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Oral history interview with Julian E. Levi,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Julian Levi on October 7, 1968. The interview took place in New York City, and was conducted by Colette Roberts for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

COLETTE ROBERTS: Colette Roberts interviewing Julian Levi in his studio at 282 West Fourth Street. Now, we'll try to put a little order in the information and we'll try to make it biographical first and then get into the work afterwards. So, if you don't mind it would be wonderful to just retrace. Were you born in New York?

JULIAN LEVI: I was born in New York, yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Not so many people are.

JULIAN LEVI: No, it's a rare thing probably.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And did you live long in the neighborhood where you were born?

JULIAN LEVI: No, I think just a very short time. I was born in Yorkville.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh. That's where I live now.

JULIAN LEVI: Oh, really? I got out first.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And actually you were raised in New York too?

JULIAN LEVI: No, I grew up mostly in Philadelphia.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And did you go through the regular routine of high school and that kind of thing?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Or did you get into art earlier?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, I got in quite early. I was a high school dropout, as a matter of fact. I went to the art school in Philadelphia. Of the Pennsylvania Academy.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Was Mr. Frazer there already?

JULIAN LEVI: No, no, this was long before Mr. Frazer, John Andrew Meyers was the Director. I must say a very austere man. Not nearly as nice as Mr. Frazer.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And what were the trends at that time in the Academy itself?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, it was quite academic as a matter of fact. It was like all the other schools in the United States at the period. Do you want me to tell you the year?

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, since we are trying to be precise.

JULIAN LEVI: It was 1917 when I went there.

COLETTE ROBERTS: You were born actually in 1900?

JULIAN LEVI: In 1900. That's correct.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That was quite early for art school.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, it was. And remember this is four years after the Armory Show. But the schools were still very academic. But there were a few men teaching in the Pennsylvania Academy at that time who were very ----

COLETTE ROBERTS: Were you at all aware of the Armory Show?

JULIAN LEVI: We never heard a word about it.

COLETTE ROBERTS: You didn't?

JULIAN LEVI: No. Not till long after.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I'm jumping a little bit but that takes me to Walter Pach. Did you know Walter?

JULIAN LEVI: Oh, yes, I knew him slightly but that was much later, of course.

COLETTE ROBERTS: You lived in Philadelphia until about what time?

JULIAN LEVI: I lived in Philadelphia until 1932.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I see. Until the start of the Depression - no, it wasn't the start of the Depression.

JULIAN LEVI: No, it was the depth of the Depression.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That's right. And at that time were you on the Project?

JULIAN LEVI: I was in 1934 I believe. 1934, 1935, 1936 in that period I was on the Project with all my friends. And it was very exciting.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And when you say "all your friends" may I ask who they were at that time?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, they were, let's see, Francis Criss, Louis Ribak, Gottlieb, Stuart Davis, they are too numerous to mention because everybody ----

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, everybody was there. But were you working particularly on the Project with somebody? Or were you all by yourself on your own project?

JULIAN LEVI: I was on the so-called Easel Painting Project which meant that I did things by myself.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I see. Now did you do things for post offices and that kind of thing?

JULIAN LEVI: No, no, that was the mural project. That was quite different. I was an easel painter.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I see. Well, some had to shift at that time into both.

JULIAN LEVI: That's right. No, I, during the time, I ----

COLETTE ROBERTS: You had the privilege of remaining what you were.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Which was perfectly marvelous because we were supplied with what was at that time an adequate amount of money to live on. I don't know how we managed. But we did. And we were given materials very freely, paints and brushes. For instance, I still have a few of the brushes that were given to me when I was on the Project. They were the best in quality. All the materials were very good. And, we were expected to turn in one canvas every six weeks I believe, or two watercolors. I've forgotten exactly but we were given a great deal of freedom of scope.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And when it came to easel painting did you have a way of exhibiting them at that time?

JULIAN LEVI: There were exhibits arranged by the Projects at these little museums that they were setting up throughout the country, and at public-supported institutions like jails and schools and so on. You're probably familiar with all the mechanics of the Project.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, I am, except that, strangely enough, of all the people who I've interviewed who were on the Project none was working alone. There were always two or three working on a form of mural thing. So this is the first time that I've encountered the pure support, shall we say.

JULIAN LEVI: Well, they found a great deal of use apparently for the work that was produced by the easel painters because they found America completely barren of pictures once you got outside of big cities and this was marvelous in a way for these ----

COLETTE ROBERTS: So they were circulated through the various states?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. It was an extraordinary thing that in the depth of a depression people were given access to certain cultural things that were never provided before.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But at that time do you remember what kind of credo in art prevailed? I mean you have

been pretty constant in your own preoccupation, but as a wave, shall we say, what was prevalent?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, American Scene was very much prevalent in that period. I don't think I was particularly influenced by it. I would say, as a matter of fact, I was antagonistic in a way to the rawer aspects of it as projected by Mr. Craven and so forth.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Would it be fair to say, as some have said, that you were very close to the French School at that time emotionally?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, I think that's true.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Because I know it's very often said about your work at that time. Who in the School of Paris did you feel at all attracted to?

JULIAN LEVI: Strangely enough I was attracted to certain painters whose work I don't think I've reflected in any way. Which is kind of ambiguous. But men like Leger who I admired enormously. But I don't think there's a trace of influence.

COLETTE ROBERTS: No, I would have thought more Matisse than Leger.

JULIAN LEVI: Matisse, I feel is great. But I don't feel any great warmth about his -----

COLETTE ROBERTS: That's interesting. Because certainly you see no trace of Leger in your work.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. I know these things are very odd. Picasso of course everybody, I think, was touched by.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Did you go to France at that time at all?

JULIAN LEVI: Not at that time, no. I had returned from France in 1927.

COLETTE ROBERTS: So you were in France during the 20s?

JULIAN LEVI: That's correct, yes. I went in 1920.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, those were, of course, the booming years.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, they certainly were.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Do you have any special memories of the scene there at that time that you'd like to tell us about? I mean people you've met - Americans, French, Russian.

JULIAN LEVI: Well, Pascin was a man I knew quite well and associated with considerably in Paris at that time. I was very much younger than he. He had a real entourage, as you probably know.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Was he with Hermine David at that time?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Were they married? I've never been quite clear about that.

JULIAN LEVI: I think they probably were. But this was in the transition period between Hermine and Lucy.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I see. But then you knew him when he was with Hermine?

JULIAN LEVI: With Hermine. That's correct. Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I think she retired into a convent or something.

JULIAN LEVI: Something like that, yes. She was a very gifted graphic artist.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. I remember those very black outlines.

JULIAN LEVI: She was very good.

COLETTE ROBERTS: There were two women like that who were known in those days, as I remember. Do you remember Alika?

JULIAN LEVI: Oh, sure. I certainly do.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Alika was the wife of Marcoussis.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: She had those romans capitanees. Do you remember?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That's something one forgets. I wonder, I think some people might want to fish it out again some time.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. That was a great period in many ways, you know, on many levels. Man Ray was there of course. He's always been there I think. I saw him last summer and he looked just the same after forty years.

COLETTE ROBERTS: He looks the same now.

JULIAN LEVI: Doesn't he? He's a remarkable man.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I had a tape with him not long ago. And he seemed just exactly the same.

JULIAN LEVI: He looks the same. And he's almost eighty I think, isn't he? He must be.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Probably, yes. He was quite struck by the death of Duchamp I know.

JULIAN LEVI: Oh, I imagine so. Because they were very close and there are so few left of that particular group.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But going back to Pascin and Hermine David, at that time they were in very difficult circumstances, were they not?

JULIAN LEVI: He was getting out of it. As you know, he was a very complex man. And I think the dealers were selling almost everything he gave them.

COLETTE ROBERTS: At that time already?

JULIAN LEVI: At that time, yes. It was a very good period for painters.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Did you exhibit with any special group in Paris when you were there?

JULIAN LEVI: I exhibited in the Salon d'Automne of 1921 and 1922 and that was the avant garde salon of the period.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. But it stopped being avant garde about six years later. You're referring to the Salon d'Automne of 1921, 1922. That was the time when things were happening.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Did you later exhibit in the Independents and the Surindependents?

JULIAN LEVI: No, I was here then, I was back in the States by that time.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Actually, how long did you stay in Paris?

JULIAN LEVI: Actually in the years between 1920 and 1927 I was there five years. In other words, I was back here for a year once, and once for about 4 or 5 months.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Were you already married then?

JULIAN LEVI: No. I couldn't have traveled so freely if I had been married.

COLETTE ROBERTS: It makes a difference, one or two, on expenses. I was wondering about that period, of the people that you saw there. This was, I think, before the time of people like Ferren.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. They mostly came in the 30's, that group.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Ferren, I think, probably a little earlier than 1930 but not the early 20's.

JULIAN LEVI: No. This was the late 20's perhaps and early 30's. It's funny, there's a real generation gap there. I presume there's only about a 5-year difference in our ages but in relation to the development of our careers there's quite a gap.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That's right. When you came back to this country you had a few good years before the Depression?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, they weren't good for anybody. No American painter was regarded with any great affection it seems to me, in those years. The country was rather prosperous, I imagine, but I don't think we shared in it at all.

COLETTE ROBERTS: When did you get with the Downtown Gallery? When did Mrs. Halpert discover you?

JULIAN LEVI: In 1940.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, that was much later. So you actually didn't have a gallery then in New York?

JULIAN LEVI: No. I had no thoughts of one at the time. First, on the Project I was doing all sorts of things to earn a living. I was designing textiles. I was doing whatever I could.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And I was wondering about another thing. When you came back to this country and you had to make a living, you were not able to teach at first, were you?

JULIAN LEVI: No. There were very few teaching opportunities during this period.

COLETTE ROBERTS: When would you situate in time, the time when painters were able to teach? I mean, in other words, to make a living in their profession?

JULIAN LEVI: By teaching, you mean? Well, of course during the Projects ...

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, they taught in the Projects?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Certain artists were given teaching assignments.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I see. So that was really probably the start?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: In the early 40's, I remember, all the painters of abstract expressionism used to meet very often, you remember?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And they were all looking for jobs, hoping for jobs. But there was nothing much.

JULIAN LEVI: There were very few opportunities, yes. Except for private classes some of the painters arranged. Francis Criss had a private class for a number of years. He did very well. He was an extremely good, competent teacher.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Now going back to Philadelphia, was Watkins teaching anywhere around at that time?

JULIAN LEVI: No, he was a student when I was a student. He and Abe Rattner and myself - they're a little bit older than I am but they had been in World War I so their period of schooling had been interrupted for a year or two. So they came back to school and we were all students at the same time.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, yes, of course. You were mentioning Abe and I was wondering if you knew Henry Miller through Abe at this time?

JULIAN LEVI: Oh, yes, I knew him slightly. And I knew him through Abe, as a matter of fact.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, because everybody who knew Abe at that time would know Miller.

JULIAN LEVI: Strangely enough, I never met Miller in France. Abe brought him here one night when he was in the States in the 40's.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, Miller was not in France I think when you were. It was later.

JULIAN LEVI: He was in Greece, I believe.

COLETTE ROBERTS: No, Greece was much later in his life. I think he was in France perhaps in 1928 but not before. I may be mistaken.

JULIAN LEVI: But Abe brought him here one night and we had a very pleasant time. We sat up all night eating and drinking.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, that's the tradition. What were your reactions to him as a human being?

JULIAN LEVI: Oh, he was a very warm, very pleasant, a very mild-appearing man.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, I know. When you think of what he writes. As a matter of fact, did you meet him before his books?

JULIAN LEVI: No, I think I knew the books before I met him.

COLETTE ROBERTS: So therefore it must have been a surprise?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, it was.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Did you travel extensively, as Rattner did, through the States?

JULIAN LEVI: He and Henry Miller either were just going on a trip all over the States or they had just returned, I've forgotten which. No. No, I didn't.

COLETTE ROBERTS: You traveled abroad more than in this country?

JULIAN LEVI: Much more, curiously enough.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And when you started to teach, aside from the Project, where was it?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, I didn't teach on the Project. I first started at the Art Students League.

COLETTE ROBERTS: You're still there, aren't you?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. They invited me to come there in 1945. And the New School in 1946.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And you're still there too?

JULIAN LEVI: I'm still there but I'm not teaching. I'm directing the workshops department. I've been doing too much teaching and I had to give it up this year.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, you want to be a little freer.

JULIAN LEVI: Right.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But you also taught at the Pennsylvania Academy at one point?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. I still do. I've just been doing that for the past five years I think.

COLETTE ROBERTS: When you started to teach, I'd like to have a little information on your approach to teaching. When you first started to teach, how did you do it and what is your attitude now toward teaching?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, that's a little difficult to answer. I remember when I started I was scared to death. And it seemed to me that it seemed so formidable, the idea of teaching, that I followed pretty much the methods, as I remembered them, of the people with whom I'd studied, those whom I considered very good at the time. Because in those days at the Pennsylvania Academy there was a great deal of confusion between the modernists and the academic people who were very much in control. But there were a couple of rebels who were very unpopular with the administration there.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And who were they?

JULIAN LEVI: Arthur Carles was one, Henry McCarter. And two or three others who had been in contact with what was going on in Europe. And there were deep antagonisms actually. The instructors apparently in one party didn't speak to the others. And then the student body was equally divided. Although, as I say, the preponderance of power was on the side of the academicians.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I was also thinking of your many activities as a juror. You've always been very tolerant in your understanding of forms of art, and I was just wondering how you sorted the - well, shall we say, the good from the bad? What appeals to you most in the work of art that you see from an unknown - you know nothing about the person, nothing about his background and all that, just the painting has to speak to you in one way or another - now what is the language that you exchange most with?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, I think you use a happy expression there when you say "it speaks to you" because this is actually, I think, what a painting of quality and of great merit does exactly. It communicates something to you very rapidly. You don't have to search for what it is. In juring, I think to recognize the bad is very, very easy. This you do at a glimpse. There are things that can readily be discarded. Most everybody will agree. Nobody will defend a bad picture. I don't know what the criterion is but there's usually agreement on what's lousy, what's bad. Juries seldom quarrel about that. It's in grading the different degrees of excellence I think that makes the horse race. Curiously enough, I think I've never seen a dishonest or a prejudiced jury that took stubborn and arbitrary stands on a form of art that wasn't more or less admired by the jury as a whole. It was simply a matter I think of placing the superiority of the value of one painter over that of another where disagreements arise.

COLETTE ROBERTS: At the same time what do you feel about Duchamp's attitude that one cannot judge one's time, so that really one can only go so far in judging what is current?

JULIAN LEVI: Oh, I agree with him thoroughly. It's like trying to write today's history today. It will be a hundred years perhaps before today's history can be written. You're really in the same position that a journalist is in in reporting what's occurring and reacting as sensitively as he can to it. You can't be very definitive about it.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Right. So that really, this quality of excellence which we practically all agree about, when we find it, is really sort of an equation between the individual talent and the time?

JULIAN LEVI: That's right.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I mean at some point they have to communicate something to one another?

JULIAN LEVI: That's true. And there are certain currents, as you say, in the air that makes this communication possible. In other words, we all speak a certain language at a given moment. We're not speaking Elizabethan English now, although we might understand it if we heard it.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Now among those various juries that you've been sitting on do you remember certain of the jurors with whom you had the greatest communication?

JULIAN LEVI: Let me think. There have been a great many. I've been on juries with Franklin Watkins who is an extremely able and fair minded juror; Stephen Greene is a very sharp and perceptive juror; Isabel Bishop is excellent. I'm only mentioning the good ones. Philip Evergood is very exuberant.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That surprises me because I would not have thought he could be objective somehow.

JULIAN LEVI: Well, I think in the context of working with 4 or 5 other people you have to suppress a little of subjective attitudes I think and accommodate yourself more or less to the other jurors.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. What do you feel about the trends at present?

JULIAN LEVI: That's a big question.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Maybe we should save it for when we get to talk about the work. We referred to your coming to New York to live in New York after you left Philadelphia. Where did you live then?

JULIAN LEVI: I lived here in the Village within a block of where I am living now, on West 11th Street.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Was it also a house like this one?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, it was. And landlords were very generous. It was in the depth of the Depression. Rents were very low and when you couldn't pay your rent the landlord hardly considered it worth his while to try to get it. Because everybody else was in the same boat and there were no other prospect for renting.

COLETTE ROBERTS: It was no time to be a landlord. It's not like now.

JULIAN LEVI: It was no time to be a landlord, exactly.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Speaking of the project, did you get to know Joe di Martini at that time?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, I knew him slightly.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And did you have some kind of comradeship?

JULIAN LEVI: No, I never knew him particularly well. But there was a real feeling of comradeship on the Projects. Curiously enough, we stood in line to get our checks at a building - I forget just where it was - on Sixth Avenue in

the upper twenties. And we'd all be broke by the time - it was every week I guess - so we'd promptly go to a bar on the corner of 26th or 27th and Sixth Avenue that cashed our checks for us, I think they took a small fee of a dime or something.

COLETTE ROBERTS: You know, that's where he lives now - on 27th right off Sixth.

JULIAN LEVI: That's interesting. So we'd all meet there and have a few beers and a sandwich. This was our big blowout of the week usually. We'd get this big sum of money and feel very wealthy for a few hours. And we'd discuss things and discuss the Projects and so forth.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Of course di Martini has always sort of been reluctant to talk which sometimes makes it hard for him, I think. It is too bad because he's a good painter.

JULIAN LEVI: Oh, I think so.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And he has sort of slipped out of the picture.

JULIAN LEVI: He and Jean Liberte were very good friends for many years. They had great communication I imagine.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Liberte is dead, isn't he?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. A few years ago.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, that's right. I wanted to have Joe on the program and I choose to interview him, as we are old friends. But he didn't want to. And it's funny. Because we're such old friends I would have thought that it would come naturally in conversation.

JULIAN LEVI: Well, it's not an easy thing to do, as you can see. There are certain people who can't.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, that's it.

JULIAN LEVI: I find it painful.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, but you teach, so it's not that painful. I mean people who teach have sort of a habit of voicing their ideas.

JULIAN LEVI: Well, they're opinionated.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Did you get to know personally Bill Hayter - Stanley Hayter?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, I knew him in France. I also saw him occasionally here in the States when he was here.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Did you have any print work done at the Atelier 17?

JULIAN LEVI: No, I didn't. At that time I wasn't interested in graphics at all. But I sublet a studio from Bill Hayter at that time in Paris.

COLETTE ROBERTS: On Rue Boissonade?

JULIAN LEVI: No. This was on Rue du Moulin Vert.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Ah! Yes. He is now in Rue Boissonade.

JULIAN LEVI: Well, I think he had his class in Rue Boissonade too, his atelier where he taught. Yes. 17 Rue Boissonade. Well, he was here in the 40's, late 40's and early 50's. I saw him here then.

COLETTE ROBERTS: He must have left in the mid-50's.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But that is quite a different time. I was thinking of the people that you know, since we try to retrace a little bit of history of art through each one of these.

JULIAN LEVI: Well, in the early period in France, in Paris it seems to me that I associated more with writers. And I think this was just by coincidence. Bob Coates was in Paris at that time.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, yes?

JULIAN LEVI: He was there for, I guess, about the same length of time that I was. And Malcolm Cowley. And of course Sandy Calder was there. We were quite good friends. In fact, you won't believe this, but we looked so much alike at that time that we were frequently mistaken for one another.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Is that so!

JULIAN LEVI: He was thinner and I was fatter.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And you probably didn't have a mustache then?

JULIAN LEVI: I did. But he had a huge mustache as well.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, he had one too?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I was thinking also of the surrealist period then. Did you get acquainted with many of the surrealists there?

JULIAN LEVI: Let's see. Well, Breton.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Did you know Breton?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, but these are people I knew very slightly.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Through the Dome?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, the Dome and the Rotonde were the only cafes at that time. And, as I say, Man Ray, and Zwart? ---

COLETTE ROBERTS: Did you get to know Max Ernst at any time?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, I knew Max, not terribly well. I got to know him better over here one summer when he was married to Dorothea. We played chess all summer long on the beach at Amagansett. This was in 1945 I guess, or 1946.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I thought he was married still to Peggy at that time?

JULIAN LEVI: No. No.

COLETTE ROBERTS: When was it with Peggy - was it 1942?

JULIAN LEVI: It must have been around then.

COLETTE ROBERTS: 1942, yes. Because I remember going to the parties when they were together. Going through the surrealist period - oh, maybe you knew in Paris the surrealist poet Minna Lloyd?

JULIAN LEVI: No, I never did.

COLETTE ROBERTS: It was more or less at the same time.

JULIAN LEVI: The name I knew very well.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, she was the mother-in-law at that time of Julien Levy.

JULIAN LEVI: Well, I knew Julien very well, of course, and his wife very well, who was ----

COLETTE ROBERTS: Joyla.

JULIAN LEVI: Joy. And in fact the summer I speak of in Amagansett - this goes into the late 40's I think - he and Max had a house together in Amagansett with their wives. We were nearby and we met every day on the beach to play chess.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Not to swim but to play chess.

JULIAN LEVI: Well, we'd jump in the ocean to cool off every half hour. They're both excellent and superb chess players.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Speaking of chess players you must have played with Duchamp too?

JULIAN LEVI: No, never. No, Julien and Max were just willing to play with me - I was so inferior - because they were bored playing with each other. They were so good they had become accustomed to each other's moves and games so they just used me as what we call a stumblebum.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Julien Levy's wife after Joyla I can't remember her name.

JULIAN LEVI: Her name is Muriel Streeter.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That's right. I forgot what she was doing. I knew she had an activity too.

JULIAN LEVI: Well, she worked at Julien's gallery of course. And she paints very well herself I think. She lives right nearby and we see her occasionally.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, they are in Bridgewater or something like that.

JULIAN LEVI: No, Julien is in Bridgewater. But Muriel - they're divorced of course - both remarried.

COLETTE ROBERTS: No - actually I didn't mean her - I meant his new wife.

JULIAN LEVI: I've never met her. Her name is Jean the same as my wife's name. There are two Julien Levy's and with two Jeans for wives.

COLETTE ROBERTS: At that period in Paris were you at all acquainted with the magazines they were publishing at that time? Because you speak French and you read French.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Were there any magazines that you felt were particularly important at the time that come back through your mind?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. L'Art Nouveau was very much alive.

COLETTE ROBERTS: There was also Forme.

JULIAN LEVI: Forme came later.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Wasn't there some - no - L'Assiette Aubeurre was when?

JULIAN LEVI: I think that was much earlier.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. That was really Dada time, more or less, wasn't it?

JULIAN LEVI: In the teens I think it was.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, it was around the Dadaist period, I think, if I remember. 1915 or something like that.

JULIAN LEVI: I think it was around that period, yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: They were collector's items by the time I grew up. There were very few numbers issued anyway.

JULIAN LEVI: There were a couple of American expatriate publications that were quite good. Broom was one. It ran for 3 or 4 years. It published early work of Hemingway and Kay Boyle and so forth.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, really? And who was the publisher of Broom?

JULIAN LEVI: A man named Harold Loeb. I believe he was wealthy. These had to be subsidized, magazines of this sort. And there was another magazine called Gargoyle that I was loosely connected with. It was the same sort, I guess, a peurile, pretentious little magazine but it seemed appropriate in the period.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I was wondering about another thing now, which is your interest in - because after all it's not by accident that you were very much with writers. Do you do any writing yourself?

JULIAN LEVI: I've done a little bit. Not very much. And it's not to be taken very seriously.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Were you ever interested in art criticism per se?

JULIAN LEVI: Not really. Whatever I've done I found a torture. It's a painful thing to write. There's no joy in it at

all.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Were you doing creative writing?

JULIAN LEVI: No, no. The only writing I've done had been sort of quasi-critical.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I see. But you didn't do it for any magazines? I mean you were not assigned to any given job on that order?

JULIAN LEVI: No.

COLETTE ROBERTS: They were free lance articles?

JULIAN LEVI: Right. Exactly.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But do you remember what would be certain titles?

JULIAN LEVI: The Magazine of Art did a series in the 40's - I don't know whether you've seen them. They were rather interesting.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I don't think I have.

JULIAN LEVI: They were autobiographical articles by American artists. They did a series of about 20. They're very revealing and quite interesting.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But don't you think that whenever one writes an autobiography there's so much editing that goes into it because there are things people never want to reveal that you cannot completely trust it? I wonder if it can be more trusted than anybody else's biography on you?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, no, I don't think so. But nobody ever tells everything.

COLETTE ROBERTS: It's the style and the free association that would be revealing.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. I don't think anybody falsifies things. I think many things are withheld naturally for privacy or whatever. And other people involved.

COLETTE ROBERTS: So this is in the Magazine of Art. And that was what period.

JULIAN LEVI: I think in about 1942. It was published in Washington I believe. Forbes Watson was the editor.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes! I remember now.

JULIAN LEVI: It was a very glossy, beautifully printed magazine.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And quite thick if I remember. Like Vogue.

JULIAN LEVI: That's right. Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And who wrote their biographies in it. Do you have any recollection?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Well, the Soyers. Which was, as I remember, a very interesting one because it was done as a whole family.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Like a saga.

JULIAN LEVI: Right. And Watkins did one. I actually forget, it's so many years ago, who all the others were.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. It's a good many years ago. As a matter of fact, the saga is still true, I think - I interviewed Raphael Soyer after his retrospective at the Whitney and this came out very much so, a sort of "we" quality in his interview.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. He thinks of himself in terms of the group, the family.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I had that feeling very much. When did you write? Because I know about your writing by those books that you didn't mention. One is called Modern Art.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But there's another one.

JULIAN LEVI: No, No, there's not. This is the one and only.

COLETTE ROBERTS: It's the one that's called Introduction ... ?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. No, it was that subtitle and Introduction was - well, it says precisely what it means. It didn't pretend to be a ----

COLETTE ROBERTS: What was your special project? I mean did somebody ask you knowing the way you think that they want you to do a sort of short explanation of the articulation of the history of art?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, the publisher asked me.

COLETTE ROBERTS: He sought you for it?

JULIAN LEVI: That's right. And I presume that recommendation must have come from some other source, among artists perhaps, since this publisher I think didn't know a thing about what was going on in the modern art world.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I like the title of a chapter very much. You started at Cezanne more or less?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I mean that's modern art starting at Cezanne?

JULIAN LEVI: That's an arbitrary start I suppose.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, but you had to start somewhere. But I notice that that chapter is called "The Form Givers," which I think is a very fitting title. And the Form Givers are really - well, as I see, you have Cezanne.

JULIAN LEVI: Cezanne and Seurat.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But I was very much interested to see that you placed the Impressionists afterwards in this particular sequence. And I was wondering what was the real reason for it?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, you see, in this book you probably notice I didn't do it chronologically in any case.

COLETTE ROBERTS: No, that's why it's very special. Yes.

JULIAN LEVI: I made groupings of certain categories that I thought made up the total picture of what modern art was and how it developed.

COLETTE ROBERTS: So that really in The Form Givers you put everything that took place before the discovery, for instance, of the exotic and primitive?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Of course that did come rather late in history.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, I was looking at this before coming here and I was thinking that it had an extremely real eye appeal for somebody who would want to have a quick look, just sort of an experience of what is.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Well, that was its intention. You know, it's a small book and it's based largely on - whatever appeal it has is based on its illustrations. It's sort of like a tabloid view of an introduction to the subject.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And I like your position between geometry and calligraphy because some of it could belong to both. But you really made a definite delineation - I mean really limited the field there. Of course the Cubists are in the geometry tradition.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I was very much interested in this. Do you know if this book, for instance, is particularly purchased in art stores, or is it all over?

JULIAN LEVI: No. Apparently it's only in art stores and in university book shops. It's not in the regular trade book stores.

COLETTE ROBERTS: It's really people who want it visually rather than historically?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Exactly. And then apparently it's bought by university students who are taking courses in art.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Now when you speak of the artist's environment, and that takes us to environmental

painting and sculpture as it exists so widely in our time, what is your reaction to it as a whole?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, I think it's a very determining element in an artist's whole life. I mean since he doesn't exist in a vacuum used broadly the term can mean every association the artist has with the world, human and concrete and whatever.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Now it seems this takes us back to this question about the trends today. What is your reaction to the art of the 60's? Because that makes it possible to hook it up after your Modern Art, An Introduction?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, I find a lot of it fairly stimulating. I find a great deal of it boring. That's the most damning word I can think of. And frequently the so-called minimal sculpture, for instance, bores me. I get no sense of gratification or aesthetic pleasure out of it. I wouldn't condemn it. Any activity that an artist does as far as I'm concerned has validity. The very fact that he does it.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. It's an engagement.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Now I think there are certain things that are so thin and so barren that they bore me. I find no nourishment at all in a great deal of it, as I said.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, but when I was speaking of the art of the 60's I was thinking perhaps more of the art of assemblage and its growing into other things. Of course the art of assemblage started much earlier than one thinks.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Much earlier.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But if one thinks of the show called The Art of Assemblage which was in the early 60's which was encompassing Pop art as well as some of the optical effects ----

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. I think that some of the things that were done in that particular show were very diverting and entertaining. Some are quite excellent. In other words, I'm always sort of beaten into a corner where I have to admit that a very talented artist paints or sculpts good works of art in whatever form.

COLETTE ROBERTS: In whatever form.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Really the trends matter very little.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Really you know the second and third string people in any group it seems to me are not very interesting.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Going back to your biography, who would you consider have been your gods in a museum? That is to say when you started to go to the museums when you were from seventeen on.

JULIAN LEVI: I would say Masaccio, Uccello. I think those perhaps would be the two museum gods.

COLETTE ROBERTS: You mean a sort of constant that you have kept referring to in your mind through the years?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. There have been others who somehow have declined in my esteem, like El Greco, for instance. I still think El Greco is a great painter but he doesn't interest me any more in the sense that Uccello does.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I understand that, yes. It doesn't keep its mystery as much as the others do.

JULIAN LEVI: Right.

COLETTE ROBERTS: For instance, when you started to paint were you attracted to some of the 19th century painters? I mean people like Corot, let's say.

JULIAN LEVI: I didn't really know him except as a painter of sentimental trees. I wasn't aware of his painterly work or his painterly qualities at that time. I would say Winslow Homer was somewhat of a hero simply because the Pennsylvania Academy owned that magnificent one of The Fox in the Snow, the fox and the hawks.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. That fox reminds me of a painting by Wyeth. What are your reactions to Wyeth?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, I'd rather not say. I think he's all right in his place. I think he's magnificently skillful craftsman and with this heavy layer of the illustrator and his topical interest seems to be not very universal. I find it tedious. He's very local, very limited. And, I think to most painters now, irritating because he's so successful.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. It's incredible.

JULIAN LEVI: I think that's very irritating.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But I think that every time people have a chance to take literature instead of painting they will always pick up literature.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, I think there's no question of it. And also they have enormous admiration for skill. They love to watch jugglers, I think, and acrobats.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That's right. That's what you find they have also for the new media, whatever goes into plastics or metal or something intrigues them no end.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. I think this is really the motivating thing; that is, this great admiration for Wyeth is really for the craft.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, I'm sure that's true. Yes. But those are the constants. But let's put it this way - for instance, I remember that - well, Mark Tobey, for instance, before he really got to know modern art was interested in calendar painting which happened to be the only thing he had in the Middle West.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. I think I grew up in a more civilized environment perhaps but I first became familiar with pictures, let's say, through calendars, magazine covers and so on before I was ever in a museum.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Do you think it would be fair to say that perhaps it's immaterial for an artist, the quality of his interest, providing he has tremendous involvement?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. I think so. He might start out being attracted to things that are rather inferior in grade and quality. But I think with viewing his taste gets refined and it eventually discards all the rubbish he admired when he was young.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That's right. But maybe what is important is his fervor, his real passion for whatever it is.

JULIAN LEVI: I think so. And this is not only works of art but it's all kinds of visual phenomena which is around you all the same and you become very observant.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Right. Because ultimately it all goes back to a sensitivity of the eye, so that gets refined like anything else.

JULIAN LEVI: Exactly.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But it first has to exist.

JULIAN LEVI: Exactly. And as it becomes refined you reject more and more.

COLETTE ROBERTS: How do you start your students, for instance?

JULIAN LEVI: I have no particular method really. I have a prejudice in favor of their learning something about drawing. I think drawing is a real discipline and extremely important. For the rest - you asked me before if I had any method or any theory about teaching. And I would say the only thing that I have is a feeling that I'm a coach rather than a teacher.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, yes. Well, that shows you're a good teacher.

JULIAN LEVI: Well, I don't know. I'm simply applying greater experience to the same problems, my own as well as theirs, helping them to work them out and offer direction.

COLETTE ROBERTS: You really want to open doors for them rather than present a closed wall of a sort.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. That expresses it very well. Yes. No dogmas.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Did you encounter certain students that you felt were particularly gifted or interesting to - I mean what is the quality of exchange you require or hope to have with the student?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, you know, it's like your general associations. Some are very sympathetic or automatic, there's some chemical response to certain people who, let's say, are on the same wave length or with whom you can communicate very readily. And talent itself, I think, is such a spectacular thing that as an instructor, I think, you reach out more or less for the students with great talent and you probably give them much more of yourself than you do those less talented. And they're rather rare. They don't happen very often.

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COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. Do you have any such memory of a student that - well, surprised you from the start, so to speak?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, Leonard Baskin is one. He was really a sculptor before I ever knew him, before he came to the New School; he was a very well-trained and accomplished sculptor. But he drew in my class at the New School and he was sensational as a student.

COLETTE ROBERTS: His drawings are much more interesting to me than his sculpture.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, I find that they are.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Because his drawings are so full of life.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: There's something extraordinary about them. But among the painters?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, there's a young Haitian painter, now resident in Paris who studied at the Art Students League. He came here from Haiti. His name is Herve Telemaque.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Telemaque? That's a marvelous name.

JULIAN LEVI: It's a typical Haitian name. They took heroic names. He's very much in the surrealist group in Paris now. He's very well thought of there. He lives by his painting in Paris. He has a dealer there.

COLETTE ROBERTS: He doesn't ever come to the States?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, I believe he'll return perhaps permanently. I have seen him on several trips to France and he's in a very sort of mixed-up position really. Being colored makes the situation just as unhappy in a way in France as in the United States, even though the French are much more tolerant. He's often said to me that it's all right - the French show no prejudice whatsoever against the Negro except they treat us like children, like fascinating, interesting children. He says it's a typical Colonial attitude.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, I see. I never thought of it. But it's quite true.

JULIAN LEVI: No, I never would have thought of it. But it hurts him professionally.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But I think it's mostly because Haitian work, as a rule, is primitive.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. But his is highly sophisticated.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Which gallery is he with?

JULIAN LEVI: Fels. On the Right Bank. It's a very good gallery.

COLETTE ROBERTS: You were speaking of those trips to Paris of a more recent date. How often have you gone back since?

JULIAN LEVI: Only twice. I was there in 1965 and stayed just a summer, I think four months.

COLETTE ROBERTS: In Paris proper?

JULIAN LEVI: We traveled quite a bit. We got a little car and drove down into the Dordogne, which is marvelous country. And then this past year I was in Paris for about six months and again we went down to the Dordogne and traveled quite a bit around La Rochelle and up the west coast into Normandy and Brittany. We did it very leisurely. And I visited some places that I knew many years ago like Honfleur in Normandy which is still charming and wonderful.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, yes. It's beautiful. It's unspoiled really.

JULIAN LEVI: It's unspoiled. It smells the same and everything about it is the same.

COLETTE ROBERTS: The thing I think that kept it was the rain. People don't want to go there quite as much now.

JULIAN LEVI: That's true, yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: The rain has kept it free of trouble.

JULIAN LEVI: Occasionally they have a good summer.

COLETTE ROBERTS: People who want to make sure they have sun go to the South. But in the Dordogne, did you go also near the Lot area?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. We were down in the Lot area. Once we visited somebody in a little town there perched on the side of one of the most formidable looking cliffs I've ever seen in my life. It's most frightening driving there. Oh, it's intensely dramatic. You go through one little tunnel after another there where the road is pierced through the mountains.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Which part were you at particularly?

JULIAN LEVI: We were around the Beqiers area.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh yes. All the grottoes.

JULIAN LEVI: And the roads are very narrow and people drive very fast, as you know.

COLETTE ROBERTS: You don't happen to know the place where Bissiere was?

JULIAN LEVI: No.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That's a beautiful area, too.

JULIAN LEVI: Is that in that general area?

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. It's in the Lot near Gourdon. It's a much more temperate landscape. It is not arid like that. There are some nice poplars around and that kind of thing.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. And they grow some good grapes in that area.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. That's right.

JULIAN LEVI: That's the only part of the Dordogne, I think, that has vineyards.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Did you stay at all in Paris this time?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, we stayed there about four months I would say.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Did you have somebody's studio to be able to paint?

JULIAN LEVI: No, I was working at a lithographer's.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, with Mourlot?

JULIAN LEVI: No. With a much smaller shop and many people think better, run by a Dane. Give me time and I'll think of his name.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. Well, there is one also on the Right Bank near the Marais.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. I know that one.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I've forgotten his name. I know Le Point Cardinal used him quite a bit.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. A lot of the artists with the LeFebre Gallery, the Cobra group - a lot of them work in that one near the Marais. I know that studio. Peter Bramsen is the name of the lithographer. He's become very well-liked by the artists in Paris who are working seriously.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, it pays to replace Mourlot because it's impossible.

JULIAN LEVI: There's great pressure there because it's a commercial pressure really.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But they had a studio - you found a studio for yourself during that time?

JULIAN LEVI: No, I worked right in the lithographer's shop. I went there every day. We have a little hotel that we have; it's sort of an apartment with a small kitchen and several rooms. So I even did some work there.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That's marvelous! Where are such things?

JULIAN LEVI: The L'Aiglon.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Ah! Yes, I know, Montparnasse. It's on the Boulevard Raspail near the Dome.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. A lot of painters stay there. Adolph Dehn always stayed there. And Fred Castellon. And beautiful stewardesses from the Japanese Airlines.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That's right. Well, there's a Chinese restaurant just downstairs from it, or practically. We were mentioning the various galleries that you have been with - how did you get discovered by Edith Halpert?

JULIAN LEVI: I think probably through Kuniyoshi.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Through the League, really, indirectly? Through your friendship with him?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, this was before I was at the League. He, I think, mentioned me to Edith and I think she had seen a canvas or two at the Whitney and at the World's Fair exhibit of 1939. The Metropolitan bought the picture there. I guess I had come to her attention in that way. And Kuniyoshi brought her here one evening. And this is how it all started.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And then you went with Alan for a while after that?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. It was for 10 or 12 years I was with him.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But Alan went much more surrealist, I would think, than Edith.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, he did. I don't want to go into the details. But he changed his whole method of dealing. It was an entirely different approach. His interest narrowed very much. I think, as a matter of fact, that it was a good gallery. He wasn't a pleasant person but, the gallery itself I thought was run very scrupulously and very well.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, yes. I'm sure of that. As a matter of fact, the story of galleries in our time is a real problem.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Because the collector is so snobbish that you have to go to a certain location, to a certain type of presentation. And to pay such rents is such a horror for people. It's absurd. I mean it shouldn't have to be.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. But it's all become - I wouldn't say all - but mostly it's become a kind of super merchandising business in which the artist plays a sort of very minor part.

COLETTE ROBERTS: It's really very difficult because I have had that experience I must say myself. I've had some students from NYU who bought things in the non-profit gallery that I ran but they never would have bought anything much about three or four hundred - I mean those I'm referring to (not that other people didn't) but I'm thinking of those - and now at Sachs the same people buy for three thousand without thinking of it.

JULIAN LEVI: I know that. It's extraordinary.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That's the difference between walls.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And of course one must say that the same people are slowly getting familiarized with a field that they knew nothing about. I mean when I started them at NYU they knew very little.

JULIAN LEVI: That's true.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And now they've got very interested and they follow various things and so they do that. But just the same it's really the thing that certain walls make a big difference in the response of the public.

JULIAN LEVI: Oh, of course, yes. Because it looks like a kind of theatrical presentation.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That's about the size of it. What do you feel about the role of museums as they have evolved through the years? Don't you feel that actually their action has been very important for the young collectors? I mean they've gotten interested in many things that they didn't even suspect existed before.

JULIAN LEVI: That's true, yes. I don't know whether this has all been to the benefit of art but it's been very stimulating. Let's put it that way. It has created an enormous interest. You know, we've almost been suffocated with interest.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. It's very difficult to reach a happy medium in those things.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. It puts you on a little bit too much, I think. We hated being neglected and then after we became overwhelmed by too much attention that seemed to be almost as bad. It's disturbing to try to work.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I was wondering about something else. As you've always known writers and contemporary literature - is there any form of writing in our time that attracts you particularly? And before that, maybe I should ask you, were there any books that made a special impression on your youth or even more nature days? I mean things that you felt had a potential imagery that you were interested in?

JULIAN LEVI: I think only one - one writer. That was Joseph Conrad. and this is many years ago. I haven't read anything of Conrad's recently. This is many, many years ago. I think I read everything he wrote.

COLETTE ROBERTS: How would you define this appeal? I mean do you think it's because basically there's certain classic form to his writing with a romantic spirit?

JULIAN LEVI: No. I think the sea, the subject matter itself had a great deal to do with it. And a certain mysticism. And maybe the formal structure of his books, the kind of austerity.

COLETTE ROBERTS: You just mentioned the sea and that brings me to your biography again. You live in East Hampton part of the time?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. At Springs. I bought a house in 1947.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That was the time to do it.

JULIAN LEVI: That was the only time one could afford it.

COLETTE ROBERTS: You were one of the firsters then?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Well, I think Pollock was there a year or two before.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Really? I didn't realize that.

JULIAN LEVI: I think he bought his house in 1945. In Springs.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Because de Kooning got his big mammoth house only recently.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Comparatively recently. But he's been out there for quite a number of years. It's funny there've always been artists in that general region.

COLETTE ROBERTS: At all times?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, in the general region of the Hamptons, I would say from the 19th century on. A lot of the middle 19th century painters were there.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Who would you name as such?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, Chase and Thomas Moran.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, yes.

JULIAN LEVI: Childe Hassam. He was a great man.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That's right. Which Hampton was it?

JULIAN LEVI: He was in East Hampton.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And in Springs there's Ferren, I know, because I've visited him.

JULIAN LEVI: Ferren and Lassaw. Marca-Relli was there but he's moved to East Hampton. Quite a number.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Where is Gottlieb?

JULIAN LEVI: He's in East Hampton.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, Springs isn't that far.

JULIAN LEVI: It's about five miles.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. Are you on the part that's near that little cove?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, that's the Acabonic Harbor. Really it's a little peak that comes in there from Gardner's Bay.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That's right. But there are no waves there. It's like a lake somehow.

JULIAN LEVI: It's still water, yes. But there are tides of course.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Are you on that side?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. We face out on that. You've been there of course?

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, I've been there.

JULIAN LEVI: You know where the church is? And there's a little town hall there.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I'm not that familiar with it but I do see that special sort of curved landscape around that water.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Well, we look out on that.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That's a marvelous place. That's a marvelous place for ducks, too.

JULIAN LEVI: Oh, yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: You live there most of the summer, don't you?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, when we're here, more than that. We usually go there in April and come back here when I teach and stay until November.

COLETTE ROBERTS: At present you're there then?

JULIAN LEVI: Right. I just came in yesterday.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Just for the purpose of your courses and things?

JULIAN LEVI: Right.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Are you planning to go out of the country soon?

JULIAN LEVI: I'm not planning. If we go abroad again, from now on, I think it'll always be short trips. I have not great desire - I think my wife has - to spend longer periods abroad.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, to live is really quite expensive in Paris.

JULIAN LEVI: Oh, very. Terribly.

COLETTE ROBERTS: L'Aiglon is not a cheap place to be.

JULIAN LEVI: No. No place is. Italy was just as bad.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Really? I would have thought Italy could be a little cheaper.

JULIAN LEVI: No. We were shocked at the cost of food. We were keeping house there. I was at the American Academy.

COLETTE ROBERTS: So that means Rome, yes.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I didn't know about Rome. But I thought that the prices in Venice, for instance, were fairly reasonable compared to Paris.

JULIAN LEVI: Oh, sure. It struck us as about the same.

COLETTE ROBERTS: By the way, how was your reaction to the American Academy? Who was there when you were there? You taught there this summer?

JULIAN LEVI: No, I was there for eight months. I was the painter in residence. And Jack Zajac was there. He's a sculptor.

COLETTE ROBERTS: The one from the West Coast?

JULIAN LEVI: I guess so - or Minnesota or some place. Maybe you're right. I think he does come from the West Coast. He shows at the Alan Gallery. He's quite a good sculptor. Very lively. And that was all. Naturally there were archaeologists and architects.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And as artist in residence do you have all the Americans who come abroad as students?

JULIAN LEVI: No, you have the winners of the Rome Prize. And there are only four altogether.

COLETTE ROBERTS: So that's all you had to teach?

JULIAN LEVI: I didn't teach. They were supposed to be there working independently on their own projects. And the artists in residence simply were to make themselves available, when and if wanted. Which is very seldom.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Osler was there as artist in residence too as I remember.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, about 8 or 9 years ago.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But I think he went back.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, the residents are always welcome to return. There's lots of space there really. And visitors are welcome if they've been associated with the academy.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Like MacDowell, in other words?

JULIAN LEVI: In a way, yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Speaking of MacDowell, did you ever go there?

JULIAN LEVI: I've recommended quite a number of people. But I've never been there.

COLETTE ROBERTS: It's really quite an experience. It's a marvelous thing that it exists.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Oh, things like Yaddo and MacDowell are great. They're always too far away from the sea for many. In summer it always seems to me I want to be on the water.

COLETTE ROBERTS: There's another thing. And that is you feel - well, for creative work for myself, I feel that a cafe is more conducive to it than MacDowell. But to put your notes in order it's marvelous.

JULIAN LEVI: I would think so. I think I would find it impossible to work under the conditions there.

COLETTE ROBERTS: It's marvelous to just sort out and do all the kind of work where you need that sort of peace.

JULIAN LEVI: I would think so.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But, for the stimulation of creation, I don't think that it will come in an institution.

JULIAN LEVI: It wouldn't seem to me that it would.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But some painters can work there well.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, I presume so. Painters are very adaptable people, you know. They can work at night when they have to.

COLETTE ROBERTS: It's nice because you have such big studios there.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Incidentally, the studio I had in Rome was tremendous. I'll never have another studio like that the rest of my life. It was thirty feet high and huge.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Too big?

JULIAN LEVI: It was almost too big, yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: When you are accustomed to working in more modest size.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I think that we have really covered quite a bit of the field and you may be tired now.

JULIAN LEVI: I'd be willing to quit at any moment and we'll have a drink, but it's entirely up to you.

COLETTE ROBERTS: We can perhaps stop for a few minutes.

[Machine turned off for a break]

COLETTE ROBERTS: You see, it's funny when you speak without the tape. Those are very useful bits of information because after all we didn't speak of your galleries as we should really. Could you give me the dates when you were with Edith?

JULIAN LEVI: 1940 to about 1951 or 1952. That's not it exactly but ---

COLETTE ROBERTS: And Alan [Gallery]?

JULIAN LEVI: Then Alan for about 5 years. And then I was with Nordness. They're very much the same group who were once with Edith. There was a real sort of progression.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. I remember that Edith had a special interest in Nordness so as to find a house for her people.

JULIAN LEVI: Many people thought so anyhow. Many people thought she was even interested in - had a professional interest or commercial interest in Nordness. Which wasn't true.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Which wasn't true, no. But I think, just emotionally, she wanted that people she had handled had a roof.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, I suppose that's putting it very kindly. That's probably it. I don't think they were in need of Edith to be able to get a roof. She had a guilty conscience. Let's put it that way. Is this on the tape?

COLETTE ROBERTS: It's all right. It doesn't matter. Yes, she probably had a guilty conscience. And also I think from a strict interest as a dealer because whenever you've done something for a man you want the thing to keep on going. And if people get a little too slow at finding their gallery because they are too difficult and do not want this or that. In the meantime they lose momentum so I think that ---

JULIAN LEVI: I sound bitter about Edith which I don't at all feel.

COLETTE ROBERTS: No, no, you're just being clear minded. I understand. And now you're with the Rehn Gallery?

JULIAN LEVI: That's right, yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Are you going to have a one-man show?

JULIAN LEVI: I am if I ever accumulate enough work.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, they are big walls.

JULIAN LEVI: They're enormous walls.

COLETTE ROBERTS: After all it's the former Kootz Gallery, so those are huge walls.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. They're formidable, but it's an attractive gallery. It's not frightening like the Marlborough.

COLETTE ROBERTS: No, it's a very nice gallery.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: In fact I miss those openings which were almost an east Hampton crowd.

JULIAN LEVI: At Kootz, yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Really, you could see all your friends from way back.

JULIAN LEVI: That's right.

COLETTE ROBERTS: It went way beyond Kootz. It was really a sort of gathering of all - of the (quote) "art world" (unquote) to a certain extent.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, his gallery was exciting. Nobody can dispute that. And he had a certain warmth about - he had a kind of nice human relationship with the artists. Even though I was never with him but I ---

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, he was in the tradition of the European galleries.

JULIAN LEVI: Right.

COLETTE ROBERTS: It was really very much that way. I saw him the other day. He came to Sachs with Greenberg and so we had a nice exchange. But going back now to the scene as a whole, what is your reaction to Pop art, for instance, as a historian and as an aesthetician both?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, as I said before, I think some of it is fascinating and it's highly entertaining. It's hard to designate really - to define really the Pop artists. I think, for instance, of Saul Steinberg as being one of our greatest Pop artists.

COLETTE ROBERTS: He's pre-Pop.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, pre-Pop I mean. He didn't wait for the School to form.

COLETTE ROBERTS: No, but, I'm very much interested in what you just said because I have a feeling that in a way Pop art is in the true American tradition because basically American art of many years had been in the cartoons and in the drawings much more than in painting.

JULIAN LEVI: That's true.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And that is really of the storytelling.

JULIAN LEVI: That's right. For instance, I think Lindner is an excellent painter.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, he's a marvelous painter.

JULIAN LEVI: He's in the Pop some place. That's why I think these categories are always a little bit false. Because it's part surrealism. It's part Pop. It's just good painting.

COLETTE ROBERTS: You know, incidentally, it's Lindner - I say that because you're interested in her - who was influential in getting Jennett Lam in Eckstrom.

JULIAN LEVI: Oh, really? That's interesting.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. Because he liked one of her shows. I say that because I know you've always invited her paintings for the various juries you had.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. They never seemed to work very well but I was hoping that one would be bought.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Anyway, it always was invited by you. And also this other man I had who you always invited - Robert Reed. And I think that among the Negro artists he was perhaps the greatest sensitivity.

JULIAN LEVI: Well, I think he's in many ways most imaginative and very sophisticated in his work.

COLETTE ROBERTS: How does he compare with Telemaque, for instance?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, I think they're comparable. Telemaque has been very much influenced by Pop as Pop is known and interpreted now in Europe with deadpan, hard edge figures, part construction.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, I see. Letters also? I mean with raised letters?

JULIAN LEVI: Oh, yes. And pieces of furniture constructed right into the canvases. In other words, almost Happenings on a small scale.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, I see. He must be very good from what you say.

JULIAN LEVI: He's very good. He's very clear minded. Very intelligent. And his work will probably continue to change.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Was he ever shown in this country?

JULIAN LEVI: I think there was one show of Haitian artists that was held here a number of years ago.

COLETTE ROBERTS: In a church, wasn't it?

JULIAN LEVI: That's right. It was in a church uptown some place in the Sixties or Seventies.

COLETTE ROBERTS: In the Seventies, yes.

JULIAN LEVI: It was a mishmash of ---

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. I was so struck by the pure imagery that was quite pleasant but very much on the primitive side.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Well, he's not even part of that really.

COLETTE ROBERTS: He has nothing to do with it from what you say.

JULIAN LEVI: No. He's highly sophisticated.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But can't you bring him to the attention of other people here?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, I've been wanting to. I think I have some of his photographs here which when I find them I'd like to show to you.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, that would be very interesting.

JULIAN LEVI: Of his work of about 3 or 4 years ago. I showed these to Nordness and he became interested in the work. And there was some kind of a mixup in Paris. He couldn't make communications with them and they didn't get together. But I think he would be quite a catch for somebody.

COLETTE ROBERTS: He was a student of yours?

JULIAN LEVI: At the Art Students League. He came there direct from Haiti. He spoke very, very little English, practically none at all. And they sent him to my class because I speak fractured broken French.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, you speak very well.

JULIAN LEVI: No, I don't. But adequate for the job. And within two years or three he spoke English perfectly. And not only that, he expresses himself with grace and he has an enormous vocabulary which he uses with ease. So he'll have no difficulty as far as that's concerned when and if he returns here.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. But when it comes to finding a gallery which has just the right place for somebody and the space for him it's really in the hands of the gods.

JULIAN LEVI: Oh, I know it, yes. Well, for instance, in Paris when I saw him last summer I said Cordier and Eckstrom is the perfect gallery for you. Your work is sort of in their groove and they have lots of space. But he was horrified at the idea, thinking that he would be unacceptable. He knew Cordier, or knew of Cordier - didn't he close his gallery in Paris a number of years ago?

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, that's right. And why did he think he'd be unacceptable?

JULIAN LEVI: I don't know. It was just some kind of inferiority or something.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, Romare Bearden is one of the painters there and so maybe he didn't like the idea that he might be recommended there on the racist level.

JULIAN LEVI: That could be. Sometimes these things are rather complicated. We don't know why.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Maybe that was what he may have felt something. It's strange ---

JULIAN LEVI: Possibly, yes. I don't know. This is as of last summer.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But then every so often you have good luck and it's something that comes just at the proper time.

JULIAN LEVI: Right.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I discovered a real primitive but extraordinary in drawing animals and things not completely by accident since she was a student of mine at NYU. I think she's going to be shown at Betty Parsons in the small drawing section.

JULIAN LEVI: Oh, good. Well, this is the only way things seem to happen in the art world. In other words, it can't be arranged really.

COLETTE ROBERTS: When you first started to show was it in group shows?

JULIAN LEVI: I showed at the Pennsylvania Academy when I was still living in Philadelphia. That was post-student years. The New York Independents, you know, the old Independents, that was in the old Waldorf-Astoria, you know, the old hotel which doesn't exist - which was, I guess at 34th Street. You probably don't remember it.

COLETTE ROBERTS: No. That was before my time.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. The first Independents was there. Or the first few. On the top floor there was sort of a gallery.

COLETTE ROBERTS: So that was the independents? And then did you have anything to do with Illinois and things of that order?

JULIAN LEVI: You mean the University of Illinois, that collection?

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. Because they have that Annual. But you never were an artist in residence there or anything like that?

JULIAN LEVI: No. They bought a picture of mine, I think, the first year of that program.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And among the various shows that you have juried - I'm jumping a little big now - well, you do work with the Academy jury, don't you? The Academy of Arts and Letters?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, the Institute. I do occasionally.

COLETTE ROBERTS: You help them select certain of their shows?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But, also, I knew you had for the Pennsylvania because I remember your coming. But what were the other shows that you were connected with that you have been instrumental in?

JULIAN LEVI: You mean on a jury?

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, jury of selection. Because I always feel that the jury of selection is much more important than the jury of awards.

JULIAN LEVI: Well, it's frequently one and the same jury. Well, the Corcoran ---

COLETTE ROBERTS: You've done the Corcoran?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Indianapolis, Buffalo, Syracuse. I don't know - there are an awful lot. I sort of lose track.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, the reason it seems to me that the selection is more important is because ultimately the awards you have to decide with many people. I mean there will not be an interesting choice of awards if there is not an interesting selection to start with.

JULIAN LEVI: If there's not good material to work with. That's right.

COLETTE ROBERTS: So that's why I always feel it's more important to know who you sit with on the selection somehow.

JULIAN LEVI: Well, it's very frequently the same jury. Particularly on the smaller shows where you can do the whole job in, let's say, two days. Which is rather difficult.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. Since you have such an experience do you feel that a gallery in East Hampton - I know that there is the East Hampton Gallery there.

JULIAN LEVI: In New York.

COLETTE ROBERTS: In New York? But I think he had a place there.

JULIAN LEVI: He did for a while several years ago.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But do you think that it's important for people to show who paints in that area? I mean local shows? Because it seems to me that the painters in East Hampton are so far beyond the audience they would have that there is no need for a gallery there.

JULIAN LEVI: Oh, I agree, I don't think there is. There are several galleries there, not very good ones. There's no real need. There's the Guild Hall which more or less has museum status that puts on a rather good exhibition once a year of a group of the regional artists. Regional meaning really they were all very well-known artists.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, well, that's not the regional in my way of thinking.

JULIAN LEVI: Well, in their context that's what it is. And it's usually a good show. But it's not necessary really. Certainly not for the artists. But it's rather good for the people who come there in the summer.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. That's it.

JULIAN LEVI: It reminds me very much of yesterday's story about the Longchamps restaurant at 79th Street. Did you see it?

COLETTE ROBERTS: No.

JULIAN LEVI: Well, briefly the story is that the owner is remodeling this restaurant. It used to be the restaurant where many of the dealers and many of the people in the art world gathered for lunch. It was a shabby sort of rundown Longchamps. And the owner became very art-conscious and he's closed it now and is remodeling it and arranging it so that he can show exhibitions of pictures there and so forth. And one of the dealers said, "My God, if there's anything we don't want when we go out to lunch is to see art," and he said that arty situations aren't manufactured.

[Interruption]

COLETTE ROBERTS: I wanted to ask you, when you were at the Downtown Gallery who among the people that you met there were close to you? I think Stuart Davis was one of them, wasn't he?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, Stuart Davis was. Niles Spencer. Ben Shahn. Kuniyoshi, of course. Katherine Schmidt, who of recent years has been very much neglected. That was about it. It was a comparatively small group. I think 6 or 7 artists who Edith Halpert considered in her first range. And then as a result of the Projects she had taken on a number of younger artists like Jack Levine and Siporin and so forth who were very chagrined but they occupied a much less position. Which was kind of embarrassing to everybody.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. I was wondering about Davis because it seems that I remember that at the Institute of Arts and Letters you did something when he died.

JULIAN LEVI: Well, it's the custom of the Institute to print an annual book of its procedures in which, oh, I was going to say obituaries, which certainly isn't the word, appreciations are published of artists who died during that current year. And I was asked to do one on Stuart. Which I hesitated doing. But finally I was persuaded. I have it around here some place if you would like me to get it out.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, I would like very much.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: What kind of man was he?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, he was a very strange man indeed. He was extremely reticent, let's say, in small groups; he was an extremely shy man. He could also address a thousand people without feeling any shyness at all. He had great public presence.

COLETTE ROBERTS: In other words, he was closer to ideas than to people?

JULIAN LEVI: Exactly. Except a very, very few people he opened up a little bit. But, let's say, a small party at which 5 or 10 people were present where he felt close to only perhaps 2 or 3 of them he'd close up like a clam and he'd be extremely uncomfortable and ill at ease.

COLETTE ROBERTS: What kind of credo would he advocate? He's close to Cubism no doubt and was at all times, but it's not really the European Cubism. It's closer to the poster which really brings it closer to even the Pop artists of our time in a way.

JULIAN LEVI: Exactly. Naturally I can't speak with any authority about his credo because this is a very personal thing. And he's done a great deal of writing himself, as you know; a great deal of it unpublished. Perhaps the Archives would have it. I think after his first trip to France - his first and only I believe - he was infatuated with Paris. But after two years, I think it was, he felt that was not for him.

COLETTE ROBERTS: When was it about?

JULIAN LEVI: It's hard for me to say. But it was in the late 20's. It was after my period in France. I think it was perhaps 1928, 1929, in that period. His ideas seemed to come in a very curious way, largely through music. You know he was a fanatical jazz enthusiast. Which he followed very closely. This became a very important part of his life. And I would say sensation in, you know, the pure sense. It determined his character. In other words, he sensed things through his ears, through his eyes and he had an extremely keen and analytical mind. But his art didn't proceed in my view from any cerebration.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I was wondering if it would be fair to say that maybe he was one of the first environmental painters?

JULIAN LEVI: I think it's true because he responded so directly to the things that surrounded him. And I regret to say that very few of us - others even saw or were aware of - you know, he was the whole world of mechanics as expressed in American mass production and that sort of thing; the machine. In that way he was very much moved as Leger was by that aspect of ... But he was even much closer to it than Leger was because everything was familiar to him. The sounds, you know, the sounds of the subway, the sounds of the boats on the Hudson River.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That's very interesting. Do you think that it could be said that some of his cutouts - because after all he did with paint what people did later with collage or earlier - but do you think that in a way those were chosen accents like in music? I mean there was a definite mood created by an accent of a sort?

JULIAN LEVI: Oh, yes, I think that's very possible. It was the aural sensation translated into the visual. And apparently he could make this leap without any effort. It was part of his constitution to make this conversion.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Did he have friends among the jazz players?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, of course you know that. He did indeed. And these were his heroes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I know. But who, for instance?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, one to whom I introduced him became his last, I suppose, and closest friend was George Wettling, the drummer. I introduced him to George because George had started to paint. I knew him through Eddie Condon who had a prominent jazz band. He was the last of the Chicago style players who was having any success in the East, meaning New York. And George Wettling at one time played drums in Eddie Condon's band, here in New York. And very shyly one day George Wettling showed me some of his paintings, he showed me slides of them. And they were just imitations of Stuart Davis. Which he admitted freely. He had gone to museums and gotten reproductions and so on and since he didn't take painting seriously as a career this was kind of great relaxation for this - he was a very tense man, as drummers are apt to be. He thought constantly in kind of rhythms. So Stuart was the answer to this. And I told him I knew Stuart rather well. He said, "Do you?" Without knowing him he had put him on a tremendous pedestal.

COLETTE ROBERTS: This drummer's name was - ?

JULIAN LEVI: Wettling. He died about a year ago, about a little over a year ago I think. And he was one of the greatest of the jazz drummers. I guess he was about 60 or perhaps a little under when he died. But jazz players have a rather hard life.

COLETTE ROBERTS: There's no place in the American Institute for jazz players so far?

JULIAN LEVI: No, not as far as I know. I think some of them could be considered - I mean at the moment there's such an awful dichotomy between the so-called serious musicians and the frivolous ones and I think they still consider jazz, even though they borrow from it, considerably frivolous.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Even when they are - I understand when they are just instrumentalists that's something else - but when they are real composers ---

JULIAN LEVI: Oh, yes, exactly. Just being instrumentalists of any kind wouldn't qualify anybody for the Institute. But, strangely enough, Stuart Davis's widow has frequently mentioned this since Stuart died - perhaps the idea generated with Stuart - that why isn't Duke Ellington considered, as he is one of our great musicians ---

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. Because it's such an American tradition, too. I mean it's on that level.

JULIAN LEVI: Why isn't he considered as a member. But this is an institutional thing, it's departmental and it's controlled by the musicians themselves.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. And actually it has always had a rather - in fact it's been a very liberal line in many, many ways because certainly that Henry Miller, for instance, should be one of the academicians would not ...

JULIAN LEVI: And John Cage.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And of course Cocteau became a member of the French Academy.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. With a green uniform.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That's right. And a sword.

JULIAN LEVI: I think it's a form of snobbery really I suppose, or insecurity, or something.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, don't you think that in a way it's terribly important to have such institutions because the people don't very often believe in their own reaction and it makes - it gives a certain - well, how could I say it? - well, just actual official credentials?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, I think in that way it has its importance. Some people would dispute it. But it establishes standards.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I think it's very important.

JULIAN LEVI: And the standards are very absolute and they're subject to the errors that men make, particularly in their own profession. But on the whole I think its standards are quite excellent.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Isn't it one way to fight fashion? Because there are certain standards that apply to various periods and facets of art and therefore in a way it counterbalances the idea of fashion.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, the ephemeral, the thing that comes and goes very quickly. You know, the whole process being a little slow and a little lugubrious has its difficulties too sometimes. Some very good things are missed or rejected.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That's possible. I know you're always trying for the more advanced at all times.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. And there's always a certain resistance but the resistance isn't institutional. It's simply the voice of individuals and sometimes they're in the majority in certain situations. And it's very hard to explain why.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. And it is a majority vote.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Whatever faults it has are the faults of democracy whatever they are.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I notice that it also has a wide range internationally. And how did that come about? Because it's not only the national names but I know, I think, Malraux is a member.

JULIAN LEVI: Malraux and almost every distinguished artist or writer or intellectual of the last twenty years I would say. But this is a separate category of membership. These are honorary members. Miro is a member. Picasso. Malraux, and so forth and so on. These are honorary members who don't participate naturally since they're not in this country. But when they're here they often are present.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. So that in a way it branches out way beyond the national scene?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, it does.

END OF SIDE 2

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COLETTE ROBERTS: Now that we have spoken about the permanent aspect of recognition we might perhaps go and see what happened to the scene in a more general way, and which is very often less permanent. What is your view in a more general way of what happened in the fifties? I mean how history sort of articulated itself in the recognition of the action painters, etc. What was your first reaction, for instance, to a Pollock painting when you saw it?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, the first ones I saw were at the Peggy Guggenheim Gallery, which wasn't at all the Pollock that the world is now familiar with or that it thinks of as being the image of Pollock. They were tremendously exciting and vigorous but I doubt that anybody at that time would have surmised that he would achieve the type of fame that ultimately came to him.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Right. But you accepted him as a painter with a capital P right then?

JULIAN LEVI: Oh, yes. He was outstanding. This first show of Pollock's - I assume it was his first - was put on with tremendous excitement. The catalogue foreword, as I remember, was by James Johnson Sweeney. So it was put on as a show of a man who had already achieved importance, which he had had in a comparatively small circle. To the public he was rather unknown at that time.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Since you mentioned the Peggy Guggenheim Art of this Century Gallery, were you close to its growing and the people who were in it?

JULIAN LEVI: No, I really wasn't. I just simply have, it seems to me, of the Hans Hofmann School and the people who were under the influence of Hofmann or who came together, who sort of congealed through their association in the School. Whether they were influenced by Hofmann or not, doesn't matter. It was the meeting place for a tremendously stimulating group. And The Club, I think, developed out of that. I was not of that particular generation. These were not my intimate friends although I knew a great many of them.

COLETTE ROBERTS: What was your reaction, for instance, to a first painting of Rothko? I know that his first paintings were not like the more recent ones, but when did you first become aware of his existence?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, it seems to me I became aware of his name before I became aware of his work. The first time I had an opportunity to see his work, in any comprehensive sense, was at a show at the Museum of Modern Art, which was only five years ago, perhaps.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, the one which was a sort of retrospective?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. And I thought he was absolutely a magnificent colorist. And I think it did overcome any theoretical prejudice I might have had against work, that seemed so barren when seen in black and white reproduction, or hearing it theorized about, because his colors were so superb.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. Do you think it would be fair to say that somehow painters recognize painters? Your painting is certainly different from that of Rothko but you are essentially a painter and therefore you can abstract from your thinking when you feel that it is painting.

JULIAN LEVI: I think that's generally true.

COLETTE ROBERTS: It takes almost always a painter to recognize a painter.

JULIAN LEVI: I really think that's quite true. And where this doesn't happen, it means that the painter is so self-absorbed that he has eyes for nothing except his own work or things that are closely related to it.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, it's sort of an obsession. But in that framework of reference how did you judge in its time - and now we're going back - *Nude Descending the Staircase*?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, I found that exciting. It didn't seem shocking to me at the time. On the contrary, this kind of fragmentation was a little unusual, but the color was traditional and very undistinguished. It was pretty much the same color that was being used by Picasso and Braque.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And all the Cubists.

JULIAN LEVI: And what was this period? - the Analytical period of Cubism.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Since Marcel Duchamp died very recently, I was wondering what was your reaction to the man who decided to abandon the making for the thinking and all that kind of thing. I was wondering if you had any particular reaction to the man and his way of life?

JULIAN LEVI: No. Really I admired him, I knew him slightly. It seemed to me he abandoned painting because it was, in him, a function of pure cerebration. I think he was a thinker, essentially, and a man who lived the history of the collapse of 19th century painting which was extended into the 20th century by the Impressionists. And I think he reached a complete dead end and I think World War I had something to do with it. The Dadaists came about because the same sort of historical forces and pressures. And looking back at it, I think it was a perfectly normal way of destroying the past. The Dadaists seemed frivolous. They were extremely serious people - like Jean Xceron, I never saw him smile in his life. Man Ray seldom smiled. I think they were the witnesses of the

destruction of the past. And I think Duchamps stopping painting was one evidence of this. And the wonderful Dadaist's proposals like should we burn down the Louvre, because we are being oppressed by the past, by references to the past, this whole thing has to stop. Look where it has led the world, to World War I and then the complete corruption of society and so forth and so on. It's very hard to pull out these different threads because they're so interrelated.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, they are. But what you said a minute ago is to be very interesting, the fact that you consider Duchamp as a thinker who celebrated life by painting for a while, not a painter who stopped painting to become a thinker?

JULIAN LEVI: Right. I think that. And of course the whole family painted, the father was a painter, wasn't he? The sister and brothers and so forth.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Everybody.

JULIAN LEVI: So he was born into painting the way one might be born into running a grocery store, without any enthusiasm.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. His father was a sort of barrister - notaire - but I think he also ---

JULIAN LEVI: They were amateurs.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. He was very understanding to the painting of his family anyway.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, obviously. Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: So really you feel in a way that the death of Duchamp sort of closes up the 19th century which was carried to its destruction by the 20th?

JULIAN LEVI: No, I think he really had two lives in a way because Duchamp, I would think, in the thirties and early forties was a forgotten man.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, yes.

JULIAN LEVI: I think he was resurrected in the fifties because the time, what was going on in the world, lent itself to his revival.

COLETTE ROBERTS: To his resurrection.

JULIAN LEVI: It gave his ideas credence.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. It became much more apparent what he had been after, too.

JULIAN LEVI: It wasn't relevant at all in the thirties or forties but it became very relevant in the fifties when Gorky came along and ---

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, it's interesting. So it would be really through the abstract surrealism, so to speak, that one would have gone back to a form of pre-surrealism that is Dadaism?

JULIAN LEVI: Right.

COLETTE ROBERTS: So it would have been through abstraction again?

JULIAN LEVI: I haven't thought this out very clearly. Sometimes you reach these ideas quite spontaneously when you try to fit the pieces in the puzzle together.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Right.

JULIAN LEVI: You wonder why Breton came to this country and found Gorky. Gorky was around, you know, and very available. But it took Andre Breton to really understand him; although he was far from obscure.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. But that's where your homonym Julien Levy played a tremendous part.

JULIAN LEVI: Well, in showing him, yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And also of course he had all the surrealists around him at that time, didn't he?

JULIAN LEVI: That's perfectly true, yes. He had Masson and all the surrealists - and even Dali. But it seems to me

that the arrival of Breton seemed to give it much more authenticity than it had be merely showing at the Julien Levy Gallery which did a remarkably interesting job. There's no question about it.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. It gave it the value of a manifesto.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, exactly. And then he's a master propagandist.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, it seems that this is really sort of a final closing of an era, because, after all, Breton is dead and Duchamp is dead.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And it seems like defeating almost its own end, so to speak.

JULIAN LEVI: I guess so. You sort of hesitate making any predictions, of course, they're very dangerous. But one would imagine so. Sort of the cool movement of the present moment seems quite far away.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Do you think that the cool movement may have come from some of the excesses of the followers of Pollock, that is of the drip, pushed too far, and that there was a sort of -- well, almost puritanical search for clarity and definition?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. I guess nothing gets pushed too far as long as it's viable, you know; as long as it expresses sort of the inner soul of the country or the civilization or whatever is going on at the moment. I think the abstract expressionism of the fifties was a reflection of the whole Freudian doctrine, and its place in literature was quite similar to what took place in painting. It was the apotheosis (is that the way you pronounce it) of the individual looking inside himself. And this vein was temporarily exhausted. And I presume that the painter being alert to new things turned to the hard, the impersonal, the anonymous, which ends in the sort of cool painting and sculpture.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Right. Do you have any recollection of that show on Ninth Street, I think it was at 68 Ninth Street, and I think it was Castelli who did it, in 1951 where there were all the - well, the abstractionists and slightly surrealist painters?

JULIAN LEVI: When was that? In 1951?

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, I think it was in 1951. I was wondering if you had been close to it in any special way?

JULIAN LEVI: No. No, I wasn't. Truly I wasn't close to this whole movement.

COLETTE ROBERTS: You've always been very much of an independent?

JULIAN LEVI: Looking back I suppose so. Although I hadn't thought of myself in that way.

COLETTE ROBERTS: You're not a misanthrope but you're an independent.

JULIAN LEVI: I guess so.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Because many of those people become cliques.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, they do. My first meeting as a matter of fact with many of the individuals was at a party that Dorothy Miller gave at her apartment, she and Eddie Cahill, one Sunday afternoon to which my wife and I were invited. We arrived and I was sure I'd see all my old friends. And I didn't see a person that I knew. This was a whole new generation. I felt very much as an outsider, you know. Barney Newman, and so forth, Franz Kline, there were many whom I had never heard of. And I became very aware then that a whole generation gap had taken place as far as association of individuals was concerned.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Right. I was wondering since you have that marvelous book explaining what the layman should find in looking at the painting, how would you present the work of Kline to a total layman?

JULIAN LEVI: This would be difficult to the total layman.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Not somebody who doesn't think but somebody who is not versed in the - well, in the visual arts, shall we say, which always makes it harder to present.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But through their faults sometimes you can reach them.

JULIAN LEVI: Well, the only idea that comes to mind in that particular sort of presentation is a work I think I used in categorizing Kline, and that is tremendous energy, the real plastic device which he invented or whatever for conveying this kind of energy that, let's say, we see in bridges and in the kind of ambitious construction which goes on in this country. It's the dynamics of a particular genius of American construction I guess. Good or bad it reflects ---

COLETTE ROBERTS: That tremendous energy.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Would you say that there is a form of time element in that energy? I mean that it conveys a sort of an element of speed?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. I think this was true of all abstract expressionism. The dynamism has a time element in it and I suppose in an academic sense the strong use of diagonals always conveys the idea of movement and speed as opposed to, let's say, the Piero della Francesca vertical-horizontal tranquillity where nothing moves.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I see. Where would you place in this respect, for instance, the work of Nevelson? Which of course is not the work of a painter but it's not always three-dimensional either.

JULIAN LEVI: Can I say I'm not very impressed by Nevelson? I never have been. And I'm sure she's really much better than I think she is. I remember her work as that of a conventional sculptor.

COLETTE ROBERTS: The work of the past?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Figurative work. And it always seemed to be to be rather feeble. And I'm sure I'm doing her a great injustice but it seems to me she simply has a gimmick which is perhaps rather exciting due to size, to ---

COLETTE ROBERTS: Of course I'm bound to have a different approach because I have known her well through the years. But I think that perhaps even in her early pieces one could sense some of the poetry that she was put into her things. Because I think that's where she has a dimension which is very seldom really brought about. There's a certain form of poetry which is maybe not even always plastic, but always there is a sort of a presence.

JULIAN LEVI: I don't doubt but that you're right. You know, we can't like everything.

COLETTE ROBERTS: No, certainly not.

JULIAN LEVI: I mean we can't respond to everything.

COLETTE ROBERTS: You see, I am at present going through this book that we were discussing together a little earlier, which is called *The Artists World* by Fred McDarragh. And I am questioning you on Nevelson because I see this reproduction.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. I'm dubious, really, of the greatness of her ---

COLETTE ROBERTS: And that's the same reason I was asking about Ninth Street. By the same token I see in this book the portraits of Canaday, Kramer, Greenberg, Rosenberg, I mean all the critics. And I was wondering what your reaction to art criticism in general can be, I mean, where do you draw one line rather than another?

JULIAN LEVI: You know, I think we're natural enemies. I think nature intended it that way. I'm very fond of Harold Rosenberg. He's the one I know best among this group, although I don't know him intimately. But I enjoy his writing. He writes extremely well. He's an awfully good writer. I think I admire his writing rather than his content. In his content, I think, he hedges a great deal. He's a master at paradox, you know. It's so black it's white, you know. It's so big, it's small, you know.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, he makes you question things.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. He's very perceptive and his culture is a very broad one because his allusions to literature and poetry and music and so on give a rather complete picture rather than, say, a shallow one you might get from the man on the Times.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. But don't you think there might be a place in art criticism which would not be that of judgement but which would be the one of sort of - well, analyzing the making of a work rather than passing judgement on it?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, I think so. I think that's been done, hasn't it? I mean this has been one form of criticism. This is

kind of scholarship.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I wasn't thinking so much of the description of the work because that would be pretty bad to take the place of the looking at the work but I was wondering if there was not perhaps a place as long as one discusses the living artist to get to know the artist and his motivation before you judge the work, so to speak?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, I think that would be ideal. I doubt that this will lend itself to that on account of the pressure of time and the necessity of coming through with copy once a week or twice a week or however frequently people do.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Right. But don't you think that very often the artist as sort of a credo in his catalogue or somewhere which could be a lead to his - well, his thinking in the plastic field and at least it should be done in such a way that it would be?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, I wish I could agree with you. But I think most artists are so anti-verbal that most of what they say is quite ridiculous and frequently hilariously funny. Particularly the things you see in catalogues.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But don't you think that even if it is - well, inflated or wrong in a certain way, it's a clue to a certain comportment?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, probably. But they're terribly boring. All you have to do is look through those catalogues of the Illinois - the Krannert Museum.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, yes, I know.

JULIAN LEVI: In which each artist gives his credo and so on. I think they're terribly boring and in most cases very unrevealing. And I don't think it should be expected that the artist necessarily can verbalize even if he knows what he's doing.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Right. I see here a portrait of Ad Reinhardt and I was wondering what you felt about his anti - not anti-art - but his manifesto against everything that is in painting?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, I was very fond of him. He had a wonderfully, lively mind. It wasn't unlike that of Duchamp in many ways.

COLETTE ROBERTS: It seems sort of puritanical?

JULIAN LEVI: It was a kind of puritanism but he went through so many phases from being a cartoonist to being a rather close imitator of Stuart Davis at one period, and then moving into an almost negative sort of austerity in which the reticence became almost complete, you know, as if he didn't choose to make any kind of visual statement.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Do you remember there was one of his manifestos at The Club where he described rather well what painting could be by simply saying what painting was not.

JULIAN LEVI: I don't remember that.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, he just went into a long diatribe or whatever it would be called against what painting was not. It was not commercial, it was not this, it wasn't that; but he didn't voice what it was.

JULIAN LEVI: It was a kind of negativism which I suppose was quite a natural position to take in this period. I mean it was one of the available positions one could take and sustain with the evidence of what was going on during the period in which Ad Reinhardt was working. And, as I say, he was a brilliant man. And he loved words.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. Oh, yes. Using this book all the way through, when one went from abstract expressionism to Pop art what do you think was the feeling, the need for that attitude. Here I see the two cans of Ballantine Beer cast in bronze. What do you think happened to the art world because after all manifestation of that order is never just the feeling of the artist. There must be an onlooker too to take it in. So what sort of equation of the time brought it about, do you think?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, I don't really know, I suppose there are multiple answers to this, any one of which would be valid. It may be the Museum of Modern Art's new Images of Man exhibition.

COLETTE ROBERTS: The Art of Assemblage no doubt.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. That and certainly something to do with the - it seems to me that abstract expressionism got rather boring by repetition, became more shallow and I think a more humanist position was taken by a lot of

artists in which the environment became more important.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. But how do you feel this particular new realism differentiated itself from the social realism?

JULIAN LEVI: Oh, I think that's just semantics. The use of the word realism has no relevance one to the other. Social realism was a form of illustration, really.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And probably the new realism should perhaps be called concrete art.

JULIAN LEVI: Or something like that, some new way of defining the visual world that artists are surrounded by, its presentation or some aspects of it.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I'm just going through Barbara Rose's book now and I was looking from the past to the present. At certain times I find people like Demuth, for instance, reproduced here. Wasn't Demuth with the Downtown Gallery at one time?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, but long before I was. I think he died when he was rather young.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, that's really the forerunner of a great deal of what's been done since.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: What do you feel are the trends at present? I mean how do you think the young artist - because after all you have many students and you see how their minds work - are they trying to get in the shoes of their elders? Or are they looking for new alleys?

JULIAN LEVI: I think, they think they're looking for new alleys as young people always do. But also as young people always have heroes, they're great hero worshippers. Essentially this is part of the nature of growth. And it's healthy and sound in my opinion. And each generation I think seeks new heroes. And I find their heroes at present are the cool painters and sculptors, the minimal, the will to unite painting and sculpture and so forth. I don't know how significant that is. It might be just a matter of improved communications. Maybe they get Art News quicker now than they got it twenty years ago.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But do you think that it's possible that it's the new textures, the new materials that would also create a new demand.

JULIAN LEVI: I'm inclined to doubt it very much.

COLETTE ROBERTS: You don't think that it's the fact that acrylic dries fast?

JULIAN LEVI: I don't think that they are fascinated by the Plexiglas and its possibility in construction and transparency and things like that?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, obviously they are. But I don't know what their motivation is. It's just a means and it lends itself to - it seems novel for a year or two but I doubt that any new aesthetic will be produced by the materials by the availability of new materials which essentially are the same thing in color and shape.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And everyone can use it his own way anyway.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But what do you think of some of the attempts which is a sort of collective work? I mean there have been some among the new realism in France, for instance. I mean some decided to have a group of certain manifestation and three would take the color red, three would take the color blue, etcetera, and arrange like a ballet sort of.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Well, I'm not too familiar with that. I'm not against it. But I must say I'm not terribly impressed by this ---

COLETTE ROBERTS: The collective aspect.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. it certainly has a certain validity, let's say, in doing huge murals where collaboration was essential, collaboration with architects.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I was just wondering about that. Do you think it would be fair to say that there should be a different evaluation of work according to whether it plans to be in cooperation with the architect, or, on the

contrary, is aiming at bringing a world on a small surface?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, I don't see any simple answer to that. I would simply say that there are many kinds of artists and many kinds of talent and some lend themselves beautifully ---

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, I think you did answer it by the mere fact that it really all rests not upon the trend but on the artist.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, I expect so.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And ultimately that's where you always end up.

JULIAN LEVI: That's where we always seem to end up, yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Incidentally, I've been asked to make a survey of what sells in our time. And I was a little bit concerned by it because very often when people ask you that kind of question it's because they want to draw a conclusion that that's what should sell. There's an Artists Equity meeting Wednesday where two dealers and one curator and one director of a collection - and I'm supposed to be one of them - to speak on what do collectors want. And I'm terribly afraid of the question being used the wrong way. What do you feel about the attitude of the artist versus the collector and vice versa? I mean should the artist in any way be conscious of the demand and to a certain extent fit that demand? Or should he completely ignore that demand?

JULIAN LEVI: You know the answer of course. I think he has to ignore it or cease being an artist. He simply has to take his chances on doing his bag, whatever it is. Trying to please collectors I think is one of the most unrewarding things in the world. I think it's corrupt and it really indicates a terrible over-evaluation of the quality of the collector. I don't see any merit in the idea at all.

COLETTE ROBERTS: No. On the other hand, you know that there is an attempt that has to be made for the artist to ease communication and that's what dealers of course try to do. But I was just questioning the fact that there should be any orientation. I think it's impossible.

JULIAN LEVI: I think it's impossible. I think on its practical side you might say, artists would be very foolish to paint twenty-four foot pictures unless they felt a terrible driving necessity to because they obviously can't fit any place at all. Most museums in fact don't feel that contemporary work justifies that much space even where they have the space. In that sense I suppose the artist must recognize the existence of dealers and collectors, but other than that I think it would be very healthy if there was no association at all between artists and collectors. I think they're a very, very corrupting influence in the end, very depressing.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Probably everybody is a loser at the end.

JULIAN LEVI: I suspect so. I'm convinced of it.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Because probably the collector doesn't really get the best of the artist that way in the first place.

JULIAN LEVI: No, and this is a commercial world and he has the means for corrupting the artist. In other words, he dangles this beautiful carrot, you know.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Do you think it's really ultimately an exercise of power?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, I do. And the motivations have different origins but, as we know, a great deal of it is social climbing or tax-dodging or the will for publicity and so forth.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. You know, we have spoken previously of the value and the need at the time of the Depression of the WPA Project. Now what do you feel about the support of the arts by the government at some point? You remember that in France there was the Minister des Beaux Arts who was supposed to do certain - well, buying from the artist for the purpose. Now what do you feel are the drawbacks of that? For there are many.

JULIAN LEVI: Well, I think they are obvious. These things are usually administered by Congressmen who are not only ignorant of art but frequently they are hostile. And furthermore I think the way this country is now constituted the place has been taken by the foundations. And the foundations at least are administered by professionals, by people who have professional knowledge of the field. So whatever errors they make are, let's say, valid errors. They're not the errors of ignorance.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. So that actually you see it as a potential good if it's a division of interest, that is, not a central governmental office but just various foundations which give much greater choice, much greater margin

for both success and error?

JULIAN LEVI: You're right. I feel the same way toward government sponsorship. If I felt it could ever fall into the hands of professionals and I'm convinced it cannot, knowing the nature of Congressmen and their control over the purse strings.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. And of course you think of the Louvre having refused most of the collection bought at a certain time through governmental officials who were actually supposedly experts.

JULIAN LEVI: Right. I think it would benefit nobody and create false values. A spirit of competition would be generated and the awards would invariably go to the wrong winners, I'm certain of that.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. It might have one advantage but it's a very far fetched one: that people would have something to fight against as with the old academy and the old times, you know, when the young had the feeling that they had something to affirm themselves against to a certain extent.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. But I think it would be very dangerous. Yes, it would seem to me that this would be the least desirable way of bringing that about. I think this whole idea anyhow of youthful revolt against authority, against the so-called Establishment - well, it's a phenomenon of our time and it's happened in the past and it will happen again in the future. but it's not a thing that maintains an absolute continuity.

COLETTE ROBERTS: No. And it's a great loss of energy too, to a certain extent.

JULIAN LEVI: I think so, yes. It creates the wrong heroes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But in general what do you find among your students at present? How do they react to that sort of general insubordination of the times and - well, all the questions of the day such as Vietnam. What is generally the feeling? Or do you have no rapport on that level?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, to some extent we have rapport. We haven't the time frequently to go into these things in any depth. But it's perfectly possible to sense the general feeling of the students. And I would say they're a hundred percent opposed to Vietnam and the sort of politics that we're now engaged in. In other words, the kind of idealism they have -- they haven't yet been disillusioned -- leads them to be very critical of the Establishment. Which they should be.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Do you have among them many hippies, I mean people who function on drugs, I don't mean just hippie attitudes?

JULIAN LEVI: You know, this may sound very strange, but none as far as I know. A few with a sort of hippie attitude. My experience is very limited in this way - I can only speak for myself however - they're mostly drifters. The hippie types drift from one school to another, from one class to another. They'd rather talk than paint.

COLETTE ROBERTS: So that when you have a serious class there's no place whatsoever for those extra activities.

JULIAN LEVI: I wouldn't say there's no place, but that particular kind of alienation indicates naturally very unsettled emotions and a state of mind which doesn't make for any continuity of work. They're not prepared for it. Perhaps they will be in a year or two. They're living out some resentments which they deserve to live out if there's this psychic necessity.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Where, out of the three places where you teach, which if I'm not mistaken, is the League and --

JULIAN LEVI: The Pennsylvania Academy.

COLETTE ROBERTS: -- that's right and the New School. Well, out of those three institutions which one would you say would happen to hold the most drifters as per this class of this year. Just as your experience of this year.

JULIAN LEVI: Well, the Art Students League I'd say on account of its structure. The students aren't obliged to attend. Registration is by the month so a student is free to leave a class at any time. And he can go into another class and so forth.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. So that would be probably the place for the drifters more than the other more stable institutions?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, it's not that they're more stable, they're a little more "structured" is a fashionable word - but they're more structured.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. You have to register for so many months.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, for the whole semester.

COLETTE ROBERTS: What is the age more or less of those groups?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, at the Pennsylvania Academy they're a fairly uniform age. They're mostly just finished high school or they've had one or two years of college. So they're, let's say, eighteen to twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two. But you can consider that as almost one age bracket. At the Art Students League you have tremendous diversity in ages. And at the New School you catch people of every age.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Is it more of an adult education course?

JULIAN LEVI: At the New School, yes, because they mostly come just one time a week, one evening a week, one afternoon a week or whatever.

COLETTE ROBERTS: So it's really more of a critical --- ?

JULIAN LEVI: Avocation. Some of them are very intense and work at it very hard. But on the whole it is an avocation; it's not professionally oriented.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I was wondering now if we shouldn't perhaps stop just a minute to get to your work.

JULIAN LEVI: Well, I have practically nothing here. But if you just want to talk about it I'll ---

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, just as you want. I was wondering if we could see, you know, one of your earlier paintings and then one of the medium time, just to see the evolution of work.

JULIAN LEVI: Let's see, I'm not even sure that I have many photographs here. But I think to some extent you're familiar with my work.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, I am. But I'd like to be able to define it as it changed; it seems to me that the earlier ones were much closer to a certain form of School of Paris thinking than the later ones.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, I think they were. And there's very good reason for it since I spent about five years there. Not only that, it was the heyday of the School of Paris and Paris was the center of the art world.

COLETTE ROBERTS: What I'm not quite familiar with is who among the people of that era you would have looked upon as having certain answers to the problem of painting?

JULIAN LEVI: You mean here in the United States?

COLETTE ROBERTS: No. In that School of Paris that we just mentioned. I mean I don't see you close to Chagall, for instance.

JULIAN LEVI: No, no. I never felt particularly close to Chagall. Although I've enjoyed some of his things, in the end they've seemed rather sweet to me and sentimental both in subject matter and in the quality of color.

COLETTE ROBERTS: They're much more romantic than what you enjoy.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Well, I think in the end he gets rather tiresome simply through repetition. And his form of romanticism was something that I had been accused of many years ago. Frequently in critical evaluations I used to read the word "nostalgia." Chagall's nostalgia was for the Russia of his early youth. And, you know, the fable loses its quality I think when it's repeated too frequently. At the beginning it was very refreshing and so on. I've had this nostalgia for the sea, I suppose, more than anything else.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Did Rouault ever have a certain appeal for you?

JULIAN LEVI: No, not really. It's funny - well, I'm sure you've had this experience of esteeming somebody very highly.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, yes, yes. But not for you?

JULIAN LEVI: I recognized him. But not for me.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Matisse would have been more for you at all times.

JULIAN LEVI: Right. Matisse. And certainly Picasso. And particularly Picasso's fantastic ability to absorb and to

change and to alter and to ---

COLETTE ROBERTS: That's even the form more than the color?

JULIAN LEVI: The form more than the color. And also the content. I feel here is a man of the 20th century who kept his eyes wide open more than anybody else. It's always fresh. And he's seen everything it seems to me. He's seen the possibility in everything. And of course he's borrowed freely. This is something he's been accused of so frequently - this eclecticism. But this happens, and then later on you forget the sources. It's so transformed through personality and all these things from the Greek and from early Iberian things.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But isn't it a tremendous temptation if you don't work from nature and still use a certain amount of representational work, isn't it the normal temptation to use history?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. But I don't think they're irreconcilable. I think both processes took place. It wasn't history anyhow in his case. It was museums.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That's right. But it was also the enjoyment of the object per se.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Right.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But I sometimes wonder if as a painter he has as much of a place as he has as a creator of forms?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, that's a possibility. But his life has to be chopped up into so many periods that you can't see it as a whole thing. Because there were periods in the late 30s and early 40s where he was using color magnificently.

COLETTE ROBERTS: The still life period.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, exactly. And also he was very much interested in the quality of paint and the possibilities in the beauty of the pigment itself. And then now the late pictures have almost a contempt for the medium.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Right. Was it he or Gris who said that a picture should be painted as you paint a door? I'm never quite sure.

JULIAN LEVI: I'm not familiar with that, but it would sound more like Picasso than like Gris because Gris was a craftsman and was tremendously interested in his craft and he didn't live long enough to become disdainful as Picasso did, or has.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But do you think that whoever said it was disdainful of texture when he speaks of painting as one would paint a door? It's rather a great achievement.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, you'd expect maybe it was Braque whose father was a decorator, as you know.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. Maybe he was the one who said it.

JULIAN LEVI: And Braque started working with his father making fake marble and graining wood and all those very skillful accomplishments of the house painters of that period. I don't think any of them are left.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Right. Did you have a truly Cubist period?

JULIAN LEVI: I did, yes. After I returned from Europe in 1927 I worked in a Cubist style I would say for about five years until I came to New York in 1932. Which then was the depth of the Depression. And I think the Depression threw a lot of people towards a form of realism.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. To be able to communicate with a group.

JULIAN LEVI: That was part of it. And it was a time of great seriousness I guess, and to do anything else at the time seemed frivolous. Which I wouldn't want to defend now. But I think this was the feeling. I think I probably shared in that.

END OF SIDE 1

SIDE 2

COLETTE ROBERTS: I'm glad that we were able to look at some of your work because the evolution of it is I think very important. And I have seen some of what I would call your blue period, your sea period. But that you don't have around in your studio here.

JULIAN LEVI: Unfortunately not. They're at the Rehn Gallery or they've been sold. I've always tried not to keep pictures here. That other time you were here, as a matter of fact, I had them sent down I believe from the Gallery. I haven't the space, for one thing, to store them. And I have a thing about hanging my own pictures in my home.

COLETTE ROBERTS: You'd rather hang other people's work?

JULIAN LEVI: I would, yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That's interesting.

JULIAN LEVI: I enjoy them. You know, they're certainly much more objective. The only two things I've ever kept here permanently hanging are very old. That one portrait you saw which was done in 1936.

COLETTE ROBERTS: The Chef?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, The Chef in 1935 or 1936. And then there's a little head in the studio of my wife which was done even before that. That was done about 1934. So these are so far away from me I don't feel that they're my own.

COLETTE ROBERTS: They're sort of Degas period. They have sort of that kind of refinement and realism.

JULIAN LEVI: I guess so, yes. It's funny - I've enjoyed Degas but he was never really one of my heroes at all. The pictures I usually have hanging here, which are not my own, are up in the storage warehouse now where I put them when I was in Europe and I haven't brought them back yet.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I saw in your room something which seemed very interesting to me. It looked like a primitive sculpture of practically any civilization. It's by Nivola.

JULIAN LEVI: Nivola. You know the pronunciation of his name is variable. Nivola seems to be the American way and the way that they've finally come to accept themselves I think.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes.

JULIAN LEVI: I think he's wonderfully gifted. We traded things about seven or eight years ago and that is the result.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But this, which you have here, when did you do this?

JULIAN LEVI: That was done about two or three years ago.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Because they relate to Hebraic writing.

JULIAN LEVI: That's right. This is casein by the way. I've frequently done small things in casein that relate directly to a subject of this sort. This is a menorah which for some reason I find a fascinating shape. And, frankly, symbolically it doesn't mean very much to me. But I've done two or three things with that shape, the candlestick.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I think you told me about those letters that you have shown them to Ben Shahn, and could he identify them?

JULIAN LEVI: No, apparently nobody can except a scholar of archaic Hebrew. As a matter of fact, I think I got those letters, I copied them at the Jewish Museum from a document or from a small thing, I really forget just what it was. And then I showed them to various people. I wanted to use them because they're very beautiful.

COLETTE ROBERTS: They're beautiful forms.

JULIAN LEVI: I still haven't had it deciphered.

COLETTE ROBERTS: We speak of Ben Shahn -- did you ever know him well?

JULIAN LEVI: Not intimately. But I've known him a long time. We were in the Downtown Gallery together for many years and I've seen him off and on all during this time. I see him at the Institute and so on. He's a very brilliant man.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. I remember having heard him on the panel at the Museum of Modern Art with Edith Halpert on - well, as a matter of fact, the problem of collecting. And he seemed to be extremely good in argumentation, among other things.

JULIAN LEVI: Oh, he is. He's extremely articulate and he's got a very quick mind. Above everything else I think he enjoys speaking and he does it well.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I don't deny his talent, that's not at all what I'm trying to say - but how do you explain that he has been constantly supported by, let's say, public opinion for the past -- no matter what trends have been around he's been actually sort of on the crest of the wave, so to speak?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, I think essentially he's a graphic artist. All of his pictures tell stories in rather respectable graphic terms. And I think he doesn't differentiate between painting and illustrating. I recently saw that quote which obviously is one of his close beliefs. I think his best things certainly if you remember are the Sacco and Vanzetti things.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, yes, that was by far the most striking.

JULIAN LEVI: They were done very early in his career and I don't think he's ever exceeded those as far as quality and intensity are concerned. And he stayed rather closely throughout his whole career I think to a subject. He had a rather fanciful style that sort of got in a groove I think, certain mannerisms of drawing that were unfortunately widely imitated.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Do you think it might be fair to say that actually he is about all a draftsman - do you think it might be fair to say that the constant of interest in American art through the years has been graphic?

JULIAN LEVI: No-o, I wouldn't want to answer that question directly because I don't think I can. That would take a great deal of thought and research. I think it's been storytelling to a great extent. And when I use that term I simply mean where there's a strong relationship to a subject. It doesn't necessarily have to be illustrative. And I think Shahn in a different way has been eclectic in very much the same way that Picasso is; in other words, he goes to remote sources such as medieval manuscripts and has found style suggestions in those. I think the very nature of his line, which has become so famous is like a woodcut line cut in the twelfth century. And then he's always been fascinated by lettering. And he's found exquisite examples in manuscripts. And I think really in many ways this is probably where he's at his very best in his sense of the quality of design in lettering.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That reminds me of Schwitters to a certain extent.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Schwitters, Picasso and Braque used lettering in their early Cubist paintings.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, that's right.

JULIAN LEVI: Leger used lettering, a kind of stencil type of letter. Some of his paintings have a marvelous sort of industrial look.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, and there's that still life of - what? - 1908 or something like that with Picasso's Journal.

JULIAN LEVI: With the Journal, yes. Well, he and Braque did that frequently I think.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But do you think that Shahn's inspiration. I mean his use of letters was influenced by that form of thinking? Or did he find his own by just a love for manuscripts?

JULIAN LEVI: Oh, I think it's probably a combination. I think one thing just simply led to the other.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, because basically art is born out of art anyway.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, I think so. He's made his contribution I think in very strange ways. He's not very popular in present among artists. I think they feel justifiably that he's really more of a graphic artist. And artists know what we mean when we use that word. As you know, he's been tremendously successful and has a great public following. There are one or two paintings he did that I think have a very durable quality. One is of a playground - I don't know whether you recall this - there are children playing in a playground with a wire fence.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, yes. It's a beautiful one.

JULIAN LEVI: Now this is the first time I ever saw a wire fence painted and he gave a certain integrity and a certain meaning to a wire fence just as you might say that nobody ever saw a mountain before Cezanne painted Mont St. Victoire and then every mountain looks as though you are seeing it through Cezanne's eyes and it becomes more beautiful.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Speaking of mountains I'd be very curious to have your reaction to that young Englishman, Mason. Pierre Matisse has a show of his at present and it's mountains made in a relief through clay really - it's bronze - but I mean ---

JULIAN LEVI: I don't know it - I haven't see the show. I haven't see a show since I've returned from Europe. I haven't had time. I've been in the country and then just came back to teach. Well, Nivola did some things that weren't quite mountains but they were sand dunes and things of that sort. And sky. I thought that was rather amusing, doing sky as sculpture with clouds.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Speaking of sculpture, here on this beautiful desk of yours I see that rooster. What's the story of that object?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, that's a weathervane. I got it years ago from Edith Halpert who, as you know, aside from the Downtown Gallery had the American Folk Art Gallery.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, that's right.

JULIAN LEVI: It's Edith's claim that she supported her artists for years - her gallery - through the folk art. Which I'm sure is probably true in a way.

COLETTE ROBERTS: This is so perfectly beautiful.

JULIAN LEVI: They're very beautiful some of those things. We have another in the country, Indian, that we got from her. And it's much more primitive than this. It's cut from a flat piece of iron.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I was wondering if she had given things to the Museum of American Folk Art near the Museum of Modern Art?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Well, I doubt that she's given them things; she might have. But I'm sure they bought things from her. And that museum up in Vermont, the famous one, Vanderbilt Webb ---

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, yes.

JULIAN LEVI: I think that's the name of the Museum. I think she sold many, many things or collected many, many things for that museum.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But this is particularly monumental. It's very handsome.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Many of them are. They had a great sense of monumentality and simplicity I think some of these primitive. They were artisans who probably didn't even consider themselves artists or sculptors. They just made these things.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Do you think that that would justify the fact that art is what you read into the thing more than in the intention of the artist? Because in this sense maybe you are the one who is creating the art of that craftsman who was just trying to put together some things.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, I think so because from his point of view - well, it had a certain utility, it was a weathervane; it functioned. It has a balance, you see. The tail is large enough and it's balanced in such a way to swing with the wind so that it gave an accurate direction to the wind. And he also had a decorative impulse I suppose that made him want to do a rooster instead of something else.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Where did you find all these antique pieces that you have here?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, many in different parts of New England. Quite a few on Long Island years ago when they were easier to find there. And some here in New York. And where we've been able to we bought things that were not in a fashionable period because there are fashions, as you know, of course in antiques too. This American Empire is completely unfashionable, or was, when we bought it about twenty years ago.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Now it's very fashionable even in Europe.

JULIAN LEVI: Oh, yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: They have Early American, for instance, in Europe now.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Well, this is later of course. It's around about 1820, 1830 to 1840, you know, in that general period.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But are those also American Empire - those?

JULIAN LEVI: No, strangely enough, those are Italian fruitwood chairs that are in that same period, in the Empire period.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, because the feet are definitely Empire.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. You can see that structurally they're very strong even though they look very delicate. You're sitting on one.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And they're quite comfortable.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. And it doesn't seem weak, you know.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But they also have a sort of imagery which is very animal-like somehow. You have a feeling that they are the animal species somehow.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. It has a shape, let's say.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Incidentally, have you ever been interested particularly in other aspects of art, that is to say - well, decoration if you want to put it on that level, but I would say the architectural aspect of art?

JULIAN LEVI: No, not really. Except out of necessity. I've done some mighty funny things, as has most artists have who survived - such as designing fabrics, and decorating speakeasies. I did a night club years ago in Paris. This was the old Boeuf sur la Toit. The old Boeuf sur la Toit moved across the street. Somebody took over the old one and redecorated it and called it Chez Mr. Finney. And I did that. That was in - what? - 1925 or thereabouts.

COLETTE ROBERTS: So yours was Mr. Finney?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Chez Mr. Finney. But just to answer your questions I've never had any real interest in ---

COLETTE ROBERTS: No, but this Mr. Finney. How did this come about? Because after all it's always because you know somebody who knows somebody etc.

JULIAN LEVI: I knew a bartender who knew a girl who was a very close friend of the proprietor, the man who was going to open this place. And as near as I remember the money was coming from an American. And the person with whom I had to negotiate spoke only English so he was particularly anxious to have somebody who could speak English decorate it. And I got the job. It was one of those chancy, funny things that, when you're young and crazy, happen. But it seems to me I wouldn't be here now if I hadn't, from time to time, had things like that turn up.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Had some other means to fill a gap. Yes. As a matter of fact, one thing that people overlook completely, is that the problem for the artist to survive exists today just as much as it existed at any other time.

JULIAN LEVI: I think so.

COLETTE ROBERTS: What has loosened up, I think, is the teaching because now a modern artist is not considered an unwanted member of society so that he has a right to teach. But aside from that I think that the problem remains.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, I'm afraid it does. The number of artists has increased enormously and certainly the number of galleries. And I don't think the ratio of buyers to galleries and artists has really kept up.

COLETTE ROBERTS: It can be very good for an artist one year but he's never sure that the next year will be the same way.

JULIAN LEVI: Oh, exactly. At this particular moment in history I think we're dealing with a very fickle public.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, yes, very much so. And, you know, that's true in Europe now too. It used not to be because, in the past it was so hard for French artists, let's say, to have a reputation, that once he had one it was there to stay.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. I know that.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But it isn't true any more.

JULIAN LEVI: No. In a way it's unfortunate. I've always - you see I've long compared the United States adversely with France with the image that - well, even Mistinguett after she was seventy she was still dearly loved by the French public.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That's right. She had a job, yes.

JULIAN LEVI: She had a job, she was never discarded just because she had gotten a little older and lost her voice;

she still had her legs.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That's right.

JULIAN LEVI: And we don't treat our people that way here. And I suppose they don't any more in France.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, you know, I think it comes from something. It's not necessarily that they treat people better. They treat themselves better. Because they don't like to think that they've ever been wrong.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, that's very interesting. Yes, they don't discard anything. Because it would be a form of admission that an original mistake had been made.

COLETTE ROBERTS: They don't discard anything that they've loved. That's right.

JULIAN LEVI: That's an amusing idea.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But I think that that's it. But now it's not so true any more. I think that they accept the idea of having been wrong; and then it's finished.

JULIAN LEVI: They keep their cars for a long time without changing them. The models don't change so frequently. A Frenchman is very apt to keep a car for fifteen years or more and keep it in fine condition usually.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Did you see many French films when you were in France?

JULIAN LEVI: I regret to say that we hardly ever go to the movies. I think the last film I saw was on the boat, on the France. It was "Grand Prix", which was a film about racing. And it was very good. That's two years ago.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I'm curious to know if by chance you might have seen the film of Tati because this is an extraordinary film and I know you would enjoy every aspect of it.

JULIAN LEVI: No. I know something about it. We went to the movies about three or four times a week when Kuniyoshi was alive because he was crazy about movies. But he didn't care what he saw. If he saw the same film two or three times it didn't matter as long as he had some little images flickering in front of his eyes. And he wanted to go every night. And really we'd meet two or three times a week at least and have dinner together, the four of us, and go to the movies here in the neighborhood. And after his death I don't think I've seen five movies in that fifteen years.

COLETTE ROBERTS: It probably acted on him like a Turkish bath.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, it did. It was relaxing.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But, you know, I was asking this because so much of art in our time goes into the movies.

JULIAN LEVI: I know it. Yes. I really feel that I've been neglecting it and that I would be tremendously interested but I'm so far behind now that I wouldn't know how to catch up with all the things that have been done in the last fifteen years.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. It's not essential anyway. The point is it comes about.

JULIAN LEVI: No, it's not that. It would be a matter of interest however.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But Tati, one I would beg of you not to miss.

JULIAN LEVI: Jacques Tati.

COLETTE ROBERTS: The last one I think is one of the best. It's been commented on rather badly in France. I mean they didn't like it that much. England loved it.

JULIAN LEVI: "Hulot's Holiday" is one of them. You know, I read about these things and see them announced.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That was really a very, very good one. And then "Mon Oncle". But this one is about, about modern times and the absurdity of so many so-called conveniences.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. This is kind of the Chaplinesque idea, isn't it, of the victim?

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, in a way, it goes back to Chaplin certainly. But it's done with a certain different touch. Such as those marvelous doors in plain glass so that people never see that they are doors and break them and what results from it.

JULIAN LEVI: I know. It can be fatal.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But the man who is supposed to make money for opening and closing the doors in that restaurant decided that all he had to do was pretend, just using the handle.

JULIAN LEVI: That's wonderful. If I get a chance to catch up with it.

COLETTE ROBERTS: The French didn't like it so much.

JULIAN LEVI: They didn't? They have a very special taste in almost everything I find. Not always the greatest but it's quite special.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, timing has a certain element. And anything that bears a little too long on an idea is rejected. And this is sometimes quite long because it wants to be unbearable. So it is unbearable after a while.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. They are a rather impatient people.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, yes. There's no question about that. You did go to Italy, too, this time.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, we spent the last eight months in Italy.

COLETTE ROBERTS: How did it compare as to art tempo, let's say, with France?

JULIAN LEVI: I think at the present time more is really happening in Italy; although it's not so great. But it's much more lively in the art world in Italy than in France, where I found everybody rather depressed. The galleries seemed rather empty. I'd go to a show as good as a Miro show and find five people there.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That is absolutely so. Especially after the May events which certainly disrupted a lot of things.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. But this was before that. That was the summer before.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, yes. Did you find a different climate in Rome and Milan? Because there are some very good galleries in Milan.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, I know that, but not from my own experience. Because we didn't get to Milan. I got sick in Rome and it was ---

COLETTE ROBERTS: With what - virus?

JULIAN LEVI: No, it was a little more serious than that. So we didn't really do as much traveling as we had hoped to do.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I see. You didn't go to the Venice show?

JULIAN LEVI: No. That was on the agenda but we never got there.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, not if you were tired, of course. I don't know - people seem to say that the only good International this year was Dokumanta. That's been the general consensus.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, I hear that. I think some of the others are getting exhausted, for one thing. And I think novelty starts playing an important part in the big shows and jockeying politically and so forth.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. It might be fair to say that a big show is almost a production of its own, like theatre.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, exactly.

COLETTE ROBERTS: It doesn't really take into consideration the temperament of the artist perhaps as much as the show itself.

JULIAN LEVI: Exactly. And even the choice of artists is oriented toward showmanship, novelty, sensationalism. That doesn't mean that there aren't frequently extremely good artists. But the whole swing of the show is towards showmanship, and I suppose maybe it should be; I don't know.

COLETTE ROBERTS: That's pretty true. Did you go down the Italian Riviera on your way? Around Alassio and all those places?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. We stayed over in San Remo for a while, which is a charming town. I liked it, as a matter of

fact, much better than the French Riviera. It's quieter, simpler. It's not nearly as crowded and in many ways it's more beautiful. I happened to be on my way back from the Venice Biennale and I stopped in Alasio with an artist whose specialty was chairs. And it was in Alasio that we saw this incredible spectacle of a deserted beach with rows of chairs, completely deserted; I mean void. A thing which you would never see on the French Riviera.

JULIAN LEVI: You never find an empty spot. And then all the towns become cities. Cannes is a city. Nice is a city.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. Whereas those little places are still in horrible taste and lovely all around the Italian Riviera.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: The construction is certainly not beautiful in any way.

JULIAN LEVI: No. And domestic or small architecture in France is pretty bad.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, yes. Did you have American friends who were there with you?

JULIAN LEVI: A few. In France I was dealing mostly - I was working at a lithographer's shop, as I think I told you - and the other people working there were mostly either French or Norwegian or Belgian or people from the Netherlands. It was a real polyglot situation which was very pleasant to me. A great many of them spoke English, to my surprise and very well, particularly people from the Netherlands. I saw very few Americans. One day I was in the shop and I walked Balcomb Greene and his wife. Apparently he had used this shop at some time and knew these people.

COLETTE ROBERTS: In Holland I saw a great many Americans in Amsterdam. It seemed that there was quite a lot of ingoing and outgoing traffic.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, the traffic is enormous.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But in Italy I was wondering if there were many American residents there?

JULIAN LEVI: There are a great many. There are enough American residents in Rome to publish a daily newspaper in English, for one thing. It's the Rome Daily American. (The Herald is available there; it comes down from Paris). The Rome Daily American is circulated in Southern Europe and North Africa - Italy and Greece and North Africa. It's not a very good paper but it's in English. I was at the American Academy - I don't know whether I told you that - I was the artist in residence. So there was association with Americans there.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, you told me. But I don't know if we took down who was there at the same time.

JULIAN LEVI: Let's see, just give me time, Jack Zajac was the sculptor in residence. I was the painter. And a man by the name of Imbry, a very good composer from Berkeley, was the musician in residence. And the rest were archaeologists and classic scholars and so on. There were only four painters there and about the same number of sculptors.

COLETTE ROBERTS: When you first started to be interested in the arts did you find that what other artists had written useful to you? I mean things like the Journal of Delacroix?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, I read it much later. It seems to me now I realize that I should have done more reading perhaps when I was younger, a young art student.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Do you advise your students to do it?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Yes, I think it's important. I think a well-rounded person is apt to make better use of his talents. I think there's this terrible danger of becoming too narrow within one's craft. But maybe the books weren't available, or I was too young to know about the, or whatever there were many less. For instance, when I was a student at the Pennsylvania Academy one of our fellow students who, for some reason, was much more sophisticated than the rest of us - he was from New Orleans, maybe that explains why - he had books with reproductions of Degas, of Cezanne, of Matisse perhaps: and these were things that were hard to come by in that particular period. But these were rare, reproductions were -- there weren't any except in books. And these were very expensive books that were imported, of course. Nothing of that sort was being done in this country. In many ways this is how we first got to know of the existence of the Impressionists.

COLETTE ROBERTS: It was through books, yes.

JULIAN LEVI: And which were extremely scarce. And if it hadn't been for this chance encounter I think we would have had no knowledge at all about what was going on.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And now probably it's also what hastens all the trends to go faster in and out is because there's so much diffusion it becomes sort of worn out before it's digested.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Yes, I know. Right now I find that art students or, let's say, younger artists away from New York where they can see the real thing have grown terribly dependent on the art publications. They spend far too much time studying them and trying to imitate what they see in them, which is unrelated to them in any way. They see superficially. So from one end of the country to the other now you find the same picture being painted really because it's either a Franz Kline or a de Kooning or whatever.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Or a Kelly.

JULIAN LEVI: Or a Kelly, yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, I think it's probably if you have to go to two excesses I suppose it's happier to have the excess of reproductions rather than the lack of it.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, I would agree to that. We were really deprived really without knowing it.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I know that in France there were the Albums Drouet which was a great innovation at that time. Do you remember the Cezanne one and all those?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, I do indeed.

COLETTE ROBERTS: They were quite nice. But it was a great innovation at that time.

JULIAN LEVI: Of course. And they were very, very expensive.

COLETTE ROBERTS: They were quite expensive. Were you interested in foreign literature at all? I know that many artists read a lot of Russian literature.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, I did. I read a lot of Russian literature and French literature, in translation of course, in that period.

COLETTE ROBERTS: What, for instance? What was your favorite reading by epoch, so to speak, when you were a young student?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, let's say, we'd go through Dostoevski, Turgenev. We'd read a great many plays, incidentally - Ibsen, Shaw, Oscar Wilde. In French we'd read Balzac. And who wrote *Le Rouge et le Noir*?

COLETTE ROBERTS: Stendahl.

JULIAN LEVI: Stendahl. This will give you an idea of the period because I'm sure everybody else was reading these same books in that period.

COLETTE ROBERTS: What about Proust?

JULIAN LEVI: No. My wife and I were in Rockport one summer - this is a long, long time ago - and she read a good part of it aloud to me. She went through the whole thing in the summer and so I had it kind of secondhand and not at all complete.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, it's probably just as interesting because then it was a shared experience.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And people like Malraux? I'm just thinking of *The Voices of Silence*.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Well, you know, I've had that for about twelve years and I've never read it. I've picked it up and put it down, picked it up and put it down.

COLETTE ROBERTS: They're beautiful reproductions.

JULIAN LEVI: The reproductions are great. I've got a fairly good art library which I don't read very much. I look at the pictures. One of the best books, incidentally, from the point of view of text I think is Willensky's *Modern French painting*.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I don't think I read it.

JULIAN LEVI: It's an excellent book. I think he's an Englishman. It was published at least twenty years ago. Its

form is very interesting. He correlated historical events with things that happened simultaneously.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, it was a sort of sociological background.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. He'd say, let's say, in 1895 Seurat painted la Grande Jette at the same time Dreyfuss was on trial and at that very moment something was happening in Rumania. Well, I'm sure this is all very confused but this relation in time of simultaneous happenings created a focus that was extremely interesting.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And very useful too to really feel the background for the thinking.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. It's a fairly good critical work too on the quality of the works being done, the successes and the failures. You got a picture not only of Cezanne, let's say, and Monet but the whole circle around them, the lesser men, the men who've been forgotten, and so forth. It's good enough I realize now for the publisher to have brought out a new edition of it I think just two or three years ago. In other words, it had that quality.

COLETTE ROBERTS: What do you think in terms of modern American painting of the book of Hunter? I found it very useful for students. You know, the pocketbook edition of Modern American Painting and Sculpture.

JULIAN LEVI: I'm sorry I don't know it. A book I've found extremely good for students is a book written by Hiram Williams. Are you familiar with his painting?

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes.

JULIAN LEVI: He wrote a book that was directed towards students. I think it's very good. It's perhaps amateurishly written but it's got some really great material in it.

COLETTE ROBERTS: It really does. There's another book that I was thinking of, the Curiosites Esthetiques of Beaudelaire. You didn't -- ?

JULIAN LEVI: No. I know there are many lacunae in my reading. In other words, you know, I'm a half-educated man.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Who isn't?

JULIAN LEVI: But it seems to me that there are so many things that everybody should have read in a way and if you pass the time you're not likely to read them.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, I know. But that's why I'm quite interested to see the focus of so many things that you have there because it's really quite - it's very important. Especially when you teach, I think it's very important to be able to communicate with your students.

JULIAN LEVI: I've made use of it, I suppose, in a way, without being too self-conscious about it, because the men I studied with sort of seemed to transmit a great deal of knowledge that had nothing to do with painting or with art but indirect references to literature and other things that seemed to be to be very enriching.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. It's probably the only way you can teach painting.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. And you automatically sort of pass along the method that you were weaned on, I suppose, without thinking about it.

COLETTE ROBERTS: When you start your students, I mean you start them from nature?

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And do they under your influence, or on their own, go to abstraction? Or does this sort of evolve?

JULIAN LEVI: I think it's mostly on their own. Nothing is imposed on them really but -- by "nature" I mean the availability of a model and a still life that's pretty casually set up but with certain problems in mind. To the more advanced students, this can quickly move into a kind of abstraction, even making use of the available models and things.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, it's abstracted from nature anyway.

JULIAN LEVI: Right. Exactly.

COLETTE ROBERTS: I know those things are so different according to the person you study with and all that. But I think that you are all your life marked by your teachers.

JULIAN LEVI: I think so.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Particularly if they've been good.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. I think this is true of a great many people I know, and it's certainly true of myself. I think this was very true, let's say, of all the students of Hofmann.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes.

JULIAN LEVI: I don't know what it was they got but they got something that was tremendously important to them.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. Well, energy I think they got.

JULIAN LEVI: Energy. I've never quite been able to put my finger on what it was. I've tried to read some of the things Hofmann wrote and they're completely incomprehensible.

COLETTE ROBERTS: They're totally subjective.

JULIAN LEVI: They're subjective. And I guess he had a little difficulty with English besides. And, you know, it just seemed like meaningless tripe. I'm sure conveyed verbally, with the personality of the man, that it was very impressive, that it meant a great deal. They still worship him.

COLETTE ROBERTS: They do, yes. Well, the same thing with Albers. All those who studied with Albers have had the same thing.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But I think Albers taught them a discipline, whereas Hofmann taught them to reject discipline. So it's a very different ---

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, it's quite different. And there was a man at the Art Students League - I never studied there - Kenneth Hayes Miller. Who had quite a strong ---

COLETTE ROBERTS: Wasn't it mostly engraving and graphic art?

JULIAN LEVI: No. No. There was a famous printer in New York of lithographs and so on by that name.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Kenneth Hayes Miller?

JULIAN LEVI: No - Miller - I forget his first name. Kenneth Hayes Miller was a painter, I don't think a very good one; sort of like John Sloan but not nearly as good. And the only reason I mention him is he built up a fantastic sort of hero worship that's still felt there, and he's been dead for twenty years, I think.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, you would sort of wonder what he had to teach them.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Well, Reginald Marsh was a student of his. Isabel Bishop. Katherine Schmidt. Kuniyoshi.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, I suppose there was the personality that - I mean somebody was giving.

JULIAN LEVI: It must have been. Well, I knew the man. I didn't think his personality was very compelling but obviously I just mention him to propose there is such a thing as ---

COLETTE ROBERTS: He must have communicated with his students.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, in some way. He's still spoken about with great affection and quoted and so forth. Very much the same way that Hofmann is but in a different context.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, that's probably a form of presence that comes through.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But I remember in those days, which were actually Cubist days, when I was studying, I remember that Bissiere would come every year with another approach which was not painting and when you did something that was not painting that was the end.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: This was not painting. It varied every year that which was not painting.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes, but that was stimulating.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, yes. Because it's like a religion really.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. Novola told me an amusing story. He studied in Milano with the sculptor who did the horse.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Marini.

JULIAN LEVI: Marini, yes. He said that the studying consisted of Marini coming into the atelier every Friday, I guess it was, and walking through the studio saying "Bravo. Bravo. Bravo" and walking out of the room. He said this was his teaching. And he said for the rest of my life he could say he studied with Marini but this is all the teaching he ever got.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. It's sort of strange, I would have thought that Marini would have had a lot to say.

JULIAN LEVI: Apparently not. Now, you know, Tino is a very amusing person and he might have built this story up a little bit.

COLETTE ROBERTS: No, but it's probably true.

JULIAN LEVI: Marini might have lectured from time to time.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But he's very truthful.

JULIAN LEVI: Oh, yes. oh, Lord, yes! But in the studio he was that way. You know, I think Nivola was at the Academy in Milano at the same time as Saul Steinberg was.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh! That I didn't know.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. They were there at the same time. Now Steinberg has a place right opposite Nivola in Springs, and they're still very good friends, of course.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Well, they must share a certain sense of humor.

JULIAN LEVI: They do, yes.

COLETTE ROBERTS: But speaking of Steinberg, do you find that your students, for instance, react mentally or aesthetically to his cartoons in The New Yorker?

JULIAN LEVI: I think aesthetically really. I think, you know, aside from the humor and the wit which is pretty obscure sometimes ---

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes.

JULIAN LEVI: I think sometimes the beauty of the drawings, the line and the - I get a tremendous kick out of them. I have one that I keep hanging in my studio in East Hampton. It's the most perfect example of an artist's frustration in the world. It's a dog on a leash tied to a tree with a paint brush in his paw and his easel just a little beyond his reach. And to see this thing eternally, this dog trying to reach the easel - it's the kind of dreams we have, you know - a nightmare.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Oh, yes, it's absolutely so. And so witty of course.

JULIAN LEVI: Yes. And beautiful drawing besides.

COLETTE ROBERTS: And I suppose the dog will receive a diploma some time.

JULIAN LEVI: He'll get one of those wonderful Steinberg diplomas.

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes. They're marvelous. Well, I think that I shouldn't abuse too much of your time. Is there anything that you feel that we should go back to? We did go on to quite a bit of material but I'm not sure that I went through, for instance, among the younger generation who are the painters that you feel are still dealing with the problems of painting?

JULIAN LEVI: If you would only define who the younger and what age group it is ---

COLETTE ROBERTS: Yes, it is a little difficult it's true. Well, I meant younger generation, I would mean perhaps -

well, let's say, among the pop artists and among the minimal, who would appear to you to remain in a certain tradition of thinking in plastic terms?

JULIAN LEVI: Well, I think for instance, just offhand Jasper Johns is a very painterly painter, whereas I'm really bored with, let's say, Rauschenberg and with Lichtenstein. I feel they're certainly gifted but they really bore me. I don't find anything that seems to concern painting in their works. It's something else. And this something else may be great but it's not painting.

END TO TAPE 2 - SIDE 2

END OF INTERVIEW

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