

IMPORTANT

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NATIONAL LIFE STORY COLLECTION

ARTISTS' LIVES

EILEEN AGAR

interviewed by Cathy Courtney

F828 Side A

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If we can talk a little bit about the years in Argentina.

Yes.

In your book, you talk about plagues of locusts and things like that, which sound as though they're quite good preparations for surrealism!

Yes!! It does, it is. It does. It is very curious. Of course, I left the Argentine, my father was a business, Scottish businessman, out in the Argentine, and he had something to do with windmills, and as it was a great desert outside Buenos Aires, the capital city, and he suddenly decided that a windmill should irrigate the land, because it was very dry, sometimes it didn't rain for three years, you see. It was a very dry country. So he had this, and he made a lot of money, and so my parents were very wealthy, and they used to come to England every two years, or every year, and, so that he, because he had a business also in New York, Buenos Aires, and London offices. But I don't remember very much about Buenos Aires, except a plague of locusts which descended on the whole countryside, and ate up everything, every little bit of leaf or anything, it was completely, and we all used to have to go out with sort of carpet, mats, or something like that, you know, to try and beat them down, because you could see them coming over in thousands, and it was most horrifying, and really disgusting. They were awful creatures, and that was the only thing that was dreadful,

because, otherwise, it was a lovely climate, it was very warm, a bit cold in the winter, but, and all the wealthy Argentinians used to wrap up their children in fur coats, though you didn't really need fur coats, but they wanted to show how grand they were, and in summer, of course, in the ordinary, everything was upside down. In summer, which is December, everything was beautiful, peaches, and you could go into the garden and pick peaches, and nectarines, and anything you wanted. We had a big garden in the days when I was a child, and it was a, a very beautiful country, but it was ruined by some people. They, they started fencing it in and buying up a lot of property, and then doing nothing with it, you know, absent landlords.

Were these British people?

Yes. Some British and some Argentine people, both. A mixture of both. And they were both sort of capitalists, in the sense that they knew that later on this land would be valuable. In the meantime, they didn't do anything with it, you see, they just sort of kept it. It belonged to them. And, but every year, or two years, we used to come over to England, and we stayed at the Hyde Park Hotel of all strange places to stay. And now I pass it, and I think, "How extraordinary!"

Did you feel English?

Oh yes.

Did your parents talk about England a lot?

Oh yes, yes, yes. My parents spoke Spanish, but I hardly remember the Spanish words, except "Thank you - Gracias", and things like that, you see. But both my parents spoke Spanish, because they'd got so used to, having to talk to all their servants, and they were all Spanish, you see. The only person who was French, was my mother's maid, the one who helped dress her and looked after her clothes, and our clothes, and that sort of thing. But otherwise, it was all, everybody spoke Spanish.

When you were very small there, who were you closest to?

Yes, I was five years old when I left. But I remember the lovely gardens, and my parents had been to Japan, and they came back with a rickshaw, and we got all our friends, we sat in the rickshaw, and we got our main friends to pull us around, and as children, you see, around a very big garden. We thought that was wonderful!

Did you have wonderful games in the garden?

Yes, we did. And I remember, we also had a little stream coming through the garden, and we, as children, we loved making mud pies, and then selling them to our grown friends for 2d. or something like that, you see. Just making a bit of, you know how children love playing with anything, and that's another thing I remember.

But who did you spend, when you were four, who did you spend most of the day with? Did you have a nanny?

Oh yes, we had a nanny. We had an English nanny, who was very severe, and then later on, we had a French governess, because my mother also had a flat in Paris, and she insisted we should all speak French, because French was the second language, like it is really today as well. It was in those days, so later on, when we were sort of, almost at school, we were, we were, we had a French governess.

When you say the nanny was severe, was your upbringing at that time, very strict in general?

Yes. Yes. My mother was very strict, and she, she loved children, but she was very strict with us, because she said, if we didn't learn now, how to behave, and all the rest of it, you see, we would never learn. Well, I mean, we would get into bad habits, and never learn.

And when you were quite small, did you already begin to rebel against that ... were you quite rebellious from a young age?

Yes, yes. Was I quite a what?

A rebellious child?

Oh rebellious. Oh yes, yes, I was. I remember my mother smacking me because I refused to apologise to my godmother about something that I'd done, and I said, "No, I won't apologise", and she smacked with the side of her hairbrush, you see, and that made me absolutely furious, and I don't know what, whether I was rude to her or

what. I was very rebellious, anyhow. So I must have started as a, certainly at an early age.

And did your father discipline you as well?

No, he didn't. He was very kind, and only much later, when this godmother, the same godmother, whom I loved, she was marvellous, very, wonderful sense of humour. She used to tell the most ribald of stories, and when we were about 13 or 15, or something like that, and my father was ... she would start telling some of these stories, and he would say, "Now, Mita, not in front of the children!" It was rather charming, you know, that she was telling stories that weren't fit for our ears!

Can you remember them?

No, I can't, I can't.

Was she somebody you would confide in? Was your godmother somebody you would confide in?

Yes. Yes. Very much so. I was very fond of her. She was a great friend of my mother's. I think she sort of helped with the house, they used to have a lot of big dinner parties, and all the place names were all round, and she would help decide who must sit next to who, and that sort of thing. And then we had, also, he was no relation, but he was a very good friend of my mother's, called "Old Joe". He was a millionaire, and every time we gave a, my mother gave a really big party, he used to

put diamond bracelets, or rings, or some valuable thing next to the person, you see, on the dinner plates, as a present. And we thought this was really rather ... but he was a very charming man. Everybody thought that he was my mother's lover. But he wasn't. He wasn't. He wasn't at all. He was just a very, fond of the Agar family.

That was one of the things I was going to ask you. In your book, you say that she had a lot of admirers, but she never took a lover.

I had a lovely what?

That your mother had a lot of admirers.

Yes.

But she never actually had a love affair.

That's right, yes.

How are you so sure?

Well, I'm sure, because she always told the truth. And she used to tell, we used to tease her about "Old Joe", as we called him, you see. And we used to say, "Well, everybody says that he's so fond of us all, and that sort of thing", his old wife had died much earlier, you see. And she said, "No, it was never, that's never so." People think it was so, but it was never so. And one thing she always told us, she doesn't mind

what we do, but we must always tell the truth. We mustn't lie to anybody or anything.

And I, I just know that she would, she was also telling the truth, you see.

Did you always tell the truth?

Yes, I think so. I remember even being, when I was five years old, four or five years old, the nanny was reading us a story, and I suddenly burst into tears. And she said, "Well, what is so wrong about this story?" And I said, "Well, the little boy in it didn't tell the truth, and now he won't go to Heaven", you see. So we were so trained, all of us, to this, that I even burst into tears when a small boy hadn't told the truth. It was only in a story, you see.

So were you the sort of child that felt very guilty about things?

I hadn't thought about whether I was very ... I do think so. I think I must have felt guilty about certain things, but, you see, I was rebellious when I wouldn't apologise, and yet I was very sad when this little boy in a story, not even in a thing, just in a story, hadn't told the truth, so it's a very difficult thing ...

And did religion play quite a strong part in your life at that stage?

Well, my parents weren't religious in that sense. They used to go to weddings and funerals, and that sort of thing. And I remember my mother saying, when we were young, "You must go to Sunday School, or else everybody will think you're little heathens." I remember that very well. And so we went to Sunday School, but

otherwise, not, I mean, I don't think they, as I say, except for weddings and funerals, they never went. They weren't particularly religious themselves.

And do you have any religious belief now?

Not particularly, no. No. I think it's a marvellous idea to sort of build the cathedrals, astonished me with their beauty, I've seen Chartres, and I've been to the one in Paris, and they're marvellous creations of man. They really are, I'd be very sad if they weren't, hadn't been built, you see. But I don't go to church myself. I've got my niece, Mary is a Roman Catholic, and she became a Roman Catholic, and they go to church, some Sundays, not, they're often away for the weekends, but when they're alone, they go to church, at Easter, or some time like that, you see.

Is this the niece who's a painter?

No. The other niece, it's another one who isn't a bit religious.

And are you quite close to your nieces?

Yes, I am. One of them, they both live in, just off Notting Hill Gate, and so I usually, she was, one of them was here yesterday, you see, and brought me a pot of marmalade that her husband had made. He doesn't cook at all, but he loves making marmalade, which is very funny!

Are you closer to them than you were to your sisters?

Oh yes. Well, both my sisters are dead, you see. I'm the only one alive. My eldest sister died in 1980, and my younger one, whom I was more fond of, and knew better, because the elder one lived in the country, she died in '84, or '85, or something.

But the impression from your book is that you weren't particularly close to them.

Well, not really, because, to my younger one I was, especially later on, when she got ill, or I had, otherwise they thought I was crazy, becoming a surrealist painter, you see.

Did you feel very let down that they didn't ...

No, not at all. I just knew that I would have to fight my way, and I was ready to, so I didn't feel, I just disagreed with them. Later on, my younger sister was more interested, because she saw that I was becoming successful, and once a person becomes successful, other people take notice, you know. They don't think it's so mad! That is the only thing.

When you were a little girl in Argentina, were you quite solitary, or did you play with other children a lot?

Oh no, we used to play with cousins who lived, we had some cousins who lived Rio, in Brazil, and whenever the ship stopped on the way, it always stopped two or three days, we'd go out with them, you see, to see them, and that sort of thing. And we had

a lot, I still, I didn't know that I had any relations, but I've still got a lot of relations in Argentina, because my niece, the one who lives in Clarendon Road, whom I see a lot of, at the moment she's in Cornwall, but she usually lives in London, she went out two years ago, because she'd heard so much about the Argentine from all of us, she went out, and she said she had a marvellous time. All her relations, my relations, who knew that she was also a niece of mine, they all invited her, and what used to be a desert, has now been irrigated, and there are wonderful trees, with marvellous coloured parrots, and God knows what kind of birds floating about in the branches, you see, and she thought it was absolutely beautiful.

Presumably all the landscape and foliage is something that's quite deeply embedded in you as well?

Yes, yes. I think it is. It was. I can remember it vaguely, you know. As you get older, your memory doesn't get so good, and as I'm now very old, I, it's more indistinct. But I remember it vaguely. I remember the, the, this big villa we had by the tributary of the very big Rio Plate, you see, and that's very nice.

Can you remember what a typical day would have been like, when you were about four?

Oh. Well, we had to get up. Our nanny was very, 9 o'clock breakfast, and we had to get up. And one day I got locked in the loo, because the loo was sort of, it was upstairs, and without me noticing it, the lock had slipped to, and I couldn't get out. And I yelled and yelled and yelled, and everybody was wondering where I was, you

see. And then they heard me yelling, and I kept on yelling, "I'm locked in". I couldn't reach the (INAUDIBLE WORD), and so they sent a ladder up, and somebody climbed through the window - luckily there was a window - and let me out. I remember that, that's simply a child being locked in, it was very frightening.

Things like that, and the locusts, things like being locked in, and the swarms of locusts, did it give you nightmares?

Yes, it could. I used to have very bad nightmares. Also, I used to be thinking that monsters were coming at me in the night, you see, and I would wake up screaming. And the nanny would come and say, "What are you screaming about?" And then I would tell her. But she said, "Oh, that's not so. Nobody here's going to frighten you." And that sort of thing. But whether my two sisters had nightmares, one of them, I think, sometimes, but I was the one that had the most frightening nightmares.

And did that go on all your life? Did you have nightmares all your life?

No, no. I, now I sleep like anything! I don't have any nightmares.

And did you have any kind of imaginary world as a child?

Yes, I did. I always thought that I was a bit different to other people, but I didn't know why. I just thought that I was a bit different, and I must do something different, and so I was always drawing, and thinking, and, but my younger sister was very talented. She wrote two books that were published you see, and, in those days, it

was easier to get a publisher. Nowadays, but still I, my niece, the daughter of ... who lives here in Notting Hill Gate, she let me, they've gone out of print long ago, read these two, and I thought they were both quite good.

When you were children, did you feel you had to do something in order to be approved of?

No. We didn't. My mother once, when I said I wanted to be a painter, or I was painting, she said, "Well, why don't you buy paintings?", you see, that sort of thing. I said, "It's not the same thing."

So, on a typical day, after you'd had breakfast, what would happen, after your 9 o'clock breakfast?

Oh, we would go for a walk. We would have to go for a walk, or in the Argentine, you rode a lot. We learnt, I used to have a pony called Strawberry Cream, I still remember that, and you had to ride a lot, because there was no other way of getting, there weren't motor cars in those days, and it seems fantastic now, but then all the roads were also not proper roads, you know, just very much country roads. But you had to ride, and learn how to ride. I remember learning how to ride, and even to jump, and I was terrified. You see, like on a horse or something. They started very slowly, to teach me, to all of us, to teach us, because we had to learn how to ride. It was the only way to get to somebody else, you see. We lived in a, in a place, it was so full of English people, it was called Hurlingham. It was the Hurlingham in BA, as everybody called it. When I met Nancy Cunard years later, she said, "I see you've

been born in BA." She said, "I've been there." And she'd been out, you know, she was the daughter of Emerald Cunard, who my mother knew, but I didn't, never knew her, but I knew Nancy, and Nancy was great fun.

What was she like?

Oh well, she was, she horrified her mother, of course, because she slept with a black man, you see, and that, in those days, was absolutely unheard of. But I liked her for her bravery and her, and she thought BA, as she called it, it's always called BA, was fantastic. She loved it. She saw the shops, the Spanish, or the Argentine people, are half, a lot of them are Spanish, and a lot of them are Italian, who have gone out there, you see, and sort of made good. And she said, "If you walk in the streets of Buenos Aires, you see the most wonderful clothes, and everything." They had jewellery from Rue de la Paix, and clothes, because there were some, people were so very wealthy.

And at that stage, when you were drawing a lot, as a child, what pictures had you seen?

Oh well, I used to love, and they always used to give me picture books, as a child, as a Christmas or birthday present, or Christmas, and I used to love Edmund Dulac, and Arthur Rackham, for his curious trees, and that sort of thing, and I think that is what, and I've forgotten if there were any others, but I remember those two best, and that first gave me the idea of, I used to copy some of these, you see, and I was very good

at copying things, in those days, and then I would try to draw a little myself, or something, but that gave me a start.

And given that what you'd been looking at were illustrations, did your own pictures, did they have a narrative content at that point?

No, no. Not very much. They didn't very much. They were just vague, slight, some of them might have had it if I'd drawn a line or something, then that would suggest something to me, but that was at first, the way I first started.

And were stories read to you? Did people read stories to you?

Yes, very much so.

Do you remember what they were?

No, mostly fairy stories. Fairy stories, I used to love, you know, the frog prince, and I can't remember half of them now, but they were mostly fairy stories. Yes, we were well provided. They had ... and then I remember that somebody, my parents were friends of Rudyard Kipling, they met him somewhere, and they, we were in England, in Switzerland skiing, I was about 17, or 16, and somebody, my mother came up to me, and said, "That was Rudyard Kipling that I've been talking to." And I knew him just for his Just So Stories, and I was so excited, I jumped up and kissed him, and he picked me up in his arms, and carried me about! And that's all I remember of Rudyard Kipling. Later on, of course, I read all his, he was, he was a very nice,

kindly man, and he loved children. And that's why he did the Just So Stories, although I didn't know it at the time. But when I thought that I'd met this marvellous man, and he, he very soon after, lost his son, didn't he, or something, I think, yes.

As a child, was there much physical affection shown to you?

Physical? Yes, there was. They used to pet us. We used to have to dress up if there were a lot of people coming for the weekend or something. I remember, we had to dress up in clogs, and little and bonnets or something, and play, sing a song about, "I am the", I've forgotten what the songs are, but you know those kind of songs.

And did you enjoy that?

No.

Or did you object?

I did rather, yes, because everybody clapped afterwards, and it's marvellous to be a child, and be clapped, you see, you know. Children love attention, and to be, well, the three of us were all in a row, I'm the, I'm trying to remember what the song was, but I can't remember it.

F828 - End of Side A

F828 Side B

So were you, I mean, your parents were obviously quite strict in some senses, and you weren't looked after minute by minute by them, but you were quite fond of them, and easy with them, by the sounds of it?

Oh yes, yes. I was very, I was very fond of them. After all, they looked after us very well, they did everything they could. The only time I got angry with my mother was when she insisted that I should apologise to my godmother, and I refused, you see. I didn't think I'd done anything that needed apologies.

And who told you about sex?

Oh, I, my first boyfriend! That's right, yes. Because I was very worried about that. I can't remember, I just know that it was my first boyfriend.

And was sex something you could talk to your parents about?

No. I had to keep it very, very, because my mother was very strict, you see. I remember, there was a married man, I won't mention the name, because he's quite a well, he belongs to quite a well-known family, I mean, he's dead, but he was looking at me, I was very pretty when I was young, very attractive, and my mother saw him looking at me in a way that she thought he shouldn't do, you see, and she said to him, "Look here, if you fall in love with my daughter, I shall send you, I shall ask you to leave." And he was so astonished that he just left, although his wife was there, no, I

think his wife wasn't there, his wife couldn't come, she was ill, or it was only for the weekend or something like that. But anyhow, that shows how strict she was. And we were never, ourselves, you know, told anything about sex by our parents. We had to find out everything for ourselves. Nowadays, it's so usual to have boyfriends and everything, but then, it was absolutely, you either married them, or you, you didn't get on, you know, you didn't get on.

So, what was it like coming to England? Do you remember arriving?

Oh well, we used to come every, every year, or every two years, because my father, as I say, already had a business here, and he liked the whole family to be with him. And so, as I said, we used to stay at the Hyde Park Hotel, we had a lovely suite overlooking a park, with a sitting room, and bathroom, and everything. They had plenty of money. And now I look at it, and I think, "What a funny place!" But it was very beautiful, because you, you could see the riders, riding in the park. It was all, you were looked after beautifully by everybody at the Hyde Park, because they used to know us so well. We used to leave luggage there, even, you see, when we came backwards and forwards, because it was very hot, and here when you came, perhaps it was colder, or the other way round, I don't remember.

Do you remember actually realising that you were leaving Argentina, do you remember leaving Argentina to come and live in England, do you remember the break?

Yes, I've got, well, I remember it because I've got photographs of us all. I've got an early album, and it's there, but I don't think you want to waste time looking at it, but that's how I remember it. Three of us, about five and seven years old, something like that. And we're on board, it was always a Royal Mail line. We had the best cabins, and I enjoyed it, except that I was always terribly seasick if it got rough, in the Bay of Biscay, or something like that, but otherwise, I enjoyed it, I enjoyed all the games. We used to have egg and spoon races, and all the usual things.

[break here]

... a long time ago. In the '30s, I suppose, and then it had people like Andre Breton, and all the surrealists, my friends, they were all there, and so I felt I was, I gave a dinner party. They were, just before the War, they were all going to America, and I stayed, you see. My two sisters, one went to South America, and the other went to New York, and I thought, "I'm not going, I will stay." And so when they left, before they left, I gave them this surrealist dinner party!

[Menu on wall of EA's drawing room]

What was the soft soup?

Well, the soft soup, I can't remember, it was some soup that, some sort of cucumber soup, without the cucumbers, you know, you can, or a watercress or some soup like that. Somebody, I think, we had this Italian cook, there she is there, and she used to

make things. That's a portrait of her. She had a wonderful face, at least I think so.

Very strong, and she used to stir the soup and curse Mussolini at the same time!

So what would your dinner party have been like with the surrealists?

Well, it was very nice. That one, you mean?

Mmmm.

Oh, I can't remember. I just remember that I wrote out the menu, and somebody found it in the attic in the other place where I was, and they said, "You should have this framed." So I had to framed, and somebody hung it up. Because, I know we had goose, that's why it's called Wayzy Goose, I believe, and then somebody told me that in the Middle Ages it used to be called "a stuffed goose", it was called a Wayzy Goose, so that's why it's Wayzy Goose. But the other things are just fun.

Because the surrealists used to meet once a month, for a meal in a restaurant, didn't they?

Yes, they used to, yes. I used to go there. That was in Beak Street. It's now under a different proprietor, but it's still got a restaurant there, and we used to meet once, oh, once a month or once a week, I can't remember. Once a month, I think.

But I'm surprised, because that's quite a formal arrangement.

Yes, it is, yes. Well, one time, we, we weren't so formal. Everybody thought, "Well this is", Roland Penrose, who was a great friend of mine, thought that this was rather silly, just to meet or eat, so we all sat at different tables, and we had spoons and forks and everything, and each one sat at a different table, and nobody said a word.

Nobody spoke to each other, or anything. And so suddenly, George Melly, I don't know if you know him, picked up all the spoons from every table, and threw them in the air, and some of them he caught, and some he didn't! But very dangerous, because knives can be very sharp, you see, so he thought it was, everyone was getting very dull.

But presumably you all used to meet much more informally a lot of the time?

Oh yes, yes, we did. We, nowadays, the whole thing has disappeared, you see. I'm still called a surrealist, but I'm allowed into the Royal Academy. In fact I'm an RA. I was astonished, but evidently everything has changed. Now, surrealism is an accepted. People didn't know, somebody said to me, "What on earth is a surrealist? What does it mean?"

What did you say?

I said, "It means the element of surprise in, in whatever you do. If you paint, or whatever, it must surprise you, otherwise it's just quoted in, as they call it, it's just ordinary. And to me, surrealism is somehow or other, the element of surprise.

But was there a pressure to be exuberant when you didn't really feel exuberant?

I don't think so, no. There's no pressure nowadays, there's no pressure on anybody, they could do what they liked, you see. I mean, look at this, I've just been sent this.

Gilbert and George?

George, and you know, from, from George, and I've forgotten his, Gilbert and George, that's right. And it's my dealers who were arranging it, very curious.

When you had meetings with Breton...

Yes.

Would he be talking about the serious surrealism, or would it never get mentioned?

Oh yes, yes. He, he, first he was, I didn't have very many meetings with him, he was always too busy, but his flat was full of wonderful things, things from New Guinea, and things from Max Ernst that they'd given him, or, you know, they all sort of treated him. He insisted that he was the king of the surrealists, or he was a "roi".

And what did you think of him?

Well, I think he was very argumentative, and he didn't like, if people didn't recognise him as the king of the surrealists, he wouldn't get on with them. You see, Max Ernst said, "I'm a better painter than you are", you know, he would sort of, even to Dali, he

would ... and Breton always thought that he was the, the, the surrealist, because he'd started the whole thing. And to a sense he had, that's quite true.

Did any of them talk about Apollinaire, because they must have,

About what?

About Apollinaire?

Yes. I've got a post-card somewhere, here of Apollinaire, I don't know where it was. They talked about him a lot, but, of course, he was wounded in the War, and he always had his head bandaged, and he was an awfully nice man. I've got, somewhere, a post-card, I'm trying to think.

Did Breton, was he someone you felt, had a lot of authority?

Yes. He liked to have a lot of authority, and he would go, be very annoyed if ... this book is rather interesting. It's all, it's got surrealism in it as well, I'm trying to think, see whether there's a photo of ...

[small break here]

You felt, you said in your book that Breton's wife, for instance, was very overshadowed by him.

Yes, that's right, exactly. She was a very good painter, but you see, in those days, men thought of women simply as muses, they never thought that they could do something for themselves, and I'm always astonished how they let me into the 1936 Exhibition, but ...

Did you feel they took you as seriously as they took the other men?

Yes, they did, you see, because I did something that they'd never seen before. I did the "Quadriga", and do you know which one it is? It is taken from the head of Silene, in the Parthenon, and I turned the insides of those heads, if you've seen it, you know what it's like. Totally different.

It would be nice for the tape if you would describe it.

Yes! And it was quite fantastic, and they'd never seen anything like it. And they, "Well, we must have this." And that meant that I must show it, you see. And then, of course, I was, I was the youngest Englishwoman showing. I think there'd been Breton's wife, and he hadn't even seen her work, she'd been too frightened, she'd kept them in a cupboard or something, until somebody said, "You know that she's a very good painter." He said, "I've never seen anything she's painted." It's amazing, isn't it, yes, it's absolutely mad. To think of it nowadays!

And did you feel any kind of alliance with somebody like her, simply because you were women, or not?

Yes, no, I don't remember. I just remember her, no, it was mostly men who came round me, you see, and talked to me and that sort of thing, and they were so astonished, because it was nearly all men who were showing.

In the run up to the 1936 Exhibition, how did you expect the work to be received?

Well, they chose the works, you see, I didn't choose it. I had met Paul Nash, and he suggested that, to Roland Penrose, and Herbert Read, who were the two who were choosing for the English side, they suggested that my studio was worth looking at. I had it done very fantastically with, you know, not like this at all, but all sorts of things. And as somebody said, "It looks like an Aladdin's cave", it's a very big studio, and they, so they chose the things.

Were you all expecting the Exhibition to have the enormous impact that it did?

Well, I, no, I didn't know at all. I was very nervous, because I was practically the only Englishwoman that was showing, at the time, and, but I enjoyed it very much, because everybody came round and, excitedly, and I met Juan Miro there, Juan Miro, and Max Ernst, I met them all, you see.

What was Miro like, then?

Well, he was charming, very, not much taller than I am, a little bit rotund, and, but, with a sort of, like a young child, he was so innocent, he could hardly speak any other thing except Spanish, and luckily I could speak a little Spanish, because I'd been out

in the Argentine, and also I'd been out in the Canaries, where they speak a lot, I have a friend coming over in May, who has a lovely house out there. And they all speak Spanish, she speaks Spanish like she does English, you see, and so that I could get on a bit with Miro, and I was enchanted with him, because he was so childlike, you know. He'd give you the feeling that he's, he lives in, I think, in Majorca now, or did, he's just died, didn't he, last year, or something. But he was one of the most charming surrealists that I'd met.

And what about Ernst?

Who?

Max Ernst.

Oh, Max Ernst. He was a tall, very good-looking man. Very brilliant also. He said, "Dali? Dali isn't a surrealist, he's just a fantasist, I'm the real surrealist", you see, he was very, because he felt that Dali was getting all the attention, whereas Max Ernst didn't do anything to make himself a publicity man, whereas Dali did nothing else!

Was there really a sense of being part of a group, or is that something that's happened in retrospect?

Yes, I think that happened. Once you are known that you can, I'm practically the only one alive who's still there, you see, at the 1936 show, because when they came to the

studio, Roland Penrose and, and Herbert Read, they looked round this big studio that I had, and they said, "But you're a surrealist." And I said, "Am I?" I hadn't any idea!

And was it a supportive group, or was it very competitive?

Oh yes, yes, they were very supportive of me. They helped me a lot, you see, they took everything I did. They showed it in Tokyo and in Paris, and everywhere, the whole ... Once I, if I had been on my own as a painter, I wouldn't have got anywhere. It was Henry Moore who said to me, I used to be great friends with him, and his wife, we used to play tennis almost every Sunday, together, and he'd said to me, "Do something different. You'll never get known if you go on just painting houses and little, you know, scenes", like my niece does today, but she just does it for fun, she doesn't do it for making money. But Henry's idea, and that gave me, I think, the idea to do something different, and at the time, doing something different made, joining the surrealists. So he gave me very good advice.

And you said, in the book, that you thought that English surrealism was defeated by the English character?

Yes, yes, that's right. The English character is very lyrical, and are much more poetic. The French are much more cruel, you see, you know. When you think of the French Revolution, or, what is it? The French song, the Marseillaise, or something like that. The French are probably more cruel, and they say that nature is cruel, and therefore we must be cruel too. Whereas the English don't like that sort of thing, they're much more poetic and lyrical, and they are benign.

And do you think that's a bad characteristic?

No, I don't think so. I think it's very good. But now it's getting a bit more rough with these, these prisoners and that sort of thing. But, on the whole, they haven't had, well, they had a revolution in Cromwell's day, or something, but they really haven't had anything since, so that, and the French are always having revolutions! The French are more, a battle cry, you know.

But were the French surrealists cruel to one another?

Sometimes they were. For instance, who was it who lost an eye? And he lost it from fighting with another surrealist, I think, I've forgotten which one it was, but one of those, it's probably in my book.

Did you wish you'd been French?

No, I don't think so. I like France very much, and I love going, I lived two years in Paris, for a time, you see.

That was when you met Eluard.

Yes, that's right, yes. And, but I don't think I would ever, I hadn't really thought of it. I love France, and I love going there, but I haven't now been for some time because I

like to go with my niece, it's not much fun going alone, you see, and she has a lot of French friends, and that sort of thing, so I haven't, it's about two years since I've been.

What was Paul Eluard like?

Oh, he was a very good-looking and very charming man. And he could be, he could be very, he had this terrific temper if it got roused, and he had a terrific fight with, I've forgotten who it was, they picked up chairs, and threw them at each other, but I've forgotten who the other is, it may say it in my book, I can't remember.

And did you and he used to quarrel?

No, no, I don't think we ever quarrelled. He was a very charming ... he liked women, and, I'm trying to think, no, certainly we never quarrelled.

And did he pay a lot of attention to your work?

Yes, he was the one who told Roland Penrose and Herbert Read, that they should come and look at my work, you see. He and Paul Nash, he came over for the show, and he met Paul, who was the English person choosing, and they sort of got together and said, "Oh, this girl ought to show."

So they were both people you had love affairs with? Both Eluard and Nash?

Ah yes, yes.

How were they different from one another?

Oh well, one was a Frenchman, and the other was an Englishman. That's about as far as I'm going! You know, they're very different. A Frenchman is so, he practically makes love to every good looking girl he meets, whereas the English person is more reticent. He's, I think that's the main difference.

But they were both quite unhappy men, weren't they?

Yes, yes.

F828 - END OF SIDE B

F829 Side A

8th May, 1990

Before we carry on, can I just check a couple of details from last time?

Yes, yes.

Can you tell me your date of birth?

Yes, 1899, December 1st. Exactly a month before the New Year, you see, the new century really, yes.

Were your parents hoping you would wait a month? And be born with the century?

Yes, yes.

And the other thing I wanted to check was how old you were when you first met Kipling, when he took you up in his arms?

Oh, I was about 10 years old, something like that, yes.

Can we talk a bit about your art school education. The first place you were taught at was the Byam Shaw, wasn't it.

Yes, that's right.

And you were there during the First World War?

Yes, yes. Because I insisted that I wanted to be a painter, and my mother said, "Why don't you buy paintings if you're so keen on them," on painting, you see. And I said, I couldn't explain to her that it wasn't the same thing, but eventually, she didn't want me to go to the Slade, which was the place I went to after. First I'd gone to Leon Underwood's. I went to the Slade, and Tonks, who was the Head of the Slade at the time, said, "It's the middle of term, and we don't take anybody in the middle of the term. Why don't you go to Leon Underwood, who used to, who now teaches, and used to be at the Slade himself. And he's a very good teacher." So I went to Leon Underwood's, and there I met girls whom I made friends with, like Blair Hughes Stanton, Blair and his wife Gertrude Hermes, and other people, and I enjoyed being at Leon Underwood's so much, he was such a good teacher, that I stayed about two years, two or three years.

What made him such a good teacher?

Well, I don't know. He was very, he was difficult, he spoke in a very involved way, and if he wanted to explain how you draw a figure, he would start from the very beginning, and his speech was rather involved and we all agreed that it was difficult to understand what he said, but he was such a good draughtsman, that he got it through in that way, you see. He was, he was really very good, but he was a born, his parents, I think, were, sold jewellery or something like that, in a small shop in the City somewhere, and he hadn't really had a good education, so that ... they weren't

rich enough, I mean, they were poor people, so that his rather Cockney accent, it wasn't exactly Cockney, but it was very London accent, was rather difficult to understand. But he was really a very fine teacher. So much so, that, lately, a book has been written about him, as a teacher. He was Henry Moore's teacher for sculpture, you see was also a sculptor. And his daughter, who came to see me, because he died some time ago, said that she lives in the same place where he taught. It's a big studio, with a sort of rail going, it is below the house, so that it's, if you look up from a rail, and you can look down on the big school. And that's where he taught, and she still lives there in the top flat. It's rather extraordinary.

Did she become a painter?

What? No, no. She's not, she's nothing to do with painting. She's an education person, or something like that. Teaches young children how to spell, and you know

Do you think the fact that Leon Underwood had a fairly impoverished upbringing, helped him to be able to be close to someone like Henry Moore, who was also from the ...

Yes, I think so. I think that, I think it did help. He didn't like, he had a few pupils who came from very wealthy families, you see, even like mine, but it made no difference. He very sensibly treated us all the same, and he was more interested in gifted pupils than whether their parents were wealthy or not, very naturally. He was

a real born teacher, and a very good, I liked his sculpture better than his drawings, but he was a very good draughtsman as well.

Did you know his work before you went to the School?

No, no. I didn't. I just, it's just Tonks who told me about him, as a teacher, you see, that I should go there, because the Slade didn't open until the Christmas or some time.

So, when he was teaching you, he'd talk first, and then he'd actually draw?

No. He would, he would let you, he would let you work, and then he'd look over your shoulder behind you, he'd be behind you, and he'd say, "No, that's not right." And "you must make this form more, bigger, or place it in a different place", or "the elbow isn't right", you know, that sort of thing. He was a very good teacher, but he did it in rather an involved way.

Did you know who his heroes were?

Did I know?

His heroes. Heroes. Other painters and sculptors?

Oh I see. Some of them, yes. I knew, I knew Barbara Hepworth, and Ben Nicholson, but that was later, but they had, I think, they had gone to Leon Underwood, I don't remember that. Let me see. There was also D.H. Lawrence's daughter, by his first

wife, I think. Well, she was at the same school, at Leon Underwood's, and then the Slade.

Was she good?

What?

Was she any good?

I think so, yes. I think she was good, but she was too influenced by her stepfather, D.H. Lawrence, and he had all sorts of ideas that you must, you know, bring out the essence of a person, not only his bodily person, but his spiritual person. He was too involved in that sort of thing, and she found that difficult to take. She was more practical than he was. He was very spiritual.

Did Leon Underwood encourage you to look at the work of other particular painters?

Oh yes, he did. He said, "Go to the National Gallery and copy things", you see, but I was never very keen on doing that. I, somehow, it disturbed me to see youthful girls, standing in front of a Masaccio or something, and trying to copy it. I didn't think that was much use. I preferred trying to do a model myself, I mean, any model they chose, because there used to be a lot of models, I suppose there still are for art schools.

So would you draw from a model every single day, or did it vary?

I think so. Sometimes we had to do very light figure sketches, for two minutes or something like that, of people walking about, you see. We'd go into the street, and he'd say, "Now, just draw, very quickly, what you see." And so that also was good.

And did he teach you art history?

A bit. But he told us to, to study that more for ourselves, because it would take too much time. You see, we only had, say an hour and a half, or two hours each day, and then there was a break for a bit of coffee, or a biscuit, or something, so that he told us to, he gave us a rough idea, but he told us to go to the National Gallery, and go to see other painters, but especially the Old Masters.

And was he at all aware of what was happening in France? Of cubism?

Well, he was perhaps more aware than Tonks. Tonks said, "Don't", when I was at the Slade, he said, "Don't listen to that rubbish that they're producing in France", he said, "a literal impression", he said, "That's just flinging a pot of paint in the public's face, and you shouldn't do that, you should draw very carefully what you can see."

How did you feel about that at the time?

Well, I did my best, but it's very funny, because not long ago, George Melly was on Question Time, and he knew that I didn't like Tonks, I thought Tonks was too academic for me, you see, and so he showed me, on slides, it was for Question Time,

on slides, he showed me the dress, the rather finnickier dress of some Edwardian beauty, and he said, "Do you know who that is by?" And I was absolutely bewildered. I said, "No, I don't." And it was Tonks, a painting, an academic painting of Tonks', and he'd caught a tiny bit of the end of the dress, it was very difficult to tell, but, however, that's about as far as I got there. Not knowing the answer to the question.

When you were at the Slade, you hadn't been to France and seen the cubists, and met the artists yourself, had you? So were you quite influenced by what Tonks said?

Yes. I'm trying to think whether I, when I was at the Slade, I hadn't met any of them. No, it was too early. I was, it was a fight for my family, to even be a painter at the Slade, you see. Then a friend of my mother's said, "Oh, do let her go. She has talent. You can see that by these little drawings she's done. Let her see what she gets done with other people's collaboration," you know, "with other people who are also there. She'll soon find her own level." That's how it was cemented.

So you didn't rebel against Tonks at that stage?

No. No, no. I don't think I ever rebelled against Tonks. I was just very keen to go to France, and to learn, because France was a Mecca of every painter in England at the time. Unless you'd been to Paris, you didn't know anything. I mean, really, because the British are much better now, naturally. I mean, with air flights and I don't know, the whole thing is different. But in those days, Britain and France were almost

enemies. I mean, it was impossible. You had to go by boat, and then you had to find your way to Paris, and it was full of difficulties, you see, passports, everything.

So, amongst the students at Leon Underwoods and the Slade, you would all have been talking about what was happening in France a lot?

Yes. Yes. I think so. I think they were all, I don't remember Underwood so much, but I remember Tonks saying, "Oh, don't listen to all the rubbish that France is producing. Don't go to France." He said, "The British, the Royal Academy, and the British, are the people who will lead art."

And most of the students didn't agree with him?

Yes, I think most of them didn't, because we all swore that as soon as we were free of our parents, and our everything else, and had the money, we'd go to France, you see.

But what did you learn at the Slade that was added to what you'd learnt before with Leon Underwood?

Well, I don't know that I learnt, I learnt how to stretch a canvas, and that sort of thing, you know. How to keep your canvases rolled up, which side to roll them, and, but otherwise it was a very academic training at the Slade then, because of Tonks. And it was very finnickily, you know, you, you couldn't draw in any impressionistic way, or anything like that, except when, I think it was Underwood who was more innovative, because he used to tell us to draw very quickly, people walking about in the street, or

something like that, but Tonks would never do that. He would just have one model, a male or a female, and in those days, they were segregated, the women had a female model, and the males had a male model! Nowadays, it's all, it doesn't matter, but that's how it was. And Tonks would never, he didn't have any ideas, except just copying the things.

So was the atmosphere at the Slade very different from Underwoods?

Yes, I think so. It was, Underwoods, in a way, was much freer. I was supposed to only go for three months, or six months, but I stayed about two years, because I liked his teaching so much, and I learned so much from him. He was a freer spirit than Tonks. Tonks was very academic and just was one way of seeing, and that was the thing that was in front of you, and you couldn't compromise or experiment in any way.

And how did most of you see your futures as painters?

Well, it would be difficult, because most men thought, "Oh well, the women will get married and have children, and they'll forget about art", you see, once you have a child, you're fixed to the child, and you may draw a little something, but that's why I decided I'd never have children. I thought, "You can't do both." Once you have a child, the child comes first, and away goes your art. So I just decided that I'd never have children, you see, then I could be as free as I wanted.

Are you glad about that decision?

Yes, I'm still glad about this! I think I was quite right.

Did you have to sort of fight with the male students to be taken as seriously?

No, well, I, most men thought of women as muses, that is, they inspired the men to do great things, you see. But for some unknown reason, it was Paul Nash who first suggested that, when he came to my studio, I had it very fantastically arranged, not like this, but much more fantastic, and when he suggested to Herbert Read and Roland Penrose that they should come and look at my studio, because they were looking for artists, male or female, who would be good enough to join their Exhibition of Surrealism. And they looked at my studio, and as I say, I had it very fantastically decorated.

Can you describe it?

Describe it? Well, it's not a bit like this. It was absolutely covered, especially the mantle-piece, which was rather beautiful, I wasn't allowed to bring it back, a beautiful serpentine marble fireplace that I had gone with an architect, and chosen the serpentine myself, in some place where they have that marble, and above it, I had a collage of all sorts of things. There was a round dish, which this architect friend, who built that table, he's still alive, that table there, he designed a dish which had apertures for all the numbers of the clock, and it had a light behind it, so that the light would shine through the apertures, and they could tell the time. And this was a lovely simple thing, like a silver dish, about this size, and here, I couldn't fit it in,

because it's concrete, everything here, and so I had to, the Victoria and Albert have got it now. I told them it was done by a very famous architect and they were so fascinated by it, that they bought it, with my big wardrobe, which he'd also designed.

Who was it?

Rodney Thomas. Do you know him?

I know of him from your book, really.

Yes, he lives at the end of the Kings Road, he's absolutely blind now, which is awful. But his wife helps him round.

Had you known him for a while, at that stage?

Yes, yes. That's right, yes. He was known, he helped with, he did the Ministry of Transport show with the Festival of Britain, you know, he was well-known, until he went blind. Architects are all, they have to do these tiny little measurings, you know, and that just destroyed his eyes.

Did you go to the Festival of Britain?

Yes, of course I did, yes.

What did you think of it?

Well, I thought it was very exciting. I loved it. I've forgotten, it was in the 1950s, wasn't it.

1951.

Yes, 1951, that's right.

Did you think it was a good thing insofar ...

Oh yes, very good thing. It gave a chance to architects, and painters, because they could show inside some of these galleries and things. I think that it was an excellent thing, and it was a great success. Hundreds of people, thousands of people went to see it. It was, it was very well done, and the architects were very, new ones, full of new ideas, and you, you hadn't seen architecture like that before, so that it was very good.

Can we go back to the description of your studio.

Yes, well, my studio was really one immense collage of all sorts of things. On the mantel-piece, a much bigger mantel-piece than this, I had little cut-outs that I did and pasted on the walls, it wasn't concrete, you see. This is concrete so it's very difficult to do anything with it, but it really was, I've got photographs of it, I think, if you want to look. It's an awful business hunting through photographs to find ... but I did take photographs and other people did also, to, to show it.

While you were at the Slade, did you and most of the other students think you'd be able to make a living as painters? Were you quite romantic about it?

Yes. I don't know. I thought I wanted to. I didn't want to be known as a painter with rich parents, wealthy parents, you see. I wanted to stand on my own, and at first, I, I took a tiny studio just off the Kensington Square, or one of those places, and it was minute, but I thought, "At least I've got it on my own." And I had that for a time, and it was just one room, but then I could have a board and lodging, very near, in Royal Avenue somewhere, I just had to walk a little way, and that was when I left home, because I decided that my parents, they were very wealthy, and they would give you anything that you wanted. But I decided that it was much better to be on my own, and so I just walked out one day, while they were in Scotland or somewhere. And she was, my mother was very upset, and then I'd gone down to Cornwall, and my father came all the way down to try and persuade me to come back, and I said, "No, I want to be a painter, and I've got to be free. And I'm not free while I have to listen to what my parents tell me what to do", you see. I explained it, and he understood that quite well. She was much more difficult. She was a real matriarch. She thought it was awfully ungrateful to leave one's beautiful home, and go and live in a little tiny room, or something like that. And, but, however, I got my way. I usually do! And that's how I first started.

Were your sisters very shocked when you left home?

No. My sisters, yes. My eldest sister was, but my younger sister, now said, before she died, that she wished she'd done the same, but she didn't have the courage. They thought it all very courageous of me, because I didn't have any money, and I did have a little, œlOO or something, that an uncle had left me, so, but in those days, it would, you know, I ate for IO bob a week, that sort of thing, in a little restaurant, and I managed all right.

How long was it before you sold any work?

Oh, that's difficult. I remember the joy when the first, I think it was some show at the National, International Show, a big gallery in Piccadilly, it's gone now, but it used to be, you could show there, and somebody bought some drawing of mine, and I was, oh, terribly pleased. That was the first thing I'd ever sold, and I, I sold it, you see. And there were other things as well.

Do you remember what the drawing was like?

No, I don't. I haven't got the foggiest notion. I think it was some dancing, or flying figure, or something like that. I can't really remember.

F829 - End of Side A

F829 - Side B

... the first art school, which was the Byam Shaw. What was that like?

Well, the Byam Shaw, was the first time I'd ever smelt turpentine or that sort of thing, or seen brushes, I really knew nothing about it. And I was thrilled to bits, just the smell of turpentine, or, most people can't bear the smell of it. But, to me, I was in the middle of painting. You see, although it was a school, he was a good teacher, and I think he was there, himself, for a time, but then he died.

Who was the good teacher?

Rex Vicat Cole, I think his name was Rex, yes. It was Rex Vicat Cole, who was the Head of that school, and it was, I think, called the Byam Shaw, wasn't it? Yes, that's right.

Can you remember what the days were like there?

Well, we only, I was already learning French in Cromwell Road with some, three sisters called the Ozannes, a finishing school, it was. My mother insisted that we should speak perfect French, and so that I was at that school, and then ...

I was just asking you what the pattern of the day was like at that school?

Oh yes, and then I remember that the bombers came over, it was during the First World War, and we always had to go down into the cellar, and sort of take our blankets, and just try and sleep there, but you couldn't sleep with the sound of our guns, and the bombs that were dropping, and then when that was, so that I really never got to Paris, much, till later, but my younger sister, the War had already been over, and she went over to Paris, and these three women who were teachers for a finishing school, and my mother knew about them, or something, and that's why we were sent there. So we all had a good idea of what, what it was like, what the French language was like.

Was the Byam Shaw School, was it a big room, or

Yes, it was a biggish room, it was. It was very near Rowleys, which is near Notting Hill Gate, somewhere, that's right. Well, it was just round the corner from there, and it was a room about this size, I would think, and Leon Underwoods was a much bigger studio. He had a big room, with stairs coming down, so that you could stand at the top of the stairs and see everybody working away on the donkeys, you know what a donkey is? Yes. And we would all be sitting on our donkeys drawing, you see.

And would you all be drawing in silence?

Yes, yes. It was, there was, they didn't encourage talking, unless it was Underwood or somebody else who was a teacher, telling us what to do. Otherwise, there were breaks. Every hour there was a break of 10 minutes, and you could talk and move about and, otherwise, you got very stiff, sitting astride these donkeys, you see.

And would the students get together in the evenings, or would you all go home?

Sometimes. Once there, we gave, Underwood was rather fun really. He liked enjoying life, and he said, "Let's have a fancy dress dance or ball." And so we all rigged ourselves up in the evening, and we went into this same big studio, and he put on a gramophone, or whatever you could do in those days, and we danced! It was great fun. Because young people are very fond of dancing, I was mad about dancing when I was young.

And did you fall in love with anybody while you were at Underwoods?

No, no. I don't think I did. They were all, they were either girls or, I was fond of Rodney Thomas, who I still see, but he's not the kind of person you'd fall in love with. He's 6'4" or something! Very nice, I liked him, and we always kept in touch with each other, but I certainly didn't fall in love with anybody there.

And what was Gertrude Hermes like?

Oh, she was a charming person. I met her daughter, not the other, just the other day, and Gertrude was, everybody loved her, "Gert", as we all called her. She was a beautiful engraver. She gave me that little one. That's hers. And a tiny one, and I've got others of hers also, but I haven't got them here. But there wasn't a single person who ever said anything against her. She was awfully nice, very kind, and something very serious about her, innerly, she took her work very seriously. She was a

beautiful wood engraver. And I've got her book somewhere, of plants. She did a book of plants. I don't know if you know it? And I ... her daughter is very nice, she also, Gert, had a lovely sense of humour, but I knew her better than her husband, Blair Hughes Stanton, because he used to live in Suffolk, when they separated. I hardly saw him, you see, but she used to, I used to go out with her, and she was a lovely person. I was terribly sad when she died. The funny part is that she rang me up to say that Rodney Thomas this architect friend was very ill, and that I should go and see him before he died. And he was very ill, but I went to see him, but when I came back, I heard that Gert had died. She had, standing about to do this sculpture, she had something wrong with her legs, I don't know, she couldn't walk or something, and I've forgotten what it was, really. She died very suddenly.

So she was a very close friend?

Yes. She was a very, she was lovely to everybody, and everybody loved her. And I remember going in to the Academy one day, and on top of the Academy they always put what is happening in the Academy, and this said, "Leonardo da Vinci - Gertrude Hermes." And I asked Gert, I said, "Well, what do you think about being closely linked with Leonardo da Vinci", she said, "You know, I didn't notice it."

Did she change over the years?

No, not very much. She was just the same person. She was just a lovely person who was very kind, helped an awful lot of people who were worse off. She made a lot of money, you see, with her engravings. She was very poor to start with. But she was

really, nobody, I've never heard a single word against her. She was very popular, and much loved.

And was she doing the same painting and drawing course as you? Or was she engraving?

Yes, she was, but she was more interested in wood engraving. I did one or two wood engravings, then I jabbed my fingers, and I thought, "This is not for me, I prefer painting", you see. But she had a terrific skill. She could do it, curves, and do whatever she liked, and on a woodblock.

And were you encouraged to try out different things, at Underwoods, and at the Slade, were you encouraged to try wood engraving and sculpture?

At Underwoods, I was very much, because we, I helped edit a book called, The Island, you know, three copies, it's now in the Tate, and I had to do wood engraving because we couldn't afford any other kind of illustrations, so I had to do, I think that's one, that's only a photograph, that's only those two, three figures there, that's one of them. That's one of Gert's, and that's my drawing of the architect, who built the table, right at the top. But I, I didn't take to wood engraving. Some people can just do it. Gert, and even Blair are very good, but I prefer Gert's work to his.

Why?

Well, I don't know. She's more, there's something more human about hers. He's a bit more, perhaps because he lives in Suffolk, and I really didn't see him so much, you see, and then I was

(TELEPHONE CALL HERE - Waterman's Gallery ringing to say they have sold a painting.)

I meant to go and look at it, but you know, once you've sat down with a friend and had tea, I've completely forgotten. It doesn't matter.

You're showing a lot at the moment then?

Yes, I'm selling quite well. Enough to support myself, anyhow.

When you cut off from your parents, financially, did that last all your life? Did they not give you any support, always?

No. When my, my father and mother died, they left me less than my two other sisters, because they said I left home and I'd wanted to help myself, you see. But I'm amazed, I do really, I pay my rent, everything, with paintings that I sell. And Nicholas Serota, the Head of the Tate, is coming to look at that big painting, "The Bird", on Wednesday, whether they want it for the Tate. I do all right.

When I was here last time, you'd just been sent an invitation for Gilbert and George.

Ah yes! Well, I didn't see that. I'm rather fed up with Gilbert and George. I know they get an awful lot of publicity. I was sent an invitation by my own dealers, you see, and they're, however, they say that they're hard up, their rent has gone up, and they've got to move, and they have to do it, they don't like Gilbert and George anymore than anybody else does.

Are there some young painters and sculptors that do excite you a lot now?

Well, Maggie Hambling is a very good painter, I think. I'm interested, she's a very good writer as well. I've read her article on Velasquez in Madrid, she did one for Peter Fuller who has just died, you know. And she's, I think she's very good, very good. There are other ones, but I don't think there's anybody, she's good intellectually as well.

What do you think about most critical writing on visual arts? Do you think it's any good in this country?

Well, I don't read an awful lot, you know, because I make up my own mind, and if I happen to have a newspaper that talks about somebody, I used to have Modern Painters, but I don't know what's going to happen now that Peter Fuller's died. Terrible thing. He was a very, although he didn't get on very well, and you mustn't say this, with Nicholas Serota the head of the Tate, he was a very good critic. It's a great loss.

Did you know him? Did he come to see you about your work?

No, no. I didn't know him at all. I just knew him from ...

You used to go to galleries a great deal?

Yes, yes, I did. I don't know, because I'm too old, and I can't go unless somebody goes with me, and it's very difficult.

1st June, 1990

Did you say the Tate came to see you?

Yes, Nicholas Serota came with Caroline Cuthbert, who does the archives at the Tate Gallery, because she knows where I live, you see, and he had no idea, and they came and looked at a whole lot of paintings.

... Futurist book?

Well, I find it very interesting. I'd always heard about Marinetti, but I never met him, but I think it's a fantastic cook book, and very surrealist, as well as being futurist. I

didn't know much about the futurists, but now I've learnt a lot more. I just knew Marinetti as a name, but it's, some of his menus are marvellous.

... painting and sculpture developed?

Yes, yes. Well, I really haven't done any sculpture, hardly, I mean, I didn't do that, for instance, you see, you know, that one. I just bought it. But do you want me to talk about that kind of painting?

Yes, the portrait of your cook, you said you did very early.

Yes, that's right, very early. And also, I've got a self-portrait in the National Portrait Gallery, and that, I, I did at the same time.

Can you describe the way you were working then?

Yes, well, I was at the Slade for about two years, two and a half, three years, when Tonks was there, and I didn't think Tonks was a very good teacher, although I'd never seen anything he'd painted. George Melly had a programme the other night, in which he showed me, you know, the Tonks portrait of some girl, and it was very academic, and I, somehow, didn't like it. I thought it was too fussy. But this is how I first started painting the old Italian cook, and one or two others that I've done, that I've, some of them, I don't know what's happened to them - two others - a portrait of Mouma, who was a niece of some Russian, very famous Russian countess, or something, and two Italian, boy and girl, both sitting in the same chair. They were

about 9, or 8 years old, that sort of thing. A big chair, and there was room for both of them. And I must have sold them, or something, I don't know where they are, or what's happened to them. I never made notes as I do now, when I sell something. I try to put down who's got it if I know, but in those days, I was just happy to sell a painting.

Would those have been commissioned portraits?

No, not commissioned at all. They were just, I wanted to try and learn how to paint, so I used them as models, you see, and that's how it was. No, I, I'm never very good at commissioned work, because I feel that a strain, I'm rather free, and once it's commissioned, even Picasso said, himself, he hates being, he does it, but he hates being commissioned. He likes to do something, and nowadays, they don't commission him, they just say, "I'll buy whatever you've done", you see! So

But when you did a portrait like the cook, what was your thinking? You were, it's not exactly a realistic portrait is it?

Yes, yes, absolutely realistic. I had been at the Slade, and that's how they taught you, you see. Tonks was very realistic. He wouldn't let you, if a line was wrong, in a body, or something, he would correct you, and say, "It's not like that", stand over you and be angry with you, so that I learnt, I suppose, at the Slade, how to do those things. And then,

Would Tonks have been pleased with this?

Yes, I was very pleased with it, that's why I kept it, you see.

But would Tonks have approved of it?

Yes, I think he would have. He would've said, "Oh, this is too rough.," His idea was complete smoothness, you know. Academic, very ... yes, he would have thought that was too, too Cezannish, you see, I didn't think of Cezanne at the moment, but people have looked at it since, and said, "Did you study with Cezanne?" Well, I never studied. I did see his studio when I was in Paris, just outside, I went to see it, because I think he was a very wonderful painter. But I never met him. I mean, he died before I became conscious of him, you know, as a painter.

But did you know his paintings while you were at the Slade?

No, I don't think so, because Tonks used to say, "Don't look at that French rubbish. It's all absolutely, it's wrong, and it's not English painting and they do also ..." He was also thinking of the Impressionists, people like Securat, whom I think is a marvellous painter, you see, but at the time, Tonks wouldn't look at anything like that. He said, "People aren't as thin as that", or "Trees aren't" you know, he was absolutely for British painting, and trying to teach us how to paint, very academically.

And were you working in oils all the time?

Oh yes, all the time. I was working in oils till 1965, when somebody told me about acrylic, and then all these later ones, after 1965, I moved to acrylic.

And did that change your work at all?

Not very much. People wouldn't know. I've asked people, you see, which would you think that " Birds" is painted in, would you know? Oil or acrylic?

I'd guess acrylic. I'd guess it was acrylic because ...

Yes, it was acrylic, you're quite right, yes.

It's slightly different colours?

Yes, yes. Yes, the colours are slightly brighter, and you, in acrylic, you can make rather wonderful glazes, which is very difficult to do in oil.

When you were in Austria with Joseph, you were doing water colours as well, weren't you?

Yes, I was. I was doing quite ordinary, you know, I mean, nothing surrealist about them, but it was such lovely country, we were up in the hills somewhere, and it was so beautiful, and also in the Lake District, I did water colours.

In the English Lake District? In England?

In England, yes. And we went up to the Lake District, first when it started, they started bombing, and we thought we, we had so many sleepless nights, that we thought we'd better go somewhere, and somebody told us about the Lake District, because I'd never been at all, and then we liked it so much, we went every autumn, almost, it's so beautiful, because all round London it's not really country, but it's rather flat and uninteresting.

So what did doing the landscape painting teach you?

Well, I suppose it was, it taught me to look at things as they are, you see. And water colour, I'd always been doing so that, from very early on, I had been scribbling since I was about five years old, copying fairy stories, Arthur Rackham, and that sort of thing, you see, as much as I could, so I always wanted to be a painter. And my mother thought it was an awful idea, but never mind, I managed to succeed.

When you went to Paris, you were also taught by a Czech man, weren't you?

Yes, a Czech painter, that's right. But he was a very abstract painter himself, but he explained cubism to me, what they were after, because I couldn't understand the Braque and the Picasso cubist ones, they were so like each other to start with, I said, "Well, how could you tell the difference between them?" And then he explained, he wanted, himself, to be an abstract painter, but he was very poor, and when I asked him, had he had anything to eat? He said, "Well, I live on milk." He really did, so that I gave him some money, and he taught me about cubism and abstraction, what

they were after, you see, because I couldn't understand it at that time. And he was very good, he spoke English in a very broken way.

F829 - End of Side B

F830 - Side A

Can you remember what he told you about cubism? How did he explain it to you?

Oh well, he explained that it was a question of structure, that cubism said that a house is built by walls, boardings, and then he made a drawing of a cube for a room, you see, and he said, "Well, you have to put a door in, and that comes in and out, depends which way you like it", and explained a structure that every building is a structure, and really, it is a cube, we all live in cubes, you see, which is quite true. I mean, they may be different, they may be a bit rounded, or something, like modern architecture, they're making it a bit different, but otherwise, we all live in cubes. And so that they, the cubists were explaining that, in a sense, saying that, and then people said, "Well, but the earth is round. Why isn't the earth cubist?" And they would explain that that's only because of the very difference in scale, the earth is round, because it gets, they think that it may have been even flatter than it is now, because now people, there are people who say that the earth is flat, you see, because of the Sahara Desert and God knows what. And then they argued with it, and said, "No, it's, one day we'll discover that the earth isn't a bit like we think it is", and there were all these sort of fights, between scientists, even about what the earth is really like. Why it goes whizzing about in space, you see. And all that interests me, because after all, we all live on it. And nowadays, we're all frightened of the green effect, it gets so hot, we won't be able to, by the year 2030 or something, we'll have to have suits with a bit of ice in them, or, you know, cold ones, to keep us at a certain temperature, but this is all the speculation.

What was the name of the Czech man who taught you in Paris?

Oh, Foltyn. F O L T Y N.

And did the contact with him, did that change your work?

Yes, it did a bit. It opened me to what the abstractionists were doing, and the structuralists, you see, because I didn't understand it before. And also, when I saw Braque, or a Picasso, cubist painting, you know, very involved at the same time, with this nose coming out, or the pipe or something like that. I was puzzled. But then he explained that light is really, it goes in two ways. You can have wavy light, or you can have what is it? Instant light, or something like that. I've forgotten. I know that light works in two ways, and they had tried to put this in a painting. Of course, you can't do it, you just really have invented something new, but they were the first to do these abstract works, structural works.

And you were saying that while you were in Paris, you came across a surrealist picture in a gallery window.

Yes. That's right. I was walking somewhere with a friend, and I suddenly stopped and saw, I don't know if it was a Dali, or Max Ernst, and I thought, "Well, now that's an interesting thing." Because I didn't want to go on, as I told you, being just a painter of portraits, I didn't want to be a portrait painter, and it seemed to me that this was more imaginative. I didn't even know the word "surrealism" then, but I was very attracted to it. And then, funnily enough, very soon after, in Paris, I was asked to a

party and then somebody said, "Well, now, most people are surrealists coming." And I'd heard the word, and I thought, "Well, then, I must go", you see. And then I met some of them, I met Max Ernst there, and Paul Eluard, who very seldom came over to London, but he did for the big International Show. Well, that is really what set me on it, because Paul Nash, whom I knew, had asked Roland Penrose and Herbert Read, he had seen my studio, and he said, "Well, this is an Aladdin's Cave". I had all sorts of things.

What was your work like then?

Well, it was, I think it must have been good, because they chose something for the '36 International Show, you see.

Can you describe the work they chose?

Yes, it was called "Quadriga", but it was really a copy of the Silene horse, that's in the, there's a copy of it in the British Museum, I think, or the real one, I don't know. You must know it, you know the, just the horse's head, nothing else. And I thought with this, I used to ride a lot as a child, I thought, "This is a very lovely looking thing", and so I copied the outline of it, and inside I made all sort of strange patterns, and didn't have an eye or a mouth of a horse, or ears, I just made an absolute silhouette as the outside line, and then put what I wanted inside, you see, made it more surreal. And when they came to look, they looked at my studio, I had it covered in all sorts of things, much more fantastic than this is, this isn't, it's just got paintings in. And they looked around, and they said, "Oh, but you're a surrealist!"

And I said, "Am I? I hadn't thought of myself ..." and that's when they chose, Herbert Read, and Roland Penrose came and chose two or three things, and one of them was the Quadriga, I called it Quadriga, because it was four, but it was just heads, you see.

And were you already making assemblages by then?

I did make assemblages very early on, certainly, or objects and that sort of thing. I had done one, I think there's one in my book, of, which is now, I don't know what's happened to it, but, of a pigeon, a false pigeon top, you know, they used to make pigeons for some reason, just to, what the top of a pigeon looks like, in leather or something, and covered it and painted it all, and I used that, and a little bit of some building that I had, and put it together, and made an object out of it. I'm still doing objects, you see. That is, as I told you, is going to the Tate, that one. And the little one with the scissors.

Can you describe that one to me again?

Yes, well, I was in a French fishing port, with my husband, staying at a tiny little village, and we used to go down to watch the fishermen coming in in their little fishing boats, they were all very small. And every, 6 o'clock, they used to come back in the evening, or 7 o'clock, some time like that, and we used to go down there to watch them, and one day, I saw a fisherman cursing, because he had brought up something in his nets, and it had torn his nets, and nets are very expensive, so they have to buy a new one, or something like that, and he was cursing it. And I looked at this, and I saw at once it had been something or, in the sea, and I said to him, "I'll

have that." He was going to throw it back, you see. And I said, "No, I'd like it."

And for a few sous, I gave it to him, and then I discovered that the top was also there, in the net, and so I put it together, and made, that object out of it, which I called "Marine Object", and that's now going to the Tate, you see. So I never thought of, I mean, I don't suppose I'd even heard of the Tate hardly, in those days.

And you said it's Greek, and very old, didn't you? You said it's probably 2,000 years old. You said the pieces are very ancient pieces.

Oh very very ancient, because they, they dig it up from the sea, and even Nicholas Serota, the head of the Tate, when he came to see it, the Tate wants it, you see. He said, "You can see that's been at the bottom of the sea. That must be 2,000 years old." I don't know, the Greeks used to use them for their lamps. They had little lamps, and I've seen them in the British Museum, and they needed oil, and for that, they used to stick their, there's oil in the sea, or grease, or whatever it was. But I got that in the South of France, so there must be thousands of them, lying at the bottom of the sea.

And then you added the starfish?

Yes, yes. I added a starfish, and the, the horn of a ram, a ram's horn, which is that round thing.

And did you find that all in the same area?

Yes. No, I find, not at all. We used to go up to Cumberland to get away from the bombing, and I found that in Cumberland, because it was some, they had a lot of sheep, or rams there, and I just found it lying in a field. And I thought, "Well, that's rather nice ..." I always collect things that I think are collectable, and I'm able to make a, I didn't know at the time that I would do that, but you know, you collect them, and later on I used to have a big box full of things that I'd collected, and then one day I'd look for something, and find it, you see, what I wanted, to put together. I'm very fond of putting different objects, different things, together, to make a totally new object.

And so, would you have the objects for quite a long time, and then suddenly realise the combinations?

Yes, yes, I could. I had this box of things, you see, and it might take, I'm just in the mood to do it or not, I'm painting, you see, the more things you can do, the better.

And you parted company with the surrealists? You didn't really agree with the automatic painting of the surrealists, did you?

No, I didn't. I think it's very difficult to be an automatic, Andre Breton believed in it, but I don't see, I think you can write something first, at once, that's completely automatic in the sense that it may not have any reason to do with anything else, but after that, you think, "Well, what am I going to do next?" And you have to think about it, and that's not automatic, you see. So I think that's a difficult suggestion, to

believe in automatic writing. The first sentence might be automatic, it comes to you naturally, and then you have to think, "Well, what am I going to say next?"

Just going back a bit, in your book, when you were talking about your self-portrait, you said it was the first successful painting you'd done.

Yes.

Why did you feel that?

Well, I suppose I had never, I had done exercises at the Slade and that sort of thing, but I never really tried a self-portrait, and at, in the old flat where I lived at the time, there was a mirror, you see, instead of that door being so absurdly glazed like that, there was a mirror somewhere, I can't remember where it was, it was years and years ago, and my husband said, oh, I wanted him to sit for me, and he was very bored with sitting for me. And so he said, "Why don't you paint yourself for a change?" So I thought, "Well, I've got a mirror, I'll try." And so that's how I did it.

Why were you so pleased with it? What made it different from other portraits?

Well, some people have seen it, my relations have seen it, and said, "Well, it doesn't look very like you", but one changes. How can they, you know, I've got photographs of myself, and I look much more like my self-portrait than I do now! One completely changes. After all, I believe that you change your skin every seven years. Did you know that? Yes. So if you even change your skin, when you're 90, you can't look as

if you're, I was about 27 when I painted that, you see. And, but, I never, I just did it to see if I could do a portrait.

And can we talk about this piece?

Yes. Well that was done much later, in 19, no, I can't remember when I did that, 1940, I think, 1939, 1940. I did the first one. I've got a painting of the first one, I think it's in the little ..., you must have seen it there.

What's the name of the actual,

The name is "The Angel of Anarchy", that's right. And then, it's a painting I have, I sent it to Amsterdam, or somewhere, just when the Nazis were beginning to bomb everything, and people have tried to trace it, but I sent it to a gallery in Amsterdam, but people have tried to trace it, and there's never been any ... but luckily I had a painting of it. That's the first one, that's different to this one.

How did the first one come about, what was the idea behind it?

Well, you look at it, well, I would get it.

I want you to describe it on the tape.

Yes, I see. Well, it was much more realistic. It looked like a head. People used to say, "Well, it looks a bit like your husband", you see, but it was covered not in that

fantastic way, you could see the eyes, the nose, but I covered it with doily papers, instead of that sort of stuff, you see, that's a lot of all different things. Some of my mother's feathers that she used to wear in her hair, and everything like that, and it's totally different. It's much more realistic, the first one.

Were you doing that for a particular exhibition, the first one? How did the whole idea build up?

Well, I first built up, because I wanted to do a head. My husband had a very good head, even when he was older, very good looking, you see. And I thought, "I'd like to do a head of him", because Leon Underwood, my teacher, had done a head of him, but I didn't think it was a bit like, I wasn't, I didn't think it was good. I thought, "I can do something better than that." I'd never done sculpture, but I, so I got a lot of clay, and learnt how to do it, you know, that you have to keep the clay moist and that sort of thing, and I battered it, and succeeded in making something, and it does look, more people have looked at it and said, "Well, it looks like, a bit like your husband." So it was slightly recognisable, whereas his different, this is totally different. And later on, you must look at the first, it's just there, the first one there, as I say, it's, it was covered in doilies and papers, but you could see the eyes and the whole thing was very different. And then, when I discovered that something had happened to it, the actual, in Amsterdam, or when the war broke out, I thought, "Well, the only thing to do is to do a second one." Because, for some unknown reason, they'd sent me two, the people who make the model, I had a model of it in clay, but they had to make it in plaster, you see, they made it in plaster, and I thought, "Oh my! That's horrible. That white thing. It looks like a death sculpture or something." So I covered it with

whatever I could find. And that's the second one which is quite different. I'm sorry the first one ... but I've got a very good painting of it, I can show it to you. But this is one that they chose for the Tate. They wouldn't, I don't think they would have chosen the first, so from that point of view, it's very good, because I never believed, thought for a second, that they would be interested, even, you see.

Does the fact that you've got work in public galleries, that will go on and on, give you a lot of pleasure?

Yes it does, yes. Because one always wants to be known. Last night, I was at a private view of a girl that I know, that I promised to come to, and there were an awful lot, it was the Mall Galleries, and it was, I had put her up for being, it was the RA's choice, and I'm an RA, so I could choose somebody, and I chose this young friend of mine, she's about 28 or 29.

What's her name?

Zara Matthews. She's, was a girlfriend of Andrew Lambeth who helped me write my book, you know my book, so you know about him. Well, they parted or something, but anyhow, he asked me would I like, they're still friends, but she's got a new boyfriend, Roger, but she's very talented, and so that I got her to show at this, I put her name down, as I'm an RA, and it's called "The RA's choice", and it was packed, it was so hot, I felt like tearing everything off! But it was packed with people, you see, come to watch the RA's choice, and I'd chosen her, and she wrote and thanked me, because she hadn't shown very much, she just goes on painting, and she's a very good,

nice painting there, and she said, "I've brought something for you that shows how much I want to thank you." It's the first time she's ever been put in a proper exhibition, you see. And this hasn't come yet, because I couldn't bring it home. It's a marvellous sort of, vase-like structure. You'll see it next time, she's bringing it next week, it's too heavy for me. All made of tiny little shells, like a big vase, you know. It's a beautiful surrealist object. And I said, "Where on earth ... must have cost thousands, or a mint of money. Where did you get it?" She said, "No, it cost œ5", because she's not well off, "It cost œ5, and I got it at Greenwich Market", wherever that is, it must be miles away in Greenwich. But I think she's got a car, or anyhow, she managed to bring it. It's too heavy for me to climb up these stairs, and then these as well, you see. And so she's bringing it. It's a lovely surrealist object.

What do you feel about the Royal Academy?

Well, I was astonished when I was made a member. I'd never shown, I'd always rather laughed at the Royal Academy, you see, but when I went to see ... the President rang me up, and he said, "Can I speak to Eileen Agar?" I said, "Speaking." He said, "Well, I'm the President of the Royal Academy, and we've decided to make you a member. I hope you're pleased." I said, "Well, of course, I'm delighted." I didn't say, "Well, I've always thought the Royal Academy ..." Well, evidently now, they take every sort of, they wouldn't have surrealists at one time, you see. They wanted to be completely academic. But this new Director, or President of the Royal Academy, Roger de Grey, I'm having lunch with him on Wednesday. And he's asked a few people, about 12 people or something, it's really nice of him, so I'm going to lunch there. And to see the first opening of the Royal Academy.

The Summer Exhibition?

Yes. So it's a thing that's changed like anything!

And you've always been open to change, haven't you?

Yes, yes.

Have you felt, over the years, that galleries have been supportive, or have you felt, sometimes, that you ...

Well, I've always had my own gallery really. At the moment I don't have a gallery, because Birch and Conran have, they've put their rent up so much, that they're looking for a different place, and they'd like somewhere nearer Bond Street, but the prices are so immense, so I just have to sell in my home, because I've got nowhere, they have got a lot of my work, which is in store, safely in store, I mean, it's insured and everything, but there is not really a chance of having another show, until they find something.

You were with the Hanover Gallery, weren't you?

Yes, I used to be with the Hanover Gallery for a long time.

And what was that like?

That was very good. They did me, I also was with the New Arts Centre after the Hanover. Hanover was Erica Brausen, you don't know her, I suppose, no.

What was she like?

Oh she was a very good gallery expert. She knew at once of my paintings and that sort of thing, the New Arts Centre, they were all very good, but they didn't want to give me a retrospective, and I thought, by this time, it's about time I had one. And Birch and Conran offered me one, so I took that chance, you see.

And you were with Robert Lewin for a while, weren't you, too?

Yes, that's right, yes I was, yes.

I mean, did you feel that the galleries,

They've finished, they've closed up, Robert Lewin, now. I mean, he's not doing, he's in business, he's not doing any more.

But there was any one particular gallery owner who you found very sympathetic and supportive?

Well, I think Henry Birch and, and Paul are very sympathetic. I like them both very much. And their difficulty is that they haven't got a gallery at the moment, you see. I

don't know when they'll have one. But also, Marian Ponsonby of the New Arts Centre, I like her very much.

Do you think, on the whole, artists get properly supported by galleries in this country?

Well, it depends. I think if the gallery likes them, the gallery say to me that they have an awful lot of young people coming in, who aren't really decided what kind of painting they do, or would like to do, and they said the gallery has to show something which is more or less, that's what it's like, their work, you see. It's got to have some connection with each other. And they get an awful lot come in, and they just say, "No, that won't do." They have to be very hard-hearted sometimes. These poor young painters are not well-off, and they're hoping to do something, but they just say, "We would lose money on it."

F830 - End of Side

F830 - Side B

8th August, 1990

... the founding of "The Island" with Leon Underwood.

Oh yes. That was an amazing thing, because it was all done privately, you see. I mean, we had to publish without, give our own money and that sort of thing to get, to get it printed, and luckily, in those days, it wasn't so expensive as it would be now. But, and there was also great discussion, because my husband wanted it made into a more Continental work, at least in a sense that he wanted to invite people like Cocteau, Jean Cocteau, and other, Andre Breton, people who were known as surrealists on the Continent, and I don't even know if they were, had taken the name of surrealism at the time, it was so early, but "The Island" was, Leon Underwood, on the contrary, wanted to keep it, he said, "It's called 'The Island' and England is an island, that's why we've called it that, and it would be absolute, a pity, to invite Continental people, because they would destroy the idea of it being an island." And there was a great discussion about it, so I'm afraid only three copies came in. One was a double copy, and the Tate has now got them all. There was such dissention that that's why it folded up, I think.

There were fortnightly meetings for it, weren't there?

Yes, there were, yes, that's right.

Who would be there?

Well, Underwood ... we sometimes met at Underwoods. His daughter now lives on the top floor of the same house where I used to go to school, you see, it's very strange. His daughter came to see me because there had been a book published, did you know, about Leon Underwood? I didn't know it until she told me. And then she sent me a copy, and he was a very good teacher, but he was very involved, his way of talking. He, he had, hadn't learnt really, how to express his, what he wanted to say, in simple language.

And was it like that when you were working on "The Island"?

Yes, it was like that.

Was he very much the dominant figure?

Yes, he was, because he was really the one who did the design on the cover and he was a sort of a, the one who led us all, except my husband wanted to, having been out on the Continent, born on the Continent, he wanted to bring in more Continental people, but, so I'm afraid there was a bit of dissention.

And what did you feel?

It's very difficult. I thought that it was, either we should change the name, you can't call a thing an "Island", I mean, a magazine which comes out a lot. And then we ran out of money, you see, and it was very difficult, altogether, to have more ... and then

some people, I've forgotten their names, even, it's so ... and now I've got no copy, because it's all in the Tate, which is rather a pity, because one would have to go and look at it there.

I did go and have a look. There were some people I wanted to ask you about.

Well, who is that?

Who is Velona Pilcher?

Yes. I remember Velona Pilcher. She was the sort of fly in the ointment. Whatever we said, she disagreed with, you know. She was a very fighting, she lived all alone in a little cottage in the Sussex hills or somewhere, and she was very difficult, argumentative. She would always see the other side, and the one that you were suggesting, and she was a sort of a half-American, and I think it was the American in her, she was very tough, very, I would say, a very tough girl, and we were all rather young, and not very experienced. But she was a bit older, and she was more experienced in certain things, and in life, she lived just round the corner here in Child's Place. She had a tiny little cottage or something, and ...

She was a writer, was she?

She was a writer, yes, in a way, but she would write, sort of almost like dreams, you know. She wouldn't write about reality, she would write about what she thought was good literature, or something like that. And it was totally different. She seemed to

be at war with everybody. Whatever you suggested, she would say, "Oh no, no, that's not right", and "we must do something different."

Do you know why, did Leon Underwood invite her to be part of it?

Leon wasn't, he was interested in her way of thinking, but he didn't agree with her, you see. But he thought that she had a bit of a mind. We were all too young really, to do much, you know. And you need a bit of experience in life, to be able to think even, properly. I could have done things much better now than I could then! But ... she was an interesting person to know. I rather admired her, the way she was, but I've forgotten, I'd have to read my book again to see, do I talk a lot about her? Can't remember.

And did she go on to do anything else?

No, I don't think so. She, she got very ill suddenly, and she just died. No, she never did anything else. That's what we all said. You see, Leon did. I mean, he was such a well-known teacher that somebody has written a book about him, and I was astonished. I was very glad, because he was really, I helped him go to America, with money, because I thought he'd be better known, you know, in America, at that time, everybody was interested in English artists, and, but he didn't do very well there.

Was he not very good at promoting himself?

No, he wasn't. He never thought of it, you see, and, none of us were any good. But there was just one girl, who was a very brilliant lithographer or ...

There's somebody called Grace Rogers?

Yes, no. That's ... she was also very good, and she lived a long time, and could get into the surrealist groups, you see, but that happened much later.

This is Grace Rogers?

Yes, yes.

And what about Sidney Hunt?

Who's Sidney Hunt?

He did a wood engraving in the first volume.

Yes, oh, wood engravers. They were very good, you see, and I'd never done wood engraving before, and I was, that's just one of mine that is there, underneath one, in a black frame, and that's about the only one, I find it extremely difficult. I was always stabbing myself, you know.

Apart from the ones that are attributed to you in the magazine, did you do some of the extra ones as well?

The etching? Oh, I don't, only the ones that I signed, that were signed.

Every now and then there's a little woodcut that ends a chapter or something like that, and I didn't know if some of those would be yours.

Yes, that's right. One called "Family Tree" that was the one that I did.

What about the one called "The Bird"?

Yes, that I did also. That was a small edition of that one, you see, that one is still called "The Bird", although it was quite a different one. It might have been a very early painting. Was the one you're referring to a coloured one?

No, I think it's a woodcut.

A woodcut, yes. I can't remember that.

So that was an idea that you began very early.

Yes, that's right.

This painting is quite recent.

Oh yes, '62, well, I don't know if you call that recent, '68 or something like that.

But it was thirty years later than the woodcarving.

Yes, yes.

How did the idea evolve of the bird?

Well, somebody was asking about, which came first? The egg or the bird? And I said, "The egg", naturally, because in a womb, it's the egg shaped embryo, you see, that eventually has a child, and that's totally really different if you see an embryo nowadays, you can look at them and ... so I insisted that the egg came first when we used to have an argument about it. And, but "The Island" was very, it's a pity we didn't have more money, and we could have made it more interesting.

I'm very interested in your essay about religion and artistic imagination.

Yes, yes.

Because you were talking about the earth, and the sun and the moon.

Yes.

And the Jewish quality of the Soviets.

Yes, yes.

Can you talk about that a little?

What do I talk about? The art, and the sun and the moon?

The symbols of the earth and the sun and the moon.

Yes. Well, it's very funny. Some people say that they're more inspired by the moon, you see, because it's night time and it's dark, and you're more likely to be alone, and other people say, "No, it's the sun that inspires me. The sun and walking in the fields and woods", and that sort of thing. I feel the same. With me, it's the sun. It's the sun that inspires one to, well, you see everything, and with the moon, it's night, and you can dream, but I've never found that I want to, I've never found that I have dreams that I can illustrate, you know, you can daydream and that sort of thing, but night dreams, I don't remember them to start with! Very very few, I remember, if any.

And in that essay, you also talk about the Russians, the Jewish element in Russia being near to the earth, and ...

Yes, yes. I think that, I've always thought that the Jewish intellect, the Jewish people are more intellectual than the British, for instance, who are more physical. The British love playing games, or horse riding, or doing something physical, you know, and the Jewish people, I asked my husband who was, his grandfather was Jewish, but his father wasn't, or he wasn't. His mother was a Protestant, so he couldn't have been

really. You've got to have a Jewish mother if you're really ... I never knew that until he told me. And he didn't, his mother was Protestant, but he said, when I said, "How is it that the Jewish people are more intellectually ahead? All the big sciences, nowadays, or practically, they've all been Jewish," you see, somewhere or other, some Jewish ... and he said it's because that when they're 16 or 17 they're all allowed to come together, and they must argue a case, they're taught to argue, and defence. One is defending something, and the other one is proposing it. And so they're taught to be very calm and cool, and not to get excited like sometimes we do, if there's any argument, you know. People nowadays are so wicked, they come out and bang you, or do anything, but Jewish people are, are very, and now they've had to fight, of course, it's awful that they're still fighting about being Jewish. And, but he thinks that was it, and they were taught when they were 16 or 17, to plead cases, to stand up for them or to ignore them, and say that they weren't fallible.

But you made a particular link with the Jews in Russia, and Russia, at that time, was obviously a great point of interest.

Yes, yes. I know I didn't, I didn't know enough about Russia, you see. In those days, nowadays, you can all read about Russia, but there were no newspapers that, I never heard about Russia, I just knew it was a very cold country, an enormous country, miles away. I never ... nowadays people go to Russia. My niece has even been in Russia, and ...

And you make a parallel in that essay with the Negroes in America.

Yes. Do I? Well, that is curious, because the Russians wouldn't like that!

Well, I think it was the idea of particular cultures within a ...

Yes, yes,

Large country.

Yes, that is true. It's only just, Mandela is amazing how, I was watching TV last night, how he's been applauded and everything all over the world. I mean, he's going, he's been, he's now in America, he's going to South America, he's become world wide, it's amazing that they give him that freedom. I think it's very good. I think that everybody should be equal in that sense. I think it's awful to batter down people because they're Negroes or the scientists are wondering how, why they got so brown, otherwise, the blacks, you see, some of them are very dark, and they decided it can't be anything except the pigmentation. Very extraordinary. The sun, eventually, being so strong, it seems to me, I don't know enough about it.

And linked to the idea of the symbolism of the moon and the earth and the sun, there's all your thoughts about womb magic, I wondered if you could say something about that.

Now, what was moon magic?

Womb. Womb.

Womb magic, oh! Well, that I do think is so extraordinary, that it should be a woman who carries the child, and that it's an amazing, I didn't know anything, for instance, about the embryo, and yet I called this big painting that the Tate has, "The Autobiography of an Embryo". Well, now I've learnt how it happens, but I didn't know at the time, I just thought, "That's a good title for this rather difficult painting", you see. It's, it's, I don't think, I don't even know if scientists knew as much, nowadays they know so much, that they can carry a child, a woman can, and it's absolutely, practically safe. I mean, the child and the woman will both survive, but in the early days, of course, I don't know, it must have been dreadful in the 16th or 17th century, you see, how anybody survived, I don't know. That, I think is ... I think science is, I've got a great respect for it, because it's, what they discover is fascinating.

So when you did "The Autobiography of an Embryo", you'd done the painting and you added the title afterwards?

Yes, that's right, yes. Absolutely.

How did that painting evolve?

Well, I don't even know. I know that Andrew who helped me with the book, I saw him yesterday, and he was, I was moving here from West House, I don't know, did you ever come to West House? No. Right down the same road, there's a very old house, and it had a lovely studio in the top, and I was there, but the rain came in the roof, and you know, it was dreadful. They had to, I like this, I'm very glad to move,

but I had a big, I couldn't have painted that painting here. It had just a cork lining, and a studio floor, and it was an immense studio, and I must have had this canvas for a long time, and then I thought, "How, how am I going to, what am I going to do with it?" And I suddenly started. I thought, "Well, I can't just leave this big canvas here." It also had a very tiny frame, blue frame, which they've still kept, and they've put a proper one over it, and by the time it was clean, and then Andrew brought it out, and he said, when we were moving, he said, "Look what I've found in the attic." And he pulled out this enormous painting, you see, and it was covered in dust, because I never dusted anything in that room, in the attic, it was just too dirty, and I'd forgotten all about it. And you know, I can't even remember what I did. I remember one time thinking, "Shall I turn it into a collage?" And then I decided, "No, it must be a painting, because it's so big, and the collage might, sort of, come off or something." And, and so I just started on it. And I don't remember what. I remember I was looking at all sorts of drawings of early Venuses, and early work, sort of 16th century work, 12th century work, anything that was very early you see, because I thought that would give me an idea of how human, mankind, gradually evolved. Or women, or whoever. And I got very interested in this. And then, of course, I had almost finished it, and then I put this big head right at the end, because that was the symbol of the, of the whole of mankind. It was a sort of human face of mankind, or it wasn't really a face, but a sort of face. I didn't want to make anything too definite, so that one could sort of, almost dream about, and, but it was a, and how I got it, the title, I can't remember.

A very good title.

Yes, it's a very good title, but I simply don't remember. I know the whole thing, it was 1936, or '37, or something, when he pulled it out of the attic, but even when I did it, I can't remember. I know it was covered in dust. First it had to be cleaned, but the Tate cleaned it, and they've made a marvellous job.

Was that a very much one-off picture, or would you have done lots of studies, a bit like "The Bird"?

No, I think it's a one-off picture. It was so big that, I may have done little sketches for details of it, you see, but it was, it always had, my idea, it was a sort of history, a history of mankind, or womankind. And it's very difficult, it's such a long time ago now.

In "The Island", and round about that period, you were signing yourself "Allegra" sometimes.

Yes, yes, that's right.

How did that happen?

Well, that happened because I thought, who was it? Oh, I'd been reading about Oscar Wilde, I think, he had a daughter called Allegra didn't he, and I admired his toughness or something. I don't know if it was Wilde or somebody else. And I thought Allegra is an easier word than signing Eileen Agar. My very early portrait is signed, the one

in the National Gallery, is signed Eileen Agar, you see, and then I thought, "Well, that's too long to paint in", or something, so I just signed myself Agar.

And how did the contribution from Gandhi come to be in "The Island"?

Oh well, that was interesting. Gandhi happened to be in London when we were doing "The Island", and Joseph, who was very interested in intellectuals, in a way, you know, more brainy people, we were just artists, and artists are not supposed to be, they had, they jolly well had to be intellectual, but people don't give them credit for it, they think intellectuals are only scientists, and well, he happened to hear that Gandhi was in London and he thought it would be marvellous to interview him, and he wanted to interview him. So Gandhi was looking for people to help him in his way of Indian life, because he already was dressed as an Indian, you see, and so Joseph asked, rang up, he knew somebody who was in touch with him, he rang up and said, "Will you find out if Mr. Gandhi, if I could come and interview Mr. Gandhi", and he was, luckily, staying in Knightsbridge, and I said he was there with his goat, because he had to always drink goat's milk. He didn't drink anything else, he didn't eat meat or anything like that. He had this religious thing that you must just drink milk, and so he had to bring a goat with him. So I said in my interview, or something like that, that he was living with his goat! And everybody laughed. But anyhow, Joseph went to see him, and he found him sitting on the floor, cross-legged, you know, like they do, with his, what do they call it? Those white cloaks that they have, a saki, or sari, or something like that, and so Joseph sat on the floor also, in front of him, and said, "Mr. Gandhi, can you tell me about your religion, and why you are here, and why you brought a goat with you?" And so he interviewed him, and it was a marvellous

chance. He used to be a reporter in, on the Continent, so he wasn't going to miss his chance of giving "The Island" a boost, by having a famous man like Gandhi coming, you see. And this was long before he started his uprising. He was just a lone man. He had been, really, a clerk in some office, Gandhi, and he'd had to dress in a tie, and you know, a coat, and he hated that, he thought it was dreadful, so as soon as he got a chance to be on his own, he dressed like an Indian.

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And did you get the impression from Joseph that he'd felt Gandhi was a particularly holy man, or did he not say?

No. He thought he was very holy. He said, "I couldn't have done that!", you know, fast. On certain days they fast, they don't have anything to eat, and even I say sometimes, "I ate too much last night, I'm not going to have any lunch", or something. I find it very difficult. It's just habit, I suppose. And, but Gandhi is marvellous, I've got lots of friends who go to India, love India so much that they go quite a lot. And I say, "Do you fast on fast days?" Some of them do, yes. I've got one friend who loves India, and she says she does, but I find it very difficult. It's very good for you, of course. I mean, very good both for your will-power and your, your stomach.

Is will-power very important to you?

Yes, of course it is, really important. And, but that was an interesting thing, it livened up the, "The Island", a lot, when Joseph interviewed Gandhi.

And what was Henry Moore's contribution?

Oh, he was very good. Those were his first ... I haven't, I did have a, I did have a little stone statue of Henry Moore's, but unfortunately, I sold it. I should have kept it. It was too heavy to bring here, you see, it wouldn't have fitted on those, it was bigger, it was one of those with the hands clasped, I don't know if you saw it. And we were

great friends with Henry. We used to play tennis together, and Joseph and I used to play against Henry and Irina. Poor Irina, I meant to go and see her at Much Hadham, because that's where they live. And he was an awfully nice man, even when he was very very famous. He was still the same. The only difference is, when we first knew him, we used to call him Harry, he was always called Harry.

That was his mother's name for him?

Yes. And, yes, that's right. And then Irina said, "Well, Henry you're getting ... Harry, you're getting so well known, I think you must call yourself Henry, it sounds better. Harry sounds like somebody out of the pub or something", you see. And so he took her advice. She was, she was a very sensible woman. Very attractive. Very small, and not, don't think she was any bigger than I am. But the minute he saw her, she was working as a model at the Royal College, and the minute he saw her, he thought, "That's the kind of face I like, and body." You see, she was young and slim then, and he took her out once or twice, and eventually they got engaged, and then they got married. That's really how it happened, he just saw her as a model. She was only doing a model because they were quite wealthy in Russia, and they'd arrived in England, in London, with a frying pan, nothing else, because they thought, they were only allowed to take one bit of luggage or something, and they thought, "What is the most useful thing?" And they thought, "Well, at least we can buy an egg!" And so they bought a frying pan! And then she was so wealthy, you see, eventually, when Henry started making money, he, he was a very clever man, he knew, we used to go for walks on the beaches, and we'd pick up stones and something, pebbles, or stones, and he would look at it and say, "That would make a good sculpture", and then he'd

devise something, first in clay, and then carve it, you see. He knew exactly where his, and very early on, Sir Michael Sadler was interested in his sculpture, so he helped him a lot, to get known and that sort of thing, and give him shows.

And was Irina an artist as well?

No, no. She didn't do anything. She just looked after him, and she was so miserable when he died, he died when he was supposed to have retrospective, and it was thought he was going to be there. I was horrified one time, when I saw him in a wheelchair, because even I don't go in a wheelchair, but then I refuse to. And I find if I have a stick I'm all right. And yes, and then he got ill, he got cancer or something. It was very sad because they had this one daughter, and the one daughter ...

Mary?

Married a South African who wasn't against, you know, not one who was against apartheid, one who said, well, it was nothing to do with him. She didn't mind. She used to go, I don't know what it was like, but he was very upset about that. He thought that, even once we were having dinner in some restaurant, and somebody, my host or somebody, spoke rather sharply to the waiter, and Henry was very cross. He said, "You shouldn't speak to a man, just because he's a waiter. You mustn't speak to him as if he's a, you know, a Teddy Boy or something in the street." And it was very noticeable that he'd come from a working-class family. He described his love of sculpture by rubbing his mother's back with embrocation, because she had very bad arthritis, or rheumatism, or something, and it used to help her a lot. And he thought,

as he felt, he used to try and help his mother, he loved his mother very dearly, like all men do. He said that gave him the feel of stone sculpture, somehow, because she was a very big woman, and she had a big back, and he loved doing it!

Somebody said that he used to have a great fear of being shut in anywhere.

Yes.

His mother used to send him to get apples in a cupboard under the stairs, and that frightened him, and that he thought that one of the reasons he made hollows in his work, was that there was always an escape.

Yes, that's right, yes.

Did he ever say anything about that?

Yes. He used to, somebody asked him, "How did you think of making hollows?" And, of course, it's very difficult, but he did say that she used to make burnt apple, you know, put raisins in it and that sort of thing. I've done that, but I always forget about them, and left them too long, and they get burnt, so I don't do it any more. But he, evidently, the mother was, used to cook for him, and, and I'm not sure was he the only son? Was he the only son?

The only child.

Yes. And so that they were, he was very precious to her. And I remember him explaining how he loved this back, how he used to rub it, and that gave him a feel of doing a marble or whatever he did, clay first, and ...

He was a very devoted father, I gather? He was very devoted to his child, I gather?

Yes, oh yes. Mary her name was, yes. He was. That's why he was so sad when she went to South Africa, you see. He thought it was dreadful. But he was an awfully nice person.

And Naomi Mitcheson was part of "The Island" as well.

Yes, yes, she was. She was a great friend. My niece was talking yesterday to this architect friend whom we went to see, and he also knew Naomi Mitcheson, because she used to be in Scotland a lot, and, you see, I met her when she was, she was about the same age as I am, but she said she can't get about like I can, you see. And she's an interesting person, because she'd known, she was the, oh, she's the daughter of, oh, I've forgotten. She knew everybody in the, in the writing world, anyhow. Very well-known.

She wasn't part of the meetings for "The Island"?

No, no, I don't think so.

And what about

I didn't know her at the time.

And what about Ralph Chubb?

Oh, he was, he was, we used to rather laugh at him, because he was a homosexual, and that to Leon and to all of us at the time, was rather horrifying, and he used to do woodcuts. They were quite good sometimes, but always of young boys together, or little children together, you know. And some of us said, Velona Pilcher especially, said, "Well, what do we want with Ralph Chubb? He's a homo, he shouldn't be let in", you know!

So the group was, in some ways, very tolerant, and in others rather conservative?

Yes, that's right. He was. He was, as an engraver he was very good. I used to admire his things.

And what about Nevinson, he contributed too?

Oh Nevinson, yes, he was a very different kettle of fish. His father was a very famous journalist, Henry Nevinson, and he used to have a marvellous studio. He had a studio in Hampstead somewhere, a big one, and you could go out into the garden and everything, and he was always giving parties, and there was a sort of little curtain behind where you, this enormous studio. He loved drinking parties, you see. He drank rather more than he should. He was very sort of, very cheerful, and always

very happy. And he had a lovely wife, Kathleen, who survives him. But I think he was drinking too much. And there was this little curtained alcove, and suddenly two people disappeared behind it, and when they came out, she said, "Oh, I thought you were so and so!" He said, "Oh no, I'm, my name is Edward Wadsworth", or somebody. And she thought it was somebody totally different you see. It was a joke really. And then, one time, he came, he invited us to dinner, and that's very rare. He gave drinking parties, but not to dinner. And he said, "Well, you're going to be alone with Sacheverell Sitwell and his wife, Georgina," whatever her name was. "You don't mind that?" And I said, "Not at all." And Joseph was very interested to meet them. He'd met Osbert Sitwell, but he'd never met Sachy, you see, and so we'd all sat down, after drinks, and a little table for four, and for some unknown reason, Joseph was very talkative, but I was a bit, I don't know if I was nervous, I wasn't so explicit as I am now, I've learned how to talk. But as Joseph always used to do all the talking, he was a very good talker, I used to just sit and listen, you see. And Nevinson said to me afterwards, "Why were you so silent? Did you feel ill?" I said, "No, I wasn't ill. I was just listening to everybody else, whilst they were talking." Because Sachy knew almost more than Osbert, but Osbert used to lay it on thick, how he was the son of Sir somebody somebody in Yorkshire, or something, and how his father used to paint the cows whatever colour, they liked black and white, and they couldn't get black and white, so they just painted them, black spots on them, or you know, mad! This was the father, not the Sachy. And they used to tell, or Osbert used to tell these stories. Sachy was more, he didn't like his family being laughed at. Osbert used to rather laugh at his family doing these strange things. But Sacheverell was rather, I don't know what it was. He was a bit more proud, or stuck up, I would say. Osbert wasn't so stuck up. Some people, and Edith Sitwell we met, also. She

used to be at the Poets, there was a thing called the Poets Club, I don't know if it's still going.

Poets?

The Poets Club, somewhere in London. And we used to meet there, and Edith would be wonderful with her hats, and her diamond, enormous, cabochons, rings, you know, huge. And all her bracelets and everything like that. But she was very, she was very, strongly believed in her poetry, and ...

Did you hear her read?

Yes, I heard her read. One time, she read behind a screen, because she thought it's better not to see the person. And it's a marvellous idea. She was behind a screen, and she was reading, but I didn't awfully like her poetry!

Did she show any interest in your work?

No. She didn't show an interest in, I don't think so, in anybody except her own, and perhaps Sachy's, or Osberts, but she was very hidebound in that. She didn't think anybody else was worth anything.

Do you think she really thought that, or do you think somewhere, she didn't have much confidence?

Well, it might be, I don't know. I think the Sitwells had quite a lot of confidence in their own family, but they didn't have much confidence in anybody else.

And in 1938, I think, there was a big meeting with the Euston Road people, and Coldstream.

Oh yes.

To debate realism and abstraction.

And abstraction, yes.

Were you there at that?

Yes, I used to go to some of those meetings, in the Barcelona Restaurant in Beak Street, there is still that same restaurant, but it's under totally different management now, and we used to go there and debate. I said that, that, to a certain extent, abstraction and surrealism are sort of brother and sister, but slightly different, but you would also call, even Ben Nicholson said that you can call abstraction a certain kind of surrealism, and I thought that was a difficult thing to put across. But I think it's just because they wanted, they wanted to bring big artists together, and they didn't like this fight between surrealism and abstraction, so they, they just tried to smooth it over.

What did you feel about the work of somebody like Coldstream?

Oh that's, Coldstream was completely naturalistic, wasn't he, yes. I didn't like it very much. I thought that was, you just copy something in front of you, and it's really just a copy. I think he's a good draughtsman, but I'm not, it's not interesting enough to me, that's the whole thing. A painting has got to be interesting. It's got to make you stop and look and think, "Well, now, what's that about?" Or, "How is it done?" Or something like that you see.

And were you seeing quite a lot of Nicholson and Hepworth?

Of who?

Ben Nicholson, and Barbara Hepworth?

Yes. Not Barbara Hepworth. Ben came to see me in my big studio down the road, but Barbara wouldn't. She said, "Oh, I'm not interested in surrealism or anything. Why should I go?" Because I asked them both. And Ben came, and he looked around, and he sort of, he was rather nice, but Barbara said, "No, I'm not ..." She was very determined to fight her own way, you see, and they weren't really together. He had been married, as you know, to Winifred Nicholson.

Did you know her at all?

No, I didn't know her. I just knew her by name. I think she died very soon after I was sort of known.

And you don't particularly remember Coldstream arguing his case?

No, I don't. No. I wish I did, but I just didn't, didn't think it was interesting enough.

And in 1933, you joined the London Group?

Yes.

What did that mean?

Oh well, that meant, it gave me a chance to do more than just do woodcuts in "The Island", you see. And I was asked to join, which also was nice. I didn't have to put my name up, and that sort of thing. And it gave me a chance. And I remember that the first time I ever showed, I went to see, very proudly, and I was next to a John Bratby, and I'd never heard of the name, you see, which was very funny. And since then he's become very, very well known. But I thought it was nice. I showed there for quite a time, until somebody gave me a show. I think it was the New Arts Centre, or something, and then I found that that was very easy, other than having to send up paintings, and having to be accepted by a committee, and all that sort of thing. If a gallery likes your work they just take it, you see.

Who was the driving spirit behind the London Group?

I think it was Eliat Seabrooke, yes, it was Eliat Seabrooke, I think. He was the one who thought that there wasn't enough chance for people to show their work, and, and then we got together, I don't know exactly how it, I was never on the committee, because I said that I didn't want to be. I don't want to have to pass judgement on fellow painters, you know, you don't like it, or you throw it out or something. I didn't think I was, I was really just starting to be a painter myself, and I didn't think it was right. But I remember, he was an older man. He was very good as a sort of committee person, and Ceri Richards was also on the, and he was awfully nice. I liked him very much. But he died, you see. And then I knew Frances, his wife, and well, I knew them both. And Merlyn Evans, I knew. And I think she's still going, I see her sometimes at, what's her name? Mary, Margaret or Mary, I can't remember.

What about David Gascoyne, did you ...

Yes, yes.

What was he like?

Oh, he's very tall, and very shy. Paul Nash used to call him the, "the shy violet", or something like that, you know, because violets never, they're not sort of like rhododendrons, that you can't help seeing them, they're rather quiet. And he was very, until he met his wife, he, he was so depressed that they sent him, the doctors sent him to hospital, to see if he could relax a bit. He thought if he'd be, he didn't know anybody, he used to stutter, and he was extremely shy. He was innerly all right, but he was almost terrified of people, you see, that he'd talk ... and then he was

sent into hospital, and he had a nurse who looked after him, or who liked him, and the nurse suggested once, that people should read poetry, it would help these very inferiority complexed young people, there were a lot of them at the time, I don't know why they were like that. Nowadays they have more confidence. But they were very shy. And she suggested that he should have a poetry reading one afternoon, when he was better, and sitting up, and so she found some people who had written poems, and she asked him, did he have any? And he said, "Oh yes, I sometimes do", but he was very unspecific about it, and then he read his poems, and she said, now I've forgotten. He didn't say who they were by, he just read them. And she said, "Oh, I liked the one about ..." whatever it is, I've forgotten what it was about, you see. And he said, "Oh, I'm so glad you liked it. I wrote that." And that gave him a certain confidence. And then she discovered that that was what was wrong with him. Nothing except such a malaise, that he was frightened of speaking, almost. And so they met, and they married, and they now live in, in the Isle of Wight. You know that, probably, yes? Didn't you? Yes. Yes, they live in the, because he found the Isle of Wight is cheaper, to have an ... and I've got their address. When he comes to London he comes to see me. He's very nice. He's very tall, and very thin, and his wife is called Julie, I think. But she absolutely made him forget his shyness, and now he's talkative, and he's, he's more like a human being, you see. She did wonders for him.

So he's a very close friend, really?

Yes, well, except that you can't be close friends with somebody who lives in the Isle of Wight, if you don't go there, you see. But when he comes up to London, we go

out to lunch or something like that. But it's very rare. He says he so loves it in the
Isle of Wight, by the, by the sea, or somewhere.

And he's still writing?

I think so, yes, he is.

F831 - End of Side A

F831 - Side B

Ezra Pound was somebody else you knew very well, wasn't he.

Oh yes, yes. He, I met in the South of France, of course. It was so hot in Paris, and Joseph asked somebody where should we go, and they said, "Oh go to Rapallo, it's really the nicest part of the South of France, and it's very good little hotels and cafes there, and that sort of thing." And he said, "Max Beerbohm lives on a hill, up high, and you might even get an invitation from him!" But we didn't think about that very much. And Joseph and I were sitting outside, cos in, it was so lovely and hot, you see. We'd been in Paris and it was so cold and damp and foggy, that we went down to Rapallo, and we were sitting in a coffee place by the seashore, and we were playing chess, because it was nice to play in the open air. Every coffee house in Italy, practically, has a chess board, or two or three, and if people want to play chess, and I was learning, more or less, how to do it, Joseph had played it when he was a child, but there was chess, and swordsmanship, fencing, chess and fencing, are the two things that Hungarians excel at, you see. Every coffee house in Hungary has a chess board. So we were sitting outside, and I was wondering what my next move was, and I was very slow at chess, and suddenly I found somebody, the seats were long seats, you see, sort of edging nearer and nearer me, and I sort of looked, who's trying to push me, and suddenly he said, "Now, that's not the right move. You do this move." And I looked at him, and I thought, "This is very strange." And then he introduced himself, he said, "I'm Ezra Pound. I'm always playing chess. I love chess." And that's how we became friends. But it was really through the chess game.

What was he like?

Oh, he was a small man, with a beard, and a moustache, but a rather sort of, little pointed beard, you know, rather distinguished, and very fierce looking eyes, and a little hook nose, and very forthright. He would tell you exactly what he thought of you, and he, he and Joseph played chess next day, or something. He said, "Oh well, let's meet", you see. Because Joseph, funnily enough, in his pocket, had an invitation to Ezra Pound, from a mutual friend in Paris, but he hadn't sort of given it to him, and so that he, he just said, "Well, I've got an invitation from so and so, to meet you."

And so then we became friends, and he used to play almost every day. And he was there, otherwise they'd walk, arguing. And Yeats was also there, and Joseph said, you know, the poet, and Joseph said he felt like a child, walking between these two very famous people - Ezra Pound, and Yeats. Because they were already friends.

Did they get on quite well with ...

Yes, oh yes, they got on very well. Oh yes, Ezra was a great admirer of Yeats, you see. He used to say, "Well, it's a bit ..." And Joseph and I are both in the Cantos, you know. It was funny.

Did he tell you you were in the Cantos, or did you discover it?

No, we discovered. And Joseph, of course, he gave us a copy of the Cantos, all beautifully designed by some woman, you know, in almost classical writing, and I said to Ezra, "Well, why did you choose such a classical writing? Somebody to do it all in this kind of writing, when it's such a modern thing, the Cantos?" And he said,

he thought it was better like that. Unfortunately, when Geoffrey Brightson was ill, I gave him the copy that I had, it was very silly, I thought it would cheer him up, because he was a great friend of Ezra Pound's also, in fact, he was the one who said, "Look out for Ezra Pound, if you meet him in the South of France." But he died. It didn't make any difference.

But did you recognise yourselves easily in the Cantos?

Yes, yes. Well, he just said, he talks about "Joe Bard", and then in a different canto, he talks about Eileen, but he doesn't say "Eileen Agar" or anything, so one didn't know, he might have known a lot of other, but he told me that it's me he was talking about.

When you say he would tell you what he thought of you, what did he tell you?

No, he didn't. He didn't. He was very fond of young, rather pretty girls, and I was much more attractive then than I am now, you see! And we had a house in Portofino, a lovely little house, and rather high up on the hill, and he used to, one time, I was, thought I'd walk up to Santa Margarita, which is very near, to buy some paints or something, because I wanted to paint. And I saw him, or he saw me, walking in the road, he was in a bus. And he hopped out of the bus, and he came and joined me, and we went back to lunch in Portofino, because I had a girl who was, who cooked for me, you see. And it was very nice.

He didn't try to seduce you?

No, he didn't, you see. And Joseph, when he heard, Joseph was in Paris, when he heard that I had been, or Ezra had been to see me, when I was alone, he was furious! And he came rushing down, third class, the only class he could get in a train, and, and got to Rapallo, and I said, "No. He behaved absolutely perfectly." And so he was more at peace. But he said afterwards, he told somebody, he was frightened of Joseph, he thought he might challenge him to a duel!

Because later on, both you and Joseph were able to get involved with other people, and stayed together.

Yes, yes, yes, that's right. He was very nice. But he was very fierce. It's awful, you know, because they, they, they tried to have him up, because he said such dreadful things about Roosevelt, you see. He had this awful, Major Douglas complex about money. I don't know if you've heard about it. Well, he used to say that all money, all banks are usurers, whatever a usurer is, and that he talked so much about Roosevelt, and this other, that they really wanted to extradite him, and have him tried in America, you see, he would write to any Italian paper, and say, "It's this dreadful Roosevelt, when are they going to hang him?" Or something like that! And instead they jolly nearly hung Ezra! And he had to be had up, and then Archibald MacLaren, or somebody, I've forgotten his name. They came for Ezra and wanted to extradite him, and put him in prison, you see. And this great friend said, "You can't put a poet, who's so well-known", he was getting very well known for his Cantos, "you can't put him in prison. The whole of Europe will be in arms against it." And so eventually, this famous writer, I've forgotten, I don't know whether it was MacLaren or somebody

like that, got him with Yeats' help, got him put into a hospital. They said, "Well, he's, he's very, he's just suffering from something." And they managed, anyhow, not to have, they might have hung him, you see. It would have been terrible. He was a charming, lovely man, except he had this usurer, all banks are, I don't know what they do, but they're all wrong.

What about his anti-semitism? Did he talk about that to you?

Well, he didn't seem to. I didn't even know he was anti-semitic. After all, Joseph, well, he wasn't really Jewish, because he had a Protestant mother, and if you have a Protestant mother, you can't be called Jewish. But he never talked about it.

And when you went there, he was making furniture, wasn't he?

Yes. Yes, we showed, we went, he had a lovely flat overlooking the bay of Rapallo, and he had a terrace outside, and then he had a very ugly screen, and when he moved the screen aside, when he moved the screen, he would show you his wardrobe that he made, and his chairs. He was very interested in, he said he had to do something while he was not writing poetry, you see, and you can't be writing poetry all the time. And this was his sort of hobby.

What were the chairs like?

Well, they were not very comfortable, but they were quite good-looking. There was an awful lot of wood about that he could have.

And he managed to have a wife there, and a mistress, did he?

Yes, that's right. He had a mistress who lived up on the hill. She was very nice.

And a wife, who was called Dorothy Shakespeare, and that was her maiden name, you see, but she always insisted on using it, because she didn't want to be known as Mrs. Ezra Pound. It didn't sound right. And she was very fond of the name Shakespeare, whether she was any relation or not, I don't know.

And did she and the mistress ever meet?

I think they did, yes, eventually, eventually they did. Olivia something, I can't remember her other name. The mistress was very nice. The mistress was a very good violinist, really a classical ... she used to play at concerts and that sort of thing, but, and Ezra was very fond of music, you see, and he met this, she was also a woman of quite 30, or 40, or something like that, but

And was Adrian Stokes out there too?

Yes, he was. We used to meet him there occasionally. He'd be, and didn't used to come very often to the same cafes as we went to, but he, I met him there, and we talked about painting and he saw some, but, you know, all painters just like their own work!

Was his wife with him then? Was he married?

What was his wife's name?

Margaret Mellis?

Oh yes, yes, she was. Margaret Mellis. I used to see her afterwards. I'd forgotten that she was the one, yes. She was nice, I liked her. But they all, they live in Hampstead, or something like that, it's very difficult to, to ... Roland Penrose used to live in Hampstead also, and it's a hell of a way to come from here, you see. So now, then he took, he took a flat just round the corner here, and we used to meet once a week, or once a fortnight, for lunch or something.

Had he changed as he got older, Roland Penrose?

No, I don't think he changed. He really hadn't changed at all. He still looked young and slim when he was older. I mean, he naturally, was a bit more paunchy here, and that sort of thing. He liked good food. But I sometimes see Tony Penrose, his son, but he's also got a farm, he's now got two farms. He's got Roland's, which he still keeps, you see, his father's, and he had his own, that Roland gave him when he became 21 or something.

But Roland's beliefs about art, stayed the same really?

Oh you bet he did. He didn't think there was anything else worth doing, you see. I mean, all artists are, to a certain extent, except a person like Norman Adams, who's an

RA, and whom I've met occasionally, they're really irreligious, because they, in a sense, that they believe art is a better thing than religion.

Do you have religious beliefs now?

No, I don't. I'm absolutely, I don't have any.

And the other place I wanted to talk to you about was Brittany, because that had such an effect on your work.

Yes, yes.

Can you say a bit about that?

Yes. Brittany was lovely. I don't know how we, well, we were staying very near where there was a sandy beach, and we used to bathe at Perros-Guirec, it was called, and it was only a bus ride, or something. And I'd heard about these fantastic stones, and when I saw them, I went to Brest, and got a camera, a Roliflex there, because somebody said afterwards, I didn't know it, they're very good shops in Brest for cameras, because the Navy get all their equipment, and they have to have very good cameras to make their naval records, you see. So it was just luck, I got a camera, a Roliflex, I just told a man, "I've never done any photography, but I'd like to do some, and I want the best camera you have, the lens." And they gave me this wonderful Roliflex. Well, they didn't give it to me, I had to pay for it, but I mean, I took all

those photographs with it, you see. I didn't even know, I still don't know how to develop or print.

So those particular rocks became very important didn't they?

Yes. I thought they were such natural things, and even the geologists didn't know how they got up 100 feet, they're up 100 feet above the shore, you see, and they say the sea wouldn't have been strong enough to, they're huge. Some of them can hold a house or a bus inside them, the curved ones.

The waves?

Yes.

And so how did you later use them, the photographs, in your work?

Well, I just more or less copied them. I thought, at first I did photographs, and then it took me a long time, I had got a sort of block in my, I couldn't work, I couldn't think of anything more to paint, you see, after I'd done all these paintings, and I thought, "Well, what about just painting the rocks instead of just having them as photographs?" And that's really why I did it. I don't think they're very serious art, because they're not inventive. It's not invented, and I like something that's inventive.

And Tenerife again, was another place?

Oh yes, that was lovely. That was lovely. It was getting away from the winter in England, you see, which was very cold in those days. And then this friend, she was really a physiotherapist, and I used to go and be massaged because I had a bad back or something, I don't know how it came about, but I crooked it somehow, and they gave me her address, a doctor did, he said, "She's very good", and on the floor while, on the wall, while she was giving me a massage on a table or a board or something, I saw this house, and I said, "That's a very nice looking house. Where did that come from?" She said, "Oh, I've just, my father just died, and I've inherited this place, and I go there sometimes in the winter." And later on, when she came to see me, we got friendly, and she said, "Would you like to come out?" And I said, "Well, I've got a husband, but if we can both come ...". And, oh, she was madly keen. And we used to pay seven guineas a week, or something, for both of us, for food and breakfast, and everything. It was marvellous.

And did the colours there change your work at all?

Yes, the colours were marvellous. Her garden, she had a lovely old house, which she'd inherited, it had belonged to her grandfather, or somebody. She'd done some alterations, and now, she didn't have a swimming pool then, but now she's even got a swimming pool. And

And that fed quite a lot of work didn't it?

Yes, yes, that's right. Oh, it was lovely, getting away from the winter. We said we'd only come for a, oh, three weeks, or a month, and we stayed about three months!

Until April, or something like that. And then we used to come back by banana boat, and all the bananas were green, you see. And bananas and tomatoes all over the place. Those are the two exports of the Canaries.

And did you have quite a long time when you couldn't paint, after Joseph died?

Yes, yes, that was very, I just felt I didn't want to do any more. Because he used to always look at it, and say whether there could be an improvement, or whether it was okay, leave it alone, you see.

Did you think he was right usually?

I think so, yes. He had a very good visual sense. He was a great friend of Oskar Kokoschka, and Hungarians have these Viennese habit of liking the arts, music and paintings, they all have far more galleries, had far more galleries than we had in London, then, you see. There were very few galleries. Now there are a lot, but there were very few then.

Did you meet Kokoschka?

Yes indeed I did. But it was very funny, because Joseph said he could hardly have enough money to buy a meal when he first met him, and when we went to see him, he was staying at the Hyde Park Hotel, in a lovely suite with his wife Nora, and they were as happy as anything. It looked, it looked over Hyde Park, you know, because you can have those. So it was all green, and he was very happy.

What got you painting again after Joseph's death?

Oh I don't know, I just was, I thought, "I must do something." And I'd always painted all my life, and so I, I, I started again, you see.

Was it very difficult to live on your own after that?

Yes it is. It was very difficult at first. Now I've got used to it. I, I just, my woman who comes and cleans, she says, "What a lot of books you have." I said, "Well, I'm all by myself, what else would I do unless I just sit and look at things?" you see.

Do you listen to the radio much?

No, hardly any, only if something is interesting me very much. But I like TV, I've got that. Not a very big one, but it's just big enough.

And you said in your book that you think your nature is split between pessimism and gaiety?

Yes, oh, did I? Oh well, it might be sometimes, but I'm not a very pessimistic person, I'm, on the whole, rather a happy person.

You didn't ever get hit by great depressions?

No, no, I don't think so. Once I, once or twice when Joseph died, I was very depressed, and that's terrible, because, you know, you have to get over it. You've got to face life alone, and you just do it.

And do you do any collage now?

Yes, some collage.

And one more very peculiar question, I was interested in what you feel about the Royal Family.

Oh, what did I say about the Royal Family, I can't even remember.

You mentioned enjoying the Coronation and going to a garden party.

Yes.

And I was quite surprised, I wondered what you thought about it all?

Yes, well, I think, on the whole, that if one, that if some people wanted to turn it into a republic, I think that is a pity, because I think it's a, it, look how they all cheer, it's all something that when the Horse Guards come out, and then the Royal Carriage comes out, it's a festival, and in England, it's rather a, in the winter, it's a gloomy place, and even in the summer, everybody goes abroad, so that it's a, it's a statement, which is a pity to be abolished, in other words. I think it is a good thing to have a

Royal Family, and Charles is very good, he tries to make the best of a rather rotten job, I should think! And I went to a garden party, yes, I was asked, and it was amazing, the size of the, of the lawn at the back of the Royal, of Buckingham Palace, which, by the way, Buckingham Palace was built for the Duke of Buckingham, as a town house! Did you know that? It's amazing. In the 17th, I don't know, the 1730s, or something. A marvellous town house. Anyhow, at the back of Buckingham Palace, it's the size of two or three football fields, it's all grass, and the Royal Tent is on one side on the right, and the common or garden people, at least they weren't really, women were terrifically dressed in wonderful huge hats, and, you know, as if it was a wedding or something like that, and men, all the men were in brown top hats, I've never seen a brown top hat before. Have you ever seen a brown top hat? Well, most of the men were in brown, and I thought, "Well, that's something, evidently they must have it specially for garden parties." I know, even Joseph had a top hat, but that was for the opera or something like that. It was different. But the Queen is not more than my size, she longed to be taller, but the Prince of Wales, the Princess of Wales, is very good looking, of course, beautifully, immaculately dressed. The Queen wasn't very well dressed. But it's very difficult when you're ... she had a silly little hat on.

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END OF INTERVIEW

