



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Ralph Coburn,
1995 May 25-June 23

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

Contact Information

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Ralph Coburn on 1995 May 25 and June 23. The interview was conducted by Robert Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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

Interview

ROBERT BROWN: His house in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Robert Brown, the interviewer and this is May 25, 1995.

I thought, Ralph, we'd just start maybe with your -- some of your early memories or maybe you could say a little bit about your family background. You told me your father was a Harvard graduate, class of 1910 and you were raised --

RALPH COBURN: No, 1911.

MR. BROWN: 1911 and he was from this area. Is that right?

MR. COBURN: He was from Lowell.

MR. BROWN: From Lowell, Massachusetts?

MR. COBURN: Yes, he was born and brought up in Lowell. He comes from a -- he came from an original family, I guess you would call it. His ancestor came over, I believe, in 1630 or so. Went to -- landed in Ipswich which makes me think even in 1630 ships were landing in Ipswich, Massachusetts, you know, 10 years after the pilgrims which makes me think, "Gee, this area was pretty well settled in those days."

At any rate, he went up to -- I guess his ancestor was an indentured servant and went up to -- was given a piece of property in Dracut, Massachusetts and that part of the family comes from Lowell from many, many -- yes, across the Merrimack from Lowell. Many, many, many generations.

At any rate, my dad went to Harvard. He became a teacher. He taught Latin, Spanish, French. He was a linguist. He was one of those people who could learn a language very quickly. He could go to a country and within two or three weeks, speak fluently. He had that kind of talent. Unfortunately, I don't have it.

MR. BROWN: Was the -- would his family -- did they have a tradition in later generations of sending people to Harvard? Or was he --

MR. COBURN: No, I don't -- I think possibly he was the only son who ever went. His fathers and his grandparents were all in trade and business in Lowell. Their ancestors were farmers.

MR. BROWN: But that was -- in Lowell, that was the time of great prosperity, wasn't it? The late 19th century?

MR. COBURN: Yes, this was -- yes, exactly. This is when the mills, the cotton and the woolen mills were thriving and he -- at any rate, he was one of three brothers and I believe he was the only one of them that went to Harvard. I don't know what happened to the other two; where they went.

He served in the -- after he left Harvard, before the First World War, he did a grand tour to Europe. He landed a job at the University of Madrid teaching. I think he taught English there. And then he went to Grenoble in France and he taught there, also. Then he came back. The War -- First World War started and he served as a private, I believe, in the First World War where he met my mother in Paris.

MR. BROWN: In Paris?

MR. COBURN: My mother had --

MR. BROWN: What was she doing there?

MR. COBURN: Was born in England from a part-English, part-French and on her father's side, I think, her grandfather was Egyptian. He was -- they were in the importing business and she had a lively childhood of growing up in Brussels; Tunis; Turin, Italy; London; Glasgow and eventually Paris. They settled in Paris before

the First World War and they lived -- uh-oh. They lived -- that's the fax.

MR. BROWN: So what was she doing during the war when your father met her?

MR. COBURN: She was working. She, too, could speak a number of languages.

MR. BROWN: Sure, with that background.

MR. COBURN: Yes, and she was working at the American Express and my dad came in, took one look at her and there it was. The, you know, swept her off her feet and they eventually got married.

MR. BROWN: He was still in the army?

MR. COBURN: He was still in the army. He was decommissioned. Came over to the United States, went back to marry her in 1920 and brought her -- they had a great honeymoon, I think, in Rome. And he came back, got a job at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis.

MR. BROWN: As a what? A language instructor?

MR. COBURN: He taught language and he -- then that is where I was born in 1923 and then he had a job at St. Johns College in Annapolis, Maryland.

MR. BROWN: Which was a very liberal --

MR. COBURN: Yes, that had the program of 100 Great Books, I believe. And they -- the students studied those great books and they got a complete liberal arts education.

MR. BROWN: Do you remember either of those places, Minneapolis and Annapolis? You were just tiny.

MR. COBURN: No, I was one year. I think I left Minneapolis before I was even one-year-old and I don't remember Annapolis at all. My first memory is in Miami Beach.

MR. BROWN: Now that's where -- what? About 1926 you went?

MR. COBURN: '26, yes. So I would have been three or four years old. I have a vague recollection of -- my dad was somehow contacted to run a country day school in Florida, in Miami. And that school -- he became headmaster of that school. That school prospered. It moved to Miami Beach. It started small, but then it became very prestigious. It was a good school. It was a --

MR. BROWN: And what was it called?

MR. COBURN: Coburn School.

MR. BROWN: Coburn School. Now, what would the demand there have been? Because presumably it would have run during the winter months.

MR. COBURN: It ran during the winter months. Its particular benefit would have been that the students who came to that school came to that school half -- partly through the semester. They sometimes wouldn't come down to Miami or Miami Beach until after Christmas and they would leave sometime in May.

The advantage of going to that school is that they had individual attention. They could bring their own school books down. The -- probably the number of students to teacher ratio would be one teacher to eight students, I think. They got a lot of individual attention and it was -- one of the good things was that they were sent back north to their schools wherever else ahead of their classmates.

MR. BROWN: Because of this individual attention, it was a very intensive structure?

MR. COBURN: Because of the individual attention, it was intensive and, you know, it was reasonably intensive. You know, in those days, education was quite different. It was -- there was a lot of learning by rote and memory and so forth.

MR. BROWN: And the children were expected to listen and to behave?

MR. COBURN: They behaved themselves, yes.

MR. BROWN: How do you suppose your father was as a teacher? You must have seen him in action.

MR. COBURN: He was a very popular teacher. He wasn't -- I thought he was very strict with me. He taught me

Latin and I must say, I never really learned how to speak Latin. My dad could speak Latin which was interesting. Yes, he could talk it fluently.

MR. BROWN: Do you suppose --

MR. COBURN: Yes, he could write, you know. He wrote.

MR. BROWN: Was he otherwise -- he was strict with you, but was he otherwise a rather charming man and a sunny disposition or --

MR. COBURN: Yes, he was. He was a very charming man. He looked a little bit like Ernest Hemingway and I think at one point he may have met Ernest Hemingway after the Second World -- after the First World War when Hemingway moved to Paris or to Europe. And he looked something like Hemingway.

He was a good looking man and the school did very well. My mother also taught at the school. She taught French which she could speak very well. They never spoke French at home because they had different ways of saying things and it always led to a disagreement. So they --

MR. BROWN: No.

MR. COBURN: Which is too bad which I didn't learn French at all in the house.

MR. BROWN: That would have been difficult, no. But was it a fairly happy household?

MR. COBURN: Oh, yes. I think so. Of course --

MR. BROWN: What are your early memories of Miami Beach? What was it like as from through a child's eyes and --

MR. COBURN: Well, of course, I didn't know anything else. At that point, that was my awakening consciousness. I thought it was nice. We came north every summer. By that time, my dad's mother had moved to Wellesley Hills here. We would come up and spend part of the summer with her in Wellesley Hills and later on both I and my sister went to camp, summer camp, in New Hampshire. She went to a camp in Maine and she was born seven years after I was born. She was born on Miami Beach or in Miami Beach and is a true cracker.

MR. BROWN: Really?

MR. COBURN: Florida cracker.

MR. BROWN: She stayed on?

MR. COBURN: She stayed on. She's still there. She's still in Miami. Let me see. My memory of -- especially growing up and becoming a teenager in Miami Beach is that it was paradise. It was lovely there. It was palm trees; it was warm weather; it was swimming every day after school; it was sailing.

It was -- the school was attended by people of considerable means; Maytags, Firestones, you know, people that came from -- made -- manufactures tires in Akron and it was new money. It wasn't old Vanderbilt money that went to Palm Beach. This was new.

At that time Al Capone was in Miami Beach and I remember once seeing him and later on I -- when I got a job in a -- with the Air Force in the Second World War, Al Capone's son was my foreman for a little bit.

MR. BROWN: You mentioned an incident your father had with Al Capone and maybe you could tell about that.

MR. COBURN: Yes, that's right. Well, Al Capone wanted to send his son, whose name I've forgotten. I think it might be Al. I'm not sure. His son to my dad's school and my father was very, very suspicious of that idea and eventually turned down Al Capone's son for entry saying, I think, that it would be disruptive to the other students in this school and that their parents might object.

In those days, you can say things like that and get away with it, I think. Al Capone never challenged that, but one day, he drove up in front of the school and got out of his car and stood and I believe he had his arms folded in front him and stared at the school and my dad said -- looked out the window and he said, "Oh, that's Al Capone out there." And he stood there for about five minutes and then got back into the car and drove off. But we never heard from him. No...nothing happened. I think the son went to Miami Beach High School.

MR. BROWN: Was Miami Beach a fairly big place in your time?

MR. COBURN: Well, it was growing. It was -- this is after the crash, 1929. The money kept pouring into the city. All the people who were not damaged by the crash kept on coming down to Florida and, as I say, this was new money. They were making automobiles. They were making tires. They were making washing machines, whatever.

MR. BROWN: Do you recall some of those people or at least their children?

MR. COBURN: Oh, yes, yes.

MR. BROWN: Perhaps you could describe some of them.

MR. COBURN: Well, I went to school -- they were born, I think, on the same day that I was born, the Maytag twins. They had a beautiful house on Pine Tree Drive in Miami Beach and they -- Bobby and Betty Maytag. They were good friends.

Another friend of mine was a native of Miami, John Gardner. His father was head of a grocery chain in Miami in Dade county, I believe. He -- they were quite wealthy and very nice, very real southern people. And, let me see. I didn't have too many friends who were artistically motivated. Betty Maytag was perhaps the most talented of my classmates. Bobby, her brother, was not. Bobby liked to ride horses and carry on.

No, I didn't have much influence from my peers as far as -- as a matter of fact, I was somewhat out of step. John Gardner and another student both played the piano and I was very musical partly from my father. My mother sang. She sang very -- she had a lovely voice. My father, when he was in Spain, learned to play the Spanish guitar. And not only did he play somewhat flamenco style music, he was very talented. He wrote music, too. And, you know, he had many, many talents; a very interesting man.

MR. BROWN: So you were --

MR. COBURN: So he encouraged -- both parents encouraged me to take piano lessons and I immediately was attracted to classical music; all kinds of music, but especially classical music and, of course, when I was a teenager, by that time, the big bands had come out. So I was not interested in classical music quite as much. Although, I never lost my love of it. And along with that were art classes.

MR. BROWN: At the Coburn School?

MR. COBURN: At the Coburn School, yes.

MR. BROWN: Who would have taught those?

MR. COBURN: Well, a woman by the name -- there were a number, but I remember this woman particularly had been a student of Charles Hawthorne in Provincetown.

MR. BROWN: In Provincetown.

MR. COBURN: Yes, and she brought Charles Hawthorne's method of teaching to me which was direct observation, very much on the order of Monet saying, "If you see a yellow square, put it down." And so she wanted me to learn to see accurately. Put down what you see. She had a technique of painting with palette knife and I must say I did some horrors under her tutelage.

MR. BROWN: Did you object? You'd rather have used the brush?

MR. COBURN: No, I knew nothing in those days. I did -- what she didn't do was teach me how to draw. She taught me how to see colors and put them down; see spaces and put them down. She was very good as far as color was concerned.

MR. BROWN: But you had no drawing before her?

MR. COBURN: No drawing at all.

MR. BROWN: And you were quite a compliant young student?

MR. COBURN: Yes, I was. Yes. I didn't even know what drawing was. I remember Betty Maytag drew a lot better than I did. She somehow knew how to draw, but I never did. I didn't know how to draw until I came up to -- of course, I would go and draw. I would do charcoal sketches and try and draw from life or do a portrait of my sister or something like that which were all disasters.

MR. BROWN: What was the name of this teacher?

MR. COBURN: Rose Clephane, C-l-e-p-h-a-n-e.

MR. BROWN: Well, did many of the students take art instruction?

MR. COBURN: Oh, yes, a number of them did. Not many. I would say ten or twelve, I suppose.

MR. BROWN: How about -- what was the enrollment approximately of the students?

MR. COBURN: Oh well, the enrollment would vary during -- it would start off in late September with an enrollment of maybe 40 students and go up to almost 200 and then dwindle down to 40 again at the end of the year. Of course, I went to the school all that time.

I did a stint at Deerfield Academy when I became -- when I was fourteen years old and they, my parents, thought I should go up to a prep school up here. Well, I got measles and I got scarlet fever and then I got pneumonia and spent most of the year in the infirmary and I was miserable. I was very glad to -- when my parents yanked me out of Deerfield and brought me home.

MR. BROWN: So that was really --

MR. COBURN: That was traumatic, yes.

MR. BROWN: No experience at all because of the trauma of these dire illnesses.

MR. COBURN: Yes, exactly. Well, of being away from home, of being the first time in my life I had ever seen snow that I could remember, of course, and ice skating and stuff like that. And also I, in those days, 1936 or '37 I believe it was, at a boys school you were severely regimented. You had to do things. You had to show up at chapel. You had to answer a role call every day; that kind of thing was awful to me and I would -- I think the seeds of my rebellion were planted then.

I know that I used to pretend to be either Catholic or Episcopalian so I could get on the bus on Sundays and go to Greenfield, Massachusetts to either go to a Catholic mass or to an Episcopal communion. Nobody checked, but it was just in order to get away from the school.

MR. BROWN: Did you resent your father and mother for having sent you there? You probably did.

MR. COBURN: Well, I think so, yes. I think so, but they were so nice to me when they -- my father said, "The best thing we ever did was take you out of that goddamn school." So --

MR. BROWN: Sounds that way.

MR. COBURN: Right, so --

MR. COBURN: The Coburn School was perhaps unusually liberal and free-thinking and free-ranging for its time at that time.

MR. COBURN: Yes, I think so. I believe so. I think it was enlightened, yes. It was a good school.

MR. BROWN: But also because of the few numbers, the rise in numbers and then drop off at the end of the year. Your father and the teachers had to accommodate to a [inaudible].

MR. COBURN: Well, they sent several of their students to MIT without requiring entrance examinations. It had a very high academic rating. In those days there was a person by the name of Porter Sargent who rated private schools and he gave my dad's school a very high rating.

So yes, well, as I say, it was paradise. It was palm trees. It was moonlight. It was glinting on the water and also it had a certain glamour to it.

MR. BROWN: It did, yes.

MR. COBURN: And all of this money, naturally, Cadillacs and beautiful Duesenbergs and all kinds of fancy stuff.

MR. BROWN: And as you look back, was there a danger that you would have just slid into sort of a life of disillusion?

MR. COBURN: I don't know. I'll tell you why. I did rebel against it. I didn't think that was the kind of life I wanted, attractive as it was. In those days, too, I'm talking about pre-World War II, the '30s, there was a lot of building going on especially on Miami Beach. A lot of hotels were being built. A lot of houses were being -- a lot of modern architecture. In those days art deco architecture, you see, was being put up especially in the early to

mid '30s.

Later on, the big fancy Fountain Blue Hotels went up. But they were always architectural -- had architectural attractiveness of some sort. And I was impressed with those and short of becoming a pianist, and I learned very early in my musical career that I didn't -- could never bring my technique up to snuff. I could not become a good pianist. I might have become a composer.

I wanted to become an artist, but I settled -- when my parents kind of discouraged me from that. I settled for architecture and I had always been interested in architecture. I would design houses and stuff, you know, sketch and do plans and elevations and try and render them in watercolor, et cetera, et cetera.

MR. BROWN: On the other hand your father, you said, was -- didn't want you just to become an artist. He felt that that could lead to nothing more than being an art teacher.

MR. COBURN: That's right and that's exactly the argument he used against it and, as you say, I was compliant and I never even dreamed of disobeying my father or my parents. I loved them very much and I thought what their suggestions were bound to be for my good. Well, that changed when I came up. I went to MIT.

MR. BROWN: About 1940.

MR. COBURN: In 1940. Excuse me, my -- 1941.

MR. BROWN: '41.

MR. COBURN: Yes, in '41. Because I was class of '41 in high school and I came up in the fall of '41. I had come to -- my math wasn't very good, so I came in the summer of '41 to take solid and plane geometry, trigonometry and algebra at MIT summer classes as a kind of refresher course. That got me into MIT without having to take any other exams at all. I did so well in those classes. So my math was better than I thought it was and, of course, that freshman year at MIT, I plunged right into calculus and freshman physics and freshman chemistry.

MR. BROWN: And did very well?

MR. COBURN: No.

MR. BROWN: No.

MR. COBURN: I did okay in the calculus, but in the physics -- physics was all right. Chemistry was horrible. At any rate, that was not important, because those classes, those courses, subjects were pared down for the architects. They weren't as stringent for the architects.

MR. BROWN: And you were in all --

MR. COBURN: I was staying in. I was studying architecture.

MR. BROWN: And you could from the beginning, the freshman year, be in an architectural program?

MR. COBURN: An architectural program that was not as stringent as the regular freshman science courses.

MR. BROWN: And how long would that program go for [inaudible]?

MR. COBURN: Only for a year.

MR. BROWN: But the architectural program was --

MR. COBURN: Oh, it was a five year program.

MR. BROWN: A five year program beginning with your freshman year?

MR. COBURN: Yes.

MR. BROWN: Yes.

MR. COBURN: Beginning with my freshman year. We had our architecture assignments in architectural design. It was fascinating. We could -- for our first semester we could only design colonial houses. Imagine.

MR. BROWN: Who set this?

MR. COBURN: Well, that was the curriculum and we -- so we did colonial houses for -- the very first chance I got

in the second semester, we had a project on -- in Chatham and we all went down to Chatham as a class and inspected the property and we all came back and, you know, we measured and all kinds of stuff. We had a plot plan.

It was a great project to design a house for that property in Chatham. So, of course, I designed a far out international style modern house for it. I --

MR. BROWN: What would this be based on? Was it things you'd seen?

MR. COBURN: Seen in magazines, in *Architectural Forum* and also from my recollections of what houses looked like in Florida going up.

Yes, so I did modern architecture from then on. I came under the influence of some -- of one particular very talented fifth year student; fourth or, yes, fifth year student at MIT by the name of Walter Netsch. And Walter Netsch later became, I think, is now one of -- or became one of the principal architects in Skidmore, Owings and Merrill.

MR. BROWN: What do you mean by coming under the influence? You admired what he did or you actually worked with him?

MR. COBURN: He was a person who opened a lot of doors for me. He introduced me to Shostakovich. He introduced me to Prokofiev. He introduced me to Gustav Mahler. All of these people that I only had, you know, a glancing acquaintance with. We -- Schoenberg, all of those, the big guns in contemporary music in those days. It was contemporary, you know.

MR. BROWN: Sort of avant garde.

MR. COBURN: Yes.

MR. BROWN: Right. And was that -- did he have a European background?

MR. COBURN: No, he didn't. He was a highly intelligent person. I heard from him about a year -- two years ago. I sent him a letter back on my tape, my answering service. He was very important to me. Now --

MR. BROWN: Did he encourage your going into modern design. I mean --

MR. COBURN: He, yes, of course, he did. Because he was revolutionary in those -- while he was still a student. He was, again, a very enlightened person. He designed furniture. He designed all kinds of things that related to living in the house, in a building. He was able to -- he challenged everything in design. What do you call it? Industrial design.

And, let me see, he was -- I would work for him. In those days, the fifth year students would come down to the freshman class and say, "Does anybody want to do some work? We are -- we have a project that is due and we need somebody to help us out."

MR. BROWN: It was almost mandatory or at least --

MR. COBURN: It was not mandatory. It was voluntary. I thought it was a terrific idea because I could learn from these people and I was also oriented toward people who were a little bit older than I was. I really don't know why, but I thought I would benefit from their experience which I think I did. He -- I worked for him. I worked for a number of other people.

I remember I worked for a fellow by the name of John Alschuler. Alschuler, his name was and his girlfriend's mother introduced me to Anton Bruckner. I remember that --

MR. BROWN: You mean his music?

MR. COBURN: Right, again music was important and the Alschuler and his girlfriend, her name was Jean [phonetic] Rogers. They -- we all went out to Tanglewood to hear the Shostakovich Seventh Symphony which was -- had just come out.

MR. BROWN: In the -- also in the new Shed by [inaudible].

MR. COBURN: Yes, it was in the Shed and, again, it was the Leningrad Symphony. It was -- I guess it was the summer of 1942 that we went out there. By that time, I had already been kind of approached by the draft board.

MR. BROWN: What would you do for these upperclassmen like Walter Netsch?

MR. COBURN: Oh, I would -- they would have a presentation to make. I would help draft. I would help render. I would do errands for them. I would bring them supplies. I would bring them food.

MR. BROWN: Was this work called something? I mean, did they have a term for it?

MR. COBURN: It was called, "En charette."

MR. BROWN: En charette.

MR. COBURN: Yes.

MR. BROWN: And you were part of this en charette?

MR. COBURN: I was part of the charette teams. Sometimes they would have more than one student work on. Usually, it was just one, but we would work all night long and in those days, there was in fact, a charette, a little cart that went through the drafting rooms of the upperclassmen and they would put their drawings onto this cart which was really a bin. But it was on wheels.

MR. BROWN: Kind of like a print bin?

MR. COBURN: Yes, like a print bin and the drawings were always on Bainbridge and, you know, they were neatly rendered and quite comprehensive.

MR. BROWN: What about your own freshman work? How were you expected to complete that?

MR. COBURN: Well, that was -- this was on weekends and in the evenings that we did this work for the upper-class people and our own work was merely -- it was much easier than what the upperclassmen were doing and that -- because, no, I don't even remember making -- I do, that's not true. I do remember making presentations, but I don't remember working very hard on them and I think my presentations were not very good.

I remember one teacher telling me that he wished I had done it a little bit better. It was Herbert Beckwith was the teacher that said that to me.

MR. BROWN: And Beckwith was an architect, himself.

MR. COBURN: He was an architect himself and part of the firm of Anderson and Beckwith. Lawrence Anderson later became dean of the school.

MR. BROWN: Of the school of architecture.

MR. COBURN: And head of the department, but briefly he was the Dean of the School of Architecture and Planning at MIT.

MR. BROWN: What was Beckwith like as a teacher?

MR. COBURN: I thought he was a good teacher. He was a little cynical. He puffed on a pipe. He was a fine-looking man and I don't know. He had idiosyncratic tastes. He loved the combination of gray and yellow. I remember that and he would always wear a gray or often wear a gray suit and a yellow tie and that was stunning in those days, you know, to dress like that. Yes, he was good.

Lawrence Anderson, I think I liked better. I found him a little bit more sympathetic. And later on Lawrence Anderson and I became very friendly when I came back to MIT.

MR. BROWN: As a teacher, was he rather hands-off or did he --

MR. COBURN: Both of them were rather hands-off.

MR. BROWN: They would --

MR. COBURN: They were good teachers, yes. Excellent. I know Walter Netsch admired Beckwith very much more than Anderson, I believe. But I had -- there was several other students who I worked for. John Alschuler was one of them and we became very good friends.

We would listen to Walter Netsch's records. God, he got the Bartók string quartets on record and at one point we -- and in those days, of course, you could go to the New England Conservatory and --

MR. BROWN: You mean easily?

MR. COBURN: And go to free concerts of contemporary or modern music, you know, done by the faculty and students. It was great and Boston, of course, was, again, in those days you could sail through the city in an automobile in a matter of fifteen minutes because there was no traffic. There was no Starrow Drive. There was none of that stuff. Yes, it was great, yes. Starrow Drive came after the war. Then, of course, the war started and --

MR. BROWN: You -- back to these projects you were doing. You said that occasionally, this work entailed working with students at the Museum of Fine Arts School?

MR. COBURN: Yes, there was --

MR. BROWN: How did that happen? Did you need someone who had a particular training or --

MR. COBURN: That was a project, yes. It was called a sketch problem and I think in this case, it was a common -- a room had to be designed. A commons room in a university, let's say, or in a club house or whatever. It was just a room and the dimensions were prescribed and the architect students collaborated with the, again, fifth year students in both the Museum School and at MIT Architecture, had a collaboration.

The Museum School students would do a mural and the architecture students would do architectural details around or layout of where the mural was and what amenities the room had whether it was a kitchenette or a bar. All of that had to be accounted for and one of the students did a wonderful bar relief mural, very much like a Ben Nicholson.

MR. BROWN: So quite an abstract?

MR. COBURN: Abstract. An abstract which had a great deal of influence on me, incidently, and I --

MR. BROWN: Now was a museum school student. His name was --

MR. BROWN: Do you recall --

MR. COBURN: John Birschneider [phonetic], I don't know what's happened to him. He -- then another student was Esther Geller. Another student was Cleo Lambredus [phonetic] who became Cleo Webster. Esther Geller later married the composer at Brandeis, Harold Shapiro. Let me see. Who else would -- I remember Al Duca who lives here in Annisquam. He was one of the students that was involved then.

MR. BROWN: At the Museum School?

MR. COBURN: At the Museum School.

MR. BROWN: So you would have known him?

MR. COBURN: Yes. At that point, somehow, I was working for a fifth year student at MIT by the name of Burt Eddy. Burton Eddy. He was from, I think, Philadelphia. I can't remember his design at all, but at that point, I met all of the fifth year -- or a lot of the fifth year students at the museum school.

Now, these were the first real artists that I had ever met, you know. I knew about Picasso and Braque and Miró and Hopper and all -- John Stewart Curry and Thomas Hart Benton and Reginald Marsh and Paul Cadmus from illustrations in *Life Magazine*. That was my real art education at that point before I came to MIT.

I knew about these people and I was absolutely bowled over when I finally saw their works at the Institute of Modern Art which was on Beacon Street in those days in Boston and I think I went there first in 1941 and I remember I saw a little Salvador Dali there. Oh god. And a little Miró, yes. Wow, I'll never forget that.

That's what -- Walter Netsch was also very talented in with watercolors and he did a number of water colors very much like John Marin. He was -- oh god, what a talent that kid had, yes. And, of course, he -- after he came out of the war, he went to -- he was drafted after he graduated from MIT and served in the war at -- or went to camp at Fort Belvoir outside of Washington and let me see.

MR. BROWN: Did you stay in touch, then, with him pretty much?

MR. COBURN: Pretty much.

MR. BROWN: Of course, you were somewhat younger.

MR. COBURN: I was four years younger, I guess. Yes, pretty much. Not a great deal, however. Because in those days, you know, there were so many influences piling in on top of you. So many people piling in on top of

you that you couldn't spend too much time with earlier influences before later ones supplanted them.

[END TAPE 1 SIDE A.]

MR. BROWN: Well, you mentioned then at some point through this work, I guess you met the principal teacher at the museum school.

MR. COBURN: Karl Zerbe.

MR. BROWN: Karl Zerbe.

MR. COBURN: Karl Zerbe, for some reason or other, and I cannot figure it out to this day, was very nice to me and because he saw that I was working --
[tape stops, re-starts]

MR. COBURN: That he invited me along with the architects and along with his fifth year students in painting, now these are painting students, mostly, to his annual picnic luncheon in Belmont. I believe it was Belmont. He lived in one of those Carl Koch houses that were built in Belmont in the early '40s, late '30s.

MR. BROWN: Oh yes, Belmont on Lexington [inaudible].

MR. COBURN: I think it was Belmont. I think it was near Spy Pond, but I'm not sure. I'm very vague as where those houses were, but they were houses that were featured in *Architectural Digest* and -- or whatever it was called, *Architectural Forum*, in those -- I think *Architectural Digest* came later. And he was a man of enormous, I thought, enormous charm and sophistication. Now, he was the first real artist I had ever met. A real professional modern functioning famous artist and of course I was terribly impressed.

MR. BROWN: And he was famous because you knew -- people talked about him and he --

MR. COBURN: Well, because he was having shows in New York and because he was represented in museums --

MR. BROWN: You were becoming [inaudible].

MR. COBURN: And in those days, he was doing encaustics and he was also a representative of the German Expressionist school. When he came over to the United States, I have no idea. It must have been sometime in the '30s.

At any rate, he introduced -- or finding out about him opened up another school for me. The school of Expressionism. I have nothing but admiration for that, too. You know, all of the influences are flooding in me. So I would go -- I would ricochet between Cubism and Expressionism.

MR. BROWN: Well, from his students, some of whom you'd worked with, you would have begun to get hints of Expressionism, I suppose.

MR. COBURN: Yes, there's no question--hints of Expressionism, but, you know, it's a funny thing. He was also influenced by Picasso. So you would get Cubistic elements in his own work and also in his students' work. A number of his students became more or less abstract artists. Esther Geller being one of them. Ellsworth Kelly being another. Ellsworth didn't come to that school until after the Second World War and he was a fifth year student, I believe.

MR. BROWN: Zerbe was -- you were surprised he was very charming to you. Was --

MR. COBURN: He was great to me, yes.

MR. BROWN: Any reputation as being rather stern?

MR. COBURN: I think so. I think so. He had a strong German accent. He had a very nice wife, Marion, who was soft and kind where he was rather stern and strict or at least opinionated. Although, I guess he must have been opinionated. I don't know.

MR. BROWN: Did he talk a lot?

MR. COBURN: Yes, I think he did. He talked about what he thought art was. What he -- what kind of influences influenced him. Now, of course, Max Beckmann is an enormous influence on Karl Zerbe, but all of the German Expressionists of those days was an influence. So he was -- they were contemporaries of his. You know, he -- they, the school, the museum school got Oskar Kokoschka to teach and teach out at --

MR. BROWN: The summer school in Langover -- Pittsfield.

MR. COBURN: In Pittsfield, yes. And they had Max Beckmann come and give lectures and so forth. You know, at that point, this is after -- I guess after the war they, the Institute of Contemporary Art had a Max Beckmann show. Let me see. Yes, it was very important to me. Finally, I said, "Gee whiz. I might as well become an artist. If you can't lick them, join them or something like that."

MR. BROWN: You were saying this even by the end of that first year? You were beginning to think [inaudible].

MR. COBURN: Oh, I had doubts. No, I couldn't allow myself to give up architecture. I wasn't defeated by the end of the first year, but the end roads, you know, the poison was beginning to take hold.

MR. BROWN: [Inaudible.]

MR. COBURN: And so I -- let me see. I was -- for some reason or other, the draft board wasn't interested in me until the summer of 1942. I think it was even the fall of 1942. This was after a whole summer of Tanglewood and the Leningrad Symphony and working. At that point, MIT, the architecture school, the draft was beginning to make inroads and I think they had an accelerated summer course to get those winter students pushed up further in their curriculum.

MR. BROWN: But you weren't drafted then 'til fall according to --

MR. COBURN: I wasn't drafted until the late fall of '46 and I was --

MR. BROWN: '42, right?

MR. COBURN: Excuse me, '42 and I was called to my draft board in Florida and I went down there, was not drafted. I was rejected after spending the night in Camp Blanding in -- near Gainesville, Florida. Unbelievable.

MR. BROWN: And you were --

MR. COBURN: I was rejected because of my eyes.

MR. BROWN: Were you -- what was your feeling about the prospect of being in the armed services? Were you --

MR. COBURN: Oh, I was very patriotic and was ready to serve. Everybody I knew --

MR. BROWN: Everybody [inaudible] probably felt the need to do something.

MR. COBURN: Yes, right. Absolutely. No, there was not problem with that. It was the thing to do and of course while I was down there -- I've got to think. I came back north in the next semester in the -- it was --

MR. BROWN: Spring of '43. 1943.

MR. COBURN: No, the fall of '42. I came back up '42 and completed my sophomore year at MIT. Then the school practically shut down. I think there were only a few women students left at that point. The ranks had been decimated and the curriculum was curtailed almost entirely it seems to me.

So I went down to Florida which at that time, Miami Beach had become a training -- or south Florida had become a training ground for the Air Force. There were troops all over the place. My dad's school was commandeered and turned into training classes for Air Force and the --

MR. BROWN: Was he sort of left on the sidelines?

MR. COBURN: Yes, you know, the government paid him for the -- and he became an air raid warden and there were soldiers marching in the playing fields and all of that kind of stuff going on. The hotels were commandeered by the Air Force. Troops were everywhere and I got a job at the -- for the Air Force at the Miami air depot as a draftsman. And I did mechanical drawing for the Air Force until 1944. The fall of 1944.

We were involved with the maintenance equipment and supply of the Air Force in the African campaign. And you know all of these bombers would come to Florida and take off for Africa from there, a lot of them. And they had to be equipped and --

MR. BROWN: And your company, that company --

MR. COBURN: Well, it was the government. It was a civil service job, yes.

MR. BROWN: Did you find the work grueling or interesting or --

MR. COBURN: Oh, it was just plain drafting. I found the atmosphere terribly exciting. I found the buildings, the wind tunnels, the -- all of the equipment fascinating, architecturally fascinating, esthetically fascinating. Buildings that were a quarter a mile long. I'd never seen such big buildings filled with -- and it's there that at one point I was assigned to grind gears as a replacement grind -- not gears, cylinder heads and that's where Al Capone's son was my foreman and he taught me very carefully how to grind these flanges on the gears which I found esthetically --

MR. BROWN: There was nothing ever mentioned about his siblings --

MR. COBURN: Oh, no, no, no. I never brought that up. I didn't think that was appropriate. By that time, of course, his father had long gone and --

MR. BROWN: He, himself, bore none of the characteristics --

MR. COBURN: Absolutely none. He was a big guy, it seems to me and he had -- I think, very nice, very good blue eyes. It seems to me he had blue eyes. Very --

MR. BROWN: What was his [inaudible].

MR. COBURN: What?

MR. BROWN: What was his name?

MR. COBURN: I think it was Al, but I -- it might have been John. I'm not sure. I can't remember it.

MR. BROWN: These were exciting times. Even during the war.

MR. COBURN: Oh, yes. It was glamorous, you know. And it was the age of the Andrews Sisters and it was --

MR. BROWN: Oh, I see then.

MR. COBURN: It was lot's of fun in a way.

MR. BROWN: Quite a -- you had a lively social life if you wanted it.

MR. COBURN: Absolutely, yes. Oh god, we would stop in at a bar every night. We had a car pool and I lived eighteen miles away. We had a car pool that brought us back and forth and every day we would stop in at a bar and have a beer on the way home. Of course, it was a hundred degrees. It was terribly hot and we would -- I was there for about two years, I guess. Then --

MR. BROWN: Did you live with your family?

MR. COBURN: Yes, well my dad had gone up to -- he had wanted to keep on teaching. So he went up to Phillips Exeter. He got a job teaching at Phillips Exeter and he came back the summer of '44. He was kind of depressed and he was kind of I don't know, disheartened somewhat. And he sickened of leukemia and died about two weeks after it was diagnosed, you know.

It's possible that he contracted that from working with paint remover. I remember we had -- it was in the summer and we had been using paint remover on shutters. You know, down there you have to prepare for the hurricane season and there were masonite shutters that we put on over windows. And I remember he was involved with doing that and I helped him, but I can't remember exactly how it -- at any rate, he became ill of leukemia and died very quickly. That was the late fall of '44.

My mother was devastated. So we came up to -- we hired a teacher, a professor, by that time the Coburn School was back in business again. The African campaign had come to an end and the Coburn School was back in business, but my mother couldn't bring herself to run it. So we hired somebody to run it for the winter. And we came up to live in Wellesley Hills.

MR. BROWN: Where his -- your father's family --

MR. COBURN: Where my father's family -- only my uncle lived there at that time. My cousin, who owned the house had moved up to Peterborough, New Hampshire by that time. She had been a WAV during the war and she was, I guess, she was decommissioned at that time, too, and moved up to New Hampshire.

MR. BROWN: So you moved back up here and then we come [inaudible].

MR. COBURN: We moved back up here and we spend the winter here.

MR. BROWN: Did you return to MIT?

MR. COBURN: I returned to MIT. No --

MR. BROWN: So this you would have been --

MR. COBURN: No, excuse me. I got a job with an electric company, the Holtzer Cabot Electric Company which I think made equipment for some aspect of the atomic bomb because it was very hush-hush what we were doing. We didn't know what we were doing, but in retrospect, I think some of the stuff that we had was -- had to have had something to do with the atomic bomb.

MR. BROWN: Maybe we should stop this.

[Interruption to tape.]

MR. BROWN: Continuing our taped interview, this is June 23, 1995 and we talked about after your father's death, you and your mother and sister returned to live with a cousin in Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts and this was still during the war, I guess, in 1944. And you, then, went to work with an electronics company or something like that in Cambridge, wasn't it?

MR. COBURN: No, it was in, excuse me.

MR. BROWN: [Inaudible] contradicting me. [Laughter].

MR. COBURN: Right. [Laughter]. It was in Roxbury. Actually, it was just beyond the Museum of Fine Arts on Albany Street and I think that area is Roxbury. And it was a big electric company and it was -- I was a draftsman and the project that I was working on seemed to me very mysterious. I think it had to do with telecommunications of some sort. But that's all I knew and I never really bothered to find out. I was just told that it was not to be talked about.

I did not enjoy working there and I was there for probably three or four months and then I went to MIT to apply for the next term because it looked like the war was going to be over fairly soon and I think I applied for the fall of 1945. Before that, however, I got a job as a draftsman for an architect on Boylston Street in Boston overlooking the railroad yards where the Prudential is now.

MR. BROWN: In the Back Bay?

MR. COBURN: In the Back Bay, yes. It was -- he did all kinds of -- in those days he wasn't building new buildings. He was renovating existing buildings and he was doing just as much work as he possibly could find to do at that time. Remember the war was still on.

MR. BROWN: And so he couldn't get sufficient materials to build new [inaudible]?

MR. COBURN: No, no, no, no. He worked for hospitals and renovation projects, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. I got a job because he was very nice to me and he had a fairly good functioning office. He later moved to Newbury Street just opposite the John Hancock building, the old, new John Hancock building which was kind of being built at that time.

MR. BROWN: What was the architect's name? Do you recall the name of the firm?

MR. COBURN: Merritt. Clark Merritt. I think M-e-r-r-i-t-t.

MR. BROWN: And you were -- but you could easily get work then as a draftsman. Is that --

MR. COBURN: Oh, yes, yes. And he was a great guy. He was very nice and he had a very nice staff. He hired a couple of other students from MIT. By that time, I was moving into -- getting -- psyching myself up to go back to school and so I probably worked there for the whole summer of --

MR. BROWN: Into '45 or --

MR. COBURN: Into '45, yes. Because I remember when Roosevelt died, we were still living in Wellesley Hills. He died in the spring of '45.

MR. BROWN: And you were then working for the architect?

MR. COBURN: I was at that time -- by that time I was working for the architect, yes.

MR. BROWN: Well, did you find his work appealing and interesting?

MR. COBURN: Oh, it was fine, yes. I learned a lot. I learned about things that I would not have learned in school.

MR. BROWN: Really?

MR. COBURN: The -- yes. Things that really got built. Things that really got torn down and changed and then rebuilt. Yes, it was very helpful. Then my mother and sister at the end of the spring decided to return to Florida because my mother wanted to continue running the school. By that time she had somewhat recovered from my father's death. So in the --

MR. BROWN: Your sister was a bit younger [inaudible].

MR. COBURN: My sister was younger. She's seven years younger than I am. So in 1945, that spring, they moved back to Florida. I did not go with them. I think that was a disappointment to my mother, but I insisted somehow that I should go back to MIT which I did. I don't know whether we spoke about my first terms at MIT when I met so many artists. Did we speak about that?

MR. BROWN: You did and you talked about sort of slaving for the upperclassmen and lasting friends.

MR. COBURN: Oh, yes. That's right.

MR. BROWN: In fact, I think the work was called "Niggering," or something that you were doing.

MR. COBURN: "Niggering," I was a "Nigger," very often. God.

MR. BROWN: And you talked about working there with a Walter Netsch?

MR. COBURN: Walter Netsch and --

MR. BROWN: Several others.

MR. COBURN: A guy by the name of Burt Eddy and a guy by the name of John Alschuler. Burt Eddy was from Philadelphia I think.

MR. BROWN: These people, were they still around in the fall of 1945 when you returned to MIT?

MR. COBURN: No, no. They had all -- they had -- by that time, they were all seniors in 1941 or '42.

MR. BROWN: They were sometime gone.

MR. COBURN: Yes, they were seniors and had graduated and so they were nowhere to be found and all of my classmates in my freshman and sophomore years had also gone elsewhere and of course, unfortunately, a number of them were killed in the war. And so when I came back to MIT in the summer of -- in the fall of 1945, I found only one of my classmates still there, a young woman. And she had married another of my classmates who had been killed in the war and she was the only one left of our class and I lost sight of her. I haven't, you know --

MR. BROWN: So when you reentered in the fall of '45, what -- did you have required courses still to take or what was the program?

MR. COBURN: Yes, the program had changed radically. They had put much more emphasis on science, chemistry, physics. I had to take freshman chemistry, the real freshman chemistry course. I had to take freshman physics course, the real one. I had --

MR. BROWN: As opposed to what? Something specially tailored?

MR. COBURN: Something for the architects which was not very rigorous. A little smattering that they thought architects -- I had to take a perfectly horrible course called, "Heating and Engineering," or "Heating Engineering," or some --

MR. BROWN: Was this owing to a new dean or something or --

MR. COBURN: It was owing to a curriculum change because, of course, during the war, it was shown that people needed a scientific, a more technological education, to be valuable members of the MIT graduating classes. So the emphasis went onto science and technology. And of course, that was -- at that point, the great new hope of the whole world was technology at that time. Technology would solve all of our problems.

So that was where the emphasis was. I was totally unprepared for that. I had forgotten or purposely forgotten

all the algebra, all the science courses that I had previously had and it was very, very difficult. I had tough time and I had a great faculty advisor by the name of Gardner [phonetic].

MR. BROWN: Gardner?

MR. COBURN: Oh dear, what was his first name?

MR. BROWN: What field was he in?

MR. COBURN: He was a -- he taught a course called -- a subject called, "Abstract Design." He had us do posters, book jackets, title pages, designs for friezes, very much beaux arts emphasis. He was still there. He had -- another teacher who was still there was one, who I believe, had studied in Chicago with Moholy Nagy. His name was William Brown and he was an influence on me. He was still there. Those two guys were terrific.

At any rate, Professor Gardner -- I think his first name was John. I don't know. His -- he called me -- he was my faculty advisor. He called me into his office. He was a gruff son of a gun. He had -- he was not very nice, but he told me that I had a lot of talent, but that I would never make it at MIT as an architect and advised me to go the Museum School. That was the best advice anybody could have given me. He pinpointed where I was. Of course --

MR. BROWN: Why do you suppose he thought that you'd never make it as an architect?

MR. COBURN: Because my grades weren't very good. I was probably flunking. I never got a chance to flunk out. That is, I dropped out the second semester.

MR. BROWN: But did the grades [inaudible] in the sciences? That's what he was thinking of?

MR. COBURN: Yes, they would pull down your average so much so to disqualify you. Professor Gardner -- previously when I was studying at MIT in 1941 and '42, I did very well in all of my classes, I believe, but especially Professor Gardner's and Professor Brown's courses.

Brown taught a thing called -- oh, some kind of word like, "Visual Design," and we would put -- it was creative. We would learn how to fold paper. We would learn how to do all kinds of things with matches and razor blades and we would -- it was great training. It was visual training and a kind of manual training. Brown taught that kind of thing. Brown gave a very swell -- he had wonderful slide presentations that he would ask -- he would shoot, project pictures on the screen and ask us, "What are these things?" He would develop. He would show the pyramids or the Louvre or the Place de la Concorde or Luxor, you know, and "Where is this?" "What is this?" One day, he showed a picture of a bridge, an arched bridge going across a river. "What is that," he said. I said, "Oh, it's the bridge over the Rio Grande at Brownsville, Texas," and by god, it was. He nearly died. I had remembered the picture from Life Magazine or a newspaper. He couldn't believe. So I got very good marks from then on.

MR. BROWN: But this was when after you reentered this --

MR. COBURN: No, that was still --

MR. BROWN: The earlier years?

MR. COBURN: That was still in the earlier days. By that time, Professor Brown, he had moved up to, I think a higher -- I think he had moved up to the juniors. I was in my junior year, but I didn't take any classes from him that year. I was too busy taking science and trying to qualify for those terrible courses. Oh, was I at sea.

MR. BROWN: You were rather miserable, anyway in doing that.

MR. COBURN: I was very unhappy, yes.

MR. BROWN: Had you moved into Boston? Were you living in Boston by then?

MR. COBURN: Yes, I had a great apartment. In those days, of course, again the war was still on. There was an outfit called the Russian war relief at the corner of the alley and Dartmouth Street, the alley that went between Newbury Street and Commonwealth Avenue next to the Vendome Hotel which I think is Vendome Condominiums now. There was a block of buildings. There's now a parking lot at that point.

That block of buildings was -- the bottom floor was the Dartmouth bookstore, a regular bookstore. The second floor was the Russian war relief. The third floor was the USO office, the American theater wing, it was called and it had to do with not just USO shows, but it had to do with theater performances for service personnel.

MR. BROWN: When they were, say, in Boston or --

MR. COBURN: I think they would get together a group of actors and send them out to camps and across the sea, I believe.

MR. BROWN: And where were you living?

MR. COBURN: I was on the fourth, the top floor. It was a great building that had an elevator that came right into my apartment. So anybody could go into my apartment if they chose to. I paid \$45 a month. I had the whole floor. It was astonishing. It was a great apartment.

MR. BROWN: So the location and the kind of apartment sort of compensated for the ordeal you were going through trying to pass your science --

MR. COBURN: Absolutely.

MR. BROWN: When did Professor Gardner suggest you --

MR. COBURN: At the beginning -- at the end of the first semester.

MR. BROWN: Did you take off --

MR. COBURN: So that was just before -- that was in early January --

MR. BROWN: Early 1946?

MR. COBURN: Yes.

MR. BROWN: And did you take him up on it and decide you --

MR. COBURN: I had to. There was no alternative and I was not about to fight. At that point, I was very upset. I was in a deep depression. I had been challenged and I had been discovered to be unfit to meet that challenge and I knew he was right, but I was infuriated and resentful and would not ever do what he suggested because I was -- my resentment was so enormous. So I -- like a fool, didn't follow his directions, didn't enroll in the Museum School. I wish I had. As it was, I began to work --

MR. BROWN: But you did drop out of MIT?

MR. COBURN: I dropped out of MIT. At that point, in early '46, I had gotten a job through Hyman Swetsoff who was sitting, who was kind of an assistant director or an assistant in the Institute of Modern Art which had just moved from Beacon Street to Newbury Street. Are you --

MR. BROWN: All within the same general area?

MR. COBURN: Yes.

MR. BROWN: And had you known Hyman Swetsoff in college?

MR. COBURN: I knew Hyman Swetsoff when I first came to Boston in 1941 as a result of that collaborative problem between the MIT students and the Museum School students. Hyman Swetsoff was like me, kind of a -- well, a hanger on and he was a kind of impresario at that moment. He was a very astute guy and he brokered a lot of introductions and connections.

He offered or his boss, Thomas Metcalf, I guess, offered to me the job of stoking the furnace in the Institute of Modern Art on Sunday mornings. So I would go there and at 6:00 in the morning and shovel pea coal into the furnace for the day. And I think I did it again in the evening. I can't quite remember, but seeing that the water level was correct and it was not a difficult job and I think then I graduated to sitting in the gallery when Hyman Swetsoff felt that he had other things to do. He was hired full time by the Institute of Modern Art on Newbury Street to be their -- kind of their gallery director and attendant.

MR. BROWN: So did you find that he was fairly compelling guy. I mean you knew in [inaudible].

MR. COBURN: Oh yes, he was absolutely the most exotic personality I had met to that date.

MR. BROWN: What -- maybe can you describe him a little bit?

MR. COBURN: Well, he was continually opening doors for me. He did it in a very dramatic and disdainful way which only served to encourage my abject kind of discovery -- what would you call it -- not really admiration, but it was wonder, abject wonder at such an exotic personality. I don't know whether you've spoken to other people

who knew him well, but he really had some kind of personality, that guy.

MR. BROWN: Was he a spellbinding talker or --

MR. COBURN: Yes, he was an intellectual. He was a writer. He was a poet. He translated a short or a long short story by Gide. Which I think is now translated as, "Straight is the Gate," but it was not -- that was not a good title for it.

At any rate, he drew. He gave me an alphabet that he -- an original alphabet of his poems starting from A through Z with original drawings which I've given to the Boston Public Library. They were very pleased to receive that. Now, Hyman was a glamorous figure. He was very fond of the ballet, the dance and he would dance.

And so many of the Museum School students, the women especially, Esther Geller, Charlotte Sarnay [phonetic] and Cleo Lambridus all, I think Cleo, all took dancing lessons or ballet lessons from Anna Socolo [phonetic] who came up, José Limón who came up to give a class once a month or once every two weeks here in Boston. They were -- I would go and audit those classes. I never participated in them because I really wasn't interested in dancing, but I was amazed. It was all a part of a great, new, glamorous world for me.

MR. BROWN: And you were only -- employment at this time was sort of doing maintenance at the Institute of Modern Art?

MR. COBURN: Exactly.

MR. BROWN: In early 1946?

MR. COBURN: In the spring, yes. That's exactly right. In the spring of 1946, Boris Mirski bought 166 Newbury Street and that -- oh, I think before the spring. I think actually in January and he hired Hyman Swetsoff to be his gallery director, this new gallery on Newbury Street, Boris Mirski Art Gallery. He -- Hyman took me along with him. "Why don't you be my assistant?" There was my job. Mirski had a frame shop in the basement.

MR. BROWN: Which he ran?

MR. COBURN: Which he ran and which I was peripherally involved with, very little. Most of my involvement was with Hyman Swetsoff and what his plans were for directing the gallery. They were very ambitious.

MR. BROWN: For example, what [inaudible]?

MR. COBURN: I think the first show we had -- Mirski at that time, had gotten a large collection of Mexican graphic art. Mostly lithographs. Some silkscreens, but original works. Our first show was by Carlos Merida. I think that was in September of 1946, I believe. That was an elaborate opening with oodles of food and Mirski's openings were always great parties.

MR. BROWN: Really?

MR. COBURN: Yes, they were wonderful parties with so much to eat, you couldn't believe it and his wife prepared most of the food, you know. She was Italian and she sure could cook and --

MR. BROWN: Who would come and what --

MR. COBURN: There was a large mailing list. It was a mailing list that perhaps Hyman Swetsoff had brought over from the Institute of Modern Art and it consisted of all kinds of museum directors and collectors especially in Boston. A good representation, in those days, what could be called Boston society or at least the movers and wheelers, dealers in the, I don't know, the clubs and the organizations that would be thought of as being important in the city of Boston.

MR. BROWN: First he had moved from Charles Street. He had a frame shop.

MR. COBURN: He had moved from Charles Street. He had a frame shop.

MR. BROWN: Did you know that at all, did you recall it?

MR. COBURN: Yes, I remember seeing it.

MR. BROWN: Did he also have a bit of an art gallery there --

MR. COBURN: He did, yes. 106 Charles Street, I think it was.

MR. BROWN: What was Mirski like when you first met him? What was he -- can you describe his personality back in the 1940's?

MR. COBURN: Oh god. There -- I said Hyman Swetzoff was exotic. Mirski was even more so. Mirski was a very interesting person. He was short, rotund, balding, immensely powerful, strong. He was physically strong. He could lift all kinds of stuff. He was ambitious. He was immensely charming. He was a scoundrel. I loved working for him.

[END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B.]

MR. COBURN: We always had all kinds of situations that were -- turned out to be hilarious. These are all elements of slapstick comedy, working for Mirski.

MR. BROWN: Could you give an example?

MR. COBURN: Well, probably not to be -- but he would -- the problems with Mirski were not with the gallery so much as with the frame shop. Because he was a great procrastinator and he would also promise things, "I'll have it ready for you Monday." And of course the client would come in on Monday and the work was not ready. He would begin to dissemble and he would create a real fantasy scenario of how to get out of delivering the material on time, picture frame or the mat or, you know, the framed work. And he would put the -- so he would -- the Tuesday would come, the picture still wasn't ready. He would dissemble further.

One day, for instance, he would bring up a package from the basement. The frame shop was in the basement -- that had written in pencil on the wrapped package, "Mrs. Goldberg," for instance. Mrs. Goldberg would unwrap the package and say, "Boris, this isn't my picture." He had hastily wrapped it in the basement. He'd say, "Oh, my god. I've got to do something." And he would wrap this picture up, some picture that he grabbed and write, "Mrs. Goldberg," and she would unwrap it and he would undo it for her. "Boris, this isn't my picture." "The wrong Mrs. Goldberg," he would yell. "Jim," he would yell down the stairs.

MR. BROWN: And some hapless person --

MR. COBURN: Who would come up. "Well, Boris, that was my understanding that that was Mrs. Goldberg's picture." "No, there are two Mrs. --" All kinds of fantasies of that sort. Sometimes he would come up. I remember there was somebody. I think -- I don't think it's a good idea to mention his name, but he was a well-known Boston person, a bachelor who lived on Beacon Street in a very nice apartment who was a hypochondriac and Mirski knew that he was a hypochondriac and the guy was just breathing down Mirski's. After many phone calls, they -- I mean, they bounced off of him. He would never really try to fulfill his deadlines. So it was torture.

One day, he came dragging up the stairs with his eyes heavily lidded with two wads of cotton in his ears. One wad of cotton up each nostril and he would be -- Mirski would drag up and extend a hand, "Boris what's the -- stay away from -- I'll be back next week!" Mirski --

MR. BROWN: He had every trick in the book.

MR. COBURN: He had one after another. It's like a Phaedo comedy. It is -- talk about -- oh, Chaet has a story --

MR. BROWN: Bernard Chaet, yes.

MR. COBURN: We have stories about Mirski and his automobile, the trouble that he had with his automobile. Once when he -- he could never back out of the alley properly without knocking over some garbage cans and one garbage can in particular, he knocked over in such a way that when he reversed, he was able to jack his car up on the back of the -- on the top of the garbage can. You know, this is a little thing, but the panic that that caused with the wheels spinning and the frame shop personnel running out with two by fours and pieces of frame to try and -- they were hysterical moments.

MR. BROWN: This is on a -- regularly, this was daily?

MR. COBURN: This happened daily. These kinds of comic, comedic situations.

MR. BROWN: Now, you and Hyman Swetzoff upstairs, were in the -- you were a bit removed from it?

MR. COBURN: Yes, yes, we were. And I enjoyed them thoroughly because I thought they were hysterical. Hyman was a little disdainful of them because he was a much more dignified person than any of us were. At any rate, Hyman was finally -- the gallery wasn't doing as well as it perhaps should have done and Mirski noted that I was far more punctual at coming to work than Hyman was and Hyman sometimes would stay out of work for a whole day for one reason or another. I can't really remember why. And Mirski got a little disenchanting with him

and he felt that he was being taken by Hyman Swetzoff. Of course, our salaries were minuscule, you know, it's --

MR. BROWN: Were there commissions on sales?

MR. COBURN: No, only -- not that I know of. I never got a commission if I sold a piece and maybe Hyman did. I don't know.

MR. BROWN: How were sales? Were they fairly --

MR. COBURN: They were reasonably good, but remember the frame shop was a successful frame shop and it carried the gallery on its back.

MR. BROWN: Despite the procrastination, it had a regular clientele with the frame shop?

MR. COBURN: Yes, that he had brought. He had been a framer for many years on Charles Street and he had developed a good clientele. He -- oh, there are so many facets to his personality. The things that he believed in. He believed in modern art. He believed in young artists. He embraced the graduating class of the Museum School, for instance and gave -- included them in his stable of artists.

MR. BROWN: You mean as students or right after graduation?

MR. COBURN: Even while they were still students. Certainly right after if he liked their work. That was when I first met Ellsworth Kelly. He was a fifth year student at the Museum School and he showed his work with Mirski in 1947 and '48.

MR. BROWN: How would Mirski, do you suppose, had learned of these students work? Would he go over to the school and [inaudible]?

MR. COBURN: No, he wouldn't go. Kids would bring their works and they, by that time, I was friendly with a number of those kids. Also, he opened up a school up on the third floor of the building. There was galleries. There were galleries on the first floor and the second floor. On the third floor was a school. On the fourth floor, I think there were offices or he rented out a couple of offices and I immediately started taking lessons. There were afternoon and evening classes. I took lessons from John Wilson who was -- Esther Geller --

MR. BROWN: What did you study with these?

MR. COBURN: Drawing and painting. That's all. We drew from the model and we would do a still life or a painting of the model or anything we wanted to do, but mostly it was a still life setup and drawing from the model.

MR. BROWN: And you had not done things like that steadily?

MR. COBURN: No, this was new.

MR. BROWN: A new experience?

MR. COBURN: This was a new experience.

MR. BROWN: How were they as teachers?

MR. COBURN: Terrific. John Wilson was a wonderful teacher. He had a great method or way of teaching life drawing. Now, I learned at that time you can never get enough drawing. I wish I had started to draw sooner. I wish I had kept at it longer. I worked to a certain proficiency, but not great ever. That's like technique and playing the piano, you know. At any rate, it functions as technique sometimes. It's -- although, I do realize that it's an end in itself, of course. I used it as a technique towards painting because I was always more interested in color than I was in line.

MR. BROWN: But what -- Wilson's method, what would it be with you if you recall as a teacher?

MR. COBURN: Marginal notes. He was not great at expressing himself. He was more articulate, much more articulate when he drew on the margin of your drawing or sometimes on a separate piece of paper how you did not understand what you were looking at. How you had missed recognizing the structure of the model, of the model's action, of her gesture. He was magnificent at showing by example where I had gone wrong or anybody had gone wrong.

Now, I understand he got that way of teaching from Tura Banks [phonetic] at the Museum School. I believe that's what I found. I think that's how he got it, but at any rate, he was superb and he was a superb draftsman;

superb. We had very good models. We had the same models that we used at the Museum School, too.

MR. BROWN: By very good, what would you have meant in those days?

MR. COBURN: They held good poses and they were interesting models. One of them was a singer, Marianne McCray [phonetic]. She was like a Gaston Lachaise. She was a magnificent woman and a very nice woman and she was great to draw because she could hold a pose and she could also strike a pose beautifully. She was a creative model. Oh, we had a number of interesting models, mostly women. Very seldom did we have a male model.

MR. BROWN: Why do you suppose that was?

MR. COBURN: I don't know. Because I think that most people wanted a female model. I really don't know. I think that we got models that we -- that they knew, that the teachers knew and that they had worked with before. I don't really quite remember, but I studied there from '46 until May of '49.

MR. BROWN: So quite a good stretch.

MR. COBURN: Right.

MR. BROWN: And that would be what? Several times a week?

MR. COBURN: Yes, certainly. I think there were night classes every night at one point.

MR. BROWN: And this would be after work?

MR. COBURN: After work, yes. We started at 8:00.

MR. BROWN: You were also taught there by -- these were mostly Museum if not all Museum School people.

MR. COBURN: That's right. Except for one.

MR. BROWN: Were there exceptions? Esther -- who was that?

MR. COBURN: Carl Nelson.

MR. BROWN: Well let's maybe ask about him as a teacher or let's first ask -- you had two other teachers connected --

MR. COBURN: Esther Geller.

MR. BROWN: Esther Geller, who taught what?

MR. COBURN: Who taught painting, mostly.

MR. BROWN: And was she quite an effective teacher?

MR. COBURN: Oh, I thought she was wonderful. Of course, I had never really had a real art teacher before except back in --

MR. BROWN: Coburn School.

MR. COBURN: Yes, in high school and not long -- not very much of that, either. That might have been once a week or once every two weeks. I can't remember. And that was rudimentary at best. Esther Geller was a lovely creative enjoyable teacher. She has a great sense of humor and she was one of the people that danced and so she had a wonderful grace to her. I think she still does. She was very encouraging.

I remember I did an elaborate still life on cardboard under her tutelage and that turned into a successful picture. I think I showed it somewhere. That picture's gone. I have no idea what's happened to it.

MR. BROWN: So she was a -- how -- would she hover around or just occasionally give critiques of work?

MR. COBURN: She would occasionally -- she would -- oh, there were about six or seven or eight in the class at one time. There were a sufficient number of people in it that she could divide her attention and the class would be at least two hours long and up on the third floor there were two fireplaces and we would have a fire burning in one of them with the class in front of it and it was great fun. The third -- at one point, Barbara Swan became a teacher at the school and I studied from her. I think I did life drawing under her. Not for very long, though.

MR. BROWN: She would have been very young. Well, they were all quite young, these teachers.

MR. COBURN: Well, of course, Barbara was older than I was. She, I think, is a couple of years older than I am and she had already graduated from Wellesley before she went to the Museum School. So she had a considerable education as far as that's concerned.

MR. BROWN: You said earlier that she was rather very girlish, in fact [inaudible].

MR. COBURN: Oh, well, yes. She was. She was giddy. Oh god, you know, her parents are from Rockport, Massachusetts and one year, she took a studio on Bear Skin Neck.

MR. BROWN: In Rockport?

MR. COBURN: In Rockport. That was in 1947, I believe and she invited Kelly.

MR. BROWN: Ellsworth Kelly.

MR. COBURN: Ellsworth Kelly, Onni Saari, another student. They were all students of the Museum School. Diana Kelly [phonetic] who later married Michael Tulachevsky [phonetic] and who died much too young and myself to come out and visit her for a day and we went swimming in the quarry and we brought our bicycles with us and we had a meal. We had a great time in Rockport. That was the first time I really got to know Ellsworth Kelly.

Now I know it must have been in 1947. Then Kelly and I became pretty good friends and Onni Saari and I became good friends and so that was the beginning of our friendship which has lasted to this day and naturally Barbara who's been a friend since '46. She's the first -- she and Esther Geller, Cleo Lambridus, there was another person by the name of Charlotte Sarnay. Then there were men, too. There were male students from the Museum School, but they never -- Richard Bois [phonetic], later Reed Kay, Jason Berger, Jack Kramer, oh my Al Duca who was -- I think he was a student at the Museum School way back in the early 40's, I believe. He went to the Pratt Institute at one point and he came, but I think he had a connection with the Museum School at one point and I don't quite remember what it was.

MR. BROWN: So you had quite a large circle of friends among these budding artists?

MR. COBURN: Oh, yes. Oh god, yes.

MR. BROWN: Were they very serious, self-conscious about what they were -- about their careers?

MR. COBURN: Yes.

MR. BROWN: They were?

MR. COBURN: Oh, yes. Yes, they were all serious. They were students, you know, that were young, lively, interesting kids. Arthur Polonsky, oh god, and Michael --

MR. BROWN: Why do you say [inaudible]?

MR. COBURN: Well, because Polonsky was especially sympathetic, a very sympathetic person.

MR. BROWN: Meaning what? What do you mean?

MR. COBURN: Oh, gentle and sweet and intellectual and kind and humorous and enormously talented. He, again, you know, everybody at that school drew well. It's hard to say which -- whether anybody drew any better than anybody else. They all drew very, very well and that was the emphasis of the teaching at the Mirski school. So I learned to draw. I don't think I ever learned to draw well, because, as I say, I hadn't started early enough. I still draw from time to time, you know, and I get great pleasure out of it, but not as much as I would like.

MR. BROWN: So the exception to those teachers with no connection to the school was Carl Nelson. [Inaudible.]

MR. COBURN: Carl Nelson had somehow heard about the school and wrote to Mirski, I believe, or saying that he understood that Mirski had a school in Boston. I guess he had some -- and would it be possible for him to get a job teaching. Carl Nelson, who later went on to become a pillar at the Cambridge Art Association and a man of an enormous amount of friends and influence had a different method of teaching from the Museum School approach.

He had a -- oh, gosh, what would you call it? A kind of pictorial method. He was able to visualize the whole

painting. He was especially good at painting at pictures. He would organize the whole surface in his mind, I think, before he started painting a picture and he somehow conveyed that to us to think of the whole area as one. I guess, I don't know -- how would you describe something like that?

MR. BROWN: A very comprehensive and --

MR. COBURN: Exactly, yes. And he also believed in high color, light color, impressionistic color whereas the Museum School students used darker colors, browner colors, grayer, more olive, drab colors or low key colors, not brilliant colors.

The influence of Hyman Bloom little by little crept into the Museum School, but the influence of -- and of course Hyman's colors were enormous. He was quite a colorist. However, the Zerbe color or Zerbe's teaching of color I don't think was very advanced in those days. I don't think so, but then I really don't know.

MR. BROWN: Was Nelson a very -- how did he teach? Did he work closely with you as a student, or --

MR. COBURN: He had a gift of gab. He ran -- he talked nonstop. He didn't -- he was never silent. He had thousands of anecdotes. He had an enormous well-developed philosophy of life that he never tired of promoting and he was a non-stop talker, but everything he said was agreeable and pleasant and interesting and unusual.

He used all kinds -- he had studied, I believe, he had studied at the Art Students League in New York in the '30's and he was quite a bohemian. And he, at one point, had an enormous beard and he tells a story of -- the kind of story he told typical of Carl Nelson was one day he, while living in New York, went to the artists' ball, you know, students and he decided to paint his beard and his hair gold with gold paint, god, and go as some kind of Neptune of some sort. Well, of course, the gold wouldn't wash off and he had a habit while he was painting in his studio in New York of sticking the end of his paintbrush into his beard. And one day, a visitor to his studio said, "Carl, how many paintbrushes," and this bristly golden beard was still stiff and he was able to, I think, he was able to put something like fifty to a hundred paintbrushes into his beard. And the friend took a photo of him.

Well, wouldn't you know, one day when Carl was going back to his family's house for Christmas in Minnesota, I believe, or Wisconsin someplace, he had got off a bus. This is many, many years later. He got off a bus in Sioux City or someplace, changing buses to go to his home wherever it was in Minnesota and he -- the bus stop was right outside of a photographer's store and he looked into the window and there was that photograph of Carl Nelson twenty years later off with the beard and with all the paintbrushes stuck into his beard and his hair. At any rate, see he had all these kinds of stories and he went on and on and on and on and it was very enjoyable.

MR. BROWN: So he was somewhat different from the others.

MR. COBURN: Very different.

MR. BROWN: And a very different background. He wasn't from anywhere near here.

MR. COBURN: That's right.

MR. BROWN: The rest were more serious, I suppose, and --

MR. COBURN: Oh, he was serious enough, yes. Yes, he was a serious --

MR. BROWN: But they didn't have his kind of --

MR. COBURN: He was a very different approach. His was a more -- well, you could call it a more modern approach, a more -- oh, he was a great follower of Nicolaides, "The Natural Way to Draw."

MR. BROWN: Oh, Kimon Nicolaides then.

MR. COBURN: Yes, right. And he also, strangely enough, was a friend of John Cage, Merce Cunningham and their coterie of Merton Brown and Christian Wolff and a number of those very advance [sic] garde musicians and writers and dancers that he met and knew in New York when he was a student.

John Cage, you know, about ten years older than I am at least and Carl was probably ten years -- a little bit more than that than I was. He was the same age as Boris Mirski. So he had that approach which was far more contemporary, I guess, and less tradition bound than the Museum School gang.

MR. BROWN: Well, did you find he was effective as a teacher?

MR. COBURN: Oh, yes. He made building a picture a lot more -- a lot easier, somehow. He had ways of dividing

up the surface of the picture. He would -- he had these techniques of dividing up the surface of the picture in order to build a picture as though you were building a wall of some sort or a stone wall.

MR. BROWN: Did you get to know some of these teachers on the outside as well?

MR. COBURN: Yes, but they were all friends.

MR. BROWN: Well, by then --

MR. COBURN: John Wilson was a little bit more distant, but they were all friends, yes.

MR. BROWN: Was there much talk -- this was the last half of the '40s. Was there much talk of politics or what were -- aside from your intense studies and your work in the gallery --

MR. COBURN: Were we -- well, needless to say, we were all liberal. A number of us were probably -- we probably had all socialist leanings or socialist sympathies. Remember the Russians were our allies and we all believed in Shostakovich and we all believed in Prokofiev and we believed in a great new world where socialism would probably be the best solution. I don't know how many of us still think that way. I believe I do.

Yes, but define it anyway you want to, we were certainly horrified and very frightened of the McCarthy era where a number of our friends were seriously threatened. I remember the people who ran the Russian War Relief where on Dartmouth Street, the offices there --

MR. BROWN: Which continued after the war.

MR. COBURN: Which continued until -- no. Which continued until the end of the war and I think it stopped. More or less, it stopped at VE Day. I believe Mrs. Faxon, Janet Faxon, whose husband was a teacher, I believe, of mathematics. I believe their career was destroyed perhaps because of his liberal leanings and because of her involvement with the Russian War Relief during the war.

MR. BROWN: So destroyed, you mean, in the 1950s.

MR. COBURN: Yes, I know George Faxon had to be discharged from his teaching position and I think in some Boston school or public school. I'm not sure of that, but --

MR. BROWN: You were all youthfully -- youthful idealists?

MR. COBURN: Idealists, yes. I would think so.

MR. BROWN: And as a city, as you look back, there must have been a lot of poverty still in that -- in Boston? I mean, weren't there still until -- you mentioned you lived near the railroad yards and the Back Bay. Weren't they --

MR. COBURN: Well, that was where the office was, but, you know, across the -- you know, the whole Prudential area.

MR. BROWN: Where that was a once great railroad yard.

MR. COBURN: It was a huge railroad yard and filled with choo-choos with enormous amounts of soot puffing away and backing and carrying on, you know, changing, putting together trains for commute, mostly commuter trains.

MR. BROWN: But the city itself, I mean, you were otherwise in a fairly elegant part of town, wasn't it?

MR. COBURN: Oh, yes. The, of course, the Back Bay in those days was much more sedate and quiet than it is today and a lot less tacky. Those -- all of those buildings -- only the ones on Newbury Street had apartments and were sometimes rooming houses. Some buildings on Beacon Street and Marlborough and Commonwealth Avenue were converted into apartments. There were rooms for rent for students on Beacon Street. A lot of MIT students rented rooms on Beacon Street. A lot of BU students, Northeastern and do you remember BU had its campus in Copley Square.

MR. BROWN: It was just beginning to move out further.

MR. COBURN: Yes, that's right. And so the Back Bay was filled with students, not the way it is today. I mean there are many more students in the Back Bay and it's a total scene very different from the one that we -- but Emerson College was there and --

MR. BROWN: Was there still also, though, the life for which the Back Bay had been built? Was there a bit of that left?

MR. COBURN: Yes, there was, yes.

MR. BROWN: People kept large houses?

MR. COBURN: A lot of people kept their houses. That wonderful building on the corner of Dartmouth and Commonwealth Avenue was held as a private residence.

MR. BROWN: [Inaudible].

MR. COBURN: Stone -- I think that's Webster, Stone and Webster.

MR. BROWN: Webster.

MR. COBURN: That was until the early '60s if not a little later still held as a private residence and a lot of those big houses were.

MR. BROWN: Well, now you mentioned having worked at the Institute of Modern Art. The Metcalfs would have been a family you got to know a bit.

MR. COBURN: Yes, they lived on -- facing Louisburg Square on Mount Vernon Street, I believe. Tom Metcalf was a wonderful person. His daughter, Diana, studied, I believe, at the Museum School. She was a kind of a glamorous debutante. I don't think there are any such things as debutantes today. But she was a very nice person. I liked her.

Her father was terrific. He was a real democrat, that man. He had a good feeling for young artists. He loved to meet them. He loved to support them. In that way, he and Mirski were very much alike and Tom -- Hyman Swetsoff made the Institute of Modern Art the center of the art world in Boston simply by his connections and by the force of his exotic personality. It was fun to be with Hyman Swetsoff because you were always challenged and shamed or whatever. And Metcalf was very supportive of Swetsoff and they got along very well. Of course, when Metcalf -- when the war ended, and the old guard, Plaut --

MR. BROWN: Oh, James Plaut.

MR. COBURN: And Saltonstall --

MR. BROWN: Nathaniel Saltonstall.

MR. COBURN: Came back from the war to take up the reins of the Institute, Tom Metcalf had to leave or did leave and that was a sad day because we all -- the young artists all loved Thomas Metcalf. Then therein lies another story, you know, of the dissension and the manifesto and the rebellion of the artists, yes.

MR. BROWN: Can you recollect that or would you recall that for us?

MR. COBURN: Oh, gosh, yes. You know, there's a video. I assume you have that video. And there's a transcript of material that I don't know whether you have or not. Do you think you do? Yes.

MR. BROWN: Well, how did this come about. Did you get to meet -- run into Plaut and Saltonstall fairly soon after they returned?

MR. COBURN: Oh, this is a big, complicated story and I don't know. Do we have time to --

MR. BROWN: Yes, we do.

MR. COBURN: All right. I think it's 1947 that James Plaut decided or the board decided, I think, because of the challenge offered by Jackson Pollock and De Kooning to change the name, which I gather they, Plaut and his gang, equated that with modern art. I don't really understand. I don't seize the subtlety at all. However, they decided to change it to the Institute of Contemporary Art and to write what we called a manifesto enjoining artists to disassociate themselves from what Plaut called the cult of bewilderment and chicanery.

MR. BROWN: So he threw out fighting words?

MR. COBURN: Oh, those are very inflammatory words and in doing that, he also made a pointed effort to exclude the young artists from the openings at the Institute saying that the staircase could not hold that many people.

MR. BROWN: Now, was this utter surprise. I mean, what was expected of Plaut. What was known of him before he [inaudible]?

MR. COBURN: Well, I never knew anything about Plaut before he came back.

MR. BROWN: But he had been there before the war?

MR. COBURN: Yes, he had. I don't know anything about Plaut before. See, I had never met him before.

MR. BROWN: But by reputation, was it quite shocking to people who did know?

MR. COBURN: I don't know. I can't tell you. I think you'd have to talk to some people, you know.

MR. BROWN: Yes.

MR. COBURN: You know, Nelson Aldrich, Saltonstall and Plaut. And Plaut hired two other people to help run the institute; a man by the name Frederick White and another one by the name of Frederick Brown. And Frederick Brown, I think, went up to the Portland Museum later on. Frederick White went out to the west -- California, yes.

MR. BROWN: California.

MR. COBURN: Frederick White was a very interesting and a very nice person. They were all snobs, you understand. But Frederick White seemed to have a core of humanness to him and I liked him very much and the more I knew him, the more I liked him. Mr. Plaut rubbed people the wrong way and of course he rubbed Mirski very much the wrong way and Mirski resented him.

Mirski was always quick to join the fray. He loved controversy. He loved discord. He loved having enemies. And he enlisted a lot of people in his causes. Now, I will not say that he is to blame for the -- because there are other people to blame for it. Mirski is not the only one, although he played quite a part in this dissension behind the scenes.

MR. BROWN: Mirski did?

MR. COBURN: Yes, Mirski. There was another person, Angele Myrer, M-y-r-e-r. Have you heard of her?

MR. BROWN: M-e-y-

MR. COBURN: M-y-r-e-r, Angele. Her husband, Ray -- Raymond Myrer. He was a financier of some sort. I think he was with Fidelity.

MR. BROWN: They were both greatly angered Plaut, though?

MR. COBURN: Angele Myrer had studied with Carl Kinoss [phonetic]. She's, I think, originally from -- she may have originally been from Provincetown. In any case, she studied with Carl Kinoss out in Provincetown and she knew Hans Hofmann and she knew a lot of those New York artists that came out to Provincetown while she was growing up to be an artist. She was an artist herself. Her daughter-in-law, Judith Rothschild has become a very fine abstract artist and she was in those days and she's just had a show in New York which I wish I had seen.

MR. BROWN: But she helped --

MR. COBURN: She was very instrumental in fomenting this discord and spirit of revolution because she was --

MR. BROWN: People were just very, very offended then?

MR. COBURN: They were offended by -- no, people were genuinely angry and they met with Boris. "What are we going to do about the Institute? They've excluded the young artists, the students, from the openings."

MR. BROWN: This time you were with -- not at the Institute, but you were with Boris?

MR. COBURN: I was with Boris, yes. And I don't think I -- as soon as Plaut came back and Metcalf, I was no longer sitting in the Institute on Sunday morning or Sunday afternoons and I think that stopped very quickly in 1946 when those guys came back.

MR. BROWN: They excluded the young artists from the opening.

MR. COBURN: Yes.

MR. BROWN: Then they moved toward changing the name to Modern --

MR. COBURN: They did it simultaneously.

MR. BROWN: Contemporary.

MR. COBURN: Simultaneously, they felt that the young artists made a very bad atmosphere at the openings and were perhaps a little rowdy or at least noisy and very possibly clogged the staircase which was in danger according to Plaut.

MR. BROWN: This is an old townhouse back then?

MR. COBURN: No, it was in an office building that was built. It became -- it had a big storefront. I don't think it was built as a house.

MR. BROWN: But it was [inaudible] really. Not that small and [inaudible]?

MR. COBURN: It was a good building, you know. It was a good strong building. It was a great building.

MR. BROWN: But the people were very offended. I know the story's been told, but what was your reaction? Were there meetings at Boris Mirski's gallery or --

MR. COBURN: There were meetings in the evening at Mirski's of Angel Myrer and her husband were very peppery and little by little a movement grew to, at one point, a terrible point, Dorothy Adlow who was a fine critic, wrote a kind of apology, it seems to me, for the Institute's changing its name. Now, I do not recollect what she wrote. It must be somewhere in the Christian Science Monitor.

[END OF TAPE 2 SIDE A.]

MR. COBURN: I wrote her a letter in which I accused her, I believe -- I have no copy of that letter -- of airily subscribing to the Institute's point of view. I may have -- the character of my letter might -- I sent a copy of it to Plaut or to the Institute. I may have been disrespectful. I may have been rude. I don't know. I don't remember my letter. I just remember I used the word -- I was criticizing her for subscribing to the Institute's point of view and it may have sounded accusatory.

MR. BROWN: Because what happened?

MR. COBURN: What happened was Plaut came into the gallery, Mirski's gallery, one afternoon while I was sitting behind the desk. There was nobody in the gallery and he --
[tape interruption]

MR. COBURN: Very badly when I'm threatened. I freeze. My mouth drops open. My jaw drops open and I stare at the person appalled as though I am watching a movie or something. Plaut was furious. He called me all kinds of names among which was a traitor and I don't know what else he said. He was furious. He finally went. He asked me, "Is Boris downstairs? I want a word with Boris."

And so he stormed downstairs to the basement, "Boris, Boris." And he said to Boris, according to Boris, there are no witnesses. He said to Boris, "The best thing to do with that boy of yours is to take him out in the alley and beat him up." And before he did that, before he left, Boris -- I think he fled through the back door out into the alley. Boris said, lifted up his finger and he said, "You can't do that, Jim." Plaut said, "Why?" Boris said, "Cleveland Trust." That was all Plaut had to hear. Magic words made out of whole cloth. Cleveland Trust. That's the kind of mind Mirski had.

MR. BROWN: And so Plaut --

MR. COBURN: So Plaut storms out the back door because I don't remember him coming back up. I was trembling in my boots, you know, thinking of course he was going to punch me in the nose right there. He was a big, strong man and I was a weak, skinny, knock-kneed nothing.

MR. BROWN: Boris [inaudible] by telling him --

MR. COBURN: So Boris says, "You can't touch him. Cleveland Trust."

MR. BROWN: In other words, a lot of money.

MR. COBURN: If you touch -- lay a finger on that kid, you are going to be in very hot water. He didn't say that. All he said was, "Cleveland Trust," and Plaut left. Now, that's what Mirski said. I don't think it is untrue. Mirski lied a lot, but it's too good to be just a fabrication by Mirski of what he said.

MR. BROWN: And from what else you know of the assumptions and attitudes and the others, it's very possible. He could have. Mirski might have said that and it would have had that effect.

MR. COBURN: Evidently, it did have that effect and of course all I can do is bless Cleveland Trust for the power of their -- symbolic power of their name. Wow, what an idea. Of course, there's no Cleveland Trust in my family that I know of, but one day I hope to go to Cleveland and say a prayer in front of --

MR. BROWN: This is an instance, though, of the snobbery and the bowing to riches that evidently were the politic of the Institute?

MR. COBURN: I would think so. It did the trick. I mean he could have said, "You can't touch him. The FBI," or something like that, you know. You know, he's connected to President Truman or the atomic bomb or something like that. That's the story that, of course, that we had a number of meetings as a result of that. That galvanized the whole thing.

MR. BROWN: You mean after --

MR. COBURN: Plaut's threats.

MR. BROWN: To you?

MR. COBURN: To me or to Mirski.

MR. BROWN: To Mirski. Then what happened? What did people --

MR. COBURN: What happened was that we solicited Jack Levine, Hyman Bloom. Hyman came to a couple of our meetings. Carl Kinoss, Karl Zerbe, Walter Gropius --

MR. BROWN: All the supporting of the [inaudible]?

MR. COBURN: All supportive of a meeting which was to take place in the Old South Meeting House in the spring of 1947. I believe it was the spring. I'm not sure. You know, there's that book, "Dissent," in Boston or whatever it's called.

MR. BROWN: Years later the Institute put it out.

MR. COBURN: Yes, right. As -- which, in part, is a kind of whitewash. At any rate, so we got together. We all -- oh, Harley Perkins who was an artist. Let me see. Who else was there?

MR. BROWN: This was to be a meeting at the old south --

MR. COBURN: A protest as Mrs. Myrer kept saying, "You protest for. You don't protest against." So we were protesting for the idea of modern art. Now, we -- I think that it was Jackson Pollock which was the threat to modern art or to contemporary art and almost immediately, Plaut began to put on a series of shows of not -- of more decorative contemporary artists.

I remember one of the first ones was Massimo Campigli who was not a very interesting artist and a number of not very good shows and then all of the sudden they became very good. He had wonderful shows. Had a great Ensor show and, yes. I mean one wonderful show after another. That was in line with the tradition of the Institute of Modern Art who had all kinds of good shows in my recollection of them. Again, the Institute of Modern Art was the first time I ever saw any modern painting in real life.

MR. BROWN: [Inaudible.]

MR. COBURN: Yes, right.

MR. BROWN: But Plaut first got off -- he didn't care for the tendency represented by Pollock for example?

MR. COBURN: I think it was Pollock and De Kooning that was the threat and that was that cult of chicanery and bewilderment.

MR. BROWN: Which he mentioned in his printed [inaudible]?

MR. COBURN: Right, in the manifesto.

MR. BROWN: So but he first Plaut, if you recall, went into sort of some decorative things, Campigli, and then he got his feet on the ground and you saw Ensor and --

MR. COBURN: Then we saw good shows one after another, you know. And then he eventually gave Hyman Bloom a show and Hyman Bloom was one of the rebels.

MR. BROWN: By and large there was nothing at the newly christened ICA for the local artist. Is that correct?

MR. COBURN: No, I think at that point they had discontinued the members' show. Now, the members show was a wonderful show open to all artists. I don't think it was even juried at one point while Metcalf was -- of course, being a member of the Institute of Modern Art, you were pretty careful if you were an artist what you submitted. So you probably --

MR. BROWN: But now did Metcalf play a -- take any role at this time of protest?

MR. COBURN: No. I don't remember his -- I think he was in the -- on the sidelines. I think he may have been gleeful about it. I have no idea.

MR. BROWN: Do you recall meeting in protest? Were you there?

MR. COBURN: Oh, good god, yes. I certainly do. I read Hyman Bloom's speech because Hyman did not want to -- he had stage fright. He was sitting on the platform with us. Poor Harley Perkins was so nervous I think he threw up before. He was very, very nervous. He gave the kind of lead off speech and he was a very gentle and very kind man and he was a pretty good modern artist, too. I'd love to see some of his things. I can't remember them very well. I remember when I first had a show at Mirski's he bought one of mine. I wonder what happened to it.

MR. BROWN: Now, the topic, what you read for Bloom, were these things printed at any point or typed up?

MR. COBURN: Yes, they were typed up. And --

MR. BROWN: Then were there resolutions voted or anything like that?

MR. COBURN: Yes, there were. It was a very successful meeting. A lot of people attended. We were all very nervous. Carl Kinoss came -- did not come, but he sent a brief message. Zerbe spoke. I spoke for Hyman Bloom. I also read -- I believe it was I that read the Carl Kinoss message which was two sentences, I think. I think I read that. Jack Levine spoke. Zerbe spoke. Perkins spoke. Ray Myrer spoke as a collector because he was a --

MR. BROWN: He was a collector.

MR. COBURN: Right. He spoke as a collector. Gropius did not speak to my knowledge. It was so long ago. So it was wonderful. It was a thrill and then it made the Life Magazine and the New York -- and the Time Magazine and Newsweek.

MR. BROWN: Did it have any effect on exhibitions and [inaudible]?

MR. COBURN: I think it did. Eventually did. You know, this was supported a lot by Levine's and Zerbe's gallery in New York, the Downtown Gallery which was made up of a number of very liberal and left-wing artists and I think we solicited a certain amount of support from them. Ben Shahn would, of course, and well --

MR. BROWN: So you read Bloom's talk?

MR. COBURN: Yes.

MR. BROWN: This was after you had your -- you had written your letter.

MR. COBURN: Yes, this was -- I like to think my letter and Plaut's reaction to it galvanized --

MR. BROWN: Galvanized.

MR. COBURN: Yes, it was the catalyst of the whole thing. And the outrage that everybody felt or at least pretended to feel at Plaut's threat to Mirski about me. So that was thrilling and it was great to be involved in something like this.

MR. BROWN: You came out from this then feeling much more courage I would suppose.

MR. COBURN: Oh, yes.

MR. BROWN: But how large was the crowd at this protest? Several hundred students?

MR. COBURN: Oh, yes. I would think certainly two or three hundred. It was well attended and it didn't last very -- I remember, well, in the video, I went up back onto the platform there and I'd forgotten and read part of Hyman's speech again. Then I have a transcript -- I have some material from --

MR. BROWN: From that time?

MR. COBURN: I was the -- we were called the "Modern Artist Group of Boston." That was the name of the group we formed to -- and I was the secretary. I typed all the material and would you know that I don't have any -- very little of that material?

MR. BROWN: But he was a --

[Interruption to tape]
[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated...June 11, 2009