody seemed to think that my colors were influenced by the desert because I use tans and browns and grays and soft colors. That may be. It's possible. It may be also that I just limited myself to that sort of a palette. Well, then I came back to New York and had a show of that work. A lot of people seemed to think I had become very abstract. It didn't strike me as being particularly abstract.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This show, what did it consist of, still lifes of bones and things?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes, it was at the Artist's Gallery.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What made them feel it was more abstract? Was there a reduction of means?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes. I simplified my space very much. And it was at that point that I became very much aware of certain special problems. It was necessary for me to have a certain kind of space for the kind of forms I wanted to use. That I think made it seem rather abstract. Oh, I was dealing with an abstract problem in that sense. It was all very tangible and specific to me as I worked but it had a look of what people call abstract.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You say that you needed certain kind of space for the kind of forms that you wanted. Could you define the kind of forms that were now appearing in your work?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, in a way I can. It's like some of the paintings that I am doing now in which have a horizon and some very simple shapes. The canvas is divided more or less like it's two parts by this horizontal division. You have some simple, a few simple shapes. Obviously these shapes are invented shapes such as I use now. The space has to be a kind of imaginary space too. It can not simulate what we are accustomed to calling real space. It can not look like real space, three dimensional space that you can walk into because these are not real objects.

DOROTHY SECKLER: They were not then real shapes either. They were invented shapes?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: I based them on real shapes, on actual objects. I got forms from actual objects, then they became transformed and didn't look like real things, so that the space then couldn't look like real space either. It all became flattened out. Much more flat than I had ever worked before.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was there a complete absence of any kind of modeling at this point then?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: No, there was a certain amount of modulation but it was very limited so that it gave a sense of unreality. It wasn't real in the sense of looking at an actual scene. Although my work fluctuated. There was a certain phase of that work in which I became extremely realistic and made these things really three-dimensional with actual diorama-type space. I was somewhat ambivalent, a little bit ambivalent, about just what direction I wanted to go in. Until like 1940-41 when I just eliminated any illusion of depth, of diorama-type space.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Before we get that far ahead, you did return to the West again, I believe, in 1939?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: No, I didn't return to the West until '59. That's quite a bit later.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I see. So that we were at the end of the '30's in any case. Around the end of the '30's you were still swinging back and forth between more realistic and more abstract.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What were the circumstances of your life as you entered the '40's, I mean of your life as an artist? We had that work on the WPA. Is that over now?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Oh, that was over. I was only on that for a year, I think it was 1936.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: That didn't influence, that had very little effect on me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And that took you out of the studio for a project of some kind, didn't it?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: No, it was actually after I got off the WPA. I entered a U.S. Treasury Mural contest. It was called the 48 States Competition. There was a prize for each state and I won one of the awards. I won it for Nevada. So I did a mural for the Post Office in a small town called Yarrington, Nevada, and I didn't think I did a good job.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Is it still there?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: I hope not.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you influenced as to what kind of subject you would use in any way or were you allowed freedom of choice?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: I was allowed freedom, and I chose a . . . it was based on a scene that was outside my house

in Tucson. The country was very similar in Arizona and Nevada. So it was sort of appropriate.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Now I'll have to take us back to the question I had asked you about your interest in primitive art and you were telling me about something that happened in 1935.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes, in 1935 my wife and I took a trip to Europe and spent a lot of time in Paris. I had some connections there with people who handled primitive art. So I bought a bit, I bought a few pieces. I didn't have much money or else I would have bought a great deal. However, I had been interested in African art long before that because the interest was aroused by the interest the Cubists had in African art and also there were very famous collections that you could see in New York. A friend of mine, John Graham, had a marvelous collection. He was collecting things for Frank Crowninshield. He helped assemble that collection and also did a lot of things I believe for Helena Rubenstein. So I was associated with people who had an intense interest in this matter and I had the opportunity to see very good pieces and I read whatever I could about it so that I became quite familiar with it. And when I bought it I was fortunate enough to get some good things. I have been buying things on and off ever since. I have a very nice little collection now by my interest in it hadn't anything to do with my painting - just like other collectors I know also have collections of African art or Pre-Columbian art. It doesn't have any relation to what they do. They just like it and they collect it if they can. Also it happened to be something that an artist might be able to afford to buy because in those days it was possible to buy these things, some of these things, very cheaply. You could get very good things for a low price. Even today it is cheaper than a lot of other stuff.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you interested in other kinds besides African art?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: I was interested in everything but primarily in the African things. It just appealed to me. Maybe because of the link with Cubism. It may have been that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Then the formal aspect was much more important than the magical aspect of African sculpture?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Oh, I don't think it was the magical implication because we don't even know today what these people really think. All we know is that certain things have fetishistic values. It might help you to cure a disease, it might help you to punish an enemy, or ward off evil, or whatever. I mean they have their superstitions and these things were used as part of their beliefs. I think that for the artist it was a use of form that was very different from any sort of traditional art that we knew. It was very inventive and showed a different way of looking at the figure, for example.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Of course, the surrealists were going to associate primitive art in general to the idea of the preconscious. But this is jumping the gun and getting ahead of the game.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, that was later. I don't know to what extent the surrealists were concerned with that. These were people in the field of psychiatry who I think were more concerned with that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: At this time? At the end of the Thirties?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Maybe it was the early Forties.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, then, we are getting very close to the time when there was a very drastic change in your work, where a good many things seemed to come together. What prepared the way for that and what actually revealed it to you?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, I think what happened in the early Forties after the war started was, first of all, a number of surrealists came to this country and we were able to see them in the flesh, and see that they were just ordinary people such as we are. Then we were also cut off from the periodicals that used to come over like "Cahier des Arts." So that we weren't so continuously immersed in French art. I think there was some kind of sense of crisis so that you had to, at least I felt that I had to, dig into myself, find out what it was I wanted to express, what it was possible for me to express. I had to really come to grips with my painting problems which I couldn't separate from my personal problems. Everything was all tied together; it was one thing. I think that, as a result of this sort of period of introspection and of digging in, I evolved something that was personal which I then recognized as being something personal to me and which I tried to develop and fell over and clarify for myself. That was when I started doing what I called the pictographs which a lot of people think have something to do with primitive art, my interest in primitive art. Like when you were saying that surrealists seemed to think it had something to do with some sort of universals. My recollection is that it was Jung who came out with the idea of the collective unconscious. I was interested in reading Jung at the time and the idea interested me. Then it just appeared; I mean it just corroborated my idea that I wasn't really interested in primitive art, that if I decided to use certain symbols in my painting, for example an egg shape, I did this without extending it to be a symbolic reference. Why couldn't I come up with the idea of an egg as signifying fertility just as well as some

aborigine in Australia? And we do know and we knew at the time that these symbols developed spontaneously in Africa, Australia and America among all sorts of primitive peoples. It wasn't something exchanged because we know they had no contact with each other. It was impossible for them to communicate so that these are symbols which are universal symbols that people arrived at simultaneously. Now what I was trying to do at the time was . . . For one thing I decided to restrict myself to those shapes which I felt had a personal significance to me. And I wanted to do something figurative. Well, I couldn't visualize a whole man on a canvas. I couldn't see him in a flat space. I felt that I wanted to make a painting primarily with painterly means. So I flattened out my canvas and made these roughly rectangular divisions, with lines going out in four directions. That is, vertically and horizontally. Running right out to the edge of the canvas. And then I would free associate, putting whatever came to my mind very freely within these different triangles. There might be an oval shape that would be an eye or an egg. Or if it was round it might be a sun or whatever. It could be a wriggly shape and that would be a snake -- whatever I felt like doing. Then there would be very little editing or revision. However it came, that's the way it would be, more or less. Now it wasn't just picture writing. I considered myself a painter. I was involved with the painting ideas and making the thing painterly. So that it was a complex process that went on. It's very much over-simplified when I describe it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Having made your compartmentalization, did you make the division first?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes, I made the division first.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Then you have a kind of rectangular thing in one compartment and a round one in another. The fact that you would make a serpentine shape in a third part of the canvas, would that be dictated more by the aesthetic feeling of a need for a contrast to these two other shapes rather than some thought about snakes as having importance in a collective unconscious?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: I wasn't thinking of snakes at all. If I made a wriggly line or a serpentine line, it was because I wanted serpentine line. Afterwards it would suggest a snake but when I made it, it did not suggest anything. It was purely shape.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Something happening at a certain speed in a certain relationship to everything else.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Precisely. And this of course at the time was a very weird, seemed to be a very weird way of making a painting. In fact, although I had had a number of years in which I was supposedly a professional painter, when people saw these things who didn't know anything about me, they thought I didn't know how to paint. So then it became a question of whether I was even a professional painter any more because there was no composition in conventional terms. It certainly wasn't the way you make a painting by the standards then. For example, there was no focal point. If there was anything in the way of a focal point there was a multiplicity of focal points.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It's a shame they didn't have Marshall McLuhan to explain how this was the thing to do. He could have rationalized it all very beautifully.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Anyway, I had plenty of practice in being willful in doing what I wanted to do; just what I wanted to do.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How did the artists receive it?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, in those days the artist's world was small. I knew a lot of artists. The artists received it quite well. They liked it. And then a few other people liked it very much.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How did you arrive at color, by the way? We talked about the shape and the divisions. What were your first colors like in appearance?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: The first colors were like my desert paintings, very sandy in color. But then I became very free with my color too. And that changed it. I used the whole gamut of color. At different times I changed.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was it very direct painting or was there any sort of stumbling and overworking for richness of surface or what?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, it varied. If I may say so, I was very inventive. I would use every technique. I would use the old masters technique of mixing oil and tempera. I used to mix up my own tempera paints. And I would overpaint and underpaint and paint a la prima. I used every possible device that I knew of and discovered all sorts of curious effects that I played around with. I continued exploring this for about ten or twelve years.

DOROTHY SECKLER: During this time was it always done directly? You didn't make sketches or preparatory things first?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, it was almost always directly because if I didn't do it directly I wouldn't be able to tap that subconscious sort of thing. Then it would have been premeditated, planned thing. I did work that way once in a while but mostly I was trying to capture the direct, improvised, fresh sort of feeling.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Some artists at this time were, of course, doing automatic drawings and paintings. Did this seem to you a related way of doing something, but obviously more controlled?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes. It seemed to be related. I thought of it more as related to the automatic writing the surrealists were interested in. And I thought of it as kind of a picture writing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: But it was painterly. I was primarily concerned with the painterly character of what I was doing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did your repertory of pictographs change very much during the years you were doing it?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes and no. Basically all the forms could reduce themselves to simple shapes like rectangular shapes, round shapes, or triangular shapes. Some sort of definite category of shape. But in the merging of these shapes they took on a different form. A different emphasis. Different times the emphasis might be on color, or at other times it might be more linear.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In the beginning they were perhaps more isolated in each compartment. Later did they tend to join the sides of the compartment and each other to an extent?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes, as a matter of fact, I finally got to the point where the compartments disappeared. But then that's another story. Then I got into something else, which was a transitional phase. I also eliminated the images. I just had a grid, which became like a labyrinth in which there were overlapping grids going in every direction. Not only vertically, horizontally, but also diagonally. That was around 1950-51. You see, it was at that point that I was finally getting away from the pictographs and looking for something. The reason I sort of got away from all this was I had gotten to a point where I was able to do it very well. So it seemed to me that the question was should I just continue doing this and just do it better? Well, I wasn't interested in doing it better. Let someone else do that. I was interested in finding something else to say, to express. So it was necessary to find other forms, a different, changed concept. So I finally, after a certain period of transition, I hit on dividing the canvas into two parts, which then became like an imaginary landscape. However, while this seemed like a great break, it wasn't such a great break because in a philosophical sense what I was doing was the same. In other words, I've always done the same thing. That is, I'm interested in certain opposing images.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, that seems very fair. Before we get too far away from the pictographs, I think that this was such a very rich period I'd like to just explore a few other aspects before we leave it. At that time were you evolving ideas about myth and . . . ?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: The unconscious?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Were you at any of this time in analysis or was that contributing to any ideas?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: No. I think that if I ever needed analysis, I'd probably treat myself.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did it seem to work therapeutically?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, I guess so. I never failed to function so I suppose that's why I didn't need analysis.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did it ever seem to you that the pictographs, in addition to their function as creating painting with its shifts of space and images, was it revealing any other clues? As you said, you were in a period of intensive self-exploration. Was there anything more explicit there? As you moved through this period of eight or nine years working on the pictographs, did you seem to move away from the sense of the image as a kind of revelations toward a more deliberate aesthetic manipulation?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes, well, I did. That was why I eventually stopped doing the pictographs because I became very adept at the manipulation. I was no longer surprised and actually, I didn't mention it to you, but sometimes when I became too aware of what some of the symbolism was, I would just eliminate it because it bored me. So I would then look for new, fresh images. I liked to surprise myself. The surprise in a painting is not the surprise of discovering some kind of a story or myth, it's the surprise of finding a clear statement about something that you felt and then to see it, to see this feeling become materialized in paint, then it really exists. And until it is materialized, it's not really certain whether this really exists or not. So in a way, I suppose, what I have been doing with my painting is making manifest certain feelings that I have. And also ideas in their intangible form. Then I know that I am actually alive and this is not all a figment of some imagination.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The forms that you were using, if I'm right, were always those that had an organic reference. People sometimes have compared your work with that of Garcia and I believe I read somewhere that you hadn't seen his work in any case at that time or you saw it later or something. But of course in his compartments he did use things like steamships and trains and so on. This never happened, however, in your work.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: No. I had seen his stuff. I thought it was sort of corny. And I know that if I thought he was better off than I, I certainly wouldn't have been influenced by him. But in any event I wasn't influenced by him. I think he was a kind of a mechanical Cubist or sort of pseudo-Cubist. His work doesn't really interest me very much. I think the relationship that people found was they were trying to . . . Well, I think, whenever they mentioned it, it was just to denigrate my work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, it would have been out of character for you to have introduced objects from the exterior world related to, well, machines or cars or things of that sort. The organic reference was basic to your thought.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, I was interested in a subjective imager. In fact, Kootz once had a show called the Interests Objectives. And my feeling was that I was looking for a subjective imager, stemming perhaps from the subconscious. Because the external world as far as I was concerned had been totally explored in painting and there was a whole ripe new area in the inner world that we all have. Now, in order to externalize this you have to use visual means and so the visual means may have some relation to the external world. However, what I was trying to focus on was what I experienced within my mind, within my feelings, rather than on the external world which I can see. I see it the same as everybody else sees it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: By the time this show was held at Kootz, of course, there were probably a number of you who had shared this feeling that art was a matter of the subjective rather than the objective world and so on. Who was closest to you at that time?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Oh, well, I think Tomlin was one of the closest to me. Well, I used to see a lot of the artists of my generation, like Rothko and Will Barnet, and Bazioties.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Where did you carry on most of your exchanges with them? Were you involved with The Club?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes, I used to go. When The Club first started I was there a great deal of the time, almost all of the meetings and panel discussions and the forums that they had. I was pretty much involved with that. And we'd see each other at parties and go to each other's studios.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And there was a good deal of talk at that time about work. There doesn't seem to be much of that today.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, I don't know. I suppose young artists today talk about their work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Maybe they do, but I don't hear it. But there was a kind of sense of shared preoccupation. Not styles, but things that were important.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes, it was to a certain extent. I would say that the further back I go in time, the younger we were the more we talked about art. As you get older, you either do it or you don't do it. And, in talking about it, what you're looking for is confirmation. Or you try to convince somebody else about what you are doing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you have a sympathetic feeling for much of what was going on with this group around you?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Oh, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you know Rothko or was this earlier?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Oh I knew Rothko for years at that point. I knew him for years.

[END OF TAPE A]

DOROTHY SECKLER: For the record, Mr. Gottlieb's present gallery is the Marlborough Gallery.

It was about 1944 that you made this statement in the paper to, oh roughly . . . ?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Roughly, right. 1944-45.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That was about it. Your work at this point was also going through a period . . . well you had already changed it.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, I was doing pictographs at the time. I was doing pictographs from about 1941 to about 1952.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was there any change in attitude or style or anything else that we should mention? I understood from what you said before that, as you ended, toward, let's say, 1950, you were becoming more refined, more adept, more subtle perhaps in the way you handled and joined the various symbols. I remember a very beautiful one that was reproduced on the cover of Art News.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: That was around 1949.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. And your colors then included oranges and grays. You were getting a bit more color, departing from the earth colors a good bit.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes, I used the full gamut of color at that time. I'll find out when I see my show coming in.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You've already mentioned your feeling that you didn't want to just go on refining the same approach. And you shifted then into the horizontal division. What other emblems or shapes were now on the canvas?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, I had this idea of disparate images you see which occurred throughout the pictographs. What I really was trying to do when I got away from the pictographs was to make this notion of a kind of polarity clearer and more extreme. So the most extreme thing that I could think of doing at the time was to divide the canvas in half, make two big divisions and put something in the upper section and something in the lower section. So I painted that way, with that in mind, for quite awhile, for a few years. Oh, I would say roughly from about 1952 to '56, '57. About five years.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But we were not yet at the period where there would be a roundish shape occupying the upper section. To come back a moment to the period of the pictographs, you were going to tell me something about how they evolved that we passed over.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, I'll tell you how the idea of compartmentalization occurred to me. I was looking for some sort of a systematic way of getting down these subjective images and I had always admired, particularly admired, the early Italian painters who preceded the Renaissance and I very much liked some of the altar pieces in which there would be, for example, the story of Christ told in a series of boxes, starting with the Nativity and ending with the Resurrection. This would be told chronologically, like a comic strip technique. And it seemed to me this was a very rational method of conveying something. So I decided to try it. But I was not interested in telling, in giving something its chronological sequence. What I wanted to do was to give something, to present what material I was interested in, simultaneously so that you would get an instantaneous impact from it. So I made boxes but then I put the images in with no sequence and no rational order. In other words, there was no chronology and you were supposed to see the thing instantaneously. Then, since there was no chronology, there was no rational order. The images appeared apparently at random; they then established themselves in a new system. So that was why all those years I was able to use very similar images but, by having different juxtapositions, there will always be a different significance to them. Curiously, I've told this to people but it doesn't seem to register, but what really puzzled me is that nobody ever accused me of being influenced by Mondrian. They accused me of being influenced by psychiatry, primitive art, by Torres Garcia, all sorts of things, but nobody ever mentions Mondrian. No one ever thinks of early Italian painters.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Hess said you were working in an area between Mondrian and Soutine!

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yeah. I don't know where he got Soutine into it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I don't either. I don't understand that. Surrealist would have been more, you know, the extreme. I was surprised by it. In fact, my own suspicion frankly, if you want to know what I suspected, was that it was Australian aboriginal art. Because, if I were going to be influenced by anything primitive as a painter, I'd go straight for that.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, I was influenced by the early Italians.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That is a much more interesting derivation. And, of course, I think that you want to get away from the Renaissance perspective and the Renaissance logical space, that pre-Renaissance is just as good as primitive in a way. You know, it is primitive in a way.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes, and besides not only wasn't I an aborigine, I wasn't an early Renaissance man either.

[Laughter] I was just a 20th century painter.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, that is a very interesting aside and I am glad we put it in. To return again to the later point of time that we interrupted, you had arrived at a horizontal division of the space and to place in each part a disparate image of what type, initially?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, initially, and I pretty much stuck to it, in the upper area I put something like a Morse Code, which consisted of very large dots and dashes. As a matter of fact, some commercial artist once put a full page ad in the Times in which he had laid out the type and made it look like one of my paintings. And it was Morse Code. In Morse Code it said "RCA." [Laughter] Then in the lower section I put a kind of free calligraphy and these were sort of extremes which I felt had no connection with each other but I had a feeling that I could make them cohere in some way. And, curiously enough, they did. See, I never understand why my paintings hold together because I don't have any tricks for doing it and that is usually what makes a painting academic. There were some well-known devices for making the painting work, hold together, have cohesion. This seemed to be organized. But I don't . . . I try to eliminate any of these things and, if the things fall into place, that is what I feel they should do. But I don't necessarily have to know what the mechanism is. Because there is no mechanism really. You see, what it really is, is something you have in yourself that makes you feel, it gives the painting a feeling of unity, of oneness, and being all of one piece. It's not any series of devices.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would it be an intuitively felt scale which relates not only to size in a literal way but to the potential for expanding or contracting elements within an area? I mean not that you'd think it out but that you just, I mean, after all your years of exposure and involvement, that you would sense this relationship?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, that may be but, if that is the case, I don't know, frankly. But I do know that it's not something which, as far as I can make out, is measurable. If it's not measurable there is no way of verifying it, so your guess is as good as mine.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, I have been, as you know, working with Harold Rosenberg and he recently, in trying to explain why "action painting" is a term that could be used to relate to your work and to Rothko's and Barnett Newman's as well as Pollock's and deKooning's, seems to arrive at the point of saying that, well, where with Pollock and with deKooning there is involved a direct discharge of energy, with the other painters it is a matter of expansion and contraction of space. Which I would think had to be true of all modern art anyway, you know, and it doesn't necessarily solve the problem. But the other thing that interests me is the idea of two disparate things rather than two harmonized things, something that probably had been in the air with the Expressionists to some extent. You see the beginnings of composition in which things hold together not by being harmonized but by being as opposite as possible to each other.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Are you talking about the Impressionists?

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, the Expressionists.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Oh, the Expressionists. Well, the Impressionists sort of broke up the color into its components. This created a kind of disparity of color which theoretically was unified in your eye when you stood at the proper distance. But that was just theory.

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, I wasn't thinking of Impressionism at all. [Both talking] Well, I think that was one of the things that came along.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, I don't know, Dorothy, I never thought of the Expressionists as dealing with any sort of disparate imagery certainly. Their methods, their means, were that they used violate brush work, and harsh colors. Well, I don't know.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, it isn't important for this discussion. I mean, the point is that for you it was a fresh discovery and wasn't certainly a very original innovation and probably also a very disturbing one to people who were used to paintings in which there was an obvious harmony brought about by echoes of certain little things that were picked up and repeated in variations and so on. Here they were suddenly confronted with the most stark opposition of a movement which was calligraphic and rough in one area and with a very different kind of movement or image in the other. Of course, the ones with dots seemed to expand into a kind of sun or orb. And many of them lost the Morse Code feeling and seemed to take over, having a new kind of identity eventually.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, the forms were ambiguous of course, intentionally so. And I really didn't intend them to look like Morse Code so that they could be de-coded, nor did I intend them to look like sun spots. I didn't have any way of explaining why I used these things. Because I've never been an ideological painter anyway; I mean, it's sort of afterwards, in retrospect, that I can say what I'm saying now. I had certain instincts, reflexes which impelled me as a painter. You see painting as a non-verbal thing, it is just visual. So I was dealing with visual things, and these were the visual things which I'm trying to describe. But you have to remember that they were

visual things and they weren't Morse Code. They weren't suns or anything else; that's just a description.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It seemed to me, if you took the elements of the forms in the pictographs and sort of compressed them and reduced them, that you somehow would arrive at something very close to what you did.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: That's true, especially when I see some of my pictographs now I see the forms that I am using today. But at that time I hadn't simplified or boiled things down as much. I don't know if you want to get to this yet but there was just as big a change in my work later as there was in my work when I started doing pictographs. You see, after doing the imaginary landscapes until, say, '56, in '57 I came out with the first burst painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: First what?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Burst.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, yes.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, it happened that the title of that first painting was "Burst" so since then everybody calls them Bursts. Although I give them all different titles. But there was a different type of space than I had ever used and it was a further clarification of what I was trying to do. The thing that was interesting was that it was a return to a focal point, but it was a focal point with but the kind of space that had existed in traditional painting. Because this was like a solitary image or two images that were just floating in the canvas space. They had to hold the space and they also had to create all the movements that took place within the rectangle.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Just how did it come about? Do you remember the first one and how it evolved from the former stage? By the way, to consider the element of scale, your paintings must have become larger after you left the pictographs or at the end of the pictographs.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Well, at the end of the pictographs they became quite large and at that time I was working in a room that was about 16 foot square. So I decided to . . . well, I wanted to do some large paintings and the largest I could do was 16 foot. So I did a couple of 16 foot paintings, going right across from one wall to the other. And, well, at one point that you know I did that stained glass job the surface of which was 1200 square feet, a five story building. So, after that, nothing seemed particularly large; it didn't make much difference. It was just a matter of, if I wanted to work large, I could. Now, if I do a large painting, let's say it's twelve foot, 8 x 12, something like that. To me that is a reasonable size.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Up until this point, had your direct painting continued? I realize that during the pictograph period you were a very direct painter and that things evolved on the surface. Did it continue to be direct painting into the second stage of the horizontal division? Or would you sometimes make a small sketch and work out an idea?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Sometimes I would make a small sketch but mostly, even today, throughout my career, I've mostly worked directly on the canvas, large or small. Most of my things are of good size. I rarely work from sketches although once in a while I do. My theory is or my explanation of it is that working directly on a large canvas I get the spontaneity and directness that people have always valued when an artist does a sketch. So that in a sense my large paintings are my sketches. Sometimes, after I do a large painting, I will do a small painting or a series of small paintings based upon the large painting. But the large painting, when it comes off, has that roughness and unpremeditated quality which I value.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you painting on a vertical surface during the first break into the new horizontal things or were you working on the floor? I see you were working on the wall when you mentioned the 16-foot painting.

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Yes, I was. When I started doing the Bursts, I began to do part of the painting horizontally. It was necessary to do that because I was working with type of paint which had a particular viscosity which flowed and, if it were on a vertical surface, it would just run. If it were on a horizontal surface, I could control it. So I'd put my paintings down horizontally but I didn't put them on the floor. I had them set up on horses or stools, so that I was at a good working height.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Then were you still using brushes at this point?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: I was using a combination of brushes and knives, palette knives.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you use palette knives?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: Oh yes, I use them a great deal, and spatulas. And for a while I was using squeegees for putting on paint. I've tried everything, rollers, rags. I've put paint on with everything.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You know when the squeegee had a long handle of some kind?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: I have used that, yes, when it was a very large painting and it was hard to reach it in the middle. I worked with a squeegee on a long handle.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you able to keep the feeling of the spontaneity and of the free invention with that cumbersome device? Or was it cumbersome?

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB: I didn't think it was cumbersome. I thought it was a very handy device.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It gives you a very different kind of effect than if you had to take a smaller brush and go in there later. Is that partly what you were avoiding? This filling-in thing?

[END OF TAPE]

Last updated... *September 23, 2002*