



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Sonia Wolfson,
1990 August 19

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 recorded interview with Sonia Wolfson on August 19, 1990. The interview took place in Beverly Hills, California and was conducted by Ilene Susan Fort for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The Archives of American Art has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ILENE SUSAN FORT: So today is August the 19th, Sunday morning, in Beverly Hills. This is Ilene Fort going to interview Sonia Wolfson. I thought we would start with something very basic. Why don't you tell me where you grew up? When you were born, where you grew up, and if there were any people in your family that were artists or interested in art?

SONIA WOLFSON: I was born in Gomel, which—I always said I was born in Moscow, thinking it was a suburb of Moscow, but it wasn't. It was a different guberniya. Now, whether a guberniya means a state or a county, I don't know enough Russian to know. I've forgotten. I asked someone once. We came to New York when I was one year and eight months old. My brother was three and a half, and my sister was two months old, I think. My father came here ahead of us. And we lived in New York until I was 18, and uh—then we moved out here for my father's health, he had tuberculosis. And out here, my parents separated—anyway, my interest in, my interest in art stems from the fact that when I was a child, we didn't have money to go to the movies or anything, and I would go to the Brooklyn Art Museum, Metropolitan. You know, wherever I could that was free. And I came out here, and my first job was with the American Red Cross of New York. When I came out here, for the first few months, it was the only time in my life I didn't have to work, and I got very bored not working, so I went down to the Red Cross and did some volunteer work. [00:02:07]

ILENE SUSAN FORT: What year was this?

SONIA WOLFSON: Pardon?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: When did you move to California?

SONIA WOLFSON: Nineteen eighteen. And then, when their roll-call campaign came, Mr. Guy W. Finney was doing their publicity, and he hired me to work with him. Well, he started a magazine called the *California Graphic*. And so, I was told to phone theaters and so forth and get a chronicle of events. Uh, so I had listings of what was at the theaters, what was at art galleries, what was at concert halls, and so forth.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Sort of a calendar of events?

SONIA WOLFSON: Yes. And then he once had extra room, and he said, "Why don't you describe one of the paintings or something?" So I called the Kantz Art Gallery [ph], which was in Hollywoodland, and asked him to describe one of the paintings by Hans Dahl, which he did. And I don't know why I got the idea that it was a very dramatic girl in a rowboat, a Norwegian fjord, and she was on the edge of uh—I don't know what—anyway, I found out the following Saturday—I got someone to drive me up to the Kantz Gallery, and it was a very calm, serene painting, not at all as I described it. So I vowed never again to write about anything that I didn't personally view and react to.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Good idea.

SONIA WOLFSON: And that's how I got started. [00:04:00] And gradually, I had a half-column, and then I had a whole page of art reviews. Of course, in those days, there weren't very many galleries in town. There was the Los Angeles County Museum, which was at Exposition Park at the time. There was—Jake Zeitlin's bookshop then was down on Sixth Street, and he had a small gallery. There were the Dalzell Hatfield Galleries, the Stendahl Galleries. Altogether, I think there were six galleries in town. And in Pasadena, there was the Grace Nicholson Gallery, and the Du Kevitz Gallery [ph] at the Vista del Arroyo Hotel. Now, I didn't have a car in those days, so I, you know, traveled by streetcar or got a lift to various galleries on my Saturdays and Sundays off, because I worked at the *Graphic*, and I didn't get time off to do these things, even though I was writing. So, that was how that came about. Now, I notice now, in the current Los Angeles magazines, there's a list of art galleries in Los Angeles and the Valley. I think I counted 111 of them.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Sounds pretty accurate.

SONIA WOLFSON: They're all six and two. Of course, in those days, there was nothing in the Valley. It was all group art—artists, so forth. Now, the exhibitions were mainly—there weren't very many local exhibitions. They had exhibitions by Frank Tenney Johnson. I remember he was very annoyed, because I called him a sentimentalist instead of a romantic. [00:06:04] And—oh, various local artists. William Ritschel, Armin Hansen. Uh—but the main exhibitions were at the Los Angeles County Museum, and they weren't necessarily local.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Right. I've checked the records, and they had quite a few changing exhibitions. It seems like, almost every month, the museum was changing an exhibition. And you're right, it wasn't only local groups like the California Art Club, but contemporary artists from back East sent work over.

SONIA WOLFSON: Yes. Anyway, eventually I decided I wanted to do this as a living, and all my life, so—I left the magazine. I wrote for them, but left the job. I was a secretary there. And I think I worked at three jobs at once to earn the roundtrip fare. And, you know, I went to San Francisco, Chicago, Cleveland, Toledo, Washington, D.C., and I was in New York and ready to earn my way to Europe so I could see all the art collections there when my mother became very ill. She had cancer of the breast and had to have it removed, and I had to come back. Then I worked for *Game and Gossip* magazine.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Tell me about that magazine. It's not really well-known nowadays. What was *Game and Gossip* all about? [00:08:00]

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, it was a general magazine, like *Vanity Fair* nowadays. Not quite as extensive in its interest there, but it covered art and music, and sports, and concerts and—

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Was it mainly an LA magazine, Los Angeles?

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. *California Graphic*—it was LA and California. And it's too bad that there isn't any—I gave the Smithsonian the one copy I had, which—I think Philip Shure [ph] was going through old magazines, and he ran into this with my name in it, and his cousin worked at 20th Century Fox, where I worked for 35 years, and he sent it to me. Well, I gave my Rockwell Kent to a friend of mine, Oren Bossin [ph], and I gave him the magazine with the article on Rockwell Kent. And you see, after I worked with—I came back, I worked with the Stendahl Art Galleries, and I wrote for *Game and Gossip*, but I didn't keep any of the magazines.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: That's too bad. So *Game and Gossip* was sort of extra work you were doing while you worked at Stendahl?

SONIA WOLFSON: Yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ILENE SUSAN FORT: What—you were doing art reviews for *Game and Gossip*?

SONIA WOLFSON: Yes.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: I see. And this would have been early 1930s?

SONIA WOLFSON: Yes.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: I see. When you did the reviews for *California Graphic* and *Game and Gossip*, did the publisher tell you what to review, or could you review any art show you wanted to?

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, no. Whatever art shows were on, I covered. Nobody told me what to do. The only time my publisher, Guy W. Finney, ever said anything to me was—oh, I wrote a caption for a painting, and I said it wasn't up to his usual standard or something, and apparently—I didn't know it—but this artist was a friend of my publisher. [00:10:21] And the man complained, you know. But he didn't say anything very much. He just said, "How did you happen to say that?" and I said, "Well, that's how I felt about it." I thought his other work was more—[Joe] Duncan Gleason was his name—was more suitable. Anyway, that's really about all there was to it.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Um, so you were working for Stendahl Gallery after you came back from the East Coast?

SONIA WOLFSON: Yes. Well, I was working at Columbia Studio, as a secretary. In fact, I remember this trio of writers who—I was terribly embarrassed, because I didn't know anything about the movie. And this was to star Barbara Stanwyck as a lady of the night. I don't remember the title of the picture. And they were all, you know, saying things that they weren't sure they could get away with, you know. And I was embarrassed as hell. I think I worked there three days when I asked if I could do publicity. And a girl named Molly Lewen [ph] was doing the publicity, and they said, "Well, we're trying to get—thinking get rid of her," and I didn't want her to be gotten rid of. She had a limp. She was a crippled girl. [00:12:00] And so Mr. Stendahl called me up, and I went to work for him the following day.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: So you only worked for Columbia—

SONIA WOLFSON: I never even collected the three days' salary at Columbia.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: [Laughs.] And what did Mr. Stendahl hire you for? Secretary or writing?

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, everything. I was to write the uh—whatever—

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Publicity?

SONIA WOLFSON: —brochures that were about the exhibitions. I was—I wasn't exactly a secretary. I was receptionist, and I had to talk to people who came into the gallery and try to sell—a salesperson. I remember the first sale I made. It was to an old lady, and Mr. Stendahl went past me and said, "She doesn't look like she can afford anything. Why waste your time?" or something. Well, I—she was interested in several things, and I took three paintings up on Sunday. The gallery was closed, and I didn't have a car. My sister and brother-in-law drove me up to her. I've always meant to write a most unforgettable story about her. She was Mrs. Montgomery of Simi Valley. And she bought two of the paintings. I had to bring them back, because they were in the exhibition. But she was a remarkable lady, who apparently had been made ill or crippled or something for several years, and to bide the time, she saw an article about learning to paint, you know, and wrote. Her nieces and nephews got her the paints and brushes and stuff, and she turned out to be quite a good artist. In fact, several years later, I went by the Stendahl Galleries, and there was the painting, sitting on the floor, that I thought she had. [00:14:08] I said, "Don't tell me she returned that." He said, "Look again." She had painted a copy, because both her nieces wanted that painting, so she had made a copy of it. She was quite a remarkable lady. In fact, she didn't realize it, but she did us out of a lot of commission. She also bought a ceramic sculpture by—oh, what was her name? Anyway, the woman brought the sculpture up to where Mrs. Montgomery lived, and told her about her husband, who was very ill and so forth. So Mrs. Montgomery invited this woman to stay, and to bring her husband and two children up. And she had a house for them to stay in, and she could paint portraits of her nieces and so forth while her husband was recuperating. Very remarkable lady.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Generous offer, yes.

SONIA WOLFSON: So anyway, that was—I don't remember too much about all the exhibitions I covered, because it's so long ago. I'm 87 and a half years old, and that was when I was in my 20s.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: I'm always impressed by how much you did, considering you were so young. Um—

SONIA WOLFSON: Well, I was very careful not to meet the artists, because I think they would resent the fact someone so young writing about them, and I was scared of that. I think, finally, towards the end of the time, Luvena and Edouard Vysekál invited me to the California Art Club one night, and I asked them please not to introduce me. [00:16:00] And so I sat there, and all these artists, some of whom I'd written about, and others that I didn't know were there. But they did introduce me, and I just stood up and went like that, and that was that. But I was aware that I was so young. Of course, the main art gallery in those days, aside from Stendahl and the Los Angeles County Museum, was the Biltmore Art Gallery, and they had the whole corridor where they showed paintings, and then they had a gallery. I don't know what more I can tell you. The Grace Nicholson Gallery in Pasadena had some nice exhibitions. They had an exhibition of carpets, rugs, from the Orient. One of them went from the ceiling all through it, and you had to stand in the doorway to see it. It was the most beautiful colors I've—more beautiful than any painting I'd ever seen. And Mr. Kevitz [ph], at the Vista del Arroyo Hotel, had an exhibition of foreign artists, mostly Italian, and then this Dutch artist that I had written about that was in the—and he gave me that, because he had asked me if I would go with him to Italy, and get to meet these artists and know them and write about them. And then, at the last minute, he canceled it

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Oh, that's too bad.

SONIA WOLFSON: And so he gave me the painting by way of thank you, and a Fortuny robe, I think belonged to his wife. [00:18:04] A beautiful thing.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Oh, yes. Fortuny. Wonderful things.

SONIA WOLFSON: So that was that. And then came the Depression, and Mr. Stendahl wanted to reduce my salary by—I forgot how much. I was making \$25 a week, plus 10 percent commission. Well, when the 10 percent commission came around on the sale to Mrs. Montgomery, he pleaded that his wife had been—used to have two maids, and now was doing all her own housework, and this, that, and he cut my commission to five percent. So, then when he wanted a little—oh, by that time, we had moved from the Ambassador Hotel to the new gallery, where Caroline Chafin [ph] was. And he was having an exhibition of Macdonald-Wright's work, and Macdonald-Wright was supposed to talk. Well, I had written about Macdonald-Wright, so they felt I should introduce Macdonald-Wright. And I said, "Mr. Stendahl, I can't speak in front of a lot of people—I"—well, he gave me a

drink. Well, I don't drink. It was the worst thing in the world they could have done. He said, "That will pep you up!" So I stood up on this platform, and was supposedly saying very nice things about Mr. Macdonald-Wright, in introducing him, and finally, Macdonald-Wright, who was sitting in back of me, turned around and looked up at me and he said, "You're talking, and there isn't a sound coming out of you."

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Oh, that's funny. [Laughs.] A little stage fright.

SONIA WOLFSON: I was terrified. I ran out and called up for a taxi and went home. I think I fainted en route to the house and so forth. [00:20:03] So, that ended my public speaking. I could speak to individuals, you know, on the gallery floor, but to face a whole—

ILENE SUSAN FORT: It's scary.

SONIA WOLFSON: —audience, I just was not up to it. Anyway. Anyway, he tried to reduce my salary, and I said no, you know. I didn't realize the Depression had hit and people weren't buying art and so forth, so I quit. Well, I was out of work for a whole year, I think, before I—

ILENE SUSAN FORT: When was this? When were you out of work? What year?

SONIA WOLFSON: Nineteen—let's see. Nineteen thirty-two to '33, because I went to work at 20th Century Fox on August 1, 1933. Yes. Uh, curiously, it was an artist, Edgar Payne, who gave me an introduction to Paul Snell [ph], who was the assistant publicity director.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: How did he know—they were friends?

SONIA WOLFSON: Yes, they were friends. And to the assistant publicity director at 20th Century Fox. And I went out there—oh, and I had—my sister was very depressed for me, and she'd gotten a friend to invite me to Catalina. I'd gone on to Catalina, and as soon as I got there, then I got this telephone call to come back, that I had an appointment to go to 20th Century Fox. Well, I worked at 20th Century Fox for 35 years and five months, until my retirement 20 years ago.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Was this a publicity department you worked in?

SONIA WOLFSON: Yes. I was what they called a unit publicist. The unit is the picture you're assigned to. [00:22:00] And I did the publicity on everyone connected with the picture.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: I see. That could be fun. Interesting.

SONIA WOLFSON: Yes, it was interesting. It was very interesting, because—I enjoyed it.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: What kind of people—who did you meet? Do you have any interesting stories about various actors and actresses?

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, yes, of course. I met them all. I mean, we had quite a contract list at that time. And in fact, they started a school for newcomers that they signed, for very little, and they groomed them. They would fix their teeth and send them to the doctor, and do all kinds of things. They'd pay them only \$50 or \$75 a week, but they took care of them physically, and they had dance lessons, and drama lessons, and all sorts of things. And you know, Alice Faye, Don Ameche, Tyrone Power were our big stars. Betty Grable and so forth. And that was it.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Uh, do you remember some of the specific movies that you had to publicize?

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, let me get the book.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Okay.

SONIA WOLFSON: You want to turn that off a minute?

[Audio Break.]

SONIA WOLFSON: I was very annoyed when this book came out, because it doesn't list the first two years I was at the studio. When I first came to the studio, it was 20th Century Fox—it was Fox, and it became 20th Century Fox two years after that, so that my first two years aren't in here. [00:24:00] Darryl Zanuck and George Arliss. Winfield Sheehan was the head of the studio when I first came. He's with his wife, Maria Jeritza. Let's see. Oh, I handled Jane Withers, the child star, when she was younger, and I did all her pictures. I was very annoyed when I saw Shirley Temple's book, and she had nothing good to say about anybody except her mother. And about Jane, she said she was a spoiled arrow—just described the part that Jane played in the picture. It wasn't Jane at all.

Jane was a well-bred little girl. Let's see. [Inaudible.] There were several years when I did gossip and symposiums. And for the gossip, I'd call people who weren't working in the morning, and in the afternoon I'd go on the sets to ask them, you know, what they'd done and where they had been and so forth.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: And this made up—that information was then used in the publicity?

SONIA WOLFSON: Yes, of course. And I'd write—symposiums meant, you know, one general theme with a number of people, for instance—I did one story on people in the industry of Indian descent. Uh, Charlotte Austin was under contract to us. She was second lead. She was—Gene Austin was her father, and they were descended from the Indians. [00:26:02] Well, I called the other studios to find out who of Indian descent they had, and made a sympo—well, it made a very big story around the country. I think Associated Press used it. In fact, one headline was "Indians Taking Over Hollywood" or something like that.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: That sounds exciting. So early, a topic like Indians in the film industry—you wrote it so early on.

SONIA WOLFSON: Yeah. Let's see. I don't know if you want all this in here.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Oh, no, please.

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, *Checkers*, there's a Jane Withers picture, yes. I remember—is that the one? No. Picture—Jane Withers was on location, and I [inaudible] about 40 miles from here. Anyway, there was a scene where she was supposed to start crying. Well, she did it so realistically that everybody started crying with her, you know? And I wrote the story and said that so—Mr. Frank Ferret [ph] was my boss at the Western Avenue studio then. He said, "You see this story? Nobody would believe it who wasn't there." I said, "But there was a press person there, from the [inaudible] something or other." And eventually he sent me the clipping and I showed it to my boss. He said, "Yeah, but nobody here would believe you." So, lots of things that are true, they do not believe.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: That's interesting.

SONIA WOLFSON: And *The Holy Terror*, that was it. Yeah. Jane Withers, Anthony Martin—Tony Martin—Leah Ray. Anyhow. [00:28:00]

ILENE SUSAN FORT: I didn't know Jane Withers started out as a child actress.

SONIA WOLFSON: Pardon?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: I did not know that Jane Withers started out as a child star.

SONIA WOLFSON: Yeah.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: I didn't realize at such an early age.

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, yes, she was five years old when she started out.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: That's young.

SONIA WOLFSON: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Yeah, oh, God, I could go on and on.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Well, it's interesting.

SONIA WOLFSON: And then, you know, Ty Power and Don Ameche, they worked a lot of pictures together. Alice Faye did *Alexander's Ragtime Band*.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Oh, I like that movie.

SONIA WOLFSON: And we didn't know it until after she finished a scene, but she was absolutely petrified. She had to be on the stage, looking down at the audience, and the camera—we didn't know she had a height phobia. She's acrophobic, which I am. I'm terrified. I won't go to my sister's house. She lives on a—she doesn't live high on the hill, but to get there, you have to go up the hill, back into a little place, and come down. There isn't parking on both sides of the street. And the last two times I was there, there was some kids driving—I was within a half an inch of them, they just drove like mad there. There's Robert Taylor and Barbara Stanwyck. Well, there was a very funny story about that. She had a—they were married, and she had a birthday, and he came home, and the place was dark, and he said, "Honey, I'm home." You know, he shouted to her upstairs. She just got out of the shower and said, "Here I am," and just then the lights went on, and all these people saw her standing there nude.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Oh my God. [Laughs.] [00:30:01] How embarrassing. Oh my.

SONIA WOLFSON: Ben Bernie.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Who's Ben Bernie—

SONIA WOLFSON: Jack Haley, Walter Winchell, and Alice Faye in *Wake Up and Live*. And Winchell fascinated us. You know, we'd sit there and listen to him all the time. *You Can't Have Everything*, Alice Faye [inaudible] Don Ameche. Oh, I started to tell you, Don Ameche and Ty Power worked in a number of pictures together, and they used to play pranks on each other. And one day, they came back from lunch, and Don wasn't needed in the scene, they said. "So, Ty, you get ready." And it was going to be a close-up. Well, he had nailed Ty's shoes to the floor. Well, they could get him up, and what they did was stood him on books, the equivalent of his, and photographed him that way. Then, of course, Ameche was quite famous as a—well, he could imitate anybody. And what was the name of the producer who had an impediment in his speech? He would talk—

[END OF FILE AAA_wolfso90_7874_r.]

SONIA WOLFSON: —*Alexander's Ragtime Band*, and Ty, and Don Ameche. Alice Faye, Ethel Merman, and so forth. Anyway, so this producer called Don Ameche at home, and Mrs. Ameche, Honore—Honey, he used to call her—said, "Oh, Don," you know. He said, "No, this is—no." So later, Don called her, and she said, "Did you call me before and pretend you were"—he said, "No." Well, it seems the producer had called him about a role, and—

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Oh.

SONIA WOLFSON: Because Don Ameche could imitate anybody. His wife thought it was—she told me a number of stories like that. I can't remember them all. Oh, the Charlie Chan pictures. Yes, I did those.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Oh. Some of my favorites.

SONIA WOLFSON: Huh?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: When I was growing up, the Charlie Chan movies were playing every Saturday night, and I got to see them at home on the TV. Really liked them.

SONIA WOLFSON: My God, who's that? George Sanders, Loretta Young, Will Henry, Richard Greene. Oh, yes. And David Niven. *Four Men and a Prayer*. Well—John Barrymore. Oh, he did too many—I had to take someone, a foreign correspondent, down to the Western Avenue studio, where John Barrymore was working. And I took them on the set and introduced them to John Barrymore, and then Barrymore asked me who was working at the main studio, and I said such-and-such a picture, and so-and-so was in this, and so forth. [00:02:11] "Oh," he said, "would you take a note to"—I said sure. So he scribbled the note and handed it to me. I put it in my purse. And the person who was working on stage B, on the back lot—I went over, and he was rehearsing a scene, so I couldn't bother him, so I gave it to the doorman and I said, "Mr. Barrymore asked me to give this to"—oh, what was that? Some character actor, I don't remember. Well, Mr. Barrymore had written, "Why don't you F this girl?" The whole lot was talking about it, because the man told about it, you know.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: How embarrassing [Laughs.]

SONIA WOLFSON: I don't know what he thought I would do. Read the note first or something? But I didn't. I just folded it and left it at the gate. That's Mr. Barrymore for you. Let's see, Temple and Bill Robinson. No, I worked on Jane Withers pictures, not on Shirley Temple pictures, but I—occasionally, when the unit person on the Shirley Temple pictures was busy, I would be asked to take the press person to the Shirley Temple set. And for years, we had a birthday party every—for Shirley, in the commissary. And uh, I was not allowed in there.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Why?

SONIA WOLFSON: She thought because I had Jane Withers that—so finally, another publicist, who was assigned them, said, "What's the matter with you? [00:04:06] Sonia comes and she works on arranging the tables and the setting, and then she disappears. What is this?" And Mrs. Temple said, "But she handles Jane Withers." He said, "Yes, but how do you think the stuff about Shirley gets into print? Sonia is the one who calls the Louella Parsons every morning. And I give Sonia something, and she calls Louella, and it gets into the paper, or she gives Molly Merricks [ph] something for Hedda Hopper about Shirley." Because I was a planter in those days. Anyway, a planter is someone who plants a story for the press. So, then that was the first time that Mrs. Temple invited me to be at the party, and I got a bottle of, I think it was Shocking [ph] perfume by the way of saying thank you and so forth. So that was—anyway, let's see. That's the girl with the mother's gamble.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Did you have favorite actors or actresses?

SONIA WOLFSON: Pardon?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: I said, did you have favorite actors or actresses you worked with?

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, yes, a few. There was Mitzi Gaynor who was a favorite. Ann-Margret was a favorite. Deborah Kerr was a most favorite.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Oh, tell me about Deborah Kerr. Wonderful actress.

SONIA WOLFSON: She was a lovely human being. And uh, I worked with her. I did all four of the pictures she did on our lot—I was the publicist on. And I know when she was to do the one we did in the West Indies, she and —*Island in the Sun*, we did at the same time. [00:06:19] I was on both pictures.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: In the West Indies?

SONIA WOLFSON: Yeah, and what was—I'll come across it here. Robert Mitchum was to be her co-star. So, they met Robert Mitchum at the plane and said, you know, "Deborah wants Sonia Wolfson to be on the picture. Is that okay with you?" And he said, "I don't know her, but sure. What's the difference?" He said, "The difference is she won't be able to haul you out of saloons." But anyway, he was very nice to work with.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Others?

SONIA WOLFSON: I still hear from Deborah.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Oh, really? How kind.

SONIA WOLFSON: And Ann-Margret. Every Christmas, I get this enormous array of poinsettias and so forth from her.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: You must have worked for Ann-Margret—

SONIA WOLFSON: Hmm?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: You worked for Ann-Margret? You know, covered her?

SONIA WOLFSON: Yes.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Which movies?

SONIA WOLFSON: I—I think she's a terrific actress and lovely human being. It's a shame what has happened to her, her son. [00:08:00] Or—I don't mean her son. She doesn't have any children. Her husband. He has a strange disease that hits him periodically.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Oh, I didn't know.

SONIA WOLFSON: Periodically he's all right, and then—I've forgotten the name of it. It was in the *Times*. And then—Ian Livingston. I remember Gordon was on that. Gordon is a novelist, a writer. [Inaudible.]

ILENE SUSAN FORT: So Shirley Temple wasn't—

SONIA WOLFSON: Huh?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: I was about to say, Shirley Temple wasn't easy to work with?

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, no, she was lovely to work with. Her mother was difficult. Her mother was protective of—for instance, Mrs. Withers told me once, Jane was doing *Checkers*, and I think Shirley was doing *Susannah of the Mounties* or some such thing. Anyway, they each had horseback riding scenes in the picture, and Jane said, "What's the problem about what she wears? She wears a checkered shirt and denim pants. She can wear her own. You don't have to provide anything." Well, she can't wear that. Shirley's wearing it in her picture, so you can't wear the same thing. Well, Shirley was, you know, queen of the lot for—oh, four years, she was—four or five years, she was number one box office star. And uh—

ILENE SUSAN FORT: She was a good little performer.

SONIA WOLFSON: Pardon?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: I said Shirley Temple was a very good performer. [00:10:00]

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, yes.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Her movies are quite entertaining.

SONIA WOLFSON: Yes. I'll never forget, we were having some Sonja Henie showing on the lot, on one of the stages, and the press and everyone was invited, and the stars were invited. I was sitting down front, holding a seat for a star who hadn't arrived yet. And suddenly, I heard—Jane was sitting in the back, and she came forward. She saw someone on this side that she knew, and she went over to say hello, and she was right back of where Shirley was sitting. Shirley said, "Oh, Jane." Well, just then Hymie Fink grabbed a picture of Jane and Shirley together. Well, I knew there would be hell to pay, so I went to [inaudible] the assistant publicity director and I said, "Hymie just took a shot of Shirley and Jane." He sent four people out looking for Hymie. I think there were two other big filmland parties going on that night. Found him, and they had to, you know, kill that negative.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: That's amazing.

SONIA WOLFSON: That's Mrs. Temple for you. *Grapes of Wrath*.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Did you go on vacation—uh vacation—did you go on set quite often, at different places besides Hollywood?

SONIA WOLFSON: Yes.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: I thought most of the movies in the '30s and the '40s were made here, on a set here.

SONIA WOLFSON: Well, they had location shots. [00:12:00] It depends on the picture. They had shots all over the place. I was in the West Indies on two pictures. *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison* was the one that Deborah Kerr did, and *Island in the Sun* was the other. I had to fly between the two pictures—were on separate islands. And they had a British publicist, because—I've forgotten if *Island in the Sun* or *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison* was financed by British money, all British money, in Britain, you know. So he—my typewriter hadn't arrived. It was not on the same plane with me, and for two weeks, I was on symposium and I couldn't write anything. I found out he had left it stuck in Trinidad when he was on [inaudible]. I finally went over and got it. Yeah, *Island in the Sun*. In those days, a black person and a white person couldn't have any relationship in the picture. So there was a scene with Joan Fontaine and Harry Belafonte—they talked, but they did not touch each other. And uh—

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Once you started working at 20th Century Fox—

SONIA WOLFSON: Pardon?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: I said once you started working at 20th Century Fox, at the movies—[00:14:00]

SONIA WOLFSON: When? August 1, 1933, and I retired December 31, 1968.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Thirty-some years. During this time, did you give up attention to the art field?

SONIA WOLFSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. In those days, you have to work six days a week.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Six days, wow.

SONIA WOLFSON: All day Saturday. It was only in the last about six or seven years that we had half-days on Saturday, and then, finally, there was no work on Saturday. All the unions agreed with that. So that was [inaudible]—there was a period of, I think it was two years, when I did the gossip and symposiums, and then I went on all the sets, so I get confused as to what picture I was on and which set I just visited.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: I see. Clarify for me exactly what a symposium—a term you have used once or twice so far—

SONIA WOLFSON: A symposium is a story from a single angle, but involving a number of people.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: A number of actors, in other words?

SONIA WOLFSON: Yes, actors and actresses.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: And it would be published where? A story.

SONIA WOLFSON: AP [Associated Press], UP [United Press].

ILENE SUSAN FORT: I see, okay. I don't know the lingo, movie lingo.

SONIA WOLFSON: Associated Press, United Press. The Hearst press was—and I think the NEA. [00:16:00] Or sometimes a single person would take them. You know, Dorothy [inaudible] the *Examiner*, or so and so. During the layoff at Fox, when *Cleopatra* ran us out of money and the studio shut down for almost nine months, I was out of a job, and so I worked at MGM for those few months. My boss recommended me. And uh—what was I going to say about that? I don't remember.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: What year was this?

SONIA WOLFSON: Pardon?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: What year was this when *Cleopatra* caused—

SONIA WOLFSON: I don't remember. I have to go in the closet here.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Okay. Can we go back a little to your writings in *California Graphic*?

SONIA WOLFSON: Pardon?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Let's talk a little more about your writings for *California Graphic*. I've read a good many of them, and I was quite impressed by your knowledge of art, and definitely your writing skill. It seemed like you were well-read on the subject.

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, yes. I'm very grateful to the Los Angeles Public Library, because I would go there to check out things and to read histories of art. I've got quite a collection of art books, there and there, which I'm going to leave to the Los Angeles Public Library, because they were instrumental in my knowledge of art. And uh, I don't know what else to say? When I wrote about Macdonald-Wright, he mentioned the ying and the yang. [00:18:04] I didn't know what that meant. I went to the library and found it was the male and the female. The essence of the female and male, you know, so forth. It's very, you know—you don't have to be educated in art at a particular place or university or something. If you've got the good sense to go to the library, you can find out everything you want to know.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Definitely. Some critics don't go to use libraries too often. I was quite impressed with the reviews. I had the feeling, in some of your reviews in the *California Graphic* that you were trying to help promote art and the understanding of art in the Los Angeles area. Was that a specific intent, or was it sort of done unconscious, this promoting the interest and appreciation—

SONIA WOLFSON: I know, at one time, I wrote an article about, it's imperative that people invite young persons to the museum, you know, to—but I don't think I had that intent specifically, except at that one time when I wrote that. I think I was just trying to be as lucid as possible about the paintings I saw, the sculptures I saw. As I said, I wanted to do that all my life. It was heartbreaking to me that I couldn't continue it. The minute there was a let-up in art sales, there was no more room for paying an art reviewer. [00:20:02]

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Right, right. Did it seem to you that, during the Depression, the artists complained more about not being able to sell their works?

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, yes. I remember an artist named Stan Pociеча Poray, and he had been a count in his native Poland, but of course he was now an American citizen and didn't use the count particularly. His wife needed, oh, surgery, which he couldn't afford. Well, there used to be a surgeon that would come in regularly to the art gallery to see what was what, and I sent him to Dr. Arthur Bond Cecil. Dr. Cecil agreed to take a painting in exchange for the operation. In fact, I got to be known as "Trader Wolfson" during the Depression, because I remember—oh, Edgar Payne, the one who introduced me to Paul Snell at Fox, his only daughter was going to be married. It was during the Depression. They couldn't afford to buy a trousseau for her. I had also, at that time, written temporarily for the hotel magazine. I forgot what it was called. I've got a copy somewhere.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Which hotel was this?

SONIA WOLFSON: So I had covered the nice shops along Seventh Street, you know, and one—Muriel Lacen [ph] was the milliner. [00:22:01] I forgot the name of the designer. She had been a designer at MGM. I can't think of her name. Anyway, so I went and talked to them, and I said, "Would you go and see Mr. Edgar Payne's paintings, and see if you will exchange some clothes for his daughter for the trousseau, for one of his paintings?" And they went—made an appointment and they went to his studio and saw his paintings, and they agreed. Mr. Payne had specified that I was to get one-quarter of the loot in clothes. I remember I got a red-and-white silk dress, with a matching jacket, and I got oh—a beautiful royal blue, sort of coachman coat, and from Ms. Lacen, the milliner, I got a quilted, sort of black velvet beret—not a beret, but it was a big hat. Clothes I could never afford to buy myself. But that—

ILENE SUSAN FORT: That was kind of him.

SONIA WOLFSON: Yeah. So yes, it was interesting. There was another instance where I traded something for—I don't remember. Anyway. Oh, yes. His sister-in-law—Tuget's [ph] brother, Francis [ph] Tuget, was also a painter, and his wife was a painter, and she needed surgery, and I suggested they go to Dr. Cecil. [00:24:02] And I don't know what happened there, but he operated on her. That's all—I don't remember anything else. Anyway.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Do you remember writing about the Pan-American Exhibition in Los Angeles, major? In 1925, '26, you wrote a series of articles.

SONIA WOLFSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ILENE SUSAN FORT: What was—I understand it was the first major international display of South American and North American works of art. What was it like? Could you perhaps discuss the interest among artists who exhibited and not exhibited? What—you know, the public?

SONIA WOLFSON: Well, it was a fantastic exhibition, you know, of universal interest. It encompassed almost every type of painting. And it was very remarkable. So I was very proud of the fact that I think I reproduced three of the things that eventually won the prizes in the thing.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Yes, you did. Yes.

SONIA WOLFSON: And I don't—I have no idea how many artists went to see the exhibition, but I'm sure they must have gone, if they had any sense.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: [Laughs.] Did you go to the exhibition a lot, or did you see the paintings before the show opened up to review them?

SONIA WOLFSON: I saw the paintings as they were being hung, and I went back and saw the finished exhibition twice.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: I see. Was it crowded the days you went?

SONIA WOLFSON: Yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ILENE SUSAN FORT: I know it was called the first Pan-American Exhibition, hoping that there would be others, but there weren't. Do you know what happened? [00:26:00]

SONIA WOLFSON: No, I don't. I don't. At that time, I think, Dr. Bryant [ph] was head of the museum, and—oh, what was her name? Was the curator.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Ah, yes. Her name—I know who you mean. I just can't think of her name.

SONIA WOLFSON: Yeah, very lovely old lady. To me, she seemed an old lady. I was very young at the time. And no, I never knew why they never followed up on that. I thought it was very sad. But as I say, I didn't have the time to cover art exhibitions after I was at the studio, because we worked six days a week. My mother was ill and had to be—live in Tujunganga for her health, and so I spent my Sundays going up to Tujunganga.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Getting back to the Pan-American Exhibition, what, if anything, did you—perhaps we should discuss the fact that certain artists were exhibited—who were the people you knew in those days, the artists that you were friendly with? Do you remember any of their reactions to the Pan-American Exhibition?

SONIA WOLFSON: No, because I never was friendly with artists. I was very, very intent on keeping my privacy and having them not know me, because I knew I was too young to be doing what I was doing.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: [Laughs.] You did it so well. The age really didn't matter. But you were afraid, I see. You did—I recall that you did know the Vysekals. I'm probably pronouncing their name wrong. The couple, Luvena and Edouard—

SONIA WOLFSON: Edouard and Luvena Vysekala. V-Y-S-E-K-A-L.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Yes. Can you recall anything about them? [00:28:00] I've been interested in his art quite a bit, and I have never been able to see any paintings by her. I don't know. They've seem to have all disappeared.

SONIA WOLFSON: They were both very good painters.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Wonderful.

SONIA WOLFSON: But they didn't have one-man shows during the time that I was writing, and so I never—I don't remember how I came to be invited to their home and saw their paintings. I think, at the time, though, that most of their paintings were up north on exhibition, or something like that. I don't remember.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: They did have an exhibition in Northern California.

SONIA WOLFSON: No, I have really very little memories of those times, you know, because I felt that I was unqualified, and I was afraid to meet people.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Having read other art critics of the era, their reviews and yours, yours were so superior to theirs. I think, no doubt, because of your age.

SONIA WOLFSON: According to who?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Antony Anderson.

SONIA WOLFSON: What?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Antony Anderson. He worked for the *LA Times*.

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, yes, Antony Anderson was the *Times* critic, and Arthur Millier followed him, and then there was Alma May Cook on the *Herald Express*.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Did you know her? Did you know any of these other critics?

SONIA WOLFSON: No, I met her, but I didn't know her. I remember when I went down to the *Examiner*—I remember when my friend Mr. Cartamaka Kattamako [ph] had an exhibition, and I did some publicity on it, and I took the story down to the *Los Angeles Examiner*. I forgot who it was—a lady, who afterwards became their city editor or something, and she took it. [00:30:04] In fact, I took that clipping with me when I went to see Paul Snell, because it was a sculpture that sort of poked fun at—I've forgotten what it was. Anyway, I took the clipping to Paul Snell, and he said, "Oh, you did that?" He was very impressed that I had written it and gotten it into print. So, that was that. Then—

ILENE SUSAN FORT: And you weren't friendly with the other writers, critics, in the area?

SONIA WOLFSON: Hmm?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: You weren't friendly with the other writers, critics, in the area?

SONIA WOLFSON: No. No. I think it was to Antony Anderson that someone complained that I called him a, you know, sentimentalist instead of a romanticist, and he used that in his column. I never met him. I think—I met Alma May Cook, and of course I knew Arthur Millier, because I went out a few times with Franz Geritz, who did some of those caricatures of me.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Yes, I saw one. Were you good friends with him?

SONIA WOLFSON: Pardon?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Were you good friends with Franz Geritz?

SONIA WOLFSON: Well, we went out, I think, just two or three times. I remember he took me to a party where Frank Lloyd Wright, Jr. was the—

[END OF TRACK AAA_wofso90_7875_r.]

SONIA WOLFSON: —oh, yes, and Frank Lloyd Wright said something about, "Well, a little vulgarity is healthy" or something. I said, "There's no excuse for vulgarity at all." He turned away from me. [They laugh.] I was very young at the time. Franz met—married a good friend of mine, Josephine Heintz. She was a musicologist. She lectured about music and so forth. And let's see.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Did you ever meet, or know, or hear stories about William Preston Harrison?

SONIA WOLFSON: No, but—I never met him.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Not—how about his wife?

SONIA WOLFSON: Huh?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: How about his wife? Did you ever meet Mrs. Harrison?

SONIA WOLFSON: No, not to my knowledge. I don't know. I might have at one of the museum parties, but I don't think so. I know he donated so many paintings to the museum, and they had a collection of his.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: We still have it—a good many of the paintings.

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, yes. I think it's very sad that, nowadays, people are selling their paintings for the millions of dollars instead of donating to a museum.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: We think the same thing. It's hard for museums to get uh—gifts. Mr. Harrison seemed not only to be generous in giving his collection, he wrote, often, in letters to the director of the museum, how much he wanted to give paintings that would help the museum become a better museum, and equal in quality to the Chicago Art Institute. [00:02:01] And I've read a lot of his letters. That's why I wanted to know if you knew him.

SONIA WOLFSON: No, I didn't. As I said, I used to shy away from knowing anyone.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: What was the sentiment about his collection and his giving to the museum? I ask this question because, in his letters, in Mr. Harrison's letters, he often feels like—he would say that the art public in Los Angeles didn't understand why he was giving the paintings to the museum. He was often frustrated about it.

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, how awful. How sad.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Yes, very sad. What—the people you knew, what did they say about the collection? What was their opinion of his collecting?

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, they were very impressed with it, and thought it was remarkable that he gave it. I'm sorry that we never said that to the museum or wrote it in a letter so that he would know that. As I say, I shied away from knowing people, because I felt inadequate. I thought if they didn't know me, they wouldn't know how little I knew. You know?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: [Laughs.] Oh, I think you knew a lot more than you thought you did.

SONIA WOLFSON: Well, I guess I did, but I didn't think I did then, and so I was—

ILENE SUSAN FORT: It is sad in some of these letters. Like, I read one letter Mr. Harrison wrote to the director of the museum, saying that his wife—his wife was painted by Robert Henri from New York City. How, when it was hung in the gallery at the museum, people laughed at it and made funny remarks about it. She was a somewhat heavy woman. I think the portrait, which we still own, the portrait of Mrs. Harrison, is quite lovely. But he was so upset by society matrons laughing at the painting, that when he gave to the museum a portrait of his young son, which was painted by the American artist Frederick Frezigt [ph], who lived in France, he entitled the portrait, *Portrait of Young Boy*. [00:04:17] And after a few years, people forgot it was his son, and it's only because our museum is researching the collection we discovered his son—the little boy in the painting was really his son. I found it—it was so sad and pretty cruel, actually.

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, I wish I had known that. I didn't know.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: He also was instrumental in helping organize, I think, the idea, and actually organizing the Pan-American Exposition. Did you know anything about the organization of that?

SONIA WOLFSON: No. No.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Let me see. Um, what did you think of the California landscape painters? The so-called Impressionist landscape painters, like William Wendt, Guy Rose?

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, yes. They were very good, but they didn't happen to have one-man shows that I could cover, you know? But I reproduced, I believe, a William Wendt, and a William Ritschel, and an Armin Hansen, and so forth. I thought they were very good, but it wasn't until afterwards, when I went around the country and saw the art of others, that I realized that they were quite as good. But as I say, they didn't have too many one-man shows of the local artists, in the few years that I—now, I'm sure that I wrote longer than I—I don't know why I didn't keep magazines that I went on, you know? [00:06:07]

ILENE SUSAN FORT: It is too bad. Okay, um—

SONIA WOLFSON: And I understand, you know, the magazines in the Los Angeles Public Library and the Hollywood Library were burned.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Yes, that's my understanding.

SONIA WOLFSON: So they have no—

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Well, there are the—the Natural History Museum, the museum still at Exposition Park, has scrapbooks of some of the reviews of their own shows, so that's still useful. But it's getting very hard to research that period, mainly because the newspapers are being destroyed, or have been destroyed already. It's sad, very sad.

SONIA WOLFSON: I remember, briefly, after I worked for Philip Billsley [ph]—he had the gallery at the Ambassador Hotel after we moved out, you know, and so I worked for Philip Billsley, but then the Depression was on. I remember the only two paintings we sold during—we had a \$100—a show of paintings to sell for \$100, and we sold two paintings. One was to Alan Dinehart, a character actor who's dead now, and he paid \$50 down and \$50 the next month. And one was to a schoolteacher, who paid \$10 down and \$10 a month. So Mr. Billsley was at his wit's end to pay me, and he finally got me a job—I think for all of two months, I did publicity for Laguna Beach Art Association. I haven't any of that—you know. [00:08:00] It was a very difficult period.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: I understand.

SONIA WOLFSON: People just—artists were starving during the Depression.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: I think that's why a lot of them went to work for the movie industry, doing backdrops and things like that. A lot of artists ended up there.

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, it was very, very sad time. The uh—

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Let me ask some more. There were these so-called more Modernist artists in the '20s—Nick Briganti and people working in Los Angeles who were—who gave up the conservative landscape painting, like the Impressionist paintings, and did more modern things. Do you remember any of them? You mentioned Macdonald-Wright, and he had a great influence—

SONIA WOLFSON: Macdonald-Wright. No, I don't remember. What was the name of the man—

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Feitelson?

SONIA WOLFSON: —I met him once, but I didn't—he didn't have an exhibition. Can't think of it.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Stan Berlin?

SONIA WOLFSON: No, Macdonald-Wright was unique in the sort of thing he did.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Was the response, the public's response, to his work strong?

SONIA WOLFSON: Pardon?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Did the public respond positively to Macdonald-Wright's art when it was shown? No.

SONIA WOLFSON: Honey, after that talk [laughs] when I failed to utter a sound, I fled. I don't know what they thought. No.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: You don't know anyone who bought his art?

SONIA WOLFSON: Pardon?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Did anyone buy his art? Did you know who he sold to? [00:10:00]

SONIA WOLFSON: I don't remember. I think it was about that time that Mr. Stendahl wanted to reduce my salary, and I quit.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: I understand that Picasso's major painting, a statement—he painted his major painting, *Guernica*, as an anti-fascist and what was happening in Spain at the time, the Spanish War. It came to Los Angeles age—excuse me. It came to Los Angeles, and it was shown. I think Mr. Stendahl organized the showing of Picasso's *Guernica* here. Do you remember anything about that?

SONIA WOLFSON: No. Because by that time, I was working at Fox.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: I see. Did you go see it? The painting?

SONIA WOLFSON: No, I couldn't.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: That's right, you worked—

SONIA WOLFSON: I was working six days a week, and Sundays I went up to Tujunga to see my mother.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: It's too bad. I've always wondered about—most people don't even realize the painting was shown here. When I came across an article and they were talking about it, I was really shocked.

SONIA WOLFSON: I know. No, I missed an awful lot, because that six-day-a-week, and then going to see my mother on Sunday. She lived to a month before she was 80. And then, during World War II, I didn't have the gasoline. I would go up every other week, but—

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Did you know Merle Armitage?

SONIA WOLFSON: Pardon?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Did you know Merle Armitage?

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, yes, I knew Merle very well. [00:12:00] His wife, Fanton [ph] Armitage, was my closest friend. His first wife, I mean. I don't—what's her name from the—told me that Merle was married five times. I only knew about his second wife, who turned out to be a lesbian. He told me about that. He had to go out, and he came back and started up the stairs. She said, "Don't you come near me. I'll shoot you." Oh, quite a thing. No, I knew Merle very well. Merle gave me the Rockwell Kent I had, after I had written that article for [inaudible] and I gave it recently to a friend. I've been sort of giving things away, jewelry and stuff, because I don't think I'll live that long, and I had a burglary here, and that frightened me.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: I understand.

SONIA WOLFSON: Both doors—I have triple locks on the door.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Doesn't matter. They want to get in, they'll get in.

SONIA WOLFSON: They got in through the window. They broke the latch on the window and came in that way. Fortunately, I came home—I'd gone to have my hair done and then went to the market, and I came home and came in, and there was a bunch of motor vehicle licenses sitting on that thing, and then there was one thing on the floor. And I went into the bedroom, and all my lingerie was scattered around. And I looked—I had \$25 under my nightgowns. It was gone. Fortunately, they had never gone to another drawer, where I had \$100 stashed. Because I came home, and they went out. I didn't know that they were in the house when I came in, and they went out through the bathroom window. [00:14:06] I don't know how he didn't break a leg jumping out of there. But they broke the latch on that window, and on the venetian blinds, and they tore the curtains and stuff in there. Well, of course I called my landlady, who lives above me, and we called the police, and they came, and they discovered that they'd gone out through the bathroom window. I didn't even go into the bathroom. And so it was—and they weren't interested in my jewelry—

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Money.

SONIA WOLFSON: —or anything. Just the money. I never said anything to them, but I have a hunch that it was a boy that I once had washing windows. I thought, my God, all he got was \$]25—it cost me, I think, \$55 to have that Venetian done. By that time, I had it cleaned and everything, and so I had all the Venetians done, about \$350. And I thought, it's amazing that he didn't take any of the jewelry. I only had a few valuable pieces, but I gave a friend of mine the \$1,400 jade ring I had, because I—why leave it where anyone can get it? Let her enjoy it. She'll give it to her daughter, which is what I wanted to do with it anyway. And so, it was a frightening experience. You feel invaded, you know, your privacy.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: That's happened to me. My apartment has been burglarized. I understand the feeling.

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, it has?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Yes. Not far from here. I used to live near here. It's an invasion. [00:16:00] It's an awful feeling. Let's get back to—I want to know more about Merle Armitage. You said you were close friends with his first wife.

SONIA WOLFSON: Yes, his first wife, and with Merle. Merle was very nice. He was instrumental—he took me to the Print Rooms. Oh, that was another gallery. And Fanton was playing the piano there, at a party. And so, Merle—when he and Fanton were separated, my sister and I had a joint apartment, that was before she was married. Merle would call up and say, "Can I bring a couple of steaks?" and so forth. Then he came to see me another

time. Anyway, the last time I saw him was at the museum, and he introduced me as Mrs. Nash, because when I had seen him before, I was engaged to Willard Nash, who was a Santa Fe, New Mexico painter. Before I had a chance to say I was not Mrs. Nash, someone else came along and they got to talking and so forth, and I let it go at that.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: What kind of role did he play—

SONIA WOLFSON: Pardon?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: What kind of role did Merle Armitage play in Los Angeles art circles?

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh well, he was a promoter of musicians, and he handled concerts at the Philharmonic and so forth. I can't say what role he played, except that he collected prints and etchings and so forth himself.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Did he teach you about prints?

SONIA WOLFSON: Pardon?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Did he teach you about prints?

SONIA WOLFSON: Yes. [00:18:00] I think his interest in me was simply because I wrote about paintings, and I was a friend of his wife. But what's-her-name from the—where you went to read my stuff.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Archives?

SONIA WOLFSON: Huh?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: The Archives of American Art? Yes.

SONIA WOLFSON: Yes. What was the name of the girl?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Barbara Wilson. She runs it.

SONIA WOLFSON: Anyway, she told me Merle had been married five times. I didn't know that.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Neither did I. Let's see. Oh, yes, you wrote a few articles for the short-lived San Francisco museum—bulletin—San Francisco bulletin called *Argus*, A-R-G-U-S. I found you wrote two or three articles for them. How did that happen?

SONIA WOLFSON: For whom?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: *Argus*, A-R-G-U-S.

SONIA WOLFSON: I don't remember that. Well, just like I didn't remember that I had written articles for *Topics of the Town*.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: That was going to be my next question. Supposedly, yeah, you wrote poems that were printed in *Topics of the Town*.

SONIA WOLFSON: Yes, I wrote poems. I remembered about the poems, but I didn't remember that I'd written art articles for them. I think, though, that was when I worked at the Stendahl Galleries that I covered an exhibition there, but I haven't kept a copy of it—any copies of it, so I don't know what else I wrote.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Too bad. You seemed to write—for the *California Graphic*, you wrote on pretty much every type of art—local California painting and sculpture, and also reviews of East Coast artists who came here to exhibit, as well as European art, and even some Asian art—often quoting other writers and things like that. [00:20:20] I was quite impressed with them. Did you find that there was more interest in one type of art as opposed to another among the art public and artists themselves? Was conservative art, landscape, more popular—

SONIA WOLFSON: Honey, I had no connection with the art public. I really didn't know what they thought.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Well, you did, at Stendahl Gallery, sell—help sell art, right?

SONIA WOLFSON: Yes.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: What seemed to be more popular—easier to sell at the Stendahl Gallery?

SONIA WOLFSON: Well [inaudible] had an exhibition by Nicolai Fechin, a Russian-American artist. I sold two of his paintings to Mrs. Montgomery, as I told you. I think I sold some Edgar Paynes. He's a local artist, but he's painted in Switzerland, and Swiss Alps, and the Italian Alps, and so forth. Is he still alive, do you know?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Edgar Payne, no. He's very popular now.

SONIA WOLFSON: Hmm?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: The landscapes that Payne did, and that type of landscape painting, is very popular among collectors.

SONIA WOLFSON: I'm very sorry that he gave me a painting, during the year I was out of work, and I was broke. I think I sold it for \$75 or something.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: That's too bad.

SONIA WOLFSON: Horrifying. I could kill myself. And uh, yeah, I had to move out of my apartment and move in with my sister and brother-in-law. I lived in a pull-down bed in their living room during that time. [00:22:04] No, I don't recall. I know people came in and they looked at things, they admired things, or they—but I didn't know what the reaction was to a particular painting or painter.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Did you read—when you were working and writing these reviews, did you read the reviews of other critics in the area, like Antony Anderson's reviews in *LA Times*?

SONIA WOLFSON: Yes, I read Antony Anderson's reviews.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: What was your feeling about it? Did you usually agree or disagree about certain artists?

SONIA WOLFSON: I don't remember thinking of agreeing or disagreeing with him. He was—all I remember is the time he chastised me for calling so-and-so a sentimentalist instead of a romanticist. He didn't mention my name, but I knew he referred to me and so forth. And he wasn't a critic for very long—when I went on, I think then Arthur Millier came on the scene and was doing it.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Did you read his reviews?

SONIA WOLFSON: Pardon?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Arthur Mill—did you read his reviews?

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, yes.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: And think they were good or bad? Did you agree with them?

SONIA WOLFSON: I don't remember thinking of him that way, I was just interested in what he had to say.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Because in many cases, your reviews are much better than theirs [laughs]. [00:24:00] Um, *Game and Gossip*—did we talk about that? I think we did.

SONIA WOLFSON: Pardon?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: *Game and Gossip*. What type—you said that was a more general magazine?

SONIA WOLFSON: Yes.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: And you wrote—

SONIA WOLFSON: I wrote art reviews.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: How did that come about?

SONIA WOLFSON: And I remember one time, instead of writing about a particular exhibition, I covered a number of exhibitions. I remember writing about an exhibition at Jake Zeitlin's downtown bookshop gallery. And Jake referred to that when I last talked to him, a couple of years before he died, and his wife might have a scrapbook with that in. I don't know. He was more interested in rare books, which was his—

ILENE SUSAN FORT: —specialty.

SONIA WOLFSON: I knew Jake. I dated Macdonald-Wright exactly twice. I didn't even know that he was a

Southerner until, I guess, that first date. Came to call for me at my sister's house, and I mentioned it was Lincoln's birthday or something, and he got so furious. He said, "That [inaudible] that carpetbagger, that"—oh, he got so—that was the first time I realized he was a Southerner, and was very anti-Abraham Lincoln.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Oh my. I didn't know that.

SONIA WOLFSON: I was shocked. I was shocked, frankly. And I remember after we had dinner, he took me to some—I don't know whether it was a hotel, and off the lobby, there was this huge apartment. [00:26:08] It was covered with the most beautiful Turkish short carpets. Everything—I thought, God, this looks like [laughs] you know, a place where they kept harems or something, you know? So I sat down in one chair, and he sat in the chair after that, and there was this lounge that was covered with beautiful carpet, too. I don't know what—because I had heard things about him from—I don't remember who, but they were pretty bad things, and I didn't know where to reach him to, you know, break my date. Anyway, the next time, he invited me to dinner with his mother, and his lady who became his wife, and some other man I don't remember. But I admired his art.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Did he seem to have a strong influence on artists here?

SONIA WOLFSON: Pardon?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Did Macdonald-Wright seem to have a strong influence on the artists around LA?

SONIA WOLFSON: I don't think so. I think his art was unique, and that—I'm sorry I was ill when, a couple of years ago, he had a one-man show at UCLA, and I missed it. [00:28:00] But I don't really—I was never aware that—what artists had an impact on whom.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: When you had dinner these few times with Macdonald-Wright, did he ever discuss art with you? Or was the dinner table conversation more general?

SONIA WOLFSON: No, no, it was more general.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Too bad [laughs]. He's an interesting man. It would have been—I would have liked to have met him.

SONIA WOLFSON: Yes, well, in a way, you're lucky you didn't. I met him at the school where he taught, and I arrived just as all the pupils left, and he came out, and before I knew what was happening, he'd thrown me on the couch and was kissing me madly. I had long hair at the time. The hairpins flew out of my—I thought, what on earth? Of course, he was apologetic then. I had heard that he was all sorts of things.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Liked the ladies [laughs]. Interesting. Um, Earl Stendahl. When did you first meet him? Tell me something about this man.

SONIA WOLFSON: Well, I wrote about his exhibitions when I was on the *Graphic*. And that was how he knew my work.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What was he like?

SONIA WOLFSON: He seemed a nice man, and his—[00:30:00]

[END OF TRACK AAA_wolfso90_7876_r.]

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Uh, you helped Mr. Stendahl be more interested in modern art. Do you remember any of the other modern sculptors, painters, he exhibited?

SONIA WOLFSON: I remember [inaudible] came in, and he bought two things there from Mr. Stendahl, some modern things he had. I can't remember what it was. Ah. I can't remember, I'm sorry.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: It's okay. What did they look like?

SONIA WOLFSON: Pardon?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Do you remember what they looked like, the paintings?

SONIA WOLFSON: No, no, I can't remember what the artist was. It was a modern artist that we had a show of, and [inaudible] was staying at the hotel, the Ambassador Hotel, visiting here, and wandered into the gallery, and he bought two of the things and had them shipped east to where he lived. I wasn't instrumental in the sale. Mr. Stendahl sold the things to [inaudible]. I'm trying to think. I don't, I don't think I was too instrumental. He probably would have—

ILENE SUSAN FORT: —have exhibited them even if you weren't there?

SONIA WOLFSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Perhaps, perhaps not. Tell me if you remember anything about some of the other art galleries. Dalzell Hatfield had a gallery.

SONIA WOLFSON: The what?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Dalzell Hatfield.

SONIA WOLFSON: Dalzell Hatfield? Well, I didn't remember this, but Mrs. Hatfield called me one day, about a year or two before she died, and she talked at great length, said, "Sonia, you were the first one who wrote about our gallery." [00:02:09] And I said, "Oh, was I?" I didn't remember that. And she said, "Yes, you were." And so she said, "Let's get together," so I went down to the Ambassador Hotel and we had lunch together. But I don't remember where their gallery was. On West Seventh Street or something, originally. I don't know why I didn't keep more of my stuff. I don't think I kept all the *Graphic* stuff that I had. I just seem to—and the only reason I have this scrapbook, is during the year I was off, I just—

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Cut and pasted.

SONIA WOLFSON: —to do something, I pasted the things in the book.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Well, I'm glad you did.

SONIA WOLFSON: I don't know why I didn't keep the rest of the stuff.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: How about do you remember anything about these other galleries? There was the Weil Gallery—W-E-I-L—galleries in Westlake district. I had never heard of them before.

SONIA WOLFSON: Which gallery?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Weil, W-E-I-L.

SONIA WOLFSON: I don't remember it.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: [Laughs.] Okay, neither did I. You had mentioned Kant Art Gallery once—

SONIA WOLFSON: The Kantz Gallery in Hollywoodland, yeah.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Yes, yes. Who ran that?

SONIA WOLFSON: Well, it was too difficult to get there. I think I was only there the one—once or twice. You had to have a car to get there.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: How about Southby Art Salon? You wrote about it at one point, when it was first opened up. The owner was Maxwell Southby. [00:04:00] I think "Southbee" is how it's pronounced.

SONIA WOLFSON: I don't remember.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: He had been a minister, and then opened up this gallery.

SONIA WOLFSON: Did I write that?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

SONIA WOLFSON: I don't remember at all.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: It's interesting, because it's not a well-known gallery. When you went traveling around the country to see more art, and you wrote those series of reviews of art of San Francisco and Chicago, whose idea was it to do that? Was that your idea, or the publisher's?

SONIA WOLFSON: That was my idea. I worked at three jobs at once to earn the roundtrip fare, and I went—I thought I should see what art there was in this country, and so I went to San Francisco, and there, Nelson Partridge [ph] showed me around.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Who was Nelson Partridge?

SONIA WOLFSON: He was with—oh, gosh, I can't remember the names of anything.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: A museum, an art gallery there?

SONIA WOLFSON: Hmm?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Do you mean a museum or art gallery in San Francisco?

SONIA WOLFSON: No. He was with—can't remember her name. Her son was a—is a correspondent in Paris. Anyway. In fact, they—I'm still ashamed, because I lost my address book. They had arranged for me to go to a dinner party at the home of Mr. and Mrs. English. They were artists. [00:06:01] Then I went across the bay to an old girlfriend, and she and her husband took me to dinner, and they had a young dentist there as my escort, and he insisted that I come to his office the next day before I went back to San Francisco, which was strange, and she kept insisting that I go. So we went to his office, and what he did, I had a front tooth that he could see had a temporary filling, and he put a permanent filling in. I never wrote him a thank-you note. I couldn't remember his name or—anyway, I lost the address book, so I couldn't write her and ask her. Then, while I was gone—I had stayed overnight there—Mr. Partridge had arranged for me to be a guest at a dinner by the San Francisco Art Club or something. I didn't know anything about it. I wasn't in town. And I came back the next day and found a box of flowers and all this thing, and a corsage, and the dinner was the night I was not in town, having gone across the way. So it was awkward. I'm sorry I can't remember names.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: That's okay. I'm bad at names also [laughs]. What city did you go to after San Francisco?

SONIA WOLFSON: Hmm?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: What city did you go to after San Francisco?

SONIA WOLFSON: After San Francisco, I went to Chicago. Yes. And uh—

ILENE SUSAN FORT: What was that like?

SONIA WOLFSON: —after Chicago. I went to Cleveland, Detroit, Toledo, then New York. [00:08:04] From New York, I went down to Washington, and came back to New York, and was planning to go to Boston when I got notice about my mother. So my plans to work my way over to Europe from New York were gone and I had to come home, and that was that.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Did you meet any interesting people on this trip? You know, various artists or curators or writers?

SONIA WOLFSON: Well, I met the curators at the various museums and so forth, because I had this letter—

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Of introduction?

SONIA WOLFSON: —introduction. They were nice enough to send an introduction—what do you call it? A magazine could use. In Washington, D.C., my publisher Guy Finney's brother was supposed to be there, but by the time I got there, he had gone to Europe, so I didn't know a soul in Washington, and I stayed at the YW, because I was broke. I remember I had a box of graham crackers and two apples, was what I ate the two days I was in Washington. Only when you're young do you have the courage to go on a shoestring.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Oh, that's true. That's very true. What impressed you most about some of these art museums? Art Institute of Chicago, and the Metropolitan Museum. What impressed you by these large collections you had never seen before?

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh. [00:10:00] I remember my favorite painting was not a Rembrandt, it was a Hans Memling. A small portrait of an old man. It was a small painting, and I thought that was a remarkable thing. Uh, I don't remember, It's [been] so many years since I've been there, you know, I can't remember. When I went from the studio to the West Indies to handle those two pictures, I stopped by in New York, but I was kept busy by the New York office, so I didn't have time to go to the Metropolitan or anything. I think the last time I was at the Metropolitan—let's see. I was uh—at the studio for 25 years when I decided it was now time to go to Europe for the first time—

ILENE SUSAN FORT: So you actually went?

SONIA WOLFSON: —since I was born there. And I asked for a three-month's leave of absence, and I went to Europe, but on my own. I went, you know, to all the museums that I meant to go to when I was an art reviewer. And I was in London for two weeks, in Paris for two weeks, and then Revere for five days, and Florence for a day, in—with the *Last Supper*—and Italy for two weeks, and then Spain. I did not go to Germany. I wouldn't spend

money, you know, where the Nazis had been. And uh, I think—I remember when I was in Spain, I took a ferry across—[00:12:07] Someone said, "Take the ferry across to"—I forgot what the island was—"and come back. You will see the coast of Spain, and it will be worthwhile." So I did that as soon as I got there. And on the ferry, there were two children, sat beside me. And when the man came around to collect my fare, I said, "How much is it, please? Just take the money." I did not—so the little girl, who spoke English, said, "I will take care of it," and she paid it. And said, "I want to practice my English with you. Do you mind?" I said, "No, I'm delighted." She wanted to know why I was there. I remember I said to her a bunch of movie-star pictures when I came back. But I was so enchanted with this little girl. Well, by that time, I didn't realize I had the flu, and I came back and I tried to get someone at the hotel to get me some aspirin or something, and they came back with I don't remember what. So I got dressed and went out, and I forgot—I kept forgetting, in Europe, everything closes at noon while people have their siesta and so forth. It was about four o'clock before the grocery store reopened. And I was standing there, and I got talking to a very nice-looking, well-dressed man. I think he was a doctor, and he had to be at the hospital at six o'clock, but could he show me around—I was not about to go out with somebody I didn't know. So, apparently, he had been educated in uh—probably in England, so he knew English. [00:14:06] I thought more likely he had to get home to his wife.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Yes. [Laughs.]

SONIA WOLFSON: Not—you know. Anyway.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Well, I'm glad you finally saw some art in Europe. I'm glad you did have that opportunity to go to Europe.

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, yes.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Did you enjoy the art museums there?

SONIA WOLFSON: Pardon?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Did you enjoy the art museums in Europe?

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, yes. You know. Both the main museum in London and the—and in Paris, of course, the Louvre. I was at the Continental Hotel, and from my window, my balcony overlooked the Louvre on one side, and the little Impressionist museum on the other. And I was in both of them. It was fascinating to see paintings I had seen reproductions of all my life. And I enjoyed it thoroughly. And then, on the Riviera, there was a museum—oh. I remember, on the bus going to the Riviera, I thought I was on the wrong bus, and I sat, [laughs] and I think I was weeping. And two ladies spoke to me, and they reassured me, and there was another bus coming along, and they would get me on that. And they told me to look up somebody or other on the Riviera when I got there, and so I did. [00:16:08] This lady, very nice, and she said, "You must meet"—apparently it was the wife of a navy officer, who was very, very lonely. And anyway, she drove me down to the little museum on the Riviera, which was very nice. And afterwards, in Italy, I met somebody who was going to the Riviera, and I said, "Would you do me a favor and go and see this lady and bring her something from me?" So I bought—I forgot what it was. Two little things. I don't know if they ever got it or not. I never heard. But Milan was where the *Last Supper* was.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: It's wonderful. Yes.

SONIA WOLFSON: And Florence. Fascinating city. And Rome. It was Rome, I just decided, I can't leave here without going to the Prado in Spain, so I wired my brother-in-law to deposit \$350 to my account so that I could buy a ticket to Spain. But I got to Spain, and as I say, I had the flu. I didn't know it. I got on the plane, and I was so sick. So—

ILENE SUSAN FORT: That's too bad.

SONIA WOLFSON: I stayed in New York two nights. I was supposed to go and see the Parsons [ph] up in Connecticut, and then I phoned them that I couldn't. And when I felt better, I got on the plane and came home. [00:18:01]

ILENE SUSAN FORT: That's too bad. The Prado is a wonderful collection. I went there years ago. Um, how about if I just re-ask you about certain artists, if you remember their art or anything, or if you reviewed any of their shows. We've already talked about Macdonald-Wright. Um, what about Lorser Feitelson? He was supposedly very —

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, yes, Lorser Feitelson, yes. He was a very good artist, and I think I used a cover of his on a story. Lorser Feitelson. What was his wife's name? She was a painter, too.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Oh, yes, first wife. His second wife was a painter also. Oh, God, what was her first name,

Nancy?

SONIA WOLFSON: I ran into him once at the market, and he looked at me very approvingly. He liked what I had on or something.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: [Laughs.] He taught, or influenced, a lot of artists.

SONIA WOLFSON: Pardon?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: He seems to have taught or influenced a lot of artists.

SONIA WOLFSON: Lorser?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Yes. Yes. A lot of people adored him. He seemed to be very popular as an artist and a teacher.

SONIA WOLFSON: I—I didn't know that. I can't remember very much about him. I remember that a painting I reproduced in a magazine, I saw what seemed to be original—he must have copied it from—in Europe, and that disillusioned me.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Oh, that's too bad. Karl Yens? [00:20:01] Y-E-N [S]. Karl Yens. I don't know anything about his art. Karl Yen, Y-E-N [S]. He was a somewhat conservative figure painter, I think.

SONIA WOLFSON: Y-E-N [S]?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Y-E-N [S], yes.

SONIA WOLFSON: I don't remember.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Orrin White? He painted landscapes, conservative landscapes. Paul Lauritz?

SONIA WOLFSON: Yes, I remember Paul Lauritz.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Exactly the same time as Edgar Payne. Do you remember anything about his art?

SONIA WOLFSON: No, I remember his painting. I don't—I didn't know him.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Okay. Uh—Millard Sheets?

SONIA WOLFSON: Millard Sheets, yes.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Do you remember—we own a painting in our museum called *Bunker Hill*. It's not called *Bunker*, excuse me. Uh, it's of two women standing on the top of Bunker Hill. And when it was exhibited in the early '30s, I think '30, and I think '31, it won a lot of awards, and the museum eventually bought it, our museum. Um, do you remember any of that? It's a very exciting painting. He died just recently.

SONIA WOLFSON: He died this week?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: No, a couple months ago. He was very active up until his death. I had written to him a few times before he died. I asked him information about his paintings. Ben Berlin? He was a close friend of Feitelson's. Paul Sample?

SONIA WOLFSON: Yes.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Yes, he worked with Willard Sheets occasionally, before he moved to the East Coast from the west. An artist I can't find too much information on, and I think he's so wonderful—I own one of his sculptures—is Karoly Fulop, F-U-L-O-P. [00:22:00]

SONIA WOLFSON: Karoly Fulop, oh, of course.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Anything you can mention and think about him, please tell me, because there's so little written on the man, and his artwork is wonderful.

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, yes, Karoly Fulop was a very talented man. I remember he invited—who was that going through my patio?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Want to take a look?

[Audio Break.]

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Uh, you were saying about Fulop?

SONIA WOLFSON: I thought I had a reproduction of one of Karoly's things here. Jane Withers. Yeah, but I—no, I guess I'm—

[Audio Break.]

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Oh, they're wonderful line drawings.

SONIA WOLFSON: This is one he did of the composer.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Oh! Did he do them when people weren't watching him or what?

SONIA WOLFSON: What?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: His portraits—drawings. Did Geritz do them while he was just—

SONIA WOLFSON: Yeah.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: —talking to people?

SONIA WOLFSON: We were at a party at—I think it was at the home of Stephanie Kastner's father. He was the harpist for the Los Angeles Philharmonic. [00:24:01] And there were a bunch of artists there. What's this? Am I in that? Nope.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Where's it taken? Where was the photograph taken?

SONIA WOLFSON: The Fox. [Inaudible] daughter's wedding. Major. All these chinless caricatures of me. Whatever is this? Oh [inaudible]. I don't know what that is. I guess that's lost at whatever it is. Sorry.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: That's okay. What were you looking for? Something—

SONIA WOLFSON: Is this yours?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: No, it's yours. It came out of the scrapbook you just were looking at. You were about to tell me about Karoly Fulop.

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, Karoly Fulop. Uh—I started looking for that thing. No, he did very, very beautiful, sort of religious things, and he was a charming man. He had taken me up to his place once.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Where did he live and what—

SONIA WOLFSON: And he couldn't make up his mind who to make love to, you know.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Where did he live and work?

SONIA WOLFSON: I don't remember. Yeah, I'm sorry I'm not much help to you.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Oh, no, it's interesting—

[Audio Break.]

ILENE SUSAN FORT: —even the little bits you remember. [00:26:00] Other questions about Fulop. I understood that he ran a school or gave art lessons for a while? Do you remember hearing about that?

SONIA WOLFSON: No.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: There's so little information on him, and his art is finally becoming more popular, and more people are digging out of their attics works by him. The museum owns a wonderful relief. That's why I ask you.

SONIA WOLFSON: Well, he did very intricate, very beautiful stuff. But I don't remember too much about him, personally. He just seemed to think it was necessary to make a pass at gals.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Okay, maybe some others. Peter Krasnow?

SONIA WOLFSON: Pardon?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Peter Krasnow.

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, yes, Peter Krasnow. He was a remarkable man. He and his wife. Peter did a lot of religious stuff. He's done some new kind of thing. I saw it, some exhibit or something. It's totally new to me, the kind of thing—

ILENE SUSAN FORT: He started as—you're right. In the '20s, he was doing religious things, probably—some of them were design for some of the synagogues around this area. Then he became a sculptor in the '30s, but you probably didn't know that.

SONIA WOLFSON: No, I didn't.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Very uh—he spent a few years abroad and then came back, and did woodcarvings. Very powerful, interesting work. Let's see. Maurice Braun?

SONIA WOLFSON: Maurice Braun, I remember vaguely. A lot of these, I knew their work, but I didn't know the people.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Right, I understand. [00:28:00] Uh, tell me more about Frank Geritz.

SONIA WOLFSON: Who?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Frank, the man who did all the drawings we were just looking at.

SONIA WOLFSON: Franz Geritz?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Yes.

SONIA WOLFSON: Well, he's a Hungarian-American, and he had some sort of disease in his knee. First one leg was amputated, and this, and the other one was. He was a very sweet man. And I say he married Josephine, but I think they moved to Pasadena, it seemed to me, or someplace, where she gave more of her lectures there.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: I had never heard of them until I saw the drawing, the line drawing, he did of you. It looks similar to other ones you have. Uh, did he teach anywhere that you know of, or did he just—did he paint or draw?

SONIA WOLFSON: No, I don't think so. But he was very active. He was a friend of Merle Armitage and Arthur Millier, and he went to concerts, and he—

ILENE SUSAN FORT: How did he support himself?

SONIA WOLFSON: Pardon?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: How did he support himself financially?

SONIA WOLFSON: I presume with his art, I really don't know.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: [Coughs]. He was definitely a good caricaturist.

SONIA WOLFSON: Hmm?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: He was definitely a good caricaturist.

SONIA WOLFSON: Oh, yes. The little thing he did there of Stravinsky, I meant to give that to her. I thought she might like it for the archives.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: They're wonderful little drawings.

SONIA WOLFSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. No, I don't know too much about that. I think I worked with him just a couple of times. My mother was horrified. [00:30:00] You know, he was a bearded—you know. My mother—"Oh."

ILENE SUSAN FORT: [Laughs.] Tell me about the um, Mr. Nash. You said you were engaged to him once.

SONIA WOLFSON: He was a painter from Santa Fe, New Mexico, and—

ILENE SUSAN FORT: How did you meet?

SONIA WOLFSON: I first met him—I think he came to the gallery.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: That would be Stendahl?

SONIA WOLFSON: To Stendahl, to see about an exhibition. Then I left there and never saw him again. Then—I don't remember where I met him again. By that time, he was divorced. And he lived down in the Silver Lake area. I remember we had to go once each time to feed his dog, which he'd forgotten to do, and we went down there, and he had a dinky little place. And I don't remember. I did a thing about him, an article, but I don't recall where, you know, he was born. I think it was Cleveland or Detroit or something. My memory has gone to pot. I was very involved with him, and very much in love with him, but he turned out to be an alcoholic, and I couldn't take that.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: That's understandable. Too bad. He probably did the watercolor over your sofa.

SONIA WOLFSON: Huh?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: I said—

[END OF TRACK AAA_wolfso90_7877_r.]

ILENE SUSAN FORT: —um, you mentioned some of the [inaudible] walked around your apartment before, and you told me about some of the paintings and drawings. You have these two Kathryn Leightons.

SONIA WOLFSON: I have the one Kathryn Leighton.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: One. The one in the hallway. Uh, did you know her well?

SONIA WOLFSON: No. She took me to lunch one day, and took me back to her studio and handed me that. And I was very embarrassed.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: [Laughs.] Generous.

SONIA WOLFSON: But she said it was a sketch for a larger painting, so—

ILENE SUSAN FORT: When was this? Did you go out to lunch with her—

SONIA WOLFSON: Pardon?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: When did you go out to lunch with her?

SONIA WOLFSON: I don't remember.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: That's unusual, painter giving—

SONIA WOLFSON: And uh—that's Conrad Buff. They had me over to their home, and gave me that painting.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you remember anything about Buff?

SONIA WOLFSON: No. I remember he was a very interesting artist.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: I know our museum owns two very big paintings by him.

SONIA WOLFSON: Hmm?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Our museum owns two very big paintings by Conrad Buff. And one of them is his typical landscapes from high up, with some Conestoga wagons being pulled up a cliff. I spoke to his son, whose name is also Conrad Buff, who said that he posed one—as the little boy in the painting. He was that age at the time he painted—

SONIA WOLFSON: He didn't usually put figures in his landscapes.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: No, no, no. But they're little, and they're in the front, but they are a major part of the painting. It's interesting. His style was so different from anyone else's around here.

SONIA WOLFSON: Yeah.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: [Coughs.] Did Stendahl have an exhibition by him? I can't remember. [00:02:00] I don't know if he did or not. When was Mr. Pugat [ph]—his show? You said—

SONIA WOLFSON: Tuget [ph]?

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Stendahl.

SONIA WOLFSON: He had an exhibition at the Stendahl Galleries.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: This is in the early '30s?

SONIA WOLFSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Mm. Was he a performer at that time?

SONIA WOLFSON: Late '20s. I don't remember exactly. Probably early '30s, because I worked at the studio— August 1, 1973. Must be 1930 or '31.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: It's a really good drawing. Watercolor, isn't it? A tempera? Oh. Did you know of Merrell Gage the sculptor Merrell Gage?

SONIA WOLFSON: I knew of him. I didn't know him.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: There was an exhibition of his work, his sculpture, in 1925, and I believe you wrote something about it, his art.

SONIA WOLFSON: I don't remember.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Hard to find his, too. Uh, some of the artists who were active in those days, you can't find works by them anymore. It's very frustrating, because they were good. From what I can see in photographs, they were really good. There was a lot more going on than most people give credit to Los Angeles. Do you have anything else you might want to say?

SONIA WOLFSON: No. No. I'm sorry that I have so little memory of those days.

ILENE SUSAN FORT: Well, you actually remember more than you think you do.

[END OF TRACK AAA_wolfso90_7878_r.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]