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Oral history interview with Hilla Rebay, 1966

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Hilla Von Rebay in 1966. The interview took was conducted by Bruce Hooten for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

BRUCE HOOTEN: Last time you told me about where you grew up.

HILLA VON REBAY: Alsace Lorraine. My grandfather was a mine owner from the Rhur. He developed the Rhur. My mother was born Von Eichen and her father was quite a genius. The family of my mother owned the Rhur since the 11th century and in the 1800s he developed the Rhur for the first time. He found coal there and he made the first coal mines. He was quite a remarkable man, I, of course, didn't know him, and he did a great deal for art and he gave money to the Academy at Dusseldorf and such things. And my mother, later, was always amazed that I had this talent, already at five years of age I made designs of people that were remarkable. Somebody kept them and later someone showed me. It was really wonderful for five. They were little portraits. Later, when I was ten there was a professor from Munich who was interested in my designs, and he gave me a beautiful paintbox which I still have. Beautiful, wonderful wood and everything, like professional. He was a professor from the Academy in Munich - we were at that time in Baden, on the other side of the Rhine. My father was an officer and that's why we were moved often but we were mostly in Alsace Lorraine and in Baden and in Cologne. In Cologne we played quite a role because my mother was from this great family from the Rhine.

BRUCE HOOTEN: What kind of General was your father?

HILLA VON REBAY: Artillery. Every officer had lots of horses, naturally.

BRUCE HOOTEN: Was he in the First War?

HILLA VON REBAY: Yes. He was wounded. He sat once between the two lines for 14 days in a dirt hole because he didn't want a young person to be in this terrible danger. That's the kind of man he was. And he was very artistic. He could do beautiful carving in wood. Whenever he went on maneuvers he came back with sketch books ... silverpoint, beautifully done. My mother was very artistic because her father had a great collection and so she was brought up with art. In Strassburg when I was a little girl we knew all the painters so I saw many things. There was also the Prince Hobenlohe who was a friend of my parents and he became then the Professor for Bismarck. I remember when the train left we were all standing at the station and I cried my heart out because I had always been allowed to come to his palace. On the floor there were these big lion heads with the mouths wide open and wolves - because he had possessions in Russia - his mother was Russian I think. And I would put my head into this open mouth. So I was used, from childhood on, to important men...important people all over. My parents were very hospitable and we had artistic people - not only military people - so the house was interesting. My mother never did what military ladies should do - a very interesting woman. Beautiful, too. So it was natural that I got into the world of art.

BRUCE HOOTEN: Did you have formal training at all?

HILLA VON REBAY: Oh yes! And how! In Paris at the Academie Julien. I was 16. At 15 I didn't want to learn mathematics and so on which I knew I would never use. Of course I was already by then a very good pianist. I played in concerts when I was 12 and 13, I always played Bach. I had professional teachers but I was not allowed to become professional. In Cologne I wanted to get the best Bach teacher because I wanted to play Bach always. I went there to the conservatory and - I had curls - I was thirteen or fourteen but I looked ten, I was always small. I played in a concert and my father was in the audience. They called for an encore and I was not prepared, so I played a Gavotte that he had the regiment's musicians always play for him wherever he was. And I played it for him because he had to listen to this endless Bach. The audience came up on the stage - they nearly tore me to pieces. That was when I wasn't sure whether to be a painter or a musician. But, I knew then I belonged to painting. I never played again in public.

BRUCE HOOTEN: Who did you meet at the Academie Julien when you were there?

HILLA VON REBAY: I studied with Rollais and Bouche. They were the same professors as at the Royal Academy. But there they took only professionals. It depended on money and social standing which studio you went to and I went to the Julien near the Champs Elysee. I was surrounded mostly by society girls. This class was only for ladies. Even then the governess was sitting at the door. You were never alone on the street, always somebody with you. I had a great teacher when I was in Cologne. A genius and one of the most important men I have ever met in my life. His wife was a famous pianist. He was full of humor, you know how the Cologne people are, the

Rhinish people? They are the most humorous in the world. I learned from him but my parents thought it was nothing. I knew immensely what I learned but it wasn't showing up. Before, I made these portraits that everyone found beautiful - but now they couldn't see a thing because with him I studied the anatomy. Sometimes I did nothing but noses or eyes, detail - and these were things you couldn't show. This great teacher also was a great human being and I was at that time very high brow, you know? And anyone who was not nobility I didn't know. And he said to me "First, I make a human being out of you." He was right. Herbert Finkeisen. He never became famous because he painted only one painting in his life. But what a man! Marvelous. He was the only pupil of Von Gebhardt who was a very great painter who painted the Christ Church in Dusseldorf. That was his life work. All his work was destroyed by the First World War. He was 80 something. And when I told my parents I didn't want to be a musician but a professional painter, my father said "I allow you to paint until you are 18, but then you're my daughter, you go out and finish. No artist in our family." So we went to Von Gebhardt who knew friends of ours. He was at the Academy that my grandfather had paid for but he was not to know that I was the grandchild. He had an enormous studio. My drawings were lying on the table when I came in with my father, but he didn't say a thing. Finally he said to my father "Well, when is the artist coming?" My father pointed to me and Von Gebhardt said "What! This child?" He said he had just the teacher for me in Cologne. So I went there and learned from him nothing to be shown but I think I know more about academism and knowledge of details and of the human being and anatomy than anybody. I was always superior to even my teachers in Paris. In Paris and later in Munich the pupils came to me for criticism and advice because I knew more. I could write books on how to paint objectively, rules which are absolutely lost today ... but I'm not interested in objective painting. About 1913 I told my mother I was through with painting because it was only copying nature and God's creation and there was no creation in painting - only copying and pretense and it was against my nature. So I gave it up. I was invited to the festivals and I was only a young girl. In Paris I won all the prizes because I knew more than my own teachers. I had learned for several years tremendous techniques and tricks - there are a lot of tricks in painting - that's what I didn't like: with this you can do that and with that you can do this and then this will happen - it's sort of calculation - all of which I didn't like but I knew them and wherever I went, wherever I studied with a professor, in no time the pupils, some were 50 years old and I was only 15 or 17 or 18 or 20 - they became my pupils. Then there was the war and I had given up painting. My mother was with the Red Cross and so was I, and I had my own hospital...we were in simple schoolrooms. They had so many wounded - twice as many wounded as inhabitants in villages. The Rhine was blocked - it was a frontier. When we got to Alsace my father had no idea that war was coming - but nobody would believe that. It should really be written some day. My mother and I were in Switzerland at the time between Montreux and Interlachen. I went to the train to send some letters off when a man appeared at a train window and said to me "My God! You are still here?" I asked why we shouldn't be here and he said "Because there's war against Germany." I ran back to my mother and we threw everything into trunks and managed to get the next train but when we got to the frontier it was closed. We went to the head of the railroad and asked what we could do to get over the frontier and see my father before he had to go. The German Ambassador was leaving in a half an hour and he took us back. In the middle of the night my father came through...he had been on maneuvers and didn't know. The French were five miles from where we lived, already in. I never felt very German myself because my mother was from the Rhine and half-French and my father was really Austrian. But we originated in 1001 in the Provence in France. My ancestors were the first Crusaders. I am a crusader myself. And my brother's grandchildren have the same spirit. They're always leaders. Wherever they are they are the first, always - it's innate for centuries and centuries. I was always a leader...I never had to ask anybody what to do. Anyway, that night my father came and stayed only an hour and told us to cover the house with straw, open the doors, feed the soldiers that come, let them in and don't do anything. The Frenchmen came but they didn't come into our house because a wonderful protestant clergyman who had worked with my mother who was then the president of the Red Cross of Alsace Lorraine. She had many connections with ministers. This clergyman, whose community was near the Rhine, came in the night in a peasant's cart and he hid us in the hay and took us to his house for a few hours. Then early in the morning he took us to the Rhine and over the Rhine in a boat.

BRUCE HOOTEN: When did you start becoming interested in modern painting? Was that in Paris?

HILLA VON REBAY: No. I created it. I did everything myself for the first time. But during the war when we had this house filled with wounded, I said in the middle of the night, between those wounded men, I said to myself "And yet there is an art in painting"...I knew there was an art in painting because there are forms - there's light and heavy on a canvas - there's delicate and strong on the canvas - there is a square - there is a triangle - there is a straight line, there is a horizontal line - there are so many absolutely pictorial tools in existence with which I could animate this space and bring it to rhythm and to life and to creation. That is Art and that I was going to search and do. I was in this hospital where we had brought soldiers over the Rhine when I was ordered to go in a train to supervise wounded. This train went to Strassburg and there my mother was, standing across two rail lines on the other side, organizing traffic for wounded and so on. And I called over to her "And yet there's Art in painting." I'll never forget that. She couldn't understand what I meant. I couldn't wait until I could get out and when they had enough nurses, I began to create. That's how I came to Non-Objective painting. In 1915 Switzerland invited me to show my last known paintings which were cubistic - they were objective, but cubistic. I was invited to Basle and Zurich and I got permission, which was difficult, to leave Germany to see my

exhibitions. I was invited by Busoni, the pianist, who had bought some of these cubistic paintings and when I got to the hotel there was a letter from Busoni asking me to come and he would play for me that night. Wasn't that nice? So I went and he played for me a whole night Bach. The next morning his wife brought us coffee and then he said I must meet the painters there....Hans Arp and others. That was the first time I had ever met modern painters. Hans Art was Non-Objective. He made collage, you know, and he was always more or less a dreamer. He was never a creator but he was very much up my line. After seeing my cubistic things in the exhibition he asked me if I had gone on with that. Then he said we must write to the der Sturm. Have you heard of the der Sturm. And the der Sturm invited me to Berlin for an exhibition of my Non-Objective paintings.

BRUCE HOOTEN: The first exhibition was when?

HILLA VON REBAY: 1917 in Berlin.

BRUCE HOOTEN: Was Kandinsky there then?

HILLA VON REBAY: No. He was in Russia all during the war. Only in 1922 did he come and I did meet him but I wasn't impressed. More important than meeting Kandisky was in the der Sturm meeting Rudolph Bauer. This was really an extraordinary experience. He was a very quiet man...would never speak. He always sat next to me but he didn't say one word...nothing.

BRUCE HOOTEN: Was he painting Non-Objective at the time?

HILLA VON REBAY: Oh yes. He was, even then, greater than Kandinsky and Kandinsky was jealous of him because he had what Kandinsky never had - the __of space.

BRUCE HOOTEN: When do your earliest Kandinsky's date from?

HILLA VON REBAY: 1904.

BRUCE HOOTEN: Your Bauers go back too?

HILLA VON REBAY: Bauer was the greatest designer for Oulk which was a paper...a magazine full of drawings and jokes. Bauer was the man who make the title pages for it. I think he made 8,000 a month - he was immensely wealthy because of his genius - and because he was employed in Austria and Sweden and in Berlin and Munich...everywhere. He had places where the covers of these magazines were piled up clear to the ceiling. Kandinsky was always tremendously jealous of him. Kandinsky was a Russian and Russians are very intriguing - you can't trust them.

BRUCE HOOTEN: Did you tell me that Mr. Guggenheim visited your family?

HILLA VON REBAY: Yes. In Baden.

BRUCE HOOTEN: And he saw, in your studio, the two Bauers?

BRUCE HOOTEN: It is very complicated. I was invited to Philadelphia by very wealthy friends. After the war was over I came to Rome, first to Viareggio to visit friends of my parents. They asked me to come because while skiing I had broken my leg and from the shock I got instant jaundice so the doctors sent me to Viareggio. Fortunately before the accident, I had missed five meals and my stomach was empty, otherwise you die from instant jaundice. I went to Italy to recover. When I could walk again I went to Rome and was invited to exhibit. It was there I met the people who invited me to America. In Rome there was a young girl from Philadelphia who had a beautiful voice. I met her because she was staying at the same hotel and she was studying music. At Christmas her parents wrote to me if she could come home with me for the holidays. Then later the parents wrote, would I take her home to America. I was invited in New York to Marie Sterner's who was carried away by some of my paintings she had seen. She made me an exhibition which sold out completely - to the Guggenheims and the Vanderbilts and everybody. I didn't get a nickel out of it -- she counted for this and that, the hall and so on. But I didn't care because these people were so enthusiastic about my things. And this is where Mrs. Guggenheim came in. She came to a reception Marie Sterner gave on a Saturday. On Monday she called and said, "I'm sure you thought I had forgotten you." And she took me as a mother her child and was very nice to me. She took me to the exhibitions and to the theatres. And so the two Guggenheims became like my second parents. After that I went back and forth - every summer with my parents and sometimes in Italy and many other places. There was a famous lawyer in New York whose name was Adrian Larkin and I became friends with his daughter and then with the rest of the family. I painted the whole Larkin family. I painted portraits in those days as well as Non-Objective art. With portraits I made my living. I painted the children and grandchildren and nephews and nieces and Mrs. Larkin said to me, "Hilla, you've got to have a studio in Carnegie Hall." So she sponsored me and that's how I got into Carnegie Hall. Then I took an apartment next to Carnegie Hall. I was always invited to all those big houses on Long Island and everywhere. I was always invited - much, to much, to

my pleasure. Then I only showed portraits, extractions and paper plastic things. I was in Europe with the Guggenheims and they came to visit my parents in Baden and that's where he saw some Non-Objective paintings on the walls. Somehow he saw them. "Ah," he said, "That's what I want to collect." And I said "Mr. Guggenheim, you're much too old for that - in fifteen years. But this is not now. All right, you'll only make yourself ridiculous." I was always very sensitive about anything that was new. I wanted it for myself and I was never interested in what other people thought but I didn't ask their opinion either. I never exposed them to my real work. Nobody knew what I was really doing. I did what they understood and that was all. "But here" he said, "this is fabulous. And I want to buy these two paintings." "But they belong to Bauer" I said. "Well, write to him." And I knew that Bauer would say they were not for sale because I had supported Bauer in such a way that he didn't have to sell. I wanted to create in Germany a second B___, only for painting instead of music. For Non-Objective painting. I intended to have a building and needed his work to be kept together and several other painters I helped this way...and I had Kandinsky. And I saw to it that this work was kept together. Then Mr. Guggenheim said "Let me do that!" And I thought he was too old. But what did he do? He went himself, without telling me, to Bauer and Bauer was only too glad to do it right away. I wanted to do it when time was right, and I was ready financially and in every way to organize this thing. Oh no! Mr. Guggenheim took over and said "Now I want to do something prominent." Now all his brothers had Foundations and everyone was doing something of the ears or the eyes or something or something else on earth. But he, having seen these paintings, held up his sleeves "this is what I want to do - introduce this." "Oh," I said, "Mr. Guggenheim you will never live to see that, you know." I didn't want to get into public discussions, all my life I was the most exclusive person. I didn't want to be in the limelight. When I had big exhibitions I was never there at the openings. I just didn't care. But he got me into it and how! You see, the Museum is standing there. And of course the only sad part is that it is the hands of a man who is horrible. He never was friends with Mr. Guggenheim.

BRUCE HOOTEN: You say Mr. Guggenheim started collecting more or less on his own ... and then he asked you to take over?

HILLA VON REBAY: No. He did buy watercolors direct from Bauer. Then Bauer went to a dealer in Berlin who had Kandinskys and sent a big roll of Kandinskys to our place and Mr. Guggenheim opened it and said "That's not what I want." Kandinsky hadn't got the purity and sublimeness of Bauer which appealed to this great man. I never thought he would see it a success. He said "Why shouldn't it be...other people will like it if I like it." He finally talked Bauer into selling him wonderful paintings and his whole bedroom in the Plaza Hotel was Non-Objective. He had corridors of Non-Objective. Mrs. Guggenheim couldn't understand it at all and she really thought I had talked him into it. I could never get that out of her head that I didn't. She was angry that he didn't continue to buy primitives and old masters.

BRUCE HOOTEN: Italian primitives?

HILLA VON REBAY: French mostly. And so rare that you probably have never seen them.

BRUCE HOOTEN: When was it decided that there would be a Museum? Wasn't it first on 54th Street?

HILLA VON REBAY: Well, it got so that the Plaza Hotel was so crowded. I suddenly got a telegram from a professor at Columbia University when I was in Europe saying "Congratulations..Headlines Herald Tribune. You are the Curator of the Guggenheim Foundation." I think, yes it was Frederic Keisler, he was then at Columbia. I sat on my terrace and I began to cry and my father came over and asked me why I cried and I said that I couldn't let Mr. Guggenheim make a mess of it and make himself ridiculous and it meant I had to go to America because you cannot introduce such a thing wrong with an ignorant public. You have to do it in such an elegant way and so overpoweringly exquisite that they just will accept. And that's what I did and that's how we got on 54th Street. And that's how he got me..tied down! I said "You're much too old to make a Foundation." But he did live quite a while longer.

BRUCE HOOTEN: You did have traveling shows didn't you? They did go to many parts of the country. I have seen the early scrapbooks of the museum which show your founding of it.

HILLA VON REBAY: Oh, they have those in the Museum?

BRUCE HOOTEN: When did you first meet Mr. Wright?

HILLA VON REBAY: I didn't know Frank Lloyd Wright at all. Mr. Guggenheim told me to find an architect. I didn't know any but I knew of Frank Lloyd Wright and called some people who said "Oh, he died long ago." But I couldn't imagine that one wouldn't have heard if he had died so I wrote to his editor but got no answer. Then one day someone called here and said "This is Frank Lloyd Wright. I hear you want to meet me. Shall I bring my wife and some people along?" Then I told him what I wanted and he said he'd let me know. I explained to him what I wanted, a museum that goes slowly up. No staircase, no interruptions, He said, "Have you a design?" I gave him a design. He said, "Excellent." Then I didn't hear for long. Then he called from Washington and came and it showed how great a man he was, great people have great humility you know. He came in and over his

arm he had a redwood board with red leather, this funny red that he has in everything, with red ribbons hanging down, the flesh color red he has in everything. And he was nervous, he was trembling with nervousness. I thought what a great man. He put it out. It was go gorgeous! I have to write to his wife, to send the originals to the Museum.

BRUCE HOOTEN: The original model?

HILLA VON REBAY: No, the design. Because it should really belong to us. I asked him to but he wanted to take it home. Possibly he gave it to them, I don't know. He came in and he put it out and the design of it! The coloring of it! "Oh," I said, "it's gorgeous!" And he was so relieved. I was carried away, oh God, it was so beautiful.

BRUCE HOOTEN: Did you have any encounters when he was building it?

HILLA VON REBAY: He was dead when they built it.

BRUCE HOOTEN: But in the beginning - wasn't he working with them in the beginning? Wasn't he working with Mr. Sweeney in the beginning and there was some argument between them? Sweeney was the first Director wasn't he?

HILLA VON REBAY: On no. Of that Museum?

BRUCE HOOTEN: Yes, when it was built.

HILLA VON REBAY: No. I was then still Director. But I didn't go there much you know. I let the thing run by itself. No, Sweeney came in after I was too ill to go on. In '53 I stopped going there and I was two years in bed. And I told them that they would have to find somebody. Naturally I never thought they would fall on Sweeney...who was already thrown out of the Modern Art. Which is a silly word...how can art be modern? How can sunshine be modern? Have you ever heard such a thing? The modern sun has been shining today. The word Modern Art is simply ridiculous. We say Non-Objective painting...but the word Art! You try to explain that to Mr. Sweeney. I had disliked him for a long time because I always thought he was an imposter. I think that's what he is. Wasn't he in the corset business?

BRUCE HOOTEN: I don't know. He was a poet at one time.

HILLA VON REBAY: A poet?

BRUCE HOOTEN: I think so. He used to write for "Transition." I think he used to be an editor of "Transition" magazine.

HILLA VON REBAY: Well, that may be but he was a corset manufacturer or something - he was a businessman.

BRUCE HOOTEN: Yes, I think he was a businessman.

HILLA VON REBAY: And then he came to the Modern Art and with his brashness said "As much as they know, I know too," naturally that was easy. And there he made himself a position. I was dumbfounded when they took him at the Guggenheim because he was thrown out of that other place. I resigned very soon, even as a trustee. Because I wasn't well enough, you see. And it wasn't anymore the Museum I wanted. And they didn't care what he wanted.

BRUCE HOOTEN: Did Mr. Guggenheim like the design when he first saw it, do you remember?

HILLA VON REBAY: Did he see it?

BRUCE HOOTEN: Yes, Mr. Guggenheim saw the Museum.

HILLA VON REBAY: The old man?

BRUCE HOOTEN: Yes. He saw the plans didn't he?

HILLA VON REBAY: That he may have seen. But then we changed it around. We thought at the time that we would have only half the block. After Mr. Guggenheim died we were able to buy the entire block. You know there was a big building where the Vanderbilts were. We didn't imagine that we would ever have a chance to buy that building. But I think Mr. Guggenheim was dead then already. I have forgotten how these thing were because I'm always thinking forward. The past has never, never interested me. Whether the Forum looked this way or that way I don't care. I found it ridiculous the admiration of dead stuff, you know? Already as a little child I was always forward. I would like to live until 2004, that I would like.

BRUCE HOOTEN: Are there any of the American painters that you like, other than those you knew? Those painting in America when you were here and the Museum was going?

HILLA VON REBAY: Well, I don't remember great ones...but I've forgotten even that...I don't remember much. If I would look at my catalogues perhaps I could tell you. Let's go upstairs, come along.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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