



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

**Oral history interview with Harry Sternberg,  
1999 March 19-2000 January 7**

**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.**

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Harry Sternberg on March 19 and October 8, 1999 and January 7, 2000. The interview was conducted at Harry Sternberg's studio in Escondido, California by Sally Yard for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

**HS:** HARRY STERNBERG

**SY:** SALLY YARD

**RH:** ROBERT HOEHN

### Session 1, Tape 1, Side A (30-minute tape side)

#### March 19, 1999, in Harry's studio at 1718 East Valley Parkway in Escondido

**HS:** The way of life was wild here [in southern California]. Everybody laid back. Everybody dressed casually. And so much available. New York, you have to make an expedition if you want to get out of New York City. Out in the car, I can almost see the mountain out there. I wanted to isolate myself up here. Having a studio at 30 East 14th Street, which was in the heart of everything, interruptions were more common than not. My building had all the famous artists in it. And, of course, any artist who isn't working, one drops in on another artist—it doesn't matter if he's working or not. Jack Levine and [Philip] Evergood, [Robert] Gwathmey—any of the boys felt like dropping in, they would. And it was fun. But it was always an interruption. And I was commuting then from Long Island, which meant I had an hour and a half en route each way, so that was three hours out of my day, and all I needed was a long lunch or somebody cutting into my painting time, and I had no painting time.

**RH:** So how many days a week were you teaching at the Art Students League?

**HS:** Two. Only two. I held to that always.

... I'm here, and once I pulled that door shut I was alone with God, could paint away. It was wonderful.

**RH:** How long has your studio been here—is this where your original studio was?

**HS:** Yeah. I'm in it about twenty years, twenty-one years maybe. See, we had a big fire—you saw that.

**RH:** I was telling Sally ...

**SY:** Disapprovingly.

**RH:** I was telling Sally we had to find a place for your prints.

**HS:** I was reading about the Lower East Side, where I was born. A shift has gone through it, and it moved from being kind of a Jewish ghetto, and then Puerto Ricans and blacks moved in there, gradually took over. And now, very wealthy people have taken it, gone back. I don't know what they can turn it into, because they're all flats, long ones, and the toilet was out in the hall and you shared it with another tenant, and there was no central heating, so you lived in the kitchen, with the coal

stove. It was very funny: Mary—my wife—came from a farming community in Missouri; as we talked about our youth, I realized it wasn't so dissimilar.

**SY:** Part of the pleasure for you of being out here is also in a way probably built on all of that intense activity with other artists earlier.

**HS:** I needed it, I thought it was great: all the activities—political, social, aesthetic. In the WPA days, in the thirties, there were a lot of parades, demonstrations, marches. And there was a flying squad—a loose one, maybe twenty artists who were involved in this—and somebody would pull up and say, "We need a float for a demonstration—are you free?" I'd either join or not, and six or eight of us would assemble wherever they told us to. They never had enough money, so that we had to improvise. But it was very challenging and very exciting to see how impressive a float you could build with, say, all they had was a hundred dollars, or seventy-five bucks. And I remember particularly there was one big meeting in Carnegie Hall, and it was to free Czechoslovakia from Hitler who had invaded it. So we built a gigantic thing—it covered the stage—with a picture of the then-ruler of Czechoslovakia who I remember had a patch over one eye, a military figure, and he was imprisoned, and as they raised money—theoretically this thing could be moved—to free him . . . You know how big Carnegie Hall is. We got the float up—you can't get in early ever—we got the float up about two hours before the doors were supposed to open, and just as we finished the damn job, the whole thing went down and crashed over the first twelve seats maybe. And here people were coming in—they were already coming in! In those days, nobody thought anything much about it, and all the early people came in to help raise this and brace it—audience and we, together. And we got it up and braced, and then they went back to their seats. There were all kinds of fun. Sometimes it was held in one of those places where they'd have, say, ice skating the day before, and you had to wait till the ice melted before you could get into it.

But that kind of intense activity: there was the [American] Artists' Congress, artists against war and fascism—there were many organizations. And somehow—and I'm talking about the best artists in New York, all the famous ones: Gwathmey, Evergood, I of course—all the good ones would pour out for these occasions, demonstrate with the WPA boys. And we met after, say, an Artists' Congress meeting—we'd go to a bar and drink beer and eat hard-boiled eggs and talk. And it was beautiful because nobody climbed on anybody's back. More abstract, less abstract, Social Realist, non-Social Realist—that didn't bother us. We'd talk about art, talk about life. So it was intense.

But at some stage—I didn't realize until I came out here—I'd had enough of it. And I blessed the silence of this place. I blessed it. When I shut that door, I was not interrupted. The phone I have is unlisted; only Mary has it, and a few people.

And even at home . . . We originally had an acre of ground about three miles that way, up on a hill, with maybe forty avocado trees, fruit trees. At that point I was full of hell, we wanted a big garden—vegetable garden, we'd can stuff. And it was in the hills so we had wonderful wild animal life, which, to me, from New York, was wonderful. I had never seen these things, except occasionally in the zoo. And they paraded right through—coyotes walked through, skunks, all kinds of things. It was just great. But it got to be too much, and we took a little house out here in a retirement golfing community.

**RH:** I don't know—there's something about this Harry of protesting in the thirties and forties living on Country Club Lane . . . Well, all your old chums . . .

**HS:** You're reading my mind.

**RH:** I would guess that very few of your old chums made a break from New York—they probably

think you're crazy.

**HS:** Yes. Yes. They thought I was absolutely nuts. How could I live without them? And the museums and stuff. It really didn't bother me. The first break, we rented a house, and it was a writer's house—a fellow by the name of Wright, an early American writer. It was a wonderful, typically Spanish—the main house, so-called—two wings, and one wing was a library, with all kinds of shelves and closets for books. It was heaven for Mary, who writes. And isolated. And I gave Mary six months. **HS:** I said, "I don't know if I could live out here." But my daughter settled it for me, really. She ran away—she was eighteen—ran away and went to Berkeley and San Francisco. So how can I go back to New York? I wanted to be within reach, number one, of her, in case she needed—if I could find her. And Mary—her family lived out here and she hadn't been with them much. So there were many arguments for staying here.

We lived in this isolated house. There's a Mexican who worked on the ranch and he looked like a guerilla from the early Pancho Villa days, and I didn't know much about that, hardly spoke the language much. And I used to have to make trips. Like I'd teach in Palm Springs for a week, Mary was left alone there. And she's a toughie and is unafraid. And finally she said to me, "I hate to complain, but every once in a while I look up and there's that damn guerilla looking through the window at me." So I said, "I'll settle that one," and I got my shotgun out and I sat on the front porch of that place cleaning it till he came by, and there I was holding the gun in my lap, for authority. And I said to him in my best Spanish, "Es mi esposa. This is my wife. You stop: no more." And the guy looked absolutely astonished. And he finally got it across to me. He said, "I know you go away and I'm looking out that your wife's all right." And Jose and I became good friends. We still are. He lives in an apartment here. So he was protecting her, which is a long way from the Lower East Side, I will tell you that.

Although that youth—it was very important, life on the Lower East Side—I don't know what yours was like in New Jersey, but in the slums it was special. You only lived in the kitchen. Any immigrants that came over, you took in—there was no government place for them to go to—and you kept them till they got organized, and then they would have their own place. So the house was always full, and when a bunch of Jews get together, who listens? Noisy! Noisy—they'd try to out-yell each other. It was kind of wonderful, as against the reserved, quiet Christian ways. You know, if somebody died they raised hell—cut their clothes, tore them. One would try to jump into the grave—it was real exciting. And for me, it was a constant disruption, because all I wanted to do was draw and read. And my school had never mentioned the word library and they taught us nothing that interested me. How I made it through high school I don't know. I flunked math anyhow, and had to make it up, but nothing influenced me. And I found the Public Library—it was way over on Arlington Avenue in Brooklyn—it had a fireplace, which I had never seen. And in those days, it was a temple, like a synagogue.

**SY:** It was just what you wanted—total quiet, peace.

**HS:** And I had all the books I wanted. The world of books opened up. I didn't know where to start, so I decided a simple way to start was Altschuller—A—and work my way through. And I read, and that was an escape for me, a beautiful escape. And the librarian was interested in this Jewish schmuck coming into this library, you know—we lived far away from there.

None of my gang ever went in there. Never—wouldn't be seen dead. The only reason they took me in—I didn't want to go—was I was a big, rangy guy, and we were fighting with the Italians; they needed me—I was impressive.

**SY:** But did you really fight, or did you just be impressive?

**HS:** No, we fought, too. It would usually start with a baseball game, and we'd play for ten cents maybe, if you could get that much money, and it always broke up the fun. It was not like today—no knives, no guns. And if two guys started a fight, we didn't jump in, the way the hockey players do. Everybody would stand back—we had it worked out. And at the worst, there'd be rocks thrown—at the worst. If any of the gang bothered a woman, or pulled anything like that, I think the rest of us would have beaten him up—it just wasn't done. There was an ethic that was good.

I think—for me at least, for the creative person—wherever you go there's somebody there to carry you through the worst storms. All my life this has been true. I didn't know where to read—the librarian took me on. I had never heard classical music at home—any music—and my first teacher, Harry Wickey, decided to educate me, and he'd come every Friday to do criticism—for free, he wouldn't let me pay—and he brought along a friend, Harry Shapiro, a wonderful guy. He was an orthodontist—had money evidently. He had a place on Prospect Park. And his wife played the piano, and taught me about classical music. And there was a telescope in the window, and that was the first time I looked up. And they'd bring food, and after the criticism they would talk about something. They were trying very seriously to educate me. And it was marvelous, because I was hungry for it.

So my youth was a time of wonder. We didn't have enough money, sometimes went hungry—never bothered me. The dumps we lived in never bothered me. I never thought of anything but that's the way things are. But the learning was so exciting. So exciting. When I got out of high school, the first job I got . . . . I'd learned typing and shorthand—I thought that would be useful. I knew I had to work to go to art school. I'd been going to school at night—free school at the museums. The first job I got was in the General Theological Seminary [of the Episcopal Church] in New York, where they raised high Protestant ministers—very cultured. It was a long square block in New York, between Eighth and Ninth, with a stone building circling it, so it's really enclosed. And the men all wear these capes with a red lining in winter—looked most impressive. That's when I learned to read mysteries. There was a professor of philosophy there, who was one of the most brilliant men in America, I would guess—he loved mysteries, and after he was through with them he started giving them to me. And I was secretary to the professor of Christianology, which is Christian history, and that was another whole learning experience. Two or three guys would sit around the professor's office, and he'd raise questions: "How do you handle the Virgin birth?" was the first one—I've never forgotten that, I was shocked to have a Christian questioning this. "How do you handle it symbolically?"

I had a wonderful two years there. And it was easy, half days. I had enough time to go to school. And I was learning, too, about religion, a great deal. One morning I came in and there was a note on my typewriter with a two-week check—salary check—saying, "Harry, you'll never see me again—goodbye, Reverend Ralph B. Pomeroy"—signed his name. So I got in touch with his sisters. The jerk had gone to Central Park, tried to pick some other guy up, turned out to be a detective, so that was the end of his career. In those days, there was no monkeying around. This was out.

**RH:** Harry, how old were you then? In your early twenties?

**HS:** Out of high school, yes. It was really tragic, because he was a hell of a sweet guy. He was so nice. And so decent. And I spoke to his sister, whom I had talked with before. And she said I was the only one who could come to see him—he wouldn't see anybody else. And he poured his heart out to me. It was a real friendship. And after that I never saw him again. I don't know what happened to him—private—took him out and put him somewhere, in the church.

But see, again, it was a godsend. Every job I took I was jealous of the energy and the hours that it took from me. I worked in construction work. I did soda jerking. I worked for medics. All the jobs. And I

resented every one of them. Again, I run into a guy at a party. He comes into my studio, sees what I'm doing, he says, "You're not going to waste any time at these jobs. Apprentice yourself to me." He was a lighting fixture designer. Now, there was no school for that at that time. So for a year I worked fulltime with him. And then he said, you'll go on your own or you'll work half days here. I'd bump into these guys always. So the guy upstairs is looking out for me. And I had no guilt. And I wouldn't ask a person for a meal, but a drink is something else. I wouldn't ask about clothes, because I didn't give a damn what I wore. I got married—I was thirty-five years old now. And it's summertime. My wife says to me, "Why don't you put on a summer suit?" because I was wearing this vest and a coat made out of some kind of heavy material. And I said, "What do you mean? What's a summer suit?" I only had one suit all my life. I wore that out, you got another suit. Summer, winter, didn't make any difference. She said, "How can you put on those socks with that outfit, and you're a colorist?" I said, "Well, they were the ones on top." I don't know if I'm dressed or not dressed—still. She lays out my wardrobe. She said this morning, "You're going to wear those damn shoes?"

Session 1, Tape 1, Side B

**HS:** Did I ever show you my sword cane?

**RH:** No.

**HS:** On the doorknob of that closet. [RH walks over to retrieve it.] That's a beautiful piece of equipment.

**RH:** [snaps or clicks something open] Oh, my!

**HS:** It's a beauty.

**RH:** Oh, that's great. You know, these are completely illegal.

**HS:** They're illegal. But that's beautifully done. And I know how to use it. See, among my other duties, I—being very romantic—got interested in fencing. Philip Reisman and I shared a studio [in Sheridan Square]. He and I used to fence up there. We didn't have chest protectors or anything. Masks were all we had—we picked up secondhand foils. And I looked up an epeege in the middle of town; I knew there had to be one. And, lo and behold, the guy who coached the Olympics [Santinelli] was teaching. So I went in and said, "May I watch?" He said, "Sure, any time." I went to a couple of sessions trying to pick up what I could. But you can't. It's like fiddling: it's all finger work, and you can't see it, it's invisible. He was waiting for someone to come who was late one day. He says, "Come on, let's see what you can do." Well, he played with me like I was a baby. Took the pole right out of my hand in no time. But he got interested. So he said, "You'll need lessons," I said, "No dinero" [no money]. He said, "I didn't say dineros—you need lessons." So, he said, "You come and any time I'm not busy, I'll teach you." And he coached me, and I got good. At the Art Students League there was a guy teaching who was a champion in Annapolis, and I could beat him. He and I used to fence after class. We'd clear a place in their so-called dining room, a little coffee shop, and we'd bring out foils and stuff, and we would fence every night that we were there. And he was a nice guy, and hated my beating him, particularly because I was a Jew—this especially bothered him. But we got along, we had some good fencing.

But again, see, I ricochet off these things: there's a guy waiting for me. When I worked for the construction company—Spencer, White and Prentiss—I was field clerk which meant I handled payroll. There were roughly, as I remember, about a hundred-fifty laborers. And the superintendent who hired me, the first day on the job—I was hired in the New York office and I'd been sent to this

job—he says, “Come on, we’re going for a ride in my car.” [HS: recalls what he was thinking at the time:] “Just act very calm . . . what’s happening?” But I went. He drives around, and he said to me, “Who are you working for? The office or me?” I said, “I don’t know.” He said, “Well, I’ll give you a hint. If you’re working for the office, you’re fired at the end of the week. If you’re working for me, you’ll make a lot of money.” I said, “I’m working for you.” I had never gone fulltime to art school. And that was a dream of mine. All I could see was how I could get a year out of this thing at the League. One summer, three months, I made enough that I got my first year at the League. I had no guilt—I don’t know why—but this was as if it were for a church or a synagogue. To me it was that important. But again, these things fall into place. When I was going to high school, freshman, I heard of the Brooklyn Museum, that they had free Saturday classes and a model. I was there. I fortunately married the right kind of a gal. Very fortunately. Because anybody who marries a dedicated creative person is in trouble. If your art doesn’t come first, almost, you’re not an artist—you won’t make it. You have to step over and step on many things, and a poor wife has to take it. So much falls on her back. And she’s a wonder. Very beautiful. Mine was very understanding and willing to give up a whole lot for me. Quietly. So we’re married now for 59 years, and it’s still good. I still feel good when she walks into a room. I sure felt for her: my friends, my family and her family all said it would never work. She came from a very upper-class, very wealthy area. And she came to live with my mother on 18th Street [333 West 18th Street], and they said it would never work. While they were still around, they were proven very wrong.

**RH:** I think Mary was even disinherited, wasn’t she, by her father?

**HS:** Oh, yeah.

**RH:** Twenty, thirty years later, didn’t they reconcile?

**HS:** Twenty-five. Her father and mother were divorced, and her father, who had, evidently, a big streak of anti-Semitism, was suspicious of her marrying a Jew, an artist. A Jew to him meant a Communist.

**RH:** You were probably a little left of center politically, right?

**HS:** I was way left of center, yes. And I’m sure he had us checked out. He had me checked out. When we did get married he threw her out of the house. Wouldn’t talk to her for twenty-five years. His divorced wife did, her mother. And, oddly enough, a brother of his, an uncle. He and I got along great—primarily because I could eat as much as he could and I could drink as much as he could and stay vertical. We got to be good friends. But, she loved the guy and I pressured her to write. I said after he goes you’ll feel very bad. So she wrote a couple of letters and finally they made up. He lived up in Santa Barbara, so I would drive her up—often she went alone—but sometimes I’d drive her up, drop her two blocks from the house, and I’d horse around in Santa Barbara, which is a nice town to horse around in. And she’d visit with him. Then at a prescribed time Sunday, I’d meet her at that corner and off we’d go. It worked very well. She got to see enough of him so she has no guilt. I think he lived about two, three years after.

He remarried and had two daughters, one of whom died. The other is still alive. And Mary became friends with this one who’s living. After twenty-five years—she was an infant when Mary left home—and she’s been a wonderful sister. She lives up in Monterey. And they’re all in the legal thing. Mary’s grandfather was a retired judge. Her father was an attorney—the attorney—for Richfield Oil. All of them—cousins—it’s a law firm, law family. Do you ever read dissenting opinions of some of the great judges? Among them Judge Learned Hand—how’s that for a name for a judge? My best friend went to law school. He educated me on them. He’d bring precious ones for me to read.

**SY:** Everything you've done seems to me to be rooted in an underlying sense of humanity and justice.

**HS:** I think that's part of the Jewish tradition that affected me strongly. Even though I am still not a synagogue-goer. I did some paintings on the law that were quite interesting, and they were used by all these law journals all over the country. One of them I liked the title almost as much as the painting. Title is "Just Ice"—and it's a bunch of Supreme Court judges on an ice field, and some of them are sinking in, and they're all thinking, the speed of justice.

You know, a part of the awesome wonder in life for me is people. They fascinate me because they're like icebergs. And the best part of them is buried and only the tip shows. Most people, in one way or another, have hidden fascinating things. Always more interesting than you would think they would be.

**RH:** Malcolm [Warner], in his [1994] catalog, was talking about how Harry is essentially a romantic. I think I've got a little bit of that, too.

**HS:** What do you mean, a little bit of it? You're saturated with it. Your whole attitude towards life . . .

**RH:** Okay, a little bit more than a little.

**HS:** And it's wonderful, it's wonderful. People miss so much if they aren't. She's [SY] a sentimental romantic—I can tell that. You have to have a very romantic love of man to take what he looks like on top, which is a kind of a remotely ugly mess, to take the time to dig. I find it pays very well. Are you going to tell how we first met?

**RH:** We met through Malcolm, and the common denominator was Martin Schongauer.

**HS:** There was a show of prints at the San Diego Museum. And I was invited to speak on the prints, for a group that followed me around. And I was lambasting some of them—modern ones—very strongly. And then I bumped into Schongauer. And this is like meeting an old love. So I talked about it at some length. I didn't know Bob [who had loaned the Schongauer print to the museum] was back there watching. So then, when I found out who he was, and then I saw his other prints, we bonded. He's the first person I have met—one of the very few, let's put it that way—that I've met out here, including some of our dear museum people, who loves prints, and who can look—not glance—at a print, but look at a print lovingly, and know what he's looking for. Now this is rare.

**SY:** That actually brings me to a question about your reason for making prints. You've spoken about the process of making prints.

**HS:** Your gesture almost told it, almost gave the answer. I've always liked material that challenged me, that fought me. Drawing I love, but you do that for different reasons. Because you draw, you make a mistake, into the garbage can, no loss. But a metal plate fights you tooth and nail. How much is the acid doing? It's invisible. What's it going to look like when it comes out? It's negative—you know, white on black is going to turn black on white. It's going to reverse, and you never really know what it's going to look like until you pull your first proof. Then you can maneuver with it. This has interested me always. The wood—it's all resistance. The fact that you can't horse around with it. If you make a mistake, it's tough.

**RH:** What about the whole thing of multiple images? I mean, that part of it didn't really interest you, did it?



**HS:** Yes.

**RH:** It did.

**HS:** Yes, yes. It is the only way—when you're a young artist—to really sell any work. Because a print is five bucks. A painting you can't sell for five bucks. So you say, in those days, a hundred or a hundred fifty, there are not many people in those days would spend that much on a young artist. But a print they would buy. And you still have it.

**SY:** Actually, it's one solution for the predicament that there are certain things it's very difficult to let go of.

**HS:** Yes, to part with. I have a canvas there, the one behind the one in front, which is on the theme of love [probably *Insecurity # 1: Love*, c. 1943-46]. And although I'm getting a nice sum of money for it, that's one I hated to part with, and Mary hated to part with. Sure, there are some. But basically my general answer to people is, "Everything I have is for sale—except my wife." Of course my first teacher was a printmaker—Harry Wickey—and he got me interested in etching. And I used to make my own presses and sell them. I found, on the Lower East Side, there was a clothing business, and for pressing clothes they had a machine that looked like the basic element. It was this vertical stand on two rollers, and a heating pipe ran through one of the rollers, so that when they put the clothes through, it would press them. I looked at the damn things and I saw no reason they couldn't make good etching presses. So I concocted one myself, and it worked beautifully. All I had to find was the steel bed, actually, and rollers to support the bed. And I must have sold half a dozen of these. I made some money. And they worked beautifully.

October 8, 1999

Session 2, Tape 1, Side A

**HS:** Much of contemporary art has no content orientation. What they want to say is terribly unimportant, and it's only when something is terribly important that great art is produced. Great art. The concept of a found object would be like approaching religion and saying, "All right, I'll join whatever religious institution there is in the next block. The first church I see." When a statue or a painting—a big one—went up in Mexico or Italy or wherever, the people didn't know much about the greatness of the painting but they understood what the guy was trying to say—and it touched them. So here, now, this art doesn't touch people; it titillates them. I walk into the La Jolla Museum—I still try to keep an eye on what's going on—and in one little room there's an overturned armchair and a woman that's caught under it, her head shows, and she's saying something but you can't hear it . . . Well, now, let's gather all this together. What does it stand for? What does it do for man's soul? What does it do for his mind? What does it do for artistic concepts? It just struck me—it's too meaningless. It doesn't bother me too much that that goes on; stuff has gone on always. But the church windows, when they're good they're magnificent, because they're truly using light. And you know, it's god's light. It isn't paint. It's unlimited.

**SY:** This issue of content . . .

**HS:** This is so basic to me. It holds in literature. Mary and I both read, and the hunt in contemporary literature—we could come out of the library with twelve books, and eleven are not readable. They use four-letter words. Hell, I was raised when a four-letter word was the only adjective you knew: "shit" and "fuck" were the adjectives. Everything was that. It didn't serve any purpose then, and it doesn't serve any purpose now. It sure as hell doesn't give me any belt if someone says these terrible words. And yet that's, you know, it's the shock thing. And it's, even a short story—I'm re-

reading Gogol. I go back every once in a while to something real to satisfy this hunger I have.

**RH:** Who are you reading?

**HS:** Gogol. The Russian [Nicolai Vasilevich Gogol]. I love the short stories particularly, all the Russians—Chekhov, the whole bunch of them. Dostoevsky's a little tough, I get bored. That's a minor word, but it's very important. I won't let people bore me. I won't let anything in life bore me: if I can get out of it, I leave. Or I kick it out. I'm not going to waste the time being bored. These young ones, god bless their souls—I can't wait for them to grow up.

I saw up in Idyllwild [School of Music and the Arts, near Palm Springs] thirty years ago one of the great modern dancers. They had good talent up there—great—and I loved the evening, when we could sit around, because New York was too busy. And this guy put on a performance. Instead of leotards and stuff, he appeared dressed like a lumberjack—hiking shoes, a plaid shirt—and he had a four-by-four. And he came out—no music or anything—and he did a dance square. You know, one step, two steps forward, pull, two steps side, two steps this way. Deadpan—twenty minutes. And he'd make moves I'll never forget. I said to him, "Come on, I'm a hick, I guess I don't understand anything. Tell me what you were doing up there, because I don't get it." He said, "You looked, didn't you?" I said, "Sure, because I was waiting for something to happen. Nothing happened." He said, "But you looked." Now that was what he wanted.

That's not enough, particularly if when you do look there's nothing. It's symbolic of the whole deal. They want "they" out there. And our good university is very responsible for a lot of this. They're very dominant in our field. They aim to attract attention. It's bad when the human being focuses on this. It's even worse when something sacred like art is abused by this—I find it cynical.

One of the things my teacher Harry Wickey said was, "When something disturbs you, go back again and again." I came to him and I said I had seen some painting that was very bad. He said, "If it bothers you enough so you talk about it, go back and look at it." Well, I've done that. Avant-garde dance bores me. It simply bores me, so I don't look at it anymore. Painting. Music. It's there in all the arts. And just infinitely boring.

**SY:** Do you think it has to do with a self-consciousness? When you say, "Oh rubbish, wait 'til they grow up," perhaps you've hit that quality of self-consciousness that is sort of adolescent and keeps you wrapped within your own world.

**HS:** For the adolescent and the young person, yes. They're insecure, they're scared, and they don't know what in the hell this is all about, and they put on fronts. But I don't like people who don't grow up. I'll accept, sure, a college kid doing some of these gimmicks. But when that college kid is forty and still doing the gimmicks, I'd begin to say, "Hey!" I want to shake him, say, "Hey! Cut this crap out now, you're a grown person."

**SY:** For you, art has this immense force.

**HS:** That's why it's especially sinful to abuse it. I go to Las Vegas. People pulling slot machines, playing the tables and so on. I shoot a little craps myself, enjoy it. But, gee whiz! It's horrifying the amount of energy, the amount of money, the amount of time spent. I take twenty bucks, I enjoy losing it. As a matter of fact, I don't leave until I do. I mean, if I'm ahead, I just keep on playing. The abuse of this, when it becomes something that is the total focus of their life—that isn't what God, or whoever, designed people for. Gives us this wonderful potential, gives us creativity.

I think the human being is as miraculous as any miracle that's ever been wrought. And particularly

the potential. It's there in everybody. Everybody has a potential. It's sad that for some it's never been realized. And you get hints—so many people when they're old and retired say, "I always wanted to play the piano," "I always wanted to play violin." Sorry, why the hell didn't you?

Some days I think I'm painting better than I ever painted before. I'm more involved. I have more discipline behind me. And I trust my intuition. I go home for lunch practically every day. We have a kind of ritual. Lunch is not a major meal. Soup and sandwich or something. But we sit down before with a drink, and Mary will read to me what she wrote that morning, because she's writing. Now she's working on a book, and she has these characters getting in some kind of a jam, and I'm fool enough to say, "Now how are you going to get them out of it?" And she says, "I don't know." And I could kiss her. And she literally doesn't. She trusts her intuition. She'll jump off the board into the pool, and she'll find out if she can swim or not. Sometimes it's a whirlpool. And she is as involved as I am; it's beautiful.

I watch Bobby [Robert Hoehn]. First time I met him I was giving a talk on a print show at the San Diego Museum and wandered through this whole show, mostly ripping the hell out of the stuff that was there. I didn't know he was there, I didn't know who he was. It was like a drink of water on the desert. So here, in this community, where the women and men who are on boards are mostly those who give the most money and who don't care about art—mostly—I find a jewel. This makes me happy. His own love for this—I love him for it. And, you know, I know some people with huge collections. They talk about them—the way people discuss when they talk about their children. And when they do, I know I'm going to dislike this collection. You don't hear any yammering about his. So, there's gold, but you have to dig for it. Chance brought us together—just wild chance.

**SY:** So you didn't know each other before that.

**HS:** No.

**RH:** I think Malcolm Warner introduced us that evening at the San Diego Museum.

**SY:** That's such a nice story.

**HS:** Oh, it's a beautiful story. A lovely relationship came of it. Just found. He liked what I said about his prints. And I liked any son of a bitch who'd buy one of these things.

**RH:** I think the print by Schongauer was The Man of Sorrows.

**HS:** Yes. Beautiful. And I knew these prints. Being an etcher I knew what went into the engraving or the etching—the space of gray, the masterliness of it.

**SY:** I'm intrigued by what you were saying about the unforgivingness of printmaking—this feedback of the process. It's such a dialogue and a process.

**HS:** Oh, yes. That's a good word for it. It's also fascinating: you take a plate—it's copper or zinc—and you put a coating on it—acid-resisting—so it's now black. Now I want to make a drawing that's going to be a black line on white paper. But when I put my needle and scratch, it's a white line on black. So I have to visualize ahead: what is this going to look like when it becomes that? Then I go bite it. Now, if I'm drawing with a piece of chalk or pencil, I can control the pressure: dark, light, then back. I don't know what the acid is doing—I'm guessing. I know approximately what it's supposed to do, but I don't really know. So then comes that precious moment: you wash the black off. This is a dialogue between me and the plate. You wash the black off, and now all of a sudden there are no lines; there are some cavities. I still can't have any notion what's going to happen. Now even when I

ink it, whatever it begins to suggest, it's reversed. So it's like looking in a mirror reversed—you look at your face and it's all cockeyed. It's only when you peel that first print that you finally see it. So it's an extended dialogue, and a very exciting one. Working in wood—I don't pre-draw what I'm going to do. Give some gouache rough-ins. So here I'm cutting, and I'm cutting white lines against a light brown. But those lines are going to print black on white. And here again there's a whole dialogue. And I don't know what, literally—after thirty, forty years of doing them—when I pull that, I don't know what I'll find.

**RH:** Seventy years.

**HS:** Seventy.

[The interview finishes; a conversation continues over lunch in an Escondido restaurant.]

**RH:** If you were to have one painting and one print that were going to be on permanent display at the San Diego Museum of Art—or somewhere more prestigious—what would they be? Of yours.

**HS:** That would be a toughie to answer. I'd have a hell of a job picking it out.

**RH:** Okay, three of each.

**HS:** I think the triptych that I'm giving to your collection [The Hoehn Collection of Prints at the University of San Diego] would be one.

**RH:** Really?

**HS:** There's a painting that Ellen Fleurov is trying to get for the exhibition at the California Center for the Arts Museum in Escondido. You've never seen it and never seen a reproduction of it. It's a big painting—it's a painting of a parade, kind of an orgy [Crucifixion, 1950s]. In the background is the gigantic figure of Christ on the Cross. And instead of a face there's a mirror. I'd like to see it again, it's been so many years. She's going through letters, catalogues, a ton of stuff, trying to find a direction for the show. I told her what I'd be happy with—I think she's going for it—is a show that's arranged by themes, because I worked that way. I'd pick up a theme and I would mine it until it gives out on me, then I'd go to another one. I think that's the way she's heading. The Art Students League has a wonderful collection of self-portraits. Every year I printed on paper a Christmas card that was a self-portrait—you know, holiday, a message. Somehow get the message across of Christmas greetings. But they're good self-portraits. She's going to go and look at them. I did a series [of 10 paintings] of what I called Insecurities—Man's Insecurities—good paintings, too. And one guy in Del Mar—a couple—bought two.

**RH:** The Dykstras [Sandy and Bram]?

**HS:** One of the paintings the Dykstras have had areas that were problem areas. I showed them—we talked about it before—he took them anyhow. And he's having one of the conservators who used to work at Balboa [Art Conservation Center], who's in Del Mar now, repair them. And I went out to see what they're doing—I was curious. It's kind of interesting. I went to find out if they knew their stuff and I think they do. My paintings don't deteriorate. I use a very simple, basic process: gessoing. I use a simple medium—three-way medium. If I use a varnish, it's a Demar varnish. And I use good paints. So no problem. On this one painting though, there are two areas. So I asked them, "What are you going to do?" And, the first time, I got an answer. I used white heavily on these two areas, and they don't know why that failed, except that they said "you probably got a bad tube of white," which is possible even in the expensive paint. But it's only where I used that white. And I used it

quite heavily. It drove me crazy, because I'm not used to this kind of problem—I'm very proud of my work. I won't go for new techniques as they come out. I don't trust them till they've been going for a while.

I had an interesting experience. When I drive and I'm very tired—if I've been using my eyes a lot or I'm very physically tired—my eyes tend to see double. Of course I'm scared stiff. So I go back to the guy who put implants in. He's very expensive. But I went back to him and I explained my problem; he's totally disinterested. You know, if it isn't an implant . . . So he said, "You know, you're older. Rest more." So I walked out a hundred dollars to the poor with less knowledge. But I have a man at Kaiser—I belong to Kaiser—I went up to his place. He sat with me for about 45 minutes—asked me lots of questions, tested my eyes. He said, "I think I can cure it probably in one eye." He said, "I will put something in your glasses—like a crystal" [perhaps a prism]. I didn't believe him but I ordered the glasses.

**SY:** And it worked?

**HS:** It's perfect—I'm so happy.

Session 2, Tape 1, Side B

**SY:** Did you sometimes trade works with friends?

**HS:** When I was feeling confident I would. And many times I sold off most of what I got. [Marsden] Hartley gave Mary a beautiful work. And when we hit a really rough point, we sold it. We got several thousand for it—hated to part with it, because he gave it to her.

**SY:** It seems that as an artist you fight your way to a certain kind of style, that's going to work for what you're doing, but how is it that you don't get too comfortable with it?

**HS:** There's a tricky balance there. You used the word "style": that isn't what you go for. What is important is, when you walk into a show, you don't have to read the signature. Picasso had thirty different styles, but every one of them were Picasso. And I work on many things and, in some sense, in many styles, but I feel I've gotten a little of what I was trying for. You don't have to read my signature. That's very different than style. Sure, some men find a style and they're recognizable, and on that basis they sell well because you know if you buy a Dali, you buy a Dali. You're not going to be fooled, you're not going to be surprised.

**RH:** But Harry will fool you. At the show where we met, I remember going into the twentieth-century room. One of my favorite modern printmakers is Diebenkorn, and Harry, it turned out, had gone to meet him in San Francisco.

**HS:** Now he had one quality: he was one of the best colorists I've ever met. Color that made me happy to look at. And that was enough. I wouldn't hang one in my room and live with it, is the difference. But I like looking at it, and I respect the guy, like I respect craftsmanship.

**RH:** If you could have one painting to live with, what would it be?

**HS:** That's a toughie again. Off the top of my head, it probably would be an El Greco. But I don't know which one. I'm pretty sure it would be an El Greco. On the other hand, it might be a Goya. You're making it very hard for me. I want them all. Can I go back to the Frick? There are so many paintings, and they're so diverse, and one visit is not enough—you can't really do it, even though it's

a small museum. And then there's Rembrandt's [painting of the] young son on a horse. [It has been proposed by Simon Schama (Rembrandt's Eyes, 1999, 599) that the unidentified horseman of Rembrandt's The Polish Rider (sometimes read as an image of The Prodigal Son) in the Frick Collection in New York might have been the youthful son of the unidentified family who commissioned the painting.]

**RH:** At the Timken Museum there is this wonderful dichotomy. There is Rembrandt's Saint Bartholomew, and then there's the central gallery, and beyond that the Copley portrait of Mrs. Gage. But the difference between these two.

**HS:** One was painting the outside, and the other one was painting the soul. I keep a print of Rembrandt's Self-Portrait. I use the symbol: a bowling ball is no subject to paint, but a rock that size that's been eroded by the sea is. And that painting tells so much of what this poor bastard went through, and how wonderful he'd been in handling it all. I come up the stairs and that's just the first thing I look at. The whole business with human beings, which is your basis for all of this, is always religious. Always to do with religion—human beings. Or art. When I was a kid and I went to synagogue, it was an orthodox synagogue. And what impressed me as a kid, the Jews would take the curtain, grab it in their hands, and they would close the door, so that they could be uninterrupted in their one-on-one with god. That they kept women behind curtains I could understand—then. It was distracting. That kind of intensity, that real reality, of spirituality, touches me. And in art and in human beings this is what . . . When you teach, you find that the students suck the energy out of you if you're a good teacher. If you give generously, you have nothing left, you can't create anything. I used to teach two days at the League. I never took a job more than part-time—two days. I went back to my studio after teaching in the morning and I'd have nothing left.

...

**RH:** For my daughter's thirteenth birthday party, she asked if she can have a dance, so we're having a dance at our showroom. We're going to have lots of chaperones—it's such a responsibility.

**HS:** If we have any sense, we do all the things we can do—have a dozen chaperones, have sixteen chaperones, have thirty chaperones, hand-picked—and no matter what you do, it's life. And they are infinitely ingenious in getting around any barriers that you can construct. And it's a part of their growing up. I admire it. I tremble, I have one daughter [Leslie Louise Sternberg] is all I have, and I tremble. But, boy, I'm proud. And they will wiggle around you. You can call the whole US Army out, and they'll find a way of raising some hell. So be prepared.

Session 2, Tape 2, Side A

**RH:** Bill Kelly down at Brighton Press has proposed—or maybe Harry proposed it to him, I don't know—but the University of Minnesota has a lot of Harry's plates, and to do some second printings of them. That would be kind of interesting, I think. Especially to see if what Bill would do would be different than what you did fifty years ago.

**HS:** It would be interesting to see. Of course, some of the plates with aquatint would be more worn than they were originally.

**RH:** Did you do your own printing?

**HS:** Originally, yes, in New York. I finally got Will Barnet as a printer of lithographHS:, so I did some of his printing. But I did all my own printing.

**RH:** So, I'm interested in the collaboration, say, between you and Bill Kelly or you and Will Barnet—how much can the printer add to it?

**HS:** The printer is capable of adding a lot to any print medium: lithography, etching. He can monkey around with it and do all kinds of things. The simplest things, if you think of it, if you just took a line engraving, it depends on how much you load that line with, as to how black the impression is. Bill pulls a print for me—I look at it; if I don't like it, I say, "Give it another shot." I sign that first print, then he can't monkey it, and he has to work to that print that I've okayed. With lithography, it's such a sensitive matter. You have the leather grips holding the roller, and depending on speed, pressure, as to how the impression comes out. So you can either slow it up, more pressure, less pressure—you can monkey with it.

**RH:** When you were doing your own printing, did you like that process?

**HS:** I hated printing. The first prints were marvelous; the second and third print, I'd get it right, then I was bored. I hated printing, and I was a slob about it, and I didn't keep records, and I printed on bad paper. A total slob. And I never printed full editions. I always marked them: thirty seemed to be a good number for me.

**SY:** But you would never make the thirty.

**HS:** Sit there and print thirty prints? But that collaboration is terribly important. The printer has to really like what you're doing. In the early days, the American Artists group [Association of American Artists] would give a prize every year. And it was a small money prize, and they would print an edition, and George Miller did the printing. He was a prestige name in printing in those days.

**RH:** Didn't he do a lot of work with Bellows?

**HS:** Yes. A lot of other work. He put in a lot in the Weyhe Gallery—my gallery. He was a cold fish, and he insisted on a print being the way he wanted it, not the way we wanted it. And the prints would be very cold. Very cold. Mechanically, perfect. He was a good printer. And I wanted to do a zinc plate once, and he wouldn't do it for me. Carl Zigrosser at Weyhe gave him a lot of business. Carl went and said, "Hey, I want to do some plates." Told the guy, he said, "You'd better do the things right for Harry, or else." He gave him a lot of business.

**RH:** How did you know, originally, Carl Zigrosser?

**HS:** I got out of art school, when I finally quit, spent a year or two making prints in my own studio, learning. And then I took a portfolio around. The first place I went to was Keppel's [Frederick R. Keppel and Company], which was the fanciest dealer, who dealt only with Rembrandt and . . . . And I got into a discussion with the young guy who came out, because he took my portfolio and stood it up on one of these racks and was going through it like this [demonstrates turning pages like a book]. So I clamped the portfolio shut on his fingers. Tight. I said, "Uh-uh. You don't look at my prints that way. You either look at them or don't. When I say look at them, you put in some time or else." So we got into an argument. He's saying, implying, "What's a freak like you telling me . . ." And David Keppel came out because he heard this and he said, "What's going on?" So I told him. And he said, "Let me see the prints." He went through them nice, and then bought three of them. And he said, "I will give you a show." I was doing coal mining for a subject. He said, "I'll give you a show, but I can't sell it to my customers. You won't sell anything, but it'll do you good." Which it did. And he said, "The gallery I would suggest you check up with is Weyhe's." So that's how I got to Carl. He was running that gallery then. And he liked my prints. He gave me a one-man show right away, after Keppel gave

me a show.

**RH:** Speaking of confrontations, tell Sally about the guy that reviewed your music series and made some comment about the male nude.

**HS:** Oh! That was the first show I had with Weyhe's. I go rushing for The New Yorker—Friday afternoon—and I got a column-and-a-half. But he was implying very openly that I was probably a homosexual, to be doing all these male nudes. And like a stupid jerk I get mad, and I don't wait. I go right to the New Yorker offices, 2 or 3 in the afternoon. They have a railing and a receptionist, and then there are all the offices. So I pull up there and I say, "I want to see the art critic." She says, "He's busy. Do you have an appointment?" I said no. She said, "You can't see him without an appointment." So I looked over the waiting room, and I got a chair and pulled it around to the opening there. I said, "I'm going to sit here until that son of a bitch comes out and talks to me." Well, she phones him: "There's a nut out here." Because heads kept popping out of the offices looking at me. And this big guy finally comes out. He's putting glasses on—"Don't hit me." I say, "Well, what do you mean by this?" He reads the whole thing, and then he says, "Well, I can see where it might imply something." I said, "What do you mean 'imply something'? You're calling me a fairy right there." At that time "fairy" was the word. Well, I had him scared to death. He said, "I'll print an apology next week." I said, "You hold it until I talk to my dealer." I went back and I'm telling Carl Zigrosser about this. By this time I'm laughing. And old man Keppel comes up: "What's this? What's this?" I told him the story. He said, "Don't have him do it." He said, "I'll tell you a story. A man—somebody wrote about him and said he wasn't fit to sleep with pigs. So for apology he wrote that he was fit to sleep with pigs. He'll pull something like that on you. Let it rest." He said, "Watch the crowds come tomorrow." And they came.

**RH:** What has changed from the time you were a teenager to your experience in the thirties, to being ninety-four?

**HS:** In the thirties, I thought I had found truth **HS:** in the political scene. I thought Russia was doing a pretty good job, with a phrase like "the brotherhood of man," which comes about as near—if it were true—as anything you could want for a truth. It was too narrow. It was only when I began to move around and beyond that, that I began to see that the truth **HS:** that so many believed in had a kind of a core that I recognized—a central core. They also say "Thou shall not kill" and they all go on killing.

**RH:** But just because they don't abide by a truth doesn't mean that the truth doesn't exist.

**HS:** No, no, that's all right. I agree.

**SY:** Well, for me, ideas are ideas, and what's lived is real. It's the reality that's knowable today. And therefore it's not, as it would be for you, more absolute, because I can't get a hold of it. That doesn't mean you don't grapple toward it, you don't wrestle to understand. It's a sort of humbling recognition of all that isn't knowable in relationship to all that can be known.

**RH:** Sally, I have one word for you: Kierkegaard.

**HS:** I'll pick up on her—if she can't grasp it, it doesn't function for her. I have exactly the reverse. I'm terrified if I would ever grasp it, it would end. It's the ungraspable that keeps challenging and tempting me. When I make a picture that begins with a conscious sketch and evolves or grows from that sketch into a canvas, it's always a little stuffy. But when I start on a canvas—as I do—or on a drawing pad with just the brushes, or just colors, and let this mysterious thing happen, suddenly an image comes to me. I don't take it—it comes to me. Then the image is more fantastic. The color is



more fantastic. It's altogether more exciting. And I have—I'll have to show you—I have one canvas that I treasure that I started one way and I turned it upside down. It's a beauty, I'll show it to you. It's the unknown. Look, I'm married quite a few years. Mary holds me, because I'm sure that I still surprise her, and she sure as hell surprises me. I still don't know her, in that sense that I can say "know." I know a lot about her. We exchange ideas without talking. I'm driving home and I'm thinking, "Geez, for lunch I'd like pancakes." Nine times out of ten she'll get the message, and she'll say as I come through the door, "I've got pancakes for you." But that isn't knowing her. There is so much of her that tantalizes me. She is infinitely more kind than I am. She'll look at a painting—she's my best critic. If she stands and doesn't say anything—not anything—then I have to rethink it. If I ask her, she'll tell me why. She knows me well enough. And yet I don't know how she's going to react.

It's the unknown. It's finding Bob, and he was nice from the start, and a great guy, but he's an involved guy. And I don't know Bob, I can't say I know him, but I'm proud to say we're good friends. But I don't know him. This is what life is all about, thank God!

**RH:** Harry, if the big breakthrough in prints was that show at Keppel's Gallery, what was the big break for painting? What came first?

**HS:** Prints first. Because that's what I was doing mostly. My teacher, as I told you, was Harry Wickey. The first things I took out were prints. I was painting along with that, but Weyhe's was essentially a print—and a little sculpture—gallery. Of course I knew about the Armory Show, and I had gone to Stieglitz's Little Gallery. Until I ran into the ACA [ACA Galleries showed Sternberg's work in one-man exhibitions between 1943 and 1974], I didn't show paintings. Now, with them I didn't show prints; I showed paintings. And it was a politically left-oriented gallery. I couldn't let the color information or the transformation that I saw going on interfere too much, because I was focusing on statements more.

The Whitney [Museum of American Art, New York] picked one of my paintings for their first show when it first opened, on Eighth Street. And that famous first opening, never to be forgotten, where they gave out free drinks to artists, which they never should have done—that was the wildest opening that ever happened, never happened again. She had black men in livery passing things out. They never got two feet from the bar but the artists would empty them. Well, by midnight that first opening, artists were crocked all over the place. And the little lady who ran the Whitney then was standing at one side of the room with two big black guys—in green livery, I remember—looking the crowd over, and she pointed her head to some guy who was passed out on the floor, and the two guys would go over and lift them off the floor and walk them outside and dump them.

**January 7, 2000**

**Session 3, Tape 1, Side A**

**HS:** A friend of my teacher's was a dentist and an anatomy lecturer at the Medical Center, uptown New York. This is back in the city. And he was a very interesting guy—Harry Shapiro by name. Now he used to prepare his anatomical subjects for lecturing, for the following day or week, and he hated to drive from downtown New York up to a hundred and forty-something, where the Medical Center was. So occasionally he asked me, and I was excited because I could watch him dissect.

So the first time we went up he announced very casually that when he was driving he could take naps and he knew he would wake up in time if there was any danger. Well, this shook me up considerably, and we got up to the anatomy . . . he was doing a masseter muscle, which is your chewing muscle. And we went into this room which looked like a kosher delicatessen. It had these big jugs, and there was a head in each of these jugs. And he reached into one and took this black head out, and he put it on the table and he proceeded while we were chatting to dissect out this section of the face. Kind of interesting because this was a very well-preserved guy. He must have

been very fresh: eyes open, intact. It was quite interesting. I meanwhile, sweating blood, thinking that we'll be driving home late at night from uptown—downtown on the freeway. So I figured the way to do it was to figure a good story to keep him awake. So when we left he took the head on this long dissecting table, wrapped it in a cloth soaked with formaldehyde, rolled it up, and dumped it in the back of the car, and he got in and we started driving home. He was lecturing the next morning on it. Well, it gave me my story. Because as he was driving, I said, "Hey, Harry, wouldn't it be amusing if we had a terrible wreck and we were dismembered and then what would they do with this one odd head that didn't fit?" Well, that kept him awake pretty well, on that trip anyhow.

But it was marvelous for me because I got a close look at dissection, and I'll never forget the masseter jaw, because he called me up to the office to show me an experiment he was doing with this head. It was the same head, before we returned it. And what he did was he opened the mouth and stuck a piece of cardboard vertically between the teeth, and then he stuck two electrodes in the masseter muscle to stimulate it, and suddenly we saw the muscle in action. The muscle contracted and, of course, the mouth closed and bit down on it. It was a slow-motion, very lifelike action. It was marvelous. A number of experiments I was blessed to see. It gave me a peek inside the body. That's my story.

**SY:** You taught with George Grosz at one point at the Art Students League. I always think of him in that context of Germany. What was he like when he was in this country?

**HS:** Ah, this was a tragic tale, really. I admire his work enormously, particularly his *Ecce Homo* series. I have a couple books here of his works. And he and I—he commuted from Long Island further than I did, he was on the train when I got on—and we would come to New York frequently. We'd meet and come to teaching together, and we had lunches. I was fascinated with the guy because he was a very troubled man. What had happened I gradually gathered—not verbally, but as he talked—not directly, I mean. He had something in Germany that he didn't have here. When he got here he thought of making money. He used to commute with a homburg and a briefcase, looking like a businessman. He wanted to be very American. And he did these idiot paintings and watercolors and drawings of Long Island Sound—the marshes, the waves—obviously with an eye toward selling. He tried a couple of anti-war paintings, but they didn't work. They really weren't working. So one day he said to me, unexpectedly over lunch, he said, "I'm going back to Germany." I said, "What for?" He said, "I'm going to look for something." He didn't specify.

Well, what he was looking for was what he had lost, somewhere along the line. When he had that vicious German middle class to attack he had all the material in the world, and he knew how to do it, and he was excited by it, and was George Grosz. He couldn't find it in America. It wasn't here, number one. Number two, he couldn't handle the American scene. It wasn't for him. So he came back very disappointed and proceeded to drink himself to death as fast as he could. And he did it. I knew his monitor—his class monitor. Each class had one. And I talked to him quite a lot about George. And he just drank himself to death is all. It was tragic.

One of the things I dreaded when I made a move from New York coming out here was how would I handle this. I'm out of my own environment. I'm in something that I'm wildly excited by, but I don't know if I'll be able to handle it. Fortunately, I love it. Adjusted very well. So Grosz was a sad, sad case, and a very, very nice, intelligent man he was, too. And a friend, I might say.

**SY:** We brought these Goya prints, *The Disasters of War*, to show you. I was thinking about some of your images of the thirties and forties—*Southern Holiday of 1937*—that have that extreme, almost Goya-like sense of unspeakable brutality. But probably you were thinking of the world at that point, not of Goya.

**HS:** Well, I am tied to Goya, like I was tied to George Grosz, like I'm tied to a half a dozen other artists. We don't suddenly exist in space. I found it fascinating when I did try to track down . . . I sometimes try a color scheme that I haven't used, that isn't mine, so to speak. And if I try and track it down, I realize and recognize it's something I saw—usually in a woman's dress—as a combination. There's a source. You're in a canyon, and there's certain colors in the layers that especially hit. And they're stored away unconsciously in the library in the back of one's head—the back of mine, certainly—and they appear unexpectedly at times. It's this way with the influence that artists have.

Goya was probably as vital an influence as any artist of late because he moved sort of parallel to where I was going. I had a tremendous empathy with him—plus visually, obviously some of his attitudes in art, his approaches, intrigued me. His use of aquatint dominated my thinking about aquatint—inspired it at first and then dominated it. And his handling of social phenomena, whether it was a bullfight or an execution, had that wonderful simple directness that stimulated my thinking. So there was a good connection. I went to see the [Max] Beckmann show recently, and was very, very excited by it. There was no immediate evidence, but I guarantee you in my paintings somewhere it'll begin to slip in.

Picasso, his *Guernica*, came near—and a very inspirational one to me—when it was shown in New York I was living there. But it was indirect: he had transformed the symbols. Goya never needed to do that. When a guy was being shot, it was a guy being shot, period: they're both humans. I guess that's the word—the humanity of Goya, including the wonderful *Maja desnuda*, where he could take the most ordinary little figure I've ever seen painted, nothing extraordinary, nothing sensuous, and yet transform it into one of the most sensuous paintings I've ever seen of a female. It's this kind of wonder that gets me in awe about artists.

It's almost the same thing with people. The people I like are the most direct. Our friend Bob, sitting here. I think one of our mutual attractions is that we're very direct and open with each other. Deviousness bothers me, and particularly feminine deviousness, which is very complicated, subtle, and difficult—I can't fight it. I feel that way about art, a great deal, in general. I come to one of the art forms: a setting, there's a room. It's complicated in some sense, because the room is made out of paper. But it's a room: some chairs, there's a table, plates. And there's a catalogue with pages and pages of explanation of what this is supposed to do. And I get angry, because it's a lot of crap—I don't understand why this artist is playing games with me with this. I despise it. I don't hate it; I just despise it. It's stupid to me. But also here I don't know how to fight it. It's the accepted—kind of a social thing.

**SY:** In an interview with Malcolm Warner, you spoke about how Goya's images transcend the particular to expose something more universal.

**HS:** You just said the phrase. He transforms the immediate, obvious incident into something beyond it. I'm always reminded—I've seen thousands of paintings of Christ on a cross. For the most part they look like a studio model posed against a wall: they don't touch me. The one that touches me the most deeply is the [Wilhelm] Lehmbruck because he's the only one who simply felt honestly realistic: if you hang a man by his hands to a cross—even though he has a little support under his feet, it's still a hundred and forty pounds—his arms are going to stretch. And Lehmbruck is the only one who stretched those arms, to the point where he drew a half circle, and found the way the arms—the hand—is supposed to go when you drop your hands: he would be able to scratch his ankles. That was distorted that much.

That's what I mean. Goya never just recorded an incident. He transformed it, but he transformed it with an integrity and a quietness, that you have to look. And you have to look and you have to look.

And his pictures are very simple. This is what I think really high art is about, essentially.

**SY:** As you're talking about the humanity of Goya, it seems to me that your work in a way comes from the belief that in order to go beyond a specific incident, it has to still have all the truthfulness of the human body in the world, rather than some generalized idea, or some pose of the Crucifixion. So the chance to observe Harry Shapiro's dissection of anatomy must have been important because it entails the evidence of what you're trying to get to of the truth, the truthfulness.

**HS:** Yes. There's a tie. It's almost like an artist who hasn't seen deeply dissections, really doesn't know the human figure. There's so much camouflage. What terrified me when I fell [recently], was if the wrist is a ball-bearing, which operates all this, and it consists of—I forget the number—of little bones, like dice, all bound with tendons. Now I've known a number of people who've broken a wrist, and those bones never straightened out again. Never. They're crippled always. The last one being Mary's mother. She went down the same way I did, I guess—smashed something in here—and that hand was always out of shape ever more. So you have to know that, underneath, that's there.

The teacher I studied with, the anatomy teacher—[George] Bridgman—was a great teacher in that he humanized his studies always. He was trying to have you understand, for example, the pelvis and its action. And he said, "It's like digesting. It's a bowl of mixes and food that you put in it, with its movement." All of a sudden you see it, you know. It becomes very real. Incidentally, he and I had a running battle. I went into his class [beginning in 1922] a cocky kid, thinking I could draw better than da Vinci, and I walk into Bridgman's class and all the students are working on one of these cube plaster heads. They're just the planes chopped off. Well, that's baby stuff. So I walked up to another part of the room and I got the Hercules, I think it was, set it up on a stool, and proceeded to do a drawing that would knock Bridgman dead when he came and I met him.

Anyhow, finally Bridgman walks in, and he's a little guy. He invariably wore, I learned later, a celluloid collar and a tie. And he went around to all the students, didn't even look at me. I'm six foot three; I'm a very obvious character. And what he did essentially was erase every drawing and do a correct drawing. Then finally came to me, and the whole class followed him because they knew something was going to happen—this was a time bomb going off.

And Bridgman, when he approached, I noticed the students stood up, he sat down. So I bounced up, and he sat down. So he sits there and he looks around the room very slowly. And as he looks around the room this creaking collar, which I got to dread, the celluloid collar creaked. I still can hear it. And then he turned and he looked me up and down very slowly, all six foot three of me. From head to foot and then up again. Hadn't said a word so far. Then he turns to me and he says, "Young man, what are you drawing?" Well, here I was all alone in a corner of the room with this statue in front of me. And he walked off. That was all. He walked away.

I said okay, this is a battle that's on its way. If this son of a bitch is going to be like this, I need his education, but, oh boy, he'd better watch out. So it was very simple. Every time the class was drawing the front of the head, I'd go around to the back and draw the back. All alone. If they were drawing the feet, I'd do the hands. At the end of each week, he lined up all the drawings, and he put them in order—number one, two, three, four, and so on—in quality. And then next week the guy who was number one got first choice in the seat. See, we posed a model, then one went in and picked his seat, two went in. It was run regimental style.

I was always thirty-five, twenty-eight, way down the tail end. I didn't care. I never sat with the gang anyhow. And do you know for a year this kept on. And he would come around and he'd look at my drawing, and generally he'd wipe it out and draw it better. But gradually he stopped wiping them out. That was my first sign maybe I've got this son of a bitch.

And there was a League dance. Once a year they ran a big costume dance—all the homosexuals came in great costumes. It was quite a thing. I went alone, enjoyed it. And Bridgman had a box up above the dance floor. At one point he caught my eye and he signaled me to come up. He said, “Do you want a drink?” I said, “Sure,” and here I’m being honored—the master himself, in a box. And he said, “I have a bit of news for you.” He said, “I’m publishing a book—the best drawings in art schools from all over the country.” And he said, “You son of a bitch, I picked yours from my Arts Students League.” And he did. He put them in. It was a royal victory for me. I was ever indebted to him for being a good opponent.

**RH:** How old were you then?

**HS:** Just out of high school. What would I be?

**RH:** Eighteen. Do you remember what the drawing was of?

**HS:** Not only what, I know who it was of. There was the great Savoy dance hall in Harlem, and the bouncer of the Savoy was a model for this thing I drew. He was very muscular—beautiful muscular guy. And we got to be buddies. Because I took Mary up to the Savoy very often.

**SY:** What about the politics that artists got involved with in the thirties?

**HS:** It was very complex and very deep, and there were sharp divisions between the right and left wing. When I say “left wing” [or “right wing”], I mean everything ranging from liberal to communism, and everything ranging from conservative to fascism. And yet, oddly enough, artists worked together. It was a time of intensive organization, led, I think, by the WPA and the Artists’ Union. But the unions were being organized, and a lot of the artists, including myself, were very sympathetic with the unions. So we demonstrated with them. We paraded with them, we got to know them. We raised funds for them. We did the May Day floats, which were kind of fun to do.

A little side story on that one: there was a loose group of about fifteen artists, and when a float was needed or Carnegie Hall needed to be decorated—I’m sure it was Communist Party controlled, I’d get a call, never introduce themselves, you know. Well, you’d go there and there’d be four or five artists who were available. Six, maybe eight. And they would say, for example, “We have twelve dollars to build a float.”

A group of us was asked once to decorate Carnegie Hall for a big meeting, and I think they had something like fifteen bucks. So we devised—I’ll modestly say it was mostly my idea—a box that hung in the ceiling, and when the audience was assembled there were men up in these skyways, which are treacherous little pathways up there. Each had a rope attached to a banner inside this box, and at the appropriate time they began pulling these banners out. Gradually they came out with slogans on them, and they hung kind of all over. It was cheap material and hand-painted letters. But it worked. Everybody in the audience was watching the new ones come, you know.

But it was fun, in that it was challenging. The artists never skimped. They did their jobs. Within organizations—Artists Equity, which was a solid organization. Some of the artists were way over on the right. Some of them were way over on the left. But we had an objective, and it was imperative that we work together. One committee was formed and I was on it with a woman who was the most right-wing one there. And I simply said, “I will not work with her, I can’t stand it, I’d be angry all the time.” A man by the name of Hudson Walker was a buddy of mine, and Hudson has his technique, which was the Harvard Club, and he had us both to lunch. And about the third martini, I took a second look at this gal, and she was human. This went on all the time. There was never an

overt split.

And it was that wonderful togetherness that helped make that period a marvelous period. The artists were involved everywhere—National Maritime Union, CIO Steel—all of them. I began to spot the really good leftist guys, because they were the ones who did all the dirty work. Most of us were too busy. Like [Yasuo] Kuniyoshi was apolitical. He had no more notion about politics than the man in the moon. And yet he got involved in these organizations. We all did. And it gave us a sense of connection with society which we've never had beyond then. When I went to Union Hall, I was one of them. There was a sense of belonging. You connected with this world, and it was very wonderfully beautiful. And it penetrated every aspect of society. The fear of being identified came later with that congressman [Joseph McCarthy], and he clamped down on this considerably. I remember being in a very wealthy woman's home at a dinner, and we started to talk politics, and she stopped us. She was the hostess. She said, "We don't know if our phone's tapped or if the house is tapped. No politics." This was scary to me.

Some of my best friends were frightened. I wasn't—this may be stupid—I didn't seem to be bothered too much. I had the FBI visit me several times. They'd come out on Long Island to my home. I invite them in for coffee, cake—and answer no questions. And the guys usually were decent, the FBI guys. They always came in teams, one to corroborate the other, what they heard. There's nothing we could talk about that they wanted. And others came to me at the League to check on my students. "What newspapers do they read? Do they read The Daily Worker?" And they got their ears chewed off. I wasn't going to pull any bull with them. I told them essentially, "It's none of my business, and it's certainly none of your damn business. I don't check on my students; I teach them how to paint."

**SY:** Was Stuart Davis active in things?

**HS:** He was involved, very much so. Nice guy. I liked his paintings, too, by the way, very much—particularly the boogie-woogie dancers [probably *Swing Landscape*, 1938]. He chaired a number of meetings, because he had a reputation. And neither he nor Kuniyoshi had any notion of the rules of law, of conducting a meeting. You know, you'd start to say something he didn't like, he'd say, "Sit down, you're out of order." [Davis was national chairman, from 1936 to 1940, of the American Artists' Congress.]

**SY:** In your drawings and prints of the coal miners from the thirties, there are beautiful black tones.

**HS:** That blackness is inevitable. You go down in a coal mine, and if you're alone, you cover the lamp, you've never seen blackness like it. Several hundred feet underground, and there's no source of any reflection, of any kind: it's black. It's disconcerting, you know, the notion of getting caught in that kind of blackness. And there are rats—you hear them scuffling, and you see them occasionally. There was one coal mine that had been flooded because it caught fire. It was out of use. I wanted to get in and see the inside of this mine after what had happened. And this young buddy, whom I drank with all the time, went down with me. It took a lot of persuading and a lot of booze to get him to say he'd take me in. He didn't like it. I was probably dumb enough not to realize the danger. But you wandered in there and you saw what black was. These headlamps were beauties: when you looked up, it lit what you looked at. When you looked down, it lit the pad.

And the coal miners, when they came up from a shift, they were black. It was black everywhere. The landscape was bleak because there were mountains of slag, which is the stuff they don't use, they dump. The houses hadn't been painted; they were company houses. And it was a depressed time. It was a depressed time. Guys were hungry, angry—angry at the church, incidentally. The Catholic Church dominated this area, too. And one of the miners, I well remember him saying, "Never again to

church for me. The preacher came in and wanted some money for the church, and I said, 'I don't have milk for my kids.'" But they literally didn't have money for the iceboxes, a cake of ice on the top. And they were very hospitable. It was a wonderful period. It's like the Lower East Side. It was juicy and alive, noisy, dirty, but so alive. Everybody was fighting and arguing and pushing and yelling and talking at once. Nothing polite about it. But, oh boy, it was alive.

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... *November 4, 2004*