



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Klaus G. Perls,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Klaus Perls on January 19, 1993. The interview was conducted by Mona Hadler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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

Interview

MONA HADLER: Okay, this is for the archives, and -- can you hear me?

KLAUS PERLS: I can hear you.

MS. HADLER: Okay. They want to, really they want to record early years of your gallery and your life. And so I thought we might start with a biography a little bit. Born in Berlin I know, I looked up. And --

MR. PERLS: In a suburb of Berlin in 1912, January 1912.

MS. HADLER: Yes. And was your family dealers, or involved in the art world?

MR. PERLS: My family, my family -- my parents were married in 1910, and started, on their honeymoon, to buy contemporary French art.

MS. HADLER: Really?

MR. PERLS: So that's Picasso and stuff.

MS. HADLER: Picasso, that early?

MR. PERLS: Yeah, 1910, that was not so early.

MS. HADLER: It was cubism.

MR. PERLS: And plus they were friends of Kahnweiler and those people. And so when they got back they had [inaudible] build them a house in the suburb, and that is the house in which I was born. And then they put these things on the walls in Zehlendorf and people, friends came and say, "oh, that's nice, I would like to have something like that." And they said, "well, by all means if you want to have it, here I'll sell it to you and I'll go back to Paris and buy some more." And that is how it started in 1910.

MS. HADLER: Wow, I see. So did they, were they friends with the Steins as well, Gertrude Stein and Leo Stein?

MR. PERLS: They knew them but they were not friendly.

MS. HADLER: They knew them?

MR. PERLS: Yeah.

MS. HADLER: And when you --

MR. PERLS: There weren't that many people in those days you know, that could be interested.

MS. HADLER: Sure.

MR. PERLS: So everybody knew everybody --

MS. HADLER: Yes. So when you were young you not only grew up with the paintings around --

MR. PERLS: Right.

MS. HADLER: -- but did you meet the artists as well?

MR. PERLS: No. No, not at first, no. I was kept very separate and children were not to be seen.

MS. HADLER: But you were able to see what paintings were in your house when you were young.

MR. PERLS: Oh, yeah.

MS. HADLER: Which ones, do you remember?

MR. PERLS: Oh, yes I --

MS. HADLER: Do you have a memory of particular works when you were a child?

MR. PERLS: There is probably an apocryphal story that when my parents sold the big, big, blue Picasso at the [inaudible] that it was taken from the wall that I started to cry. It is an apocryphal story. I am sure I couldn't have cared less.

MS. HADLER: There is usually a hint of truth.

MR. PERLS: There were other reasons to cry.

MS. HADLER: Yes, like what?

MR. PERLS: I was very unhappy as a child.

MS. HADLER: Oh, in what way, why? Family or school, or certain --

MR. PERLS: I couldn't wait to be a grownup and have nobody tell me what to do.

MS. HADLER: So you think more unhappy than normal childhood --

MR. PERLS: I had no idea. I only know one childhood.

MS. HADLER: So you -- and you went to school then in Germany?

MR. PERLS: No. I had a brother who was just a year older than I. And we were privately brought up because my parents thought that the German school system was too patriotic. They didn't like that idea.

MS. HADLER: And they were right.

MR. PERLS: They are right -- anyway, we were privately brought up. And then when I was 12, I was sent to an institution in Lausanne called Lycée Jacquard. It is one of those things, international things where people who wanted to bring up their children in an international way send them. It is miserable, but you learn languages. And that was from 12 to 14. And then at age 14, I did go for two years to school in Berlin to get the degree that one has to get to go to university. Then I went to university and studied art history.

MS. HADLER: Who did you study art history with in the university, with whom and which university?

MR. PERLS: Well, first I went to Hamburg, and then I went to Munich. And then I studied in Paris. And I don't remember any of the professors, they were non, non-existent as far as I was concerned.

MS. HADLER: So the date was the '30s?

MR. PERLS: This was, this was the university. I started university in 1929.

MS. HADLER: 1929?

MR. PERLS: Yeah. And I left Germany because of Mr. Hitler. Mr. Hitler did me the greatest favor anybody ever did anybody. He forced to leave Germany, which was fine and I went to Paris and applied for a visa to New York, because I didn't like the way that the French people treated German refugees. I was --

MS. HADLER: And you were right there too.

MR. PERLS: I wrote a doctor's thesis on Jean Fouquet that has been published as a book. And Jean Fouquet being their best 15th century artist. The idea that a German/Jewish refugee would tell them about Fouquet, which was very necessary because nobody had ever done anything about it, they didn't like that at all.

MS. HADLER: What university did you do the doctorate for?

MR. PERLS: Basel.

MS. HADLER: In Basel, in Basel. And you were very young though to get a doctorate in art history.

MR. PERLS: Very, because I did -- I was just always ahead a grade.

MS. HADLER: And you don't remember any of your professors or who you wrote it with?

MR. PERLS: Well, the man in Basel was professor [inaudible] but I mean, it doesn't matter.

MS. HADLER: No? So you came here as an art historian? You had a Ph.D. in art history.

MR. PERLS: Right. And became a messenger boy in a brokerage house, and loved it.

MS. HADLER: Really? So what year was it that you got here?

MR. PERLS: Nineteen-thirty-five.

MS. HADLER: '35 - right before -

MR. PERLS: And then I stayed with the brokerage house, -- for two years. And my mother had by that time, had an art gallery in Paris. And but of course no sales, because it is very difficult, it's right after the depression. And so she started sending me pictures here, and I would sell them right there in Wall Street.

MS. HADLER: She had an art gallery in Paris during the '30s?

MR. PERLS: Yes, started in 1932.

MS. HADLER: But it was occupied, at what point was it occupied.

MR. PERLS: It wasn't occupied. The war didn't start until 1939.

MS. HADLER: Right, right.

MR. PERLS: Paris didn't even get occupied until 1940.

MS. HADLER: So that's not - okay I am just getting - all of the '30s. She had all that time.

MR. PERLS: It is all the 1930s. And I sold, also sold a lot of these things to dealers on 57th street.

MS. HADLER: Uh-huh.

MR. PERLS: And then I thought it's really ridiculous. I mean, I sell these Utrillos for \$150 to Wall Street dealers, and they sell them for \$300. So why don't I open a gallery and sell them for \$300, which I did in 1937.

MS. HADLER: You had no interest in pursuing art history at that point, coming here with a doctorate?

MR. PERLS: I never had any interest in art history. It was just a natural way to go to the university and get the doctor's degree without doing any work. But I did, I did write that book on Fouquet; that was serious.

MS. HADLER: Yes, I saw that.

MR. PERLS: But I knew a lot more when I was child and my parents were very friendly with Max Friedländer. He was a director of the Berlin museum. And he was madly in love with my mother and we would all travel together in this huge big car which my parents had. So I learned more art history from Friedländer than I could ever have learned in the university.

MS. HADLER: So you are back, it is 1937, and you decide to open your gallery. Did you -- was it from your mother that she was sending you the paintings, is that the idea?

MR. PERLS: Right, right.

MS. HADLER: I see. How did you -- what was the difference in your mind between the art world here and the art world in Europe at that time?

MR. PERLS: That was really all pretty much the same. There were very few art dealers in Europe and even fewer here. And the art market as we know it today didn't even exist, there wasn't any.

MS. HADLER: So who were the collectors in the '30s? Who were the --

MR. PERLS: Well you see I didn't really -- I headed the gallery and I quoted for the young collector. And young people came and bought their first pictures, not as a collector at all but to hang on the wall; a Utrillo for \$300.

MS. HADLER: Uh-huh.

MR. PERLS: And it was something people could afford. And my mother sends them to me, but it doesn't -- she had this, there was this contract with Utrillo and Raudeshine [phonetic] and Marie Laurencin and Lamont is four. And the contract was that she would come and she would pick out one dozen pictures and give them a \$1,000. That was \$75 a picture. And she would then send them to me, and I had them framed up and I sold them and my -- \$75 was the cost. And then whatever was more, my mother and I split in two.

MS. HADLER: And so the people that would come at that point would be young professionals.

MR. PERLS: That's right.

MS. HADLER: -- artist-types, artists, intellectuals, university people, Wall Street people?

MR. PERLS: Well, yeah, yeah.

MS. HADLER: What about other galleries showing European modernism at that time?

MR. PERLS: Well, there was something called the Valentine gallery. And he had, he had been showing serious European art for quite awhile. And there were maybe a couple of others, not very serious. There was no [inaudible] but they really dealt with old masters and so there was no competition, but there also was no market.

MS. HADLER: Uh-huh. There was no market, just this?

MR. PERLS: Right.

MS. HADLER: What about surrealism at that time, which was important in Europe?

MR. PERLS: It existed, but it was way beyond the American public at that time.

MS. HADLER: The Museum of Modern Art had a big show on 36th of Dada and surrealism.

MR. PERLS: All right, the Museum of Modern Art was the pacemaker and also the tastemaker if you will --

MS. HADLER: Certainly.

MR. PERLS: -- and very, very progressive. But it was hard enough in those days to sell.

MS. HADLER: Uh-huh.

MR. PERLS: They were very easy kind of decorative stuff.

MS. HADLER: Uh-huh.

MR. PERLS: And practically impossible -- I mean, Picasso, my mother was very friendly with Picasso. And so he said to her, "Why don't you at least send a bunch of photographs of my new pictures to your son and see whether he can drum up some trade."

MS. HADLER: Oh, that's fascinating.

MR. PERLS: Absolutely impossible.

MS. HADLER: I know. It was when Gorky was interested in Picasso early on it was a big thing. And -- Shapiro said it was this heroic --

MR. PERLS: But who was interested in Gorky?

MS. HADLER: No one, no one, but --

MR. PERLS: I mean, Gorky was a very nice man. He came around to my gallery many, many times and I liked him very much. But he could never sell anything.

MS. HADLER: No, I know. And did you know Julian Levy?

MR. PERLS: Yes, yes.

MS. HADLER: Was there --

MR. PERLS: He was one of the older dealers. And then he started -- then you see when the war broke out in 1939, and then France fell in 1940, then a lot of European artists came to New York.

MS. HADLER: Yes, right.

MR. PERLS: And then people like Julian Levy and so on were known -- he took them on.

MS. HADLER: And Peggy Guggenheim --

MR. PERLS: Peggy Guggenheim. But it was very, very hard going. You know I mean, Léger sat around in my gallery I don't know how many hours, and weeks and months. And I tried to sell Léger, without a question.

MS. HADLER: Well, what was the criticism of it, it was just too avant-garde for Americans; is that the idea?

MR. PERLS: I don't think, I don't think there was much avant-garde criticism in those days, in the early 1930s.

MS. HADLER: No, I mean that their art was too avant-garde for the American public.

MR. PERLS: Oh, yes it was. I mean, no question about it.

MS. HADLER: But what about -- so you could sell Utrillo and you could sell Lamont because of course it is easier too, certainly.

MR. PERLS: Oh, sure, yeah.

MS. HADLER: But would you have wanted to, do you think? You would have wanted to sell the Léger. Would you have wanted to sell say surrealism or --

MR. PERLS: It was never a question with me of wanting to sell this and wanting to sell that, I sold what I could sell.

MS. HADLER: I see.

MR. PERLS: I mean, as long as I was satisfied that it was minimally art.

MS. HADLER: I see. Well, during the war was there a change?

MR. PERLS: Yeah. The supply from Paris dried up entirely, and I took on some American artists, especially Darrel Austin, who was a big success at the time first. And then later on you know more, because later on all the abstract impressionists and abstract this and that and I didn't like any of these people very much.

MS. HADLER: Yeah. So you weren't at all interested in abstract expressionism or any of it. So you had Darrel Austin and you had Calder, were there any other Americans?

MR. PERLS: No, I didn't have Calder. Calder was with Valentine Dudensing and after he went to Curt Valentin, and Curt Valentin died in 1954, now we were 20 years in the industry.

MS. HADLER: Yes.

MR. PERLS: And at that point, I said of all the artists Curt had handled, the one I really wanted was Calder. And I wrote him a letter and he was very pleased and came. That was just 1953. And at the end of 1953, we had bought this house. It was 1954 when Curt Valentin died. We moved into his house, but it was still completely empty. So Calder came and looked at the house and said, "This is just what I need, I will fill it up for you."

MS. HADLER: And what was the story with the sidewalk?

MR. PERLS: Oh, that came much later.

MS. HADLER: That came much later? Should we stick historically and go back to the 40s? Let's go back to the 40s for a moment and the war. So you couldn't get paintings anymore from Europe, but you weren't that interested in Americans except for Austin. Were there other Americans that came to you that wanted to show their work.

MR. PERLS: Yeah, that whole group. There was a man by the name of Carl Freeby [phonetic] who was very good as far as I was concerned. And there were four or five others who came and we sold their paintings.

MS. HADLER: Do you remember their names?

MR. PERLS: Well, it was comrades --

MS. HADLER: Oh, that's okay, you don't, it's not. So were there a lot of other Americans who came to you and wanted -- were you barraged by slides and --

MR. PERLS: No, no. Of anybody I had a very definite taste, certain things I was willing to accept, most things not.

MS. HADLER: So then during the war, were there any people to buy art at that point?

MR. PERLS: To do what?

MS. HADLER: Did you find that there were collectors during the war, was there a change?

MR. PERLS: I told you, we sold those American pictures, we sold them.

MS. HADLER: I see. So you sold them at the time.

MR. PERLS: Yeah.

MS. HADLER: Do you want to characterize or try to characterize the difference in the collectors over the decades?

MR. PERLS: No. There isn't -- no different people coming for pictures.

MS. HADLER: But not say -- you described in the '30s as it being more you know, someone from the university, someone from stock brokers. Does it change? Is there --

MR. PERLS: It didn't really change until very much later when the art market really took off, I would say after 1950, and then became very quickly a totally international market.

MS. HADLER: Uh-huh.

MR. PERLS: Now the Japanese did not come in until 1970s, so that's another 20 years. But even before that, it was, it was very international.

MS. HADLER: When Paris was occupied, we will go back again historically, did your mother then come here? Did she close the gallery and come here?

MR. PERLS: Yeah, yeah.

MS. HADLER: Lucky. And did she work with you in this gallery at this time?

MR. PERLS: No. She came here and she very quickly thereafter died of cancer. So she was already very sick when she came.

MS. HADLER: And was your father around?

MR. PERLS: My father yes, but he was not doing any art business in those days, he was writing books on philosophy.

MS. HADLER: What philosophers was he, was it his own philosophy?

MR. PERLS: Plato, Plato, Plato, all kinds of books on Plato.

MS. HADLER: I see. So when he came here he remained a separate intellectual working on his own, I see. Let's go back to the other, to the community --

MR. PERLS: I had a, I had a brother who was a year older than I and who opened a gallery in Hollywood, California in the late '30s. And he lived and did art business in California all his life.

MS. HADLER: Mainly European or European and American?

MR. PERLS: European and American, both.

MS. HADLER: Now, you never showed, you never sold German art, you weren't interested in that.

MR. PERLS: No.

MS. HADLER: Was there any reason for that? Just basically --

MR. PERLS: It didn't appeal to me.

MS. HADLER: In any way, I see. Did you find in France, I know there was a lot of, there has been a lot of art history about changing reactions to cubism and different attitudes about Fauvism before and after World War I and before and after World War II?

MR. PERLS: Yeah, but that was really before my time,

MS. HADLER: Yes.

MR. PERLS: -- because when I got into it all these things have been completely established in Europe, not here. But then I did look to help establish them here. But the Museum of Modern Art was doing it.

MS. HADLER: When you came here there was a lot of social realism and American scene painting.

MR. PERLS: Yeah, it was awful stuff.

MS. HADLER: So you weren't at all interested in that. And there was a lot of politics involved in the artist community.

MR. PERLS: I never had any part in any of that.

MS. HADLER: No interest in it, I see. In the '40s, there were other dealers, we were starting to talk about them, who also dealt with European art. When Pierre Matisse, was he at that point? And Kootz began to --

MR. PERLS: Pierre Matisse was a partner with Valentine Dudensing originally, and then they separated and each had his own gallery. Pierre Matisse was one of the few very successful -- I mean, in moderation because even Pierre Matisse didn't have any customers.

MS. HADLER: Uh-huh, at that point. How would you characterize the difference in the different galleries, yours and the others who sold European art?

MR. PERLS: Well, each of us had his personal taste and his personal predilections. So each gallery had its own cachet.

MS. HADLER: How would you characterize yours, basically your preferences?

MR. PERLS: Well, mine was very much geared for many, many years to young people who would buy pictures primarily to hang on the wall as decoration.

MS. HADLER: And then when you got past that, when you moved out of that either was it that you moved out of it, or America moved out of it or the art world?

MR. PERLS: I never really moved out of it you see, it is just that the kind of picture that I sold for \$300 got to cost \$100,000. And that changed the character of the people who would buy them.

MS. HADLER: But when you describe works by Marie Laurencin etcetera as being decorative, are you saying that in a pejorative way, are they your favorites or not?

MR. PERLS: Today, no. Today they are not my favorites, but there are very few things left that are my favorites of anything.

MS. HADLER: What are, who are your favorite artists?

MR. PERLS: Well, I still think that Picasso and Braque, and for instance, Fauve paintings are, that is -- I like that very much. And a really good Soutine is wonderful. And of course, I have specialized for many, many years in Modigliani. And I still like the good Modiglianis very much.

MS. HADLER: And did you --

MR. PERLS: And Léger of course I think is great. That was practically impossible to sell for the longest time, but it was great.

MS. HADLER: I wish I were around then with the knowledge of today, right.

MR. PERLS: With the knowledge of today.

MS. HADLER: That would be the answer, right. And what, that was your preferences, what would be Pierre

Matisse's, how would his gallery have differed from yours?

MR. PERLS: Pierre Matisse went pretty heavily into surrealism, and in the American and Latin American things that he showed. There were a lot of surrealism. And I did, I love Miró. I mean, he was part of the surrealists in a way.

MS. HADLER: For awhile.

MR. PERLS: Yeah.

MS. HADLER: But it's different.

MR. PERLS: Yes, it is.

MS. HADLER: One could like Miró and have an aesthetic formalist to reference.

MR. PERLS: Right, right.

MS. HADLER: Definitely.

MR. PERLS: Well, I have, I have sold Dalis as long as they were earlier than 1939. I think Dali in the 1930s was a very good artist.

MS. HADLER: So then after your mother came here and after the war, would you then go back and forth to Europe --

MR. PERLS: Yeah.

MS. HADLER: -- and buy directly from the artists or from auctions?

MR. PERLS: Both, anything, anywhere.

MS. HADLER: What is your relationship to the auction houses, since you sell so much work that they also sell? Is there --

MR. PERLS: Well, for many, many years the auction houses came around calling and said they were going to bring in things today to ask me whether they were right or wrong, because then there came the period when the art market was kind of wild in the 1960s, late '50s, early '60s until the middle '60s. And a lot of scandals of fakes came out. And at that point, we already had the Art Dealers Association, which we founded as a result of all these fake scandals. And that was one of the big problems, to clean up the art market in the 1960s.

MS. HADLER: Were you one of the founders of the --

MR. PERLS: Yes. Well, we had Pierre Matisse as the first president, because he had the name that would set up the Art Dealers Association. And then I was the second president.

MS. HADLER: Uh-huh. And then you would rate the quality and background of dealers and what would be --

MR. PERLS: No, but the dealers, who were invited in, you could be part of the Art Dealers Association only by invitation. The people who were invited were the people we needed for their expertise to try and clean up the art market.

MS. HADLER: I see. So then it became a kind of group where you would all together authenticate works and put a stamp of approval upon a work, is that how it worked?

MR. PERLS: We would never do that.

MS. HADLER: I see.

MR. PERLS: I have never given a certificate in my life.

MS. HADLER: So how would it work then? A painting would be of questionable --

MR. PERLS: Well, if people come in here and show me things to find out whether they are real or not, I say if they are not real. They get kind of hard to sell.

MS. HADLER: How would the Art Dealers Association work though? You would all -- I don't know really about the Art Dealers Association, so how would it work? You would together authenticate or --

MR. PERLS: Well, if there were, sometimes there were entire collections which then the Art Dealers Association, by invitation from the collectors, would send the people who were expert in that field to that collection and go around and say "this is right." There were some big scandals like you know Mr. Meadows.

MS. HADLER: No, I didn't.

MR. PERLS: Well, that is all before your time. But he had a big collection down in Texas. We went down there and there were about 100 very important paintings and I think two of them were originals.

MS. HADLER: Oh, my goodness, wow. So then it was better to just not be an individual, but to have a whole group of you as an association so that it is not one person --

MR. PERLS: Yes, yes.

MS. HADLER: -- you know, turning around and saying, "I say only."

MR. PERLS: Yes, because there was always the possibility of lawsuits. And we never got any lawsuits, touch wood.

MS. HADLER: So it was you, Pierre Matisse, who were the other founding members of the Art Dealers Association?

MR. PERLS: Well, that you have to --

MS. HADLER: Look up.

MR. PERLS: -- look up.

MS. HADLER: Okay. Let me ask you about the Calder sidewalk, how that came about and what the story was?

MR. PERLS: Well, we had to from time to time, you know the sidewalks go bad, and it is the responsibility of the owners of the building next to the sidewalk to have it repaired.

MS. HADLER: Oh, really?

MR. PERLS: Oh, yes.

MS. HADLER: Even now?

MR. PERLS: Even now, sure. You are responsible for your sidewalk. So when it came to the point where we had to do something about the sidewalk, one of us had the idea, it might be a nice idea to ask Calder to make a design for the new sidewalk.

MS. HADLER: That is wonderful.

MR. PERLS: Then have it done.

MS. HADLER: And he was happy with it?

MR. PERLS: Oh, God. Well, you know he had the kind of facility, it would take him two minutes to do this kind of thing.

MS. HADLER: Really?

MR. PERLS: Yes. You have no idea of the facility of people like Calder or Picasso, it is just -- they do it in their dreams.

MS. HADLER: Yeah, they have enormous outputs too.

MR. PERLS: Yeah.

MS. HADLER: Do you have any stories of working with artists that you might want to have in the archives. I mean, memories or memoirs?

MR. PERLS: Back then everybody who was interested, there are already things on file of the Calder years. I mean, Calder -- I was his agent from 1955 until he died in '76, that's 21 years. And he very often lived right here in this building.

MS. HADLER: Did he?

MR. PERLS: Yeah. When he came to New York, this is where he would live. And he began to like it so much that it got to be too much for me. So his daughter had a house down in the village, so we agreed that it might be a good idea if occasionally he stayed at his daughter's.

MS. HADLER: He accepted that.

MR. PERLS: Yeah.

MS. HADLER: Up in Roxbury I know, that's where his --

MR. PERLS: Yeah, but you see he liked it more and more here in town rather than in Roxbury. Although I mean, you know he had a place in France too, outside of Tours, a place called Sache. That was the biggest option and that is where his older daughter and her husband lived. And the younger daughter lived here in New York.

MS. HADLER: Did you ever donate works to the museum or are there any stories about trying to donate works to museums, any rejections that are surprising?

MR. PERLS: Well, I think you might have heard that a little over a year ago I gave a collection of over 160 works from Benin to the Metropolitan.

MS. HADLER: Oh, I didn't.

MR. PERLS: You --

MS. HADLER: No, I should. Oh, that is wonderful. So was that your own private collection you had collected? So you had collected African art for sale, or for your --

MR. PERLS: Right, African art. I never sold any African art, but I did buy some African art originally. But then Benin is as far as I am concerned, so much better and more interesting than any other African art. And so I specialized in that. And for awhile I bought a lot of things, stuff that they -- I mean, now it is practically not available any more.

MS. HADLER: No, yes, it is very rare.

MR. PERLS: You are right.

MS. HADLER: But they showed it.

MR. PERLS: -- Metropolitan had this bound like that for me.

MS. HADLER: Oh, that is wonderful. They showed it, didn't they?

MR. PERLS: Indeed they did.

MS. HADLER: Yes, and I am sorry that I --

MR. PERLS: For many, for many months.

MS. HADLER: Because I did see it, I did see the collections, they are wonderful.

MR. PERLS: Right. Now, it is going on tour to five other museums. But then it's going to be, there is going to be a permanent installation at the Metropolitan, in the Rockefeller wing.

MS. HADLER: That is wonderful. Were there any, this is beautiful, other works early on that you wanted to donate to the museum?

MR. PERLS: No, not at all. I was --

MS. HADLER: Maybe to establish an artist?

MR. PERLS: No, I was never really interested in giving things to museums because I was working with the things.

MS. HADLER: And you weren't dealing with new artists, so that was not really the question of establishing a reputation.

MR. PERLS: Well, I mean what new artists I had the museums certainly didn't want.

MS. HADLER: Do you feel, let's see how to word this, that dealers make an impact on the way art is sold in general?

MR. PERLS: I didn't quite get this question.

MS. HADLER: Do you feel -- how would you characterize the impact of dealers on the art world?

MR. PERLS: I think it is enormously important when you -- because you weren't alive but when you think of the kinds of things that Americans were interested in buying in the 1920s and '30s, except for a few very, very exceptional collectors who had European connections, important European connections.

MS. HADLER: What were they buying? They weren't buying social realism, that was also --

MR. PERLS: No, that came later.

MS. HADLER: What would they be buying in [inaudible] neoclassicism?

MR. PERLS: They basically were buying Victorian kind of crap.

MS. HADLER: Yeah, yeah. So finish your train, I am sorry I interrupted it.

MR. PERLS: No, I mean it was, it was the dealers who came in the 1930s who were people like Curt Valentin who first brought modern art to the attention of the few people who might be willing to look and buy, and even fewer would buy. And that it was quite a struggle. I mean, I didn't struggle as much as Curt Valentin because I prefer not to struggle and to show things that were easy enough for people --

MS. HADLER: To sell.

MR. PERLS: -- to like those things, Utrillo, -- and Marie Laurencin.

MS. HADLER: Right.

MR. PERLS: But the reason I didn't, I mean I couldn't sell the Picassos and the Légers in those days, was that there were no buyers for them.

MS. HADLER: During the war, some people have felt during WWII that because the Nazis liked realism, it became easier to sell or make the American public interested in abstraction; did you find that?

MR. PERLS: No. I don't think, I don't think the Nazi's taste in art had anything to do with what the people here would do.

MS. HADLER: Or the critical reception of people that -- maybe critics who had been in favor of realism found themselves --

MR. PERLS: There was really very little criticism. Where there were exhibitions, the critic of the New York Times would come and would write up the show very tired and very puzzled, "it was a very nice show, welcoming," but never say anything interesting.

MS. HADLER: So you never really had much involvement with critics?

MR. PERLS: All the time, all the time, because we had new exhibitions once a month and the critics would come and we would talk. I was very polite to all the critics. And I think they all liked me in a way because, I don't know, of the information I have for them, which made it easy for them to write.

MS. HADLER: I mean, it is really quite wonderful that you had the vision to like so much of this art so early on, and I suppose a lot of it comes --

MR. PERLS: Well, it didn't do me any good to, in those days, to like Léger because from a dealer's point of view it was useless.

MS. HADLER: But, so you didn't feel that there was a change given in the public due to the varying different political climates of the -- in any way -- purchasing.

MR. PERLS: I don't think so. No, it just takes time for new things to work themselves into the consciousness of the public. The public doesn't go -- I mean, later on when the art world became a very different kind of a thing, when the art world became very glamorous, people would go out and look for new things, look for new impressions. But that was not true in the 1930s and '40s.

MS. HADLER: Well, I guess that is -- is there anything else that you wanted to put? Just one more question, in the '40s when Kootz who had basically been showing a lot of the Americans began to also show the Europeans, did you have any thoughts about that?

MR. PERLS: Who did?

MS. HADLER: Samuel Kootz.

MR. PERLS: Kootz, oh.

MS. HADLER: He had been, yeah, he had been showing the Americans. Then he started to show Americans and Europeans.

MR. PERLS: I -- yes, I thought he was very brave, yes.

MS. HADLER: To do that?

MR. PERLS: Yes.

MS. HADLER: And did you feel that was a good thing? He was in a way bringing American culture, early American culture together with this European avant-garde.

MR. PERLS: Right, right. Yeah, he did a very good -- he, his wife was the creative one in the combination. And -- but they did a marvelous job together. So did Janis by the way.

MS. HADLER: Yes, Sidney Janis did that too, that's right.

MR. PERLS: Yeah, sure. He, she again, the wife was very important in that combination and did a lot of collecting, they did a lot of collecting in the very, very early days of things which nobody else would buy. And then slowly but surely came from collector, became dealer.

MS. HADLER: And that none of this over the years, you never wanted or never grew interested at all in American modernism and things happening here: Pollock, De Kooning.

MR. PERLS: No, I don't know. I had plenty to do with what I was doing, no.

MS. HADLER: And now, decades later have you grown at all interested or open to it?

MR. PERLS: I think De Kooning is perfectly all right, and I think he is still a painter of the old group.

MS. HADLER: Yes, well Gorky too, no?

MR. PERLS: Well, Gorky was not very talented as far as I am concerned, but De Kooning was.

MS. HADLER: But -- was.

MR. PERLS: But, as far as all the others are concerned, it is not for me, no.

MS. HADLER: It just never -- and you never wanted to, well you did have Calder together with European --

MR. PERLS: Well Calder, you see, bridged Europe and the United States the way I myself did, because Calder worked for years in Paris. And his roots are very largely in Paris. And Calder and Miró had been close friends forever since the 1920s. And -- that fit in beautifully.

MS. HADLER: And Archipenko, who you showed, lived here.

MR. PERLS: Well, Archipenko was essentially a European artist.

MS. HADLER: Yeah.

MR. PERLS: He was, he was a cubist.

MS. HADLER: Yes.

MR. PERLS: So that worked in very well.

MS. HADLER: Yes. You have no interest in the Russian avant-garde either?

MR. PERLS: You can only do so much. If you scatter yourself then you are finished.

MS. HADLER: So you kept in with certain artists and a certain direction.

MR. PERLS: That's right.

MS. HADLER: And did a wonderful job. I mean --

MR. PERLS: Well, I mean you see sooner or later you become an expert in those few artists you specialize in. And such as Modigliani unfortunately, there has been no one in the whole world anymore who knows a Modigliani from another Modigliani.

MS. HADLER: So downstairs the secretary said something to me about a whole new cache of drawings. We'll have to see them.

MR. PERLS: Right.

MS. HADLER: What about women artists other than Marie Laurencin did you ever show any of the women artists; Sonia Delaunay?

MR. PERLS: No, I didn't.

MS. HADLER: You didn't show cubists either.

MR. PERLS: I still don't think she is very talented either. I mean, she took what there was to take from -- and didn't do much with it.

MS. HADLER: Or even Suzanne Valadon, if you are showing Utrillo.

MR. PERLS: Oh, well Suzanne Valadon is a very, very nice draftsman. She did some lovely drawings, but it was not very interesting to me.

MS. HADLER: Well, thank you very much.

MR. PERLS: Okay, you are very welcome.

[End of recording.]

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