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Oral history interview with Helen Marjorie
Windust Halper, 1994 Sept. 27

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Helen Marjorie Windust Halper on September 27, 1994. The interview took place at Halper's home in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and was conducted by Robert F. Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, I'm interviewing today Marjorie Windust Halper at her house in Provincetown, Massachusetts. This is Robert Brown, the interviewer, and the date's September 27, 1994. You were born in 1908, in Paris.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was your family's background and—were you French? No?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: No. I was—my mother was American from the Pilgrims back. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: I mean, she could trace back—she married my father who was English. He was a violinist and had studied with Ysaÿe and Ševčík, the great masters at the time on the continent. They met when I think they were both in Bayreuth, became engaged in a week, and didn't get married for a long time because mother was brought back here and he was brought back, and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was she and her family doing in Bayreuth? It was—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, because she was madly crazy about Wagner's music, and she—and music was her—she was a musician and a teacher, singing and various things like that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was she—where was she from in this country?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, she was—some forebears came—I don't know. Stratford, Connecticut. But she lived in New York City.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: And my grandfather—her father—was Dr. Walter Deforest Day, and he practiced in New York City. They lived at 56 East 34th Street, the building [laughs] still living to—there's a tailor in the ground floor; it was a brownstone, you know, and so forth. [02:00] And I think my grandmother was born way downtown in Cliffs—I don't know, one of those streets way, way down the—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: But they were thoroughly American from way back, and my mother was just very madly crazy about music. And so forth, so—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, were you the first child? Or were you—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: No. I had an older brother, Bretaigne Windust.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Bretaigne?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes. B-R-E-T-A-I-G-N-E.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: And he became very famous on Broadway as a director. He directed *The Lunch*. He directed *Life with Father*. Uh, *Arsenic and Old Lace*. Various, very well-known plays way back in those days. But I was always into—I was a second child. There was a third, who unfortunately died from measles complications when he was 14.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What are your earliest memories would you say that—as a very small child?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, I—as a matter of fact, I'm beginning to write down my memories

because all my friends tell me, you know, you've not led a humdrum life. You've been [laughs] all these happening right and left. And I started out with saying that my earliest memories were of being at the seaside on the British channel in France, and there were chalk cliffs with huge caves in them in which gypsies lived. And I remember these gypsies were wildly dressed people and running around with pots and pans all the time, and the French people kept telling us, "You children better be very careful, because they not only steal pots and pans as you can see, but they steal little children." [04:00] Those are my [laughs] earliest memories.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This would have been a place your family was spending the summer? Or did you live in the —

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, my mother—my mother usually took us there early, but my father had more or less given up being a violinist and had become a businessman in Paris. And he had to—he had certain vacation time, so we would go ahead, and sometimes we were—at the same place—that the Max Bohm family was; he was a painter of course.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Max Bohm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: And, um—but I remember one—I don't know whether it was the same place as were these—I've just spoken of, but I remember when my father came, we would go down to the beach and he would carry—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Just a second.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: And I remember he drove some hooks into the chalk cliff, because he carried our little tent, and it had to be hung on—and, um, because the French people undressed—this is what they did, apparently. They'd hang these little tiny tents—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —and undress inside the tent.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: They'd undress inside the tent. And I also remember that—I don't know if I was maybe three or four years old, or something or other—after we would have been paddling around with the help of our parents, they took us back, and we got dressed inside the tent, and then we had to sit on the beach and wait for them to get dressed. [06:00] Father poked his head out of the tent and saw me pick up my little skirts and run down into the water. Had to rescue me. [They laugh.] Then I remember being with—the same place where the Max Bohms were. It was in 1914, I think. By that time, I was six, I guess.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: And we were at Saint-Valery-sur-Somme, which is in—I don't know; Pica—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —Picardy, perhaps.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Picardy, or someplace.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: And, there was a very, very wide river mouth, and to cross over the river, they had small boats with—and had stretched a wire across the river with a ring on it, and then they'd tow the boat across back and forth; that was the way of getting back over or not.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You—your interest then—these were when you were still very young.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you considered a pretty lively child, running into the ocean as you did?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, I suppose so. I don't know; I mean, things happened that made me less lively later, but I remember—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: —I remember when I was four in Paris, and I woke up with a—sore throat and having trouble, and the nurse in the—the room with me, children's nurse called my parents, and father rushed out to get the doctor, because there were no telephones in those days. And I had diphtheria.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh. Very serious.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: [08:00] Very serious. Well, I don't remember much about the rest of it, except when I was recuperating I was left alone in the nursery, and everything had been taken out—more or less—except I had a little tiny doll. There were no toys; there was nothing, and I was left alone constantly. And right outside the nursery door there was a little, um—I don't know—well, a little place where mother had put a little tiny table where my tray was put with food on it, and I was told I was never to come out and touch that table. And one day, I remember I just got so bored—for days I'd been alone all the time with nothing to do—and I couldn't resist, and I pulled the little table in and—and [laughs] started playing with it. And mother found out, and she was furious with me. She punished me very severely.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.] Were there things you might have broken on the table? Or what was her fear?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: No, there was nothing on the table. I just wanted to play house with the little tiny doll on the table on the floor, which I—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Apparently you had to be kept isolated for—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —a period.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: After the crisis of the illness.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, you mentioned the Max Bohms being on the coast with you. Do you recall that family at all? Do you remember them as a small child?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes, I remember at Saint-Valery—I remember Mr. Bohm was very, very tall, and he teased me a lot. [Laughs.] And I was kind of scared with him; he was so tall, and my father was short, and we—the whole family. [10:00] And Mrs. Bohm—they were very poor at one point, I remember, but their second daughter, Betty, was the one I played with, and she had a little goat whom I loved to play with, and she wouldn't let me, and I was very jealous. [Laughs.] But that—we knew the Bohms, of course, and that's how we got to see them again. And the reason we—they brought us to Provincetown—Mrs. Bohm did. By that time, Mr. Bohm had died.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And they urged your family to come to Provincetown. Or Mrs. Bohm did.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes. Mrs. Bohm said to my mother, it was in—I think in New York that we met up with them again because we stayed on in—we—at the beginning of the war, 1914—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did you stay on in France?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: No, we didn't stay on in France, because my father wanted us to go to England where he thought we'd be safer from the Germans. And we were at Saint-Valery, and the Germans had surrounded us for a while, and—there was a lot of gun noise that I was told was thunder. And mother was there with us, and the three children—at first, she was told that she could pack a trunk to take to England, and then she couldn't. Then she could only less and less and less; my American grandmother was with us at the time. She sewed a flag to put over us so the Germans arrived that we were Americans, you see. And though there weren't enough stars, there were plenty—so it was an American flag with the proper amount of red and white stripes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [12:00] [Laughs.]

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: I've—the family still owns that. [Laughs.] And we—we just started—well, anyway, my father said, no, he'd preferred us to go to England. And—but he was working in transport and he couldn't be called up because he had stomach trouble and various—and was valuable at the transport business.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In France? Or—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: In Paris. At our apartment in Paris. But we—he wanted us to go to England and stay with his family in London, which mother didn't want to do very much because the climate was so bad.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm. It was that much better in France, she felt.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes. Yes. That was the reason we hadn't lived in England in the first place.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I should have asked earlier, now your father's name was—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: —Ernest Windust.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Ernest Windust. And your mother's name was—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: —Elizabeth Amory Day.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Elizabeth Amory Day.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So did you finally then go to England?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, finally, the French broke through again and we were able to go to Boulogne, I think.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And from Boulogne, you got to—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Somehow I remember having to sleep in a couple of armchairs along the way in Boulogne, and—my older—Bretaigne was taken to see the—take sandwiches and help the returning wounded soldiers, and that so upset him, he couldn't keep his food down for a day. And then—but anyway, we finally got over there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hm. But you were in England, you said, then from about 1916 to 1918.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: [14:00] Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And you stayed with your paternal grandparents? Or other relatives?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: We did at first, but mother decided that—oh, my younger brother got spinal meningitis and was in the hospital, and my mother was desperate because they couldn't seem to—they didn't know how to treat it at all, and finally, one of the—couple of the nurses said to them, "Mrs. Windust, find a house and take the child there and we will come and nurse him; we know better what to do than the doctors do. We'll pull him through."

ROBERT F. BROWN: [16:00] Mm.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: It was very serious, of course. So mother found a house, which she thought appropriate, and she examined it carefully and, she took it. And then she discovered bedbugs on the top floor where the servants had lived, and she told me that she knew that the authorities wouldn't let her bring the child—out of the hospital, so every night she hacked out the woodwork and disinfected everything, and out of the window she fixed a pulley with a bucket on it, let the wood down, and set it on fire in the backyard until she had convinced herself there wasn't any—there were no bedbugs whatsoever—

ROBERT F. BROWN: No place where they could lurk. Hm.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes. So they brought the child back, and we were sent to the country, of course. It was—some of father's friends. And, um—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —your mother nursed your younger brother.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes. And these two nurses came and pulled him through.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: So then the doctor said he mustn't live in London. By that time, the zeppelins were beginning to come through. And the Fokkers, and—bombed the place. And she tried to find a place in the country north of London where—but she couldn't because everyone who could had gone and left to the [laughs]—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —the same place. [Laughs.]

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: The same place. So she had to go down to the coast, and we were at Broadstairs between Margate and Ramsgate. And there we were bombed constantly, which was a pretty terrifying experience.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But then you realized that those weren't just, thunder; that was real. That was armament you were—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Oh yes. By that time, it was—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, you were of course in school these times, these years—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: No, I was not in school. My—my brother was—my mother kept me out of school for some stupid reason. I can't understand why.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did she teach you a bit at home? Or—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: No. But one day I—we were in a little cottage, and I remember some friends of her came over and said, "Marjorie has a pretty voice. Why don't you teach her, Betty?" So mother—didn't say anything, but a day or so later I remember her sitting me—she went to the piano and played arpeggio and said, "Sing this." So I did. And then, "Sing this." And then she looked at me with contempt and said, "Oh, I can't teach you. You don't open your mouth." Well I was very hurt, of course; I couldn't understand why, because at Christmas celebrations, I remember the doctor had a fine baritone and he sang "Good King Wenceslas"—he sang the king's part. [18:00] And then he asked me, because I had a good voice and could keep a tune, to sing the page. Which I did. So why did mother say I couldn't—well, I could never figure out. But I discovered years later that this was a threat to her singing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: She could—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: I was a threat to her singing. Some reason or other, I was a threat. Therefore, I was kept out of school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: She was to be the sole singer in your family.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hm. So you never had formal lessons in reading and penmanship?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Nothing. I—

ROBERT F. BROWN: No. You brother went—Bretaigne went—was going to school, in England.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes. He was going to school—and she had worked very hard on him, anyway. But she neglected—I mean, she had taught him a great deal before in Paris.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, when did you first go to school? You—you were back in Paris in 1918, I guess.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, then I was—I was so upset, finally, I said—I had tantrums, and I said, "You've got to send me to school. All the other children go to school. Why can't I go to school?" So finally she took me, and they put me in my age group, and of course they told me to learn the whole multiplication table overnight. Well, I never learned anything, and I got through about three-quarters of it, and the rest of it, I began stumbling when they called on me the next day. And I was so ashamed that I screeched and cried [laughs] and had a tantrum, and they sent for my mother and told her she'd have to help me, which she never did.

ROBERT F. BROWN: She never did?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No. And you were, by that time, how old? By the—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: I was nine, I think, at that point.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [20:00] Nine. Mm.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: But then we went to—when we were—I don't know, mother got very tired of being in Broadstairs, and we were being bombed there, and why couldn't we be in London, so we moved back to London, and—we went—all three children went to a wonderful school called Hudson School—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hudson—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: —and Mr. Hudson liked my little essays, and he liked what I did, and he was very encouraging to me, which was very, very nice of him. I had to catch up quite a bit.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But it was quite a liberal school?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: It was a very liberal school. We—all the boys and girls—and it was partly boarding and partly day school. And all the girls and boys learned the same thing—all of them learned a little sewing, a little cooking, a little this and that, and also—geom—I don't know; various things that boys—boys and girls learned everything—[cross talk]—it was a marvelous—I would—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Very unusual, I would think.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Very, very unusual. Then, um, we went back to—we were at—back in London, I guess, yes. And it was near Highgate, I think. And going to school every—at the end, when the great flu epidemic was killing off so many people. I remember the Hudsons made us gargle with permanganate of potash and spray—sniff it up our noses, and everything. And nobody at the school—none of the servants, none of the—everybody had to do this. [22:00] All the families of—like, our family—had to do it. Nobody got the flu. Not one.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That was a fairly frightening time, though, wasn't it? The time of the—of the influenza epidemic?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was your father with you these years? Or was he mostly—or did you live—you and your mother and siblings live with him in France from time to time? Or did—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well—well, um—let's see. When we went to England, it was—no, he stayed in France, and they were quarreling a lot apparently, by letter, and hadn't been getting along very well apparently before we left anyway. And then we came back—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were back in Paris, weren't you? Or—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, mother decided to go back to Paris, and by that time they were really very estranged. And—and then she was told that her aunt was—was going to leave her all her money, and was very ill, and if she wanted to see her alive, she'd better come. So she picked us all—three children up—and came—took us to America.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes, that was what—about 1918? '19, or so? Or 1920?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: 1920.

ROBERT F. BROWN: 1920? Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: And sure enough the aunt left her all her money in her house—and houses in various—so she didn't have to go back, and since they'd been quarreling, we never did go back except to visit my father occasionally.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So you by that time were what, around 12 years old? [24:00]

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did she explain why you weren't going back, or why you were going to stay in New York? Just—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, at first—we went to, um, New Haven, but she hated New Haven; she wanted to be in New York where her beloved opera [laughs] Wagner operas and opera in general were. So she picked us up and we went to New York and lived in New York City.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you go to—enroll in school right away then? When you got to New York?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes. We lived at 92nd near Columbus Avenue, and my brother went to Trinity School, which is a very good school around on 91st Street. I went to a little school in next—there was a church next door, and they had some kind of a church—school for little girls, so I went to that. And then later I went to Ms. Veltin's School, and mother got a scholarship every time for me because I could speak French, and Ms. Veltin was French, and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm. How was the—what was her name? Veltin?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Veltin. V-E-L-T-I-N. And her sister, Mrs. Sprague Smith. And they were very strict and never allowed any boys around. [Laughs.] And even when we had a dance before graduation or at the

end of the term, we had to dance with the girls, we weren't allowed [laughs] to have the boys—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: —it was very peculiar. But anyway.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you in these years—these would be your adolescent years—were you beginning to develop some particular strong interests of your own?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, I'd always liked to—painting—not painting, but drawing and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —sketching?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: [26:00]—sketching and doing little things.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What—what sort of things were of interest to you? Sketching things in nature? Or—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: No, little scenes of people doing this—or groups of people doing this or that, or—and I was always—you know—doing something like that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was that encouraged either in school or by your mother?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes. She seemed to think that was—because I remember, I—Mrs. Bohm had arranged in 1916 at Saint-Valery, she arranged a little group of children to do little accounts of this—illustrate things, and she said mine was the best, so that—kind of encouraged me. Well, it was in—in New York—I don't know. Anyway—and I think another very funny thing happened at the Veltin School, Ms. Veltin had always—or Mrs. Sprague Smith, I don't know, both of them together had always trained us as little soldiers. And we had to learn—in gym class, we had to drill like little soldiers. I was a squad captain, and I would say: "Squad right. Squad"—[laughs] and all that kind of—"Halt." And so forth and so on. And at the end of—when the school was about to close, and I was—they ran—they arranged to have an army general and officers of whom they knew take us up to the gymnasium at 116th—I think it is—Barnard College gymnasium and show off our prowess as little soldiers. [28:00] [They laugh.] And I can remember the look of amusement on these generals and people who were reviewing us with Ms. Veltin and Mrs. Sprague Smith.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were they getting you ready to form a female—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: [They laugh.] I don't know what they were ready—us; it was very peculiar indeed. [They laugh.] Very amusing kind of thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was the curriculum there? Was it perfectly standard, or was it eccentric in some ways? Or—is it memorable? At the Veltin School?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well I—I learned very little. I don't know why I learned very little, but I had troubles. After that, my mother put me in the—a school, somewhere. It was the beginning of—she liked these strange, experimental schools, and there was a Dalton School at the beginning that was very experimental. And, I remember my last year in the English class—

ROBERT F. BROWN: At the Dalton School?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: The Dalton School—they—I'd forgotten the name of the woman who invented that method. She couldn't keep any teachers, because the teachers just didn't know how to manage. We didn't have classrooms. There was the English teacher was in the English room, the math teacher in the math room—and so forth—French teacher in the Fre—and so forth—around. [30:00] And when you had done a certain amount of units of work in that subject, then you were supposed to get as many girls as possible together, and we would go to that teacher's room and have—demonstrate what we knew. But I would—I had went to—

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were partly self-taught then, you would—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes. But—but it didn't work very well, because—and I told—I told the—the woman who invented this that I was never going to be able to pass any college board exams because I was learning nothing. I said—for instance, the last English teacher we had, we kept having different English teachers every 10 minutes, it seemed like, in the last year, because they didn't know how to teach this. And no regular teachers could be found. There was an old lady who had taught—I don't know—sixth-grade children in public school or other, who was the English teacher in the last—full of—high school graduates, you see. And I remember she said, "Write a little—a little description for tomorrow." So I wrote a little description, and she had us read them, and then she said, "Well, that's very nice. That's very nice. That's very nice." I was learning

absolutely nothing. And I told my mother I wasn't going to be able to—well, naturally, I tried the exams and flunked the English [laughs] completely. Then I decided I'd rather be an artist, I didn't want to go on to college, and I'd better go to art school instead. [32:00] And Mrs.—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was your mother perturbed by this? Or did it bother her—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: No, it didn't bother her. But apparently there was a—a cousin of my mother's who was very wealthy, and she said, "I don't believe there's anything wrong with Marjorie's brains. I think she's been badly taught." She had me tutored at her expense by a very fine tutor who worked for one of the top-grade schools where her daughters had gone in New York. And this woman said she had never met a child less well-prepared than me. [Laughs.] So anyway, then in 1925—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did it work? Did the tutoring help you, somewhat?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes. I learned how to express my thoughts coherently [laughs] after that. So—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hm. Then all those years, evidently, your mother didn't—perhaps she didn't converse with you at length—at—when you were a child up at any rate.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: No, and I—I'd begun to be rather withdrawn, and was headed for trouble ahead [laughs] in that sense, but—because I never knew when I was a threat to her, or whether—you know, she was very peculiar to me. Sometimes she was fairly loving, and sometimes she was definitely not.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, then you—after the tutoring, that would be in the early 1920s, or mid-1920s?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And what were you set to do? You mentioned earlier that you were—you'd developed an interest in art.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: [34:00] Well—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —were you ready to do something?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well—what happened was that—in 1925, there was a—a memorial exhibition in New York of Max Bohm. And we went to it. And Mrs. Bohm and my mother took up again, and so—let's see, where were we at? What am I trying to—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were trying to tell me that your mother and Mrs. Bohm became friendly again, and that—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —and that led, what did that lead to with respect to you?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, what—what it led to was that—that—she said to my mother, "Mrs. Windust, Provincetown is more like a European fishing village than anywhere in America, and I think you'd like it there. Why don't you come up and visit us—at—in Provincetown, and see whether you like it or not?" So mother picked us up and we got to Provincetown—in the early days, a very long trip, it was.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was it—was it by—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: First we took a boat, and then we took a train, and it stopped at [laughs] every single station. [They laugh.] And we got here to Provincetown and the Bohms invited us to stay at their—Mrs. Bohm invited us to stay at their house up—the beginning of Provincetown's way up on the hill there. It's a huge house, and she was very hospitable, and mother fell in love with Provincetown and decided yes, indeed, we were going to spend the summer here. [36:00] So she rented a cottage in the beginning of Provincetown down on the water. We had no electricity; we had oil lamps and oil stoves for cooking, and of course there was no—we had a little tiny icebox and the iceman would bring ice. And—I don't know. I decided I wanted to go to art school. And so Hawthorne had a—had a class for beginners on the beach.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Charles Hawthorne.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Charles Hawthorne. And Joe Hawthorne was selling tickets to the little concerts he had at the art association—quartets. So—

ROBERT F. BROWN: He would—he would play at them?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes, he played in them, and I—we went to all of those, of course. They were—this beach class of Hawthorne's had a monitor on the beach who'd give us a little criticism, occasionally—come down and—and there was—everybody—I was one of the youngest, and everybody was taking care of me. We pitched our tent—easels—on the beach, and they had a little Portuguese child—slept on a barrel—against the sun, and we painted what's called mudheads. Have you ever seen a mudhead?

ROBERT F. BROWN: [38:00] I think—describe them.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: [Laughs.] Well, we painted with putty knives because we were the beginners, and Hawthorne used to say he didn't—wasn't interested in detail; he was interested in—and I have two right here which I remember I kept because he gave—when he—finally I got the gist of it and he gave me a very good criticism. He said, "That's very well indeed, that one. Oh, this is quite delightful." So I kept those two. I have them, and I—[laughs].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, were you regaining or acquiring a good deal of confidence? Under—because had you done some painting before this? Or was this—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, no. I'd never done any painting. I'd just—as I said, I always done on my own little stuff.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was Mr. Hawthorne quite gentle and pleasant as a teacher?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes, he was very nice. He was always very correctly dressed in white flannels—impeccable—and he would come into this large group of people up on the hill here in Provincetown and this—big barn where the advanced people studied. And on Saturday, everybody brought their mudheads and their paintings for the week [laughs], and they were stacked on a stack, several of them on this side and several on that side was on wheels, and then he would come in and we would all clap, and he would bow, and the monitors would set everything up and they would bring out this rack with paintings on it, and he'd say, "Whose are the first?" And you'd say, "Mine, Mr. Hawthorne." [Laughs.] Scared to death. [40:00] And he would criticize them, and then it would be turned around and a new batch, and this went on until the break. And then he went out, and that was on Saturday. On Friday, he gave a demonstration of painting in front of the class. Sometimes it was on the beach, some—sometimes if it was wet, it was inside. And he would paint a portrait. And he was a real virtuoso and just draw profiles accurately and very beautifully and patches of color the skin, and—just beautiful. And he was terrific, that way. And come the winter, Mrs. Hawthorne told my mother, "Marjorie learned to—needs to learn to draw. She's got a very good color sense, but she needs to learn to draw." And she recommended the National Academy in New York City—where we were going in the winter times, of course—so I enrolled. And I was bored to death. [Laughs.] They made you—we started out in the beginner's class, and you had to get charcoal paper and tickle your charcoal into a point, and then spend hours just making these little gradations of—we had to copy Greek statues, plaster statues, heads or full-length figures, and you had to tickle them just perfectly, and I was bored to death. And there was a sub-teacher, an Irish woman, and she took one look at me and she said, "Marjorie, [laughs] this place is going to get you down. [42:00] I think you'd better go down to the Art Students' League, because there's a man named Vaclav Vytlacil—you're a colorist, and you would be interested in him. He has just come back from Munich where he studied with Hans Hofmann, and he is teaching the Hans Hofmann method." So I wanted to do that, of course, because I was just was bored to death [laughs] doing this tickling business. And I—everything was very academic, and I was—

ROBERT F. BROWN: They called it tickling.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Because it was so tiny—fine work.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And it was drawing from casts.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sculpture. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: On charcoal with charcoal paper.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So you—was there any opposition to your going to the Art Students' League?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, the only trouble was—it was that it would cost \$15 a month, which was kind of expensive for us at the time, I guess. But I—there was an—in the Vytlačil class—there was a place for a monitor, and I got it for nothing, I think.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you became the monitor.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: I became the monitor, and I would set up the—we always worked from a model, and at first I didn't do very well, and then I didn't know how to organize, of course, abstractions. But after a while, I remember Vytlačil pointed my work to a nude man who had come in and said, "Look more like that." So I knew I'd finally [laughs] gotten it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [44:00] How was he as a teacher? Vytlačil?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, he came every day and worked very hard on us and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —which was—did some of the teachers not work so hard—would you say?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: No. No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He did, though.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: He did.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were fortunate in that.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes. And—and—but he was not teaching his own; he was teaching pure Hans Hofmann, which was very interesting because I, of course, knew Hofmann quite well later with the—the gallery and everything.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did he announce that that was his mentor? That Hofmann had been his mentor?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes. Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Or was it just generally known?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And what did that mean in terms of your study—your studying? What were you studying—drawing—at this time?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: No, this was pure color and abstraction from—from models, and so forth. But it was always that you had to use the color in a way that it would go like Raphael's plan of—of—the composition of color had to go from entering the picture and proceeding—leading your eye backward into space, either right or left, and then bringing it back to the picture plane afterwards to end. And color was in—brilliant color could be used as long as it did this in an orderly way. [46:00] So the—it wasn't just putting color on any which way, it was a definite plan like Raphael's.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: So, um—

ROBERT F. BROWN: And was Vytlačil a fairly warm person? Or how would you describe him as a teacher?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, at first he didn't think much of me, but then when I—when he pointed me out as a—[laughs.]

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HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: So—

ROBERT F. BROWN: So Vytlačil, you were with—what—for a year or two?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Just a year.

ROBERT F. BROWN: A year. And was your plan to stay on for very long? Or did you have a—what were you aiming for?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, I mean, I—I wanted to be a painter, but women were having a very,

very hard time getting into anything. Wasn't until much later that galleries accepted women. And, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did you wish to stay on at school—stay on at the Art Students' League?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, then I—yes, I decided that—but I still needed to learn to draw, so I decided I'd work with Thomas Benton because he had a night class—it was cheaper. It was—well, anyway, so I went and studied with him. And he also was, of course, interested in composition. But he was interested in movement and space being achieved by the eye being led, for instance, this way.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hm. You mean in a sort of a not dynamic way but a—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes. And we studied Rubens a lot in his class. So I think the combination of Vytlačil and the Hofmann idea, and Benton's ideas were very good combination for me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [02:00] Was Benton—how did he teach? Did he come and talk to you a lot, or did he work—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: No, he hated—he hated to come to class. And he—he thought it was absolutely useful—useless to teach women. So I used to fool him. I would leave my work and get up and stand around on the side when he came reluctantly in, and every once in a while he'd say, "Well, who did that?" And [laughs] I said, "It's mine, Mr. Benton." And he'd get—was quite interested in some of the things that I did. And it's strange, because I remember once, I said to him, "Well, Mr. Benton, I have to change this because the—the platform is standing up instead of lying down." And he said, "Yes, but it's beautiful color. Don't touch it." And I learned years later, I saw a small exhibition of his in New York City in which he had shown great interest in abstract color and very great sensitivity to it, which he didn't show very much of in his own work. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So you were with him, and then other teachers you had—at about this same time? Or—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, finally, no, I stopped going. And there were problems with—my mother was ill, and I wasn't very well, and we lived—we'd given up our New York apartment, and we had an apartment over on the East Side after 92nd Street in which the Hapgoods—Norman Hapgood, the editor—

ROBERT F. BROWN: [04:00] Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Norman Hapgood.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes. And his wife, Elizabeth, was very beautiful and somewhat younger than he, and they lived—she was the daughter of a friend of my mother's, who also lived in the building, and we'd been invited—it was a small cooperative, 88th and Madison—and was quite exciting because Elizabeth Hapgood had been—studied in Russia, and she had learned to speak Russian like a Russian, and when the Moscow Art Theatre came to New York, she entertained them all in her apartment and invited mother and me and Bretaigne, and he met Stanislavski, of course—and I met Stanislavski, but of course we couldn't speak any Russian. And then Mrs. Chekhov became quite palsy with my mother for—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mrs. Chekhov.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes. And, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was she with the group? Or was she—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes, she was with the group. She was an actress as well as a—and so we had—it was a very kind of thrilling, entertaining time, there. And I remember my brother went to—what was the college he went to?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Where was it, in New England or New York?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: No, it was in New Jersey.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Rutgers?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Princeton.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Princeton. And he—of course—was very interested in theater. [06:00] He had been ever since he was a child, and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What had he been interested in? Do you recall? Would he talk about it?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, I remember as children in Paris that we always had made a little—we had a little wooden theater, and he'd—I made all the puppets and dolls, but he was declaiming Shakespeare and so forth and so on, all—and he is an a—he could be an actor as well as a director, because he—my mother said that when he was a very small baby, he would imitate the ducks and the—and—or he'd imitate somebody who'd—the nurse who had taken him to the Champs-Élysées, and—[laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: So he had wonderful—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: So, he—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —wonderful talent in the—.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes. But when he went to Princeton, he put on extraordinary plays on a little tiny, tiny theater, that they had—the undergraduates had. And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Plays of his own—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: No, they were—no, they were—well, no. And I remember he got commendations from the higher-ups at Princeton who said it was extraordinary what he could do on the little tiny theater that way. And he just was naturally inclined to be part of theater.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [08:00] Well then—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: But then he became a director on Broadway, and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you saw him very regularly, then.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes. And we used to go down and buy tickets for very little and stand in the back of theaters. We'd get tickets for very little for all the best plays in New York at the time. That was pretty darn nice.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you and your brother quite close?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes, we had very little rivalry—sibling rivalry—because he saw that my mother treated me without much love most of the time, and—and so there was nothing [laughs] to be rival about. But when my younger brother came along, that was a different story. They used to fight like demons all the time; I was scared to death. [Laughs.] But—so anyway, he went onto that, and of course, I liked Mr.—oh well, I guess that's not relevant, but—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What's that? Was there somebody in the theater? Or—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: No, Mr. Hapgood.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: I used to—I think I had—I needed a father figure, but—and he supplied it for me [laughs] for a while. He used—we used to go up on the roof and throw discs and catch them just for exercise and so forth and so on.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, what were your pl—as your, in the later 1920s, your plans. Were they fairly gelled or were you still casting about? [10:00] Were you painting as much as you could? Or—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, I—yes, I came up and decided after Mr. Hawthorne died—

ROBERT F. BROWN: That was about 1930, I believe, yes?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes. And I'd stopped going to the Art Students' League, and so forth. And my mother had bought this house down on the water.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Had she bought that by the 1920s or so? Or—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: She bought that in 1930. And she put it in my name immediately. And I wasn't very well, and I wasn't psychologically in a good condition, either. And—but I painted on my own, mostly outdoor landscapes and there were no portraits or anything like that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, do you recall some of the people you became chummy with down here? You've mentioned Hawthorne. Did you know mostly people who were in his circle? Or was it such a small place that you got to know practically all the artists and writers who were here at the time?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, what happened was that—when—after my mother's death, I lived alone for a while. But then—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was that—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: —Nat came along.

ROBERT F. BROWN: She died in the early '30s, your mother?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: She died in—no, in the late '30s. And anyway, I had the house down there, and I rented part of it to a lot of psychoanalysts of the William Alanson White Institute. [12:00] The president of it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was this a place in—where various psychoanalysts would summer, at the time?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, yes. They came—there were a lot of psychoanalysts, and I rented to quite a few of them, and—and William Alanson White Institute, mostly, because Clara Thompson had been the head of that, and she had a cottage here.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Clara Thompson?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes. Dr. Clara Thompson. And I don't know; I got in a bad state emotionally, I guess. And I told Dr. Clara Thompson that I thought I needed some help. And she said, "Yes, I've been watching you for some time, Marjorie, I think you do." So I was sent to a psychoanalyst in New York to whom I paid \$10 an hour, and he took me because he said he realized I was in a very bad state and I really needed the help. So I was helped a great deal. And, in the summer of course, we were here, and in the winter in New York.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you recall some of the artists you knew in those early years here in Provincetown? Or in New York? You mentioned Hans Hofmann, when did you—did you actually first meet him around this time?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, no. What happened was that the—it was the beginning of the HCE Gallery after I—knowing Nat—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, that's somewhat later, though. Isn't it? Yes. Yes.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But in the '30s, who did you know here among the artists? Did you know—well, let's say—Ross Moffett? Was he someone you would have—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: [14:00] Yes, I knew him slightly.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Edwin Dickinson? Did you know—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Oh yes, I knew the Dickinsons quite well. And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he—was he very much admired at that time as an up-and-coming artist? Or—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: I don't think—no, not yet. But he lived next door with his family, and they were terribly, terribly poor. And since he got a little bit of—very little money from some uncle, he couldn't get on WPA because he was too honest and say he needed the money desperately. Well—they—they lived ne—between my house on the water and the motherboard and the street, there was a house, which was not very nice. But anyway, they lived upstairs, so I got to know them pretty darn well. And I remember his clothes were always frayed but very clean, and he was always very meticulous about everything. And I remember during one summer, the whole West Coast navy apparently came to Provincetown and anchored out here, and the only people I could rent to—part of the house down there—was to navy officers' wives. So I remember meeting them, and they were having big parties. The naval officers always got into civvies the minute they came into shore in Provincetown, and everybody in Provincetown entertained them a tremendous amount because they were—poor soldiers were not entertained at all. [16:00] [Laughs.] But anyway, I remember going to a party in my tenants'—down on the water—a little cottage down on the water, which was part of the one we had down there. And I was talking to this rather nice gray-haired man, and he—we were looking over the harbor, and he was asking me questions about things, and so forth, when my tenant came up to me and said, "Why, Marjorie Windust, you vamping [ph] the captain of the S.S. something or other." [Laughs.] And I said, "Oh, really? I didn't know he was the captain." And he took quite a shine to me and invited me out on his boat, and he was quite taken with Edwin Dickinson. And I remember he invited us for lunch on the S.S. whatever it was. Dickinson said, "May I bring my little sketchpad—little equipment and draw a little sketch on your boat?" And the captain said, "Oh yes, of

course." And I said, "Well, then I'd like to bring mine, too." And he said, "Yes, you certainly may." So we were ferried out there, and they had—I don't know. All the officers were lined up, and we had to shake hands with them all when we came in, and then we went to lunch. [18:00] And after lunch, Dickinson said, "I'd like to now make a sketch." So we went out on deck and I started to work and he couldn't seem to settle down. Finally, the captain went up to him and said, "Mr. Dickinson, I see something's wrong." He said, "Yes, I don't like the angle of the gun turret,"—the gun. So orders were given, and slowly the turret turned, and Dickinson said, "Right. Stop it there." So they did, and he sat down and did a beautiful—gosh—beautiful little sketch. I did something or other. We presented it to the captain, and that was that. Then they left, and some other captain took—was destined—detailed to take over, but I didn't like him very much. And by that time I was [laughs] fed up with the navy, and I wanted to get back to painting, so I went out and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you involved with the—any of the artists' organizations here in those years? Did you—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, from the very beginning, I'd been able to show in the modern show of the Provincetown Art Association. And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Those are years when there was a bit of tension between the more conservative artists and the more advanced ones. Is that not true?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Oh, they always fought. And they fought about which months each would show, because August was a better month than July, and that kind of thing. But they always fought. And—well, anyway, then I met Nat, and we got married.

ROBERT F. BROWN:[20:00] And he—he was the young writer?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: He was the young writer, and he had been on the WPA for four years in succession. He was coming out of the army because he'd been stationed in Tehran during the war years. And he came back to Provincetown, he was still in uniform when I met him. And we clicked and decided to get married. And then came a time when we were very, very low on money, and I said to Nat, you know, "You've got to do something." And I'd been renting to Sam Kootz, the cottage on the water. And Sam Kootz—every day, they'd go swimming when the tide was high together, and Sam would say to him, "Nat—you know, Nat—if you"—oh, in the meantime, my brother had torn down the house where the Dickinsons had lived, and it was a big yard. Big yard. And Sam Kootz kept saying to my—to Nat, "If you build a gallery in your backyard, there, we could make a lot of money." Because he had—on the walls of this cottage—he had—well, he had a Motherwell, and he had a Hofmann, and he had a this and a that. And apparently he wasn't supposed to sell from there but he did. [22:00] The critics discovered, you know, that he had these pretty darn good artists with him. And—so when he—when he said that, at that time, my brother apparently had owned that house, and that's the reason he'd torn it down, and—and we made some kind of arrangement. I said to him, "Well, you know, maybe you should take up Kootz on this, because here's an opportunity maybe you could make a lot of money. He swears he could make a lot of money here." So—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was Kootz a pretty persuasive person?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes. At first I didn't want to rent to him without knowing much about him, because I just didn't like him as a person, and—but Nat said, "Well, come on, you know"—I said, "Well, you know I don't really trust him very"—he said, "Well, my brother's a lawyer and he'll arrange something or other so we can have," you know, "he can't cheat us." And after about a year, the public—he didn't want to have very many people in the gallery. We built the gallery, see, and it was to be the Kootz Gallery of New York and Provincetown. But people got a little tired because he wouldn't take on more than a very small handful of artists, and the public got tired of seeing the same thing over and over again after too long; they weren't coming in and they weren't buying, and he decided he'd made a mistake having this gallery and wanted to bow out. [24:00] We wanted him out [laughs] because things weren't working out at all, and so Nat finally got the gallery. And Nat said to me, "I'll call it Halper Gallery." And then the second year after Kootz had left, a writer named Cuddihy had fallen in love with artists and their work, and then all the work had been—Nat had started showing after Kootz, he liked them very much and everything. And then suddenly in the middle of the season, he decided he didn't like them; in fact, he bought the Chinese artist—what was his name—he's still alive.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Chun-Yi, was it? No.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Oh, I don't know—I'm get—

ROBERT F. BROWN: So was your husband in any—pleased to be able to buy out Kootz and run the gallery on his own?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, he thought it would be rather interesting, and he felt he could do it. Anyway, but this guy, Cuddihy, decided he didn't like anybody but Motherwell.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: And he was making it very difficult for Nat, so Nat got rid of him and then suddenly decided he would never again have a partner; he'd run it on his own. So he got a lot of the artists together and had a big gallery and worked it out finally and it became a very great success. And he asked me what to call it. [26:00] And I knew that his great passion in life was really not art but it was James Joyce—specifically his writing of—and he—

ROBERT F. BROWN: *Finnegan's Wake*.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: —and since he called the gallery Halper-Cuddihy Gallery, H.C., I said to him, "Why don't we call it H.C.E.?" So we had a—that was the name of the gallery was the H.C.E. Gallery, which is of course the eternal man in *Finnegan's Wake*.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So it dovetailed very nicely.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: It dovetailed—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Would you like—those days would have been the beginning of the early '50s or so, right?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes, it was. The early '50s.

ROBERT F. BROWN: As you look back, were those very nice days in terms of the—your career and his business?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, of course, because he showed me in the H.C.E. Gallery and I—and another gallery here in town, and that was, I think, important to me. But finally, what happened was that the seashore we—all the artists had campaigned to keep Provincetown out of being overbuilt and the dunes all ruined and everything else, and we had petitioned and worked very hard at it, and so it was—and—the reason he got out of the gallery business was because there was no place to park here anymore—

ROBERT F. BROWN: And with the development of the seashore, did that bring even more people down?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: [28:00] Yes. Of course. Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: A great many tourists appeared, which of course, now makes it impossible here in the summer. But at least it saved the beauties of Provincetown. So—

ROBERT F. BROWN: So eventually it was just nearly impossible to get around. Also, I think he mentioned to me, the heyday of important collectors coming to Provincetown was the 1950s into the '60s.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And he felt that it goes in cycles, and that—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —they know—they ceased really coming very frequently, by say, the 19—early'60s— [28:45]

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, they—they told him—a lot of them who lived down on the Cape said, "You can't come up to Provincetown and park anywhere and see any artist you want to and galleries you want to," and—"now, because these tourists are just jamming the place up." And so that was the reason Nat decided to give up. And he told me, "Well, frankly, I'm sick and tired of collectors. They don't collect because they love paintings; they collect primarily—they think it's going to make them money. And I'm sick of artists because [laughs] they all want—" Well, anyways, so he decided to quit having the gallery there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, you showed, though—among your first shows were at the Art Association.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes. Did you begin showing in the 1930s—would you say?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: I've forgotten when I started—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mentioned you were in the modern division or section in the '30s.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes. Yes. And I knew most of the artists that were around: Phil Malicoat, Bruce McCain—and also the modern group. [30:00] And they couldn't understand why I switched from being very interested in them and then getting to know, you know, getting in with the moderns. But there was always this great tension between—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, did people like Malicoat and McCain feel sort of passed over, you think, in time?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, I think Malicoat had a very unfortunate experience, because he could do very beautiful things, I think, in his way. And—but he—after Dickinson had had such success in New York, somebody arranged to have him have an exhibition in New York, and unfortunately the critics panned it, saying he was just a copyist of Edwin Dickinson—which isn't true, exactly. He had other sensitivities beyond that. Which was a shame. But anyway, those were the conditions that had always existed, you know, there was—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mentioned earlier—by the 1950s, there was another notable art school here at least in the summers, Hans Hofmann was teaching here, so—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you get to know him at that time, or had you already seen him because you were very interested in what he was doing when you were at the Art Students' League years before?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, I was very interested, yes, but I also, we got to know him because he was in Nat's gallery. And at the very end, after Kootz left, he had to leave because he came to us and said, "I hate to do this because I love you very much, and I—you know how I hate Kootz—and—but he's making things impossible for me. He owes me so much money that—and pay"—[laughs]—"I have to leave you, Nat." [32:00] So—but we were very good friends anyhow, so—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was his personality like? Can you describe him a bit? Hofmann?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, he was primarily interested in art. Everything. I mean, he'd come into your apartment and he'd see a tile, and he'd pick it up and look—examine it very carefully. He always examined everything very—if you had a painting on the wall, you know, he'd tell you whether he thought it was good or not. He liked my work, and I liked his very much.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Would you say that was a—more of a European characteristic? A European modernist, that could be so consumed with the art? I mean, because some people here worked at other things, had to do all sorts of things to keep going, didn't they? And—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes, and the Hofmanns were very poor at one time, their—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —whereas Hofmann was able to or at least chose to be completely absorbed in his trade, his craft, his—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes, he certainly was.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: And he had a big school here, and he had a big school in New York, and—but he was very poor and had to do this. [34:00] He bought the house where the marine painter lived up the end of—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh. Frederick Waugh?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Frederick Waugh. I knew Frederick Waugh quite well.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, you did. Yes. Because he lived into—the first decade that you were here or so, he was still here.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: He was a lovely old apostle-looking man. His wife disapproved—he told me, you know, "I like to make some abstractions occasionally, but my wife won't let me because [laughs] I can't make any money."

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, I see. And she was quite interested that he make money.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes. But Frederick Waugh had the most marvelous rugs on the floor that she would—they want—replicas of in the Metropolitan Museum hanging on the wall in [laughs] New York. Oriental Waugh.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: And he had a beautiful studio and—and when Hofmann bought the place finally, his school was there. Up the other end of town.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, he was one of the most highly paid artists through—at least through the 1920s, I think. Frederick Waugh.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Probably, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So Hofmann—did you take classes or anything with Hofmann? Or—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, I started one in New York but then my mother grew ill—I was at the League; he was—taught there. And I worked for about a month with him, but I'd already worked with Vytlačil, you see, and I knew what—but my mother got sick, and I had to take care of her. [36:00] So I stopped. I had wanted to branch out on my own long before, but as I said, I'd had troubles, and the doctor said I wouldn't be able to. So I stayed and took care of her, and later I became—I went to a psychoanalyst and got some help.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Got free of that. Well, did much of your—in the later years, did—you would always spend about half or more of the year in Manhattan, and then about half here?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes. But then, at one point, Nat decided that it was much to our advantage tax-wise that we spend more time here and we became citizens of Provincetown, voted up here, and so forth. And you have to spend six months and three days—[They laugh.] To be a resident, which I am now. So I always spend six months and three days here.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, have you—would you say you're sort of a split existence or did the living in New York and living here in Provincetown, one blends pretty nicely and seasonally into the other?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes, I think so, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You weren't like your mother who had to be where the opera was and all of the great institutions in the city.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: No, but I—I liked being in New York very much because, after all, it gets pretty dull here in the winter time, I think. But nevertheless, this is what is now in store for me; I'm going to try and live up here—

ROBERT F. BROWN: [38:00] Try and stay here.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: —to begin with, I have a small co-op apartment in—north of Columbia in New York, and it's become rather dangerous territory up there, so—we have armed guards over the project, and you can't go out at night [laughs].

ROBERT F. BROWN: No. That's pretty terrible. Well, looking at this—at Provincetown as an art colony, where—would you say the '50s were a high point for you here? Or would you—could you generalize in any way like that? I mean, that's when Nat had—his gallery was becoming more successful—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes. Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But in general, in terms of the Art Association kinds of dealers, collectors, was that a high point, would you say? Or has it better since, say in the 1980s—was that a fortunate time as well for Provincetown?

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes. Well, it goes in cycles of course. Well, it's pretty nice now, you know. I mean, you know, after all, one can be close to Boston and so forth. I think I'm going to miss not being in New York because I mean, after all, the Metropolitan Museum, the Modern. You know. But I'm getting too old to be able to get around all this. So I think it's time for me to pull up stakes down there. [Laughs.] Which I'm going to try and do next year.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now, you've indicated that you're now a life member of the Art Students' League. What did that imply? You're just a supporter of them or—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: No, no. [40:00] One becomes a life member if one has studied there, which of course, I did with Vytlačil and Hofmann and—briefly with Hofmann, and Thomas Benton.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Thomas Benton.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: And as a matter of fact, I'm a life member of the Provincetown Art Association, because way back Nat and I paid to become so. And—which doesn't mean that I don't contribute more now, but I mean, I don't really have to.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, you—do you paint quite regularly now? Do you continue—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, I have. I have been painting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —and you reckon you'll continue that here in Provincetown—

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sure. What sort of—what have you evolved into as a painter, would you say? What sort of a —

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, I went through a period—a very peculiar period, like [laughs] that up there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Centaurs and other—almost folk figures.

HELEN MARJORIE WINDUST HALPER: Well, the old Greeks combined animals and humans, and I just went a step further. And I like painting and I love painting abstractions just for the color arrangements, and I've done a great deal of that. And I still exhibit at the Art Association. And I may exhibit again in New York. I don't know what I'm going to do. Depends on my health and, you know, I'm getting on in—. [42:00] [Laughs.] My energy, too. So—

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]