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Oral history interview with Juliette Hays,
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Contact Information

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Juliette Hays on July 28, 1982. The interview took place in Long Island, New York, and was conducted by Dore Ashton for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, as part of the Archives of American Art's *Mark Rothko and His Times* oral history project, with funding provided by the Mark Rothko Foundation.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

DORE ASHTON: Long Island on July 28, 1982. Now, Mrs. Hays, I wanted to ask, I didn't know something about your husband's later reputation. I know something about his work through Latin American literature. I don't know what kind of a writer he was in 1935 when you met.

JULIETTE HAYS: He was a poet. He was also working on a novel. In 1935 I think you should be aware of the turmoil in all the young people's lives because of the Depression. There were limits to what was available so we relied on each other.

MS. ASHTON: How did you happen to meet Mark?

MRS. HAYS: I met him because there was a Yale man who, strangely enough, was a mathematician who had been a classmate of we're talking about Marcus now, right?

MS. ASHTON: Right.

MRS. HAYS: He and Marcus knew each other from Yale. My husband and I had already manifested to him that we were very aware of art. And I think it was out of our kind of curiosity that he was proud that he knew a painter.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, I understand.

MRS. HAYS: And he said, "I'd like you to meet a classmate of mine from Yale." Of course, it was quite a few years later. Now I'd also like to tell you that the mathematician and all of us were in a sense alert to the new movements, believe me, in what was going on at that time which was definitely socially and politically oriented. And I have no doubt if we were growing up then, we too might have been (Indistinguishable).

MS. ASHTON: Were you from the.?

MRS. HAYS: (Inaudible)

MS. ASHTON: I didn't know that. I studied in Europe. I should say that my own situation (Inaudible).

MRS. HAYS: Well, I wouldn't say did or did not abandon principles. I'd like you to correct that, that notion of yours; because I think we were very sensitive to the demands on us as people. Now we felt, and I still do and he did to the end, we could always help someone, you know? And essentially it was a one-to-one basis. However, I have told my children that I am proud I marched even though I was in private industry. And we both sang "books not bullets." And I still have not changed my mind.

MS. ASHTON: Well, the reason that I mention it at all is, as far as I gather, Mark did mention certainly to me a number of times his youth when he considered himself a radical. And he also mentioned to me as well as many other people as having been excited as a child by an involvement (indistinguishable).

MRS. HAYS: But that was when we were all too young and we were actually outside of it. The issue when we met Mark was not really that. He thought Gropper was a cartoonist and we said that you should be sympathetic to a man who is expressing something from our side. And he might allow a little bit of that. However, he was the one who really--and I'm thankful to him for it--really made me aware of the lack of art in Joe Jones and Benton and that school.

MS. ASHTON: Did he speak to you about people he admired? Was he very much at that time, for instance, interested in Max Weber?

MRS. HAYS: Well, he'd already studied with Weber. Weber was behind him. I don't think that relationship was very long, do you?

MS. ASHTON: I think he was impressed for several years but that was long before you met him.

MRS. HAYS: By '35 Mark was no longer a student. And I can remember the very first time we went to call on Mark. He lived in a little brownstone. It wasn't a little apartment really for two people because it was a nice floor through kind of thing. And he chatted a bit, mostly about this. now I remember this mathematician's last name was Lev and I cannot remember his first name. Because, in a sense Lev was our political mentor, you see. He point blank said, "We want to know what kind of paintings you do?" And I think he was brilliant because he brought it up and Mark would have to say "Would you like to see my work?" I remember being bowled over really because, coming from art history, which was my background, he did not yet fit. Do you know what I'm saying?

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MRS. HAYS: He was much looser, and I'll show you the things which illustrate that which we subsequently acquired. There was an attitude in his work that you just felt so good about, the only way I want to put it. Now I think it's rare when an artist makes me feel good and at the same time has his own identity. And that is the thing I felt about Mark's work from the very beginning. He was a thing unto himself, annihilating other influences which we can all see, but I think that's not important.

MS. ASHTON: I would guess that he would have been attracted to you and your husband precisely because you were not painters and had been writers.

MRS. HAYS: Yes, I think that had a good deal to do with it. Also, you see, I was designing then so I had questions that in my own way I was probing him about because my approach had always been organic. I studied with people who came from the Bauhaus.

MS. ASHTON: He hated the Bauhaus.

MRS. HAYS: Well, he didn't hate them then. He didn't hate them then because in truth there was very little known about the people from the Bauhaus. It wasn't until much later when Gropius became established that it was recognized here, the school. He was not averse to Corbusier at that time. He was interested in cleaning things up. And I think those things showed early. I mean that's why he would get so mad at Joe Jones, you see.

MS. ASHTON: If he were attracted to your husband-of course your husband was a man of letters and literature-did you like to discuss literature with him?

MRS. HAYS: We talked about books occasionally but truthfully we all sat around and you don't remember those conversations. You enjoy them. You laugh a lot. You deny. You disagree. You agree.

MS. ASHTON: You saw Mark as someone who enjoyed himself and laughed a lot?

MRS. HAYS: Well, we all did together. You have to realize the sense of alienation and isolation that young people felt at that time. Unless you understand that, you're not going to get the quality of life at that time. There was also a great deal of political discussion, you must remember, at that time. And Mark was.see, I've been conditioned to Mark. Marcus in those days was very perturbed about whether or not joining a group was going to make him change his art and would he lose his identity. He was very, very aware of I, Marcus Rothkowitz. He and I used to get into what we thought were practical discussions. And it would be, for instance, the question of going to galleries and letting directors see his work. And you felt as if he had run up against a wall, where the art dealers knew brand names-of course, it's true today; I suppose it's been a fact of life-and really were not looking at what he was doing because..

MS. ASHTON: What about J. B. Neumann at that time? Wasn't he interested in Mark?

MRS. HAYS: You know, I don't remember him at all being involved with Mark. Or, during that period, I can't think of any shows because this was after The Ten, you see, and I think they were all floating around. Also, he was teaching. You know, he taught in a Jewish parochial school a few days a week to keep going.

MS. ASHTON: Did he like teaching there, do you think?

MRS. HAYS: It was interesting. Just prior to his early period in the middle '60's, he started doing.that was when he went into swirls and very free floating lines. I remember him saying to me, "I've been watching what the children are doing." He was a curious teacher. He wanted them to do what they did, but when we first met him I didn't have the feeling he was looking at what they were doing. But when he went into that very loose period was when he said to me, "I've been looking at what the children are doing." I have to tell you something which was typical of Mark. As I told you there was always this constant revival of discussion about the political scene. At some point, Tamaris, the dancer, had a Federal Works pilot project company. Of course, the dancers were

always getting it worse in the neck than the writers or the painters. They were doing a performance in a theater down from the Waldorf Astoria. I can't remember whether it was on West 44th or West 45th. And they were threatened with closing the dance project. So they decided after the performance they would be staging a sit-in. Did you ever hear about this?

MS. ASHTON: No.

MRS. HAYS: Well, word went out through all the projects-dancers, writers, artists (now this I thought was another aspect of Marcus)-that there would be the sit-in. After the performance, they would ask the audience would they sit with them. And outside all the other people from the different projects would assemble. Well, we came there to be available as soon as the theater was emptying out, and it was definitely determined by all people coming after should not attempt to go into the theater. So mostly there were writers and some dancers outside and we were marching back and forth. Naturally, there must have been some slogans, but we were just people. I would say by this time we had several hundred people out there. We looked back (at least I did) to Broadway. And suddenly coming around the corner, these banners appeared. They were Artist Union banners and Marcus was carrying a banner and he was on the line.

MS. ASHTON: I see now that he did do that.

MRS. HAYS: But it was a creative issue. It was not a political issue. You always had to remember that about Marcus.

MS. ASHTON: Yes. You said when you were speaking about the later period, '39-'40, you mentioned to me before that you and your husband were interested in the American Indians.. Was Mark interested..?

MRS. HAYS: Oh, we were not at all involved at that point in time.

MS. ASHTON: But what about him? Do you know how he felt about that?

MRS. HAYS: No, we never discussed it. The only time we discussed Indians at all was when we came back from a long stay in Mexico. And I had found archaeology and went absolutely mad about the artifacts and about folk art. By that time, that was 1939, and that was my first exposure outside of the United States. Up until then, anything I knew about anything going outside of this country was only from museums and study.

MS. ASHTON: Was he interested?

MRS. HAYS: Yes. I'll never forget, we brought him back a Waco (Phonetic). I don't even remember what it was but it was actually quite true to form when you stop and think. And we talked about the design and everything. I want to tell you something else about Mark refusing to show when I had my shop. After I closed my shop and I already had one child-and that was why I closed my shop, because I was taking time out to have a family-he and a few of the other boys came over. Would I run a gallery for them? He had obviously a certain respect for my stripping off my mask, where they felt I could do justice to them as artists because I had a very viable approach. If I was going to do a gallery, I said, you have to have evenings constantly where artists and the public came and spoke to each other so that the public might learn how to look at a painting.

MS. ASHTON: Was he in favor of that?

MRS. HAYS: Well, he came to our house to get me.

MS. ASHTON: You mentioned before that you would sit around and laugh. Who were the people who were sitting around? Were they painters?

MRS. HAYS: Well, it varied. It varied.

MS. ASHTON: What was the character of the social circle that you moved in?

MRS. HAYS: Well, it could be Adolf and Esther, the Gottliebs were there. Or it could be Clyfford Still who was there. He had a way of bringing in his friends. It was quite a busy time for us in a way. We had become interested in the artists. And there were always poets arriving and it was kind of fun for us because we sort of lived a life of open house and we'd have people floating through all the time.

MS. ASHTON: Did any of these people outside the circle.? I think Jim Leshafen who I met because I was studying with Moses Soyler who was a friend of his, people outside that circle, were they also.? I always had the feeling that Mark probably did know several sets of people and was friendly with people. I know he was friendly with Ben Zion and nobody ever mentions Ben Zion, but I know that he saw a lot of him.

MRS. HAYS: Oh, sure. I can remember being at their house and Ben Zion was there and Harris was there. Well, I

can see faces but I can't recall names.

MS. ASHTON: Did he (Inaudible)?

MRS. HAYS: No, I don't think so. I would suspect that Marcus would not have had felt much kinship. You have to realize. I don't know how I can suggest to you that he was an ebullient, romantic artist. And that's why I think he and I got along so well. We never became philosophical together, but I sensed this think in him and I was never allowed to be practical and try and talk about their worries. You know, they were often. Money was really tight with them, because curiously enough, as I look back mostly they came to our house for dinner or we took them out to dinner. And we went to their house quite often but it wasn't for dinner. So they felt the pinch. But I think Marcus was thinking about getting out of himself what was in him and putting it on paper or canvas. And he just did not want his head to get clogged up. It's the only word I can think of. Because anytime we came there, we constantly cared about getting into that studio and seeing what else was coming out of the garden. (Indistinguishable)

MS. ASHTON: (Inaudible)

MRS. HAYS: Yes, frankly Edith reflected some of the things he would say but I don't think intellectually that. Well, I know she didn't because you, of course, knew that she for a short time had a go at being a jewelry designer and became, both of them became—it was a great state of crisis. Edith was demanding more time that he should give her because she was beginning to make money. And this is something we sort of hacked about. Of course, Hays and I had an entirely different kind of relationship. I think partially that came from our own backgrounds where somehow you will fathom through on the money but it's more important to develop your bent. Truthfully I could not be sympathetic with the idea of Marcus stopping to paint so Edith could become a successful jewelry manufacturer, which in essence was that kind of thing. It was very trying, really very trying. There was that kind of tension because this was plain and here was the beginning of something happening. By this time, that was in about 1941 I guess, because I can remember his coming to see us. We were living in Connecticut that summer. This doesn't exactly relate to Mark but to us. There were two terribly old ladies living in the house next door and we were friendly enough with them. They knew that I was having an artist visiting for the weekend and asked if they could come that night. They'd love to meet an artist. I said, "Why certainly. I'm sure he'd like to meet you." Before dinner the three of us got a thing on and we were singing and raising holy hell in general. None of us could sing, but we were singing away and all and in the midst of this he brought up the fact that being in the jewelry business didn't give you time for any fun. And I could see that before that we had sort of had a surface of what had been going and that is why he came to see us alone. But to go back a few years before that, he had a wonderful way of deciding that summer was his. What they would do. Did he ever tell you about their safaris?

MS. ASHTON: No.

MRS. HAYS: They would pick up an old car, put their bicycles on top, fill it up with whatever things they thought they might need for three months, and they would take off to go somewhere. Usually they would find a place. I think it was around Lake Placid and they'd find something to live in for about \$50 or \$100 a month. You could do it in those days. And they would spend the summer and he would, I think, do a lot of work.

MS. ASHTON: It was like camping.

MRS. HAYS: Well, they didn't camp. They'd actually rent a house.

MS. ASHTON: Do you think he liked the outdoors and the country?

MRS. HAYS: I think he liked the quality of the comfort of being out of a hot, miserable city. Also, I don't think he minded having a swim. And they did take their bicycles, so he did like to bike. This particular time, and they had one it several times when they'd take off—we would be somewhere in the country—they'd come and spend the weekend with us before they took off. And they'd always arrive in one of these—we'd wonder how they made it—kind of tin cans, you know. And they were off, and he was always sure they'd find a place. And they always did. And then, come the end of summer, we'd be back in town and we'd get together again.

MS. ASHTON: Did your relationship continue much the same through the years?

MRS. HAYS: Until he got married.

MS. ASHTON: To Mel?

MRS. HAYS: Yes. Then it was another thing. I think he was frankly self-conscious about the marriage at first and later, of course. Well, I can remember quite a number of years later, it was in the '60's, we were at their house and this photographer brought Mel over and introduced her. And after that he brought her around quite a bit. Let's face it, she was a small town girl who had just come to the city and she was very quiet. I think the

conversations were over her head. She, you know, we were not the only ones. She preferred that he remove himself from people who knew him in connection with Edith. It didn't matter that we were no longer seeing Edith. It's said to say but there was nothing about Edith that made you want to continue.

MS. ASHTON: (Inaudible)

MRS. HAYS: In 1940, no. We were not here. We were living in Fairfield, Connecticut.

MS. ASHTON: Were you here when he rented the house in.?

MRS. HAYS: We were, but that summer. I think it was 1951 or '52. Those summers I was living in the city. I think we ran into him briefly once or twice. But we were no longer in touch. You see, there was a period when we were constantly in touch.

MS. ASHTON: This would be about a decade, from 1935 to 1945?

MRS. HAYS: I think it might have gone on a little longer than that.

MS. ASHTON: Were you, for instance, privy to his getting into the Art of this Century Gallery?

MRS. HAYS: Not at all, not at all, and you can thank Buffy Johnson for that. After he was divorced, after Edith, he took I believe it was a summer and went out to Hollywood because he had a cousin who was a drama coach. And it was through her that he met people who were acting. I know he met Ruthie Ford who was Charlie Ford's sister. Charlie was a poet. He knew Ruthie through Charlie. When he came back from California, he tells us that he had met Buffy and he had finally met Ruth. As a matter of fact, that was how we became friends with Buffy, who was a very charming, lively young woman who entertained and managed to combine interesting people. I think Buffy was enormously appreciative. She didn't paint that way at all you know. I mean it was her eye in that direction. But I think she realized that Mark.. How can I convince you that there was no depression in Mark in those days? I never saw him in a, no, I would never define him as ever feeling at that time depressed. I tell you he was a genius and he was a force. I wish I could remember the things that made me feel he was brilliant.

MS. ASHTON: You felt that way about his conversation as well, I gather?

MRS. HAYS: I never partitioned him. I felt it was all one thing. Also, I understood his absolute desire that he was hoping that people would know "I'm a genius."

MS. ASHTON: Do you think he knew it, he was sure of it at that time?

MRS. HAYS: Oh, I think so because he had such a fertile mind. He was kicking everything around. I'd like to get back to a facet of Mark in his summer vacation that will surprise you. It was the summer of 1940; I remember that distinctly because I was very pregnant. We had decided we'd have one jaunt. My child was not due until the fall, and we would go and call on different friends who were up north. We were sort of sitting that summer out in a little house in New City. It was okay, but we knew that Martha Graham was up in Bennington and we had friends up there, a costume designer who was a good friend of mine, and Charlie Ford TcheliEFF were up north. There were a whole gang of people we thought it would be fun to go see. Finally, we were going up to Booth Bay Harbor to meet other friends. When I was a small child, Booth Bay Harbor was the leading artists' colony that anyone hearing about an artists' colony knew about. So I wanted to go up there and see what was going on. They had this house-I'm sure it was Lake Placid-and we got there. They had already written to us and said they had room for us if we'd like to come for a visit. We got there and Edith's sister was there. We went out for a walk that night, and Mark was in a white heat because the sister had come because she wanted to get away from her husband and she was going to have a tryst with another man. And Mark's reaction was that it was completely wrong-you know, you just didn't do that kind of thing. Now you wouldn't think it about Mark, but he was very disconcerted by that. There was a consistency in his. This is part of his consistency, you know. Of course, I don't know what happened between him and Mel but it certainly became a downward thing. The wedding was cute. We all brought the liquor and they managed to provide the food. He was sharing a brownstone with Boris Margo and his wife at that time. Did you know that?

MS. ASHTON: (Inaudible)

MRS. HAYS: It forced him. but you know, that's one of the things my husband and I were always saying before he died. It seems that everything that was fun had happened 30 or 40 years ago. He was rather an entertaining man. I have a very nice painting of his, which he said (it's very severe), which he said was my personality.

MS. ASHTON: (Inaudible)

MRS. HAYS: Yes, we did. That was. when did Art of this Century open?

MS. ASHTON: (Indistinguishable)

MRS. HAYS: Yes, we did. Of course, we were seeing him at that time. And it was Buffy who I feel was instrumental in getting him to meet those French refugees. They weren't necessarily French, but they all came from France.

MS. ASHTON: Was he interested in that?

MRS. HAYS: About having a show?

MS. ASHTON: No. About European émigrés who had names.

MRS. HAYS: Well, Mark, remember, was a young painter. And he was certainly aware that they were doing something. And I think he had eyes that he saw what was happening. And whether or not he had much contact with them or not, I really don't know.

MS. ASHTON: There's another interesting question here which comes up with people who knew him. Some people felt that he was overwhelmed by Clyfford Still, that Clyfford Still influenced him. We see this as a point of view or position or attitude toward the public and critics.

MRS. HAYS: This is a new kind of question you're asking me. But I can remember Still coming with Marcus quite often. Quite often we got together. And Still was very quiet. But on the other hand, every once in a while he would break out with anger about an uninformed public. That isn't the words he used.

MS. ASHTON: (Inaudible) Was Mark as serious about those things?

MRS. HAYS: Yes indeed, indeed. You know, we went and picketed the Modern with Mark and we went and we picketed when there was that terrible thing, the Diego Rivera murals. They were the concerns of artists, weren't they?

MS. ASHTON: They were, but Still I think was an even more..

MRS. HAYS: They had a right to feel the public was ignorant.

MS. ASHTON: But do you feel Still wasn't the dominant person in his life in that period?

MRS. HAYS: Oh, I don't think so. I think Mark was aware of all of this. You know, Mark had an awfully good brain. He was just not like some artists who paint fantasies and never read a book, couldn't articulate, didn't know how to react, but they would run, run, run to make it.

MS. ASHTON: Well, a lot of people who speak about Mark speak about him as though he didn't read any books. In my experience he certainly had a lot of ideas and read books.

MRS. HAYS: He did. Does anyone know what happened to the manuscript that he.?

MS. ASHTON: No. If I knew that, I would be very happy.

MRS. HAYS: Does Katie have any idea?

[END OF TAPE]

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