

IMPORTANT

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NATIONAL LIFE STORY COLLECTION

**Artists' Lives
ROBERT MEDLEY**
interviewed by
Andrew Lambirth

F4108 Side A

[Robert Medley talking to Andrew Lambirth on the 4th of May 1994.]

Robert, to start at the beginning, what sort of background were you brought up to? Was it an artistic one?

Well, yes of course it was an artistic one, of course it was, yes. My mother actually was a very good artist indeed, and she really ought to have made more of it out of her life, but unfortunately with six children she couldn't, because, she married my father when she was 22 I think, and my father was I think eight or nine, nine years or so older than she was, and he was a successful lawyer, a young successful lawyer, very successful indeed, with principally literary interests. And his ambition in life really was to have been a classical scholar; he was a very brilliant man in his own way. My grandparents on my father's side had really little money, because he was a non-conformist minister, and my grandmother didn't have much money, though she came from a rather aristocratic, or at any rate county family background much more. She was a Birrell and connected with the Greys, and that's where she was brought up. But my father was brought up a primitive Baptist you see, so, this was rather different. But when he was at Leys School he passed into Cambridge with a scholarship at the age of 16 having done everything, and then of course his parents couldn't afford to send him, and I think he felt this very much all his life I think.

Do you think it embittered him?

I don't think it embittered him exactly, but what it made him do, he wanted all his children to go to Cambridge and take Classics, because he wanted them all to have double firsts in Classics, and of course he was disappointed in the whole lot of us.

Did none of you do that?

None of us did, no. My elder brother really should have been an engineer but he had to go into the family business, into the law, and then my younger, Oliver, he went off into the Merchant Navy and then became a farmer in Rhodesia and finally came back here and made a rather successful farmer here. And he was always a problem boy. And then my next brother, Richard, of course, Father said he could have been a very good lawyer, had a good legal mind, but he really wanted to be a statistician, but anyway he died. And the war interrupted him, so that when he went to Cambridge he really wanted, he read mathematics and what he wanted to do was to be a statistician; he had a very accurate mind. Anyway, my father's

uncle, the Right Honourable Augustine Birrell of course was, he wrote belles-lettres as well as being Minister for Ireland for longer than anybody else ever. And he specialised in the law, and was a barrister in copyright, in fact it was really his, my father and my uncle, and my Uncle Austin, they really were engaged in copyright, because there was no copyright. And so my father was an authority in this of course, and through that, and of course because he was immensely well read, he knew all the great authors of the age, and that's why of course he left my father, George Moore left my father the copyright of all his books when he died.

I see.

And so did Granville Barker, which provided my father with quite a list. When Granville Barker died there was quite a handsome amount of money of course. But with George Moore it's been very useful, George Moore; you didn't make much out of George Moore for a number of years, and every now and again you got nothing at all, and sometimes £12. But recently there's been a slight revival, and so that's all right. They made a film of Esther Waters. But Granville Barker, directly his plays come on, all the remains of the family make quite a lot of money out of this, I'm glad to say; welcome little cheques of five or six hundred even come.

So you make money out of them?

Oh yes I do, because it's...

And George Moore still?

Yes. Oh no, George Moore has come to an end, and Granville Barker comes to an end in a year or two's time, so they're both practically at an end you see, it's 50 years. And all this, all the money has to be divided you see between my father's ultimate residuary legatees, which are first of all six children, and now of course I think four isn't it.

But to return just briefly to your mother, did she actually go to art school?

She went to a private studio, which was of course what girls did in those days. I can't remember the man, the name of the man who taught her unfortunately. He was a foreigner as far as I remember, and he was a very good teacher obviously, and one of the young people who used to go and teach there in the studios, which as far as I remember, my mother was saying, it was in that block of studios where Sandra Blow is now, you know, off, what's it called?

King's Road? The Fulham Road.

It's off the Fulham Road, that's right. And, you can see they're nice handsome studios, and he ran a class there, and one of the two teachers, young, was Augustus John, and my mother, she had a life drawing of hers in charcoal with a charcoal detail, or a pencil drawing, by Augustus John on the corner of it.

Great.

Anyway this teacher gave my mother a little oil painting of a model dressed as a monk, which was the kind of thing people did in those days for quick poses. It was really a very good painting, absolutely direct. And my mother had a very good true eye, and she had a very good instinct, she had a very good instinct as to what was a good painting and what was not. She knew exactly if one was telling a lie, or gingering things up or not; she had a beautiful eye, very good.

Did she give you encouragement or any kind of instruction?

She very sensibly didn't, but I was encouraged of course in a general kind of way. I mean for instance, I mean we all, all the children had a little paint, we all had little paint-boxes, and I had little...we had...I had a sketch-book. Oh yes she always provided me with a sketch-book and a few water-colours and a pencil. And of course at home, we had quite nice pictures at home, they bought C.J. Holmes and...

Who?

C.J. Holmes, Charles Holmes; he was Director of the National Gallery, and he was a very good water-colourist actually, sort of New English Art Club. And then they bought small pictures of a kind. And then of course there were Arundel prints.

What were they?

Arundel prints. It's a well-known...prints, sort of hand-done prints. They were, of Old Masters, even frescos and things like that. You'll have to look it up to decide what Arundel prints actually are, but they were very well-known, and they're unlike the kind of prints that you get nowadays.

They're copies, are they?

Yes, they're sort of hand-done copies really. And also she had drawings, my mother had drawings of Old Masters and things like that. I always remember we had a drawing by Leonardo da Vinci and a drawing by Raphael, portrait heads in both cases, hanging in the lavatory. And when I got to about the age of about 16 of course I had begun to understand what things were about, and it was very informative to sit on the loo with these two drawings in front of one, and one saw how much more natural in a way of course the Raphael drawing was and how much more extremely artificial and structured in a certain sense the Leonardo was. It's very curious, much more stylish somehow; there was a kind of frank acceptance in a way about the Raphael, which of course doesn't show in his great big paintings but, it's a well-known sort of, little portrait drawing they had of Raphael's. I can't remember off-hand who it's of.

In chalk or something?

Yes, in chalk, I think it was in chalk. But, very very...so that was interesting enough. And of course, what happened really was that, we went, we were taken to the museums but not all that amount to the National Gallery, that I really can't remember going, but I do remember when I was about 12 or 13 when I had my bicycle first I used to go off to the National Gallery by myself, and this was encouraged, do you see, this was not...you know, it was quite natural in a certain sense that I should do so. And my mother never told me what pictures, thank goodness neither of them told me what pictures I should look at.

So the idea was that you made your own mind up.

I made my own mind up. And of course naturally enough at that age, what I liked most were the primitives, and we took it from there.

So who would you have been looking at?

Oh, well, I remember all the little Duccios and things like that, and Botticelli and Verrocchio, and what primitives they had in those days, the National Gallery. They had quite a number, but of course not as many as they have now. I can't remember in detail. And the other thing about the National Gallery in those days was, it was a very different kettle of fish from what it is now. Perhaps I should enlarge on that a bit. Well the walls, this would be, when would it be, probably during the First World War I should think, when I was...yes, it was...that would be the time when I first had a bike. And of course the National Gallery wasn't redecorated

until after the war, which I can tell you about too. It was very dark, that's the first thing about it as a whole, because all the walls were covered with Lincrusta.

What's that?

Well Lincrusta was a slightly embossed facsimile paper, it's an embossed paper, and they were most...and it was embossed in of course high Renaissance brocade patterns, I mean such as we use still of course. But they were painted as a whole rather dark brown, and then touched up with bits of gold leaf a little bit, gold paint, you know. That was my memory of it, and most of the rooms were more or less the same colour. And there were numbers of pictures which were in the gallery; they had some of the Wertheim pictures were there, and there was a portrait of a man called Sir Henry Thomson who was a vague relation of the Medleys, one of the Medleys having married Sir Henry Thompson, into Sir Henry Thompson's family, who was a famous surgeon who operated on various people including King Leopold of the Belgians for stone. And he was the person who pioneered through the Houses of Parliament cremation. It took him years to get this through, to get people to accept that idea, and they did, and so there's a little bust of him when you go to Golders Green. I shan't be able to see it I hope next time I go to Golders Green! (laughs) Unless I get myself burnt up somewhere else. And there was a portrait of him by, oh what's his name, Sir Frank Holls was it, Sir Frank...I'll remember sooner or later.

OK.

Perhaps I ought just to have a.....[BREAK IN RECORDING] I don't know why the pictures were there. And there was also Sargents, as well as the Wertheims there was, Sargent's Lord Ribblesdale was there, and I think a lot of those pictures got there because they were probably sent temporarily housed during the war there. And so it was roughly the primitives and up to Botticelli that I first liked. And then, as I say, I wasn't told but I was always, my mother always encouraged me to draw; she knew instinctively, she knew perfectly well that I was not going to be cut out to be a classical scholar, though curiously enough I think I might have been quite good at it.

Well you've always been interested in history, haven't you.

Yes. And always interested in history. Of course I get that largely through my father as well.

Did he read...?

He read everything.

Literature and everything that...?

Oh yes, yes, everything. My cousin Francis Birrell, who ran a bookshop with Bunny Garnett said of course my father was the best-read man he had ever known, and if you wanted to know about an obscure English novel you only had to ask my father to find that he had read it, not only read it but remembered it as well. And he had a large library, and we weren't sort of hampered in this kind of way at all.

But he also read history.

Yes, well he gave me, when I was run over at the age of 14½ he gave me Trevelyan's 'History of the Italian Risorgimento' to read, a nice two or three volume book. And of course he judged me quite right, because I read it with total fascination.

And you have devoured history ever since.

Yes, well I've always liked history, and he used to take us round City churches and things like that on Sundays, so I got to know architecturally quite a bit. And as I say, my mother was really a very good painter, and my mother's family of course were much more well-off people than my father's side of the family, then they went bankrupt.

Could you describe them? That's the Owens isn't it?

That's the Owens, yes. Well, my grandmother was, my grandfather I really know very little about, because he died when I was...oh, about three or four years after he went bankrupt, so I don't really remember him very well, but he was a nice gentle man. I think the force of character was ultimately of course my grandmother. They lived in Holland Park, next-door, rather next-door to where Dufferin and Ava live now, in one of those nice double-fronted Victorian Regency houses, big house they lived in down there. And my mother when she was a girl she used to go round, because there was a big artistic colony there as you know, and opposite there lived one of the Ionides girls who was married to a man called Praise[ph], and so, on my father's and on my mother's side there was a considerable number of people, like the Ionides, you know, who is a great collector, Victorian collector; the Emmanuels, the Armadies[ph] and these rich Greek merchants, who played a very important part in the cultural lifetime there. And my mother used to go, she told me that she used to go on Sundays sometimes to Watts' studio in Holland Park of course, and she was very funny about

this, it was typical of my mother, she said, 'You know, it was really rather awful, because,' she said, 'he always dressed up to look like Titian, and he was always surrounded by large numbers of other females,' and my mother as a whole didn't get along very well with other women, as a whole, she preferred...she always wanted boys instead of daughters in the family I think really. I'll tell you about that later, because it's funny. And she said, 'You know, the awful thing you see, I felt it was all a complete fraud.' (laughs) You know, she was absolutely right. And so... As I say she painted the little picture there, that's up there, you know, it's a nice, very modest little picture that people do notice.

Can you describe it for the tape, because they can't see it.

Well it's a rather dark picture of the dining room in the house in which I was born, which was number 11 Edith Grove, Chelsea, and, it's quite impossible for anyone to live there now of course, on account of the traffic, but of course a number of people have lived in Edith Grove.

What sort of style is the picture painted in?

Oh, what style is the picture? Very difficult to say. It's a kind of monochrome impressionism, to put it that way. It's practically a monochrome picture, but very very truthful in tone, she had a wonderful sense of value. And it's nothing but a table with a little, one little sort of flower on it, and a bit of the sideboard which we always had, and curtain, and a small view out of the dining room window on to the back garden in Edith Grove, which was not exactly a really inspiring sight in any case, but it's a very nice picture.

Well structured?

Very well, yes. And of course she did this other drawing which I've also got, which is a wonderful drawing I think, a really good drawing, of a ruined old pier at Walberswick, which doesn't exist any more, because it's crumbled into the mud. And it really, it's a drawing which somebody like Jongkind could well have been proud of. She was enormously conscientious, she could handle these things with great delicacy, and it's a very beautiful drawing, very attentive.

Wasn't that where Steer used to go?

Steer used to go there. I think that's partly why my grandmother and my grandfather, when he went bankrupt, why they went there. And then, they were one of the first people I think, or only about the second or third people, who actually built themselves little houses down there,

rather than just going down there for the holidays and renting, or going, you know, renting rooms in the village.

Would Steer have been part of their circle, do you think?

I don't think, not at that time, not at that time. But of course when my father, I suppose really at the time that I was born, not fully, though my father, I don't think my father probably knew George Moore as early as that. But of course when George Moore and my father, because my father went to deal as a lawyer, a legal adviser for George over all his publications, books, and George had a great respect for my father simply as a person obviously and for his extraordinary knowledge and understanding of what people were trying to do when they wrote, you know, as a writer. And of course this brought him directly into touch with D.S. McColl, and of course with all that circle, and inevitably with Steer. And then my mother's sister, she married a Slade student, and they lived in Golders Green near the McColls, so that I would say that they probably didn't know Steer personally until later on. But it wasn't part of my background when I grew up at all.

I was going to ask you whether your father knowing people like Noël Coward and the Maughams and all those people, whether that had helped you in any way in the beginning of your career.

Oh not really, no. My father kept his professional friends extremely separate. My father, he was a very strange man; he used to come home from the office and immediately shut himself up in the library pretty well. And though George...I suppose my mother must have met George on a number of occasions, but I can't remember that, but then of course there was no reason why I would because I should be [INAUDIBLE] at that time. But, Granville Barker she did a great deal, because they went down and stayed with the Barkers a lot, but as a whole my father kept things very removed. But of course these interests spread over into both their lives, and my father was obviously very much in love with my mother when they got married, because she provided an intuitive side which he hadn't allowed himself ever properly to enjoy I suspect, and I think he probably found her extremely valuable. And so, that was it. And when, my earliest sort of memories where...because we didn't live in Edith Grove...I was only there six months when then they moved, and they moved to Camden Hill Square, top house, number 42 Camden Hill Square, and I remember before the war my mother, really she was obviously a very pretty young woman because one used to lean over the bannisters when they were all dressed up to go out for the evening or people came to dinner, and, you know, with all their smart dresses on and everything else. Because of course my father was an extremely promising young lawyer, and obviously with a future, and so they behaved very much like a

newly-married, prosperous, well-found professional family. And then of course disaster struck, because - two disasters struck, because my mother...well my grandfather's thing was not important except that they left, had to leave London. He was on the Stock Exchange and he got involved with one of these kind of periodical scandals that ail the City. He put a lot of money, like a great many people did, it ruined quite a large number of families actually this did, the usual business of putting money into, I think it was the man who was building the London tubes to start off with, it was something like that. Anyway, I'm a bit obscure about that; my brother said it wasn't, but I understood from my father that it was. But anyway, it was one of these big ambitious projects, and of course the man who was financing it found that he was running short of money, as usual these things costing more than what was anticipated, and so he did the usual thing, he issued shares, printed shares without any backing, and then of course a couple of years afterwards went bankrupt, and ruined a large number of people including my grandfather, who had to leave the big house in Holland...Villas Road, which I didn't remember, because all this happened in about 1907 I think. Because in 1919 they had already built themselves a very charming little kind of Voysey garden suburb villa for themselves with a nice garden in Walberswick, where they retired, and my grandfather spent his time in his little den translating Icelandic fairy stories, and my grandmother directed the garden. He died, and then my grandmother became a kind of uncrowned queen of Walberswick. (laughs) Absolutely, she always behaved as if she was the Lady Owen, which she would have dearly loved to have been.

What about the other grandfather, the Baptist minister, did you see much of him?

Oh yes I remember him quite well, because...I remember him quite well. He was a very nice man, but even as a small boy it had leaked through that the really clever one of that pair of course was again my grandmother! (laughs) The Medleys had a kind of gift of marrying women much cleverer than themselves actually.

Well you didn't.

No I didn't, no. No I don't suppose in our generation any of them did actually.

But in the past they...

Yes they seemed to have done that. Thinking really back to the family tree which goes back to the middle of the 13th century, or the middle of the 14th century, about 1380, and earlier than that, about 1280, the family fortunes seem to have been founded on the Medleys marrying into a very well-off family of landowners from about 1280.

Very sensible.

It was very sensible. And the elder branch of that family, the elder branch of the Medleys, he went up to London and did very well for himself, and one of his descendants became...the Goldsmiths Company and married the daughter of the Lord Mayor of London, and in the end bought a huge estate for himself at Buxted down in East Sussex - West Sussex really it is.

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Well I would really say roughly that I suppose the Medley side of grandparents, they were typical Victorians really, but my grandmother Birrell was an extremely intelligent woman, and, funny thing, two brothers married two sisters, and the Birrells, they were a Scots family, and, I don't really know much about my great-grandfather Birrell except that he appears always to have led an extremely kind of leisurely life.

A certain amount of money there.

There was a certain amount of money knocking about there, because he seemed to move from one sort of journey to another, and slightly hypochondriac, but could move about the place quite a lot. And the children were extremely well brought up, those Birrell children. I suppose I'm talking about Augustine Birrell's father. Yes, they had of course, now I remember from his biography, little biographical notes which are published, a very good little book actually, and it's a fascinating book. They were brought up in Edinburgh in some considerable style, and of course they went to private tutors, and my grandmother, those two girls could read Greek at about the age of seven or eight; I mean, it was that kind of family. And of course their ancestors again had been again ministers, but one of them had been the first moderator of the Church of Scotland, I mean it was a substantial, substantial upper-middle-class professional family, with surgeons and doctors and that kind of thing. And one of them must have...because their cousin was John Grey Dilston, who was a cousin of Earl Grey do you see, and Dilston is just outside Newcastle, and my grandmother was brought up largely there in company with very distinguished people like Elizabeth Garrett Anderson and various social reformers. So that there was a great deal of what you would call...though my grandmother really, she thought that it was totally emotionless, too barbaric, she didn't like that part of the Baptist thing and in the end, so she wouldn't have much to do with that. And of course also she had various High Church connections as well, people who knew Browning and all those kind of circles, do you see what I mean? So that there was a strong political and literary side.

Quite forward-thinking.

Forward-thinking. My grandmother was certainly thinking, and a lot of them were forward-thinking, and liberal do you see. So, her brother do you see, Augustine Birrell, who was Minister of Education, who passed a mutilated Education Bill, unfortunately because the bishops opposed it like mad and ruined the whole thing, but what he actually did do, he made primary school teaching not...he made it non vocational, or non authoritarian, otherwise it had

been totally in charge of the Church of England, and he made it open to everybody, which was an enormous achievement actually. And of course when he was the Chief Secretary for Ireland, he is remembered in Ireland with affection because he fought hard for the foundation of the universities in Ireland as well. So in that way he was...it was a forward-thinking, liberal family, non-conformist, which is properly in the right tradition, and as I say with a strong literary slant, whereas my mother had a very strong visual slant in the family; that existed with, she was one of four daughters but that existed. They were a very musical and very artistic family, but musical and literary, though there was music again on my father's side. And of course my great-great-grandfather Medley had been a painter, and when I was 20, on my 21st birthday my grandfather Medley gave me his grandfather's, or his great-grandfather's, his grandfather's - I never remember how many greats there are involved with this - ticket of admission to the Royal Academy Schools, signed by Opie, who was his tutor.

Gracious.

That was in 1791, Opie was his tutor, and of course they went, he studied in Somerset House.

Do you still have it?

Yes I've got it, I've got it here. And, he wasn't a very good painter.

You don't have any of his paintings?

No, I haven't got any of his paintings; my brothers have some of his paintings, Christopher had most of them. They're not very good really, but he painted a rather smashing self-portrait of himself making himself really rather good-looking, and he painted a number of things. He had a small reputation, he had a reputation in his day, but he retired from painting at the age of about 45 because he said the smell of oil paint was making him feel unwell, which is possibly true. And he also, like a lot of painters of that time, he ran a print shop just near where the Bank of England is now, and what I have got is some of the prints and little drawings that he collected, which my grandfather kept. Anyway, he gave up the shop and went and retired down to Gravesend or somewhere down there, I think, I'm always told it was outside Gravesend, and having made enough money to retire, you know, quite nice dear. And so, as I say it was politics and literature on my father's side, which, we used to down...he retired and bought a little villa down in Barrowgate Road, Chiswick.

This is your father?

Yes, with my grandfather Medley, they bought a house down there in Barrowgate Road, which is behind Turnham Green and the church there. And we used to go there on Sundays, and we lay on the floor and read old 'Punch's' and were allowed to burn incense in little pots, some Japanese and Chinese pots which came through one of my uncles who, he taught English in Japan. And the conversation was always politics, which absorbed them do you see. I mean after all they were distant cousins of the Foreign Secretary, and my uncle was a Cabinet Minister, so you can see what...

What was his name? Sorry, what was his name?

Who?

Your uncle.

My uncle was the Right Honourable Augustine Birrell.

Oh of course, yes, I'm sorry, I thought...and who was the Foreign Minister then?

The Foreign Minister was Lord Grey, Earl Grey of Fallodon. He was then Sir Edward Grey, he was only elevated to the peerage after that. So that you can imagine with that, with the world war coming along, in other words from 1908 to 1914, and from 1909 when, I would remember there were things going on there. It used to bore my mother to tears, absolutely bored her to tears. So I think perhaps enough about my grandparents.

But you have inherited that interest in politics yourself, haven't you.

Oh it's very difficult to avoid it; if you were really involved with the Thirties it's very difficult not to get involved with something one way or another. I'm not involved with abstract politics, but you can't afford to live without a sense of a social responsibility, and this question of social responsibility of course was very much to the foreground of the later Victorians. I mean they were...they really, if you look at 'The Times' in those days, there's small print, 'Proceedings of the House of Commons', every single day it repeated, and put down there in full, and complete reviews on artistic things. It was a different world altogether. And you see on my mother's side there was this interest in sort of William Morris and dress reform and all that kind of thing, in fact I've got these Morris chairs that belonged to my grandmother, she bought those when they moved from their grand house to the Voysey villa which they lived in - it wasn't by Voysey but it was in that style, garden suburb style.

Do those chairs have a name as a style?

Well they were bought from William Morris's shop.

I just wondered if they were called anything.

No, no they're not called anything. No they're black ebonised wood.

With a rush seat?

With...it had a rush seat, it had flat-rush seats, wild rushes, not this sort of rather corded stuff which, because you can't get the other stuff now any more. Anyway that rotted up of course naturally enough, and the chairs were not very substantially made then. They're jolly pretty to look at but William Morris always said, well if you want to be comfortable you go to bed.

(laughs)

So what about yourself, when did you get the first intimations that you wanted to be an artist, a painter?

Oh, well not, do you see, for quite a long... Really when I went to public school. What happened was, when I left preparatory school which, I hated my prep school, that was a very good school and seemed to have suited my brothers but I disliked it very much, I think partly because my younger brother, who I didn't like, was sent there as well, and it was very awkward being together, and I was sent there when, my elder brother was about three years older than me. So when I went to prep school, this prep school near Swanage, a very well-known prep school down there run by Pellitt, and this was the junior Pellitt school called Alemalt House, run by people called Corbin. Naturally it was based, preparing people basically for places like Marlborough and the Navy, military and the navy and Winchester and that kind of thing, and anyway I didn't...it was very awkward and I didn't really like it. The war came on, and my younger brother was allowed to take drawing lessons and I wasn't, and pieces of things which I really don't understand why, I don't think so, but... I was allowed to go on with my music, from a funny woman, but that was...

Did you want to have drawing lessons?

Yes, I was very annoyed about it underneath. And also, I didn't like all the boys, all this mud-slinging and running around. I hated cricket, that bored me like anything. And, I liked drawing rather, and anyway I always had my sketch-books which were provided. I've got

little drawings still that I did when I was in my prep school. And the war was on, and there was no...there was no cultural life in the school of a kind that appealed to me. I can't tell you more than that, because I think I was not fully aware of what I was missing, but I knew that I was missing something and that made me dislike the school. And there was a certain atmosphere I suppose about the whole institution that I didn't like, though my elder brother adored it, and so did my younger brother who went into... But they were great different temperaments both of them from me.

Why didn't you get on with him, the younger one?

Oh I hated him right from the moment he was born. He was a delicate child and was always spoilt.

You were jealous of him?

Oh enormously jealous, and Oliver admitted to me - by the way we're enormous friends now, we're devoted to each other - but in those days it was really awful. And Oliver said to me not so long ago, he said, 'I was really an absolutely horrible little boy.' I said, 'My God, you bloody well were!' He used to sit on my toys and do things like that, and then couldn't be moved. You know, not the kind...he's only about 18 months younger than me so that you can see that there was every reason to dislike him. And all the governesses and nurses, except for an old nurse who was a gem but she had left, but some of the nurses that we had, they took to Oliver who was a raging little blond you see and supposed to be very delicate, whereas he was as strong as a horse. (laughs) They used to take him down...when we went out we used sometimes to stop at a very nice cake shop in Holland Walk, just leading on to Kensington Gardens, Church Street, and she used to go in, this woman, she was a German governess actually, I hated her of course, she used to buy some nice little cakes with icing and things and all that, and give those to Oliver and give me a plain biscuit. So that you can see there was no reason why I should like Oliver at all. (laughs) And then...what?

So after that school, which you didn't like...

Yes, and my brother went to Bradfield you see, which was a classical school, you know, in order really to fulfil my father's ambitions, because the school, you know, they run it to this day, they have a Greek play in the summer, in Greek and all that kind of thing, so this was to be a classical school for Christopher. But of course Christopher was not interested in classical schools, he should have been a...he should have been an engineer, and he was particularly fascinated of course with motor cars. And his interest in motor cars was more

than amateur, I mean later on in life; I mean he was basically of course amateur, but he would, you know, he even once drove a racing car around Brooklands. I mean he was serious about these things, but of course not allowed to do it. Anyway, he did very well in law.

No I was just wondering...

So when I left my preparatory school, there had been a slight little difficulty with some affairs with little boys together, of a most innocent kind actually, and my parents reacted I think as intelligent people, and liberal people, extraordinarily, in a way in which no parent would react nowadays. One was given a book to read where it tells you that if you masturbate you inevitably went mad, you know, it was like that, you know. So anyway, so there was a slight cloud hanging around. I mean, I wasn't sort of too upset really about it, but then the question was, what was to be done with me, do you see, and the war was just finished, and then my father had taken me out for very, what was to me a terribly grim walk in Kensington Gardens. I think I described all this in my book, so I won't go through it again. So I went, I applied to join the Navy and got turned down, naturally enough thank goodness, and so then I went to, I was sent to Gresham's School, really entirely through my mother. My elder brother who is three years older than me, he said that my mother always supported me enormously, which I didn't know, because actually they behaved always with incredible equitable fairness between all the children, there was never a trace of preferences, but apparently when it came to going to a public school, having failed the Navy, she was not going to have me go to a classical school to be forced into that, and so I was sent to the Gresham's, which was a modern school, it was like a Bryanston of its day; it wasn't as advanced at Bedales, but it was...

Single sex?

It was single sex, whereas Bedales was both of course. So I went to Gresham's, and it was really at Gresham's that things really began to take shape. And then mercifully, or luckily, I got run over, and really injured really badly in my left arm and all over the place, and had to...I missed six months or more of schooling and was sent down to...after I was discharged from the hospital in London, I was sent down to recuperate with my Pilkington relations, because - that's the glassworks, outside St. Helens at Rainhill. And what St. Helens had you see, the glassworks, they had an extremely up-to-date orthopaedic department in the works which they had developed during the war, because during the war they took soldiers in, do you see, with mutilated limbs and all those kind of problems do you see, and into an orthopaedic, small orthopaedic hospital which they built up there, which was of course also part of dealing with industrial accidents anyhow, which they have to deal with with heavy industries. And they were very...of course they were tremendous people, and there was a very

good Scottish surgeon there, and the masseurs and machinery for doing exercises, so I went down there. And it was there, and then with six months living amongst, and with adults instead of bloody little school-children of my own age. I didn't miss them at all by the way. Well one was kept on one's toes intellectually, and also one had to behave properly because one was a guest in the house, and my aunt was an absolutely, was a very good musician actually, she should have been a professional pianist, my Aunt Medley who married Cecil Pilkington. And Cecil of course was, he had never wanted to go into the glassworks for one thing, he wanted to be a geologist, and the result, one of his elder brothers died and he was summoned back in that patriarchal way that things were done in those days. And they lived in a vast house in neo-Gothic style in red Chester stone at Rainhill which is now a lunatic asylum, and, they never wanted to live in a great big place like that; it fascinated us as children of course, because it had a Gothic tower which appeared to be enormous, which was really quite small when I saw it when I was grown-up, but... And the great gardens there, and...

Did you go on visits there at Christmas or holidays?

Oh yes, oh well I had been down there before because as children we used to go down there for holidays, and for Christmas holidays we used to go down there, because my uncle had 32 first cousins, so as you can imagine, there were rather large children's parties every Christmas. And, oh we went to all sorts of concerts. My uncle was intellectually a very fascinating man, very very. They were tremendously strict. I mean, I would say that intellectually they were pretty well as exacting as those Darwin families and Wedgwoods; I mean the Pilkingtons made their name as glass manufacturers on that industrial wave just about the beginning, the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. I don't know when the Pilkington glassworks started, but they were big landowners really, and engineers, in Manchester of course, and ultimately of course in St. Helens with this big glassworks. And it was there that I had really...they finished off for me the germs of the kind of education and everything that I had at home, after all, let's face it, because, I mean you know... And my father was very exacting like that, and of course both sides of the family, all those Victorians had a great sense of social responsibility.

But why painting rather than music for instance?

I don't know. Well first of all I had got run over so that I couldn't play the cello any more, which I didn't mind very much because I always thought that was rather a difficult instrument to play and a very lonely business, practising on the cello for a child. You have to be really devoted to it. And also I liked painting, and I was allowed a wall to paint on, a decoration.

There was a small cupboard there, an airing cupboard somewhere, or a disused airing cupboard next door to the bathroom or something, a disused bathroom. It was a huge place. I was allowed to paint that, so I did it in a very solemn way, because one of the things that they had that was wonderful in there, because my aunt had a big collection of Japanese prints for one thing, and also they were keen on old English water-colours, not very adventurous taste, but they had enormous numbers of a magazine called 'Bibby's Annual'. Now 'Bibby's Annual' was a typical late Victorian, Edwardian philanthropic product produced by presumably Bibby's shipping line. But it contained a considerable art section with articles about Blake and people like that, and so my first influence was probably William Blake and the Pre-Raphaelites, and all the pictures that one saw in the Liverpool art collection. So, needless to say, fired by Blake and Raphael, I started a huge composition which was about the size of, half the size of this picture I should think.

Which is what, about 40 by 50?

Which was about 40 by 50, yes, roughly about 40 by 50 - no perhaps not as large as that, which was called 'The River of Life'. It was a kind of John Donne and people crossing a river; it never got very far. And then of course I got interested in literature, and with the usual adolescent bad taste I suddenly took to the poems of Alfred Noyes, which wasn't exactly my fault, because my father, he was one of my father's clients. And of course I read, I read a great deal, because I always had read a great deal; I used, when we were in Campden Hill I used to go around the second-hand bookshops and buy second-hand books. And so, anyway the other one, Alfred Noyes had written a huge poem all about Drake, an epic, patriotic poem which was published I suppose during the war, and I took to this, so that the next one was less elaborate, because it only involved a cliff and some green grass at the top with Darien, sitting on his peak in Darien. So that was my first, what you call public displays of art. And then at Gresham's of course we had a very good art mistress called Miss Bristow. Miss Bristow had been to Cambridge and she had been to the Slade, and she belonged to that generation of Frances Cornford and all those early educational women like Mrs Hubbard who ran Morley College. And Miss Bristow was a great friend of Frances Cornford at Cambridge do you see, and she was the only woman on the staff at Gresham's, and, I mean she really, she was very gentle and very sweet and very, didn't like teaching the school at all or being the only woman there where she was obviously not treated with very much respect obviously, in the broad way. But she was an extremely good teacher, and she and I got on very well. And the other students there, or student there who I always remember was Kit Nicholson, Ben Nicholson's younger brother, who became an architect, and there used to be a group of us that used to go and work. And that's really where, then I decided I wanted to be an artist when I was, I would say, 15½, 16, and certainly very positively by the time I was 16. By the time I was 16 I was

determined to do it. And then of course there was a slight amount of trouble, but I was allowed to become an artist, and as I had decided, having come back from the Pilkingtons, that the school wasn't teaching me anything very much, and I got bored with that, so that my... I behaved really rather badly quite frankly, I must have behaved rather badly. But very sensibly, again it was partly through my mother, and my father realised there was no good forcing me, and through a friend of theirs, F. Ernest Jackson, a well-known art teacher from Byam Shaws and everywhere, and a good lithographer and print-maker, and a very nice man, and through F. Ernest Jackson I was taken to see him, and then I was allowed, he said I had enough talent to be allowed to go to an art school, I was allowed to leave for art school actually on my 17th birthday.

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Jackson taught at the Byam Shaw school, in fact in the end he became of course a partner and ran it. He was...to start with, well he painted in tempera, and his style of drawing was founded on the quattrocento. He was a Yorkshireman, and extremely intelligent and a very charismatic teacher, and a very nice man. Anyway he had been a great friend of my father's, and of my mother's of course, but he became a friend of my father's because he was one of the foremost members of a magazine called 'Imprint'. Now 'Imprint' was a magazine that dealt with the graphic arts and printing, and so it had people like Pennell and other well-known...and, oh, another name gone. [BREAK IN RECORDING] Jackson as I say had this 'Imprint' thing, and he also taught at the Central School, and my mother used to go when she could from time to time to the Central School for kind of evening class, but of course was unable, family claims, to, you know, make anything of it. But they were great friends of Ernest Jackson, so naturally enough I was taken to him to have a professional opinion as to whether, you know, it was worthwhile my going to an art school. He said yes, and so I was naturally enough sent to the Byam Shaw school, which was filled in those days with girls waiting to be married very largely and some...

A kind of finishing school?

A kind of finishing school really, but it was very well run. As I say he was a very good teacher, and he produced quite a number of well-known people, influenced quite a lot of people, Phillips, a man called Phillips who has got a portrait in the Tate Gallery.

What did he teach primarily, was it drawing or was it painting?

It was primarily drawing, and as I say he had this quattrocento thing. We started with this other man whose name I have forgotten but who really was a very very nice man indeed, and who was interesting because he had lent his studio to, as I say to Van Gogh when they were young in Paris, and when he came back he found all the walls scrawled over with drawings by Van Gogh.

Not Hartrick?

Hartrick, yes, Hartrick, A.S. Hartrick, that's who it was. And so that was that kind of immediate ambience. And then, having got on to this age do you see, now the National Gallery was completely different because C.J. Holmes, who, we bought his water-colours, who was also a painter, who was now the Director of the National Gallery, he tore all the

Lincrusta off the walls, and as there was no money for redecoration it was all done in this new medium called distemper. So if he couldn't actually remove the Lincrusta he could at any rate distemper all over it, which in some cases he obviously must have done, and he painted them in beautiful garden suburb and impressionist colours do you see, white, pale grey, pale daffodil yellow, like probably...he would know all about what Monet was having. And of course, the National Gallery was absolutely totally revived, and all the stuffiness was gone, and he used to go round the place in a nice white overall, and every now and again if a picture was getting a little dirty or he felt wanted attention, he used to climb a ladder himself and wash it all over himself, you know, very nice, very different. And there used to be people copying in there in those days; I never got on well copying in the National Gallery but that's neither here nor there.

Did they have an artists' day still?

No no, no.

Wasn't it founded there, an artists' day, when it was founded, the National?

They may have done but there was no artists' day. There was no artist-in-residence.

No.

But, it was much more, there were many more students copying there than there are now, and of course the same thing at the Louvre, there are too many people about the place. And anyhow, the National Gallery was always too clean and prissy in some kind of way. I maybe was not very good at doing anything like that, but anyway that was it.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

So, I thought I would ask you, Robert, something about the sort of financial circumstances that you were growing up in.

Oh, yes. Well as I said we started off when I was small, I remember in Campden Hill Square as I've described, everything appeared to be set fair so far as I could see for a successful young lawyer's career, you know, proper upper-middle-class do you see. And then of course the war started, and my father was put into great troubles, which I did refer to a little while back but didn't finish the thought off, that, during the war I noticed that everything was getting increasingly shabby you see, and I thought that this was due naturally enough to the

war, but it wasn't until after the war, until quite a long time afterwards, because my father never talked about it, that the reason was not that at all, but that the senior partner of the firm had been embezzling large sums of clients' money, and though he was a rich man and lived on the Thames, by the Thames at Maidenhead or Henley, somewhere like that and was an expert sculler, he was suddenly found drowned in the Thames with his boat floating, his shell floating about on the flood, do you see. And of course my father said nobody would believe that an expert oarsman, who is taking a morning row for himself, turns his boat upside-down and gets drowned. And he said really, it was awful because there could have been a great scandal about this. But fortunately, he said, the war was declared practically at the same time, so they were able to keep it out of the press because it was swamped by this news. And my father and the then senior manager who became the senior partner of the firm, Mr Emery, they simply decided that they would have to pay off the debts, and the reason we had no money was because...and it wasn't finally cleared up for about another fifteen years when my father had finally cleared the debts of the thousands of pounds which he made himself liable for.

Was it all down to him, was he the only other partner involved, or what?

He was the only partner involved, he was the senior partner. It's not worthwhile naming the people or anything about that, but it's easily done. But it was typical of my father, he said, 'You know I really don't know how I brought you all up.' But we were all well brought up as I said, I went to Gresham's and Christopher went to Bradfield and everything. But I had often wondered that, during the war, and wondered afterwards why my father wouldn't give us things that other children, our equals, were getting. You know, I had great difficulty in getting a bicycle and finally I was given one by an uncle, a not very expensive one, and I remember feeling quite hurt about that, but of course, now I understand the reason perfectly well.

Did those straitened circumstances affect you much though, do you think?

It didn't affect me at all, but it's just a background which I thought was worth mentioning because it's linked up with the whole question of social responsibility and work ethic which belonged to that generation. And also it explains quite a lot of other things as well in an odd kind of way. And in a certain sense it was easy for us, because my mother had very good ideas about education. For instance when we were six or seven she went and got us all taught elementary carpentry. Every Saturday morning for about six months, or more, there came a very nice man called Mr Hicks who told us how to saw, to put in screws, hammer nails in, sharpen implements, and we had elementary carpentry, we had to do elementary carpentry, and it stuck to me all my life. And I think this is part of the reason also why she was keen

that I should go to Gresham's instead of having a classical education, and also while I was in hospital, though my father provided me with literature to read, which was absolutely essential because I was lying flat on my back for two months, she provided me with Vasari's 'Lives of the Painters' and the illustrated Royal Academy magazines and things like that. And there also came to the hospital a painter, a rather monstrous character actually, but he was the first...in a certain sense he made a big impression upon me as a painter, and I think secretly I made up my mind that that was what I wanted to do. And of course going to Pilkington, the Pilkingtons at Rainhill, I mean was an intellectual education as well as an artistic one.

Who was this painter that came to the hospital?

Oh I can't remember who he was at all. He was woman-obsessed, he kept on talking about a painting by Titian that it was the living flesh. Well, being a little schoolboy at about 14 and a big prudish I was a bit shocked.

But he was a professional?

Oh yes, he was a professional. Do you see there are lots of artists who lived just round behind the West London Hospital in Hammersmith Road, all round those areas behind there around Earl's Court and Olympia, and he was one of those many dubious artists. He probably made an awful living painting absolutely beastly portraits. But anyway he was obsessed with art, that was the great thing, and so with the illustrated books which were bought he launched forth into these things about the living flesh, which particularly struck me for some reason or other, which rather upset me.

Did he wear a beret?

No I don't think so.

But your mother must have paid him to come in to teach you.

No no, he was in the hospital as a patient. I'm sorry, he was in the hospital as a patient, so this was a gratuitous event. Anyway there's nothing like being flat on your back for two months to make you think, and then of course I was another four or five months with my relations in St. Helens at Rainhill, and by that time I was completely back. And then of course I arrived back at the school where I found Wystan Auden do you see, and that sort of completed one's education in a funny kind of way.

He was younger than you?

Oh yes he was younger than me, he was just, nearly two years younger I think, about 18 months younger. I forgot the details.

And how did you meet?

Largely I think through his determination actually. We met in a very peculiar way. There was a society called the Sociological Society which we all took, those of us who were sociologically inclined, including my actual best friend at that time, Mervin Roberts, who was, I'll tell you a little bit about him later, we all belonged to this. And a trip was arranged to Norwich to visit a boot and shoe factory. I don't remember the factory very much at all, and I only have the vaguest memory actually of the bus journey, except that Wystan apparently said that he had been absolutely determined to sit next door to me, which he succeeded in doing. And, we were in different houses of course, so there was no reason why I should have known him at all, except vaguely, you know, just by sight; I wouldn't hardly know his name possibly, having been away from school. And then he said, we arranged to go out for walks in the woods on Sunday or Saturday afternoons, which we were allowed to do. They were very good like that, or we could go for long bicycle rides. And then I discovered of course that he was in a way far cleverer than I was, and was extremely critical of the school as well, and was a lot...you know, really very extraordinary character. And so, then I had been sort of writing poetry with my other friend Mervin Roberts. In that extraordinary way I'd refused to be confirmed, because I had been reading Prince Kropotkin and all those kind of people, and I remember Galsworthy's 'Strife' and bits of Bernard Shaw, so I was not going to be confirmed there, you know. And so, and said no to that, which upset my mother, it upset people - I had no idea I was upsetting them a bit, it just seemed to me a perfectly normal thing to do, particularly in this school where one was supposed to do that kind of thing, but one never was allowed to in actual fact. But anyway, so I was in a position do you see of always, when I went to the school first of all, with music like that, I naturally enjoyed singing in the choir and was very determined to sing in the choir and proceeded to do so as long as I could, until my voice was obviously not going to stand it any more. And so, I was devoted to church services and to Gregorian plainsong, and also with Mervin we decided to form a society called the...oh I can't remember, it wasn't the St. Cecilia Society but some other society of this kind, kind of Pre-Raphaelite sacred thing for the propagation of beauty and social responsibility. All this was going on at the same time as not being confirmed, and what had surprised me of course, that about the second or third walk that we went when we had been discussing this question, I had asked him whether he wrote poetry and he said he didn't, he hadn't, and then I launched forth on my other more, obviously more social views, and started to make fun of the Church

do you see, whereupon Wystan was deeply shocked. And I was totally surprised that any intelligent boy should not share my scepticism about the Church, and that was very very interesting and of course gives one a big permanent insight into Wystan's later career as well. Because of course his mother do you see was extremely High Church Anglican, as indeed were all the [INAUDIBLE] that side of the family. It was as a result of that, and not meeting Wystan until I had come back from being away from the school and was already getting along towards being, well I was already 15 just about, within a few months I was going to be 15 - 15, yes, that's right, and...or really, I think I was a bit over 15, because that's the reason why in a certain sense the most interesting part of my relations with Wystan of course took place not at Gresham's so much as subsequently after I had left, and when we had to meet only during the holidays when he used to come and stay with us, and vice versa, and by the letters that Wystan wrote with all his juvenile poems as well, which fell to pieces in my pockets. He wrote very very very long letters in handwriting which was already extremely difficult to read, and the handwriting of a super-intelligent literary.

What were those early poems like?

Oh, well the real fun of it is, there was one early poem that has cropped up at one of the Bicknells[ph]. One of his mother's family, Catherine Bicknell[ph], who wrote, who has written a study of Wystan's early poems, she had to come to me to ask whether, for verification, and of course hadn't got them. But what was amusing, there was a copy of a poem that I had written. (laughs)

What, that Wystan had kept?

Yes - well no, it was published in the Gresham magazine, 'The Grasshopper', and I think at that time I published a poem in 'The Grasshopper' and the next one, I've never kept them of course, the copies of 'The Grasshopper', dull little school magazine as it was. Anyway it was edited by John Hayward, you know, the well-known bibliophile, and...

A friend of Eliot wasn't he?

A friend of Eliot's, yes. And it was edited by John, and all those people I continued to know of course after I left Gresham. So I met a lot of people at Gresham's which I knew throughout my life. So, anyway, this one turned up, so I said no, it wasn't by Wystan at all, it was by me. Because when you printed things in the Gresham, they didn't necessarily name who it was, and I looked, and I think mine is un-named, and I think the first one, Wystan's you see is un-

named, so it was easy enough to make this confusion, and it's quite possible that Wystan kept it and thought years afterwards that he had written it as well.

How funny.

Because I happen to know absolutely it was, because I had great difficulty with the last lines, two lines, which was influenced by W.H. Davies and was not the kind of poem that Wystan would write at all, and I had great difficulty in finishing it off. And I always disliked those last two lines and there they were staring me in the face years afterwards.

How serious were you about poetry? Because I know you wrote some later in the war.

Yes yes I know. I was never really very serious about poetry, except, you know, one was frightfully neurotic at this adolescent stage, and I think sexually I was a slow developer, and of course one was enormously repressed, particularly at Gresham's where they had the honour system which was abominable, which Wystan went into with great detail. He always referred to his school days at Gresham's, that he knew now what a Nazi concentration camp was like, which is a bit over-stating it, but he wrote that many years...you know, like a concentration camp in I think the 'Old School Tie', which was edited by Graham Greene or somebody, at any rate it was called 'Old School Tie' and it was reminiscences of people at school, and that's what he said in that, it came out just after the war.

This was the honour system being the idea that you informed on your friends.

Well the honour system you sneaked on your friends, and it was really a very vicious affair. And that undoubtedly delayed my development a great deal. But Wystan, do you see, was already, knew perfectly well how he was sexually orientated, right from the word...

Even though he...

Yes, he said, he realised that when he was about eight or nine, I mean there was no...he had never really had any doubt about it. But he did suffer from a bad conscience about it, but he knew. And of course, after I left school he had to develop various new sexual affairs after that, but the affair with me was, at school it was...you know, I don't suppose anything ever got consummated properly at school anyhow. But he became quite outrageous afterwards when he was still at school and come to London, he used to go off to Piccadilly Circus and he said, 'Oh I'm going to meet a young poet,' I can't remember his name, who published some of Wystan's early poems in a magazine of public school verse. I can't remember - Davidson his

name was. And he said, 'I'm going off to see this young poet who is going to print one of my poems.' Wystan I suppose was about 16 or 17 at the time. 'I'm meeting him at Piccadilly Circus. He's mad on one of the page-boys at the Trocadero, do you see.' (laughs)

So could you say that in a way it was quite one-sided, your part of your relationship, because...

Yes it was...I'm afraid it was extremely one-sided indeed, and I behaved very badly to Wystan because I thought I was perfectly normal. And also, you know, having been in a slight spot of trouble before in this schoolboy, even at the prep school, and I say, with the climate of, the prejudice of everybody. And then of course, it was perhaps rather a good thing in a way that nothing did happen at school, because when his father, when I was staying down there, which is recounted in my book, discovered one of Wystan's erotic poems addressed to me, which I hadn't realised were exactly erotic, you know what I mean, I simply thought it was a poem, and we were then taken to task you see. And this was altogether a very funny occasion which we both laughed about afterwards, but it was a little bit unnerving obviously for both of us at the time. So, but we were able to answer perfectly truthfully that it was purely platonic, which was probably a very useful thing for both of us in actual fact.

But did you think...

And it wasn't until about the year after that that I started to change my mind as you might say. And then of course I was never actually sexually attracted to Wystan, so, but it was impossible, once one knew Wystan, not to fall for this extraordinary vitality and extraordinary intelligence, and a kind of, extraordinary charisma that this boy, this very pink boy who, one of the other schoolboys that I wrote to when I was writing my autobiography, asked them what they remembered, they said, 'He was pink like a little pig.' You know what I mean? And then, from the photographs afterwards everyone said how good-looking he was. Well of course I had never really felt that myself at all. But he had this enormous...and he was a fascinating, totally charismatic character, and as one knows from the effect that he had on his contemporaries at Oxford, when he developed all kinds of deliberate eccentricities as well of course.

But to go back to his poems, I mean what did you think about them at the time, do you remember?

Oh I remember thinking that some of them were very good. When I read some of the earlier ones you can see that the personality is there, but like a lot of very early works, there was one

that I read from the Gresham's magazine which this Catherine Bicknall[ph] sent me which was plainly one of Wystan's, it was really a very bad poem, but my one was really better than that. The only thing is that his was a really ambitious poem, you know what I mean? There was a real endeavour to use language. I didn't do that, I was simply writing, 'Have we got time to stand and stare,' you know, that kind of quatrain, that was all I could really get to. And if I tried to branch out into anything better than that I knew at that age that, even at that age, that this wouldn't do, you know. And with a passion for Blake at that time I was not so much...oh no, but Wystan's was a real literary work, and of course while at school there was one of the masters there who was the classics master who encouraged him a lot, and you know, and there was another master there who helped him as well. But he was very lonely at the school in the end. And so that, and so really, the relationship didn't really take place until I was at Byam Shaw really. And I didn't realise that I was beginning to be...not until, oh, 1924/25, till '25 basically, and then I gradually realised first of all that I wasn't getting on very well with the girls, and could never get to bed with any of them, where all my friends were having nice jolly old time, and then I tried, and I did exactly what you would expect, I decided to fall in love with a girl who was quite plainly untouchable, you know, and ended up by making advances to my own sex, with a very good-looking boy at the Slade, very good-looking. And anyway, he was definitely not gay, and never was gay, but he didn't turn me down absolutely flat off. And eventually I fell violently in love, or imagined I was, with Stephen Tomlin, who was one of Lytton Strachey's boyfriends, which, so you can see how all this life all ties itself together, because... I realised after a year at Byam Shaw that they had taught me everything that I wanted, and actually things that I wanted to be able to do which Jackson, was not within Jackson's range to teach me. For instance he had a very stylized way of drawing whereas I thought one ought to draw in a more kind of, the manner that there was at the Slade or something, more realistically or something of that kind, that I didn't want the art hype that went along with Jackson's rather, because he was again a charismatic man. So then I was sent to the Royal Academy Schools where Jackson still was in charge of drawing. Now this was where my mother made a mistake. She thought that it would be...I told her I wanted to go to the Slade, and I wasn't...they said no, you had better go to the Royal Academy Schools. Of course it had to be a help for them at that time of course because I went there free of charge. But I tried to go to the Royal College but of course they wouldn't have me, though my parents knew Rothenstein, William Rothenstein, because of course it was a State school and I came from parents who could afford, so, I didn't go there, so I went to the Royal Academy Schools and I thought it was absolutely awful, and my mother wouldn't allow me to go to the Slade right away because she thought I was too young, and those wicked girls at the Slade would seduce me. (laughs) It's quite funny really isn't it.

End of F4109 Side A

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I wanted to ask you Robert about the RA Schools, whether you thought they were any good.

Oh, well yes. Well now the thing was, anyway I was sent to the RA Schools, because obviously I was not going to, I was going to be still looked after by F.E. Jackson. The thing is that though I had told my parents a bit of what I felt about Jackson's teaching, as they were one of his great friends it was all a bit tricky you see. So, anyway I went to the Academy Schools for, I think for the whole of six months, and it was absolutely horrible. Anybody going round the RA Schools now they wouldn't know it as what it was then; it was extremely gloomy and dark. Nowadays when I go round it seems to be quite light, in spite of the fact that of course the Academy Schools are sandwiched between the high wall of the Royal Academy and the equally high wall of the Museum of Mankind, and so it's at the bottom of a pit really of course which does make it extremely dark, and of course I was there basically over the winter months; I didn't get to the Slade till the summer term the following year. And it was absolutely awful. So, however, I made two friends there. Well perhaps I ought to say a little bit more about the School - well no, I met two friends there who, one, Augustus John's son Edwin was there, and he was quite a sophisticated young man, and very amusing, and he had a rather, what do you call it, not horror-comic, that's not the word I'm wanting, but, black comedy. He had a kind of black comedy sense of humour which was rather good under those circumstances. And the other one was Morland Lewis who was a little Welshman, and really rather a good painter. And we all disliked being there very much. And Morland left at the same time as I left, and I don't know what happened to Edwin, I suppose he stuck it out for a bit more. But anyway, Morland left at the same time as I did, and very sensibly he became an assistant to Walter Sickert, and he became quite well-known. A very very nice man from a Welsh village, and actually from a very clever family. And he painted little, small pictures is what he was good at, small pictures, a bit Sickertian.

Interiors or landscapes?

Mostly townscapes and small landscapes, kind of pochade size which he did very well. And he gave me an account of squaring up for Sickert's very large pictures, because he was painting large pictures like the portrait of Gwen Ffrancon-Davies, he squared all that up and he had to put in the undercoating paint. And it all had to be done extremely accurately and he had a lot of, you know, he had a good way of painting himself afterwards, Morland did, very nice man. And the other man, well Edwin as I say had this kind of black comedy humour which rather suited us all, and of course we were all waiting for Augustus John to come in and teach us, but Augustus never of course got further than the Café Royal, so he never

turned up. So the only... The Keeper, Charles Sims, was really a very nice man, a very sweet man, and highly cultured, and really, he was awfully good but somehow he didn't sort of push his weight about at all, and it's only afterwards I discovered from Kenneth Clark's autobiography, because he had had his portrait painted as a small boy by Sims, that Sims had said to him that he only wished that he could paint like Cézanne. But you would never think that anybody who painted Sims' pictures could have such a thought in his mind. But the person who was really, the only person who was really good there who I got to like very much was George Clausen. Really, you know, he gave one a feeling of being an artist. Otherwise there were nameless kind of portrait painters who could paint the buttons in the right tone on things: it was dreadful, oh I can't tell you how dreadful it was. But Clausen was very good, I liked him very much. He always went round rather like Steer at the Slade who did the same thing, only Clausen smoked Gold Flake and Steer usually smoked Players; in other words they went around with a box of 50 in their pockets, if not 100.

Proper smokers.

Proper smokers. And taught, and did talk to one not as a teacher but as an artist, you know, which is what one wants from a place like that, and what students get nowadays, and of course the whole place is painted white. And there was this gloomy corridor with all the antiques down it, which it still has but, I don't know whether there are more or less of them, but it was cluttered all up, which was interesting enough, but very very dark. And it was hung with a whole line of little pictures 20 x 30, standard size, for some kind of summer competition that they had for a composition on a set subject, usually biblical. Dreadful. In monochrome, it had to be painted in monochrome. So those were all two deep all the way down that corridor as well, all these dark sepia paintings. Really dreadful pictures, except one which I've always remembered though I don't remember the subject of it particularly but I remember it was a painting that I thought, one painting was any good and that was by Solomon J. Solomon, which wasn't a bad shot actually. So, finally after a disgruntled time at the Academy Schools I escaped from that moribund institution. I've forgotten who was the president, I'm always forgetting the name of the president at that time, but he was the worst painter that there's ever been in the Royal Academy, and was succeeded by Llewellyn, who did as little as he possibly could to rescue or do anything about Epstein statues, and you wouldn't know the Royal Academy then from what it is now. It's now become after all let's face it probably one of the most important art institutions, and certainly the most important arts institution in the country, apart from the big international collections like the National Gallery and the Tate I suppose really, as well as running a school and running a very good school. Different worlds, totally different worlds. So I arrived at the Slade where I was welcomed as a kind of a sheep from the fold, and also Jackson had taught me to draw rather

well from the nude, and so, that was all right, so, I started off at the Slade very well, and the end of the first term, the summer term, I was given a second prize, I think it was second prize, or was it honours? No, I think it was...something of that kind, for my life drawing, bang off do you see.

How did you get in in the first place? Was there a kind of...?

Oh yes, I went to Tonks and showed him my stuff do you see.

Simple as that?

As simple as that. And there...it was as simple as that, and Tonks was, oh he was a great character, but really not a very good teacher let's face it, in many ways, though some there[??] were very good. And...

You were saying he was not a good teacher?

Oh well, not from the point, as far as I was concerned. He was both rigorous and not rigorous enough, it was quite interesting. And the other teacher there who a lot of people got quite a lot from was Wilson Steer. You either got a lot from Wilson Steer or you didn't, I didn't. And, he used to come round and sort of say nothing really. Actually that was usually, he never really did say anything, but obviously he did drop the useful word to one or two students, but he never dropped a useful word into my eager little ear, as I struggled with an early life painting. And then I painted rather a good composition during the summer for the summer composition, which was...I thought I was painting something like Gertler and Seurat, and it was a view of the back gardens of the houses opposite in Belsize Park Gardens, with a figure in it, there had to be a figure in it you see, being in the Slade. And that caused for a moment quite a disturbance, because a lot of the students thought I ought to have had the prize, and of course I didn't, I didn't get anything at all. And so, so then I was of course ripe for rebellion all round, and this was of course in tune with the times; it was the times when significant form was coming out, and Henry Moore, older than me of course, already leaving the Royal College, which he did in the most graceful way by...standing in as a part-time teacher in the Sculpture Department, because Willy Rothenstein didn't particularly like Henry Moore's work at that time, and he saw that he had somebody of quality. And there was great enmity of course always between the Slade and the Royal College at that time, which was quite silly, but there was. It was wonderful. And of course, Bloomsbury disliked the Slade very much, and of course one of the people who, because they backed Cézanne, and the Ebury Street set of Sickert, Steer, D.S. McColl, and George Moore, of course, they didn't,

because they thought it was Degas and Manet - Monet rather, do you see. So Cézanne, they would go round and round crying 'Cézanna, Cézanna of the highest'. And meanwhile John Strachey, who had been sent from Gordon Square, from the heart of Bloomsbury to the Slade, who was a bit of a problem boy at the time, because, anyway, the nearest art school that they could send him to was the Slade, and he was living with his grandmother, Lady Strachey, in Gordon Square.

Why was he a bit of a problem?

Oh, well this really does come into a bit of Strachey history. He was a bit of a problem because his father you see was dead, and his mother was not really capable of looking after him, and actually she, poor dear, went a little bit dotty in the end, and she was living in a big hotel in South Kensington, and her background, do you see, was the British Raj in India with forty servants and she couldn't make, she had difficulties with life. So, both John and his elder brother, John Strachey and, oh...wrote several books, awfully nice man, elder brother, they were really, their life was directed and helped by the grandmother, and of course by Pippa Strachey who looked after all the Stracheys. And so, whereas...it's stupid, his name will come back to me, because of course I know him terribly well, but.....[BREAK IN RECORDING] The other person...well...so...

So you had...

It was an interesting period at the Slade, because people like Tom Monnington and Allan Gwynne-Jones[ph], all those people who had come to the Slade immediately after the war, were still either at the Slade or had only left, you know, two or three years before I arrived. You see the war finished 1919 and I went there in 1924, so you know, there was... And there was a feeling all the way round of changing things, and this change showed itself in the Royal College with Henry Moore and Pitchforth and the Coxons and various other people who went off and worked very largely and owed a lot to Leon Underwood's studio. So in the same way at the Slade, I thought that the Slade was not giving me everything that I wanted, and so I went to the Westminster School for evening classes, and to the Central School in Southampton Row, where Bernard Meninsky and William Roberts taught.

Who taught at Westminster?

Oh, oh that Sickertian type.

Man or woman?

Man. Name forgotten. Not a very important artist now, any more, but it was another place. And at the Slade there was also Middleton Murry's younger brother, who, a very very nice boy, older than me, and a very good painter who was the kind of sage, and like a lot of sages he didn't make it in the end, and I don't know why because he had a lot of talent and a good mind, but ultimately he became librarian at the Central School, and was very happy doing that. I suppose he had this literary strain in him. And also at the School was Richard Carline, from the war, whose elder brother was Sidney Carline, and they were living with their mother in Hampstead in Downshire Hill. So basically what happened was that between being at Bloomsbury, and by the time I got to 1925 I had made some kind...anyway, been to the same parties with and seen, and in many cases talked to, practically every painter of any note, except for Wyndham Lewis.

Did you ever meet Lewis?

Not properly no. Of course I met Wyndham Lewis along with Kathleen Raine, he came round to Kathleen Raine's parties when he was already getting very very blind, and the savage tiger was no longer there.

A bit more of a pussy-cat.

Yes, yes. Rather a sweet man who had to be looked after; he was dying really, and he was really practically blind.

So you had these different circles then; you had the Carlines...

Yes the Carlines were the Hampstead circle, which included people like, well, Stanley Spencer. And Stanley Spencer was really perhaps almost my first celebrated artist that I knew before I had got to know Duncan Grant, Vanessa and that whole Bloomsbury galère.

So were you closer initially then to the Carline group?

No, I don't want to be put into any groups like that, because it doesn't really make sense. I was not in any group like that. But there were interesting people. And the other person in the Carline, Hampstead group was a man called John Woods, John Wood.

Who was he?

Nobody knows anything about him. He had a lot of, quite a lot of money, and he had been at Cambridge, and...oh yes... He was a very very interesting man indeed. He wrote a really rather, a good book, a novel he wrote about a painter, one of the few good books about a painter I've ever read, and I can't remember the title. I have a copy somewhere, or had one. But he supported and helped Stanley Spencer and everybody that he could, and he was a great friend of the Carlines, and through Richard Carline and a man called Hartley[ph] who was a funny character at the Slade, we all got to know John Wood who had a house at the bottom of Haverstock Hill, Roslyn...Haverstock Hill, near Chalk Farm. And he was an éminence grise, that's the only way of describing him. He was teaching himself to paint, he was learning everything, he was rather an expert on Persian art. He had been brought up in some kind of Plymouth Brother background and was a bit screwed up, and he wasn't a great success with the girls, which we used to tease him around a little bit, people did. But he decided he ought to overcome his inhibitions, because he used to be at all the parties, indeed I think he largely sponsored all the big parties in Hampstead in the Carline studio in Downshire Hill. He took to learning ballroom dancing, and being John Wood, of course took it extremely seriously, got a proper teacher from the Finsbury Palais de Danse, and proceeded to go on after eighteen months of ballroom dancing in the Palais de Danses to win a ballroom prize of international dancing, ballroom dancing, in Berlin. But much more importantly, he had this collection of pictures. He was the first Englishman to buy a Kandinsky, that's, the first Kandinsky I ever saw was at John Wood's in his house near Chalk Farm Station.

What else did he have?

What else did he have? I can't remember any other pictures he had, except he had a random collection of things. And of course Stanley Spencer. But what also he did, when he was at Cambridge he had started to collect pictures there, and was a friend of Cockerell's, I think his name was Cockerell, who was the director of the Fitzwilliam at that time. And at the beginning of the war, and being a sort of Quaker or Plymouth Brother or something he was a kind of conscientious objector, so during the war I think, I don't know what he did, something, like my cousin I suppose who, you know, with the Red Cross, or, they had to do something, and there was no question of John...he would have been a hopeless soldier in any case, I suspect, except he was...I shouldn't think he was lacking in courage, or moral courage in any kind of way, but... In Paris he had seen, obviously at Vollard's or some place, the big Cézanne nude painting that we have now in the National Gallery.

'Bathers'?

The big 'Bathers'. And he wrote to Cockerell and said, 'You can buy this picture for, I think £1,000 or £2,000, and you ought to have it.' And they didn't. (laughs) So they had to pay several, a couple of million for it later on. But he was a very interesting man, and he had an eye. He used to be fascinating to meet actually, because I would always meet him, and all through my life I used to meet him wandering around the museums, and it was he who pointed out to me that the Wilton diptych was originally shown flat; it's now shown as it was meant to do, folded, to stand, folded, partly folded. And he showed me on a postcard that if you folded it, then the two groups make optical sense as well. So I was fascinated by this, and Kenneth Clark do you see, who I knew at the time, I said to Jas, I think, you know, 'Haven't you written to Kenneth Clark about it?' 'Oh no I can't...' You know, he was like that. So I thought I would. Well I must say, honourably I did say that it was Wood's idea. James Wood it was, sorry not John, it's James; I know a John Wood as well, it's James Wood. And Kenneth Clark listened quite intelligently, but never did it, for reasons which I could not understand, and it's only been done quite recently that it's been properly shown. And then, later on I discovered, later on in life, oh, shortly before he died he took to the habit of going round the British Museum Egyptian department, he evidently got very fascinated with this, and he told Harold Jones the director of the Egyptian part, he said, 'You know, that piece, you ought to do something about that.' They hadn't ever noticed it before, and now it's in a prime position, some head. But you see, he had that kind of eye and mind, an absolutely very good mind indeed. And he married Elizabeth Robertson, who had been married before that to Humphrey Slater, who was, there was Humphrey Slater and myself and John Strachey who regarded ourselves as the kind of three musketeers at the Slade, and John Strachey of course... Humphrey Slater, who was very good-looking, and also that he was descended from Sarah Siddons and so he always wore a black ribbon round his throat instead of a tie, looking very fetching, he married Elizabeth Robertson, and then when he became a Communist and left Elizabeth, James, Jas Wood finally married Elizabeth, and took on Humphrey's two children who were called Vladimir after Lenin, and something else, I can't remember who the daughter was named after, and looked after...she was a very sweet woman, but a bit scatty. She was one of the belles of the ball at the Slade, naturally enough there was a whole tribe of belles of the ball, including Esme Rudd who married John Strachey's elder brother.

So how much were you seeing of the Strachey family? I mean is that how you...?

Oh more or less every night I had...every day I was round at 52 Gordon Square. Sometimes dinner, but just in for tea, or something of that kind, but certainly dinner two or three times a week I should think for about, about a year, twice a week I should think for a year. And then John had a nervous breakdown and my mother took him home to our home in Belsize Park. So it was very close.

And did you begin to meet the painters through him then?

Yes. I didn't meet the painters through Francis Birrell because Francis Birrell of course was literary primarily. But, oh no, I met them through...I met the painters through...inevitably one would meet the painters under those circumstances, you couldn't help it you know. But I didn't rush, I wasn't rushed off at once to Duncan's studio or anything of that kind. I think the first time one really came in to Duncan and Vanessa's sphere was when Lytton wrote a play called, was it called 'The Dowager Empress' or something? It was about the Dowager Empress of China. Oh, 'The Son of Heaven', can't remember what it was called but you will find it in any Lytton Strachey book. It may be mentioned in my autobiography but I don't know. Anyway, so I and John and my elder brother Christopher were dragged in on to this, do you see, to play the part of three eunuchs in attendance on the chief eunuch who was a well-known don from Cambridge, and the cast was largely amateur, and the producer was Alec Penrose who had been the producer of...at Cambridge, the Cambridge amateur dramatics at Cambridge, the Dramatic Society or whatever it's called.

Was he a relation of Roland?

Yes, brother.

Older brother?

Older brother, yes. And, the thing was that the play was put on at the Scala as a Sunday performance, or two Sunday performances, to raise money for Pippa's and...with the women's service thing that she ran with Marjory Fry and Ray Strachey in Marsham Street which monitored the goings-on in Parliament, it was to raise money for that. And Duncan designed the settings and the costumes, which were absolutely delicious, it was, you know, quite up Duncan's street. So needless to say John and I were immediately seized upon again to boil size and generally help on that operation, and that's the first time I really got to know Duncan. And then after that I had to paint the whole of the interior stairs at 52 Gordon Square, which was, as you know, bloody high houses as you know, and you couldn't reach up to the ceiling of the staircases except on a broom about ten-foot long, which had to be French grey on a receipt provided by Duncan. And it all had to be boiled up, lumps of size had to be melted down, and then balls of chalk had to be scraped down into this bucket, and then you had to put so much ultramarine blue, so much black, a touch of umber and a bit of raw sienna or yellow ochre, and a bit of something else. Then of course it was impossible to keep this huge mixture constant from one bucket to the next. And anyway, I said I would do it, they said

would I do it for £5 and I, of course £5 was quite a lot of money in those days, but they realised that I was being grossly underpaid at 5 and gave me 10, by the time I got down to the hall. It really was a ghastly business, it's very funny actually.

But was the play the first sort of brush with the theatre that you had then, doing Lytton's play?

Yes, yes apart from the school play. I wouldn't say it was a great theatrical event for me.

No, but because it was involved with Duncan it must have been quite...

Oh yes, that was a big event. And then of course, then really for the next two or three years, you know, right up until the early Thirties, the early Thirties, I assisted Duncan and Vanessa on a number of projects. I was surprised when I looked through the details of some kind of, which cropped up when I was writing my book, how much I had done for them, and for such a long time.

What sort of things would they have been?

Oh well, I had to...the idea of, there used to be a Danish firm called Cozy Stove, the director of which was a man called Fiedler[ph] in London, a rather large, big Dane, who had the very good idea of having this cast iron stove, why not produce a model which had tiles round it like proper Continental stoves? So, and that this should be decorated by Duncan.

End of F4109 Side B

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So, Duncan and I went off to see Mr Fiedler[ph] and... There was a standard Cozy Stove, which is well-known, just a metal thing about this high; would I design this thing. And it had to be done according to certain principles which were enunciated by Mr Fiedler[ph]. First of all, do you see, you can't clamp the tiles on to the Cozy Stove itself, it had to be a separate case, first of all, and then of course it had to have...it couldn't be completely so to speak a great big solid affair, because it had to be a commercial thing, so the idea was to thread the tiles with, they had loops, each tile was to be made with a loop at the back, two loops, to be threaded on metal rods do you see, and then workmen could then easily assemble that with a bit of cement in everybody's house without any difficulty. So, anyway my job was simply to design the look of the exterior of the stove. Well knowing Duncan's work very well by then, I gave him this kind of shape which, easy to decorate in the kind that he would like. And I designed rather a good, very simple stove, that was fine. So then the tiles were all made and Duncan and I went down to a potter that he had in the Isle of Dogs actually, somewhere down there, and we went down there and duly painted all these tiles, and that was all fun. And then of course, what happened was that the tiles were then fired, and the typical kind of Bloomsbury misfortune happened, of course that somehow the mixture hadn't been right and a lot of the tiles didn't come out, didn't fire too well. I mean they were all right, it was very arty, artistic in a certain sense, but like a lot of Bloomsbury art then, the way they painted things, there was a kind of slightly haphazard thing about it. And of course the other haphazard thing that happened was that in the baking of the tiles, of course the flanges at the back through which the rods were to go got out of alignment. Now this stove was supposed to be launched at a new industrial arts fair at the Victoria & Albert Museum. Well what happened was, then it became a disastrous thing because what were they to do? There was no way in which this stove was going to be shown except to do exactly what it was designed to avoid, it had to be built solid, you know, as though it was mounted and built solid like tiles properly do you see. And, it went on exhibit at the Victoria & Albert Museum. Anyway I was paid by a free, being given a free Cozy Stove, which stood me in good stead for many years I may say, that did. And the stove now is in the Victoria & Albert Museum, and I've got photographs of it, and that's where it is. But, I did that, and I did various other jobs.

Would they mostly have been applied art, like interior design or something like that?

Yes, all of them, all of them like that.

So you wouldn't have assisted in a painting for instance?

No, no, only assisted as a model. Rupert and I assisted as models for a big bathing picture that he had, but I think it's now in Australia.

Not that one of the diving figure? No that's not, that's something else.

I don't know which, well not a very...I don't care for the picture very much, I never did. But anyway, so, it was a very large and ambitious Duncan which he worked very hard at, and Rupert and I used to pose for that, because very few models would pose in with another model naked do you see, so, without any clothes on. And so what we used to do, we used to draw Rupert and then Duncan would draw Rupert and I, and then I would draw Rupert and we all ended up by drawing each other, all of which was great fun and interesting. And we did pictures of Rupert in costume and things like that. In that case, so to speak, I did work along with Duncan in the studio.

Did you pick up quite a lot...?

But at that time, at that time...I didn't pick up much, because this would be, oh, about 19...oh no, wait a minute, no, do you see it would be much earlier than...I think '29, '30, '29/30, some time like that. And already do you see that, I was interested in...I had been to Paris, you know, and so I was able to put Duncan a little bit in perspective for myself, and that was more or less the period too when Rupert and I wrote to Duncan and said, telling him that he ought to leave Bloomsbury for a year or two and go back to Paris and work on his own and do something lighter, which we thought more... And then the letter got intercepted by Vanessa, and so we were in disgrace for a couple of years.

We ought to back-track slightly I think though, because, I know you don't particularly want to talk about the Slade, but there's one or two people there that you knew.

Oh yes. Oh yes, and there were other people that I knew. I referred to what, the shape of my going around to other schools, and the fact that really the Slade was very good, because one wasted an enormous amount of time there, because there was John and Humphrey and I, who were after all quite bright boys, and of course the other bright boys were Rex Whistler, Oliver Messel, and David Tennant.

Stephen.

Stephen Tennant, sorry, Stephen Tennant. And we used to gossip for hours on the steps outside of the Slade. Well, Oliver rehearsed, he was always very amusing and a very good

mimic, in fact he eventually appeared in one of Cochran's reviews doing one of his things, doing a lady giving a lantern-slide talk to her girlfriends after a trip to Egypt or something of that kind, it was very funny. All that was...so we had a very good time there. And of course they moved in a very smart set, you know, the Duff Coopers, you know, and, the smart end. You see the thing is that Tonks was a terrific snob, very wisely, he was a terrific snob, because he thought that the poor artists, what they need is rich girls to marry and rich patrons to buy their pictures, and as he enjoyed that kind of Mayfair company himself very much, and in fact it was always rumoured that he was out to dinner in Mayfair every night of the week, which was obviously plainly untrue, but anyway, because sometimes he must have gone round to George Moore's as well. So, that was the haute société end which slightly crossed ours from time to time. And...oh yes, oh it's all getting too complicated, there are too many memories dear.

Did it take up a lot of your energy, all that social whirl?

Oh, yes, a lot, but it's part of growing up. And of course Oliver Messel at that time, when he was a student at the Slade, he was also employed by Diaghilev to make the mask for Braque's setting for his ballet, 'Zéphyr et Flore'. So you know, this is quite something you know.

And the Ballets Russes were in London and you were going...

Oh yes, yes, yes absolutely. Well I've said that, the whole thing was that all the art students in London from all the schools, whether they had anything...they spent their evenings in the gallery of the Coliseum during the season, three-week season or month season that the Diaghilev company were there. Because there you could see an original Picasso, not one of the little reproductions one bought at Zwemmers. And of course I came unstuck at the Slade by, instead of doing a composition I did a terrible, very plebeian still life in the manner of Derain, which led to an explosion on Tonks's part; in fact having been the golden boy, after that practically, literally I would say wouldn't speak to me. However, we all made it up afterwards when we met at George Moore's play at the Arts Theatre as it then was years and years later, some years later. He played the last of the 'Essenes'.

Can you tell me something about the effects that going to the Ballets Russes must have had on you as an artist?

Well for me very considerable, and I think probably for nearly everybody who saw it, because visually do you see it was something that we hadn't ever seen before, I mean, and also of course some of the dancers, like Karsavina and Ivsikovsky[ph], Massine, Sokolova. But you

know, it was...you know, it was quite something. Because after all they were great dancers, particularly of course, particularly I suppose really Karsavina who, I mean she was not perhaps as technically perfect as Pavlova or Kressinskaya, or Krasinska[ph] or whatever her name is, or Spessivtseva, but she was a great artist you know. It wasn't a question of doing 52 grand-jetés, you know - not grand grand-jeté, what's it called...?

[INAUDIBLE].

What? Oh those things that, they twiddle around all the time. Anyway, it doesn't matter. It's not a question of that at all; it was just her presence and her style, this tremendous style throughout; everything that was done had such style to it. And after all, and then you could see designs by Picasso, Utrillo, everybody do you see. And for The 'Train Bleu' you see, Picasso painted the cloth and worked on painting the cloth himself.

Which one was that?

The 'Train Blue', you know, the three great figures running across - oh no it's two figures, isn't it, running across the... It was the drop curtain. It belongs now to a theatre museum looking rather pale and altered.

But were you seeing other paintings, modern paintings, elsewhere, perhaps at Clive Bell's house?

Oh, I was going to say, I've been meaning to mention that do you see. I also luckily with Clive do you see, Clive Bell had Picassos and Matisses and Derains in his house, and Roger of course had a bit of everything, and of course his collection is now at the Courtauld so that you can see exactly what he had. I mean there were Rouaults, those very nice early Rouault water-colours, you know, the small ones like that, that Picasso and Roger liked very much; in fact, and he had Vuillard, Bonnard, you know... He also had a Cézanne of course, that marvellous portrait, self-portrait, which is now in the National Gallery. And he had a Seurat. You know, so I was very privileged in that way not only to see those things but to talk.

Would he describe them, go through them with you?

Oh yes, yes. Oh yes I remember Roger Fry saying, 'You see the thing is Robert you see, every other blade of grass is red,' you know, in front of the Seurat, which is a large green field with poppies in it. In actual fact it's quite true as a matter of fact. And then he had Picasso as

well, but talking about...he always, he was very suspicious of Picasso as being superficial and rhetorical.

This is Roger Fry?

Yes, Roger was, he was a bit suspicious, in the same way as he was suspicious of Turner as being rhetorical, whereas Constable wasn't. I think it was the Quaker part of Roger coming out, because when I went to Paris, as I'll tell you, the first time I went, the people who knocked me silly of course were the enormous Delacroix's. I mean, 'Les Femmes d'Alger' was an absolute revelation, and, however I was told that I ought to copy Poussin, so in the end I did.

I remember you saying that Ingres was very popular at that time.

Oh Ingres was enormously popular; I mean Matthew Smith copied Ingres.

Something you wouldn't necessarily imagine.

Something which you wouldn't necessarily imagine at all. It's a very good copy too as you know, it's a well-known picture his copy of Ingres, and I remember seeing that as a small boy, because, I suppose the first painter I ever met, because Matthew Smith married one of my mother's girlfriends at the art school that she went to, at the studios in the Fulham Road, and it was the first year of the war, so I would have been 8½ to 9. We were living, when we took our little farm house down in the country for the summer holidays, not very far from Littlehampton, where Matthew and his wife also were living at that time, and she had just, they had just had their first baby, a little boy. And anyway, we went over in a dog-cart to see them, my mother and I, and I think, I don't know, probably Christopher went too, so I think there must have been three in this terrible donkey-cart, but we got there all right. And I remember more or less all the pictures on the wall in the dining room, it's very very odd, children do that kind of thing. I wouldn't go and swear now that that picture was on the wall, but I would have a jolly good go. There was one of those sort of early landscapes with black skies with a bit of a church.

All his own paintings?

What?

All his own paintings?

All his own painting, yes. And that was the first artist I ever really met, and of course I did get to know him a bit after that. And my mother and father kept up with Mrs Matthew Smith, her Christian name escapes me at the moment which is awfully silly of me, and she was very good to me, she used to take me out in Paris, because she was rather a good painter herself and she went to André Lhôte's studio while I was there painting in Paris. Now we're getting a bit away from a lot of things still. Oh no, we've wasted a lot of time. And there were these parties, and so, we had our own circle of Balfour, Claire Balfour, then one of the Barings, Calypso Baring, very well-off banking family which took us into the Barings through the Balfours to, you know, Hilaire Belloc and Field Marshal Sir Ian Hamilton. You know, all kinds of different people all over the place. So there used to be these parties going on, and then there used to be the Carlines' parties as well, which, you know, where Gertler went and Stanley Spencer and all those people from Hampstead.

Who were you admiring as a painter in England at that time?

Oh as a painter at that time, the first painters that I admired were I suppose Stanley Spencer and Mark Gertler. Particularly I rather liked Mark Gertler, he was very good-looking Mark Gertler and he had a studio also just down the road in Willow Road or one of those roads down there, which I used to go round to fairly frequently. He was very nice, he took rather a liking to one actually, and I wasn't aware that a terrible drama was going on in the background all about, you know...

Carrington.

Carrington, who I never particularly took to curiously enough; I could never understand what it was all about. But I didn't know that that was going on at the time, and in fact I hadn't met Carrington at that time, it wasn't until later Bloomsbury time that she surfaced.

Do you think you learnt a lot from going to studios like that?

Oh yes, because I tried to paint pictures in...well, with Stanley Spencer it was a bit complicated because his influence got mixed up with earlier influences of William Blake and people like that, but when it came down to what we would call more pure painting such as one was trying to understand at the Slade and through going to see Roger and things like that, I admired very much some of the Gertlers, you know, because you know, the way they're set out they're rather beautiful some of those pictures really, but of course it all became like needlework in the end. But an interesting man, nice man. And who else would there be? Oh

the Gingers didn't really have...no, it would be Spencer and Gertler, but Gertler in terms of actually subject matter, and technically I tried to paint like that for a short...I did two or three pictures like that, but then I tried two or three pictures like a Derain which I hadn't seen an original of. And then I painted with John Strachey and Humphrey and I, and we took a studio in Yeoman's Row, and we gave up going to the Slade and we painted some absolutely horrible pictures down there all on our own. (laughs) Until we all got turned out of it, because the owner of this block of, the studios, where we were having a rather somewhat drunken evening the three of us, and obviously making a bit of a noise and playing music and one thing and another, and we were smoking some kind of cigarettes, and the landlord thought that we were smoking drugs, that we were on drugs, and so we got thrown out.

Did you feel the need for wider horizons at this point?

Yes, and you see, this is the time more or less which is, in 1925 after I had been to the Slade, of the best part of two years, when I met Rupert and things then opened up. The Slade was an important part of growing up, undoubtedly, and of course one met much more distinguished people than one met at the Royal Academy Schools. I mean the Royal Academy Schools, nobody was nobody, not really. Dull people, dull art students.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

I wanted to ask you a bit more about James Wood.

Oh yes, now that's a bit of a problem because it's a long long time ago, but, yes. I met James Wood through going to the Slade, because he was a friend of the Carlines and also of this curious man called Hartley[ph]. And, I suppose I first saw...yes...

I think we've talked about that. The only thing, the question of, you know, what his painting was like, if he actually carried on painting?

Oh what his painting was and what...yes. Well, yes, this is very...well this is awfully difficult, because he was an extraordinarily interesting personality. When it came to work or anything that he undertook, I would say that he was probably a perfectionist, and that this really made it very difficult for him to work and to bring things to conclusions. I remember he was absolutely meticulous in the way he worked, because, you know, he thought it wasn't right to start oil painting unless you understood the chemistry, and so he used to take to mixing up lots of colours himself, or even if he bought them he would know which ones you mixed up with an ivory palette knife, because a metal one would damage the colours. And you know,

everything was immaculate, the brushes and everything were always immaculate, and the working hours were a bit sacred, you know, it was like that.

Was this quite common though at that period to think about an ivory palette knife for instance? I mean, I've never seen one.

Oh haven't you? No, perhaps not, no no, you could get ivory palette knives, and then I suppose a lot of them were probably, they became plastic, they must have become plastic of some kind. But one bought ivory ones, or, they had to be non-metal.

Why?

Why? Because the metal was supposed to damage the chemistry of some of the colours that you mixed up.

And this was definitely considered at the time?

Oh yes. It wasn't considered much in my day, but it was considered. I mean I went to a lecture with, Tudor Heart? Yes, Tudor Heart, who, Tudor Heart, he was an extraordinary man. He was a rather well-off man, a painter, and who had two daughters, and, I remember he organised some lectures down at Leighton House, and I went to one of those which was, I was taken by F.E. Jackson, because it was about tempera painting, because he was mad on tempera painting. And I've forgotten, Sargent was supposed to have been there but didn't turn up. And it was Ethel, was it Ethel Walker? But some woman like that was lecturing about boiling size, and that was what the lecture was about. Well it was a very interesting lecture, I've never forgotten it. You see it's absolutely fatal to boil size for one thing, you must never let it boil.

Can you explain what size is?

Size is glue which you prime the canvas with first, and the thing is that this is obviously to protect it and stop the suction.

Is that like rabbit...?

Rabbit, yes, you had to use rabbit skin glue. Maggi Hambling always does that, and she gives it usually about three coats as far as I remember, which I do if I use it. And this is I think

probably essential for an oil priming, because I think it helps protect the linen thread probably for one thing.

Yes, unlike what Francis Bacon used to do, which is to paint unsized on the back of the canvas.

He used to paint on the back. Well that was all right, because he liked it that way. I have tried painting on the back of a canvas, it doesn't half mop the colour up to start off with.

Anyway, can we get back to Mr James Wood.

Yes, well, as I say he was a perfectionist.

He showed...

What?

He showed at the Leicester Galleries, you said?

Yes he showed later on at the Leicester Galleries. He didn't show at all when I first knew him; in fact he had only recently taken to painting himself, and as I say he had been a patron of, an early patron of Stanley Spencer's, just before the war. And he wrote. And as I say, he took to ballroom dancing in order to sort of have some girlfriends in his life, and picked them up...have I told you this? Anyway, he decided, you see he used to give these parties with the Carlines at their big studio, their studio in Downshire Hill to which everybody went, the Gertlers went, Stanley Spencer, all that lot went, including a lot of Slade, a number of Slade students. And they were fancy dress and they were enormous fun. They were very grand parties, and they went on till the early hours of the morning. I remember going to one, I've forgotten what the theme was but it was a special party, so I went in a fancy dress entirely composed of fresh narcissus.

Wonderful.

Which was rather, I smelt divine of course. Gertler was very much pleased with that, but said I was getting fat, which I thought was rather... No no, no I'm sorry. Then when I came home afterwards, when I came back from Paris he said I was getting fat.

After Paris.

Yes, I thought that wasn't really...getting thin or something, but anyway, I can't remember but he commented on it. He rather liked people to be a bit fat I think.

Oh well he might have said that you had got thinner then.

He might have said I had got thinner.

In Paris.

Sorry, I've forgotten the point of the story, but I always remember he said one thing or the other and being rather upset. But anyway that's neither here nor there.

So what kind of paintings did James Wood do then?

The earlier ones, he used to paint pictures perhaps of a tombstone with lots of ivy creeping over it. Whether that had anything to do with Stanley Spencer's 'Resurrection' or not I don't know. It had some kind of connotation with Victoriana, wasteland and Stanley Spencer, I suspect. And then still lifes. And then of course later on he took to doing very conscientious, and probably really very accurate, rather good portraits of the Cambridge dons of course that he had known when he was an undergraduate and a scholar at Cambridge. And, did I mention that he had gone to Paris at the outbreak of war? He was a Plymouth Brother or a Quaker or something, but as far as I know he was more or less non-combatant during the war. I'm afraid I'm not, I don't quite know what he did during the war. I think he was a non-combatant of some kind, but probably in some kind of Quaker service, rather like my cousin Francis Birrell. Anyway, he was in Paris and he wrote to Cockerell, who was the director of the Ashmolean[SIC - FITZWILLIAM] at the time, to say that he had left his pictures that he had collected as an undergraduate and sort of fellow of the college, if he was a fellow, but he left them during the war to be looked after at the Fitzwilliam in a basement somewhere, he left them all there. And so he wrote to Cockerell from Paris to say that he had just seen this extraordinary Cézanne of bathers which he could buy for a thousand or two thousand pounds, I forgot which, which of course, the big bathers that they've got...

Now.

Now.

In the National.

Yes, yes. Anyway they didn't buy it, and so that was it. Then he bought the first Kandinsky that I had ever seen, I think probably the first person to buy a Kandinsky in this country I should think.

Do you remember what it was like?

Curiously enough only rather vaguely, except that it looked very much like a Kandinsky, but it must have been a Kandinsky of about the 1929 period, probably earlier, it must have been earlier than that, because, when was I at the Slade? I went to the Slade in 1924 and left at the end of 1925.

But was it more abstract or more...?

It was abstract.

But was it those lines or was it...?

It was sort of lines and colours as far as I remember.

And blotches.

Yes. I'm not sure that it meant a great deal to me, but it was one of his treasured possessions, and was certainly rather a remarkable picture.

End of F4110 Side A

F4110 Side B

So, I was just wanting to ask you Robert about the, I suppose what you might call the bridging movement between London and Paris; I mean you went to Paris with Rupert.

Yes.

How did that affect you? How was it different from being in London?

Oh well, yes, yes. Well, what had happened was that obviously, that when I went to Paris, I had been to the Russian Ballet and of course I knew French painting, small French paintings on the whole, they weren't big in size, which were owned by Roger Fry and Clive Bell. And so I was familiar roughly with the shape of various things, because I mean there was Matisse as well, I think they both of them had Matisses, and of course Duncan Grant had a pretty little Matisse down at Charleston. And I had heard much talk about those people too of course. And I was obviously not getting on at the Slade any more. Actually the last few months in the Slade I did try to work very hard indeed after this terrible period which I've spoken about in Yeoman's Row, when all three of us painted the most horrible pictures. I tried to work very hard; I realised I was rather pushing my parents to the end of their limit over this, and felt rather ashamed of myself into the bargain, so I tried to work very hard. But then when I, after I had met Rupert do you see, he went back to Paris to work, because he couldn't get work in London, there wasn't work in London for ballet dancers in those days. And so, naturally enough I was keen to go to Paris, and of course Roger and Duncan thought it would be a jolly good idea if I did go to Paris, because I suppose in some way I was regarded still, in spite of painting horrible pictures, regarded as rather a bright young man I suppose. And so, they thought this was a good idea so they wrote to my parents and said it would be an awfully good idea if I went to Paris for a year or two, for a finishing off thing. And my parents with admirable adaptability, in the same way as they allowed me to leave public school, it was very easy on this occasion now for me to go to Paris, for a reason which I discovered years afterwards. My father said he had set so much money aside for the education of each of us children right through the university period, and that Christopher had had his amount, that he had been to a finishing school in Tours in France, which influenced Christopher's life enormously, he spoke French extremely well, and there was still money left over which I could draw upon. So I went to Paris; he allowed me £3 a week which if I got into difficulties I could have extreme...and it could go up to 5, obviously to get me back home I suppose. But anyway, so off I went to Paris, and I've described that all in my book so I needn't go into that. So that's how I got to Paris. And of course, I realised now that in going to Paris I was definitely entirely on my own and responsible for what I did and how I got on. And of course

being Rupert for one thing, Rupert gave one a much more adult and serious view about life as a whole, because after all he had had to make his own way totally from nowt, and so when he got to Paris, he went over there without prospects of work, but to study with Madame Egorova, who was a well-known teacher, and after he had been there for a time he wished to transfer to Trefilova; Trefilova was...there were three great ballerinas, Pavlova, Kressinskaya and Trefilova, Vera Trefilova. Diaghilev always regarded her as the Ingres of the dance; you can make out yourself what that means but she was an absolutely beautiful classical dancer. And Rupert was wanting really to be totally finished off in the highest school he could get, so he was determined to go to Trefilova's, and he did first of all as a paying student, and then she saw that he had talent so she allowed him to go for nothing. And by the end of that time in Paris she had decided that she would take him to Berlin as her partner in a variety performance at the Scala in Berlin. So this was very serious work, this was Rupert's serious work during the day and it worked out of course in a marvellous kind of way, because Trefilova, well she was a great artist, and what Rupert learnt and which in a way also rubbed up for me, that everything you did had a meaning, that all these movements in classical dance she understood what it illustrated, you know. 'Giselle' was not about nothing, it's not just dance, it's dance plus, you know, that you have to have a motivation for a movement as well as just making beautiful movement, a thing very easily lost.

And did that affect you?

I think it has affected me all the time really; it's a very useful lesson for anything to learn, anybody to learn.

So what were you doing at that point?

So, Rupert was going off to practise every single day, which meant, you know, it's all day, you know. And when they were rehearsing to go to Berlin it was a very gruelling day, from, you know, from 9 or half-past 9 in the morning, or earlier in the morning, till, well, late in the afternoon, just in time to come back, and sometimes not that.

So what were you doing?

So I was going, Roger recommended that I...

Roger Fry?

Roger Fry, that I went to the Académie Moderne, which was in Rue des Petits-Champs, or Rue de Notre Dame des Champs, I can't remember, just behind Montparnasse anyway, which was run by Jean Marchand, Léger and Ozenfant. But I went there of course because Roger was a great friend of Marchand, who was a good bourgeois academic, post-Cézanne painter, a very nice man, but I found deadly boring, and I found the Académie Moderne also extremely boring. It was full of American girls trying to paint modern pictures under Ozenfant. But anyhow...

Was Ozenfant there?

Yes, he did appear occasionally. And, I'll tell you about Ozenfant in a minute. So I split my time between going to the Académie Moderne, which I found rather boring, and painting life and things like that, and working in the Louvre. So every morning I went to the Louvre to copy, but not every morning but about three times a week, and then the other twice a week going to the Académie Moderne and gradually cut the Académie Moderne out, and then went, but always every afternoon and evening to the open sketch classes either at the Chaumière or the Académie Suisse, or Ronson was it, I can't remember, Académie Ronson I think it was, which was rather a good kind of studio situation from where you painted from the models and nobody interfered. So I was, you know, it was up to me to be as busy as Rupert all during the day as well, and I was.

But what kind of painting were you doing?

Oh, well what happened was that the Louvre occupied me in the end increasingly for the first...I went over there, it was the 16th...6th of May...when did the General Strike start? I went to Paris on that day, it's in my book. But anyway, I was over in Paris for the first two months, two-and-a-half months, going back for the...

1926.

Yes, 1926, and came back to spend the summer holidays with my family, and Rupert came back to England for a short time and then returned to Paris of course to finish up the rehearsals with Vera Trefilova. And so I spent my time between the Louvre, which of course is endlessly fascinating; it's wonderful to work in the Louvre and to be simply surrounded with these pictures, you know.

But what were you copying?

Oh there I was copying 'Et Ego in Arcadia', Poussin, having not been allowed to copy the Watteau which I really wanted to.

What did you learn from that?

It's very difficult to say. A certain, I suppose...I don't know what I learnt from that. I learnt that, I suppose that art was a bit more than just being emotional about things and a bit more about... It brought one slap up against architecture and all kinds of things, how a picture was put together for one thing, and also how extraordinarily everything is painted right through, in a thing like 'Un Berger d'Arcadie'. It's quite a freeish Poussin really, and of course it's strongly poetic, which appealed to one. I don't think I could have painted a picture that hadn't got that. But I was just working in there every single day, and then when you get bored, throwing the brush down and going, wandering through a gallery and then being brought up against a Chardin or something, or going back and having another look, seeing how the Japanese was getting along with Ingres 'Odalisque'. And then to have a look again at the Delacroix's and things like that. It's simply being...it accustomed one's eye to, well you may say I suppose just the Old Masters, but that didn't interfere with one's appreciation of one's contemporaries except that I never really came to terms as to what positively Cubism was really about, and I doubt if anybody really knows that even to this day.

It's very difficult to decode it.

It's very difficult to decode it, and they obviously had enormous fun doing these things, which people forget about.

Well I always think the best of them is Gris.

Well ultimately that is the beginning of academic Cubism, and that, then from Gris it's then becomes a step to Paul Gleizes, or is he André Gleizes? Do you know who I mean?

Yes.

I read a book of Gleizes about Cubism, and it made it all very plain but it made it also rather boring, and rather academic, and somehow that sort of blew that. And there is a slight side of Gris which is like that; it's the beginning of what you call a Picasso decorative Cubist period in actual fact. I think that Gris has a very beautiful sense of colour and a beautiful, it's a beautiful sense of colour, and he did some very remarkable things.

But some of that structure is extraordinary, the way he actually placed things.

Yes, all that's very good.

But it doesn't take Cubism...

It doesn't take Cubism to do that entirely, but all those things, it sharpened one's eye, I think this is really what it did, it educated one's eye. I don't think it educated one's intellect or anything like that, it didn't particularly educate my art history, because I knew roughly art history from reading Vasari's 'Lives' and a few things like that, and you inevitably picked up art history at any art school, you can't help it.

But didn't you say at that point, which I found quite interesting, that Ingres was actually rather sort of fave-rave I suppose.

Oh yes he was very much so. I mean, a lot of those, the Picasso drawings you see with those outline drawings, it's all Ingresque. And Matthew Smith did a very good copy of Ingres, and everybody admired Ingres because it was classical, and it had a conceptual element in it.

I mean that's what I wanted to know, why...

Not only that you see, this was also, the other thing that was of course also extremely popular were the nude paintings and the little portrait paintings of Corot; I mean all the willow trees and the nymphs in the meadows and those misty steamy old ponds with trees lolling over them, all that was out, but the earlier landscapes and particularly the nudes and the woman with the guitar, those were all in, and the thing is you can see, I mean because Derain was doing directly from that kind of thing. So in a certain sense the Old Masters were never quite, they were never abolished do you see, they were never abolished quite out of the...never right away. And...

But what I need to ask you I suppose Robert is, what you got from your experience in Paris.

I am telling you, I'm telling you actually, because this is what I got. I got my eye educated in a way in which I couldn't have done in England, where things were all mixed up with...England is full of class and middle class, and people...you feel it in the blood when you go over there, that people take you seriously and they actually, you know, if they don't, if they're not artists they often don't say absolutely stupid remarks about pictures because somehow it's in...whereas in London, or in England it's not like that at all. I mean it's always

quite possible to work out of doors in Paris or to work in the Louvre without embarrassment, but very difficult to do that in London; people are always wanting to come up and make silly remarks.

What about, as a way of life, learning from the French?

Well, as far as meeting the French, French people itself, this is not at all an easy thing to do, and Paris being absolutely full of foreigners at this time, particularly Americans and English people after the war, no Germans about practically worth the name, except for Max Ernst, and Tristan Tzara, who had been part of the communist revolution of course in Munich. And so there were no...there were basically no Germans. There were lots of Russians, lots of English and Americans, and there were an enormous number of galleries open with Old Masters, scraps and antiquaires, and pictures, endlessly modern pictures all down the Rue de la Seine, Rue de Seine, and in the Faubourg Saint Honoré on the other bank, and Rosenberg and all those people had their big galleries. And, you couldn't walk down the Rue Bonaparte without seeing a recent Picasso or an early Picasso or a Matisse or a Bonnard or a Vuillard, or drawings by Maillol, or, you know, it was a complete revelation. You couldn't see this in London, only occasionally, about twice a year an exhibition say of Van Gogh or somebody, or Forain say at the Leicester Galleries or perhaps at Lefevre.

But did you find yourself in a sense becoming more European by being there?

Oh I think definitely. And of course, you may think that Bloomsbury was a very provincial little group, but of course it was strongly Francophile, and of course people like Roger Fry and Piper were enormously well travelled, everywhere, and though they were not the centre of an international movement they knew all about it, and when they went to Paris they were in it. I mean, Roland Penrose was not the only person who went to see Picasso, they had been to see Picasso twenty years before, or fifteen years before that. [BREAK IN RECORDING] Well roughly I suppose I was in Paris off and on continuously, I mean I was in Paris for about two years up to 1929 anyway, and of course I got to know the place in a way better than London. The only time I returned to England, when I finally returned, when I returned to England it was like suddenly going back to a place which was covered all over by a grey blanket, you know, I mean it was absolutely, I just hated coming back to London.

So you felt much more at home in France.

I felt much more at home there. I learnt to speak a bit of French of course. As I say, apart from the French painters, I think, I met Léger, I could have met Derain, but I didn't really

meet any people there much, except, oh, people like, younger people like Tchelitchew and Christian Bérard and people like that.

And presumably also the kind of expatriate English, like Lett Haines, people like that?

Oh well, Lett Haines do you see, Lett Hain and Cedric left Paris in 1927, so they belonged...

To an earlier generation.

To an earlier generation, and also I didn't see them in Paris, do you see, after that.

No, but you met them in Paris didn't you?

I met them first of all in Paris, yes, at their studio in the Boulevard Raspail, yes.

But then they moved back to England.

Then they moved back to England, and bought this large studio in Great Ormond Street and gave gigantic parties, and Lett devoted his life to promoting Cedric of course, but that's another history. So, that's how things really were. But I think, my real education in painting really, well, it was Paris that really started me off. I think it would be silly to say that I learnt nothing while I was in England, but certainly nothing which, I really learnt things and what it was like, and what was expected of one, through seeing the pictures by everybody as one walked about the streets of Paris, and...

It made it serious for you.

Yes it made it serious for me, and life was serious. And...

So what happened when you got back to London?

Well, what happened when I got to London, it then became sooner or later obvious that I would have to have a job, and so, also, it was also obvious that I had to live...I couldn't live at home and live with Rupert, it wasn't possible, and my parents allowing me then £5 a week instead of the £3, which we did very well on £3 a week in Paris, it was absolutely marvellous, because the franc was 1570 to the pound, but that didn't go on forever of course. And so, this money which was being allowed hadn't been totally expended yet, and so we moved to a little flat, to an upper floor in a terrible little road, can't remember its name, just off The Grove

between Shepherd's Bush and Hammersmith. Bow something or other Road, it doesn't matter, it was a Jewish house, and when I say a Jewish house was strictly Jewish, they kept the Sabbath very strictly with candles and all kinds of clothes and things once a week, and they were really very nice, but obviously that couldn't go on for very long. And first of all Rupert was of course going every day up to the centre of London to Margaret Class, Class[??] which, a famous ballet class by the way in the method of, I've forgotten the name, Petova[??], and...

And you were working, painting?

And I was painting, I was left painting down there on my own, and I think I went probably to some evening classes somewhere.

And you say on your own in that way as if you felt you had been left, deserted.

Oh no I wasn't deserted in that sense, but there I was in a flat in which we were having to do our own cooking, and you know, we didn't...I don't know how we managed but we did.

When you're talking about surely Robert, an age when there were servants around still.

Oh no we didn't have any servants.

No no you didn't at that point, but you are saying that you had to do all that yourselves.

Yes we did, yes, which, that was all right because Rupert was very used to looking after himself totally, having lived a whole life, his whole life really was theatrical lodgings and lodging houses one way or another, as well as knowing how to live of course, so that we liked food and having lived in France, so...

But let me say at this point...

I don't quite know what you're asking me.

Well...

I had to make my own living, and so I had to paint, and of course I did odd jobs for Duncan and Vanessa still over this period, and also I tried to get a teaching job, and this wasn't at all easy. This is now 1930. So, I did stupid things like trying to make myself look older and

grow a beard and applied for teaching jobs at Wellington and places like that, and Mr Mallin[ph] came and interviewed me and I thought I had got the job and then hadn't, thank goodness. I taught in a terrible infant play centre which was rather a new idea in those days in the Commercial Road. It was an awful expense going there, it cost one about threepence or sixpence to get there, and I was paid two shillings an hour for this visit, and it was a very gloomy period in a way, but one...

What kind of people were you teaching?

Oh slum kids. I must say, the smell of piss, and their misbehaviour was spectacular actually, it was actually rather marvellous, because it was a play centre, it was run in an old school to keep these kids that were aged from about eight, seven or eight, nine, to twelve to thirteen, off the streets, which of course were beginning to get quite dangerous with motor car traffic all down the Commercial Road. It was three-quarters of the way down the Commercial Road before it gets to Poplar.

Did you get any results from them?

I really don't know. They succeeded in stealing all the pencils until the headmistress got so annoyed that she started to give me only half pencils, which then became quarter pencils. She succeeded a very melancholy man teacher who ran it, who thought that his whole life had been destroyed because he wasn't a Freemason, and then this woman came along who was really dreadful. And the children were wonderful, because I was put to work in the big hall, which also had racks for people, little children to play up and down; it was a kind of gymnasium assembly hall in this rather splendid school which I hope now, if it's not pulled down it's converted into artists' studios, it was that kind of a school. And, some of the little children drew very well, and they really liked it. There was one little boy there who had a most extraordinary visual memory, he was only about ten I think, but he was always totally absorbed drawing, you never had to do a thing for him except throw a pencil at him and bits of paper, and he would draw everything, particularly motor cars and lorries with extreme accuracy, and rather good drawings too. And the other ones just splashed around in the usual way. And then what happened, being in the hall then the other children used to come in, because as soon as they got bored with being read to, or playing with bricks, they would come in to my class and start running about from one end of the hall to the other. And one little boy said that he had tried to kill his younger brother with a carving knife; he had a terrible squint, he looked a repulsive little boy, so I could well believe him. And so finally in the end my salary went up to 2s.6d. an hour, and my parents put up with this, because I was obviously making serious endeavours to, you know, to establish myself, because as I pointed out, those

Victorian people, late Victorian people had a strong work ethic and we all had it. And so, then I got to know through going to parties and knowing various people like R.O. Dunlop and, of course Duncan and Vanessa and all those people, I knew lots of contemporary young painters who you would never have heard of because they dropped out, fellow students at the Slade or Byam Shaw and everywhere else. On the grapevine things got round, and I kept on painting, and...

What kind of painting were you doing?

Well to start off with, they were realistic little still lifes, more strict than the kind I suppose, slightly in the Bonnard...one might call the Bonnard/Gertler kind of line. I didn't try to paint...it was very sensible, I never made any attempt to paint an abstract picture because it was fashionable, and I tried to paint abstract just to see what it was like, but...

And how did that go?

I didn't paint anything that was fashionable in that kind of way. And I suppose...

Was that a deliberate choice?

What?

Was that a deliberate choice?

I think it was a deliberate choice because it was a choice that was made by both of us.

You and Rupert?

Yes.

To not go with the tide?

Not to go necessarily with the pattern on the paper, but to find out what the real meanings were of things.

Did you...would you be sitting there of an evening and talking about that kind of stuff?

Oh yes very much so, yes, or aspects of the dance just as much.

Well I mean talking about a philosophy of life.

Oh yes, but enormously yes, it was enormously absorbing.

So what was it, I mean can you encapsulate in a few words the philosophy of life that you and Rupert really got together?

Oh, well it's awfully difficult, that's a difficult question to be asked, bonk off like that.

But of course it is Robert, that's why I'm asking it.

Yes, well I'm trying to describe it roughly by what one actually did.

I know, but I want you to try and encapsulate it in abstract forms.

Well you'll have to give me 24 hours' notice, that's all I can say about that one. Abstractly, the main influences were perhaps Dostoyevsky, and then a bit later Freud. Dostoyevsky, and Dostoyevsky studies, and a certain amount of...I'm just trying to wonder.

Painters?

Well painters exactly don't have a philosophy of life.

No.

Which is why it's so difficult to answer it.

But I'm using the word philosophy in a kind of broad sense.

Well yes, what one can...and what one got from Bloomsbury was...

Well quite a different philosophy.

One got a different philosophy, but it was a philosophy where also one endeavoured to tell the truth, whatever that was. It's difficult to define it, and also to be honest about things. So that's a vague, it's not a concept it's a vague concept which...

It's a way of behaving.

It's a way, it's a way of behaving, and this way of behaving of course gets into one's painting, and so it was fairly uncertain as to what to do, so I wavered between a freer brush-stroke of a Bonnard or something of that kind, and a much tighter kind of realism altogether, which is where you come in to influences which are also beginning at the same time of, well they're...they had a connection, but you wouldn't be able to connect if I said it.

No I'm quite interested in the way that, you know, you are contrasting Bloomsbury with the way you and Rupert.....

End of F4110 Side B

F4111 Side A

So this difference that I was asking you about between the kind of philosophy of Bloomsbury and the philosophy that you kind of evolved...

Yes, I don't...philosophy is such a misleading word for me, because I find philosophers very difficult to read.

Why?

I get tired of the mental effort, because I don't think like that ultimately.

Too abstract?

What?

Too abstract?

I think it gets...in a way possibly too abstract, but I think it's partly a difficulty of vocabulary very often.

But then you could go slightly further and say that probably a lot of people have difficulty reading art criticism, because...

Yes, quite...

There's a vocabulary there which they're particularly...

Yes, quite. Yes, I know. Well, you see for instance one of the sort of formative books of course was, like all young people, was Nietzsche's 'Thus Spake Zarathustra', and also the big one about, tragedy, you know, the one about the opposition of Apollo and Dionysus, which is a wonderful book actually, which is an absolutely extraordinary, wonderful book. And, what really happened was that, having been working in the Louvre and thinking naturally enough along one's own lines, and seeing the amount of discipline that goes into a lot of artistic life, not only seeing it in Paris but also seeing it every day in the dancing room, the idea that dancers are stupid and all that is rubbish, because their sheer physical discipline is something which spiritually has an extraordinary importance. And what became apparent very easily of course, when one came back to Bloomsbury, I had now got to make a separation; I don't like

talking about Bloomsbury, Bloomsbury in a lump, because they were all very much individual people.

But they are lumped together.

They are lumped together, but talking, for instance, to Maynard Keynes was very different to talking to Duncan Grant or Vanessa Bell; talking to Vanessa Bell was quite different from talking to Virginia Woolf. And I must say that...

But then I have to ask you, in what way?

No you don't, because what I can tell you in one way, because first of all we're not concerned with Maynard Keynes or with Virginia Woolf, but it soon became apparent that there was not enough discipline, and there were very deep faults in the way in which Duncan and Vanessa were thinking in the Thirties about painting and themselves. They found one thing, and they were beginning to be very successful; they were a generation older than me, and naturally enough you want to kick them out as well. And so this is what really happened. After we came back from Paris there was the process also for ridding myself of the Bloomsbury. And the trouble about...

How conscious was it?

Oh quite conscious, oh quite conscious. Because, for instance do you see, it was perfectly easy to see that, you may think that Gertler is a much less talented painter than Duncan Grant, but he was a much more disciplined painter, and I could get more out of it, whereas with Duncan it's all a bit...and also it...Roger Fry was partly to blame I think about this, because he was after a scholar, and he thought that you could combine...could combine the kind of personality and the free sort of...

Free spirit.

Free...of Duncan, do you see. You could combine the colour of Cézanne and Matisse with the chiaroscuro of Chardin. Chardin was one of their great gods, because of its extreme honesty and beauty, and of course they are wonderful paintings, but of course they are in a different mode in actual fact; though Chardin is a great colourist it depends on a different concept of light and things which isn't valid any more. But obviously it appealed to Roger an awful lot, particularly what you would call the honesty side of the thing, but he thought that they could combine the Bloomsbury versions of Matisse...Cézanne aspects of Matisse, with the kind of

depth of a Corot - either of a Corot or of a Chardin, and of course you can't. The result is that Duncan and Vanessa's paintings in the Thirties became progressively heavier, and all the time stirring up this Manneristic brush-stroke which was very apparent, and after the war, after I came back from Paris this was absolutely a conscious movement.

Did you kind of scoff at that kind of painting then?

Yes very much so, in private, yes, amongst one's friends. I remember with Humphrey Slater after one of Roger's lectures on the Dutch. We said that he was betraying the modern movement, and then we wrote to Duncan as you know, which is described in my book, a letter which was intercepted by Vanessa advising him to go Paris again in order to shake the...

Did you really think, did you really think that he would do anything?

Oh yes, oh yes, certainly. Partly because Rupert knew Duncan extremely well, for reasons which it is not necessary to go into, and...

Did he have an affair with Rupert?

Oh yes, before I met. Everybody was quite naughty in my day.

Well I think that's one of the wonderful things about that period Robert; I mean people can't be quite so naughty now.

No, and we didn't...and though there were all those kind of prohibitions and laws and everything which were very blanketing I may say, which you weren't so conscious of in France, particularly, because we weren't...you know...anyway...

No I want to know more about this affair that Rupert had.

Well, no.

Was it a long-standing thing, or...?

Oh, yes, it was quite a serious thing. It wasn't very long-standing, because I think, well I came along too soon. And also, I think that Vanessa was only frightened of one of any of Duncan's affairs and that was with this American painter whose name I've forgotten at the

moment, who was quite a good painter, finally went back but, Vanessa was very afraid of that as being an overwhelmingly absorbing affair on Duncan's part.

But how did Rupert meet Duncan?

Oh I think, I don't ever know.

But they did have this...?

Yes. I mean it's not...it's quite possible and easy for people to meet.

Yes.

It's very easy to meet in parties, very easy to meet.

Indeed. I was just wondering how close they were, because I wondered whether that would have a bearing on your work, the connections.

No it didn't, because both of them were beginning to react against that, and Rupert had an extraordinary gift, a visual perception about painting, very very very sharp visual...

Yes. But you had also met up anyway before...

What?

You had met Duncan before he met Rupert.

I had met Duncan before I met Rupert you see.

Separately.

Separately. And, I don't think I ever tried to paint a picture exactly like Duncan, using his technique, ever.

But you began to feel that that whole Bloomsbury thing was not working.

Yes, that that was not working; it was certainly not working for me, and what was taking over was something intellectually much more strict, sometimes not as good. And then of course

there was a period when I wasn't actually particularly influenced by Wadsworth but one was interested, influenced particularly by...because he was a very interesting man Wadsworth, and it represented the Wyndham Lewis...

What, the Vorticists?

The Vorticist, and 'The Enemy', you know. If you haven't read 'The Enemy' and all those, 'Paleface' and 'The Enemy' particularly of Wyndham Lewis which are directly against Roger Fry, they were written for that purpose. And of course we read all those, and they were...

'Blast'.

What? 'Blast'. Well no, 'Blast' was the original manifesto which came out in 1909 as far as I remember. No these were 1910, '11. I've forgotten when 'Blast', 'Blast' is very early; maybe it was not until 1911 or some time like that, 'Blast'. But, no this was the post-war writings which came under the heading of 'The Enemy'. There were three volumes, of, three editions of 'The Enemy'. It's polemical writing.

Did you contribute to any of that?

No.

Were you interested though?

Yes very, very, because...

In an intellectual way, or...?

In an intellectual way very much so, and, it's really heavy criticism.

Did you think that was needed?

Yes.

Did you want to blast everything away in a sense?

No, no, I was not a revolutionary, no, I'm not a revolutionary. This is not...no 'Blast' was one thing. But 'The Enemy' was a political thing which at my age one was perfectly entitled to,

you know, make one's own views up about. I wasn't going to be swept off like a revolutionary movement, like Vorticism; there weren't any movements like that until Surrealism came on.

There never have been many movements.

Yes, but...

Well talk about Surrealism, I mean you were involved in that.

With what?

Surrealism. You were involved in that.

No I wasn't ever really a proper Surrealist, I was...

Not but you exhibited in that first...

I know I did, I can never make out why in the end.

Well, someone must have asked you.

Yes, Roland Penrose did.

Or, well in that case why did you accept?

Because I thought it, you know, you accept anything when you're trying to struggle along, which is good for publicity and it's against the ordinary Establishment.

Yes, but...

And also, I was experimenting at that time, I suppose with what you would call Surrealist imagery, but it was about the Surrealism of Blake and Brueghel or somebody like that, basically. I don't know what Surrealists...there are only about two real Surrealist artists, and that's Dali and Magritte, so far as I can see.

What about Max Ernst?

Oh Max Ernst, yes. But there are very few, and as you know the writers who made the Surrealist movement didn't want to have any painters.

No, I mean Breton said that...

Oh well we're getting right apart, we're getting miles and miles away from the 1930s.

I know we are, but it's all quite interesting. I mean at that point I suppose I ought to ask you what you think of the art of Eileen Agar, but I suppose you don't want to say anything about it.

No, I think Eileen Agar is a nice artist but I'm not very interested, you know, if you want...

It doesn't...an old friend of mine said, it doesn't grab you by the balls.

It doesn't grab me by the balls a bit, no, it doesn't.

Too decorative?

Yes, I suppose so, too decorative, and...I've always associated...surrealism...unless I get a frisson, then, you know, it doesn't exist you see, for me at all. And what interests me, well Dali is interesting and not...

Great draughtsman.

Is a great draughtsman, and a pretty peculiar artist actually. He was a rum artist, like people like Desiderio; there have been lots of forerunners of painters in the past, you know. There was the man who painted all those heads made of vegetables. Arcimboldo.

Arcimboldo, yes.

Then there was art stylists like Magnasco and Desiderio, and then there's...

The great Mannerists.

Yes, the great Mannerists, which are full of Surrealists. I mean, it was all very well, we always thought that...you can't...all art has a surrealist side to it; Shakespeare, all the...

Is it perhaps why Surrealism wasn't invented in England, because we were already surrealists.

Yes, quite.

It came from France.

Yes, quite.

With André Breton categorising it.

Yes.

Anyway we don't really want to talk about it.

We don't really want to talk about Surrealism.

I'm still interested...

I try to use surreal...it encouraged me to use kinds of symbolism...

That you might not have used?

Which I might not have used if Surrealism, or aspects of Surrealism had not been there, but I find it difficult to pin down what are called realistic fantasy.

Well that's interesting, I mean tell me about that. Because, you know, where was your subject matter coming from at that point?

The subject matter at that point, we're now talking about...

The Thirties.

The Thirties, from about 1934 to '36 probably, and even 1933, probably 1933, I was trying vaguely abstract things but not in a sense of being a Cubist, it was not a theoretical thing, it was a question of, I suppose roughly surrealist, fantastic imagery, having decided that very detailed Wadsworthian kind of, Léger composition of...

Getting your line down all right.

Getting my line down, I hadn't got his kind of...he was very dogmatic and had a very clear mind, he was a very dogmatic man, which is rather irritating, but was the nicest man actually to know, and he was enormously fond of Rupert for some reason or another.

Well you were, so obviously there was a good reason to be fond of Rupert.

Yes.

Don't know what it was, but I mean, define it at this point, what made people love Rupert?

Well his extraordinary Ephebic good looks for one thing. The fact that he was...

But at point you describe him as quite tubby.

No, tubby is not the right word. He was thick set, he was short, thick set and physically very strong, but constitutionally, well not at all strong. He had a head that was too large, which he was terribly conscious of as a dancer, and he always had to dress very carefully otherwise his legs looked too short. But he was exceptionally...

That's the physical side Robert. What was it...did he have great charm?

Oh he had an enormous charm or charisma, and also he had what is very appealing, I suppose ultimately... you see Fanny Wadsworth...well he was always enormously interested in anything to do with painting or dancing or literature. He was uneducated basically; he would deny being uneducated but he was basically self-educated. He left a kind of provincial secondary grammar school early, and brought himself up on Gordon Craig and all kinds of, Dostoyevsky and all kinds of writers. And he had these extraordinary good looks and a very good figure to draw. And he was also poor, so therefore he was a waif, and that has a strong appeal.

Right.

And, he also had a very strong intuitive intelligence.

That sounds more like what I'm talking about.

And this was what really held people to him. He was obviously exceptionally intuitively intelligent, that's what Cocteau obviously appreciated and saw.

Because he had an affair with Cocteau before you came on the scene.

Oh yes, oh yes. Cocteau affair lasted about, well the best part of a year, I suppose, certainly six months, and it would inevitably have broken down, because Rupert made a great many enemies very easily, because he was also when young extremely swollen-headed, as you might say. Well if you are nineteen, dear, and you get picked up by Cocteau, it swells the head. (laughs) So it took some time. But also he was very aware that he, he thought also that he had something special to give.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

So after the kind of involvement, however slight it was, with the Surrealists, you seem to become involved in another movement, if we can call it a movement, which is Social Realism.

Oh well, this in a way, it was obviously a reaction from the Surrealist thing. What you've got to remember is that all the time there is a climate of deep social unrest and depression, and growth all the time progressively of Nazis and Fascists, and it's against that background, you can't separate the painting of the Thirties without taking account of that background I don't think. And, what happened was, not only the Group Theatre were naturally enough concerned with aspects of that, but also walking about in London in the streets you saw hunger marchers and, you know, there was...social stresses were all the time present in one's mind. And what I did, I did a number of drawings of unemployed and people and demonstrations in Trafalgar Square, and sort of tried to make pictures out of what I had seen in the streets, and a lot of the drawings that I did in Trafalgar Square or just outside Trafalgar Square, I did afterwards in the afternoon or evening after I came back, they were quite good drawings from the point of drawings, but they were undoubtedly always to my mind sentimental, and...

Why?

Well partly because I wasn't working-class, and so there was always a kind of stress to make it plain that it was about working-class, and this, I realised it led to a certain degree of falseness.

But you weren't being condescending.

Beautifully...what?

You weren't being condescending.

I wasn't being condescending. It was very like, Wystan summed it up so wonderfully, 'On the Rhondda, my time I squander, looking for my Rhondda boy. He is so rough and tough, he is such hot stuff...' etcetera etcetera etcetera. It became almost fashionable to go to South Wales, indeed I did, recommended by a friend of Rupert's who was a well-known Communist, a man called Ashley, who lived with a very nice boyfriend actually.

But I mean you weren't in search of rough trade, were you?

I'm not in search of rough trade at all.

Then.

No I'm not talking about rough trade but I am telling you how I got down to the Rhondda myself. [BREAK IN RECORDING]myself, and that through, made contact with one of Rupert's friends who was a well-known Communist at that time who gave me an introduction to a family down in Pontypridd - no, in Llwynypia, near Pontypridd, and I went down there for a fortnight. And it was extremely interesting because it was all very well wandering round in Trafalgar Square, because I thought I ought to get to know more about this, and...

Did that give you an insight?

So then I thought, well, as these are sentimental, supposing I remove what I want to say to a world of slight, of fantasy do you see, where I don't...I make kind of Freudian images instead, and I did a series of gouaches all of which I destroyed after the war, because when I looked at them again I thought they were absolutely horrid. And it was I suppose through these images that I got thought to be a Surrealist, but I didn't really know very much about Surrealism as such except that there were various artists, like Pierre Roy, who were thought to be Surrealists were not Surrealists really at all.

Who?

It was through Wadsworth, a painter called Pierre Roy. But, I think there was one thing that I think I ought to catch up with, that, as far as getting a job was concerned, I did manage to get a job, I managed to paint some pictures by about 1932 that got into the London Group, and I was a very early member, for age, of the London Group, and out of that in 1932 I got a job at the Chelsea Polytechnic with Harold Williamson, along with, where Henry Moore and Coxon and people were teaching. And from that time onwards I was not dependent so much upon my father at all.

Did that make things easier?

What?

Did that make things easier?

Oh yes a lot easier. Well once you are able to look after yourself, I mean that's fine, and I suppose, there you are. And, I think you've got to take it from there, but that was in 1932, and this was the time of going to the hunger marches which I am talking about now. And, well the hunger marches were later than that actually.

Were you ever drawn to that kind of communist idea?

Oh enormously, yes, very. I mean, what with reading the Communist Manifesto with Misha Black and Hooper Rowe and people like that. And also, I mean the Communist Manifesto, which no Communist bothers to read nowadays because it was published in 1848 and they can't read, it's the nearest thing to the Sermon on the Mount translated into politics that you will ever get, and it's completely impractical as you might say for one thing, but when you are about 25 and idealistic you don't see it that way.

My uncle became a communist in the Thirties, probably for all those reasons.

Well most of us did you see. I mean you either became a communist or the next door thing to it. As I say, I found as a middle-class bourgeois my attitude to the working classes was streaked obviously with a kind of sentiment which I recognised in the drawings. And it was all, well, intellectually, but it was not...so I therefore tried to remove it and put it one stage back.

Took it into fantasy?

Took it into fantasy, and that's how I got connected with Surrealism.

I mean, so this notion of...

I exhibited in with the Surrealist exhibition, a lot of fish eating each other up you see, which is a plain case of symbolism, do you know what I mean?

Yes.

But not really very interesting.

Tell me then, you are basically saying that you don't want to be involved or even thought of as anything to do with something which is called Social Realism.

Oh, well Social Realism, that of course, Social Realism as such finally crystallised I suppose mostly, immediately, probably after the war fully, really, because I think it dependant upon on a state of...

But surely in the Thirties?

Yes, it was the beginning of the Thirties, but in the same way there...I get muddled about the dates you know at my age. A certain amount of things took place after the war. When did the Artists International start?

AIA?

Yes. Because I was a founder member of that, and that's when Social Realism as a school of painting became vocal.

But I think it was going on before the Second World War. I mean I think...

Yes, you could say that it was beginning in the Euston Road.

Oh yes, definitely, but that's post-war.

No it isn't.

No it isn't, it's pre-war.

It's pre-war, do you see, but then it's closely allied to Harrisson's Mass Observation rather than with Social Realism. [BREAK IN RECORDING] This tendency to use Surrealism, and what we in the Group Theatre called realistic fantasy in the end was... Another thing I suppose, I suppose one of the reasons for, and why I became a stage designer and worked with the Group Theatre so much is that it relieved the pressure of being a painter in a very difficult period where there were also these political pressures. I wasn't the only person more or less to give...I didn't ever entirely give up painting pictures, because that was what my, I earned my living, to keep my reputation up there, but I more or less devoted the major part of my time to work in the theatre, in the same way as Bill Coldstream in the stresses of the same period gave up painting completely and went over to the GPO film unit, along with Wystan Auden and Benjamin Britten, who were also there, and then ultimately of course into taking part in Mass Observation. And interestingly enough you see, the Euston Road Group in about 1928 I suppose it was started, was started again as a protest against the looseness of the Bloomsbury Group of painters, you know, so all these things...

So it was a kind of recall to order.

Rappel à l'ordre. And my own rappel à l'ordre had taken place a little bit earlier in actual fact, but it hadn't of course produced any memorable works.

Do you consider yourself still at that point as a kind of student?

Up to a point.

Or apprentice work?

Still an apprentice. I didn't think that I was fully developed. I was still trying to develop, and I think the whole period of the Thirties for me was a period of trying to be oneself. I don't know, I put it all right when I mention it much earlier.

Trying to find your way.

Trying to find my way. I mean I was terribly serious and always thinking at last I had found my way, but I've never been able to repeat a work of art that, a painting which has been successful. I thought, oh well, there, that's wonderful, I've done exactly what I wanted, I'll do another one the same, and it's always been less good than the first one, and the third one is absolutely useless, so I always have to kind of, do another one which is...

Something different.

Something different. And none of this was very helpful for producing exhibitions regularly for dealers every two years, but that's neither here nor there. But what happened was that, suddenly before, in about 1936, from '36 to '39, probably even a bit later than that, I'm not sure when I actually painted 'The Butcher's Shop,' '36 or '37, but that is full of symbolism, but it was based very much on something that I emotionally felt myself about seeing young families in the streets of London with, well poor people...

Bugger all.

With bugger all of money, where the man carrying the baby, which is an image which is always very touching in any case, and the woman pushing the pram, and the child is playing with one of these little wind windmills, and a group of children in the background doing one of those spiral hopping games, and a hopping game is the...the spiral on the pavement is a symbol of time and universal. And then of course there's the butcher's shop and...

Death.

And the food which can't be touched, you know, all those carcasses hanging up, as they used to outside butchers'.

End of F4111 Side A

F4111 Side B

The thing about 'The Butcher's Shop' also you see, the windmill, paper windmill thing that the child is playing with of course is an eternity symbol along with the other things, a symbol of life. And, I think this same kind of attitude was still carrying through in the picture which I painted a year later of a lot of workmen, unemployed, in a street which are painted all red actually, all plainly plotting a red revolution, but it also had a group of children playing a round game in the distance, in the background.

Symbolic?

Which is symbolic and was meant to be symbolic, but it's what's called realistic fantasy, which was the name of course which we coined for the Group Theatre.

And, exactly at that point we could go on to talk about the Group Theatre.

Yes I know, that's what I thought, we could do that.

And I am quite interested to ask you really what effect working in a theatre had on your painting, and did you really stop painting largely for that period?

No I didn't entirely stop painting at all. I was still trying to find my way as a painter, and, of course in a certain sense the Group Theatre both helped and hindered, because of course it hindered by the fact that one wasn't thinking about it hard all the time, and didn't have the time to do it all, and at the same time of course I was teaching at the Chelsea Polytechnic from 1932 right up, well, for many years after that I taught at the Chelsea Polytechnic, Chelsea School of Art. And so not only was painting limited in time, but also with influences of Picasso and then Surrealism, and then one's own sort of personal tastes, one's own personal style which was not fully developed do you see by the time the industrial depression started; it didn't make it very easy unless somehow you had got that kind of talent which knows what it...you can only do certain things and does it, do you know what I mean, like some people do. And I've never been the type of person that wholly thinks that everything that I do is immediately important, which is a very important thing to have do you see, which Humphrey Slater had that, and of course so did a lot of other...a lot of other painters that we know, they think that everything they do is of the greatest possible...and Victor Pasmore is a wonderful example, his life is easier for him, though actually his brain, his mind is extremely complex, but he has never really emotionally been in any doubt that what he was doing was immensely important. And of course the same with Ben Nicholson. Unfortunately I've not been that

type, which, it's a temperamental trouble which has prevented me from perhaps having such a straightforward career as many other painters have had.

But it has also made you more open to development and change.

Well of course it has, and of course... So first of all I didn't give up painting by any means at all. I couldn't because my reputation as a teacher, I had to be there, and also I wanted to, and I did it somehow.

How much time did the Group Theatre take?

The Group Theatre was periodic really. At any time when we were doing either Sunday performances, that would absorb one, but not so completely as the seasons that we had do you see. The first Group Theatre season at the Westminster Theatre was, as far as I remember, it really began 1934 but '35, '36, so there was really two-and-a-half years in which the Group Theatre became really totally absorbing during which time, do you see, we produced from 'The Dance of Death' right through to 'The Ascent of F6'. But of course also at the same time we were doing other things as well. I mean there was a wonderful studio production that Rupert did of the kind of reading, visual reading on the stage, of the first half of 'Peer Gynt' which was a very memorable performance, and then it was decided to put it on and I spent, oh, about four months really totally concentrated work trying to design 'Peer Gynt'. Well all these things introduced one to a very wide range of interests, and of course on the stage, Rupert and I we weren't...in a certain sense, it was very useful to me because when it came to various aspects of the lighting and everything else, the completing of a stage picture and to move from... The whole thing, everything was in movement you see in the Group Theatre - well all theatre is always, has to be in movement, and we weren't functioning primarily by any means in a picture stage either; they were not picture stage productions basically, none of them.

So you weren't painting backdrops and so on?

No. I had to with 'The Ascent of F6' of course, I had to design some kind of set for them; I did it extremely well as a matter of fact, because it was a split stage and it had to be done, they did it first in a very very small stage of the Steiner Hall or some place like that, very very small it was. And one had to do it in the same way with curtains drawing across, first one half then the other half of the stage, but also to make it possible to use the whole stage at the same time. And all those problems were very interesting because it was a kind of design problem, and you had to move people about on the stage, and I started to learn a lot of that.

And also with the very first seasons, one of the first productions we did during that season after 'The Dance of Death', which was with Michel Saint-Denis, was 'The Sowers of the Hills', and he was meticulous about movement and the actual designing, and I had to design the set of course for that. So I had a lot of work. I didn't design the set, but one created the ambience, the atmosphere.

And the costumes?

And the costumes of course, yes. Though often not very much, but sometimes quite a lot.

Masks and so on?

And, oh yes, I had to make the masks. Oh I had to do everything myself, made the masks, painted the scenery, the lot. I'm always surprised how much work one managed to do in those days, and I managed just to keep my head above water as a painter as well.

I was interested in this notion about stage lighting though, how that might affect you.

Well I suppose, well stage lighting really has become very useful, because, it became very easy for me later on when I began to understand the mechanisms of things much more, and I treat the palette which I use, I treat it like a spectrum, and you know it's not just mixing blue and yellow to make green, you know, because of course the complementary colours in pigment are not the same as the complementary colours in light. But you can use your palette in the same way as you can use light, and that was very useful to me for many years, well it always has been, right up to the time when I did 'Samson Agonistes', I was very quick, because you can only have these rather bright coloured inks that printers, screen-printers use, and I knew exactly how to make a brown-black or a blue-black, or a green-brown, or a red-brown, or a brown-brown, do you know what I mean? Because one knew, oh yes, you take green-red and a spot of orange or something of that kind do you see, and then it wants a bit of green-blue in it rather than a red-blue. So one knows exactly, one was thinking in terms of light spectrum of course, which is green-red and violet-blue, the yellow being an evoked colour, but of course there's the strange mystery, the blue and yellow in light produces white light, as apparently, and so of course does the whole of the spectrum; it's one of those peculiar...nobody knows really anything about it, but I found it very useful. So, that was one technical point. But I suppose really, dealing with the stage where you are dealing with groups of people in movement, and masses, and...

Space.

And space, of course enormously to do with space. Oh you see we did, I mean there was Louis MacNeice's play, which is really rather a good play, I think it almost...I think it's worth a studio revival of some kind. It's all about a rather rich amateur artist, it's rather a good play.

Do you have a copy of it?

Yes I've got a copy, yes.

I would like to read that.

Yes. We did that.

So what happened with the war then? I mean that must have interrupted everything.

Well I was just sort of beginning to do quite a lot of painting when the war started, and then the war started and I got...oh yes I became...oh what happened was, as soon as the war started, I didn't know what to do, anyhow, it was...the art school was obviously going to close, and anyhow I was at kind of near calling-up age, so I got pushed into the ARP, Air Raid something or other, stretcher-bearing thing, and then, we had just moved to a new house in Moreland[??] Street in Islington, found ourselves in a disused stable near where the Islington, the Finsbury Town Hall was, with a whole lot of very interesting and dubious characters from Chapel Street market. And then of course I was rescued from that by being appointed a war artist.

Who rescued you?

K. Clark really, thank goodness. So I was full of excitement about this, and produced some kind of literature, because I wanted to go to France, and one thing and another, and then they made me an artist for ARP which was what I had been doing, and it was during the period of the phoney war, and there wasn't really anything to paint, because nothing was happening. Very boring. And then suddenly, it subsequently turned out that I wasn't allowed to go to France on account of my putative red political stance, which had come of course from the Group Theatre, because you know, we had rather enjoyed being the first company to put out an overtly communist play at the Westminster Theatre.

Which one was that?

Which was, I suppose it was 'The Dance of Death' in which we celebrated the death of the middle classes, and the middle classes were just shot symbolically by Karl Marx. Anyway, it was all a lark really. But anyway, it was interesting how these kind of things follow one through. So then I did this stint with ARP, and did some rather dreary pictures which I prefer not to refer to very much, and then I did a number of drawings which are things which now quite interest me as a matter of fact. There are one or two, there are a couple of pictures which are not too bad, but that kind of journalist recording is not something which I could do very easily, not like Ardizzone or, oh, Anthony Gross for instance, who I think, Anthony Gross did some of the best war drawings from the Middle East I've ever seen. And of course then there was Edward Bawden, but Edward Bawden succeeded as a war artist by removing himself as far as possible from the war as he possibly could, until he ended up down with the marsh Arabs. (laughs) And, anyway... So, then I was [INAUDIBLE], and I did a number of paintings. Actually I did some rather nice little ARP paintings before I was made an official war artist which Kenneth Clark bought, he bought four of them to show at the Leicester Galleries. But when I was made an official artist I somehow, I clammed up inside myself and couldn't do it really well, and worked very hard to try and do it very well but, it was not the most successful things I did. So then when there was the evacuation from Dunkirk and the whole business, France was obviously toppling, I thought I had better do something about this, and being sort of rather romantically inclined I suppose, I thought there's no good, I didn't want to go, you know, into the Army in the ordinary way and I didn't think the Army would be great fun, so I thought I would join the Navy as an able seaman or something of that kind you see. So Rupert said, 'You musn't do that, that's absolutely stupid. I mean, you will just waste what talent you have if you do that.' And so naturally enough I allowed myself to be persuaded, and I found myself then of course in the Camouflage Corps, which did employ of course a lot of artists, you know, not only myself but dozens of others. Need I mention them? No. And so I was just one of a large number of other artists, along with Julian Trevelyan, who all went for training at Farnham, and then on completion of that I was posted to the Middle East where I was from 19...wait a minute, 1941...

To '45.

To '45, inclusive. I was there basically for four-and-a-half years.

And what effect did that have?

Well first of all, one of the reasons for going to war was, and joining up and all the rest of it, well of course I joined up, I was the oldest person on the course actually, so when I had got out to the Middle East I was not sent into the combat zone, I was retained at Headquarters, at

GHQ in Cairo, and basically there I was stuck for a long time. And one of my reasons for going to the war was quite a romantic one that's very understandable, I really wanted to see what it was like really, if you were really put in...you know, whether you could stand the battle in other words, and what it was like to be dead or seeing people dead, do you see what I mean? In actual fact I never really saw any corpses during the war, except one could smell them often enough at times, and particularly in the day of the arrival after, there had been an air raid on Port Said a few days before, and there were corpses in the rubble, they smelt rather badly as we all went to buy cigarettes at [INAUDIBLE]. And the only corpses I ever saw were some Arabs who had killed themselves in a motor...obviously driving extremely badly by the roadside driving one day down by the Suez Canal in the delta, they were all being pulled out these corpses from a completely crashed up motor car. So from that point of view I didn't get much out of the war in that kind of way. I had a short stint of actually being attached to a fighting unit, but of course the job of a camouflage officer is not to fight, you're in the way when the battle comes, that takes place with the professionals and the people at any rate, the unfortunate people who have been trained for it. So the only thing really I saw was the retreat back to El-Alamein, when it was suddenly, we were well beyond Tobruk actually, and suddenly the news came through that Rommel was now behind us, so would I go out with my driver and haul in as many of the tank brigade that I was attached to as possible. And, well then this I did, and nobody knew what was happening, because Rommel had decided quite simply, they didn't bother about the desert, he simply put all his forces into one lot and drove straight through the middle. However, then after that I moved on through the terrible battlefields actually outside Tobruk, and I spent some time in Tobruk in the winter; it was absolutely perishingly cold, and for some reason or other I developed desert sores and skin trouble and much to my disgust I was then immediately put into a hospital ship and shipped back, and I found myself in a hospital for a rather long time, which I needn't go into, and then of course back to GHQ. Well GHQ was immensely hard work, and...

In Cairo?

In Cairo, yes. And, I don't want...those details don't concern one, but it was very hard work, and at the same time do you see, I was young, and what I really got out of Cairo and the Middle East, I got on the side, and became fascinated first of all with Islamic work, and also with the Alexandrian Hellenistic stuff. I don't know why I did that, it was partly I suppose kind of intellectual snobbishness of not going to join all the other officers on a culture cruise bound for Luxor and was going to go and see and find for myself the things which they didn't know about. And so that's how that happened. And also of course, there were various other occupations (laughs) which I have not described in detail but are well referred to in my book.

A certain kind of liberating sense.

It was enormously liberating. I was away from home, it just...you know, there was an aspect not only of being very hard work but also of holiday about it, and the opportunities for holiday slips were extremely frequent. And...

Well a time of war is of course notorious for that.

What?

A time of war.

The time of war is notorious for that. And the interesting thing is that, as a whole... For a long time this did me obviously a great deal of good, it released a lot of things in me that needed to be released, and then I got to a stage shortly before I came back when I realised that this kind of hedonism also can be, was beginning to be very destructive, and one could see that it was destructive, and so, I suppose...

It was a good thing you left.

It was a good thing that I left. Anyway I was getting bored with it and anyway, I didn't know what was going to happen to me; I thought it would have been rather nice to have gone to India, which is one of the ideas. I didn't want to be...I had several ideas, one was to train a lot of the troops which are going to serve in the Far East, to get them acclimatised to heat and temperatures of various kinds, to set up big training units in Palestine, which is now Israel of course. And thank goodness this didn't take place, and of course this is one of the things I would have been tied up in. But then, thank goodness of course they decided that it was possible for people who have been enlisted in my block, they could be demobilised and so I was sent back.

But during all that time when you were in Egypt, were you making drawings, or...?

I made drawings, and, not as many as I should have done.

No painting?

Oh not in oil painting, no, not at all. Well I never had a room, a place...well I had a room, but it wasn't very large and I find that really, one way or another if you've done a hard day's work

at GHQ I'm afraid my mind was on more...other things by the time I had had a dinner, and... I don't think that did me any harm at all, and what it did, the Middle East, it gave one an extraordinary sense of history, I think that's what I got out of it, I got a sense of history, and I think without sort of thinking about it at all, it kind of cleaned one's eyeballs up. The idea that, oh it's full of colour, it's only really full of colour in the evenings and at dawn; all this bright sunlight absolutely bleeds everything of colour, totally. But somehow or another, even that you see did something for one; it got the English greyness and dampness out of one's system, and there was this sense of history which appealed to me enormously, and so it provided both a kind of subject matter for me to paint by the time I got back, and also I think, it liberated me out a good deal. And then when I got back after the war I had considerable, I found I had to face considerable competition, because of course all the younger British Neo-Romantics had moved in, they being five years younger or more than me, being able to move into positions which I should have had, because the war came at an awkward moment for me between the ages of 35 and 40, which is just the time when you really, if you haven't done anything by the time you're 40, you know, you've more or less had it; you've got to paint your first masterpiece, if possible, by the time you're 30 or 32. And in a certain sense I was just cheated of that by the intervention of the war, and of course obviously partly by my own temperamental, difficulty with temperament and character. But, I've never forgotten, you know, some of the things that one saw out there really.

Did you find it difficult to adjust to being back in England, and to resuming painting?

Yes, getting painting, I started to paint more or less at once somehow or another, and then it took me about nine months to discover of course that I wasn't painting very well. But I did, that it did do, and I certainly, I realised that I had got to produce something otherwise I would be sunk I suppose up to a point, and it's after all what I was supposed to be doing and I had got to do it. And, I had various ideas, particularly in subject matter; some of it was what you call classical ideas, I liked Greek legends and that kind of thing, and all this kind of connected you see, so I did pictures of King David and things, nothing very...nothing very original in any of this, but it provided a kind of cultural tradition in which I found that I could develop in my own kind of way.

Was this particularly fashionable?

Which was not an unfashionable thing to do at the time of course, with Picasso's Minotaurs and things like that lurking around. And, I can't remember when that is, but I think it's about 1935 actually, the Minotaurs. No no, it must have been...because I painted the Minotaur picture, my own Minotaur picture, I painted that in 19...wait a minute, I had the exhibition,

that was the first exhibition I had, which was in 1940...I think it was '47, which I had at Reid & Lefevre, along with Cecil Collins. And it was quite a successful exhibition, and I painted several large pictures, one large picture of Cairo from drawings which I had done out there, and also through photographs that I took. And I was an awfully bad photographer, for some reason or another I never seemed to take interesting photographs, but I took photographs for records for things that I wanted to remember, not that they were very nice photographs, and I was awfully disappointed often when I saw the prints because I had imagined them coming out much nicer than what they turned out. But I used a lot of, I used those, and I used the drawings which I had done.

Have you subsequently used photographs very much in your work?

From time to time, yes, but I've always found it easier to use bad photographs than good ones. And I did the Caravaggio's 'Raising of Lazarus', when was that? I can't remember. Mid-Fifties that would be. I found a very bad photograph in a little book that Berenson had written about Caravaggio, and when I saw more detailed ones and coloured ones I realised, thank goodness I hadn't seen those at the time. And it's much easier, you know, the imagination works a bit freer for me, and I never was able to go as you might say right for the jugular and distort it all over the place bang off. So that, you know, the distortions came naturally through a bad photograph; that's putting it at rather a disadvantage to myself, but, it is a technical point.

And what about, could you describe the kind of painter you had become now, after the war, in comparison to what you had been before the war?

Oh, I don't know. Well, there were various things, do you see, which helped me enormously. I had decided that, coming back after the war I had had enough of Picasso as an influence. How are we going for time?

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Oh, now this first show that I had immediately after the war, which was 1947 at Reid and Lefevre, Duncan MacDonald, very good man, and I had the show you see with Cecil Collins, I may have mentioned this already. And he was doing little pictures of the Perfect Fool, you know, the Fool pictures, all those pictures.

'The Holy Fool', yes.

'The Holy Fool'. And I of course was doing something really rather different, though of course some of them were based of course on one's experiences in Egypt, there was a large picture, an Egyptian picture, which was painted really very figuratively, as indeed all the pictures were figurative pictures but a little bit uncertain in style they became, and also in imagery. Coming back from the Middle East it was very difficult because one of the, from the point of view of my subject matter, the subject matter became quite interesting, because being in the Middle East, well I had this sense of belonging and of a history which went back right to biblical times, though what I was interested in was the Hellenistic and Greek period of, in other words the Ptolemaic stuff, and the early Islamic. And this was reflected in this exhibition I gave in several pictures, some of which actually did use Mycenaean pots and things like that, which I had collected in the Middle East, and also in the subject matter which included two pictures which were in some way trying to disguise one's sexuality and one's interests, and one's historical feeling, to remove it and put it into a subject matter context. And this gave rise to two pictures, and one was of the Ezebekiah Gardens, arcade leading to there, where all prostitutes both male and female used to collect at night and people used to prowl, which had a sort of curious thing because it was not like any place like, that one had been before. And then also there was, one picture was rather like that, and the other picture, do you see, also came out of that, and curiously enough it had a dunce or a fool in it, as Theseus, and the picture was called 'The Death of the Minotaur', which obviously they are blatantly used imagery of the Picasso Minotaur things which I was aware of but it was in a different role altogether. And so, I had those two pictures. So then, when I was at Chelsea Polytechnic, I went there immediately after the war, my great friend there of course became Ceri Richards, and...

Had you known him beforehand, or not?

Oh yes, I had only known him very, rather slightly, but obviously I had known him a long time from when he first left the Royal College pretty well, pretty well back, not quite as long as that, but before any of the children were born. I remember going with Rupert to visit him

down in a studio off the Goldhawk Road in Stamford Green when, you know, the first infant was very small. And in talking with Ceri, who is enormously technically gifted, he was a very very beautiful draughtsman, we both...I was feeling, and so was he feeling, although goodness me, his own pictures were heavily influenced by Picasso at that time, we decided that we had had enough of Picasso, because Picasso seemed to rule everything, and so we rather thought that it would be better, you know, to go back to Matisse, as being much pure purely painting and perhaps less illustrative. The illustrative thing both suits Ceri of course and also ultimately suits me, but it seemed to be a very wise thing to go back to Matisse rather than to Picasso, who ruled over, could do anything.

Could you define that, when you use illustrative, what...?

Oh, I think that basically, in a much bigger way, Picasso is a graphic artist rather than a painter. Whereas Matisse is purely, much more purely, absolutely a painter. I don't know whether that makes it clear enough, but...

Well one always gets worried about words like illustrative and decorative if they're used in a pejorative way.

Yes I know. Yes, well the thing is this, I like decorative things, and unless a picture, a thing has a decorative, and is good to look at, I mean why paint it, do you know what I mean? Anyway...

So should one be making beautiful objects?

Well I wanted to make beautiful objects, we also wanted to make beautiful objects, and one wanted to not be tied down to Picasso's iconography, I suppose that is it.

So many people felt sort of trapped underneath Picasso's...

Trapped underneath, yes. And this of course immediately began to show when I had the second exhibition at Erica Brausen in Hanover Street.

The Hanover Gallery.

The Hanover Gallery, when I showed the two, the first and the second 'Cyclists', which were both, the first 'Cyclist' was consciously based upon Matisse, and there was a considerable use of colour. And I became very interested in colour, and that's one of the things that the Middle

East did for me, it did release a colour thing, which for some reason or another in my old age has completely departed from me, and I'm back on the old monochromatic scale, partly because one can get space just as easily in a simple manner, in a simple way, rather than finding the exact colour to fit into the space. It all gets, you know...

Yes but some people get more colourful with advancing age as painters.

Yes, some people do. It seems to work the reverse way with me. But anyway that's neither here nor there. But, all those early pictures right through to the 'Cyclist' period, that's to say the mid-Fifties, were really done on one's, wanting to move away from, well Picasso's imagery, and this kind of, sort of whirligig of forms which he has so readily at his disposal of any kind.

So would you and Ceri have discussions about this, or would you just say things in passing perhaps, or just look at each other's pictures?

I don't know, I just, you ask this question and that has been passing through my mind, because I can't remember particularly any particular discussion in which it came up. I think it was more a shared feeling which must have been arrived at by talking together, because one does talk an awful lot. And I suppose in a certain sense it must have been what I call in the air, between us.

A not necessarily spoken sympathy.

Yes that's right. And we were both, we knew that we were espousing a Matissian aspect rather than a Picasso one. We thought we were getting rid of Picasso, but of course we didn't, not really.

Difficult task.

Difficult task, yes.

So did your painting become less representational at this time?

Well it had become more obviously decorative, and areas of undisturbed colour.

Simpler?

I never succeeded really in being very simple. It made me be simple, and it made me lay the thing out with a pattern. Nowadays I let the pattern find itself, I suppose that's certain...I can only do that if I use very limited colour, whereas if I am using areas of colour, you have to divide a picture up into areas, and it made me think quite a lot about that, and it made me think a lot about how you actually do communicate in terms of line modelling or colour or whatever. And very simple things, but every picture has more light in it than dark, or more dark in it than light. So it will ultimately have, tends to have either more, a blue base or a red base or a green base or a yellow base or whatever, and you make your composition communicate through contrast, and it's just like a piece of music, long and short, light and dark, but long and short, big areas against small areas, big undisturbed areas, small disturbed areas, and vice versa. And you know, it's just, it's just really making communication in the way all communication is made from one human being to another; it has a grammar and a phrasing. And of course, in a certain sense it's easier to learn grammar from Matisse than it is from Picasso.

Why?

Well you would have thought, do you see, with Picasso, with the Cubists, with all that breaking down, people tried to make a thing out of it, but it conspicuously fails. But with Matisse, and everything that he says about painting in his books, it makes you perceive what the basic things are. With Picasso, I mean he just breaks all the rules and could do anything that he liked, and always went - I think Maggi Hambling put it very well the other day - he always went for the jugular without any, without mincing words about it, whereas with Matisse there's endless revisions and simplifications to try and get to the aesthetical essence, the aesthetic essence and core of the thing. Of course, I think sometimes, I think with pictures like 'The Russian Blouse', in actual fact Matisse ended really by emptying the baby with the bath water a bit, because I remember there was an exhibition at the Tate in which there were photographs of that picture in the course of its execution. It started as one kind of picture and ended up a completely different kind of picture, which was absolutely fascinating, it taught me a lot. And also it taught me a lot, the way that Matisse practised so hard before he attempted the final thing, so you will find fifty drawings of a jug, simply in order to put the jug in right on the painting.

Well that's extraordinary.

It is extraordinary. I mean all those things I found much more illuminating than gazing with admiration and trying to emulate Picasso, I think that's really what comes. I don't think I can make it plainer than that.

How did you feel that your teaching work had a bearing on what you were doing as a painter?
Did one interfere with the other, or did they feed each other?

No, well they did, they did, simply really a matter of time. When Ceri and I were first teaching at Chelsea after the war, we had to train people to pass the NDD diploma, which was a ridiculous exam and very old-fashioned, and they had to do a composition called the 'Comp' on a, on a set theme, which was sometimes an absolutely ridiculous kind of theme, or else you could take risks. And it had to have a finished life painting, and you know, all those kind of academic things which you are supposed to have, but the composition was really absurd. And really I just trained people very largely to get through the exam and telling them that the exam was absolutely silly, but if they will just follow, do what I tell them, they will get through. They always got through, we never really had any failures at all, and I never had any failures, and it was purely a cynical operation. The real teaching that I did came from, I really don't know what. I mean, one tried to explain a little bit what one was learning oneself, and also of course, I found that really I didn't learn anything from the students at all, they were miles behind me in thought, quite rightly, and so I taught what I thought was good for them to know and introduced them of course to things further on. And then of course, this was before the war, you know, as I say the climate was with Marion Richardson and all those people at the back, in the background, and children's work, that was when Henry Moore was there under...

William Rothenstein?

No, Williamson at Chelsea.

Oh at Chelsea.

Yes. He was a very good teacher, and a very imaginative, chose...he had the best staff of any of those London County Council schools really at that moment. The object, really, as I said in my book, was to present the artist with his personality at the end of the period, and that was really the same both before and after the war. And of course this does away with academic standards in the end, and so in the end of course the whole of teaching was uprooted, and Bill Coldstream was put in to formulate another broader thing which would use younger artists as visiting teachers; it was founded on a visiting teacher basis, and the fact that nearly all the, a lot of the art schools throughout the country were attached to polytechnics, and nearly all the headmasters of all the art schools in the country were occupied by RCA, ex-RCA students with second-class degrees, and some of them were getting a bit long in the tooth and really the thing was getting ridiculous. But of course, Bill changed the thing a lot, and not all...it

didn't really work out. I can go on...I was going to make a connection with what I have been saying, but it has escaped my mind, so I think I need a short pause at this point. [BREAK IN RECORDING] So this preoccupation with Matisse lasted, I suppose from '47 to the middle of the Fifties. The picture that I won with Lucian Freud, the prize for the Festival of Britain, was Matissian, that would be 1952, but by 1954 when I was trying to build on a series of cyclist pictures on to a kind of secure and slightly more, I thought would be a better form, I began to lose my way a bit, and then of course, being at the Slade, I thought that I ought to have a rappel à l'ordre, and I think that was quite right. I had come to a kind of, a dead end. And so instead of painting pictures so much entirely out of my head, I thought I ought to tie myself down to a more direct visual experience deriving immediately from things that I could see. This found its expression of course throughout that period, and to the end, nearly to the end of the Fifties, in the series of paintings that I also did curiously enough at Gravesend, that were using landscape more than the figure subjects like the cyclists, which had been the consolidation of this Matissian period. And then of course, I got very interested in the whole science of putting pictures together, and about the idea of geometry, and I suppose about the best example of that is the free version that I did of Signorelli's picture, 'The Education of Pan', which arose in a very peculiar way. I was really suffering from painter's block one day, and Rupert said, 'For Christ's sake, go off and copy something, copy something from a picture or an Old Master,' you know. So, I thought well why not? So I went up then, for the course of the next two or three months I came up with the Signorelli version. And of course as the original is almost destroyed it was a very good thing. And also I got entranced with the geometry, because this was part of learning to put a picture together. And then I got attracted by the idea that in the Renaissance time the geometry of course also had a symbolic meaning; I mean it's not just geometry, it's not just like Victor Pasmore's early Hammersmith ones when he got interested in the Golden Section, and painted a nice moon shining over Hammersmith Terrace, and then he said, 'Of course, it's on the Golden Section, I didn't think it was quite in the right place so I just moved it a little.' You know what I mean? You know, this is how an artist should work of course. But it wasn't like that, I got intrigued with it in quite a big way. And then, the Signorelli picture was bought by Sidney Bernstein, and I had an exhibition in '58 I think it was at the Leicester Galleries in which I sold four pictures to him, and I thought my name was made, but after that, nothing was made actually, it didn't work out, it didn't get me anywhere actually.

What was he at that time?

He was Director of Granada Films. And the pictures hung, one of the pictures hung in the staff dining room, a sort of canteen really, and the whole place was run very well by Bernstein on rather socialistic lines really. And another one was a studio interior, which was again very

free you see, and took a lot of liberties with the way in which things actually looked. And then I decided, partly through being with Bill, this puritan side, I began to think, well, I must watch out, because things are getting too free and is this a discipline or not, you see. So, and then that led to my doing the Antique Room series, and of course to a restriction of the colour range.

To what?

Well, oh well instead of using areas of colour, it became much more restricted in colour. They're not tonal paintings like Bill's but they're limited in colour, because it gets too complicated, and you distort in a different kind of way, it's quite different. So that led to the Antique Rooms, which I did one, figures in their settings, and I did the Slade Antique Room, and that got a prize from the Contemporary Art Society at the Tate. And very stupidly the Tate went and sent it off to Huddersfield where over the years it simply collected dirt. It's all right now, but when I had to have it back for my Whitechapel exhibition about eight or ten years afterwards - no wait a minute, no more than that, my Whitechapel exhibition was '60...

3.

'63. Oh no, about eight or ten years, it arrived late for the opening of the exhibition, it was one of the key pictures, and was so filthy that we had to wash it very carefully first, and I was assisted by one of the restorers from the Courtauld Institute. And, anyway after that they did look after it a bit more, a bit better. But why the Tate...Alloway liked it very much, and, but they didn't, they adopted instead I think a very large decorative Ivon Hitchens, which I am afraid I must frankly say was a mistake. The Ivon Hitchens finally landed up in one of the studios at the Slade, and so my 'Antique Room', of which there were two versions, the second version was bought by the Tate, have lasted, you know, have fared from the point of view of being looked after rather better. Though of course they ought to have had the first one, and didn't.

Do you think this was also partly in response to the fact that you were teaching theatre design at the time at the Slade, that you wanted a break from that?

Oh yes, I wanted a break from that. I thought, originally when I thought, well I'll teach the theatre design because it won't impinge upon my development as a painter so much, I can treat it as a hobby, something outside, just, like [INAUDIBLE], outside myself. And when I finally of course, after the kind of eight years that I was there, and it didn't quite work out like

that in the end, and it never does, but anyway, I don't think that really...did it influence my painting at all, the stage design?

No I thought there might have been a reaction to it.

I find it too difficult to say. No no, I don't think it was a reaction to that; it was a reaction actually to being at the Slade I think. And, I could see there was a point in a lot of this, do you see, and I thought that pictures were getting...could easily get a bit... There always come times in one's life, one works five or six years perhaps in one particular way, and then you get, you don't exactly get tired of it but it comes to the end of it for you, and that's what happened. I think that the earlier Matissian phase came to an end in two phases, with the Signorelli picture, and then the, well they were almost the same period, Signorelli and the 'Antique Room', and, I don't regret having done a lot of geometry at all, it sharpened up what you could do actually with the area of a picture; you got an area and you begin to be able to split it up in your mind. You don't have to do anything, you automatically split it up. And I don't believe in applying geometry as a piece of machinery in a painting for me anyway, but what it did do, it did sharpen up my ideas about proportion and what you could do with a canvas. And I suppose really that was one of the ways in which I did teach.

Which is to do with construction.

With...actually, what you can actually teach and what is not purely a matter of opinion.

Practical things.

What?

The practical things.

The practical things, and how to practise in your eyes, in your hands, to improve your performance; not teach, 'Oh yes, oh you musn't do that, you see, you must measure to make sure you've got everything in the right place. And, I don't know why you are using all this colour when you don't need...' you know, so you've got Bill's pictures. And then, you've got somebody else saying, 'You've got to have colour field painting,' do you know what I mean? So everybody is taught colour field. Or then, everybody is taught sort of metaphysical, other kinds of painting, and so we can have now artists ranging from Roger de Grey and myself to Damien Hirst, Andy Warhol and the lot, you know what I mean? But anyway I confined

myself, tried to confine myself, to teaching what I thought could be taught, facts about colour and facts about things which train the eye, but not simply train them how to copy nature.

No, composition, how to...

So it was composition. I can tell you more about that on a teaching basis. We've probably had our half-hour, haven't we?

Yes.

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.....of the first Abstract Expressionists at the Tate, '54?

6.

'56.

I think '56.

I think it was '56, I can't remember. But, this exhibition of course had enormous influence on most painters in this country, and certainly had on me. It gave me a courage to, all this business of a brush-stroke and leaving a mark, and I very soon became very suspicious of just leaving marks all over the place. It had an enormous freeing influence on my painting, because having had rather a strict period in the middle Fifties at the Slade when I decided to do 'Antique Rooms' and be orderly, it was very nice to break out and not to be orderly any more. And so, though I always retained what you would call a figurative basis to all these freer pictures, I couldn't really function without it because I couldn't be exactly like the earlier English Abstract Expressionists who just went on throwing paint and things until you decided the picture was finished because you couldn't go on any more.

Like whom?

Like Moynihan and Tibble, you know, that school.

Objective Abstraction.

Objective Abstraction, yes. Which was very interesting, but it didn't actually influence my work in any kind of way, but the American Abstract Expressionists of course did enormously, and it freed one out, and in the end, I became in the end very, through Bryan Robertson very friendly with Lee Krasner of course, who was really very remarkable and wonderful woman.

Did she spend time in England?

She used to come over to England quite a lot, and my exhibition at the Whitechapel which was in '63, she couldn't understand why I hadn't sold all the pictures, because she said I most certainly would have done in New York. But in actual fact I sold one painting to Wystan Auden, and one drawing to Stephen Spender, and I think that was the lot, in spite of the fact

that, you know, it went in for...and I had extraordinarily good publicity with David Sylvester behind me and everybody.

That didn't make you want to show in New York?

No, well I realised, there would be no connections for getting me there, and also do you see, a lot of those...this of course helped to, you know, it was very important for my career at Camberwell where I moved in 1958, two years after this exhibition.

Could you say anything more about Lee Krasner though, I wondered? I mean, did you...?

Oh, I just thought she was a marvellous woman, I liked her very much, she was warm-hearted and very very, with this American gift of, she had a certain quality about her that you don't always get in this country, and the same with Helen Frankenthaler. And I think it comes with international success, quite frankly, and coming over to a foreign country too perhaps they appeared really better perhaps than they did in their own country, I don't know. I'm just thinking about all the people that I've known very well who then became extremely famous, and then suddenly they begin addressing you as if they were a public figure, you know, a national figure, which of course they are, but, it doesn't always...somehow it grates a little bit when that happens.

Who are you thinking of?

I was thinking really of Henry Moore very largely, and of course Graham Sutherland too, and...

What about Francis Bacon?

And Francis in a way. With this enormous success they move into a different world, and it's a world, really it is a different world, of money and international réclame and meeting presidents, and Ministers of Art in Paris, Germany, Tokyo, Santiago, you know, Costa Rica, God knows where, everywhere in fact.

I thought one of the things they always said about Bacon was that he remained largely unchanged by that.

I think basically in person totally unchanged, but there was in actual fact for me a change, partly perhaps because in a certain sense, I had had everything out of Francis Bacon that I

could get, and for a time with Rupert as well, we were more of, you know, we shared certain things in common in a way of what we were rebelling against and what we actually liked. I mean, for instance there was a considerable accord, because Francis of course was extremely well read, and he had a strong feeling of course for Sophocles and Greek, those Greek theories and all. And of course this was Rupert's territory as well, so at the time one got on very well on that kind of basis. I felt that I could...tragedy was a bit beyond me and I didn't want to paint a painting that was a crime. Francis wanted to paint a painting which would be as shocking as a real crime, and of course he got near it but of course you can't in a painting do it, because a painting remains a painting, like a painting of a dog is never a dog, it's always a painting of a dog.

I think Sickert in that Camden Town murder series of paintings got quite close to it.

Yes, he got fairly close to it, and of course Daumier did in one or two of these things. You can get quite close to it, but it's never the actual thing, and it never should be because otherwise it would lose its power as a picture oddly enough. So, that was the state of affairs when I went to Camberwell, and I went to Camberwell very largely... Well of course Camberwell was in a pretty bad condition when I took over, because Leonard Daniels was a sweet man and was awfully good, was a wonderful head in one way, but in another way he was not very good at choosing staff, and he had the difficulty of course of succeeding Bill Coldstream and also Johnson of course - well, he succeeded Johnson as head of the school, and he had to deal with the painting school which had just lost Coldstream. And it had lost Coldstream, Pasmore, and that was it. And Bill wasn't, Bill Coldstream wasn't in Camberwell for very long before he moved to the Slade, only a year or two in actual fact, but of course he left a considerable mark. And then he appointed of course Gilbert Spencer. Well Gilbert is a very nice man, but my goodness me a bit cranky, and of course had no personality really for running a school. He was a much admired painter of Leonard Daniels, and he was a sweet man, but useless, and gradually the school ran down until the time I took it over, there were only 20 students left. And I got in very largely through various people who were determined, the assistant masters, really to get somebody, you know, to give the whole thing a kick in the arse, you know, absolutely. So anyway, whether I was capable of it or not, Mikey Salaman, Michael Salaman, rather a good painter, and a very nice man, I think he suggested me and pushed me, and they seemed to have persuaded Leonard Daniels that I should have it. And after all I had a certain reputation always, all the time, in any case. And so that's how I moved there in 1958, and had the most extraordinary time getting it all started up.

How long did you have to spend getting the place going?

Four years, three years, three years. Certainly two years. You can't do these things quickly at all. And also there was a considerable amount of opposition from various members of the staff, which I don't want to go into in great detail because it's small beer, but I had to fight various prejudices. There were very powerful elements in other parts of the school in the intermediate part who were able people but very sceptical of my ability to pull it off, and they really spent a lot of time unpicking what I was trying to do, which made it a bit slow. But anyway that was it. And of course I got into a position of pretty considerable power when Bill Coldstream's report was put it, and naturally enough was put on to the Summerson Committee, so that in 1962 I think it was, when...Camberwell was the first school to be inspected, and I wasn't half put through the mill on that, they really did. I suppose with a certain amount of humour they really took one right through the hoop. And there was, oh, that very nice sculptor, who was he?

Hubert Dalwood.

Hubert Dalwood, who was in, like a lot of conventional people, was entranced with the idea of being passé-paru with the university, so that we were talking all the time about university levels of education and things like that, which entirely threw me because I never thought about that. And so we had a very tough time, but of course the painting school passed, but of course the sculpture school didn't. That was of course for reasons for which, over which I had no control, but which then Leonard Daniels did.

So you had no jurisdiction over the sculpture at all?

No. On paper I was head of fine art and sculpture, which included sculpture, but it was explained to me when I went there by Leonard Daniels that he reserved really the running of the sculpture school as his prerogative. That was because there had been a very successful sculpture teacher there called Vogel, who was an Austrian refugee who was a very charismatic teacher and a very sweet man. And Leonard would not trust any English sculptor at all, not at all at all at all. And so he had appointed an Italian recommended by Manzu who was only too pleased to get this rather boring, and rather...actually it wasn't all that boring, but, he was a pastry cook sculptor really, as Italians can be, and obviously Manzu I think wanted to get him out of his hair so he sent him off as the head of a sculpture school in England. And of course it didn't work. So, Leonard Daniels failed three times to get the sculpture school through, and he didn't of course until he finally appointed one of the people that I wanted him to appoint, while I was still at Camberwell. But we can wipe that up but... So you can see it was quite an interesting situation. So I arrived in '58, which also coincided I'm glad to say with a very successful exhibition which I had at the Leicester Galleries, where

I showed the Antique Rooms, at least one, the second Antique Room, and a lot of other paintings as well which already were beginning to show the American influence, the Signorelli pictures, and an interior of the studio, very free, quite large, which were all bought by Sidney Bernstein, who bought several smaller ones to give away. So I thought my name was made. Well of course it wasn't, I don't know why, because I did very well in that exhibition. So that helped me right in to Camberwell, so I went into this terrible little room that I had over the porch, which was designed in the Gothic style, and it had little Gothic leaded pane windows with stained glass in them by Walter Crane, and of course the gallery next door, which is all covered up, had an immense parquet floor with a marquetry design in the middle, a very large size, by of course Walter Crane as well, but they've covered it all up.

They do, and uncover it once every so often.

They do, yes. I can quite see why they must cover it up, because people with stiletto heels would have just bored holes in it all over. And, I set about it one way or another, and of course knowing everybody was extremely useful, and in those days the schools really ran on the visiting staff, not on the permanent staff. On the permanent staff, I had Mikey Salaman, I think Mikey was on the permanent staff, and there was Philip Matthews of course who was my chief...he had been...he had wanted the job himself, and he had been in the school, he was a pupil of Coldstream's and had been in the school for fifteen years already, so he knew all the back stairs. And though he was enormously helpful, he was one of the people actually who I discovered afterwards had been destroying what I was trying to do, until he finally became converted, but it made things pretty difficult. And one of the earliest people I appointed there was...switch it off. [BREAK IN RECORDING] Charles Howard, who was of course the...he was the first totally abstract painter to be appointed in any art school in this country, which is quite funny.

And was he a good painter in his own right?

Oh yes, he was a very recherché, very particular painter. He said, 'You know Robert, you know, I don't ever find painting a frisky business.' Which I think was a wonderful way of putting it. He was a sweet man. And what we did was, we worked out a preliminary training course for these people, because I found they came up from the intermediate in those days totally ignorant really of what I was wanting to do, and so I had to put them right back to start again, and I did what I have tried to explain in that lecture that I gave ten years afterwards, that was the Sausmarez lecture, to teach only what could be taught, and not what one's opinion was. In other words, no good going round saying, 'Oh I like that picture, you've done so well,' but you've got to teach something which is teachable, which of course is what Bill

did you see, that sort, Bill gave his strength, he said you draw and you measure things and you get it right, you don't just use your eyes, you measure. Well, so I worked out with Charles Howard a number of exercises to do with tone and with colour and the relationship of the two, and they were very informative exercises. I won't go into the details now. And then I discovered that they were being unpicked, and then the students quite suddenly started to like them very much; they were very very anti at first and then they started to like them, because they found that if they obeyed my orders they produced pictures which didn't look like what they thought they ought to look like. For instance, I used to give them, they used to divide black, from white to black into five or seven intermediate greys, five intermediate greys to black really it was, or seven you could do, but it was better to reduce it to about five, five or six. You then did, I used to arrange with Charles very carefully done little still lifes, rather monochromatic, out of bits of ordinary brown paper and grey paper and white paper, and jugs and bottles and little pots and things like that: terribly boring looking things. Well what happened was that very often do you see, the background was the same tone as the edge of the jug. What do you do? You're not painting jugs, you're painting the tones, so therefore you've got to ignore it. So in the end you get a picture that looks entirely different from what you originally thought. That makes them think. Then they had to take the same thing, do you see, and then turn it into colour, so that the colour values corresponded to the tone values and also the strength of colour. And of course that does also make you think very hard too. So those were just simple exercises of light and of colour and tone. So that's how I tried to do things. And then of course at the same time, Charles then became extremely popular. He was a terribly good teacher in the sweetest possible manner, and one of the girls who chiefly hated it to start off with, she hated the thing, 'I hate it. He's so like my father.' (laughs) She was awfully nice, and she ended up of course devoted to him, but anyway... Then of course it was possible for me in those days, by, the numbers of students rapidly increased in number, do you see, and as they increased in number I could take in more and more visiting teachers. So that enabled me to take in, oh, well take the most famous one, Auerbach for instance, and I gave Ron Kitaj his first job immediately he left the Royal College. And then after that, then Ron left; he was very good, Ron was, but he was a bit exasperating as a head of department, because I used to make him then carry on the simple exercises that I had done before, and fulfil it in his own kinds of ways, and of course it was very stimulating in those days, everything was fresh. And so we drew up, he drew up a series, he drew up, being Ron he drew up a programme of instruction, you know, for my approval, and I took one look at it and saw that the programme, if it was to be done properly, would take three years to unfold. You know, absolutely wonderful, everything was gone into to the last moment of exhaustion. So I used to have to point out, 'Look Ron this is absolutely wonderful but you can't get it into the time; you've only got a year of this, and the terms don't last very long. I'm afraid you can only do this and that,' you know. So we never got his full programme. And then when he

left, I put in, on Ron's recommendation, Adrian Berg, who did it extremely well. And then of course I had Patrick Proctor, and John Hubbard.

Anthony Fry was around, was he?

Well Anthony Fry was, I inherited Anthony Fry as a visiting teacher from the previous regime, and of course, and the other teacher who curiously enough never apparently ever did anything who I inherited, was Richard Eurich. Very patient man, and, he used to sit about in the common-room all day and apparently never do anything. But in actual fact they had one or two students of his, and he was very, actually in a quiet way was very good. He actually was of course one of Leonard Daniels' appointments.

Did Auerbach have a great following?

Oh enormous following. I had Auerbach in in order to destroy the dot-and-carry-one system that was absolutely rooted into Camberwell, and it was the greatest difficulty to break it out. I had a lot of funny times when I went in there first, because there were two very advanced boys who were actually very funny actually, and real little toughs, and they both of them had talent; one of them had quite a lot of talent and the other one had a wayward talent. And he went to Turkey and started to make paper in the Himalayas for a bit and then came back to England, and I think he got into a spot of trouble one way or another with drugs in those days, but that's neither here nor there, but they were a very amusing pair. And they said, 'Oh I suppose you've come here, you've got the job because you teach because you can't paint,' you know. Bop, like that, you know. So I thought, well I'll get you in the end. So, and then the other thing, they were really frightfully funny, because they spotted that one of the teachers in the school, not in my part of the school, in the intermediate part of the school, was gay. He used to take these students, these young boys out, the students, to do drawings in Dulwich Park. Well, of course this was the invitation, naturally enough, for the more adventurous to scarper at once, which they did, do you see, and were stopped by the park keeper at the gates, asking them where they were going off to. So, they said, 'Oh we're being pursued by this...' (laughing) They were being pursued, do you see, by...didn't quite know what. So, when this teacher came along to chase them he was stopped. (laughs) So in the end I got my revenge, because one of them was doing quite a...doing his usual kind of life painting, which was a bit sort of Coldstream and a bit in a muddle, I did what I never usually did, I said, 'Just give me the brushes'. And in three minutes, you know, I had sort of put the thing absolutely, you know, re-done it for him. I said, 'It doesn't matter what colours you...why are you doing all these darned colours?' And, you know, you can do it out of bright orange and bright green if you like, and so, you know, I was quite good at making brown with those kinds of

combinations. And so that put paid to that little revolution. And then of course I had to have Frank Auerbach in, who simply filled all the classrooms with masses of charcoal which got ground into the floors, which all the cleaners objected to very much, and when it got into the painting school there was a terrible row one evening when I was lying with a terrible flu at home in bed in Wimbledon, and rung up by an infuriated Mikey Salaman to say that he had sat in a palette of this rotten girl who has been painting knee-deep in paint all over the place, and they had ruined an entirely new pair of trousers. What was I going to do about it? (laughs) But anyway, I can tell you it did the job.

How long did he stay?

Oh he stayed a year, a year or so. And then of course what happened, and it would happen all along the line with me, as soon as they began to get going in other kinds of ways as well of course they were all snapped up by the Slade, so I lost Auerbach to the Slade, and there he remained of course for ages and ages and ages. And then we had Adrian Stokes down to give talks, you know.

Would they be art history?

Yes. Oh he was very... though sometimes his books were absolutely unreadable because they were so arcane, in actual fact he gave the most beautiful and awfully good lecture. And we had Michael Podro, that was partly my appointment and let's say also Leonard Daniels', we managed to agree about that. I always thought I thought of Podro first, but Leonard always thinks that he did, so perhaps he is right and I am wrong in this case.

What was Podro?

Michael Podro did the history of art.

What was he a specialist in?

Well mostly Renaissance really. He's now head of Essex University fine art, you know, art history. A very distinguished man, very very distinguished, very nice man. And we had a lot of people with distinguished minds coming in which I must say they hadn't been entirely without at Camberwell before, but by the time I left, do you see, the intake, we had about 100 students, so it was a very very different picture by the time I finished. And I think I even left before...oh there was a terrible scene in the sculpture school, because this Italian went back home to Italy for a kind of busman's holiday for a considerable time, and so I put in two

sculptors to foot the bill, and that was George Fullard and Bob Clatworthy. Well of course, that set all those Alexandrian, Hellenistic sculptors who had made little nude bronzes, very pretty little nude bronzes, that set them all by the ears, but of course those little nude bronzes weren't going to get them the diploma, do you see? So, oh, then I had an awful time; then I took to doing some sculpture and going round myself there a lot, because they thought perhaps we could get some communication between sculptors and painters. Actually of course it doesn't ever work. I knew it wouldn't work, but there was a great idea that we ought to try and make it work. I knew it wouldn't work because sculptors work in an entirely different tempo from painters; it just takes longer, I mean it's just as simple as that. So then I did a piece of sculpture there, and the staff there who were wedded to the previous teacher, Vogel[ph], and also through him to Burani[ph], who enabled them to go on to do the same thing only a bit safer, really we had, it was a very unhappy time actually, I hated it. And I did a piece of sculpture and they did their best to fuck it up actually. I don't want to go into the details of that, but it was quite interesting those kind of battles. However, because one won in the end the whole lot, and in the end of course he had to have Paul de Monchaux, who was one of the people...and Evans, what's his name...?

Merlyn?

Not Merlyn Evans, no. Sculptor. It doesn't matter. But anyway, he really had to have in the people that he could have had in the first place, and then they got the diploma of course.

Was this piece of sculpture the thing that was in the Whitechapel show, your Whitechapel exhibition?

Yes I think it was, yes. It was, yes.

Made in plaster or something?

Yes, yes. Oh, and then there was a much bigger one after that.

There were two, weren't there.

Yes there were two. Was it in the Whitechapel show? The big one like that. It never really came off. I worked terribly hard at it, but they wouldn't help me, they wouldn't...they weren't useful, there was no...

Rapport.

No rapport, and in the end, when I had to leave it they kind of neglected it, do you know what I mean, so that when I came back it wasn't in a proper condition and things like that.

What made you want to do it though in the first place?

Well, I'll tell you what made me want to do it. Partly through the idea of Matisse, do you see. Now, one of the things, if you're working in colour a great deal like I was at that time, and Matisse.....

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.....to sculpture really for the same reasons as I had learnt really from Matisse who had turned to sculpture, that if you are working in colour like I was very largely in those days, it's all to do you see with space as well, and if you've actually got your hands on a piece of clay and you are modelling a figure, which of course Matisse did superbly well, it's like handling...you kind of know where your surface is, and goes back to...which in some curious way is allied to painting once you remove it from pure illustration or, you know, well purely ordinary realism as you might say, modelled realism. You need to give yourself some feelings of certainty, which curiously enough in some ways I think without thinking about it then gets transferred. And I can't make it really clearer than that, but that's what I felt about it. It gave one a certain fact that...

Physicality.

Of the physicality of the painting, and it also enabled one somehow to feel the modelling and the space, the distance between things, and how you wanted to make it, whether you flattened it out.

So in a sense it was more a way of learning more about painting than actually making sculpture for its own sake.

Yes, it was...it was more about learning about painting than making sculpture for its own sake. And I happened to make a piece of sculpture into the bargain. Anyway it didn't ever come off, and...

What was it of?

Oh, well one of them was based on, one was based on a drawing that I had done of figures, and the other one was based on one of those semi anthropomorphic Abstract Expression, American, you know, that I was doing at that time, and which were based on the idea of human beings crushed between two weights. It's called 'The Monument'. And I thought that I would do 'The Monument' in sculpture, which is a good idea because the idea could have been done in sculpture but it was probably a compositional idea which was beyond what I could do. And though it was quite good, it was never, I never felt it was Réussi. And as I say, work was made extremely difficult and unsympathetic for me by opposition within the sculpture school, and under this opposition in the school between Leonard Daniels and myself about the running really of the schools and the split of the painting, of the fine art department

into two, all of which was quite above board, he explained it to start off, but it ended up...you see it was very difficult. I learned one thing: what's on paper legally is the thing which is the right, and you've got to stick by it, but I took over the job and I gave way on an important issue which I shouldn't have done, which I didn't see that it was important, because naturally enough I was only too pleased to have a school to run, which I knew that I could run on the back of my hand actually, and...no, I became terribly absorbed in it and gave too much time to it, because these things can't be done without time.

So...

So that, at that moment, when the school crisis was at its height and the Italian pastry-maker was still there, Rupert then, do you see, his health had declined so much that it was impossible for me to keep my life together. I mean, because what happened was that frequently during the day I was telephoned that Rupert was becoming so impossibly...because he had lost his mind, do you see, that they couldn't... We tried everything, everything, and he wouldn't accept anybody but me to look after him, and then even then, do you see, he wouldn't accept me sometimes. It became extremely difficult and really, his mind had gone, was really going, and one always thought that one...it had been going actually for quite a long time, but when it started off one didn't know. And then when it was half-way there, one knew that things were slipping, and he knew that things were slipping but it didn't seem to be all that serious, you know what I mean? And then quite suddenly, fffitt! it went like that.

Was it like someone going gaga or having Alzheimer's or something, or...?

Yes, exactly, I think it's exactly like that. I mean, it began, there were hallucinations, and he used to go out for walks and get lost and not know where he was, and had to be returned, you know. And it became a nightmare, so in the end I thought, there's only one thing to do, because I didn't know what to do, but I gave up, I resigned from Camberwell in the middle really of this terrible sculpture row, which rather embittered me from a...a part of my career I really look back with considerable satisfaction over, and curiously enough, a lot of gratitude in a way to...though I didn't see eye to eye with Leonard Daniels, he was an extremely kind and understanding man, and he ran the school very well through an extremely difficult period.

Was he Principal?

Yes, he was the Principal. And of course I was retained there in an advisory capacity when I left, I didn't abandon it completely. And then of course they put in Philip Matthews, who was the person who should have had the job instead of me, and we needn't go into the long history

of that, because, he had to assist in what was probably inevitably, the inevitable decline of the school really, which wasn't quite fair, because after the second Coldstream report and then the destruction of the London art schools and their having to, the London art schools having to become...four, the four schools, was the only way they could retain any kind of independence against the new regime of pulling all the art schools back into polytechnics, and also depriving them of all the money and also depriving them of the possibility of having visiting teachers. Well, nobody can stand up to that kind of thing, and all our art schools now are beginning to angle their way through this by I think their courage and devotion. But my goodness, it knocked them all silly quite frankly.

Are you glad to be out of it?

Oh very glad to be out of it really. As I say, I never wanted to teach in the first place, and I never regarded it as my main occupation in life, ever, ever, so it was really always a nuisance. And, I suppose really, people used to ask me why I have been so successful as a teacher; I don't know, I always was, but I wouldn't, simply wouldn't know, and I must say I owed a lot to help from various people in a certain sense in changing the school I was in, helped in a curious way by Leonard Daniels, in the same way as I had been helped by Bill Coldstream at the theatre school, and I was always treated rather indulgently by Williamson at Chelsea. But if somebody asked me, why was I so successful a teacher at Camberwell, I would just say, 'I haven't the faintest idea'. But looking back on it now, and having just read 'Answers to Unanswerable Questions', I begin to see perhaps why I was.

That's your lecture.

That was my lecture. Because if there was that kind of thinking behind it, I can see it came through without one's knowing it.

But this surely links in with what you've said before about your sort of public-spirited side which comes from your parents, and that tradition of...

Yes. Yes, well of course that tradition of course was very strong, you see, with Leonard Daniels and all those people. And, I don't know how it is now, I don't know. Goldsmiths' of course really has taken the place as the foremost place now. I used to go...

The Slade is still pretty strong.

And the Slade is very strong. And curiously enough the Royal Academy Schools is a good school now. In some curious way that big upheaval of Bill's, which destroyed the old regime, and though from about 1970 onwards the Government have progressively done their best to destroy it, I think it received such an impetus that it has carried through. But when one thinks of the talent that was lost in the schools for teaching, and also the certain scarcity of I think principals who had a clear idea of what they ought to do as teachers quite frankly.

Well it's the trouble with this idea that, quite often mediocre talents are drawn into teaching.

Yes. And of course the idea that doing your own thing, which was so attractive during the Sixties and early Seventies, which of course encourages all the Craig Martins and many other people who are also related to performance arts, this is all very well but it's never a discipline, and I think that this is what happened, that there are probably too many people in the art world now, which one will get through. After all society gets the kind of art that it deserves up to a certain...well probably entirely, because it's too difficult to disentangle. I think society can deliver body blows to extremely valuable things which they destroy without knowing it, and similarly also they give opportunities, and I think we get the kind of art we deserve quite frankly, and certainly the kind of schools we deserve, all along the line.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

Robert, after leaving Camberwell you went home to look after Rupert.

Yes, that's what happened really, because, the trouble is in a certain sense he wouldn't see anybody but me, but at the same time I'm not an equipped nurse to look after anybody, and he of course absolutely refused to have anybody to look after him, and it became a nightmare. And neither Constance Foljambe who looked after us both, neither she nor I could cope any more. So after about nine months of that, the doctor said, well you know, you've just got to have a holiday yourself, otherwise I'm going to have two patients on my hands instead of one. And so I spent a terrible time trying to find nursing homes, and I can't tell you what a gloomy occupation that is, until finally I found St. Andrew's Hospital in Northampton, where surprisingly Gyles Isham, Sir Gyles Isham was one of the governors. And as Gyles had been one of the witnesses, the male witness, the man witness in 'The Dog Beneath the Skin', and was well-known to us because he was interested in the Group Theatre and had appeared in odd performances, and was a governor of the hospital, he recognised when I sent him the application, who it was, and he didn't actually come forward but in actual fact he made it possible. And so, he went there, Rupert went there, and I went off...I went off to Greece for a holiday.

Didn't Northampton seem quite a long way away though?

Yes, but it was by far the best place, I mean it because... And they made it a thing when he went into Northampton that I wasn't to come and see him, because otherwise he would never settle, and, I hadn't fully realised at the time that this was obviously going to be for keeps. So with Gregory Brown I went off to Greece, and... I had bought a car, a little Triumph Spitfire. I couldn't get Rupert to let me buy a motor car to drive him around. [BREAK IN RECORDING - RM COUGHING] So I bought - I couldn't persuade Rupert to have a motor car to drive him around in, so in the end I bought a motor car, the Spitfire, and I went off to Greece with Gregory Brown, who in actual fact had more or less, he rescued me from an impossible situation quite frankly. And the interesting thing is that he was extremely, in height and colouring extremely like Rupert had been, and if you saw them together it was almost like relations. And at the same time Gregory had an enormous gift for being with people, and he was one of the few people that he would allow me to go about with. But of course there was great objections also to the relationship, and in one of the sane moments he said, 'Well, I wouldn't mind if Gregory wasn't so young,' because after all he was at that time 19 to 20. And, you know, I had decided I would disregard this, and which was quite right, because in actual fact, it was in a certain sense the right thing, turned out to be totally the right thing to do. So, when we went to Greece I had this companionship with somebody which was...we really almost from the start, we really didn't have to talk very much, we just intuitively just got on, and it's been a bit like that all the time, and I don't really want to enlarge on that.

When did you first meet him?

And of course we met at Camberwell, and I had always been very contemptuous of all those ordinary art masters and their girlfriends who picked all their girlfriends up in art schools all the time, and of course I hadn't, but of course in the end I did, and it was a case quite frankly, in my case, of total infatuation in fact really. And I knew that at that time, and I was deeply suspicious of it, and I said to Gregory, you know, it won't last, and he said, 'Oh no, it's forever,' and it was, that's how it's turned out to be. It was he that made it.

Was he a student then?

No, he came as a model, and of course was immediately successful with Patrick Procktor and then started sitting for David Hockney, and I got a bit jealous about that. And then, anyway,

put the long and the short of it, in the end it wasn't that, it was me, and Gregory apparently had made up his mind about this, and...

That's rather unusual, isn't it?

It is unusual, because he wanted somebody, he desperately knew that he wanted somebody older.

An anchor.

An anchor. And also I knew perfectly well that he had had a girlfriend, and in fact he was even engaged to be married, totally unsuitable, and he was awfully pleased to get out of that, and I think in that marvellous way so was his mum. (laughs) Anyway that's the way life goes. So anyway...

Did your relationship develop before you went to Greece, or was that the place it...?

Oh no, the relationship developed quite a long way before. It was quite anxious-making going to Greece, because he went off, he had won an Abbey scholarship for travel, £100, and he decided to go all round the Middle East. Well, to send a little blond boy round the Middle East on his own in a bus, I thought was asking for danger, but of course I couldn't stop it so I had an agonising month or so while Gregory took a ship for Alexandria and then all up the coast through Beirut, through Damascus, and up to Antalya and through Turkey, where he became extremely ill and came back almost totally wrecked of course, but thank goodness all right.

So he had become a painter by this point?

Oh yes, he was an art student. He got the sack for going away down to Torquay or somewhere in Cornwall with a friend of his at the period when there was a school inspection on or something to do with, you know, these exams or something or another, and he and his friend were at once expelled, this Gerry Cooper, on their return, I think rather unfairly. So in order to get some money to keep on going somewhere, for a short time he became a model, and turned up at Camberwell as a model. And after that, I needn't say very much more.

But he enabled you to cope with what was happening.

He enabled me to cope with what was happening, because I had to have somebody for support, and... It was a funny kind of support actually, because I was supporting him at the same time. (laughs) It was quite funny really, but that's how in a way things really worked. And, anyway we went to Greece, and we were away for about two months. We more or less got our way through the car, which almost fell to pieces as soon as we got back, whereupon of course we bought a TR4, and then I realised that Rupert would never come back, he was totally...well, they said at St. Andrew's that he really didn't know what was happening to him at all. Actually I don't think they were right, I think that in all those cases, however dotty people appear there's a kind of core of personality and consciousness which goes. Now I used to go and see him, and he was always pleased to see me, which was a terrible effort, and he used to be...Connie said, 'You musn't do it, you musn't do it so often,' because it was very upsetting. But anyway, it was compulsive to do it, and I should have done it, you know... And anyway, then of course what happened was that the house at Wimbledon of course was far too big. We gave, Gregory and I we gave a couple of, several enormous parties there, with Bridget Riley and all kinds of people, David, everybody used to come, David Hockney, Patrick, everybody used to come to these parties. In a way that was quite a good thing, but in the end of course it was obvious that I had to get rid of the house, which turned out to be very difficult to sell, and finally I moved to Camden Town. Meanwhile, I had left Camberwell, but of course they continued me on as a kind of visitor, and also then I got offered a teaching job for six months at Newcastle with Rowntree where Hamilton...

Richard Hamilton.

Richard Hamilton and Rita Donagh were both teaching, and Richard Hamilton in charge of the, specifically of the art direction. And that was an odd experience actually, because I was a bit frightened of Richard Hamilton because our attitudes to life in a certain sense were entirely different. And the interesting thing is that though I always felt I didn't get on particularly well with him when I was there, after that I got extremely fond of him, and then also particularly of Rita Donagh, who I think is wonderful. So I had a curious time there, and amongst the other students there was Stephen Buckley, and of course Bryan Ferry, who was quite a number as they say, and always beautifully dressed, as you would imagine, and rather a good painter, just in the same way as this other boy who had gone into the Pink Floyd at Camberwell, was the same kind of elegant character.

Who was that? That wasn't Syd Barrett[ph] was it?

I can't ever remember his name. Barrett[ph], yes that's right. It was Syd Barrett[ph], it was Barrett[ph], of course his name was, yes. Had the same kind of elegance of character, both of

them had. And, it was a curious kind of interlude that. And then in the middle of that Rupert suddenly dies. As I was coming back for the Christmas holiday, and I had a kind of, of driving back in rather bad weather all the way back to London, and I had a kind of feeling as I passed within about fifteen miles of Northampton that I ought to go and see Rupert on the way back, and I thought, oh no, I had better get back home, because everybody had said, you know, this may go on for years, do you see? And what had happened, that as I left Newcastle, a telegram arrived to say that he was dying. I can't go on. [BREAK IN RECORDING] And I didn't know that until a whole day afterwards, because it had been my idea to go back to London, and there was a party with, actually curiously enough with some friends of Lett Haines and Cedric Morris, where Maggi Hambling was also staying, along with Keith Milow, and so I thought, well that's all right, I mean, I'll go there and then the following Monday I will go down to Northampton, because there's no, you know, it was in my mind a stable position. But as I had this...it's curious, I had this kind of instinct as I came down, and I didn't follow it, it wasn't strong enough to make me follow it, and I've always regretted it, not following it. And so that's what happened. So then I had to go down to Northampton of course, and we arranged the funeral, which all went off very well actually, it was very well done, and they were very helpful at Northampton, and, very few people came to the funeral naturally enough. I remember there was Vivienne Bennett and various other close friends. We went down there, and as I say, the...the local parson at the St. Andrew's Hospital turned out to be an extremely nice man and we had a very good service, and I insisted on having a live choir, and it was in a crematorium of course. And then of course after that, in a certain sense life became easier.

Well, a weight...in a sense of...

A weight had been lifted, and though I found it hard not to...I found it hard to forgive myself, in fact I never have, for not having obeyed my instincts, it still ranks, it still makes me miserable, after that at any rate the issues were clear, Wimbledon must be sold, and so I moved to Camden Town into this house which belonged to Bob Wellington, which didn't work out very well, and life with Gregory went on, and then of course he also met his wife, Pauline, and all this was going on at the same time. And within about another year he had married her, so, then I was left on my own again, except of course there was always Gregory, do you see? And in a way, it rescued me totally actually, that did, you know, and...

What was happening in your work?

Yes, well this, I'm now coming on to. Well he was painting in one room and I had a sort of studio in Bob Wellington's house, and, his work had always been rather on the non-figurative

line, but not entirely. And then obviously through partly what was in the air, and also what had happened to me over the few previous years, was that with the sort of Abstract Expressionistic element in it, and it being partly based on nature, reactions to nature, it was not totally non-figurative in other words, it was sort of, I suppose I could call it organic or something, some word like that, I found it impossible as I worked to make up my mind, so everything gradually got whiter and whiter, until there was nothing left on the canvas practically at all except dirty white. And quite frankly the one that, the second version of 'The Ear', which is a very successful picture and one of the best of that period, happened to be one of the last, and as you know it is a picture which is very largely white. Well the other ones got whiter and whiter and whiter, and finally I thought, well I can't go on, this has come to an end. And then I didn't want to return to figurative painting at all, and so the logical thing was to push it to extreme non-figurative.

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Really two things. I had been interested in the Hard Edge things, and also that linked up with an interest which I had always had, which started when I was at the Slade, with the geometry of pictures. And, whereas at the Slade so to speak I had been...yes, in the geometry of pictures, so I thought, well it will be a very good discipline, instead of having lines going off ambiguously into kind of spaces and so on, that I really ought to do, I thought, well, one ought to be able to put a line round one's thought, in other words, you know, the famous, the sort of Blakean thing. But at any rate, I ought to be able to put a line round and contain something, instead of allowing it ambiguously to go on a wander.

Was it anything to do with your state of mind anyway at that time?

I think it was, I think it was. I desperately had to have some kind of certainty, and it was in search of that certainty that I went, and therefore submitted myself not only to acrylic painting, painting with acrylic, which forced me to make up my mind quickly, and wasn't so easily altered once one had done it, and also to deal with shapes, colours as positive areas, instead of being more Turner-esque, you know, it had become, it became geometrical in the square and the circle sense rather than vaguely elliptical like Turner, which is an elliptical composition, which comes from the back forwards. The other one is brought up to the surface and is a bit like a relief where you just cut it back a bit. So I submitted to this discipline, and then I hated it, and then gradually it began to pay one or two dividends, and one or two things I did I think do look quite good actually. And then I kidded myself into the idea that they were just about, they were about something; they weren't about nothing. I don't think they were...they weren't about nothing, they were about something. I don't think I feel inclined to say exactly what, but they seemed to have some kind of universal significance through their geometry as much as anything else. And then of course I went to Iran, and there of course, in Persia you see, Arabic art, which had always interested me enormously from the war, and which I had always wanted to see more of, with Islam do you see, which is non-figurative, where representation of the human form, or any natural form, is in actual fact forbidden, which they don't always obey, one was intrigued by their geometry, which is really fascinating, and one can see that you can sit there and you can meditate amongst these extraordinary patterns which look very simple but are extremely difficult. I mean even this little table in front of you is a simple octagonal pattern, but if you actually begin to draw it out you will see how extraordinarily complex that actually is. It doesn't give all its secrets up at once. And then I realised looking a lot at these sort of great mosques, I didn't particularly like them, the Blue Mosque, which is wonderful, in Isfahan, I mean it's an incredible thing, but I got much more intrigued with the earlier work, which you get in the Friday[ph] Mosque in

Isfahan, where the architecture is I think some of the finest architecture in the world, very little known. And then I realised of course, a bit like, I suppose in the same way as Pasmore felt, that Euclidean geometry didn't really answer enough, and so he went off to all those Dutch philosophers and mathematicians who gave him formulas with which he said that he painted by, but I don't think he painted any more strictly on them than he did on the Golden Section, where he always said, 'I always put the moon on the Golden Section, and if I don't feel it's quite the right place, I just move it a fraction,' which is the human and right thing to do. I suddenly realised that of course this kind of Islamic geometry does not answer the modern feeling for relationships of a space ultimately. And in the same way I think that Islamic religion and Christian religions don't face up to modern religious aspirations, I think in the long run, and I feel something has got to happen with them. And so, when I say that the non-figurative is about nothing, in a curious way it was about something which is a bit intangible. So in the end I really gave it up. I had an exhibition at the Lisson Gallery which went off rather well actually, which was entirely non-figurative work, and, what's his name who runs...

Nicholas Logsdail.

Nicholas Logsdail, he was very pleased with the exhibition, and I think he was also a little bit disappointed that I sort of cashed out of this very modern movement, which wasn't so modern or I couldn't then go on to the very modern movements, which he ultimately became interested in. So after that, I had that one exhibition which really went rather well, he was pleased with it, I was pleased with it, and we sold, and in fact I've never had an exhibition where I haven't made a small profit, and sometimes slightly larger, but never much, until recently of course, and we needn't go into that at the moment. And so, then in the end I had to give that up, and the way in which it happened was partly through...I had always wanted to make a book, and I thought I would do one on 'Samson Agonistes', which appealed to me, and I had tried it years ago, right back in 1947 I painted several pictures on the Samson theme which are figurative. So then I thought, thinking of Chagall's Bible, well of course it could be done in that kind of way. But every time I tried to do it figuratively it didn't work at all. So in the end, that's where the non-figurative geometrical thing worked itself out, and it worked itself out very much in the Matissian way with cut-out collage, and of course it has also a figurative chain that runs through it, corresponding to the imagery of the poem itself, and the actual designs in actual fact follow this imagery. But, I reckon that was one of the best things I have ever done. And then after that, do you see, then, which was 1980-something, wasn't it, I think, I brought that out.

'79?

What?

Was it '79?

'79, something like that, that was right at the end of that period, and I was already working back again into a figurative thing, using very largely I suppose a certain amount of autobiographical material, which is the way one gets in to these things again. And then of course, that was followed, that was all right, and it worked itself actually very well. It was financed, I never thought I would bring it off, I had always wanted a book, I wasn't going to have a box, which I think destroys any pleasure of reading a poem, and in that way, when I finally had to work out the size of the book and everything else, I found Véra Russell was extremely useful to me, she was very good at that kind of thing, and she saved me from bringing the book out in the wrong shape. And, we financed it by an exhibition of 16 large prints of the first lot, I thought 16 was as many as I could do. So we had an exhibition at the Artists' Market, and Véra hung it very nicely, we had a whole section to itself, and they looked very good. They held the position on wall very well. So, we brought out an edition of those, and we sold a lot of them, I can't remember exactly what we made, but in the end something well over £1,000 out of that lot, which seemed to me quite a lot in those days, out of prints. And with that £1,000 I also asked the Linbury Trust[ph] to provide another...I think we had gone over £1,000 actually. Oh then we opened a subscription list, and to my surprise this filled up remarkably quickly, and so then Mel Clark and I from Norwich, as I had decided he was the person I wanted to work with...

How did you meet him?

Because I had been down on school inspections to Norwich for a good many years, and I had come across him, and I had turned down the offers of the Royal College of Art for help because I thought it was too near commercial business in some kind of way, that I wouldn't be happy in that world at all. Whereas if I went down to Norwich I could have the run of a small department there, and the assistance of Mel, who turned out to be absolutely a fantastically good printer of course, and was one of these people with a talent of handling paper. I've only got to touch a piece of expensive paper and I leave a finger mark on it at once. So I mixed all the colours up and he did the printing, and we got through it like anything, thoroughly enjoyed doing it, and we finally got it printed. And then we got it bound at Morley College, and we had undertaken to sell the first lot, there were 150 copies, we were going to sell them at £50 each. What's £50, that's 5,000 somewhere, isn't it? 50 times 100 is 5,000. Well, in actual fact we paid off all the debts, and paid off all the expenses of production within about a

month, which I think was pretty good going, and of course it was largely through of course also printing the book ourselves, which was much the most sensible thing to do, because we got exactly what we wanted. And that more or less finished that period, and as the figurative thing was already coming back, in fact come back in all kinds of slightly different ways, that bridged the gap so that when I gave up living in Camden Town, in Bob Wellington's house, it saw me through that period, and I was already in South Kensington, in Gledhow Gardens, when I went to Persia. I had also been back to Cyprus before then, because I had to have a varicose vein operation in about '66 I think it was, '66, just after Rupert died, I had to have a varicose vein operation, only just in the nick of time, I wasn't in too good a state, and that was followed, do you see, within about three or four years to going to Iran, and so the whole thing sort of linked together and disposed of it.

Was there a key painting of this early period of your return to figuration in a sense?

That was what I was trying to think, I knew you were going to ask that, and the odd thing is, I can't think, I can't think.

Because the 'Gilles' portraits come later, don't they?

Not much later.

Well I was wondering if it was those really that...

No, no they more or less began to culminate with the 'Gilles' painting. No these things for me never happened very quickly. The 'Gilles' painting happened like with a lot of things with me, they happened when I come to a dead end and something has to happen, and I think nothing is going to happen, and then something does happen.

Is it similar to the way you responded to the Signorelli?

Yes I think exactly the same kind of thing. It seems to me that that way, my life seems to repeat itself in that kind of way. And, I can't remember, when did I paint that bathing picture that used to be here? '60...it's put down at 1960. Yes, well I don't know, I think that must be right I think. I was trying to think, this is that awkward period between going to Iran, which was about '70...when did I go to Iran? Towards the end, about '73? When was the Oxford exhibition? This is a difficult period for me to remember very accurately. But Rupert died in '66, and between '66 and '76 roughly there was this very difficult period when I put myself through elementary exercises again in the entirely non-figurative, and I had to work my way

out of that. And also at that time I was teaching at Newcastle and various other places, I can't remember where but there were a number of other places I used to have to go to, which kept me occupied. And also there was the whole projects with Véra to do with the Artists' Market cropping up later on. And so an awful lot of things were happening, and though I painted a great deal all the time, I never gave up, I can't remember, exactly remember how things evolved, because it was a very difficult period in many ways. But it finally resolved itself by the end of the Seventies, let's put it that way.

With 'Samson Agonistes'?

With 'Samson Agonistes'. And I think the exhibition at, what's his name, Nicholas Logsdail, was about '73 as far as I remember, I think some time about then. But between '73 and '83 it was really quite a difficult period, and...I really can't think at the moment anything more I can say about it except that I had to work myself way back to this, and then of course the Oxford thing in, or just before the Oxford thing I really, you know, as soon as I did the 'Gilles' portrait, which was done three or four years before the Oxford exhibition after all.

The Museum of Modern Art in Oxford show was in '84, so you're talking about the beginning of the Eighties.

Yes. Well 'Gilles' was certainly painted '79 to '80, do you see, it wasn't all brand new, it was already an established picture by then.

How did the retrospective in Oxford come about?

I think it came about partly through the engineering of Véra Russell, and of course in the usual peculiar way, it was enormously important for me to have it, but at the same time with being with Véra Russell, everything that she did became a little bit complicated from time to time, but I managed to sort of just avoid that. And...I think that's really how it came about. And the exhibition was perhaps a little bit too big, the Oxford exhibition was, in fact I got hauled over the coals by them saying it was much too big, and actually they cut it down quite a bit too. But, I think it possibly was a bit too... I simply don't know; I think it had to be in that form partly because once more I did get all the pictures out and have a look at them, you know what I mean? And the more...and from looking at all those pictures together, I realised that though, to work in an abstract way was still possible for me, it was not going to be what I was going to have to do in the future. And I say, I've always had enormous great difficulty in producing a great many pictures every year, which is why I've had so few exhibitions, I'm afraid there are very few pictures that I can refer to, I think, I can't say any more about that.

But you feel that that exhibition showed you your way forward in a sense?

Oh I think it did, it helped to show me my way forward, and I did carry it on forward, but then of course, like all these big exhibitions, like at the Whitechapel, I didn't sell anything, so after the Oxford Museum, though it had very good reviews everywhere I went, it looked awfully good at Colchester, and I owe a deal of gratitude to the man who was running Colchester at that time; and then it went on to Bolton, and York they showed it, I was ill when it went to York so I didn't go but I am told it looked absolutely splendid in York. The only place where it didn't was Huddersfield, which I didn't think it looked very good there, but I needn't go into that, there's no point in being nasty to Huddersfield, is there? But out of all that, do you see, I practically didn't sell anything either, so basically then, do you see, I was in a position of not selling anything. And so I sold things, some things privately I did, and... Various things turned up in sale rooms, and I managed through these retrospective exhibitions to trace the whereabouts of earlier works, and these went into proper private collections, and in that kind of way I fuddled through. But really I never made any money, not really.

But you were able to survive?

Oh yes I was always able to survive, well because of course I always had a certain amount of teaching going on, and I always did manage to survive. And, from the point of view of a natural basic thing, it wouldn't have been much of a proper life for me, but through my father's death and the family, I mean I had a private income which would have prevented me from starving in any case, do you know what I mean? But it wouldn't have provided me with the kind of life to which I properly would aspire, or consider that I deserve. But of course that alleviates a lot of worries. And then all the time, do you see, friends and people were, friends had all been interested in my work, and Gregory of course gave one absolutely, you know, an endless kind of...he would say things which I didn't...I think...he would give me all kinds of views on my pictures which I thought were absolutely dreadful, but in a way it was awfully good for me, you know. He didn't mince words about things, and I think in many cases absolutely wrong, but it was very useful to have it said by somebody who you knew, you know, you kind of knew so well that it was hand and glove in a way kind of thing, in many ways. And, so my social life was very important to me, and of course it kept me in touch with people much younger than myself, and I think that there was an enormous help in that, as well as a danger of course, but there was an enormous help in that. It prevented one from ever becoming complacent or old masterish or boring or, well, don't know about the boring side of it, you can be boring under any circumstances. That was a great, that was a very important thing in my life, which I got, and where Rupert was so wrong when he said, 'I

regret that he is so young', when in actual fact this has been so frightfully important to me, not that one goes around aping young people, though I think I appeared in various clubs somewhat inappropriately from time to time. But all the young people said, 'Oh that doesn't matter, we like it,' do you see. But, so I didn't allow that side to creep in too much, but it was the availability, and the ambience of it, and the fact of course also that my former students had supported one so much. So, I haven't lost touch in thinking entirely. I mean I know now that I think like an old-fashioned old bastard, but... I don't think I need explain any more of that. So that's been one of the things that has kept me going a lot.

And when you were in Gledhow Gardens you were painting in the flat itself, as opposed to using a studio?

Yes. Yes I've never had a proper studio.

I was going to ask you, have you felt the need for one, or the lack of it?

Well, the only time I had a proper studio, it didn't have any side light at all, and I became so miserable in it that I became ill, and this was when I was a student at the Slade, and I became very seriously ill actually, I couldn't breathe, it was really dreadful. I don't think it was heart, but it gave all the symptoms of a heart trouble. And I had to lie down every afternoon because I couldn't breathe. And so I've never wanted a studio after that. But I've sometimes been in other people's studios and said, oh I would love to have it, you know.

I wondered if you felt it would have helped in a sense to get away from where you live. Some people think that's important, rather than walk in to the next room.

No I haven't...that hasn't particularly worried me. And I don't think it's worried, particularly worries a lot of people. I don't think it really worried people, I think, Matthew Smith very much, who when I knew him lived in close contact with his studio. And, that hasn't, that hasn't worried me. I think living with your things is not a bad idea actually. I haven't felt it necessary to get away from one kind of life into another kind of life.

But you weren't just surrounded by your own paintings anyway, because you enjoyed collecting things.

I enjoyed collecting things, and after all I was living with Rupert who was not greatly always admiring what I painted either, and none of my boyfriends have ever been in that line of business, so that's all right.

What were some of your most treasured...?

Then I liked, do you see, I liked...I like making a room and using it. I mean it's only now that I've had to sleep and paint in a room as such, though I did at the end at Gledhow Gardens, but then I had always in the other side, do you see, a very large sitting room, where, because I've always liked books, and I have liked to buy objects, and I like to go from one place to another, but not to the extent perhaps of getting in a bus and going to Fulham, which I could perhaps have afforded a studio when I couldn't get it, in South Kensington, because they are always occupied by the super rich. And a warehouse situation of course, it hadn't occurred to me, I'm too old to cope with a warehouse situation. But I thought those big warehouses were marvellous actually.

Well, people like Derek Jarman and...?

Yes, yes. And indeed where Hoyland and Allen Jones, let's say, they have the same thing, huge studios.

On the other side of Charterhouse Square isn't it, yes.

Yes, yes.

I was wondering if you would like to mention some of your favourite objects that you have collected over the years, maybe that you don't have any longer with you?

Oh yes. Do we need a new tape?

Not quite.

Oh well, oh yes, the Egyptian statue for one thing, which is a Cypriot statue, which Gregory has.

Did you get that in Cyprus when you went there?

No, I bought it in Clifford Street, from one of those, McAlpines, I saw it in the window and I thought, golly that's wonderful, so I thought I would like that, it was wonderful, it obsessed me rather. And then I thought, I couldn't afford it, it was £3,000.

What period is it?

Well it's 24th dynasty, it's about, what is that, it's about 600 B.C. I mean it's a latish thing.

Could you describe it?

Well, it's headless, and it's like a Greek Kouros, and about 2 foot 6 high, headless, and also chopped off in the middle of the shins, so it has no feet.

Marble?

No, limestone. Very fine grain limestone like you get in Egypt more. And, it's like a standing Egyptian figure, and it's a bit like a Kouros, which is about 600 B.C., it's about the right date. And it's a piece of sculpture which is really done in the square...it's four profiles really put together. And, I was rather cautious about this, and I said I couldn't buy it. I took Gregory to have a look at it, and he thought it was wonderful, because he is particularly keen on Egyptian things anyway. So, I said I can't afford it. 'Oh,' he said, 'you've got to...you buy it, you're going to buy it.' So I did, I bought it. So before I bought it, I was going to photograph it. They are very good people at McAlpine, there was no question of it not being genuine or anything of that kind. I took it to the BM, to the British Museum, to speak to the Egyptologist there, who, Howard Jones, who was enormously helpful, and he said, 'Well I don't think that the McAlpine people are right, because they say that they think that it's Egyptian, and the work of a Greek colony which worked in Egypt at that time, under special charter, and it's not a very easy piece. It's plainly genuine,' he said, 'you needn't have any doubts about that, but it's a slightly puzzle piece.' And there are similar pieces in the Met in New York, and it had various oddities about it. For instance it was plainly Egyptian in the sense that he was wearing a kind of kilt with the imperial sacred insignia of the snake as a pattern round the bottom of the kilt, but the kilt itself is not like the Egyptian one, it was folded plonk

like that, and then there's a fan, if you remember, it's straight. So then this question of.....

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You said at this point you thought it was, or they thought it was Cypriot.

They thought it was Cypriot. So I went round the Cypriot Collection in the British Museum, and I couldn't see anything like it at all. And also, one of the striking things about it was that the Cypriot statues or sculptures of a similar period were of course plainly executed in local limestone, which is much coarser grained; in fact the surface of the sculpture was totally different. And so I went to Harold Jones afterwards and said that this had occurred to me, and I said, could we get nearer if we took a sample of the limestone and checked it up. And he rather choked me off about this, because quite rightly he said, 'Well there are 136 different varieties of limestone, and I'm afraid we're not really going to get anywhere fast on that line of research,' so I gave up. I've forgotten the name of the...this Greek colony is well-known to Egyptologists and to art historians of this period, I've forgotten, it has a name. It worked in the delta area behind Alexandria somewhere, but I've forgotten the name for the moment, it's doesn't matter, I've got it down somewhere. And so I bought it, and it's given me permanent satisfaction, and even David Sylvester was very impressed by it, so I feel that it passed muster. And when I moved from Gledhow Gardens to come here of course I couldn't bring it here, because I originally had a tiny room, and Gregory always wanted it so I gave Gregory the Egyptian statue, which is looking smashing over in Paris now, it makes me feel at home, and he has a lot of other small objects which I brought back from the Middle East as well. The trouble is he likes all those things very much, and so he has a great habit of getting them out of me, and I am quite pleased to let them go, so when I go over to Paris I am surrounded by my own objects, which is very nice, it's a kind of second home really.

Didn't you have a horse?

Yes, a Chinese horse I inherited from my uncle and aunt Pilkington. It was bought by my Aunt Christine Medley who married the Pilkington, and it had been in the Eumophopoulos[ph] collection, and she bought it at the Eumophopoulos[ph] sale which I think which was in 1929. The other two horses of the same kind were more perfect, and one I think went to the British Museum and the other one to the V & A. I think sculpturally curiously enough mine is better, but I think, it's also been more heavily repaired I think than the other two, so it wasn't quite in the museum category, so she got it fairly cheap really. She thought it was a lot of money in those days, it was her prize possession really, it was a splendid thing, and when she died my uncle Cecil gave it to me. So that, I acquired that. And I thought, well, as I had got that one from the family, it goes back to the family, so I gave that

to Michael, my elder brother's son, who has a very nice house in Scotland and quite a collection of works of art as well, and whom I am going to see of course shortly.

Is that Tang?

That's a Tang horse, yes. A very splendid affair. And so those are the two main things. But the other things I bought, I bought a wonderful Amlash pot, which is about, I think it's about, what are they, about 1,000 something-or-other B.C. which comes from...it's basically almost like Hittite stuff, it's that pot up there.

Like Hittite did you say?

Yes, in form it corresponds to what's called Hittite. It's Amlash, and it comes from the borders of Turkey and Persia, and that beak shape is what they call usually Hittite, but there's a whole mystery about who the Hittites really were and where they came from and what it was all about. And I'm afraid I hold the opinion, an opinion, which scholars are not prepared to admit to at the moment, which they're going to have to in the end, because I'm a great follower of, I can't remember his name now, who wrote 'The World in Chaos' and those things, the most extraordinary book that's very interesting. He maintains that there's a...our dating is wrong by about 700 years, 5 to 700 years, and he worked it out in relationship to the times of the Nile water clock, and the evidence is absolutely incontrovertible, and only now are scholars beginning in a back-handed way to shift. And it's strongly supported really by the dating of the battle of Carchemish, which is enormously important, when the Egyptians fought the Persians from Ninevah, and we know from the Bible that they had a squad of Jewish volunteers or conscripts in the Egyptian army, which is what you would expect because it belonged to Egypt, in the time of Jeremiah. Now we know the dates of Jeremiah, but this is recorded, do you see, in sculpture in Egypt in Rameses II, do you see, who is dated at 12 to 1300, when Jeremiah is about 700. But that is the record of the same battle, and even with that evidence they wouldn't agree. But this is what's got to be right, because you see, the whole of their museums of Egyptology are founded on a dating which now becomes dubious, and to change the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum and the museum in Cairo and everything obviously becomes...you could see, they're not going to do it if they bloody well can help it. But various evidence has come up, and I noticed the other day in one of these archaeological papers that they're going to have to acknowledge this sooner or later, right?

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

.....collecting, Robert.

Yes. I was going to say, I know very few painters that I respect who aren't in some ways collectors. I mean, there's what's his name, Josef...you know, with the Negro collection, what's his name, Josef..?

Herman.

Josef Herman. And then of course, you know, they've all collected something or another, either the drawings of their immediate predecessors or something. Degas had a big collection, indeed a very big collection, and after all, what do we owe to Sir Thomas Lawrence for instance, as a great collector?

What?

An enormous collection of Lawrence of Old Master drawings to start off with.

Where are they now?

They're in national collections. And, I mean Picasso collected, Matisse collected, Derain collected, Duncan and Vanessa in their small way collected, indeed, you know, they had examples of this that and the other, and things that interested them in the course of their lives, and...

The only person I can think of who possibly didn't was Bacon.

He did, he bought one or two examples of work by people that he admired, and rather unexpected people. I can't remember their names now, but he did take the bother to collect one or two things that he liked. No, Francis Bacon as a whole had been an exception, but even he bought things in that he liked that had been done, they were rather special things.

Am I right in thinking that he had a Sickert at one time?

I think it's quite probable, and he bought that rather, he was quite well-known, an interesting French painter who did kind of little scrawly patterns in the Thirties and Forties very largely; I think he bought one of those ones in the late Fifties when he was still going on.

What, Michaux or somebody?

I don't think it was Michaux, it was somebody else.

Not Masson, no.

No, not Masson, definitely not, not Masson. I can't remember off-hand, the name might come back to me, but one of Bacon's biographers ought to be able to pick that one up. But he would be probably a near exception. So...

No, but I was wondering if it ran in the family, I mean your family.

No, I think scholarship runs in the family but not collecting. You see curiously enough though, my sister is a kind of expert on Chinese, well a great authority, let's face it, on Chinese works of art, bronzes and above all ceramics, she has never collected. She has one or two pieces but she has never collected.

Presumably she had the opportunity to.

She had every opportunity to collect. But that was not interesting; what interested her is the knowledge and the experience of them, and I suppose she didn't have very much money and therefore didn't think of collecting things that she couldn't really afford to keep, let's face it. You see Roger Fry had a big collection, as you know, and which he bought of course for nothing at all in those days, and it was, that was the collection of a connoisseur of what we would call a curator of pictures nowadays, this horrible, beastly term. And of course a practising painter and a philosopher, and he had a very good eye for a painting, and he paid practically nothing for them when he bought them.

And the Courtauld collection have got them now.

Yes, they in the Courtauld and the National Gallery of Scotland have the Seurat that he bought, which I thought looked as if it wanted a bit of looking after, but I dare say Roger smoked too many cigarettes in the dining room before they got hold of it.

But just to briefly return to your sister, she has written one book or more?

I think she has written only one book of scholarship, but she has written quite a number of pamphlets, and of course endless scholastic articles in specialist papers. You've only got to open any catalogue of first class Oriental ceramics and you will find at least several pieces,

they'll say in the provenance, and that, etcetera etcetera, quoted by, quoted by, M. Medley, you know, and often the remarks quoted as well. I mean it's...

She's an authority.

Well, she is an authority. But as a collector she has certainly collected a little bit, I mean she has one or two pieces, but I don't think collecting has been in her...but scholarship certainly has, and I think that's more in the family line perhaps than wanting to collect. My great-great-grandfather of course was a painter, he collected, but he collected for commercial reasons, like painters in the Regency period they all opened little shops for selling prints.

Which he did, didn't he.

Which he did. And he opened a shop just opposite where the Bank of England is now. And that's about as much as I can say about that little subject.

What I wanted to do at this point was to recap on your family. To ask you I suppose, you know, your siblings and so on, how important they have been to you, whether you spend much time with them, and of course who is still alive I suppose.

Oh, yes. Well curiously enough, it's a family where each one member of the family has been very - and this is not exceptional after all, but rather sharply distinguished from the others. And in a certain sense you would think that there had been very little family feeling, but when you get down to it, in some curious way blood is thicker than water, and in actual fact in a way we have stuck together. I mean I don't see Margaret; until she had this terrible stroke I didn't really see her hardly from one year to the next, and actually she was famous for not keeping in contact with the family at all. In actual fact the family always meant just as much to her as it does to me, which one can see in her conduct and everything else, and I hated my younger brother but now we're the best of friends. I was dependent on my elder brother. And then my idea was naturally enough, when I was 20 or 19, was to get away from the family as far as possible, and this was partly on account of my being homosexual of course, and the difficulties which this presented, which I daren't tell my parents at all about and never did in actual fact, but they accepted it I think in the end without saying anything about it. Though my mother was rather hard-pressed, she couldn't think why I didn't get married, and then she finally realised I was not the marrying kind so she didn't press any farther. I think my father did realise quite naturally because I think you can't be in the legal profession and know everybody from Somerset Maugham downwards through H.G. Wells and up to Ronald Firbank practically, you know, without having come across them legally one way or another

without having a pretty clear idea about life. And also of course, with regard of his own personal life; I don't think for one moment that he was ever a practising homosexual in any way, but he certainly had strong, in his youth I think, pretty strong, what you would call gender bonding with people of his own sex, which of course was common in those days, and what we are now supposed to regard, if anybody shows any tendency to bond everybody thinks they are getting into bed together, so of course obviously the next thing they have to do is to get into bed together, whether they would or not, do you know what I mean? So there's a kind of silliness about all this, which I must say makes me, you know...and that's why I don't like these feminist movements or anything like that, it makes everything too black and white in a silly kind of way.

But if your parents, or you, never sort of spoke openly with your parents about your homosexuality, did you to your siblings, or was it just understood, accepted?

Oh, I was more or less taunted by it you see. And, so that simply made me clear out. They knew, of course they knew, because they had all been to school, and all this rubbish about public schools, I have never heard of such rubbish. I mean, from my boyfriends who have been through comprehensive schools and the national thingumabob, day boys or not dear, they got up to many pranks which I am afraid we never got up to at Gresham's School, and it would have been much better if we had had a freer life at Gresham's School and which we weren't allowed. The idea that public schools are a hot-bed of vice, it would be much better if they were just hot-beds of a little bit of adolescent enjoyment without interference. People get what they are afraid of, is my view of that kind of thing.

So, you're saying that your siblings were aware of that, and that...

Oh yes, of course they were, very much so, even my younger brother was who I was rather devoted to, because I thought at any rate he was one of the family who might be gay, but turned out to be not; it would have been much better if he had been. But, I was rather shocked with his reactions later on in life; I didn't think, because I had treated him as an equal and it turned out that there was a back-wash of stupidity there which, I thought he...well I think really basically, he had an intelligence beyond it, but I think he got trapped in it. He would have defended me in public up to a point, but wouldn't...anyway, I needn't go into that.

No. I just wondered...

I needn't go into that.

Whether you spent much time with them over the years.

Oh, off and on, yes. We never actually broke up. We've never had a quarrel, never, and when my father died we never had a quarrel about his will or his personal possessions or anything, you know, and with a family of six...

Is that the rational side?

...

What?

Is that the clear, rational side of the Medleys?

It's the clear, rational, and also humanistic side of the family. So I am highly critical of those members of the family who didn't live up to my humanistic ideals.

Yes.

My elder brother did.

The elder brother?

My elder brother did.

We have to recap on their names I think. Your older brother's name...?

Oh I don't want to push this too far.

Oh, right.

I don't want to push this too far. I'm telling you things which I shouldn't tell you.

I don't think so Robert.

Because I think they are irrelevant.

Right, no.

Totally irrelevant.

Well let's leave it.

You know, all children, no parents bring up children ideally. Parents do their best. I can criticise my parents, I can criticise my brothers and sisters, and do in my mind still, but I think that's of no general interest beyond the fact that people do their best, and that's about as much as you can do.

Yes, I just wondered whether, you know, they would have been any help or encouragement or whatever in terms of your art.

Oh, from that point of view they would all like to have done, but weren't very good at doing it, because we lived in...they didn't live sufficiently in that world to be able to be of any use. From time to time they tried; Richard tried, the one I am a bit critical of, he tried hard on a number of occasions. I think Christopher tried, but in a kind of inept way, because by the time he had got to that I was perfectly used to having to help myself, do you know what I mean?

You could have done with it when you were younger.

Yes. But when I was younger, they wouldn't have known how to do it. My father didn't know how to do it, and anyhow, the tastes of my father's friends were not the kind of people who had the kind of tastes that would buy my pictures. I mean, my father's friends were buying French Impressionists and paintings by Forain and Sickert, and I had to encourage them to buy a few Duncan Grants or something, do you know what I mean? Because they said they couldn't afford a Sickert, you know. And so, you know, and that was pushing them to a degree. I mean they would buy a Wilson Steer which they couldn't afford.

Do you rate Wilson Steer?

What?

Do you rate Wilson Steer?

Oh one or two pictures, yes, I think quite highly in a way. But all those English water-colours really, and per[ph] chinoiserie, I mean they're brilliant some of them, but, they don't really hold up, not really, not to me. I think his portrait of his housekeeper, which is in the Tate, is really a very very good picture, and very well painted, and very thorough all the way through,

and he has done one or two other pictures - well there are the famous Walberswick lot of course.

Don't you think they are rather beautiful?

What?

Those Walberswick paintings.

Oh yes, quite, oh, I mean those are fine, all those are fine, but then of course what he got trapped in, do you see, was English eclecticism, and the taste of the people who run Lloyd's, and the bankers, bankers' taste in the end, Gainsborough. But he did some good paintings even in some of the portraits that he painted, and I suppose some of those more worked-out paintings he did of Ludlow Castle in the kind of Constable tradition, I mean they are quite good paintings, but they are not...I suppose they would stand up in a gallery - well they would stand up very easily and look probably rather distinguished in the Quai D'Orsay, hung up with a lot of those 1890s landscape painters that they've got hung up there, do you know what I mean? And among a lot of...you know, but they're not big stuff at all. Small stuff. And then in the end pretty useless quite frankly.

I want to change the subject slightly, and go into another thing which one might consider to be a family occupation, and that's fishing. We talked a little...

Well practically all the family has fished, including Margaret. Ann not a great fisherman at all. Richard a bit. Oliver, my younger brother, of course a very very great deal, and a very very good fisherman.

But it's been something that's been important to you.

It's been important to me, because I always enjoyed it when I was young. I used to go out armed with a fishing rod and a painting box, and if there was a lot of rise on the river I would fish, and if there wasn't I would paint.

What sort of age did you start doing that?

Oh in about 18 I suppose, but before that one just fished, you know what I mean. 17 even, I probably started. But otherwise, like all boys I just fished, do you know what I mean?

But your father fished.

Well my father fished, yes. In the end he got, he realised it was getting a bit difficult for him to compete, but we were all taught to fish when we were quite young.

What age?

Well we weren't taught to fish, we were just provided with a fishing rod. Oh, from the age of 6. I remember the first fish I caught which must be the same as everybody else's first fish. I don't know whether I was even provided with a rod, I don't think it was; I think I was provided with a stick with a bit of line on it and a hook with a worm at the end of it, and it was in one of these little North Yorkshire becks, you know, a little stream about as wide as an armchair or a bit more, getting into pools the size of an ordinary writing desk. And all you had to do was to sit very quiet and let the worm wriggle around as a run went into this pool, and my father came along and I said, 'I don't know, I think I may have a fish,' and so he pulled it out and of course there was a fish at the end of it. There was a little trout of about nine inches long at the end of it. That was the first fish I caught. After that of course one was hooked as you might say, not the fish but I was.

And you carried on and still fish yourself now?

So then, we fished up in Yorkshire, at Westerdale, which, we didn't go after, I was 8 so I must have been about 6 at the time, or even earlier, and we went there every other year, and we went there for two lots. So anyway from the age of 6 certainly, it would be 6; when I was 8 we used to spend half the day running around on the side of this beck, which had some...actually as a matter of fact it was higher up. I caught this fish on a little beck on the mountainside when we were out for a picnic, but the River Esk which rose about eight miles, six miles upstream, four, five or six miles upstream from where we were, and of course it was quite a nice little stream, and it ran through the grounds of a colonel called Colonel Duncan, whose family, it was a Yorkshire family who at one time owned...oh, what's it called.....[BREAK IN RECORDING] His family once owned Rievaulx and all around there. And Colonel Duncan owned a local Victorian manor house just at the end of the farmyard, his grounds came up to the end of our farmyard, and he owned the fishing rights of course, the rights of all the...well he owned his own bank of the stream, and I think the Mercers probably owned the other bank, but this doesn't matter. But the colonel didn't mind us little kids running around fishing, and we didn't go on to his estate, because it was overshadowed by trees and everything else, it was on the inside bend. And of course you wanted to fish from the other side, so we spent hours fishing round there. And also catching elvers and eels,

which we brought back to my mother. And I didn't catch many trout; there was a great big trout that used to be under a bridge, which wasn't on his ground at all, and we spent hours trying to catch that. I don't think anybody did in the end, and even when Christopher was grown-up he used to go and try and fish this fish, and I think he caught it in the end. But even in these very small streams you see you can get very decent trout, up to a pound if you know where to find them.

But what do you think it is that attracts you about the sport? I mean is it that...?

Oh the fun of catching something that is unknown. It's a mystery from the deep in a certain sense.

But is it this great thing that, you know, you relax totally and fish, or...?

Oh well, I don't know. Children can only bear so much fishing at a time, because you know, their concentration runs out, and their interest runs out after about half an hour and they start running around the bank, if you are 8 years old you start running around the bank, and doing other things.

I know, but you still fish now. I mean is it a relaxation.

Yes.

Or is it a competition?

No it isn't a competition at all, it's a form of...for me it's a form of relaxation, because I feel, I don't feel...I like to catch fish, I get really bored if I don't catch a fish, and a bit angry, but... After I've caught one fish, you know, I don't mind if I don't catch any more very much.

But you will carry on.

I will carry on certainly, because it's really interesting, and it's an interesting pastime, because it takes your total attention; you can't throw a fly without thinking about, and feeling for every throw, and it's an instinctive movement in the end, and directly that instinct and that rhythm leaves your body you know that you've got to stop, and you may have to stop for half an hour or go back home, you know, had it for that day. But with a good fisherman of course this concentration can go on for a long time. And also, you take your time, you don't hurry about it; spend just as much time looking at the river as you do fishing it.

Do you become in a sense an all-round naturalist?

Well you have to be, but of course I am not an all-round naturalist, but my brother is basically I suppose. On the river bank and in the farm he is an all-round naturalist.

End of F4114 Side A

F4114 Side B

An all-round naturalist he is.

Yes. And all kids like mucking around with water, and so in the end I liked mucking around with that kind of water, and interested me much more than the sea because of course we were always brought up by running streams and not by the sea. My father didn't like the sea very much, because he was a great walker and he thought, well, if the sea is front of me, half the landscape is cut off and I can't walk on the sea, I can only walk on the land, which is at my back. So he wasn't too keen on the sea, so we always, if possible, had our best holidays in the country where there wasn't any sea, with nothing but lovely running water and streams.

Of course I suppose latterly you've fished with Gregory. Did he fish before you met him?

Yes. He fished again from a small boy, because he was a highly nervous boy, and a very sensible general practitioner said to his mother, 'Why don't you buy the little bastard a little fishing rod?' So at the age of about 9 or 10 they bought him a little fishing rod and put him on a bike and sent him down to the Thames, where he threw a line and a float into the river, and after that never looked back. But of course when one introduced him to fly fishing...

Which you did?

Which I did, he rather resisted at first but, then of course once he saw the point of it he became totally and absolutely hooked on it, and nothing would... I mean, of course we would go back happily and fish with a float any moment, but what actually of course absorbed him was the pêche à la mouche, you know, the fly fishing, or, it's not always with a fly, it can be with a nymph, and which you fish underwater and not on the top. And fishing in running water, streams, and where you actually, you are after a fish, which is much more exciting than being after fish generally, you know, you don't just run into one. Well often of course, even with fly fishing, you run into one, of course one runs into one, and one is delighted to run into any fish which is a good one, but you are not throwing your fly totally at random without knowing roughly what you are doing. Even if you don't see the fish, you know from experience where one is going to be. And it's much more preferable if you can see the damn thing, or if it's risen, you can't always see it. If it's risen, then you know where it is, and it's going to be so many feet above where that rise shows on the surface, and then you throw for it. And you would be surprised how often, you know, if the fish is feeding, you will get it on first or second cast. If you don't do that you had better give up, because you've put the fish down. You know, this makes it interesting, so if you wait and then you watch, and see what's

happening with those fish. And so, you know, it keeps you occupied without having to think about your own problems, perfectly happily for a whole day, and if you are throwing a line you can't think about anything else except just doing this thing, do you know what I mean? And so it's completely and totally relaxing. Well this is why, I mean Turner was a great fisherman. I don't know how many other painters have been fishermen, but you would probably be surprised, probably quite a number. I know some of them, like Vlaminck, have ridden bicycles, but...

I wonder whether Gainsborough was a fisherman.

I think he probably would have loved to have been a fisherman, but of course coming from Suffolk it would have been mostly...oh he probably would have enjoyed fishing for carp, yes. You know, it's not a prime country, but there are probably plenty of trout. There are plenty of trout knocking around in Suffolk, and in Norfolk, in Norfolk one or two are quite good streams. In the 18th century there were many more fish about than there are now. I think people, local fishermen, local people depended on catching fish from the local stream in a way which they are not any more, and the local streams have either been put into drainpipes or polluted.

Slurry.

Yes. I was just...slurry of course is appalling, it simply poisons all the fish, the smallest amount of slurry will poison the fish for a couple of miles down-stream. Dreadful. But in the old days you see, for instance in the Avon in Gainsborough's day, in fact it's in I think one of the books to do with Constable, do you see, when he went down so frequently to Salisbury, painting there, going out fishing on to the water meadows there at night with flares and tried spearing the fish and netting them up. And it was full of fish, full of fish, and the Thames was full of fish, until the 19th century poisoned it all.

Have you come across this curious thing called a zander?

Yes. Certainly, I've eaten zander.

What's it like?

Well it's not a bad fish, it's perfectly all right. It's a form of game fish, of trout and salmon trout mix, it's a bred fish, zander, and I think it's basically more in France than here.

Well I heard that there were quite a lot sort of banging around in packs in East Anglia.

Oh I should think there probably are. They would breed them in East Anglia, it's a bred fish. But then, do you see, a lot of fish that you buy, that you get anywhere, do you see, in these artificial lakes you see, and in streams; I mean I can think of one or two streams in north Norfolk where you can pick up quite good trout, and also I believe they do stock, in those kind of situations, particularly when fishing has become very popular, and you can exploit a gravel pit, which is a very useful pit, an old gravel pit, and you've got a bit of a stream or a local spring which you will just feed it a bit, you can breed trout and zanders in there. And zander grows, has the advantage of growing into a very strong fish quite quickly, so it gives a lot of sport I believe. I've never caught a zander myself, because I don't particularly like that kind of farmed fishing, but... Oh of course the fish will be lively and fight like anything, but it's a different kind of thing from catching something more like a wild fish.

I heard that they had rather taken over and sort of, a bit like the grey squirrel and the red squirrel, and sort of bossed everything else out of the rivers.

I'm not quite sure about that, I'll have to ask Gregory, but I don't read it in any fishing newspapers, fishing papers. But this is quite possible, but as far as I know in England, zander has not been a particular threat to rainbow trout in ordinary reservoir fishing. I should think zander would be a threat to rainbow, possibly a threat to rainbow, because a lot of these big reservoirs, these really big reservoirs where you can hire a boat and float about on it, they are stocked usually with rainbows you see, and ordinarily a rainbow doesn't breed in this country, but they are beginning to breed I think in streams, but I don't know. But it's stock fish, and...I don't know what would happen with these reservoirs if they didn't stock them, it would be absolutely ghastly. You don't get good fish or good situations unless you cull them and look after them.

You need sort of river keepers in a way, or...?

Of course you do, yes. I mean I can think of a number of cases where they decided to turn a loch in Scotland exclusively into trout, which meant them removing the pike. Well it had been a loch where they had caught a record pike of 56 pounds, which had been a record for a number of years until I was a boy when somebody caught one bigger than that, came from this loch. When they took the pike out, all the fish were rotten little things. I don't know what they've done about it.

They upset the balance.

It's upset the balance. And you've got to watch very carefully before you upset an ecological balance of a wild situation; but of course if you are breeding trout in a totally artificial situation, like breeding fish, if you make an artificial reservoir like that enormous reservoir in Rutland, I've forgotten what it's called now, a huge reservoir, a great lake, I could give you the name any moment if I could just remember it, but it's a great big enormous reservoir built some years ago now, and they opened it for fishing and it was a total disaster to start with, but I believe now that it is now probably very good, and it's quite expensive to hire a boat to go out there for a day, because it's mature. I mean if you do that you expect to be landing two or three, you know, two- or three-pounder at least, rainbows, and you shouldn't take too many, I mean, there you are.

Otherwise you might as well go in with a great big net.

Otherwise you would all go in with a net, you see, which is of course what they do in the salmon rivers, they blow them up.

Dynamite them.

Dynamite them.

Lay charges.

No, you put a charge in.

[INAUDIBLE].

What?

I think in Greece they used to dynamite them, the peasants.

And I have fished with cigarette tins filled with a bit of explosive charge in Tobruk. We used to get a whole mass of beautiful grey mullet, we could feed the whole unit on them for about two or three days. It just stuns them and they float up to the surface.

And you pick them out.

And you pick them out. And this is of course what they do with a lot of streams when - oh, I've gone and hit my elbow. [BREAK IN RECORDING] You can...ecologically you investigate, most of the better English rivers they are checked, and what you do is, you just stun the fish and pick them up and give them a count, and just see what's happening.

And put them back in?

You can put them back in again.

And they're OK?

But of course, if you don't want to put them back in again you can simply just lift them out and...

Have them for tea.

Have them for tea. You would be surprised how a very small pool, I've fished one just underneath a bridge in Askriigg and we were delighted, we caught a couple of trout of about three-quarters of a pound, which was quite big in those days. In actual fact the local bailiff, who was a friend of ours, an old man, he was then about 80 actually, 'Oh,' he said, 'the last time I remember we did it, we investigated that pool,' and he said, 'and we got five trout, over a pound-and-a-half, so many grayling, so many other trout.' You would be surprised how many there are, and how difficult they are sometimes to catch. This is the fun, do you see? And now that one doesn't need the fish for the food, it's the fun. What's that wagging away down there?

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

....very much involved in the business of the Turner Collection going to Somerset House, and it cropped up in this way, that John Betjeman wrote a letter to 'The Times' trailing a kite really, or trailing a flag or whatever you do trail, asking more or less what could be done with Somerset House and indicating that plainly it should be devoted to some kind of art conservancy or something of that kind. And whereupon, I actually happened to be having tea or dinner or drinks, probably drinks, with Norman Rosenthal - this is a long time ago, and Norman was very young - and so, I had been to Amsterdam, and suddenly the idea blew up between us, do you see, if Amsterdam can afford a museum, to build a museum for Van Gogh, why can't London afford to do something for Turner? And referred the whole thing

back to Somerset House. So, I wrote a letter saying if Amsterdam can do this for Van Gogh, why can't London do this for Turner?

Given the fact that they had this huge bequest.

Yes, absolutely.

Unhoused.

Unhoused. And everything, do you see? It seemed to me to be an admirable idea. So immediately this got latched on to. Henry Moore, who was absolutely transfixed about Turner as we know, immediately responded, so therefore the ball immediately got roaming, and little Medley of course, like a kind of dung beetle who had started the whole thing rotting away, and rolling, of course suddenly found himself in a completely subsidiary position. But, of course they couldn't ignore the fact that so to speak, between John Betjeman and me the thing had got itself started, and so there was then held a series of high-powered meetings with the directors of all the British Museum, the British Museum Print Collection, Alan Bowness, Colin Anderson, oh, Kenneth Clark reluctantly, who was very wise about the whole thing, he said, if you really think that you are going to get the Somerset House as a Turner research place and as a gallery, you are totally mistaken, because you see, these national collections, they won't give up a drawing that they possess, in spite of the fact that the Turner drawings would be far better looked after in Somerset House than they would be in the British Museum. And of course he was entirely right. So, what happened was, I attended endless meetings, and of course Véra Russell weighed in, and I became her kind of factotum and slave, and I carried documents around between her and Bill Allen and Members of Parliament and God knows what.

Who is Bill Allen?

Bill Allen, I think his name was Reg...no Allen. I'll tell you who he is, he is the biggest expert on air conditioning and lighting of public galleries. He is very very important, and in the documents that you will see, which I had better give you, or have photostated for you, he is extremely important. And what I learned from that, that...I really wasted six months of hard work running around. And there was a nice architect who was in charge of the place, of Somerset House, which had already been promised to the school of, the theatre people, and then thought not suitable, and Colin Anderson was saying, 'Oh well, but it would be wonderful as, you know, as a place for reception, and we could have concerts here, and it could be let for soirées and that kind of thing'. And the gallery collector said, 'Oh, but you

see it's entirely unsuitable for a collection of fine art, because of course, you know, atmospherically with the high streets outside, the pollution is going to be terrible, and of course the humidity is hopeless, and secondly of course, there is no security. And also of course, you know, there's no proper exits do you see, you know, there's just that staircase, you know, the Rowlandson staircase to come down.' They raised every single objection, none of which of course held water for five minutes. First of all there was a lift even in those days, there are now two lifts; secondly, if there was a fire there were two exits and not one. If there had been a fire at the Tate Gallery, how would people have got out? Secondly, we ran a humidity test and found the humidity at the Tate was far worse than the humidity in Somerset House, because Somerset House is extremely strongly built with very thick stone walls, and floorboards, floor planks that thick.

Six inches.

I don't know how thick they are. But I went with the architect all over that building, all over the roof, everywhere, and it was made for a centre of this kind. I didn't think it would be perfect for the exhibition of Turner's pictures, but we never proposed that it should. What we proposed was that it should be an adjunct of the Tate Gallery, that a certain number of pictures could be hung in the main gallery, and in the assembly rooms, but it would never hold more than probably about 100 pictures of Turner at any one time. But also it had a number of wonderful rooms, totally secure, which could have stored all the Turner collection, and provided research rooms. Well they shot it all down to pieces with, I think, which can only be called Civil Service lies. Monstrous. So, as far as security was concerned, it was and still is probably about the most secure building there could be, because the Inland Revenue occupied all the apartments to the side, and still do, and also when I tried even to photograph in the yard in those days I was not allowed to take a photograph for security reasons. I could do it now, in fact there's a car park. Well that was fine, so it all got shot to pieces, and I went to Yugoslavia for a holiday and fell to pieces, and that was it. So, anyway, I really wasted six months.

So it taught you not to get involved.

Taught me not to get involved ever again. And it taught me the way that high-powered civil servants, you can call it being very economical with the truth, but in actual fact using any old bogus argument and using their weight to carry it through, lying. And of course what happened then, years went by, and this gallery, which is supposed to be entirely unsuitable for the exhibition of fine art of any kind on account of security, air pollution, the fact that there's no possible means of getting in and out of the bloody place, you know, all of which was lies,

of course, it goes and it houses the Courtauld Collection and the Sieffert[??] Collection, probably the most valuable private collection of Old Master drawings left in the world. And there you've got it.

Yes, but on the other hand, isn't it true to say that a Brueghel went walkies?

The Brueghel went walkies, went walkies not from Somerset House, but from the galleries in...

Oh the other one.

In the other one, that's where it went walkies from.

Yes.

And there was every reason, every connection with Turner to be at Somerset House, because that's where he exhibited his pictures in the most superb 18th century gallery, which they are now gradually, they have now restored to its original form, but of course, with modern conservation they've cut the light down so you can't see the pictures properly. But in actual fact all they've got to do is to open the blinds a bit more and let a little more daylight in and we could see perfectly. Wonderful gallery. It's true that with large numbers of people they have had to support the floor underneath the gallery, and a great deal of money had to be spent on air conditioning of various kinds, but the fact that it was totally unsuitable for fine art, do you see, they just simply, I mean, it was rubbish, of course it was; they just didn't want it. And it would have been perfect as a Turner research. But maybe it's more useful now as being, for the Courtauld, and so I'm not sort of necessarily hooked on that, because there are difficulties of showing pictures in the big assembly rooms, which I could see very much, it stuck out a mile, that's what Colin Anderson was coming about all the time. Because they are assembly rooms, and what they've done at the moment, they've made an awkward compromise between putting some fake chandeliers up and pretending it's an assembly room and keeping all the blinds drawn so low you can't see the pictures. Well, you've got to keep those blinds drawn because it faces due south, but it's just the same situation as you arrive in any grand national heritage country house, you know, where all the great Gainsboroughs and family portraits hang, it's not difficult to see them, but they could arrange it so the pictures are hung so you don't get a flare off the varnish on every single one.

Which you do at the moment.

Which you do at the moment. I think they are trying to do something about it, but these directors you see, they don't know enough about lighting, and they don't make themselves a nuisance enough, because obviously it costs quite a lot of money. But they don't know their job. They actually don't know their job like that. They think they do but they don't. That's enough about Somerset House. I wasted six months and it taught me the obliquity of the Civil Services and governments.

End of F4114 Side B

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.....question.

I will. I was wondering about your interest in Signorelli. Was there anything connected with the fact that Roger Fry was very keen on Signorelli? I mean I came across a quote from him, he calls him, 'One of the family of the great audacious masters'.

Oh gracious me, it's a new quotation for me. No, it had nothing directly to do with Roger at all, it's a later date. I think, well the reason why I had got started was that I had got stuck, you know, I couldn't think what to paint, rather like writer's cramp I couldn't think what to paint, and I was feeling a bit miserable, and so Rupert said, 'For Christ's sake go and copy something'. So I thought, well I've got a photograph of this Signorelli knocking about, and it impressed me very much when I was in Berlin in 1932, when it was in the museum of course. And I had been reading a book of Berenson's in which he discusses it, and so I thought, well this would be a good idea because nobody can say anything about it, because the picture is burnt and doesn't exist any more. But I knew what the colour was roughly. Anyhow, it was described in the Berenson, which was only a little short book. I think it was...but no, no I'm sorry, I'm mixing it up with the Caravaggio. But I looked him up in various books, including Berenson, who took a completely opposite view to the interpretation of the pictures from what I did. And also I got very interested in it, because at that time I was rather influenced by Sam Carter at the Slade who was interested in Golden Sections and geometry and all the rest of it, so I thought, well this is plainly a picture that belongs to geometry, and indeed it is, because the centre of the picture is of course Pan's penis, it's bang in the centre, and then you can simply draw, make a circle, and divide it into a pentagon, which is again a sacred symbol, and you find that the composition is all on pentagonal angles, all those long flutes and sticks that people are wearing are all at pentagonal angles. So then, this was one aspect of the picture. The other aspect of the picture of course is that, on one side there's wild nature where the old shepherd is and all the rocks, all the rocks, and on the other side do you see, on the left-hand side as you face the picture, on the left of it, is of course the sort of ideal city, and there's a landscape, and of course that's where the Muses inhabit. And Pan is being given plainly a music lesson. And so therefore the picture, thinking about that part, the iconography, in Kenneth Clark you get the wild nature that is on one side, and it's always designed in rocks basically, and made so to speak, and the other side is sort of green, and so that the other side is a kind of hortus conclusus in a way. And then on, above, do you see, is a chariot, which I thought was Phaeton or something to do with the sun, or Actaeon or something of that kind, but is apparently Horus. Now it's travelling from right to left.

Backwards. I don't know, I...

I don't know, this is a question of whether it's backwards or forwards, because... I think it's going in that, I'm sure it's going in that direction. I didn't put it in in my interpretation of the picture, but it's plainly a high Renaissance picture of the, in the full flood of classical learning, and you can see it of course in the draughtsmanship and the way in which a picture is laid out, and the geometry incorporates the subject. So it's not just geometry as comp, as composition, it's geometry as an active force in the idea. And it seems to me that to do with the education of Pan, and...oh, there was a thing that if the sun was rising on the left, then it would be dawn, and if it was on the right then it was the evening. But it's plainly not the, he may be...it's not the evening of the day of the reconciliation of Pan to Christianity at all, because Pan is sitting in the middle and of course his cloak is studded with stars, and he has the moon in his head, above his head, and of course he is effeminate - it's a Bacchus figure as well as being Pan of course, and so the face is roughly effeminate with long hair, and he has the stars and the moon on him, the intuitive...

Female.

Female side you see. So it's an interesting balance of the two.

Did it also seem to you to be a very modern picture?

I don't know whether it seemed to me a modern picture or not, but the Signorelli thing that, what interested me roughly to do with Signorelli partly, and I think I had this book, I've got it here still, it was given to me by John Dodgson, and it was entirely devoted to the frescoes in that great cathedral church at, where is it?

Siena?

No no no, no, that other Tuscan town. [BREAK IN RECORDING] This man, blanking, the name's blanking out as usual. Anyway that's why I did it.

Did John Dodgson teach you, or was he a colleague?

No, no. He was...he had been at Camberwell, and he was I think, he had been at Camberwell before I went to Camberwell, but left when Bill Coldstream left because he didn't get along with the new management. And, I can't...I knew John Dodgson from before the war I think

basically, and then he became quite influential. He was very influential with a lot of the Camberwell students, like Tony Fry and Tony Eyton, John Hoyland, and...

I remember Jeffrey Camp speaking highly of him.

And Jeffrey Camp. Oh yes, with all that, people, and that's how I came much more closely in contact with John after the war. And he moved in to, also he moved into the house which, he bought the house that Ceri...no Ceri Richards bought the house that he had been in. No, I must get...no. Do you know, I'm a little confused as to how it was that I got extremely friendly, and to know and to rely on John as a critic.

You remark somewhere that he was a good critic of your work.

Yes he was a very sensitive person, and he was wonderful to talk to about painting, because he was absolutely totally absorbed and looked at paintings with great care, much more carefully than painters normally do. I think probably that made his own painting rather peculiar.

Did you think much of him as a painter himself?

He was interesting as a painter, yes. His best, in a way his most successful work you might say was, he did a very large and important picture, it was one of the war pictures that is now in the War Museum, it's extremely well painted, very good picture indeed. And then he became very much, I think he very much retired into himself I think in some kind of way; I had a long conversation about him the other day on this subject, because he's going to have an exhibition next year I think at the Fine Art Society. And, he is one of those people who is also so critical of his work that he could never make his mind up, and what would happen is, he would start a picture as a landscape or a still life and it would end up as a view of Lucca and then turn itself onto a lot of snails walking along the top of the castle wall. I mean this is almost literally what would happen, and they went on for ages and ages and ages, until they were beautifully encrusted with paint. Some of the paintings were really rather exceptional actually. They have a kind of dream-like quality. And he was interesting because though he was extremely fond of and had several pictures by Bill Coldstream, he disapproved entirely, strongly, the whole of the Coldstream method of everything. But of course some of the people that he influenced most were people who had been pupils of Bill Coldstream's, who have been the predominant influence. But somehow he is frightfully good, he is wonderful with people.

I've seen one or two drawings which look very sensitive.

He is extremely sensitive and a very good draughtsman, very good indeed. No, he was a...he's a minor artist well worth reviving. It will never be more than that I regret to say. We gave an exhibition at Camberwell after he died, and so I do know the work pretty well.

Why do you think he gave you the Signorelli book?

I think he knew because I was working on the Signorelli, as far as I know.

Oh already.

Already, yes.

It wasn't his inspiration then?

I don't think so, no. It wasn't his inspiration, it was the fact that I had a photograph of this, and also I had always remembered it, do you see, from my having seen it in Berlin in the first place. And then I got very interested in the iconography and the geometry of it. And this links up with the whole idea of, a lot of that obsession with geometry, probably even with Uccello, it's all very well, it's not purely scientific; science and poetry were terribly mixed together in the minds of Renaissance people I think.

Well they didn't make the same distinctions that we do.

They didn't make the same distinction; it really shows in the pictures. So, it couldn't be quite like Victor Pasmore applying the Golden Section and if the moon wasn't quite in the right place he just moved it a little bit.

Yes. Do you think, I mean, particular paintings by Old Masters have dominated particular periods of your own work? If one thinks of Watteau.

Well Watteau influenced you see... Watteau as a painter never did particularly influence me because I think it's outside my scope to draw, or to handle paint like that. And I think what attracted me about Watteau was first of all, I think the 'Gilles', which is extraordinarily moving, an extraordinary picture, and of course the iconography of the clown was very fashionable with Picasso in the days of Pulchinella and all the ballet etcetera, and indeed many of his pictures of that period in the 1925/26's. And so there was that element in it.

And, I think, later on I really got very fascinated of course with some of the large still lifes like, well some of the small still lifes I thought were wonderful, and I tried to copy those, and couldn't, because you can't get that quality of paint built up, and it depends so much upon that. And then of course that enormous still life with the skate hanging up that's in the Louvre, which is an absolutely wonderful picture, wonderful picture.

But I am thinking of, you know, perhaps in the early years there was Poussin.

Well, Poussin; I suppose Claude was the first of those people to influence me rather than Poussin, at the National Gallery before I went to Paris. You know, it would appeal to the Turner-esque side of me, and the serene classical landscape seemed to me wonderfully sentimental and enchanting. And it's a thing that doesn't fascinate me so much any more.

What happened to...?

I find rather dull in some ways.

What happened to your Turner-esque side?

Which Turner exercise?

Well, didn't you, I mean, some of those first pictures you exhibited referred to somewhere as Turner-esque.

Oh yes, did I? Yes, well, I always liked Turner you see, and particularly I allowed myself all those kind of liberties, particularly after going to the Louvre, and falling in love with people like Delacroix, and it all belonged... And Roger Fry considering they were very dangerous because they were rhetorical, and I thought that they were wonderful, so, obviously Turner comes back onto home ground as you might say. Turner somehow just sticks with one throughout one's life really, I can't remember a start and beginning.

What about an artist like Delacroix?

Oh, Delacroix, oh I go in and out with Delacroix a little bit, but there are one or two pictures which are absolutely permanent to me, and the 'Femmes d'Alger', you know, in their apartment, and, oh some of the other big ones are really absolutely wonderful I think. And, then do you see you become interested in them because he is always pushing at something, and he is one of those artists who is never quite satisfied, and one is interested sometimes

when they are not entirely successful, but one is interested in them partly because you have to make an adjustment to get into the taste of the period to feel sympathy with them. Sometimes they are very interesting from the difficulties that he had, particularly, I've always thought about them in terms, some of the small ones which he often had enormous difficulty in painting, and... And then I became of course totally fascinated with his diaries, which, his journals, which have been really sort of constant reading of mine for the past 30 or 40 years, literally.

Yes, I mean they're fantastic.

Literally. I mean, endless information, interest, absorbing. But I liked, do you see, I liked the Turner and, I think I can sum it up; I think I like pictures often which are painted out of people's heads, and not things that they see. I get tired of saying, oh well a painting is all about seeing, or painting is all about looking. You know, is it? Is it really all about looking?

A combination?

It must be something else. You could hardly say that Michelangelo is all about looking, or Signorelli or anybody; it's about a lot of other things other than looking.

How did you first begin to exhibit?

Oh, well, oh, the first exhibition I ever had was at the old Goupil Gallery, which was at the bottom of Lower Regent Street, which was run by people called Marchant, Mr and Mrs Marchant. And they had been there since the days of Van Gogh, they had inherited the gallery. And, R.O. Dunlop I think it was, who was very energetic and liked getting hold of people as well. I think it was R.O. Dunlop who organised the exhibition, or somebody, he chose about six or seven people including several young people, including myself. And at that time I wasn't teaching anywhere I don't think; I think it was before that, it must have been about '29, '30, some time like that, and I was working, painting oil paintings on paper, paper sometimes at that time, and I did two figure compositions out of my head which were rather good, I always remember them vaguely, and I can't remember what's happened to them. And one other painting I did there. And, oh the other people who exhibited, I think was H.S. Williams and R.O. Dunlop. I can't remember the other people now, but one ought to be able to find out. And that's where I first got noticed, and Eddie Marsh got interested and finally bought one of my earliest pictures, but that was just about a year or two later. So it was quite a useful little exhibition to me, that was. That was the first exhibition [INAUDIBLE] things. Then I worked very hard, and then I was put up for the London Group, and then I exhibited

there; I was put up and elected a member of the London Group, I think very early on when I looked at the documents, it was about 1929 or something. Yes it would have been, because we were in Titchfield Terrace at that time, '28 or '29, and I spent a lot of time trying to paint an interior a bit in the manner of Bonnard, and it was a mixture of Bonnard and Seurat a bit. And, it wasn't a bad painting, I can't remember what happened to it, I expect it's been destroyed ages ago, but I remember that went there. And then I exhibited at the London Group after that. And then of course I was moved on to the London Artists Association in 1932, and it was as a result of the London Artists Association and the run-up to the London Artists Association also building up from the Goupil Gallery first show, and getting to know people that I had known of course, like Raymond Coxon, who helped me to get little teaching jobs, visiting teaching at Clapham and various places when he and Gin couldn't go in the evenings, little evening classes, and it built up in that way. And then, I did quite a number of pictures in Titchfield Terrace which was a very peculiar period; it only lasted a little over a year actually, about two years at the most. I did two interiors, rather good ones, and Roger Fry bought one of those, and I've forgotten who bought the other one. And then Lady Bonham Carter started to buy little pieces, and then she continued to buy little pieces right into the Thirties, after I had joined the London Artists Association, which didn't last very long. And then I had in 1932 this exhibition with the London Artists Association with some rather, one large picture of Rupert as a harlequin, which was bought by Sir Michael Sadleir. I don't know what's happened to the picture, I should think it's got lost by now, and when it came up in this sale I could find no record of it after the war. And I had a first exhibition there, which I shared with Morland Lewis, who of course I had known since the Royal Academy Schools days. And so that was quite a nice little exhibition; I didn't make a lot of money but I didn't lose, I think I sold about four pictures, but that was all right. But then of course shortly after that, not so long after that, the London Artists Association folded up because Maynard Keynes was not interested any more; it was a vehicle basically for launching Duncan and Vanessa, and you know, and all that lot with Keith Baynes. And so finally they moved off by the time they were fully established, he rather lost interest in it I think. I think Maynard Keynes also liked to have things that were very lively, and he always liked them I think to make money as well, only prepared to lose so much. And of course, partly I think financed by Courtauld of course, I think Courtauld probably footed the bill for a bit, but I'm not sure about that.

How does the idea for a painting germinate? You've just been talking about, it's not just a process of seeing; is it more to do with memory, or imagination, or a combination of them all?

I think it's a combination of all of them. I don't always work very well, do you see, when I am in front of nature. I think one has to learn to look and to draw things properly. I mean, for

instance Daumier hated painting from nature; in fact when he did portraits he used to pretend to paint the portrait when the sitter was there but used to paint it after they had gone.

Did he draw from nature?

Oh I think he made notes from nature, yes, but I think nature put him off as a whole when it came to painting. You see, even Degas was not entirely hooked with just looking, was he now?

No.

I don't know how you get...I don't know how ideas come to one.

I'm thinking...

I find that I do something and then I have to leave it for a year or two sometimes and then I suddenly see what the picture, what I really meant by the picture. Sometimes it means that I've got fucked up with all this looking business, which always with me leads to copying the damn thing, and once you start doing that, the whole of the creative thing goes out of the window, for me, totally. And so I...I have to think in the end, in one hand I think my picture is simply about this line and that line, and one contrasts, which are things which emotionally one feels. I think that if you feel the whole terminology of the creative process, you see your subject, you've then got to digest it, and then you bring it out. And you know, it is, nearly all the imagery of creation is also naturally enough sexual.

If you take a specific example, I mean something like that 'The Monument'.

My painting, 'The Monument'?

Yes.

Well 'The Monument' came out of a feeling of mankind being totally oppressed, that was what 'The Monument' is about. It was human things which I made anthropomorphic rather crushed between a heavy weight, beneath a heavy weight, and that was...then it started, then you get a kind of motif, and then you kind of distil it, and...

Do you disguise it?

Very often I disguise it also. I think the original business of disguising it was partly due to the fact that I was not always very successful just painting from nature, when confronted with it, it didn't seem to be enough. And at the same time, actually to sort of paint a picture with a lot of Michelangelesque figures, or whether they were Botticellis or Michelangelesque figures or Magnasco figures all being crushed to pieces, didn't seem to answer modern sensibility. And with one's influence at the time, with Abstract Expressionism, the American painting and so on, and there was an anthropomorphic element, do you see, that runs right through de Kooning and Arshile Gorky and all those people. So, I used it and didn't use it, and of course it led to a lot of indecisiveness I think which is very dangerous, and I finally decided, in the end, after having painted some rather good pictures in this style, in this way, I found particularly when it came, that it isn't really a proper discipline that one came to an end of it; it wouldn't work any more, it just doesn't work any more. And you know...

Was it anything to do with being discreet as well?

Well I was determined in the end not to be discreet.

So you think you were being discreet?

I think I was being discreet. And then I decided, well why? So then I found it rather impossible to move, and...[PAUSE FOR THOUGHT] Just to exhaust this problem, what happened was, the pictures became increasingly white white, because I was always obliterating, and I thought, well this won't do. I mean you've got to make your mind up. And then Rupert died, so that, and then I became totally non-figurative, which made me make up my mind and put a line round the idea, instead of leaving everything open-ended, the open-ended ambiguity, but this open-ended ambiguity is actually my strong suit. But I think I had to learn, I wanted not to come to the kind of dead end of Abstract Expressionism; I mean one wonders why so many of them just took to drink, or killed themselves in motor car crashes a little bit. But anyway I decided it wasn't a discipline, and particularly I decided, also a discipline, particularly when I went back to the art school teaching, to see that when that kind, so many art schools took over this, and I took it over to start off

with but I always insisted on something else as well, but with those art schools that went on with it, it wasn't.....

End of F4115 Side A

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Why...we were talking about 'The Monument', why it contained this element of violence in it, I don't really know. I think an awful lot of things are done that one doesn't really know about, and one gets to know them through doing them.

Was it a kind of allegory, or abstract...it's an abstract notion, it's not a...

It was an abstract notion. I wanted to convey this feeling of life being crushed out, and at the same time was set against a kind of, not entirely...human vacancy really, I suppose. And then do you see, if you take another picture like 'the Ear', which I did two versions of, that came very specifically out of a specific experience when I first went to Delphi with Rupert. And I got up very early one morning, we spent, we were there for three or four days, and in the early morning I got up, because it's wonderful in the early morning there, and I walked right up to the top and then across to the Castalia. There's an enormous cliff with this waterfall and a stream that runs, a sacred stream, and there's this wonderful rock face which was absolutely, which the sun was hitting. And of course this was connected with Apollo, and that meant music of course and prophesy and all kinds of things, and it was the magic of that morning. And I tried to put it into something, and I called it 'The Ear of Apollo'. And there again, do you see, I had an idea at the back of my mind that I wasn't going to do, I couldn't, I couldn't put a human figure in, but I had somehow or other to evoke it. If I didn't evoke it then I broke the magic of the picture. So, that was...that accounts for that. But all that kind of school of thought as I say came to an end for some reason or another after Rupert died, and then I realised partly I suppose from being with Gregory too, I felt I must have some certainty. And so...with the geometrical things that I had been involved with before, it wasn't an impossible kind of thing to do, and also I had thought that instead of having the ambiguity I would have to put a line round things to contain a thought. And I think it was very good for me up to a point that; I hated it while I was doing it because it really did put me to it. And then I decided after that of course, because it wasn't entirely a natural form for me to work in, it really did impose terrible limitations on me, and of course I am scribbling away other things all the time, and then thinking about Keith Vaughan, whose pictures I like very much, which were plainly, I mean what they are about and the boys and everything else, and I remember Keith saying to me, 'Oh, you see I really only have one subject, and that's boys bathing; I just have one subject'. And so then I thought, yes, well that's all right, that's fine. And, I have a great respect for Keith, and one or two of them, there's a very good one, I think the Tate bought it, and it really is classically very well painted and well done, and it's always, it is abstracted. And then of course he moved entirely towards, became increasingly abstract, as obviously he was...instead of...and I thought, this won't do. What he is actually doing, the pictures are

shutting one out, shutting one off in some kind of way. So I thought I would have to try and break that, in fact not hold back, and I suppose up to a point that accounts for what I've done more recently. And then, a lot of violence got linked up with the fact that some violence entered my life in various ways, and I don't want to go into it on a public broadcast, but somebody had got, actually it's a woman, who actually got...that I knew...who actually got mugged and raped in the most appalling way, and then, I had to digest that, and I didn't want to paint that, but it simmered in my head. These things simmer in my head for two or three years before they come out, and then they come out not in the form of the original emotional source very often, they come out in another form. I think, I can't explain it better than that.

Well it's not reportage or description.

No, it's not reportage or description in that sense at all.

It's an analogue in a sense perhaps.

It is an analogue, yes I suppose you can put it like that. But it enables me then to paint something else which is not directly that, because I still don't like taking things absolutely bang on the nose. I suppose the most frontal thing I ever did was my own self-portrait as Gilles without any clothes on, which, that is, a nice little article in 'The Independent' the other day about someone writing about Giacometti. The frontal thing, do you see, is extremely important, because it imposes itself, and it's not like, it doesn't have the contrapuntal thing that classical, late classical composition has.

What, balance?

The balance, the spiral. It doesn't...you are confronted with a subject, and a certain business I suppose concerns me with frontal, being frontally with the subject. That's why I like a lot of some of primitive pictures which have come back to me in a different way. No not primitive pictures, the Antonello little crucifixion in the National Gallery, you see, is one of the most wonderful little pictures, and that is totally frontal, with Christ on the cross, and with a figure on each side, and a landscape at the bottom across.

It's a very narrow picture.

And it's tall and narrow; it's a tall narrow picture, like that, and with the figures on each side. But, it's a very very powerful image, and it accounts of course for the power of the images a great deal of earlier painting I think as well, and somehow or another there's always a dual

thing with me, because I also like the Baroque of Rubens you see. But I have become increasingly, I like to use a spiral, because that can be an open-ended thing again, but I don't want to...I think I want to confront, try to confront a subject. How the subject comes into my head is a mystery. Sometimes it simply gets there by accident. Sometimes it has to be built on quite consciously in other different ways until it becomes what you want. I think it's always important really to leave a trail somewhere. This is why I've always done a lot of drawings on rubbishy pieces of paper, because I've never thought of a drawing as in itself all that important.

As a process towards another end.

Yes, it's always been a process, which is a pity, because some of the drawings turn out to be rather good drawings in the end, which one doesn't always recognise. I can't set down to do a drawing; I suppose in a certain sense I hope a painting is going to come out and that's about it I am afraid. I don't carpenter it, I can't, I'm not ultimately a conceptual painter, I'm a muddler. I'm afraid I'm in a muddle, I can't say any more. You've muddled me up.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

The other source of how I get my ideas, I get my ideas from looking at other pictures, the pictures I think, oh I would like to...you know, this has something that I must do. And then I would try and...and the picture builds up out of other pictures, and... I think, I only get to understand what some pictures are actually about by reading other people, what they actually say about it; I suddenly realise that they have said something interesting about the picture, and then I think about that, and sometimes in the end I don't agree with it or I think of something much more interesting that comes out of it. And you see, sometimes I will take a picture I have been thinking about, Goya, and I started to do some little groups of people in relationship to a kind of Goyaesque scale, and then I draw any little groups of figures, either nudes or I invent a sort of, the old classical bathing scene sort, or jugglers or what have you, or it may be a group of people actually talking in the street or crossing the road. But it's out of the scale and the looking at that picture, and trying to do it perhaps doodling away with people crossing the road, or people standing in a conversation; but then suddenly you realise, oh, oh that will make...you know, I can make a picture out of that. And so...and then, perhaps that idea will grow even more into another. And then you can do perhaps two or three, but not consecutively, one after another, I can't do that; every picture has to be a new thing for me, which is annoying but it has to be, I can't... But things do happen a bit in series, undoubtedly. So, you know, it's not all my own work when it comes to painting pictures or getting subjects, I mean you get it from everywhere.

In the same way as you might see a photograph in a newspaper.

Yes, absolutely, in fact I've done that frequently, got an idea. I've got several little photographs in the drawer now which I am hoping to be able to use one day. And sometimes quite silly things that just, I've got a photograph of two heads, they happen to be Arab heads at the moment but the photograph so looks so like a wonderful Ribera that I can't, I'm still transfixed with that. And sometimes that will trigger off how to handle something which you are painting too.

Do you find that remarks that other artists have to make about paintings of any value, do you think?

I'm trying to think. As a whole I don't like going round picture galleries with other people very much, unless they are totally separate or unless one is singularly in tune, because people's attention period varies enormously. Some people, I very often...very often I don't really look at the pictures very much, I realise my attention lasts for about half a minute, and that it has to be really an intent look if I'm going to be in front of a picture looking at it for say ten minutes; that's a very long time to look at a picture. Three minutes to five minutes, and then you have to have a change. There are a lot of things which I don't notice when I look at pictures the first time round, particularly aspects of Old Masters where the subject matter is very important, and indeed one doesn't always understand the subject matter or anything like that. And so I often, I do enjoy reading about pictures from people; I have enjoyed very much reading Panofsky's and Roger Fry, or, or other people as well, because they bring a different point of view. That was what was useful about John Dodgson because he really did look at pictures, and a lot of painters don't look all that close; they want what's useful to them. I mean one goes to a picture gallery not...really, to raid it, quite frankly.

It suggests that you are going to raid what's closest to you; I mean you're not going to be doing it to the Prado.

Yes, and if you are in a different...yes, you're not going to do it in the Prado, no. But one does...well one raids people, and very often it's very valuable, and I used to take to going round galleries when I was abroad, I used to take little drawn notes of pictures occasionally, and that's quite useful, because if it's a question of looking, painting is a matter of looking, it certainly makes you look at the Old Masters and sometimes that's much more useful than just looking at Miss X, a model who is standing and modelling for you in the nude, in front of you, and deliberately being pointed. (laughs) Which I think is fair enough.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

I wanted to ask you about Véra Russell.

Oh, inevitably that would come up. I suppose the first time I met, Rupert and I met Véra Russell, was at the time when she got married to, she had just been married to Basil Burton.

Was that her first...?

Her first husband, who was a Rothermere, and very handsome I may say, and, they were the handsomest pair in London, and she was a great beauty you see, which she really was, fantastic. And they lived in, what is it, Connaught Street is it? It's off Edgware Road, you know, just opposite the park, a long street that leads into Wigmore Street actually, you know, it goes straight and then it turns into Connaught Street I think in the end, after it's crossed the Edgware Road. It's the smart, it's the Bayswater side of the Edgware Road.

Did they have a kind of...?

They had a nice, small little London, sort of Regency period residence, very suitable for a married couple.

Did they have a salon?

I don't know whether they had a salon or not. Certainly one was not part of a salon. But she joined the Group Theatre for some reason or another. Of course she was an actress, wanted to be an actress, and indeed she joined the Group Theatre as an early member, and I suppose the fact that it was left-wing and you know, fringe theatre and, you know, sort of left-like, all intellectuals were those days, obviously appealed not only to her but of course to Basil, do you see, who in the end became really pretty full up, pretty well totally implicated with the Communist Party, came from Cambridge. And this caused in the end of course for a certain amount of trouble between the pair of them, but there were of course other troubles as well. But anyway, so she appeared as a young actress, and she appeared in one or two West End productions along with, Tony Guthrie's productions of things, and also various other plays which I can't remember. And she played...we saw quite a lot of them in those days, and their busts were being done by Epstein and everything and it was all very much as it should be.

How did she strike you at that point?

Well I must say she was one of the most charismatic and beautiful women that I have ever seen, I mean there is no doubt about that, and of course she was of course quite famous for being a model as well, and she was highly intelligent, and ambitious to be an actress. She played one or two quite good parts, but the interesting thing is that, though she had the personality like a kick of a mule, for some reason or other when she got on the stage it wasn't there, she did not come across, and...

Well it wouldn't have been stage fright with her, would it?

I don't know whether it would have been stage fright; it could have been, because she was a mixture of, had tremendous bravery, bravado, and insecurity really. And I think it's one of the things that makes her character rather interesting as a matter of fact, because she had a formidable intellect, and a very keen sense of what was going on, which was then always vitiated by qualities in her own character, which is somewhat difficult to pin down because one doesn't want brutally to say that it was just, that she was just power-driven, but that was an element in it. It was really destructive actually. Because that was allied with a kind of femininity, so she always required a man to be a front.

As a husband?

What?

Always as a husband?

Either as a husband or as a lover. But she said to me, 'You know, I can't understand, Robert, why somebody as loyal as I am has had three husbands.' Well unfortunately nobody dared tell her, and I didn't say, well of course, you try to manage them to such a degree that they can't stand it any more. But she didn't see that, she was incapable of seeing that. But anyway she appeared as Venus in Louis MacNeice's play, 'Out of the Picture', which was a part thank goodness which she really didn't have to speak; all she had to do was to look extremely beautiful, which she succeeded in doing. But otherwise she was kind of, she always made out that she was so important and vital to the Group Theatre in its early days, but in actual fact this is not true quite, it's really not true, because very soon, do you see, though she joined in 1932, right at the very beginning, by 1934/35, do you see, she was already beginning to be aligned with Michel St. Denis, who then, with the Companie des Quinze. I mean she had her irons in many fires right from the start, and, no I can't remember the exact dates of Michel St. Denis, but when Michel St. Denis had given his first appearance, when he acted in French, I

think it was the Wyndham Theatre with 'Noah'] and things like that, which prompted Gielgud, and then of course 'Noah' had a terrific thing all the way round, meanwhile of course the Group Theatre had also done a 'Noah' just before, but that didn't matter, I mean Noah... 'Noah and the Deluge' was in the air obviously during the Thirties.

An appropriate theme.

What?

An appropriate theme.

An appropriate theme. So...

So did she have a relationship with Michel St. Denis?

She became associated, she always wanted power, do you see, and she was friendly with the Motleys and of John Gielgud, and so she went in with the Motleys and John Gielgud in a big way, also with Michel St. Denis and the foundation of the London Theatre Studio, which was up in Islington, and one really didn't see her for dust over this period at all do you see, because she was entirely wrapped up with that. Meanwhile of course, the Group Theatre had invited Michel St. Denis when he first came over to give a talk in Duncan Grant's studio, and he gave quite an interesting talk in the studio in Fitzroy Street, which he had every reason to do, Duncan had, because of course he had designed for the... Words. The Vieux Colombier, the Vieux Colombier theatre with Michel's uncle, who of course was a great director of that theatre, and he had designed 'The Tempest' I think, or was it 'Twelfth Night' or one of those Shakespearian productions for a production which I think never took place, because it was interrupted by the war, which he had designed specially for, I can't remember his name now, famous name. And so, then Michel left the company run by his uncle and started to build one of his own, and he started to build it in much the same way as the Group Theatre also wanted to build theirs, by taking a company of actors into the country and training them for a couple of years, which we were never able to do because we never could raise the money. It's shocking really that we never could raise the money for that, because it could have been done quite cheaply in those days. But anyway we didn't. And so, Véra at any rate, she took herself off into higher spheres really as you might say, where there were real theatres to perform in, and Gielgud and Motleys and everybody else in that world, do you see. So...

So when did she come back into your life?

So then she came back into one's life in a very obvious way, Véra. The Group Theatre had made itself into a considerable name by the time war was declared, in fact we had a considerable...we had enough sympathy and interest. And so we took all the money out of the Group Theatre and I carried it about in my back pocket actually for about eight weeks, which we tried to invest by buying an Old Master drawing or something as an investment, which we didn't succeed in doing, so in the end it was just put into Dunlops and it did quite well in Dunlops during the war, so we had enough money to start the thing up after the war.

Meanwhile Rupert had been running and had started a theatre school which was...well it was started really by Eva Hubback and Alan Collingwood at Morley College, and that ran enormously successfully during the war, and of course there was Tippett in the music section of that. And it was a very very lively time at Morley College during this time, and when the end of the war came there was a short movement, do you see, that Michel St. Denis, who also had been in England during the entire, most of the war, and had done French broadcasts for the Libération, for the Libération people, from here, and of course with Véra, because she in the end became a BBC correspondent for the invasion, and she was in Paris, you know, and everywhere, do you see. But when the war came to an end, there was then the question, there were two things really. There was the Festival of Britain, because by this time, well, by this time, do you see, she had left Basil Burton and was entirely devoted as the éminence grise behind Michel St. Denis, and of course it was a complete affair which made life quite difficult sometimes with the Companie des Quinze, but that's neither here nor there. So she found herself then having separated from Michel, because she tended to discard people when they, you know, she always found their Achilles' heel in the end; she was always madly excited at first and then she found Achilles' heels. And that's the other history of the thing. And so, she found therefore the Group Theatre was waiting to be exploited, and after all with very substantial connections, and so she became a kind of éminence grise behind the Group Theatre. And Rupert, who was also frustrated in his ambitions to be a great producer as well, do you see, naturally enough, you know, with Véra with her immense powers of persuasion and immense intelligence, and after all, and vision really, but, it was always vitiated by the fact that she wanted power. And the thing was that she took over the Group Theatre, and she enlarged it in a way which was entirely unsuited to Rupert's personality and his creative abilities. Rupert was one of those people who function best on his own, and fighting for it in a way, but what he wasn't any good at was dealing with enormous complicated organisations where we suddenly found we had sponsors from Graham Greene and Lord and Lady this, and the Honourable so-and-so, Mr so-and-so the financier, which is exactly, do you see, out of the Group Theatre's range, it was not what the Group Theatre was about. The result was that in the end there were flaming rows, and in the end the thing bust up in about 1932 - 1952, after the Festival of Britain.

And do you think Véra has to take some of the blame for that?

Most certainly, absolutely, most certainly. And of course Rupert is also to blame for having been led astray too. And also he was beginning to be ill of the illness of which he ultimately died, in other words, his whole grip on things was beginning to fade slowly, and it was, certainly it was not a thing that we noticed ourselves, any of us, at that time particularly, except one noticed that, you know, something was not right at any rate. So, anyway there was a flaming row, and Rupert said he would never speak to that terrible woman ever again. So, I thought he was being a bit hard on her, but in actual fact I can now appreciate very much exactly why.

End of F4115 Side B

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However, as you could imagine life was never boring when Véra was about, there was always dramas and vast new propositions and aperçus about life in general. And what happened was, that any rate, the Group Theatre - I don't want to talk about the Group Theatre, no.

Anyway it went down in a kind of blaze of glory, and then of course had no money left really, and it came to an end. There was this frightful bust-up, and I thought that, as I say...however, life as I said was never really boring with Véra. And of course I got then dragged...we didn't see anything of Véra then for quite a number of years, but of course, after Michel Saint-Denis she married Charles Barry, Sir Charles Barry, with the Festival of Britain, and of course she became a totally different woman, totally absorbed in big politics, do you see. And then when that marriage bust up she married John Russell.

How did she meet him?

Oh, well John Russell was about in the art world. He had been very much associated with Logan Pearsall-Smith, and Véra just knew everybody, and...

What was the connection with Pearsall-Smith?

I think he acted as a secretary very largely. And Logan Pearsall - anyway I don't want to talk about that, because, I know quite a bit about that but not enough to be authoritative. But anyway, there later on she was married to John Russell, you know, the intellectual up-and-coming art critic and everything else, and of course then she got to know, she got to know Matthew Smith, and so she built an entirely different life with John Russell, and which introduced her to the art world and so she became very knowledgeable about the arts. And she had an extraordinary gift for those things, I mean, because through John Russell and all that, you see, she got to know, she began to work with people like Beyeler in the international art market, and, she had really quite astonishing gifts. I'm not wanting to...you know, I think this has got to be fully stated. And she made catalogues and collected people together for these catalogues for Beyeler and all that kind of thing, and everything went fine until of course what usually happened, do you see, after a time with everyone, she suddenly finds that there is an Achilles' heel. So then, John Russell...because, the trouble was, she would manage everybody, she always knew better what the person should do, and it really became impossible. And I of course came back into Véra's life through John Russell, because I suppose I was with the Whitechapel in '73 and everything else, I was, you know, I was a bit of a figure, and I was a useful person for him to have, so he used to ask me, and we used to go on adjudicating things, we adjudicated the second John Moores, which was, I think was won

by David Hockney with 'Cha-Cha' or one of those pictures, and you know, so we were all very much in the swim. But it was through...

Rupert by this time...

Rupert by this time is now, won't speak to Véra at all, and his health is all the time now declining towards, when it became very very apparent from 1958/59, when it came to the Whitechapel exhibition of mine he was already very embarrassingly gone. And so really Véra came back into my life through John Russell. And then, knowing then more about Véra, and watching her over the time, I could quite see how appalling Véra could be, because she could behave like a fishwife; she could behave most disgustingly to people. I mean, if you got her power, she was also immensely cruel and destructive when she decided to turn against somebody. And Rupert was equally of course from that point of view, he equally had as strong a temperament, so needless to say it was inevitable that he would say that he would never speak to her again. But I did engineer, when he was really, Rupert, the poor dear was quite gaga, I did try to engineer some kind of a meeting and went to Acacia Road, where she had a wonderful house and ran a salon. And at this salon were all kinds of people of course including all kinds of young people as well, like Derek Jarman and Michael Ginsberg, and of course his wife, Robin was running a theatre group. And, you know, she ran this salon, and there was Princess Margaret going there and all that, I mean... But then, anyway this came unstuck finally when she separated from John, and she moved over to Hamilton Terrace, and this time, do you see, it was not so much the theatre, she must do something for artists and art. And so she got the idea of an artists' market, and she actually, she invited all the wrong people, and it completely collapsed before it got started. And in the end I found myself in the position of saying what artists she should more or less get hold of to start with, so we effected some kind of arrangement where we got a better range of artists to start the thing off. And she had this enormous energy and vision as to how an artists' market could be run, because it was to be run independently, it had to raise some money of course, the Arts Council had to cough up something, and it would be not a dealers' shop exactly, but it must be open to the street so anybody could come in at any time, and it was to encourage young artists, but as well show them in a context of established artists, you know, without any strings attached. A very good idea. And she found these premises with, what's her name, in Earlham Street, the owner of, well she owns the premises now of course.

Christina Smith.

Christina Smith. So Christina Smith gets taken up as well, but of course that's a couple of formidable ladies, so that there were always battles in that direction, so Maggi Hambling and

I were always having to go off and sort of pacify one or the other. And also Véra knew that she antagonised people and so I always had to, very often I had to go to the meetings with the Arts Council instead of her. And then of course if I didn't manage it right she blamed me, but she always saw that I was never quite properly briefed; she always held something back, you know, which was naughty.

Was she jealous of you doing better than her?

I think so. But anyway you can interpret it how you like, but it would mean that she would lose her control more you see. But that was a very brave thing, and we did a lot of good work, let's face it.

How long did it last?

I can't remember, about eight years I suppose in the end and...perhaps not as long as that, perhaps...no, something like...it was kind of off and on. Anyway we failed to get the support that was needed in the end to carry on.

Did you end up in having a big row?

No, I didn't. So then she got another idea, because this is now, we're talking about the late Seventies and the Eighties, early Eighties, when she got very worked up about the unemployed, so she had a big scheme for running courses for the unemployed, which of course she did with her extraordinary organising ability and energy; she did it extremely well, but of course counted on me actually to provide the bricks and mortar as you might say. And anyway so I found myself involved with that, and all the time I was beginning to feel, this is really getting too much, I'm all the time being used to develop these by Véra, and she would be very demanding of one's time. One sympathises with the idea but it was altogether getting too demanding. But we launched this scheme, we gave art classes, and the idea was to, in the end to expand it much bigger into a scheme now which is already taking place in quite a big way down in the East End now, but what happened was that the pilot thing was run off, do you see, as art classes and history of art classes for the unemployed; it was advertised in all the proper kind of, GLC papers and other papers, and you took anybody. And it was arranged with Ian Jenkin, who was very sympathetic with the idea that Camberwell School would be available during the summer holidays, during the holidays. Well, all this was fine, and I was sort of...Véra and I would give the opening speeches and I would roughly supervise the course from the part of, as far as the studio work was concerned. She would arrange for

lectures and all kinds of other support activities to take place, which she did very efficiently, including having people like Jonathan Miller, who I took a strong dislike to actually.

Why?

Oh, he was such a know-all, jack-of-all-trades. He said, 'It doesn't matter, I can lecture on any subject,' I mean, it got a bit much. So anyway, I didn't like him very much, personally. But he gave a talk. And, we gave these classes, and the thing was, to treat them all just as you would any art student or any professional, you know, and were not going to treat them as if they are oddities coming into the school. Everything was laid open for them, their easels, the materials, we provided them with, we managed to raise some money for the materials, and everything. And it was for a fortnight I think as far as I remember, and I can't tell you, it went like, it went absolutely wonderfully. I got results out of those unemployed which would have taken me, in a fortnight, it would have taken the best part of a year with the ordinary art student, but of course this is due to the fact that they are in a very extraordinary position. It was a very mixed bunch of people, some of them were very educated, some of them, you know, people who had been, perhaps lawyers or had been a teacher or something of that kind, but always wanted to paint and wanted to be an artist, and then of course there were totally East End toughs. It was a very interesting course. But of course what happened, typically, the first thing that happened was that Véra totally antagonised the staff. She also took a violent hatred of one of the teachers that I had got in, and in a certain sense, she had a certain vision about that, I won't name him, because he was very left-wing and rather communist-inclined; he saw this was a good idea, and actually what happened was that, and we gave two courses of this kind, and after that he took it over, which is what, she spotted that this was what he wanted to do. So in the end the whole thing bust up, you know, and... But it was an interesting, it was an interesting thing, and a right idea to do, and it's now being done on a much wider scale, you know, for crafts and everything else. But I got really very remarkable results out of them, I was delighted with it. And, so that came to an end.

And what was Véra's next project?

Well I can't remember the exact chronology. The next thing was of course, then one got involved with - or was that before? Oh there was the whole business of the Turner, the Turner business, which I think I've been into slightly.

You have.

And then of course...what was the next thing that one got involved with?

When did you become associated with the British School at Rome?

Oh, I can't remember; it was a long long time ago. I was I think the longest-serving chairman at the fine arts section.

Did you enjoy doing that?

Up to a point. It was an inevitable position for somebody like me to get of course, and I found it...it wasn't a very exhausting job. It was really, the principle job was to prevent the Slade School and the Royal College of Art from being at daggers drawn, because they were always jockeying for their own students to win the Prix de Rome or to get the Abbey Scholarships, and you know, I just wasn't going to have any of that at all, so I managed to keep the peace for a number of years and I went out to Rome.

Did you stay out there for any length of time?

Not for very long, not for very long. I used to go, I went two or three times for about a fortnight at a time. And one did quite a lot of goodish work there but of course it all got unpicked in the end.

Did you have any particularly talented students come through, that stand out in your memory?

Not particularly, no, no. One of two made it up in quite a big way, but what often happens with the brilliant students, they don't last, and... There are quite a number of people on the fringe, there was Nicholas Ward-Jackson of course, who was doing the history of art course. And we had some lively people there, but they had quite a difficult time because Monnington had been the, looked after this business before me, and of course he was much more deeply implicated with it, having been a Rome scholar himself, and he was at daggers drawn really with the head of the British School. Oh, what is his name? It doesn't matter for the moment. But he was, naturally enough he was a scholar and he was an archaeologist, so the whole place was filled with pot shards. He occupied really parts of the arts part with cabinets and boxes of valuable pieces of pottery waiting to be identified and collected. He had a whole room entirely, where he housed an extremely interesting collection of aerial photographs taken during the war, many of which of course covered archaeological sites, which he had got hold of very cleverly. And, so one of the first things to do was to get rid of a lot of those pot shards and get them cleared out into his own department, which was enormous, and put in proper printing presses which should have been there. So, and that's the kind of thing I

helped to get along. And I got along quite well with him, but...but anyway... And I also managed to get rid of the photographs, and they were given back I think to the Italians to whom they really properly belonged. And this room...because what I found was that the British School didn't have any money, and the artists were always getting a little bit of a cheap end of the stick, you know, naturally enough, because it was all, the British School is full of scholars, and Canadian professors and visiting professors and things of one thing and another, who are often charged, do you see, so this, you know, it's all part of the finances as well, and when I was there, and we had to argue very much about money and keep things cheap, so we had to...and we went into the accounts down to the numbers of lavatory rolls that were used. This you have to do if you are on these kind of things. So, I did some vaguely useful things there, and it was interesting enough. And then of course I did manage to use it by pulling a little bit of power, which was how I managed to get up and see the Michelangelos when they were being cleaned in the Sistine Chapel, but that was after I had ceased to be on that board.

Talking about students in general, I mean of the people that you have taught, are there any particular outstanding ones?

I don't know, I've often asked myself that. I suppose Maggi Hambling is the most outstanding student, and then in the theatre line I would certainly say I can take a certain amount of credit for... I don't think any art teacher should take the credit for the success of students, because really you can't make bricks without straw, and if you run a good art school you tend to collect some rather more talented people, and that's about as far as you can go. And, I wasn't at Camberwell for very long, I was only there for eight years, and the first two or three years were entirely in reviving the school from being a very small place with only 22 students, and changing it from the old NDD to the new thing, and after I had done that, which was about three years, well that only really, it was only sort of five years. And so I left a big mark but I am not taking credit for people really, because I think you don't, it's not done like that. And do you see, what happens, you have a student who goes to, starts at Camberwell and then goes on to the Royal College of Art, and then they scoop all the benefits from it.

What about your teaching then at Chelsea or somewhere like that?

Well it's left a considerable mark on people and on the teachers that taught with me there. And, it's left me with an enormous number of young friends which have been a tremendous, of use to me, because, if you don't have those, you've got nothing but your own little peer group all ageing away, which won't do at all.

But I was thinking...

I mean the sort of people that I think that I have had influence on, are people like Philip Prowse, and I am going to say Derek Jarman as well. And there was Maggi Hambling.

In what way? In forming their vision, or encouraging them?

Encouraging them, and allowing them to talk. I mean, Derek came because he wanted to talk to one, not, you know, I suppose...that's what one did, and as I say I saw nearly all his scripts five times over, and discussed about them, until of course, up to the Caravaggio business which went on for years and years and years. And then after the Caravaggio thing, and a lot of the small 8mm advertisement things, a lot of which were very brilliant and a lot of those early things, I didn't have so much to do with.

You didn't?

No. I did and I didn't. But a lot of the commercial things that he cut his teeth on I didn't; you know, all those advertisement things that he did for pop groups, and which after all, it created his own circle, do you see, which then got out of the original circle that he had formed, you know, through the Slade and through earlier friends.

And someone like Keith Prowse...

You mean...

Yes I do.

Philip Prowse, sorry.

Well Philip Prowse, as I say he is one of my best friends, and again, as I say I don't take credit for any of this, but one just, I do take...I suppose I can say that I have given them opportunities to talk and they come for advice, and I don't like giving advice because certainly, absolutely fatal when people take it. (laughs)

What about someone like John Berger, I was thinking...

Oh well John Berger, yes, that would be another student of mine, do you see, who was a good student, he was rather a good painter, but of course he didn't find his outlet ultimately in

painting. And I know at the back of my mind I can think of, if I'm given a chance I could think of one or two others in the same, in the same lot. And, no, John Berger certainly. And then of course, well John Berger for a time, he stayed with Rupert and I and lived in our house in Cathcart Road for a time.

Oh I didn't know that.

Yes. I had forgotten all about that until I suddenly remembered it the other day. Somebody reminded me of it. For about two or three months he had nowhere to live for some reason or another and so, we took him on there.

And that went OK?

Oh yes, perfectly OK, yes. And after all, we ran quite an exciting little household of our own after all, one must remember that.

But you taught someone like Elizabeth Frink for instance, didn't you?

Oh yes, yes. I didn't have much to do with teaching her. She was at the school, and then I saw much more of her directly the moment she left the school. She was in the sculpture school, and...

At Chelsea?

At Chelsea, and I was in the painting school. But I knew Liz Frink, Lizzie Frink very well at Chelsea. And, oh who else were there there? Oh, the Marquis of Queensberry, you know, the potter. And then there were lots of... Then one or two geniuses who never developed. There were...but you know, sometimes some people have a gift of, at certain times they come on, they flower, you know, and it answers the mood of the times. That accounts for vogues of course, but they do actually answer, they answer something.

You mean something like the Kitchen Sink painters?

Yes, they answered a thing. And then of course later on with the Richard Smiths and...

Pop artists.

The Pop artists did the same thing.

But they don't tend to live out of their period, do they?

Well it was very...they were very noticeable. I remember picking Richard Smith, it was his first year at the Royal College of Art in a sketch club that I had to do, and it's very peculiar, but as I say something happened in the colour, or something. Anyway, returning to Véra...

Indeed.

I can't remember what the last things were.

Arguments,

What?

Arguments.

Arguments. Oh, well, then of course, she rather found herself in a certain sense with the collapse of the Artists' Market with not too much to do really, so she had to think of something else.

Did she always have private means?

No, she had very limited private means indeed. She had very substantial connections from her father who was rather a brilliant man, a Russian of course, who was enormously rich, a very rich family in St. Petersburg, Jewish partly, and she knew everybody, and when her father came over he had bought a, took a house in Queen's Gate, and opened it also as a home for white Russian refugees, many of whom were very distinguished people in their own rights, some of whom went back and of course were promptly executed, disappeared. And the father thought that this revolution wouldn't last more than two years and they would be back, and so then he found himself the possessor of an enormous house in Queen's Gate, a house with butlers and everything else, you know, in the grand style. He then found of course that his money was running out, and also, the years were also beginning to add up; it wasn't two it was now three, and then four. So then in the end, do you see, he was forced then once more to make a living for himself in order to keep his family of two daughters and a wife and all. So they had to give all that up, they gave it all up, and he became financial adviser to various Conservative governments and things like that, he was a very clever man, an engineer primarily to start off with. But he had big of course international connections all over Europe,

like these big families did have, but he never had money, he never had independent...but they were always used to having enough.

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.....of the Artists' Market, and naturally got to know a lot of artists through that. And so there was a succession of young artists, like Craigie Aitchison and other people who she began to take charge of. And it was very noticeable also that she always took charge of people who were vulnerable, which is why she took on to me. And she was very good at just keeping that on. And in this way, you got this curious thing, you got this very brilliant woman full of good ideas, with a tremendous desire to do good, and with a terrible belief that she had second sight, which she thought that she had inherited from her father, a sixth sense, so therefore she always knew better than everybody else. And this was really her undoing, do you see, because everything that she took up she found never met up to her standards, and was either then discarded or there was a quarrel with, or wiped out. And I saw it happen with so many other people. 'Oh, young so-and-so, he's so...my dear, he is brilliant.' And that would last for a year, and then something would happen. 'Oh of course, you see the trouble with him is,' or 'her is...' And in this way she was her own worst enemy; she destroyed in the end what she had built in a way.

Did she remarry after John Russell?

No, no she didn't. I don't know about her sex life after that, it's only guess-work.

But you gave the impression that she liked to be surrounded by men that she was in love with or...

Oh, no she always liked to...no, she...yes, but she always liked to have, if she went out she really liked to have a squire.

And did you fulfil that for her sometimes?

Yes I suppose I did. And also on these schemes, we got involved with a scheme for doing an exhibition of British drawings at the Hayward Gallery; that totally exhausted me and that was really the beginning of the end I think. She completely exhausted me over this. She refused to allow, she never...well she didn't realise that she had dominated me. I was not allowed, I was the person who was asked to put this exhibition on, and like a fool I asked Véra to give me a hand, because I knew, I didn't want to do it particularly, and not alone anyhow, and we put up a very good scheme which was ultimately turned down by the...well, we turned the Arts Council down really because they wouldn't do it as we wanted it.

So it was never put on?

So, yes well it was put on later on by Uglow, which was a complete flop, I mean... And we could see that you couldn't fill the Hayward Gallery with drawings of British artists, young British artists, it would have been absolutely totally boring.

Uglow or George?

No it was Uglow I think did it. It may have been George.

Not 'Drawings of People' was it called?

I think it probably was, yes.

That was George.

Oh it was George was it? I thought it was Uglow.

I don't think Uglow has done a show like that.

Well you see the Hayward is a very difficult fill to do, and we had to have the whole of it, and it followed the Picasso exhibition or something; I mean it was a terribly difficult thing to do. And what we wanted to do was rather to turn it into a survey of British drawings since the turn of the century, which could have been quite interesting, and we also wanted to show caricaturists, botanical draughtsmen and other things, do you see, to bulk out the interest. The Arts Council said that their brief was that it had to be for young British artists. And then we attended this awful meeting with David Sylvester in the chair, in which I was questioned, I thought, as if I was a naughty schoolboy, at least, you know, a kind of a nobody. Why I thought that this exhibition was going to...why we wanted it like this. I mean, I won't say who did the questioning, but I went out... Véra went into this meeting determined to agree to what was going to be done, up to a point, and she was thinking that we were going to get our own way in other words. And I came out, and I said, 'Look here Véra, this is not on.' So she said, 'No I don't think it is.' So we sat outside while they were deliberating as to whether they were going to do it or not. Inside they were deciding that they were going to allow us to do it. We sat outside and said we are not going to do it. That's what happened. And anyway I was completely exhausted after that and went for a holiday in Yugoslavia, Dubrovnik, and then I became extremely ill with a bad back, and couldn't move for a week; it was much the same as what I developed later on. And that finished me off really.

Were you not part of...?

Well she came very much, I saw a great deal of her, it was always, I was holding it off at arm's length, so that when it came to 'Samson Agonistes' she was enormously helpful to me in the format and the size of the book; that, I hand her full credit for that, because she had big experiences of print, and setting these things out. But I refused always, I've never allowed her to see any of the prints or anything until they were done, and I never showed her any picture of mine until it was done.

She would try to take it over otherwise?

Yes. Also I didn't really trust her judgement either, and you know, if she ever was to get the run of my studio like that, I would have been finished off. I mean I couldn't have it, I mean I just knew that I couldn't have it, and so I became very cautious, and in the end of course we had a flaming row, of a trivial nature really, it should never have happened.

What was it about?

Oh it was about, the Tate Gallery on my 80th birthday decided to, no 85th birthday it was, decided they would give me a lunch, and it was largely motivated, it was got up and prompted very largely by Maggi, who was at that time of course already was living with Tory, and was a friend of, you know, Collins and all that, and she thought of doing this. And so then of course the problem arose, who else was going to be invited? This, my dear, was nothing to do with me at all, I didn't know. So they invited, oh there was Ron Kitaj and, oh there were various...I can't remember now everybody who was there, it was quite a number of people, Prunella and a number of names, Maggi Hambling and I think Derek and other people came to this thing. But the question was then, should they ask Véra. Well what they decided was, that they...no. So then when the guest list was all about and the thing came out in the open and I was to go there, I knew that Véra hadn't been invited, to which I was very very pleased, because I was really getting into a situation where everybody assumed that we were practically married to all intents and purposes, and I didn't want this. So I was very pleased, whereupon the following morning, or that evening, I was rung up by Véra you see in an absolutely flaming rage, and was hauled over the coals in her big and most famous way, and that was the end of that.

Did you never talk to her again?

I wrote her a letter, which she deliberately misunderstood, I think, at least I claim so. I've got the correspondence, I kept it. So I simply said, you know, I told her that she was quite wrong, that you know, and one thing and another, and we didn't speak. I was quite prepared to cut this out, and then people said, oh no, you can't really behave like that, and she is not well, which she wasn't, because she already knew that she had got cancer you see. And so after about a year or nine months there was a little mini rapprochement which, we could speak again but it was never the same. But, it had to be done, it had to be done, because it really, it was...the association was actually damaging me, it was doing me no good at all.

She sounds rather cannibalistic.

Yes. But I think, I think this insecurity I think largely comes from her being a refugee and always having to be on the make. She said, 'I followed the advice of an old ancient[??] when I was young, always talk and get to know, always talk and know the best people.' And I think that was the guiding principle in her life. And I think that being an exile I think had an awful lot to do with it. And of course she was very Russian, and though she could be quite funny at times in actual fact she had no sense of humour at all, not really, and people who think they are right all the time very rarely have any sense of humour, I suspect, I don't know. Anyway that's enough about Véra. But it was a very long association, and it's sad about Véra because she did a lot of good things, but they could all have been better if she only could have given a little bit and not always insist that she is in the right.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

I wanted to ask you about Geoffrey Gorer.

Oh yes, he somehow cropped up last time didn't he.

You said he had the second sharpest mind, the quickest mind.

The quickest mind I have known after Wystan Auden, yes. And of course he was a social anthropologist I suppose you would describe him, who wrote with Margaret Mead an extremely acute and amusing book called 'The Americans' I think which he boiled down, he really distilled during the war, when I met him again in Washington during the war. But of course he wrote earlier really rather an important book called 'Africa Dances' which is again extremely readable, when he went to Africa with his African boyfriend which lasted for a time. Then he went to...'Africa Dances' is a very good book by the way, and it's been done in several editions of paperback but it has disappeared from the shelves at the moment. And

then he went to India, up into Kashmir and up into the mountains, because he was enormously interested in botany, and he brought back all kinds of plants and things, and he also had an accident there and injured his knee I think, or no, his backbone which gave him trouble for the rest of his life.

But what kind of cast of mind did he have?

What cast of mind?

Was it analytical?

It was...I suppose it was basically an analytical mind. He was tremendously Jewish, which was interesting. His father had been drowned in the Lusitania, and he had been a dealer in Chinese blue and white in Bond Street before the war, before that, before the '14 war. And he went down in the Lusitania, and his widow, who was left with three boys, had no idea what she was worth, she thought she was poor actually. But they started buying, when they realised they had some money, and of course as the elder son, he became the important figure in the family. And the mother was a very remarkable woman, she was a very good gardener too, and then they bought a house in Highgate which overlooked the Heath, one of those very very, well now enormous, well millionaire, multi-millionaire houses that, with a large two-acre garden that looked right down and across the Heath. It's now all built round by villas unfortunately. And they started to buy pictures, and they had quite a good...quite a good eye really, and she has quite a good eye, and between them they bought...Geoffrey was very angry with her because she wouldn't buy one of the Van Gogh irises which was on exhibition at Brown's, the Leicester Galleries, when they were going for about, I think it was the second Van Gogh exhibition, and they had gone up in price a bit but they were £600 and she thought she couldn't afford it. (laughs) But they...

What other things were they buying?

Well, he had...she had various things. They then bought very much contemporaries or near contemporaries, and they bought Rouault, they bought...and then she commissioned John Skeaping, who was then very much an up-and-coming sculptor, this would be about 1935 or 4, to make a stone garden seat for them, which was rather beautiful, it was in the garden at Highgate. She had her portrait painted by Tchelitchew. And...

Did they ever buy anything by you?

No, she didn't, but Geoffrey did. Geoffrey really became my first kind of patron after the war, and he bought three pictures of mine, if not four; certainly bought three pictures of mine, and they look very good in the house actually. He had bought a house in Haywards Heath, and what did he have there? He had very good Toulouse Lautrec, an absolute smasher, drawing; he had a Juan Gris self-portrait, very very rare picture, and painted at just about his best period actually as well. And, Toulouse Lautrec, that, and some very enchanting Raoul Dufys. And as I say there was Tchelitchew. The house rather got filled with Tchelitchew, which I wasn't too keen on in the end.

You don't rate him very highly.

I don't rate him very highly. But, anyway he bought Medleys and he bought a very good Delacroix; he bought all kinds of things really.

What Medleys did he buy?

Oh, he bought ones that...he bought an early Gravesend landscape, and he bought two pictures that came directly out of the war from my first exhibition of slightly symbolic pictures I suppose, were slightly surreal.

Allegorical.

Allegorical pictures rather. Actually I've given the drawing away - no, it was bought, the drawing was at the Coram Gallery just recently, for it. It linked up a bit with sort of, more sort of fanciful, surreal Rouault, that was what I was interested in at the moment. And they always looked very well, and the landscape was a nice one. I don't know what's happened to...oh yes, he of course had it, and of course when he died it was put into his sale. I had hoped that he would return the pictures he bought to me, seeing he paid only £250 for them.

Some people do that, they leave the pictures to the artist.

Yes I know, well I've had that done to me thank goodness, and I thought Geoffrey would, but he suddenly became very ill before I had time to do it, and also he was very touchy, because, he was very touchy about all those kind of things, and it would, you know, and one would have to be very careful about that. He had this huge garden but never gave one a bunch of flowers, you know. It's a very strange mentality that. Give one enormous kindness, but would never give one a bunch of flowers.

Did you see a lot of him?

Yes I did quite a lot of him really over the years, until he died really. And, he was very generous in many ways, but he had this curious meannesses. And he bought this very large Queen Anne house outside Haywards Heath which was just made for extravagant parties. He never gave a party there at all, and when one went down there he always reminded one that the chef, the cook would require a tip. You know what I mean? It was all got...you know, he had a very very tiresome side to him, Geoffrey did.

Would you stay for the weekend or something?

Yes, I used to go down and stay for the weekend, but I didn't more recently because it became really rather difficult, because he became increasingly quirky for one thing, and obviously he was also really rather ill. And, they were an interesting family.

But you said he was...

No well he and Wystan of course were great friends too you see, and curiously enough, having been rebuffed early in life directly he came down from Cambridge by Bloomsbury, who had really mismanaged things a little bit, of course he...

They were unkind to him.

Yes, they were very unkind to him, but also he was too pushy and they didn't like it. And however, he then took up with Edith Sitwell and they remained devoted to each other, and Edith Sitwell left him a large number of her manuscripts when she died.

Did he sell those?

No no, I don't know what he has done with them at all. I don't know whether the family, they may have come up for sale in which case I may have missed it. But, I don't know at all. His elder brother, who was an extremely erudite doctor, I've forgotten, he specialised in consumption or one of those more popular diseases in those days, I think he was at Guy's; he was an absolutely foremost specialist. And then, but his younger brother was a musicologist, and also homosexual. And I must say, they all inherited quite a bit of money when mum died of course. But Geoffrey was left really responsible for the family still, because the elder brother, who was really rather, was a brilliant character, and who lived in Jewish splendour in one of those great houses between Hampstead and Finchley, up in that, on the edge of

Hampstead Heath there, was all right, but the younger one, do you see, the musicologist, was always in trouble, and always had spent all the money and he always had to be rescued. He was an absolutely sweet character in actual fact.

Was he any good as a musicologist?

I believe, I am told that he was really very brilliant. But he also took to gardening; gardening seems to have been in the family, because Geoffrey you see became a great, was a big gardener, he gardened in a big way, and it wasn't...

Was he a plantsman?

What?

Was he a plantsman?

He was a plantsman really in trees and things like that. It was not a matter of herbaceous borders, it was landscape gardening really. And of course in this house that he bought he had a considerable amount of land round about, and he for a time bought a farm. And Richard of course also took to breeding plants and flowers, and he got trapped up with a very unprincipled married boyfriend who put the money, took the money off him and also was said to look after the garden. But anyway, it was quite funny all that was. But as I say Geoffrey held that, held the whole of that family together, after his elder brother died. He had a nephew and a niece, the niece was rather a clever girl but the nephew was rather slow. But Geoffrey took on having to look after them really as well.

Do you find yourself, when you make friends with someone, also becoming involved with the whole family? I mean it's something that I don't find particularly common perhaps now, so much.

No.

Was it...is that indicative of the period we're talking about?

I think it's indicative of the period.

I mean you know the brothers, you know the subsequent generations, the mother.

Yes, well you see, some of the people that I knew, I knew, well Wystan, I knew all the mothers and I knew the brother.

The brother? Wystan's brother?

Wystan's brother.

I didn't know he had a brother.

He had two brothers. One was very, was a very erudite geologist who was used by Shell on geological expeditions round in India, married a Burmese lady and had two children.

Were they a brilliant family, the Audens?

Yes, except the elder brother was a bit of a black sheep and went to Canada. He was quite nice but he was quite different from the other two. The other two were both of them extremely intelligent of course, and also what you would call intellectuals.

How do you define an intellectual?

Oh golly. I suppose because their approach to life, they did believe that you have to use your mind, I suppose that's...

It's different from being intelligent or being bright.

It's different from being intelligent or being just bright, I suppose, yes, but it's people who try to use their minds, I think is an intellectual, and it involves a certain analytical capacity I think.

But not necessarily academic.

But not...no, not necessarily academic at all. I mean, but Wystan was both academic and experimental, and the brother was certainly not conventional either in his approach.

And would you have seen a lot of the brothers?

Well I didn't see much of the one that was in Canada, I only met him about twice, and he had a family of about three or four. But he had already disappeared from the family when I got to

know Wystan first, he was quite a bit older I think. Wystan was the younger, youngest of the three. And John, the geologist, he was already not in evidence much as, when I knew Wystan when he was living with his parents at the age of 15, 16, when he was living with...well of course was living with his parents in Birmingham, in Harborne, and I didn't really get to know John until years later actually.

It seems that people sort of come and go, go off somewhere. But come back.

Oh yes, people do. And throughout your life one has very old friends you have known all your life, and then, or at any rate certainly for the last 40 years, and then there are times when you know them extremely well, and then times when you hardly see them at all, and then they come back again for a year or two and then they disappear again and come back again.

Does that disturb you, the lack of continuity, or do you think it's quite normal?

I think it's...it's a kind of thing that I have had to accept. Sometimes I feel a bit upset about it, but I think I go off people too. And also, you get very busy doing other things, but you know that it's a secure relationship which is going to last all the time. Then when you're talking about the family relationship, I think family relationships were much more common in my day than they are now. You see the Spenders were again a tightly-closed family; though they all lived very...they did lead very different lives, it does remain a strong family...

Unit.

Unit. And I don't think that it's due to the fact that of course Stephen and the Spender family, it's about a third Jewish you see.

How did you first meet Stephen?

Oh I think I first met Stephen through Wystan I think in Berlin, I think Wystan gave us an introduction. Stephen was the only person remaining in Berlin when Rupert and I went there in 19...that was in 1932, when Rupert was dancing there with - well no, he wasn't dancing, he was the choreographer for Reinhardt's reconstitution of 'Die Schöne Helena', Helen of Troy, which Massine had done over here.

By that time Berlin had changed quite a lot from the Twenties.

It was about to change.

On the cusp.

Yes it was getting rather late, because the Nazis were very much about. And of course they came, I was there in the spring and they came in, their first sort of entrance onto the scene was in the winter, the end of '32, so it was really the last gasp of the sort of, that kind of life. Stephen still had a flat there.

What impression did it make upon you?

I don't know really, I can't remember. Was that the first time I met Stephen? It was the earliest time I can remember, because though he was at Gresham's School he was much younger, he was younger than me, and though I knew his elder brother, the one that got killed at the end of the war, and was...again he was, he was again a teacher. No, he was....was it a cartographer, a geologist? Anyway he was on one of the famous Mount Everest expeditions; it wasn't his job to get to the top but he got very near the top. I suppose he was a geologist, again, and a very interesting, nice man, not, without the charisma that Stephen had, because he hadn't got Stephen's reputed good looks.

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Robert, I have a feeling that you've got mixed feelings about Stephen Spender. Do you think he is any good as a poet?

Well, quite frankly I don't think he is very good as a poet at all. It takes a lot to get a poem that starts something like, 'I think frequently of famous men' or whatever it is. I think he has a poetic gift, and one or two of his poems I think are rather good as a matter of fact, but for the most part I don't think that they really are very good. I first came across him I think in Berlin when Rupert was in Berlin in 1932 during the Reinhardt 'Schöne Helena'. And, I think that was the first time. Though of course he did go to school at Gresham's, but he was two years younger than me and was of course in the junior house then, and he absolutely hated Gresham's and managed to get himself away from it. But of course I was at Gresham's with his elder brother, because there are three of them really.

Humphrey.

Humphrey and, I've forgotten the name of this other one, who, it begins with a G, Gerald, Geoffrey...it'll come back to me. But he was killed unfortunately; he was an intelligence officer during the war, and on the last day of the war he had a flight in an aeroplane which wasn't officially sanctioned, and it was the day more or less that the Armistice was declared, and the Army then refused to accept responsibility. So Nancy Spender, Nancy Coldstream, Nancy Sharpe...Coldstream's wife, first wife, then married into the Spenders, and, as a second wife.

Married who?

This one that got killed. And so she was left as a widow and pretty well impoverished.

Terrible, that is appalling bad luck.

Appalling, with two children, if not three, I can't remember, two children anyway, because there were two of...yes, because there were two of Bill Coldstream's and then there was a boy by Spender, nice boy. But as far as Spender is concerned, of course he also wrote a play for us in the Group Theatre, 'The Trial of a Judge', and before that of course one had seen quite a bit of Spender in the days when he was living with Tony Hineman[ph] and even before that, and was a friend of Burgess, Guy Burgess and all that lot. That was when he was first married, his first wife, Ynez. He's bisexual.

Where do you think his particular talent lies?

His particular talent lies in an extreme sensitivity, an extreme pomposity and seriousness, and, he's got a good appreciation, he's got a good mind.

As a critic?

As a critic. And also, he has a very strong social consciousness.

Is that good though?

On the other hand of course, in many ways he is also a goose.

How do you mean?

(laughs) Well he really does get himself into terrible muddles, and partly through a streak of vanity in him which refers everything really back to himself. And of course this has made him I think write one of the outstanding autobiographies I think, 'World Within World', which is really an admirable book. But to return to 'The Trial of a Judge', this is again, whereas Wystan and Christopher have always had a slight tongue-in-the-cheek attitude to everything, due to this extraordinary intellectual arrogance really in a certain sense that they enjoyed at an enormous wave of success which suddenly swept them up before they went to America, but there was always a tongue-in-the-cheek element, slightly Boy Scout element in everything that Wystan and Christopher did for the stage, they thought it was easy. Now, Stephen being serious, took it very seriously, and he took enormous trouble to write a very serious play about a liberal judge caught up in a Nazi regime, and having to make decisions against his conscience, and of course lands himself in trouble in condemning a left-wing person for whom he has the greatest possible sympathies. That is 'The Trial of a Judge'. And it was a very very serious play, because it dealt with, amongst other things, not only the social and political problems of fascism, but also the concept, is there such a thing as justice, you know, as an abstract concept.

This sounds a little like something that Rex Warner might have written.

Well he might have done indeed, but anyway Stephen wrote it. And it was a very well thought out play, but unfortunately it was far too long, and also he had the fault really of perhaps also, he had the fault of the poet of listening to his own voice. So that it was far too

long, and went into yards of rhetoric which was very unfortunate, particularly as we had an actor called Godfrey Kenton who spoke wonderful verse, a very good voice, and was really well cast for the part, but unfortunately he shared rather the same weakness as Stephen, that he also was in love with his own voice, so between them they did make part of...they did make the play not as good as it should have been. But the main fault of course must lie with Stephen, that in a way he over-wrote it. But the theme has stuck with him all his life, and he even quite recently, he was talking to me that he was re-writing 'The Trial of a Judge'. But it was interesting because it had a lot of very very good things in it, and it was a really serious endeavour to write a totally contemporary political tragedy, and so I always respect him very much for that. But of course there is another side to him which, I say he is a goose, you see, and he can't resist publicity, and I found this rather tiresome at moment, and it does overcome him and it makes him get into terrible tangles, you know, like, well the recent one has after all been the tangle as to, you know, whether that American author should publish his biography of Stephen or not. As a matter of fact I'm in considerable sympathy with Stephen over that. But there have been other ones. And then of course he annoyed me and a number of people very much over the Burgess and MacLean affair, because Wystan refused to speak about this. Wystan immed... Well Stephen immediately did, and it came out in front pages, sort of interviews in the 'Express' and papers like that. And there were times when Stephen has irritated me so much that it's really been, though I've never been closely in the Stephen Spender circle, you know, I've come across it so frequently in my life that I've thought, oh well I don't want to speak to him again, but I always do, because he has...not only that he has actually considerable intelligence, and he has done a lot of good things, I mean with Amnesty International and all those things, that - again, even that, do you see, Amnesty International gets tarnished because you suddenly find that it was financed by the CIA, you know what I mean. But of course there's no reason for Stephen really to have known that, but it's a kind of, that's what I call, Stephen as a goose; he lands himself into situations which he shouldn't really have landed himself into quite, which, at about my age I begin to think they're rather endearing, but there were times when it did irritate me a lot. Particularly when I got landed with the police coming round during the Burgess and MacLean affair, they went to Chelsea, the school, Chelsea Art School, the police did, and wanted to know where I was, you know, which was a pretty nasty thing to do. They arrived unexpected on my front door in Cathcart Road when I was living in Chelsea, and there was one of them who was obviously more MI5 or 6 than the other one; the other one was a real lumpen policeman. And I said, well in the end I said, 'Well I suppose you've come to see me, because naturally enough you've read all the things of Stephen Spender and all that, and of course you've been through the books and you know that I know him well, etcetera etcetera. And so, you know, that's why you've come round.' And the police didn't like that very much, and so they disappeared, and that was the end of that. But that's how I got involved with the Burgess and MacLean thing, because

really I had only met Burgess at Stephen Spender's and hadn't liked him at all actually, I thought he was a really tiresome little boy. Well not a little boy, a tiresome spoilt...

Brat.

Yes, young man.

This might be an interesting point to ask you about your political affiliations, because weren't you already perhaps on record as supposedly being a communist, and therefore not allowed...during the war.

Yes I was, I was on record of not being a communist, because they knew that, because I was not a party member, so they would know. But I was too left-wing and knew too many people of that character, which everybody did after all in those days.

It was the period.

Yes, it was the period. The other sort of person, the people that one met at Stephen's in those days was Esmond Romilly.

Remind me who he is.

Esmond Romilly. Wait a minute, who was he? Extremely well-born...oh yes, and he...the elder brother I think became, didn't he become head of one of those Welsh universities? No. But Esmond Romilly was the public school boy who produced an anti-Establishment magazine, which was very famous, it was well-known at the time, and of course was expelled from Marlborough or Eton, or, Marlborough or wherever he was and one thing and another, and created quite a disturbance, particularly as he came from this aristocratic family. Lord Romilly of something-or-another it was. But anyway...

He was a bit of an agent provocateur was he?

Well, he was a sign of the times, you know, the public school boys were rising against their education, they wanted to go left as well, and so it was...

Was he a Spanish Civil War person?

Who, Esmond Romilly? I can't remember, I think he was too young actually to go, but he may have gone in the end. But I can't remember. But it's easy enough for you to check up on Esmond Romilly.

Let's recoup though on your political stance. I mean how would you say you were today, politically minded?

I suppose...well of course I remain more or less left-wing. I've been, basically I was brought up as a Liberal, and naturally enough flirted with the communist ideas during the Thirties, and became implicated with lots of those kind of activities. And I never went on a hunger march, any more than I have ever been recently on a gay march, because I don't like things being politicised really. So I have rather avoided... But I suppose I remain a socialist liberal, I mean, an old humanist intellectual I'm afraid as far as politics are concerned, and quite frankly I think politics has become so awful now, and it seems very impossible not to be extremely cynical about any government really throughout the world, quite frankly.

But you, I mean it's interesting that you've kept away from being active on something like as you say a Gay Pride march.

Yes. No I did go on one march, but, was it a Gay Pride one that I walked a short distance with? No, I think it was a pre-war, 1936, '38, '39, '38/39 march, I joined it. It's a bit vague in my memory, but it's lurking around somewhere. But I have always avoided that, and I don't really...I think it was inevitable that the gay, the sex question has become political, because it's not only...it's become feminist, whether it's lesbian or not, that has to do with the rights of women, and minority movements have now I suppose been forced to become more and more political, because otherwise they would have no voice at all.

Might that thing you were talking about just now have been about Chamberlain, because, do you think Trevelyan was involved with something in Hyde Park?

Who, Julian?

Yes. They made masks and had a march, they were dressed up as Chamberlain.

No no, I don't think it was that march, no, it wasn't that, no. No, I cannot remember. It might have been...I don't think it was a gay march.

Well not before the war, I wouldn't think.

No it wouldn't have been. I was just wondering whether it was...no it wouldn't have been after the war, because I have always felt a little bit clear in my mind about that, but sympathetic. I mean I was perfectly prepared to be interviewed on 'Gay News', and they did rather a good photograph of me actually which I have always wanted but they never sent me a copy, even though I volunteered to pay for it. But that's a long time ago. But I am quite prepared to do that kind of thing, but I am not prepared...

Like that print, Robert, I mean you did that for...

Oh yes.

Crusade?

What? For Crusade, yes, that's right, yes, absolutely.

But I suppose that period then in the Thirties is in a way your most politicised decade.

Yes, it would be my most politicised decade, but now at this present moment I feel - not this moment, certainly a month or two ago, I felt so enraged by everything, it was much the same as I felt then, only I think more mature and even worse, because I think things are really not at all as I would like to have them to be. You know, when you get to my age and when you have lived through it, you suddenly realise that everything you fought for has been brought to nowt. But one knows perhaps in the end, something survives and comes back later on, but one is suddenly faced with so many of the things that one thought was going to happen for the good have been destroyed, partly through the fact that one obviously didn't get the facts right oneself, but largely due to the fact that human nature in the mass is very nasty. End of interview. (laughs)

I wondered if you had anything more to say about Stephen Spender.

Oh, well as I say, Stephen has been a great stick as I say. I think his tendency always to rush to the limelight and to be in the news, I used to find extremely irritating, but when I've needed him every now and again in the course of my life he has always come up trumps.

In what way?

Oh, well I had a terrible argument over a review of my autobiography by Carpenter, who wrote really the most ill-founded review in 'The Times Literary Supplement', and...

You mean ignorant, ill-informed?

Yes, totally, well vicious and ill-informed, and where he said that it was impossible to think a superficial character like Rupert could possibly have won the confidence of Bert Brecht. But of course we knew perfectly well that he did, and there is documentary evidence to prove it which he didn't know anything about, and we took him to task in the TLS and Stephen was very good. As I say, at times he's very good like that, Stephen, but he, as I say...I forgive Stephen practically everything, when I look at him and see that great head of his, and everything else, Sir Stephen Spender, I must say I find it hard not to have a slightly naughty giggle, let's put it that way. And then I get rung up, because obviously somebody has asked him, and I think another American is writing a book about Auden, and there's that poem in 'A Journey to Iceland' when he and Christopher make their will and leave everything, so-and-so to so-and-so, they wanted to know, they went through a list of about a dozen names, who was so-and-so in this will? He wants to know. Well I was able to fill in about three of those gaps, which I thought I did rather well. But, that's the kind of thing that one gets at my time of life, and sometimes they are rather irritating. I could have done without that one really as well.

I mean you have been in the past quite pestered by Auden's...

Yes, the Auden people, yes, very much so.

American professors.

American professors, and people, even Italians writing Ph.D.s and things like that. And it's a most unrewarding business, and the only thing was to get rid of all the stuff in the end, which I did, and put it with the rest of the Auden papers over in the Berg[ph] Collection in New York where they've got all the main Wystan documentation and so on.

It didn't increase your respect for the academic fraternity?

Well, there were moments when I found them pretty awful quite frankly. (laughs) No, it doesn't, and particularly professional biographers. It makes me extremely suspicious.

Do you think they approach things from the wrong point of view, for the wrong reasons? Or do you think they're just muck-rakers?

Well they are required to muck-rake a bit these days I'm afraid, and they certainly do, and I find that a little bit tiresome quite frankly. I mean I don't mind, Wystan after all said, 'I wouldn't write a biography of anybody unless I knew what they did in bed.' Well, it's all right for Wystan to say that, and then forbid anybody to read any of his correspondence at all, but...do you know what I mean? But there are these inconsistencies, and of course with the result of Freud's psychoanalysis and all the rest of it, it does become rather relevant what people do in bed. But I think there are ways of dealing with it, and...

But that's a question of taste then.

It's a question of taste, yes. And there is a taste now for this kind of thing. Unfortunately it's often at the expense of the main...

The work?

The work and what really actually matters.

What about the relationship between the Group Theatre and Auden and Isherwood? I mean in a sense you were saying, it sounded like they wrote the plays for fun as it were.

Yes, well there was an element of fun in it of course which was part of the things that made them good, and made them very apt, and of course they both had very quick minds. And also the whole business of that stems of course I suppose ultimately from my relations with Wystan, and I suppose this made for bits of seeds of trouble all along the line. And also, Wystan of course was always very sort of dogmatic with his views, so was quite prepared to change them, and...

He was prepared to change them, or you were prepared to change them?

Wystan was prepared to change them. I mean he had changed his views, I mean, he hated ballet for instance, and at one time he had no feeling for opera either, but then when he went to America, Chester Kallman really made him interested in opera, and also his relationship with Benjamin Britten. And that came unstuck ultimately I think because, for many reasons but one of them was that whilst that Britten always wanted to write a proper opera, and Wystan wanted, didn't really want an opera in those days, and he was always prepared to end a play which he couldn't solve the end of by having a grand chorus like Beethoven or something in his mind. And then of course he, naturally enough in America, was a friend of

Lincoln Kirstein's, and Lincoln of course took to finance the ballet, and then Wystan suddenly decides that one of the great people in his life is more or less Balanchine, you know what I mean? A complete volte-face. Whereas, it's down that he absolutely hated ballet. Now, I don't quite know why he hated ballet so much, because I liked ballet, and I was living with a ballet dancer after all.

Was there a connection there, Robert?

Well this is what I would...I suppose there must have been a connection there, but quite what, it won't be quite a simplistic one I don't think. This is where biographers jump to conclusions and then draw wrong...

Inference.

The wrong inferences. Well now, it's very rare I think for a schoolboy passion, it does exist, really to survive into adult life for more than about two minutes, because the adolescent or, you know, relationship between, for instance between the ages of 14 and 17 are quite different really from the adult relationships which one gets involved with later. In other words one is cutting one's teeth a bit earlier on, and most people do change their teeth as, they've got their wisdom teeth really through. And, so therefore, you know, quite plainly I think there was an element of jealousy in it. I think that Wystan, when we wrote to Wystan, asked him to write a play, because you see 'The Orators' had been published and played on both sides, and it was perfectly obvious that if we wanted a young poet, of course Wystan was the person to ask, and naturally enough I was the person to ask. And then of course, when he came to discuss, he agreed to do something, and was quite pleased to do it, but when it came to discussing what, then you found that there were deep differences between Wystan and Rupert. For instance, 'A Dance of Death' was discussed, and also, an 'Orpheus'. Well now, Wystan of course didn't like Greek myths.

At all?

At all.

Why?

Because he was all in favour of all those Odins and all those Wagnerian Celtic gods, and with a name like Auden he considered himself more a Saxon who was still tied up with Thor and everybody else than what have you, you see. So finally it was... So, the 'Orpheus' you see,

which would have suited the Group Theatre very well, because it would involve the balletic choreographic element in it, as indeed would have 'The Dance of Death'. Anyway Wystan went off to say that he would write 'A Dance of Death'. Well we waited and waited for a long time, and it had been quite widely discussed and we knew that it would be written in verse, and Wystan at that time was very taken up with Skelton and people like that, and Piers Plowman etcetera etcetera, and... So we waited and waited and waited, and when we finally got what he had written of course it was breathtaking, absolutely knocked over sideways, because this was not what we had originally discussed, which we had discussed at length, about Dürer and people like that, which Wystan liked very much, do you see, the German thing. And we got something which was completely and utterly different. To our credit, I may say, within five minutes we thought, well this is exactly, we've got actually not what we asked for but what we really wanted, because we had got a contemporary thing, founded on a lot of nonsense in a way, like the death of the middle classes, but anyway, finally being shot by Karl Marx in the last scene, and...

And this was...?

'The Dance of Death'. And of course, a wonderful thing which was what Wystan was very good at doing. Wystan was not good at constructing a drama, but he was absolutely brilliant at constructing a theatrical scene. In fact he was a wonderful writer of, what is...I don't know what the word is. You know...

Passages, interludes.

Interludes, yes. That's not quite the word I'm wanting.

Scenes?

Scenes, kind of divertissements, you know. Brilliant, absolutely brilliant you see. But difficulty always in bringing anything to an end, because...and for some reason or other the big bare bones of dramatic structure escaped him, and later on do you see, when it came to writing these very brilliant operatic scripts and things later on, of course it was Chester Kallman who pulled him through that one. Wystan's mind... And then, do you see, Christopher, do you see, had much more of an idea perhaps of what could be done, but by this time, based it on 'The Dance of Death', which had the most remarkable musical...it's a music hall turn, that was what I was..he was brilliant at what I would call a music hall turn. 'The Dance of Death' constructed them on a theme, like 'The Dog Beneath the Skin', founded on the simple narrative of a young man going out to.....

End of F4117 Side A

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.....and the hero has to go out and rescue the princess, and he has to go through various trials. And what made 'The Dance of Death' so extremely vital was, the extreme vitality of the verse, and the swiftness of the action. But it was typical in a certain sense to show you the differences of opinion. When it came to writing the music for 'The Dance of Death', Wystan, do you see, who had very good judgement, put forward the young Michael Tippett. Now Rupert went off to listen to Michael Tippett's music, and said yes, it was very good, but the music is too important, it's too serious to stand, you know, and that he wanted something... And so we went to Herbert Murrill.

Something lighter.

Which was something lighter, and he wrote a very easy, very successful score. And when it came to doing 'The Dog Beneath the Skin', I think I've written all this in my book, then of course we were committed to a matter of loyalty to give the next one to Herbert Murrill. And of course Wystan by then wanted to give it to Benjamin Britten. And so there were always these seeds of trouble between us, which are not really always due simply to a jealousy of a schoolboy affair, but differences, seriously, of temperament and the way things worked out. They both had respect for each other.

You mean Wystan and Rupert?

Wystan and Rupert, yes, well, and very much, but both of them extremely critical of each other, and I think a lot of the trouble that I've had in after life with people really villifying Rupert has probably started off in Oxford through Wystan. That is a conclusion that I have been forced into, but which I don't like.

You're saying it's his fault, in a sense?

I think it is, and certainly...and it's built up, do you see. Benjamin Britten of course didn't care for Rupert very much, because of course Rupert you see was very difficult to deal with, and both Wystan and Benjamin entirely entitled to his opinion. Rupert was extremely difficult, and he always was a perfectionist, and he wanted his own way. And at the same time he was extremely realistic, and of course he had a kind of genius for doing things which were just right for the moment, but you couldn't push it too far. And I suppose really he hadn't got the kind of, I don't know whether a theatre producer can have the kind of genius quite to stand up, unless you're Peter Brook, who avoids authors by the way, you are meant to

be able to stand up to people so powerful as Wystan, and ultimately of course Benjamin Britten. And they got irritated with Rupert because he was often very slow in making his mind up, and also this slowness was partly, was also caused by the fact that Wystan and Christopher never wrote a perfect script; there were always terrible difficulties with them, and neither of them could finish a play. There were 17 different ends - in which E.M. Forster was implicated - to bring 'The Ascent of F6' to a proper ending. The person who brought it to a suitable theatrical ending was of course Benjamin's song at the end, but meanwhile Rupert... And you know, this absolutely did save the whole thing. But meanwhile, Ben had wanted to write much more music for 'The Ascent of F6' and was wanting to turn it into an opera, and also had trouble with Rupert when Rupert wanted to cut some of Benjamin's music. Now Rupert nearly always had a very good reason for cutting things, and he has been taken to task on a number of occasions for having cut things; in actual fact he nearly always, I think, was correct in cutting, but he took a long time to make his mind up about those things. And so, both Wystan...you see, Wystan was never there during the production of 'The Ascent of F6', and was therefore most surprised when he saw what Christopher Isherwood had agreed with Rupert to do, who got on very well, Christopher and Rupert got on famously together always. And then of course when it... You know, this is the very strange thing about it you see, their idea, they simply wrote out a plot without thinking about it too carefully and then simply tore it up and then each went off and wrote the things independently more or less, do you know what I mean? So naturally enough, it's amazing that things do cohere as well as they do. And of course when it came to 'The Ascent of F6' there's wonderful poetry in that, and the same, there's wonderful poetry in the last one, 'On the Frontier'.

Could Isherwood write as well as Auden, in that way?

I've never really thought of that; I've always thought of the difficulties that arose on account of their collaboration, because basically the differences that Wystan is a poet and that Isherwood is a novelist. And also they were both extremely naughty. I mean even Mendleson, who edited all the Wystan things in life and everything else, said to me, of course it was a very difficult period when they were writing those plays, and he said really in many ways they behaved extremely badly, and they did.

But I'm just wondering whether Isherwood had the kind of lyric gift that Auden did, so that he could write something and Auden could write something, and you could put it together, and it would sit together.

That I don't know. I've never really been able to discuss the matter with both of them, both at the same time, do you see? And when later on I wanted to find out about the quarrel, Wystan

was wonderful at evading things, but you get glimpses of the truth in Isherwood's book, you know, 'Christopher and His Kind' I think it's called, where he admits that it was they who ruined 'On the Frontier'.

That's what you mean when you allude to the quarrel.

Yes.

There was a bust-up between...

There was a bust-up after 'The Ascent of F6', because they were so, getting so well-known that they arrived with all kinds of important people and wanted now to break in to the West End. And...

Were they getting snooty?

Yes, in fact that's precisely what they were. And they arrived with Viertel and Beatrix Lehmann, who were both very powerful in their own way. Viertel had given Christopher his first script-writing job years and years ago in the Ealing Studios.

Who?

Viertel.

V-I-R...?

V-I-E-R-T-E-L, Viertel. Bartold, I think it was Bartold Viertel. He was...in actual fact turns out to be a rather minor Viennese German Jewish film producer, but like a lot of these people they wielded considerable power in London during the Thirties, because they came over as refugees and they found us all very muddle-headed, which of course we were very muddle-headed, and we've remained bloody muddle-headed to this day. And Viertel and, oh I've forgotten his name again, Moholy-Nagy, Moholy-Nagy, and the great German architect.

Gropius.

Gropius. And then of course there was Mendlesohn. But Gropius and all those people, and particularly Moholy-Nagy, they didn't half tell you where we muddle-headed Englishmen got off. It's quite interesting like that.

Are you saying then that, to go back to Stephen Spender, he was perhaps more professional in his approach to the writing of plays, even though perhaps they didn't work as plays?

Yes. Well I don't know whether...I wouldn't say it was professional. He took it, and you could see that he could make something really serious out of it, and was given the opportunity to write a poetic play, and he would know, he knew that Rupert would be able to produce it from that point of view. And then of course, where often a play was done, it was done at the Unity Theatre, Stephen then got into trouble with the Communist Party, because we had meetings and discussions afterwards, and there was a famous occasion when some Communist, I can't remember his name, took Stephen to task over the question of whether there was such a thing as an abstract conception of justice. And Stephen was put on his mettle to defend this. And of course that is a very crucial point.

But are you entirely convinced that you know what happened, to go back again to the row between Wystan and Rupert and Christopher?

And Christopher. I don't know what happened.

Does that still intrigue you?

Well it's given up intriguing me, because I've given up, I know now that I never shall know, because they are all dead.

But it was obviously a source of some distress.

Oh it was a source of considerable distress, not only to me but to everybody at this Group Theatre summer session. The Group Theatre had this tradition of going away for three months - or, no, never was three months, a couple of months or a month, in the country, and to rehearse a new play, or generally to train. But on this occasion it was not so much for that at all, but it was to decide, was to get to know what was going to happen in the following season. And we had expected and had every right to expect that Wystan's new play, Christopher's new play, would come to us. And they then arrived and said, no, whereupon of course there was a flaming row which was confined to the three of them. And in the end Rupert emerged with a kind of victory of some kind. And then of course they promptly went off very shortly after that to China.

Do you think in some way that it was a relief to sever the connection in the end?

No. Because what happened really, the war finished that off.

The Group Theatre wasn't the same after the war.

The Group Theare wasn't the same after the war. We asked Wystan if he would do a translation of 'Mother Courage' for us. Well he had had by this time a flaming quarrel with Brecht, and he refused; actually of course he would have done it superbly well. Because there wasn't at that time a really good translation, workable translation of 'Mother Courage' at all. And Wystan of course had a great admiration for, an admiration for Brecht as a poet, and in fact both Christopher and Wystan went off from time to time to translate. And Brecht, do you see, was perfectly prepared to give us the rights of the play, which he did for three years, but we never managed to get it put on, because the Group Theatre collapsed. And you see this is where Carpenter was such a bloody fool, because he simply made a thing, in order to push Rupert down, that Brecht couldn't possibly, a great genius like Brecht couldn't possibly... Whereas I happen to have in one's possession a letter from Brecht to say to, I've forgotten...to say that the only interesting things that he had seen in London - this was in 1934 - was the Group Theatre's production in private rooms of 'Sweeney Agonistes'. And he always remained, he always remained, he stuck to one, and even before the war Rupert and I were having, went up to meet Brecht and had coffee at the Embassy Theatre in Swiss Cottage which ran a restaurant place, were having coffee there, it was about two or three months before the war started, and he said, why didn't we come over for a holiday at Esbjerg in Denmark where he had a place. And we discussed what we would do if the war broke out, and, you know, what one would do, whether one would go to the South Sea Islands or where. And anyway, we had a general thing like that, but of course Brecht knew perfectly well what he was going to do. But we knew Brecht as well as all that. I didn't know him all that well but Rupert knew him better, and he was not always a very agreeable man by the way, not really. And anyway, we never, we didn't go, slightly disappointing, but then when war started we were jolly glad we hadn't gone there.

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