

A TEI Project

Interview of Emerson Woelffer

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1. Transcript

1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, Side One (February 26, 1976)

PHILLIPS:

You were born in Chicago in 1914. Would you like to tell me a little bit about your childhood and what you remember? Why don't we start with what your parents were like and what you remember.

WOELFFER:

I remember the fire station around the corner and the police station around the corner vaguely. At that particular time on our street we had gaslights, and a man would come around every evening and light up the gaslights. And the fire department and the police department equipment were drawn by horses instead of cars. We had a house—my mother and father and myself; and we had several Dalmatian dogs, and in the backyard next to a playpen we had chickens, as most people did in those days. And one thing that stands out in my mind is that every Sunday we had chicken on the table. They'd be sort of pets to me, but every Sunday there'd be one missing. My father'd do away with one. It was quite a terrifying experience at a young age to sit down to dinner eating one of my pets I used to play with through the cage.

PHILLIPS:

In the neighborhood in Chicago, did you live in an apartment?

WOELFFER:

No, it was a house. That part of Chicago, at that time, was on the outskirts of a pickle farm, Budlong Pickle Farm, as I recall. There were a lot of trees and woods, and I recall my father used to play tennis with another neighbor of ours by the name of Kraft, who used to have a cheese business. He had a wagon. He'd go around the neighborhood selling cheese. It was the beginning of the Kraft Cheese Company. My father played tennis every Saturday with Mr. Kraft.

PHILLIPS:

Your father's name was German.

WOELFFER:

George Woelffer.

PHILLIPS:

George Woelffer. Tell me your full name, and what your mother might have had in mind.

WOELFFER:

My full name was Emerson Seville Woelffer. Seville came from her father, who was Algernon Sidney Seville, who was in the music business, QRS Piano Rolls, in Memphis, Tennessee, and he worked many of the player-piano rolls, transcribing them from the piano onto the player rolls with W. C. Handy. I recall my grandfather coming up maybe once a year and always bringing me some fabulous kind of gift in the way of a musical instrument, which I had no desire for. And I remember one time he brought a huge, huge box, a huge paintbox with all sorts of colors and brushes in it.

PHILLIPS:

What was the other family name that your mother's so proud of?

WOELFFER:

De la Fontaine. That was her mother's maiden name, and her two aunts, from Saint Croix, Switzerland. That's the French side of the family, and my father's side was the German side of the family. His father was in the meat-processing business with a man by the name of Oscar Mayer. They worked side by side making sausages. And then Oscar Mayer took off on his own one day and started his own business, which is Oscar Mayer [& Co.] now.

PHILLIPS:

And de la Fontaine was related to the famous French fabulist [Jean de la Fontaine].

WOELFFER:

Right. My mother's grandfather was de la Fontaine, and his wife was Paillard, and the family still lives in Saint Croix, Switzerland--Paillards. The whole town is Paillard. Paillards make the Bolex movie camera and the Hermes typewriter. They first started out making music boxes.

PHILLIPS:

You had a lot of relatives who did well at making certain products and some of them who came close to making fortunes.

WOELFFER:

Always just close.

PHILLIPS:

Always just close. Do you remember how old you were when your grandfather brought you the paint box from Memphis?

WOELFFER:

I guess I was about eight or nine. He also brought a xylophone, and I didn't take to it. He bought a violin and a saxophone. He played practically every instrument. In fact, he organized a businessman's string orchestra in Memphis, and he made every instrument in the orchestra. That was my first contact, in a sense, with painting, except in grade school, where everybody pushes paint and chalk around on paper. He used to take me to the Field Museum in Chicago; this was my first contact with primitive art.

PHILLIPS:

What is at the Field Museum?

WOELFFER:

It is now called the Museum of Natural History. Marshall Field changed the name to the Museum of Natural History because he wanted it to be a public museum; he didn't want it named after himself. And it's housed in Grant Park in one of the only remaining buildings from the Columbian World's Fair in 1893 or something like that. It houses not only works and costumes of people from New Guinea and Africa but China and Japan and Indonesia--all over the world, including artifacts of the people of this continent.

PHILLIPS:

What do you remember from those childhood visits to that museum?

WOELFFER:

The first thing, the two elephants you see as you walk into this huge entranceway at the Field Museum. I was there just a few months ago. I was flabbergasted they'd been in the same position for all these years, and somebody decided to turn them around. So instead of seeing them from the front when you come in, you see them from the back. It sort of flipped me because I was used to seeing them the other way.

PHILLIPS:

I know you have a great interest these days, and have for the last many years, in primitive art and that you collect as much as you can. I wonder how you see that related to your own art making.

WOELFFER:

Well, I think very definitely that what I like in it is the magic of it. As we know, the cubist painters collected solely African art because in African art, the imagery comes out of animals around them, whereas the surrealist artists collected mainly the work of Oceanic culture. These things were much more magical. And so I collect both; I like both the abstract idea of the African carvings and also the magic and the mystery of these works of New Ireland and New Guinea.

PHILLIPS:

Have you always been interested in primitive art? Can you think of the time when it started, that you really began to identify things?

WOELFFER:

Even before I started going to the [Chicago] Art Institute, I was very much interested in that. In fact, in grade school, they used to take us once a month or so to the Field Museum to look at the stuffed animals, and I found myself always wandering off into the other halls, where they had the weapons and the images and the idols of Africa and New Guinea. I was always intrigued by those things.

PHILLIPS:

Those museum experiences were very meaningful to you when you were young?

WOELFFER:

They also took us to the Art Institute of Chicago to look at the paintings of George Innes and Francois Millet, and I again would always wander off to look at the pictures I didn't understand but I was very much attracted to, the abstract paintings of the French school and so on.

PHILLIPS:

Did your family take you there first or the school?

WOELFFER:

No, the school took us there. And we'd go on Saturdays, and we would sketch a plaster cast in the museum halls, and that was my first contact with that. And then my mother's aunt, who was a cashier for many years at the Auditorium Hotel, where the famous Auditorium Theatre is, came in contact with many actors, opera people, and came in contact with one man especially by the name of Carl Bohnen, who had a studio in the Fine Arts Building of Chicago; and she arranged for me to go up and see him. I was then maybe twelve or thirteen years of age, maybe a little more. And he had a studio in Chicago, New York, London, and Paris. He was a very dignified man, wore a cane, felt hat, and was one of the world's leading portrait painters at the time.

And I was very much intrigued by my visit to him in his studio in the Fine Arts Building-- beautifully, highly polished wood floors and Oriental rugs in his studio and no paint on the floor. [laughter] Marvelous paintings. Looking back at his work now, I think he was a very good portrait painter. But I told him how I'd love to paint like he, and he said, "No, you go to the Arts Club, or when you go to the Art Institute, look at the work of the impressionist painters. Those are the good painters. Don't look at my work." Very marvelous man. And I did what he said and became quite intrigued with modern painting.

PHILLIPS:

Why don't you tell me how your mother and father reacted individually to your interest in art?

WOELFFER:

Well, my mother—everything I did was fine. My father was quite cool about the whole thing. At that particular time he didn't think he had to worry about my making a career out of art. I think if he had thought so, he would have tried to curtail it early because he was just a businessman and thought of one thing only—money. And so he felt it was a passing kind of thing with me. And when people raved about my little paintings and drawings, he thought that was fine. But he was rather cool on it. He had ideas of a baseball player or a football player or something in the sports world. When you retired you could make quite a bit of money selling insurance or whatever, due to your background as an athlete.

PHILLIPS:

You said he was a businessman. What did he do?

WOELFFER:

He was in the insurance and real estate business, But he liked sports. He played golf; he played tennis quite a bit.

PHILLIPS:

Were you ever able to talk to him about your desire to become an artist, or did you just avoid that?

WOELFFER:

We didn't talk about it too much, but when we did, it was in relation to the covers on McCall's, Saturday Evening Post, or the Liberty magazine--in terms of becoming an illustrator. I wasn't thinking particularly in one direction at all. I thought it would be nice to be on the cover of Saturday Evening Post—all the millions of people who were looking at your work, quite a nice, large audience. And in fact, when I started art school, I had somewhere in the back of my mind to be an illustrator, and that was nipped in the bud very early. I met some very exciting students at art school.

PHILLIPS:

When you were growing up, were there any paintings in your house?

WOELFFER:

We had a painting over the upright piano, a reproduction of a painting by Maxfield Parrish, one of which I think everybody who had a piano or a fireplace had. Parrish today has regained some kind of a popularity, in a pop art kind of way, through Lawrence Alloway-- Alloway sort of rediscovered Maxfield Parrish.

PHILLIPS:

Was anyone very religious in your household? Did that play any element in your growing up?

WOELFFER:

No. My mother's aunts were Christian Scientists, and now and then they would take me to one of the services. And my father was quite open in that way, and my mother also, saying that I should find my own. So I went to Presbyterian Sunday school, and I went to a Lutheran Sunday school. Then finally, when I was in grade school, I met a couple of fellows who sang in the Episcopal choir, for fifty cents a Sunday. And I thought that was pretty intriguing, so I sang in the Episcopal choir for, I think, two years, but as far as any kind of heavy religious impact on me, there was absolutely none whatsoever. I don't follow any religion.

PHILLIPS:

Your childhood was in the city rather than in the country, and I think that's had an influence on your life, don't you?

WOELFFER:

I think so. And we moved several times. We left the house that we lived in, I guess, when I was eleven or twelve and moved to an apartment building, and then to another apartment building. And later, in 1927, I recall the flight of Lindbergh over the ocean. I was then bedridden—I'd picked up some kind of a bug in northern Wisconsin stripping bark off trees for log cabins. Wayne King, the orchestra leader, had several acres of land and was building up there, and a friend of mine worked for him, so I went up for a summer.

PHILLIPS:

How old were you then?

WOELFFER:

I was about fifteen, I guess. And I came down with some kind of rare disease. They just found out about four years ago what it was. It's called Stevens-Johnson [syndrome], which is something quite rare; and it is fatal, I understand, in most cases. I was shipped down from northern Wisconsin, and the doctors came in, and they didn't know what I had. I was bedridden for a year. I was blind for three months. I lost my fingernails.

PHILLIPS:

Were you terrified when you went blind?

WOELFFER:

No, no—not at all.

PHILLIPS:

Because you were so sick.

WOELFFER:

Yeah, I was sick. I had the radio. And just recently they found out what it was, and maybe it came from the stripping of the bark. We used to chew the bark; they thought maybe some animal had deposited something on the bark and I had ingested it. They really don't know; it's a very rare disease.

PHILLIPS:

When you were over it, were you completely over it, or were there residuals?

WOELFFER:

I was completely over it, and I then went back to school, and they advised me at school that I should take it easy. And, as I showed some talent in art, that I should go to Saturday art school at the Art Institute, which I did. And this was the whole beginning of my painting.

PHILLIPS:

Do you remember any teachers in grade school who had a particular influence on you?

WOELFFER:

Yeah, I had a couple that were very much interested in my drawing and painting, but as far as the academic subjects—arithmetic, etc.--I would say no. I didn't excel too much in those subjects.

PHILLIPS:

Would you say, looking back, that you were pretty talented as a draftsman and a painter?

WOELFFER:

Yeah. I enjoyed it, I loved it—to draw everything. And there was a fellow who lived around the corner his name, I even now recall, Louis Grell— and he had a studio in what is still called the Tree Studio Building in Chicago. It's a wonderful studio building, and I went to see him, and he was painting skies for the Balaban and Katz theaters, and I was quite impressed with it. Anybody who was able to translate something in paint, I was quite thrilled with. And when I was able to see again, I read nearly everything of Edgar Rice Burroughs, the Tarzan series. And one day I was in the Tree Studio Building to see Mr. Louis Grell's latest painting, and I saw on the door the name of Alan St. John. Here was the man who had illustrated all the Tarzan books, so I knocked on his door. He was a very nice old gentleman. He wanted me to come to his studio, and he was in one of these beautiful studios with a balcony and Oriental rugs and a baby grand piano with a Spanish scarf thrown over it and big palettes hanging on the wall. I think in the very beginning that art was sort of a romantic idea with me, a very romantic thing, and I think that after one gets

out of art school and gets into the real world, I think that the notion disappears very rapidly.

PHILLIPS:

And another question I wanted to ask you about your childhood was about trips that you might have taken, excursions out of Chicago. Special events.

WOELFFER:

On my birthday every year, my mother's aunt, who was a sister of the aunt who was a cashier at the Auditorium Hotel--she was a cashier in a very fancy ice cream soda parlor and candy store in Chicago--and on my birthday, she would take me for a bus ride either to Rockford or Aurora, Illinois, or to Elgin, Illinois, for the day. And those were my excursions out, because in those days to have somebody on your block with an automobile was quite a rarity.

PHILLIPS:

Did you take any summer trips with your parents?

WOELFFER:

Well, my father wasn't an outdoorsman, to the extent of woods or hunting or fishing or anything like that. I think once he had a business associate who had a big touring automobile, and we took a trip to Waukegan, Illinois, for the weekend, and stayed at the Salvation Army Hotel. I recall that very distinctly. Oh, yes, and then twice in the summer, when I was about twelve or thirteen, my mother's aunt had a friend who had a farm in Barion Springs, Michigan. We used to take the bus up there to this wonderful old farmhouse. And on the way up, the bus would stop at the House of David, where all the bearded people were. At Barion Springs, Mr. Lybrook--that's what his name was, a man who weighed about 400 pounds--we would pick apples, and I'd ride on the tractor with him. I remember one day on the tractor with him he ploughed up a nest of bumblebees, and they just swarmed, and he took me and threw me away from--anyway, I had a head full of bumblebee stings, and I was quite ill for several weeks. Those are about all the excursions that I can recall.

PHILLIPS:

What was the House of David?

WOELFFER:

It's a religious organization. I forget the exact name of the city in Michigan where they are, but I think maybe in Michigan City--they had an amusement park there, and they had a very good baseball team. I don't exactly know the name of the religious organization--all the men had long hair and long beards.

PHILLIPS:

Was it a Jewish Orthodox religion, do you think?

WOELFFER:

No, it wasn't.

PHILLIPS:

More like the German...

WOELFFER:

Like Seventh-Day Adventists, something like that. They had an amusement park.

PHILLIPS:

Were you quite interested in sports as a child?

WOELFFER:

Yes, you know, we played sandlot baseball and touch football. After my illness, about, I think, in the early thirties, we organized a neighborhood baseball team, and ice skating was a specialty. I did racing ice skating in school also. My mother's uncle had been a professional baseball player, and he used to coach our baseball team. Then when I got into high school, my father was always pushing sports. I played baseball in high school on the team; I also was on the track team in high school; I was on the tennis team and I was on the swimming team. But that's as far as it went; I didn't really push to be a professional.

PHILLIPS:

Even though you were the only child, it sounds as if you had quite a few relatives in and out of the house. Is that true?

WOELFFER:

Oh, yeah. My mother's side and my father's side—my mother's side, my mother's two aunts, and her uncle. The two aunts were never married--three aunts, rather, were never married—and I was sort of a favorite with them. And my father's side, his sister was married and had several children, so there were more children on my father's side than on my mother's side. I had a tendency to enjoy my mother's side rather than the German side; they were a little more interesting, cultured, a little more finesse about eating and so on. Although my father's side, they had the packing house, and the food was like German art--quite heavy.

PHILLIPS:

Tell me some more about your father. How old were you when he died?

WOELFFER:

He died in 1946. I don't remember exactly when it was, but I remember the day he died because it was on August the eleventh, which was the same date, many years later, that Jackson Pollock died. So I must have been in my early thirties when he died, about 1946--I'm sure that's when he died.

PHILLIPS:

And you'd already started your career as a painter.

WOELFFER:

I'd left home about five years before that. Five years before, I left home and was married.

PHILLIPS:

How were you getting along with your father during that period?

WOELFFER:

When I left home, it was quite a relief to get out of the house because we weren't getting along at all, but later on when my mother left him and he was alone and became ill, we were quite close—the last year of his life.

PHILLIPS:

Your mother left your father?

WOELFFER:

My mother left him about four or five years before he died.

PHILLIPS:

And then you became closer with him when he was living by himself.

WOELFFER:

Yes, quite close, until we had to take him to the hospital, where he died.

PHILLIPS:

And was that, do you suppose, because you were older and could see this in more perspective or were feeling sorry for him...?

WOELFFER:

He was much softer and so on....

PHILLIPS:

They often say that artists seem to relate pretty well to their mothers and have a harder time with their fathers. [laughter]

WOELFFER:

That is right.

PHILLIPS:

Fits your case.

WOELFFER:

Right. And I found it with the people with whom I was going to school, and also the other students.

PHILLIPS:

I suppose part of that is because you're talking about male students and because art making, especially then, was not considered a kind of macho, conventional thing to do.

WOELFFER:

No, it wasn't. And then most fathers always think in terms of making a living. Where's the money coming from? who's going to take care of you? and how are you going to take care of yourself? And in those days they didn't have the galleries like they have today. In fact, when we were in art school, we never thought of having an exhibition. We only thought that the impressionists and Picasso and Matisse had exhibitions. In Chicago, especially--in Chicago there were just maybe three art galleries, and they showed only the early twentieth-century masters, the impressionist painters.

PHILLIPS:

When you were growing up as the only child, did you feel lonely? Did you feel a little special and different from the other children?

WOELFFER:

No, not at all. I had many friends. Wherever we moved, I always had a lot of friends. I never felt lonesome at all. I thought it was kind of special to be the only one. Whereas my colleagues, my friends, they had brothers and sisters--they were always fighting. One was getting this and the other wasn't getting that, and so on.

PHILLIPS:

Let's go into your high school period and then from there into what happened to you next.

WOELFFER:

That was rather disastrous. My father naturally wanted me to go to technical school, which is all boys, so I enrolled in Lane Tech High School, which is on the Near Northwest Side of Chicago. It was quite a rough school, and we studied mechanical drawing, manual training, casting, welding, etc. I wanted to have some subjects that I had an interest in, so I did take an art course which was quite minor. The teacher had you copy drawings out of books. But I had a high interest in music from my grandfather, so I joined the first group of the band and studied clarinet. And if you studied a band instrument, you also had to take up an orchestra instrument. I tried to figure which would be the simplest one, so I chose the bass fiddle. So I played in the third orchestra with the bass fiddle and played in the second band with the clarinet. A very strange

thing happened. About five years ago at Chouinard Art Institute in the music department, they engaged a man who was the head of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, and I went up to him and I said, "You don't remember me, but I studied bass fiddle under you in high school." It was [Henry] Sopkin, who's the brother of the Sopkin who's the head of the Pro Arte Quartet in New York. I went out for track and swimming and tennis, but I lasted about two months on the team, due to my grades — which were not too good, and you had to keep a certain grade average to be on the team. I joined the ROTC; I was a lieutenant in the ROTC. I guess I liked the uniform or something. And I met some interesting people there; three or four of them spent most of their life--if they're still alive--in state prison. It was an Italian neighborhood, and there were some real rough 'uns in there. And you joined them, or else. So I got in with a gang of fellows there, and we used to forget study hall cards and everything else. And it was so nice not to attend classes. So this went on for about a month—I don't know what we did. We'd go to theaters downtown, and one day my mother said, "Son, are you going to school today?" I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "Well, you haven't been there one month." So I went to school, and the principal called me in there with my father. So the principal said, "He has more of a flair for the arts—music, drawing. Why don't you take him out of technical school and send him to a coeducational high school?" Which we did, and I went to Lakeview High School, which was closer to where we lived. I could walk to that high school. And they had an old fogey drawing teacher there, and I joined the orchestra there, and it was a much nicer experience.

PHILLIPS:

Had you met any girls up until this time?

WOELFFER:

Not really. No, no--there was a girl in the neighborhood. After school, I worked as a clerk at the A&P Store, and there was a girl I had sort of a crush on. She was fatherless and motherless; she lived with her two older brothers who were decorators. I got to know them quite well, and I became sort of one of the family. In the high school, somebody had a Ford convertible, which was really something to have in high school in those days. I think there were only three people who had automobiles, but this boy's father was a friend of my

mother's family, on that side. They were in the undertaking business. And one day he came to me and he said, "We would like to invite you to become a member of the fraternity, our fraternity." I forget the name of it. Well, that's quite an honor to be asked into a fraternity. So I said fine. So I became a pledge and went to about four meetings. I had to make a couple of paddles, and it seems to me now they must have been sadists--they used to beat my ass off with those paddles. I finally told them what they could do with their fraternity, and I left. I was in third-year high school, and I felt I had had enough of it. I wanted to draw and paint, so I quit high school, which flipped my father and mother. But I went to work at a scarf-designing studio and saved enough money to go to art school. I went to night school, art school--I could afford to do that. And then the World's Fair came along in 1933, and I got a job selling ice cream cones at the World's Fair for the World's Fair Ice Cream Company, which was a subsidiary of the Polly Tea Room in Chicago and the Swiss Ice Cream Company, I guess it was. And I met a fellow who used to come around all the time to the stand and said, "You could make a little more money than you're making here." And I said, "How?" Well, it was the second stem of a gang. And we worked for them. We used to bring liquor into the World's Fair, sell it to the Streets of Paris.

PHILLIPS:

Was it during Prohibition?

WOELFFER:

It was during Prohibition. Roosevelt was just coming in with the NRA. Beer was the first thing that was legalized, but this was just before that. And then after the World's Fair, a couple of these characters said, "Let's go into something a little bigger; we'll be sponsored by the organization." And we opened up an office downtown, right across the street from the City Hall—had a telephone business, providing liquor. And that went on for six months until...

PHILLIPS:

What did that involve?

WOELFFER:

Getting liquor from the mob, and we got a certain cut off of what we sold.

PHILLIPS:

You did make more money than at the ice cream stand.

WOELFFER:

Yeah. My father's business was absolutely nowhere. There was no real estate business. So I supported my mother and father that whole year.

PHILLIPS:

Did they know what you were doing?

WOELFFER:

Yes. It didn't make any difference. And then a couple of fellows came into the organization from New York, and they walked in, and when they took their coats off, they were wearing sidearms. Up to this point, this was a clean, nice, legitimate business, with no trouble, no problems. Then that got a little bit too sick for me, and somehow I just resigned, and they allowed me to resign without any problems, which is quite rare. Maybe because of my age or something.

PHILLIPS:

How old were you then? About nineteen?

WOELFFER:

About nineteen, twenty. And so I left that business. I had a nice pot of money set aside which enabled me to put down the following year for the first year of art school. And then my money ran out and I found out that there was a possibility of working as a janitor at the Art Institute, where you dust and mop the floors and everything for your tuition, and I did that for two and a half years.

PHILLIPS:

You started art school at the Chicago Art Institute?

WOELFFER:

Yeah. I think that was 1935 I started there.

PHILLIPS:

You worked part-time as a janitor to pay your tuition.

WOELFFER:

Yeah, we'd get to school at six in the morning and work till nine in the morning as a janitor. And at lunchtime I had a job bussing dishes in the restaurant; that way I'd get my lunch paid for.

PHILLIPS:

Why don't you tell me something about your classes at the Art Institute, the people you began meeting, because it must have been a real change for you, a new period.

WOELFFER:

Yeah, it really was. At the time I started, there was a dear friend that got me on to the janitor force; his name was Arthur Osver, who now teaches at St. Louis University. He became, in the early forties, one of the leading painters in America. He was on every cover of Art Digest and Art News, and he won the Pepsi-Cola prize, and he won all the prizes. And today you don't hear much about Arthur, but he is a dear friend of mine; he got me onto the janitor force. And Edgar Ewing, a local painter out there, had just received the Edward L. Ryerson award of a \$2,000 traveling fellowship. In those days, \$2,000 was probably like \$8,000 or \$10,000 today. The Art Institute was in combination with the Goodman Theatre, and I remember sitting in the cafeteria with a young, up-and-coming actor, sort of a character actor who turns out to be Karl Malden. And there was a John Hubbard who was sent out to Hollywood. I don't know of any other painters of that period going to school who I've ever read about or heard about since. As you know, the fatality is fantastic.

PHILLIPS:

What were you all interested in as you started out as beginners there?

WOELFFER:

I was first interested in illustration, and that went by the boards in the first week, when the teacher showed us the Chester Dale collection. At that particular time, Chester Dale had loaned his collection from the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., to the Art Institute; there were these fabulous Picasso and Matisse paintings. And I said, "That's where I want to be." That's

all I knew. I didn't understand what was happening. The art teachers, in those days, said, "You study from the model. You paint the model." Never mind what's in the museum. Never mind this stuff." And in my second year, I got a job hanging exhibitions for Katharine Kuh, who had a gallery in the Diana Court Building in Chicago. The Diana Court Building was a new building, and in the lobby they had a beautiful water fountain by Carl Milles, the sculptor. And the owner of the building thought it would be quite prestigious for the building to have an art gallery, so they gave Katharine Kuh an art gallery on the mezzanine floor. To help support herself, she also had art history classes in the back of her gallery, because the kind of pictures she was showing were not selling too much. She showed Paul Klee and [Alexei] Jawlensky and Picasso classical drawings and [Alexander] Archipenko and, you know, she had a [Joan] Miro show. I hung a Miro show for her. She got letters and phone calls: if she ever had a show like that again, they'd smash the windows of her gallery.

PHILLIPS:

Was she a big influence on you?

WOELFFER:

Quite a big influence.

PHILLIPS:

Things she talked about and what she knew.

WOELFFER:

Yeah, very definitely. Because I'd unpack the boxes of pictures and I'd hang them on a wall, and she would tell me about them, you know. And I got more there than I did in the formal art history classes in the Art Institute. They never seem to get out of the Renaissance when you study art history, for some reason.

PHILLIPS:

What did you and the other students talk about? What kind of bull sessions went on?

WOELFFER:

We would argue, and we'd even get into fistfights up in the gallery when they'd have the national or international exhibitions, you know. It was quite a vital sort of thing, and a lot of the kids were not from Chicago, and they'd...

1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, Side Two (February 26, 1976 and

PHILLIPS:

We were talking about your years at the art school at the Chicago Art Institute, from 1935 through '37. So you want to tell me more about what went on during that period.

WOELFFER:

In order to be accepted, I submitted my work that I had been doing in evening school and was accepted to day school. The first year was figure drawing, design, and composition--no oil painting. My teachers were Kathleen Blackshear, who was teaching beginning composition; and a Mr. Cowan, who was teaching design, which was then a prerequisite to get into the School of Drawing and Painting; and Kenneth Shopen, who was my life-drawing teacher. And those first years, they were quite crowded, and I met some of the people in the first year whom up to now had not been very close friends of mine, not living where I did, but coming from other states. And I liked life drawing, I liked composition, but the design class was lettering and such matters as that, which I didn't have too much interest in. In fact, the teacher said that I designed like a designer, but the execution was like that of an easel-painter—pretty rough. After one year there, I was admitted to the School of Drawing and Painting, which was then called Upper School. And I painted still life with Kathleen Blackshear, and drew, did life drawing with a man by the name of Edmond Giesbert, who was a very fine drawing teacher and encouraged one to emulate the drawings of Matisse and the line drawings of Picasso, and you could do quite a bit of experimentation in his class. And I also had art history; art history was taught by Helen Gardner.

PHILLIPS:

Now, that's a famous name.

WOELFFER:

Yeah, the authoress of *Art Through the Ages*. And after three hours of janitorial work, and then going into a dark room looking at boring Renaissance slides in the dark, I would constantly be falling asleep and falling off my chair, being very tired from getting up at five in the morning. My grades in art history were not too good; I just made it by there. Seemed like we never got out of the Renaissance. Katherine Blackshear was a very stimulating person who would very often take us on gallery tours to look at the modern paintings, which was quite exciting. After one year in the foundation class, I went to the third year with—there were only two painting teachers: one was Boris Anisfeld, and the other one was Louis Rittman, and they both had their various favorite students. And it seemed like more people received traveling fellowships from Boris Anisfeld's class than did [those] in Louis Rittman's class. Everybody told me to get into Boris Anisfeld's class, if he accepted me. Boris Anisfeld and Louis Rittman would shake hands once a year—that's in the fall, when they got back from summertime vacation, and that's the first and last time they would speak to each other for the whole year. From nine to twelve we had one pose in drawing class, one piece of charcoal paper for the whole week. We had to make one complete charcoal drawing of the one pose.

PHILLIPS:

From the nude model.

WOELFFER:

Nude model. And he would come in on Friday. And we'd have horses we sat on, the tall ones in the back room. And in the front of the room, the horses were smaller so you could look over the people's heads in front of you. Boris Anisfeld would come in Friday morning and start in the front row. And the student would get up, and he'd sit down, and you could hear the charcoal snapping where he'd be correcting the bone structure and the muscle structure of the model, and he would do that on each person's drawing for the whole morning. Boris Anisfeld came to the Art Institute for a summer session and remained there for several years until his retirement, about six years ago, when he was something like eighty years old. I liked his paintings; he was never known for his paintings. His background was with Diaghilev doing costumes and stage sets for the Russian ballet.

PHILLIPS:

Was he Russian?

WOELFFER:

He was Russian, yes.

PHILLIPS:

He was foreign?

WOELFFER:

He was foreign. He had black bobbed hair, and he had a black beard.

PHILLIPS:

What did you think of him as a teacher?

WOELFFER:

We were terrified of him. He was a very good teacher, but we were sort of terrified of him.

PHILLIPS:

What do you think of art school for art students? I suppose they've changed so since then.

WOELFFER:

They've changed, and I think they're good for some people and not good for other people. Most of the painters of the twentieth century we know, early twentieth century, never set foot in an art school. They studied art looking at works in the museum. I think that one advantage of studying at the Art Institute of Chicago was the fact that they had this fantastic collection upstairs, and I think we learned more there and more from other students than we did from the teachers.

PHILLIPS:

Do you think that another kind of teacher than the one you've been describing, one who was more permissive and more supportive, would have been more helpful to you?

WOELFFER:

No, I had the balance. I had the balance. In the first year, I had this looseness, and then the tightening up in the next year. And then in the third year he had us be a little bit looser, but there was always the discipline. He felt that when you had discipline you could have much more freedom, which I believe in. And I don't think it destroyed me at all, although I would like to have had a teacher talk about contemporary paintings. I asked him once about an exhibition of Miro that was on at the Arts Club; he says, "Never mind that stuff. You study from the model." He said, "You look at Titian, you look at Tintoretto." And he was quite a person. I got to know him after I left art school much better than I did when I was in art school because many years later I lived across the street from him, and he used to come over to see me. He used to say, "Woelffer, you still paint like you're painting a barn." He's a wonderful man. When he'd come to sit down at your board— he, as I say, had black bobbed hair and a black beard, and he just reeked of garlic, all the time, and then we had him in the afternoon. In the afternoon we had a painting we would draw from position. He would work a half hour posing the model with costume, or whatever, and drapery, and then the students would draw out of a hat a number, and number one would pick the position he wanted, and number two would pick the position he wanted. and so on, until everybody had their spot. And we painted the model life-size--and this would be one pose, every afternoon, for one month. And he wanted the drawing, the painting, to be beautifully painted, very loose at the same time. It wasn't a matter of copying the figure, but it was getting paint quality into the thing. So we did that. I did that for a year and a half with Boris Anisfeld. In the meantime we had an organization called the Art Students League where twice a year we would submit work, and we would have outside painters come in and jury the work, and it was pretty free—we could submit whatever we wanted to. And it seemed at night when we got home, that's when we painted the kind of paintings we were really interested in. This is when the argument and the discussion would take place amongst the various students.

PHILLIPS:

What kind of paintings were those you painted?

WOELFFER:

I didn't know what I was doing, but I was enjoying it. Very loose, sort of colorful, nonfigurative paintings. I wish at this time I had just stayed there with them. Might have been interesting to see what would have developed. They used to have a Chicago Show, the American Show, and the International Show. The International Show was every two years. One year it was oil painting, and the next year it was watercolor painting. The Chicago Show was a juried show by Chicago artists and artists who lived in the radius or vicinity of 100 miles of Chicago; and the American Show was partially juried and partially invited. And students were not supposed to submit to any of these shows. The International Watercolor Show, I think they took about 3 pictures out of 5,000, and the rest of the show was invited from artists all over the world. And our first-year painting teacher would take us around on field trips to the park and to the stockyards to sketch, and I made a painting from one of these tours we made. And I framed and matted it and submitted it to the International Watercolor Show, and I got a letter saying that it was accepted by the jury. I think Matisse was on the jury, and [Andre] Marchand from Paris, and somebody from Germany was on the jury. If I'm not mistaken--I don't seem to have the catalog. Anyway, it's an international jury. And when word got around school that I was in the International Watercolor Show, the dean came down to class and stopped the activity in the class, and he said, "Woelffer, you have no right submitting a painting to the International Watercolor Show or any show. You're just a first-year student, and I don't think that's right at all. Here our teachers submitted work, and they're not in the exhibition, and nobody's in the exhibition. Our fourth-year students submitted, and they're not in the exhibition, and I don't think you should be in it. You should withdraw your work." And I said, "The hell with you." So I was not very popular with the fourth-year students after that. [laughter]

PHILLIPS:

By this time, you must have had some aspirations for yourself, some ambitions, and...

WOELFFER:

Well, I wasn't thinking of what was going to happen when I got out of art school. All I knew is I wanted to be a painter, and I didn't dare to think what was going to happen when art school was over with. After the second year in

art school, I received a work scholarship to the Art Institute summer school in Saugatuck, Michigan, where Francis Chapin, who was my teacher in printmaking at the Art Institute, had the painting class. Saugatuck, Michigan, was just across from Chicago, across Lake Michigan, a beautiful little town off of the main highways. It was the summer school. There were three students every year who would do dishes and serve to the summer school students, many of whom were older people, many of them teachers going to summer school in order to gain extra credit. I did that for two summers, which was a very wonderful experience. I got a lot of work done. And in the third year of the Art Institute, you were then permitted to submit your work to a jury for their yearly traveling fellowship awards, which enabled one to go over to Europe and work for a year or two. My friend Arthur Osver received one the year before, and his girlfriend, Ernestine Betsburg—whom he's still married to, a wonderful painter--received one the following year and went over to France to see Arthur, where they were married. You had to submit schoolwork, classwork, plus outside work, and I submitted my figurative paintings, figure drawings, and work I did on the outside. It was in this particular year that the school of the Art Institute of Chicago was made a member of the North Central Association of Schools of Design and Art. When they read my application for a traveling fellowship, I was—what would you say?—disqualified because I had no high school diploma. So it was at that particular time, I felt no need to spend another year in art school. It was in the height of the Depression. So I left art school, and I applied for the WPA Federal Art Project.

PHILLIPS:

What was going on with you personally during this period? How was your family faring?

WOELFFER:

Not too well. We were living in an apartment that a colleague of my father owned, so he gave us free rent. And my father's insurance business was starting to pick up slightly, but there was beginning to grow more and more tension between me and my father. The idea of being an illustrator had left a long time ago, and I was painting some pretty far-out paintings in relation to what my father thought, and so that became a tension. As soon as I got on the

Federal Art Project, with my first paycheck, I went out, and I rented a small studio on the Near North Side of Chicago and left home.

PHILLIPS:

You had a lot of close friends then, didn't you?

WOELFFER:

I had many close friends. There was Arthur Osver, some other school associates, some who are still here and many of them who are not here.

PHILLIPS:

You had some girlfriends?

WOELFFER:

Not really. We would find some now and then, [laughter] but not really. We were all dedicated to working, painting, all the time. We'd go out with a model once in a while, and that's about all.

PHILLIPS:

Well, tell me about the WPA arts program. I know that was awfully important to the artists of this country during that period.

WOELFFER:

Yes. There was a fellow by the name of Bob Wolf, and Norman MacLeish, the brother of Archibald MacLeish, who were what they call unclassified people on the WPA. They were the head supervisors. They were unclassified, as they were both very wealthy, and they were not on in a relief measure. In a sense, they didn't get a salary, but they donated their time doing this. I submitted my work, and I was accepted, and you could paint any way you wanted to paint. They gave you a canvas and paints every month, ninety-four dollars and a model if you needed a model. And that was just wonderful. I stayed on there until 19-....

PHILLIPS:

About a year, I guess, until 1939, when you went into the army.

WOELFFER:

The government wanted to know if I would go to East St. Louis and try to set up a community art center there, partially supported by the businessmen and partially supported by the government. And I said I didn't care to, and they said, "Well, there's no alternative. We're going to send you there." So another friend of mine and I went — I think it was 1939—down to East St. Louis, and we rented a stall, and we put up traveling exhibitions of the work of the WPA artists. The only sympathy we got in East St. Louis were the people of the central trades union, who were quite interested. And there was a youth organization, where we held some classes. The main businessmen of East St. Louis had their businesses in East St. Louis, but they lived in St. Louis proper because East St. Louis was known as one of the hellholes of Illinois. And we had this exhibition. I gave lectures and demonstrations around the community, and I remember there was a girl that used to come in, nearly every other afternoon, quite beautiful; and she used to drive up in, I recall, a beautiful white convertible Packard and used to come in and talk to me about all the paintings. She loved painting very much. And about five o'clock she said she had to go to work. After meeting her several times, I was curious what she did, and she was a prostitute in one of the local brothels, made quite a bit of money. Very, very nice, and we became quite good friends. Nothing like that--but just friends, talking about art, and she introduced me to her girlfriends, and so on. I was in East St. Louis for a year when some fellow came around to the students in our class, and he was trying to sell flying lessons because that was part of the government program. And he told me, "Well, come on, anyway. We'll take you for a ride." And I went out and took a ride in a Piper Cub. I got to like it very much, so I started to take flying lessons on my time off, and after eight hours, which he said was quite rapid, he said, "I'm not going to be in here this time. You go yourself." And I went up, and I soloed--I had my hours of soloing, and I had to go through spins and stalls and all that. And I thought this was a very nice prerequisite for the war, which was about to come about, because right next door to the Curtis Airport that I was flying out of I flew between Curtis Airport and Lambert Field in St. Louis. And at that time we didn't have any radios in the small planes, and when you landed at Lambert Field, you had to look in all directions--because in those days the transport planes had priority, and if you were in their way, that wouldn't make any difference: they'd come right into you. So I used to go there at least twice a week and fly back to East St. Louis, and right next door to Curtis Field was

Parks Air College, where boys were training to become pilots in the Second World War. So when I came back to Chicago after a year there, they transferred us, the painters, into a division of mapmaking, where we had to do maps for the Geodesic Survey of Washington, D.C., compiling maps. There were no maps yet, of North Africa or any of these places, with any airports on it.

PHILLIPS:

You were actually inducted into the army, then?

WOELFFER:

No, no, not at this time. I went to the air force. They were wanting pilots, so I went to the air force, and I was again immediately rejected because I had no college education. In order to be a pilot, you had to have a college...

PHILLIPS:

No high school degree.

WOELFFER:

And I said, "Well, what has that got to do with flying?" I said, "Here's my license. I soloed in eight hours. I can fly as good as anybody." Well, that didn't go over with them. They said, "If things get really rough, maybe we'll call you someday." So I went, and I was inducted as a civilian in the Army Geodesic Map Division.

PHILLIPS:

Yeah, you became a topographical draftsman.

WOELFFER:

Draftsman, right. And I was able to leave there after a year. Very boring, although we were doing something, I guess, for our country, putting lights on the map where there weren't any lights before for the pilots flying at night over...

PHILLIPS:

What city were you in, now?

WOELFFER:

Chicago.

PHILLIPS:

Chicago.

WOELFFER:

Because there was always a discrepancy. One map would say there's an occulting light here, and another one said there wasn't. So some guy flying back on a mission had that map on his lap, so I thought I could do something a little more vital than that. One of the fellows left, and he took a course in riveting in Pullman Aircraft, where they were assembling wings of the C-47 transport planes. Or you could go down to South Chicago and learn riveting, steel plate, where they were making tanks. And I thought, well, they were paying fantastic wages, and I thought I'd still be doing something for the country, so why not go where there's more money. So I took a bunch of the painters; we went down to Pullman Aircraft and took a week's course in riveting aluminium. And they gave us a toolbox and sent us to the main plant, and I worked there for a year and a half, until I was drafted. And I went down for my physical examination. Again-- it's the story of my life—I was rejected, due to something that was left over from that childhood disease I had. And I went in, and a commander of the navy came in and saw me and gave me the bad news that I couldn't get into the service. He said, "I know you're a painter, and we need people like you back here working in the culture." I stayed back, and I went on riveting, until towards the end of the war. Then a whole new thing came up. [Lazslo] Moholy-Nagy was in the city. That's another story we can. ..

PHILLIPS:

All right—let's stop here.

WOELFFER:

All right.

[Interview resumes March 4, 1976]

PHILLIPS:

Before we began talking about your experiences with Moholy-Nagy at the Chicago Institute of Design—was that what it was called?

WOELFFER:

Well, first the New Bauhaus, then it was the School of Design, in Chicago, and then it was the Institute of Design, which was the last and final name.

PHILLIPS:

Okay. Before we go into that--and you started teaching there in 1942—there are a couple of questions I'd like to ask you. Could you tell me about growing up with jazz and modern music in Chicago? What were your experiences with that? Because I know it's very important to you now.

WOELFFER:

My family had a very dear friend, a pianist, who was a jazz pianist, who played around Chicago with Jack Teagarden and several orchestras. We had an upright piano in our house, and nobody was utilizing the piano, so they thought it was a good idea that I might take piano lessons with this fellow. He had a society orchestra in Chicago—not really an out-and-out jazz band because out-and-out jazz bands couldn't make a living around town, so they had to make some compromises—and they played for various functions, society dances, etc. And Freddie Hankel used to play at the Saddle and Cycle Club in Chicago and the Drake Hotel, and he suggested it would be a good idea if I would take piano lessons with him. So I studied piano on and off with him and another person for approximately five years. And this precedes the WPA; I would say this is 1926 or 1927. But nothing seemed to happen. I discovered myself that as much as I enjoyed and loved and wanted to play the piano, there was nothing there whatsoever. So I discarded this for painting, and that's when I started to go to Saturday school at the Art Institute of Chicago. But all through my life after that, there was a contact with this person and his jazz musician friends. And I started collecting jazz sides, records, etc., but nothing happened between me and the piano. I made one recital, as I recall, at the Knickerbocker Hotel, which was right across the street from the Drake Hotel, in Chicago—not from working with Freddie Hankel, but from another piano teacher by the name of Estelle Hill. On my way on to Europe a few years ago on the Leonardo da Vinci, there was a very popular song called "Alley Cat,"

and I found out later on that she'd composed this song, which they play quite a bit on the air today. But at the Knickerbocker Hotel Sunday afternoon recitals I recall, I received more flowers than anybody else because I had so many aunts and second aunts and uncles and everybody else. But to my thinking I was quite a flop. After three bars at the recital I stopped; I was frozen; I was cold. I didn't know what was going on, and piano teacher had to come up and shake me a bit to show that I was back in our land again. And I was playing a polonaise by Chopin, and I think that was the last time I ever touched the piano. But anyway, I went home with just vases and vases of flowers and bouquets and everything.

PHILLIPS:

But you listened to a lot of jazz as you were growing up?

WOELFFER:

As I was growing up, yes.

PHILLIPS:

And to the big bands.

WOELFFER:

Right. In fact, in '27, I don't know if I mentioned— back when I was going to Lane Tech High School, one of the things I did when I played hookey from school was to go to the Oriental Theatre, and this was the date of the big bands of Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway, and all these things. And then there were the smaller clubs around Chicago. There were many boogie-woogie artists, Meade Lux Lewis, Albert Ammons, James P. Johnson, and they were around Chicago for many years after that, until, oh, I'd say, the mid-forties. And Billie Holliday. I never saw Bessie Smith. I used to go to see Fats Waller; he used to be around Chicago a lot.

PHILLIPS:

Do you relate your art making in any way to jazz and to that kind of music?

WOELFFER:

I don't see it myself. I feel it much more than I can visualize it or say anything about it. It was in the--well, you probably don't want me to jump too fast.

PHILLIPS:

That's all right.

WOELFFER:

We're now in the early forties. I was married in 1940.

PHILLIPS:

Do you want to tell me a little bit about that?

WOELFFER:

No. [laughter]

PHILLIPS:

Much as you want.

WOELFFER:

Yes. I had left art school, I was working on the WPA, and I met a wonderful girl who had just come back from Italy. She had been studying two years at the University of Florence, Firenze. And her family brought her back because she was becoming quite indoctrinated with Fascism. She thought this was quite beautiful. She'd been with flyers who used to fly in Spain for Mussolini, and I met her in Chicago through Edgar Ewing, who was not then married. And we became engaged. Her stepfather was Dr. Frederick Woodward. Her father, by the way, was a man by the name of Ernest Freund, who was a president of the University of Chicago, who passed away several years earlier. And Dr. Frederick Woodward, her stepfather, was then the vice-president, under Robert Hutchins, of the University of Chicago. They were quite conservative and wondering how I would support their daughter. They didn't know what I was doing at the time, and when my wife-to-be, whose name was Emmy Lou Freund, told him that I had such a wonderful position—I worked under the WPA art project (these people were staunch Republicans) —they were absolutely terrified. And they were against the marriage completely.

PHILLIPS:

How old were you then?

WOELFFER:

That was 1940; I was born in 1914....

PHILLIPS:

About twenty-six.

WOELFFER:

Yeah.

PHILLIPS:

How old was she?

WOELFFER:

About twenty- two.

PHILLIPS:

Twenty-two.

WOELFFER:

While they were away, I don't know, to New York or to Palm Beach, we eloped. And when they returned from their trip, they got knowledge of this from the cook, which was another disastrous shock, her mother saying, "I mean, of all things, to hear that my daughter got married through the cook or the maid." But they learned to accept me, and we used to get along quite well. In fact, Mrs. Woodward, she and her mother, were founders of the Arts Club of Chicago, and through them I met many prominent people and collectors in Chicago.

PHILLIPS:

Perhaps we should finish up the first marriage. How long were you married?

WOELFFER PHILLIPS WOELFFER PHILLIPS WOELFFER

WOELFFER:

Till 1945.

PHILLIPS:

So it was about five years.

WOELFFER:

Yes.

PHILLIPS:

About five years, and then it was all over.

WOELFFER:

Yes. That was a mistake on my part and probably a mistake on her part. Well, anyway...

PHILLIPS:

Did she have more conventional aspirations than you did?

WOELFFER:

No, not--I think, there was quite an influence by her family. Anyway, I was still groping, and I had just started teaching with Moholy-Nagy, and

PHILLIPS:

The other thing I wanted to ask you about was your wartime experiences. You were never actually in the army, were you?

WOELFFER:

No.

PHILLIPS:

You worked for the army.

WOELFFER:

I worked with the army.

PHILLIPS:

So you didn't go overseas, and you didn't have that basic training experience.

WOELFFER:

No, no. The closest thing I had to that was two and a half years in the 202nd Post Artillery, the Antiaircraft Communication Division of the National Guard.

PHILLIPS:

What I was going to ask you is if in retrospect, if you had any reactions to the war years. I know for a lot of young men, it was very traumatic when they were drafted, but since you didn't go into basic training and weren't sent away...

WOELFFER:

I was quite disappointed, which I wouldn't have been in the Vietnam War.

PHILLIPS:

You were disappointed that you weren't taken into the army.

WOELFFER:

That I was not taken.

PHILLIPS:

But the war years didn't have a profound effect on you.

WOELFFER:

Oh, no, not at all. No.

PHILLIPS:

You didn't have any thoughts about the disintegration of the society, and civilization, and that kind of thing.

WOELFFER:

No. Maybe the European artists. We weren't affected at all; we've never been affected.

PHILLIPS:

And for some younger Americans who did go abroad to fight, it was a very profound experience. Since that didn't happen to you...

WOELFFER:

In fact, a whole group of us that were not accepted, we were quite disappointed, we wanted to go over and...

PHILLIPS:

Well, that was very much the thing then. I think everyone wanted to be in that war.

WOELFFER:

That we were under attack. It was a completely different thing then.

PHILLIPS:

It was the unusual person who was a pacifist in that war. It's very different now. I think we've had so many wars that we feel differently about it. Well, let's start in, then, with your teaching with Moholy-Nagy. It started in 1942. You might tell me how that happened and what he was like.

WOELFFER:

I met Moholy a few times. In fact, we were so naive, we didn't know who he was. We heard this Moholy-Nagy was coming to Chicago, and we didn't know, [laughter] We thought he might be an Oriental. There were no books in the library at that particular time. If there were, they were very rare, about the Bauhaus philosophy, the Bauhaus school, in Weimar and Dessau, Germany. But I had met Moholy—I think the European campaign was over and we were still at war with Japan—and I called him up one day. I didn't know what I was about to do for a living because up to this point it was—after school, and then working on the WPA art project. I was well taken care of—I don't say "well," but I was taken care of. So I called up Moholy-Nagy out of the clear sky one day and asked whether he had any inquiries for anybody to teach at his school, or maybe outside of the city. I wasn't fussy; I wanted to work. I had to do something. And he said, "Yes, I do. I'd like to see your work." So I invited him over to dinner one evening, and Moholy came. I was living two blocks west of the water tower in Chicago in one of a group of coach houses. And we had dinner, and he said, "Let's look at your work." And I showed him my paintings, and he said, "Well, how would you like to come and teach for me." So I said, "That is just absolutely fantastic. I'd like that very much." So he said, "You line up a curriculum of sorts for the first year, and we'll see what we can do." So I wrote up a first-year program and took it to him, and he said, "That's beautiful. That's fine." And he said, "You'll come and teach four mornings a week, and I'll pay you eighteen dollars a week." Well, fortunately, I had quite a

few war bonds stashed away from working at Pullman Aircraft, which kept me, plus the little pittance that I was getting for teaching. And I had a very interesting group of students, about fifteen students. And Moholy sort of oriented me to the philosophy of the school. My paintings were quite loose and free before that, and my paintings became—I wouldn't say necessarily static but much more concentrated on particular abstract forms and abstract shapes.

PHILLIPS:

What kind of paintings, what kind of contemporary paintings, were you looking at, at that point?

WOELFFER:

At that point, I was still very much concerned with Picasso and Miro. And then the Bauhaus paintings, which were quite flat and quite concrete. But Helion arrived at the school at that time--he'd just been released from a prison camp in Europe, Jean Helion--and we had a show for Jean Helion. And while I was there I met Matta [Echaurren], the surrealist painter, and, one evening, [Fernand] Leger. Leger was a refugee living in New York, and Leger came to Chicago, and Moholy was anxious for him to see his paintings. Leger said, "I will show my paintings in your school, if you guarantee the sale of two paintings." So I hung the Leger show and met Leger when he came. Moholy guaranteed two sales. Moholy bought a still life of Leger for \$300, and Walter and Pussy [Elizabeth] Paepcke bought a huge, beautiful Leger painting for, I think, \$800 or \$900, which today are quite priceless. And Leger was not impressed at all with Moholy's paintings. In fact, he didn't—or didn't try to—speak any English. And one evening, Moholy had some of the trustees to the school to meet Leger, and Leger was very unimpressed with the whole thing. And Moholy thought we should move this show off the ground and go someplace and have a drink, and Moholy, naturally, looked to me to find out where there was a suitable place to have a drink.

PHILLIPS:

During Prohibition?

WOELFFER:

No, this is after. This is about '41. So we all got in a taxicab and went to a bar on Oak Street. We walked into this bar, and there was this jukebox blaring some kind of music out, and some lady went up to the bartender and said, "Pardon me, sir, but could you please turn the music off? Leger is here." The bartender looked up and he didn't know Leger from a bale of hay, but, anyway, he turned the.... And we sat and had a wonderful evening.

PHILLIPS:

Was it Leger who didn't speak English? Leger didn't speak English at all. How did Moholy-Nagy come to Chicago? Well, Moholy-Nagy had been through the United States. I think he taught a course at Mills College, He knew New York. But Moholy said, "If we can break Chicago and organize a school in Chicago, then we can do it anyplace in the world." Because Chicago's a very sort of tough place for art. Everybody left Chicago to buy art. They go to New York to buy art. Moholy had a strong feeling about Chicago and felt if we could do it here, then the problems would be solved. I remember I took a walk with Leger one day, and he loved Chicago. He loved the fact that the bridges went up; they weren't swinging bridges. They went up. They lifted up, and it reminded him of a great bird lifting its wings while the ships went by. He loved the dime-store windows. At that time, Kresge's, Woolworth's--they used to pack as much as they could into the windows, and he loved this because it reminded him very much of a film he did earlier called Ballet Mecanique. I liked Leger; he was a wonderful guy. Even if we didn't speak the same language, we understood each other. One evening, we had a school dance, a school party, and somebody walked in and Moholy introduced me to him. And his name was Man Ray. Man Ray was on his way from New York to Los Angeles, where I think he was going to marry Julie, his present wife. And we had a long, wonderful evening together. And Man Ray said, "You know, I just can't stand Chicago. It's terrible. The only reason I'm here is that we have to change trains in Chicago." This was the time long before the large commercial flights, so he just happened to be in Chicago for that evening and decided to come over and see the school. And that was my first contact with Man Ray.

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PHILLIPS:

Did you see Man Ray subsequently? Did you run into him in California?

WOELFFER:

I ran into him out here, for his show, I guess it was—what?—1963?

PHILLIPS:

Oh, the show that was at the Los Angeles County Museum, that Jules Langsner did.

WOELFFER:

I met Matta in Chicago, and he was very stimulating, and he came to visit the school. And Moholy, when he first came over, I remember he was trying to raise money-- I forget the name of the organization. Then Walter Paepcke came along with the Container Corporation [of America] and was a big backer of the school. But Moholy--I remember his English was not too good, and he was showing some slides one day at a women's club in order to get people stimulated and interested in backing the Institute of Design. He was showing slides of photographs and paintings and various things, and all of a sudden, on the screen came a slide of a photograph with a fence with a lot of graffiti on it. And Moholy said, "Look how sharp the photograph is. You can see the spelling on the fence—F-U-C-K: foush, fash, whatever it says." There are many anecdotes about Moholy. One day I remember he asked me, when we moved to a new building, to design the color of the walls and the doors and floors of the school. And he said, "Come back in one week." And I came back in one week, and he said, "Ah--you have the color scheme." I said, "Yes." He said, "That's fine. The doors will be gray and the walls will be white." [laughter]

PHILLIPS:

Do you think that he was a great teacher?

WOELFFER:

Fantastic.

PHILLIPS:

A great influence.

WOELFFER:

A great influence.

PHILLIPS:

And not only on you, but on everyone in the school?

WOELFFER:

He used to come to school on the streetcar—they had streetcars in those days—with his homburg hat and his black overcoat with a clerical collar and a workman's black tin pail. He could not afford the time to go out to lunch, and he'd eat his own lunch at his desk when he was writing or making lectures or designing. He was designing at that time the new offices of the Parker Pen Company of Janesville, Wisconsin. He said, "See that little niche in the wall?" I said, "Yes." He said, "They don't know it, but in there there's going to be a Moholy sculpture put in that little niche."

PHILLIPS:

What made him such a great teacher?

WOELFFER:

Because he wasn't closed to anything. He was a completely open man. He had a great, burning desire in architecture, painting, and sculpture, literature, music — the whole thing. He was a complete kind of man.

PHILLIPS:

He was very turned on by all of these things and wanted to pass it on to others.

WOELFFER:

Yes. I remember I went to school one day, and I said, "Moholy, I have to leave." I thought I would try New York. So we had an auction, and I raised some funds, and I was going to leave the school and go off and try New York City. And Moholy said, "You know, that'll be the end. You cut it off here, you cut it off. That'll be all. You can never come back." And I was quite sad about that. And that evening, about eleven o'clock, the bell rang, and here was Moholy, who came up, and he said, "I didn't quite mean it that way. Really, let's say you were a prince going out into the world to explore other areas,

and if you do not succeed, you're always welcome to come back to the school." He was a very sweet man.

PHILLIPS:

Did you go to New York then?

WOELFFER:

I went to New York. And it was just too soon after the war, and it was absolutely impossible to find anything. I was able to find a space on a fifth floor walk-up over the Manhattan Bridge with a bathtub in the kitchen, and I looked at that and related it to my coach house with a little backyard and one tree in Chicago and said no. At this particular time, this was just 1945, and I'd married Dina, and we both moved together to New York.

PHILLIPS:

When were you in the show at the Guggenheim [Museum]? Was it around that period, or later? And there was also a Whitney [Museum] show sometime in there.

WOELFFER:

I was quite late in showing in New York. I think my first show in New York was about 1945 at the Artists Gallery—my friend Frederica Beer Monti. It was a nonprofit gallery operated by a man by the name of Hugh Stix. It was not a commercial gallery. The gallery--I think they first showed [Adolph] Gottlieb and [Robert] Motherwell and many of the painters. And what they did, they would show your work with the hopes that a commercial gallery would then come along and take you on. Hugh Stix was in some kind of business, and he kept this gallery going in order to find commercial galleries for young, up-and-coming artists. But the Guggenheim exhibition came about much later, came about in the fifties. I think it was in the early fifties, when the Carnegie [Museum] and the Guggenheim--all these shows came about. I was quite late coming on to these national and international exhibitions.

PHILLIPS:

You said that you had married Dina. What year were you...?

WOELFFER:

1945. Married in 1945.

PHILLIPS:

You met her in Chicago?

WOELFFER:

Met her in Chicago.

PHILLIPS:

At the school?

WOELFFER:

No, I met her at a party. A month or two later we married, and we stayed in Chicago until 1947--no, excuse me, 1949. Buckminster Fuller was a part of the Institute of Design, and we were going to move to Yucatan in 1949, and Bucky Fuller said, "Well, it's on your way to Yucatan. Why don't you stop at Black Mountain College in North Carolina? I'm conducting a summer school there." This is the school that [Josef] Albers and Anni Albers founded. So I said, "That sounds fine." So we stopped off on our way to Yucatan. We drove, closed up our house in Chicago. In fact, we were evicted out of our coach house. Somebody else bought the house.

PHILLIPS:

I remember George Rickey saying that he came to visit you in that house in Chicago. It was before you left for Mexico?

WOELFFER:

Fred Wight.

PHILLIPS:

Fred Wight came, too.

WOELFFER:

Right. And we stopped at Black Mountain to teach for the summer. Dina taught photography, and I was teaching painting. And Herbert Bayer's and Joella Bayer's son was there at that time, along with a wonderful poet by the name of Charles Olson, who became a very close friend of our.

PHILLIPS:

How long was that summer teaching position?

WOELFFER:

That was a two-month summer, and we were about to leave for Yucatan. There was a young couple by the name of Vashi and Veena from India, who were at the Institute of Design, and Buckminster Fuller had them for the summer session. Veena was getting her doctor's degree in town planning, and Vashi was getting his degree in architecture, and they were both over here from India. But before they came to the school, they danced in New York for about a year in order to raise enough money to stay here because their government would not allow them to take any money out of India. So we were about to leave for Yucatan in our AC [Acedes] English tour car, and Vashi and Veena said, "Well, on your way, why don't you stop off in New York?"— which was just the opposite direction. It was the summer of 1949 when the big Life magazine story came out by Clement Greenberg asking whether Jackson Pollock was the greatest artist in America. Vashi and Veena knew Jackson and Lee [Krasner] very well, so they coaxed us to drive them to New York. The car, being a tourer, had two little jump seats in the back, which were perfect for Vasha and Veena. Veena had a bag full of a dozen saris; Vasha didn't take up much room. So we started off for New York via Washington, D.C. We arrived in New York and immediately went to Springs, New York, where we stayed with the Pollocks for several days. Pollock was still in some kind of a stupor from this big story on him. Through them we met Alfonso Ossorio, the painter, who previous to this story in Life magazine was buying Jackson Pollock. Betty Parsons was there, and it was a quite interesting weekend. And then we immediately left and drove down to North Carolina on our way to New Orleans, where we then took a plane to Yucatan.

PHILLIPS:

When you were at the Black Mountain school, were there other interesting faculty people there?

WOELFFER:

Yes, there was a scientist by the name of Goldowski who was there, and there was Ann Rice, librarian, and Dan Rice, the painter, who showed in New York,

who was a close friend of Mark Rothko. A year previous to that, de Kooning had been there. The year after I left, Ben Shahn and Robert Motherwell were there. But I came down with the Buckminster Fuller group.

PHILLIPS:

At that time, the Chicago Institute of Design and Black Mountain were places where things were really happening, weren't they?

WOELFFER:

Yes. I just missed meeting Albers; he and Anni left the day before we arrived at Black Mountain. They'd been there for many years, and they were on their way to New York. It took an auction and many other things to finance the Alberses' move from Black Mountain to New York.

PHILLIPS:

What did you think of Albers's paintings and of Pollock's paintings and Gottlieb's—what particular things were impressive in them?

WOELFFER:

Pollock's paintings really turned me on. I liked the spontaneity of them, the directness, the feeling of them, whereas I enjoyed Albers's paintings like listening to a little Bach sonata or something. But when I looked at Pollock, it was like listening to the Firebird of Stravinsky, which was much more to my liking.

PHILLIPS:

During that passage through New York, did you go to the Museum of Modern Art?

WOELFFER:

We bypassed New York City entirely and went directly to Springs, Long Island, to stay with the Pollocks, and when we left there we drove back the same way and stopped in New York. I was anxious to get down to this village in Yucatan where we were about to live for six months.

PHILLIPS:

So you got to South Carolina, and then what happened?

WOELFFER:

We Stopped there just overnight, in order to make a transaction on another automobile which I had, and then we drove on down to see Dina's daughter and husband in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where we stayed two nights before boarding a Pan American plane for Merida, Yucatan, with our dog and cat.

PHILLIPS:

And then how long did you stay at Merida?

WOELFFER:

We were overnight at Merida, where we crated the dog and cat up and got on a wood-burning train through the jungles to Campeche, Yucatan.

PHILLIPS:

What had decided you to go to Campeche?

WOELFFER:

We had a friend in Chicago, a painter, who had lived there for several months and had brought back some fantastic artifacts. You had a fabulous dwelling on the sea, and the rent was absolutely almost nothing.

PHILLIPS:

It was your friend's house.

WOELFFER:

He rented the house, as I was about to do, and then we wrote several letters from there to Charles Olson, which really flipped him on. When we came back, Charles Olson went down there, where he did his wonderful writing. He used to write for the Black Mountain Review and used many of Dina's photographs of some of the artifacts we had. He went down there and wrote, I think, the Mayan Letters, if I'm not mistaken. Some of his finest writings were done in Yucatan.

PHILLIPS:

What was the life like down there, what you did there?

WOELFFER:

The life was very primitive. There was no running water. We had the only well in our house in the community, and the people would line up because they had no fresh drinking water. So we'd provide them with water. We had nine huge rooms, a huge kitchen with a charcoal area that burned charcoal, not really a stove, but a large twenty-foot slab of beautiful tiles, where we would bake and cook whatever. It's a small fishing village-- we had the largest house down there—and the fishermen asked us if we would allow them to keep their sails on our patio to keep them dry, to which we said yes. And they would tiptoe in about four in the morning and get their sails, and they'd go out to sea, and they would not return until four, five in the afternoon, when all the townspeople would line up on the beach and wait for the fresh catch of fish. And our house roof would be lined with hundreds of vultures that were waiting for the fish to be cleaned. They'd come down and absolutely clean the beach, absolutely spotless. And the fishermen would give us pompano, and they'd give us casson, which is shark, beautiful baby shark fish. And pulpo, octopus, which was fresh. We would throw it on the grill with lime, fresh lime, and put it on our charcoal stove. When I was at Black Mountain, there was a Canadian student of mine who wanted one of my paintings, but being a Canadian, he was allowed to bring only so much money out of Canada. So I gave him this painting and he gave me several rolls of beautiful English linen canvas. And Ramon Shiva sent me boxes and boxes of colors, and...

PHILLIPS:

How did you know Shiva?

WOELFFER:

I knew Ramon Shiva from Chicago, where he manufactured his artists' colors. I met him in the early thirties, when his casein paint was introduced at the 1933 World's Fair. He was a painter at the Art Institute and didn't like the commercial colors, so started compounding colors for himself. His fellow students said, "We want to try some of the colors," and the first thing you know he wasn't painting anymore, but he was manufacturing paint.

PHILLIPS:

What were you thinking about when you were down in Carapeche? Were you just very busy living from day to day?

WOELFFER:

We had these nine huge rooms. The first thing we did, we bought two hammocks. You had to sleep in a hammock because of the scorpions. You couldn't sleep on the floor in a bed; the scorpions are very poisonous. So we put two hammocks on the outdoor patio, where we slept overlooking the Gulf of Campeche. And we rented a table and four chairs from the local cantina, and that was our furniture. Then I went and bought a hammer and some nails. I opened the canvas up, and I nailed canvas on every wall in the house. And I'd go around each day painting a little on each canvas, and this is how I did my painting. And we'd go to town once a day; we'd take the bus and go to Campeche. Because the village we lived in was called Lerma, L-e-r-m-a, a very small fishing village. Campeche, the larger city, was about fifteen minutes away by bus. And we met the postman and some local people there who knew this friend of mine who had lived there before whose name was Frank Verushka, a painter. And we were just like a continuation of Frank and his girlfriend coming down there. And one man in the village drove a school bus; so every Sunday morning, he'd bring the school bus up, and we'd get in the school bus with other people in the community, and we'd drive to all the adjoining villages and drink beer and eat cheese and pulpo, which was octopus, which was cut up and pickled and pounded for hours to make it very soft and pliable to chew. This was a Sunday ritual. It was quite beautiful. Six months later, I felt it time to leave, go back to humanity again, to Chicago.

PHILLIPS:

Did you learn quite good Spanish?

WOELFFER:

No, terrible.

PHILLIPS:

Did Dina learn good Spanish?

WOELFFER:

Much more than I did.

PHILLIPS:

Did it remind you, looking back, of the experiences of living in Italy? Or was it much more remote?

WOELFFER:

Much more remote, oh, yes, very much more remote, Nobody spoke English where we were in Yucatan. It was time to come back. Well, Dina had to stay with the dog and cat, and I hitched a ride on a Panamanian freighter that was stopping off. We met a man down there who was in the mahogany business, and he had an LST landing craft troop ship, converted to carry mahogany, and he gave me a ride. It was a Cuban freighter, Cuban crew and captain, flying a Panamanian flag, which meant the pay is little but the food is great. If it had a Cuban flag and a Panamanian entry, the food was bad but the pay was good. But anyway, I hitched a ride. Mr. Alazar was the man's name who was in the mahogany business; he was getting mahogany for a lumber company in Pensacola, Florida. So I got on at six o'clock that evening and sailed past our house and waved at Dina and the two dogs, I left her with about five dollars sitting there, with two nights and three days to get through.

PHILLIPS:

But you knew the fishermen would feed her.

WOELFFER:

I knew they would take care of her. And I went and got up to Pensacola, Florida, with rolls and rolls of my paintings and boxes and boxes of.. .

PHILLIPS:

Had you worked quite a bit while you were in Campeche?

WOELFFER:

Oh, yes, every day. And I had boxes and boxes of Mayan artifacts, and the customs were there immediately when I got off ship.

PHILLIPS:

I wanted to ask you if you saw a lot of the ruins when you were in Yucatan?

WOELFFER:

Chichen Itza, Uxmal, Palenque, and all of these places, yes.

PHILLIPS:

That must have been quite an experience.

WOELFFER:

Yeah, really. They weren't manufacturing artifacts at that particular time. There weren't too many collectors collecting this material, and upon my arrival in Pensacola, Florida, with the artifacts and the paintings, I jumped off the ship and went to the nearest bus depot. I was on my way to Dina's daughter in Baton Rouge, and I was at the bus depot. Greyhound bus depot, waiting for a bus to go to Baton Rouge from Pensacola. I had left Yucatan three or four days before in a white seersucker suit, which by the time I arrived in Pensacola, Florida, was full of rust and dirt. I didn't have a beard at that time; I needed a shave. When I went down there and when I came back, I always kept a revolver in my boot, and I was picked up at the Greyhound bus depot for vagrancy. [laughter] But I proved to them that I was getting the hell out of Florida—I was going to Louisiana--so they let me go with my artifacts and my paintings. I got a bus and went up there and started on the telephone, at her daughter's, to call people in Chicago who earlier took paintings of mine and promised to send payments to me which they never did. I needed money to get Dina the hell out of Yucatan. And three weeks later this was all arranged, and I met her at Moisant Airport in New Orleans on a Christmas Eve, where she came through a hurricane over the Gulf of Mexico and landed with the dog and cat. I met her with our little British AC tourer, with only side curtains on it--which was fine down there, but the following night we started back for Chicago from Baton Rouge. We had the dog and the cat in the box and all the artifacts and all the paintings in this car which is just two seats larger than an MG.

PHILLIPS:

And whatever clothes you owned at the time.

WOELFFER:

Which were nothing. We started to feel the cool of the weather when we were still in the south. We took a motel, and a few hours later, I said to Dina, "We've slept too long. We're ready to leave now. It's five o'clock. We want to get on the road." We got on the road, and in about ten, fifteen minutes, I ran

out of gas and found out it wasn't five o'clock—but it was twenty-five minutes after twelve. [laughter] And then it was too late, and the car was out of gas and nobody would pick me up— I forget the name of the place down south. But anyway, as daylight came, I was able to hitch a ride, get gasoline. We got in the car, and by two o'clock that morning, we arrived back for New Year's Eve in Chicago in a real snowstorm.

PHILLIPS:

With the side curtains.

WOELFFER:

And my seersucker suit, and the side curtains, Dina and the dog and cat, and we finally made it to my mother's house. A very unforgettable experience, believe me. That was 1950. First of the year, 1950.

PHILLIPS:

And you didn't have any promises in hand for the rest of the year, did you?

WOELFFER:

Not a thing. But I immediately called up my friends at the Institute of Design. Serge Chermayeff was then the director of the Institute of Design. Moholy-Nagy died just before we left Chicago. He died in 1946. And a friend of mine was buying an old building and remodeling it in Chicago, and he built a beautiful, big room for me, a lighted room, where I started conducting my own painting classes. That spring, I received a call from Colorado Springs, where an ex-student of mine was teaching. They were looking for somebody to teach painting, and I was recommended. So I took the train out to Colorado Springs, where I was interviewed by many people, and some weeks later, I received word that I was accepted for the position.

PHILLIPS:

You weren't interested at this point in moving to New York?

WOELFFER:

No. I, for some reason, always felt nervous being where the action is. I'm very much affected by action, and I prefer to live off by myself in my own kind of action. I get too involved, too emotionally disturbed where things are

happening. Like out here, I'd prefer to live where we live rather than in Venice or someplace where the action is. I can do my work much better.

PHILLIPS:

So you visited Colorado Springs and decided to take the position.

WOELFFER:

That was great. So I went back to Chicago...

PHILLIPS:

... got Dina and the dogs...

WOELFFER:

... got Dina and the dogs—left the dogs and the cat at the kennel and they flew out later on; I thought it'd be much easier for them. We drove out. We stopped in Minnesota to see Dina's father and then got into Colorado Springs. One interesting phase of that: there was a man by the name of Jan Rutenberg, who was an architect, who claimed that he was an old buddy of [Ludwig] Mies van der Rohe. I knew Mies van der Rohe quite well in Chicago, and he...

PHILLIPS:

That's right, Mies lived in Chicago, didn't he?

WOELFFER:

Mies was living in Chicago, yes. He lived in an old apartment building. He wouldn't live in one of his own buildings. He lived in an old apartment building with grass rugs and Chippendale furniture.

PHILLIPS:

And his Paul Klees.

WOELFFER:

And all his Paul Klees all over the room.

PHILLIPS:

Was he a good friend of Moholy's?

WOELFFER:

No, not too well. That whole group, they never got along.

PHILLIPS:

Sibling rivalry.

WOELFFER:

Right. Albers, and the architect--what was his name, the architect? Gropius. No, they were all sort of individual people. But Jan Ruttenberg said, "You know Mies?" He didn't believe me, so he wrote Mies a letter asking about me, and Mies van der Rohe called me up one day and had me over and said, "Do you want this position?" I said, "Yes, Mies." Well, he sent a three-page telegram to Mr. Jan Ruttenberg, and after that, Mr. Ruttenberg had nothing to say anymore.

PHILLIPS:

Ruttenberg was in Colorado Springs?

WOELFFER:

Yeah, he was a local architect. His daughter is a painter.

PHILLIPS:

What was it like in Colorado Springs?

WOELFFER:

It was just beautiful.

PHILLIPS:

How long were you there?

WOELFFER:

Seven years, 1950 to 1957, when we left. We rented a sort of house-apartment affair for the first two years, and then I bought some land with a shack on it in Austin Bluffs that Dina and I, as you know, put together with our blood, sweat, and...

PHILLIPS:

... tears. [laughter]

WOELFFER:

Sore thumbs and everything else. And after it was completely completed, ready to really enjoy, we left in 1957 for Europe. The trustees wanted to revert back to the school the way it was in the earlier days.

PHILLIPS:

What had that been like?

WOELFFER:

I don't know; it was when Boardman Robinson and that whole group were there. And they felt there was too much abstract art going on.

PHILLIPS:

Well, when you came, who was director of the museum?

WOELFFER:

Mitch [Mitchell] Wilder was director.

PHILLIPS:

Was that the first time you'd met Mitch?

WOELFFER:

That was the first time, yeah. He had set up a foundation course similar to the New Bauhaus, and they had a fellow teaching that, and I was made head of the painting department. In all these communities, there's the local art groups...

PHILLIPS:

... and the local support groups, and the ladies who start the museum, and....

WOELFFER:

And I no sooner arrived in town, and they said, "Are we gonna have to paint pictures that you don't put picture frames on, and do they all have to be abstract paintings?" And I said, "Gee, give me a chance to settle down before we...." But it was a wonderful seven years, I thought. I met some wonderful

people. If it hadn't been for that, I would never have met the Phillipses, whom I met through the Byrneses [James and Barbara], and the Paul Kantors, etc.

PHILLIPS:

There were some of the trustees you liked, too. And some of the people in Colorado Springs you got to know well.

WOELFFER:

There were the Spragues out there, who were very nice, interested in art and music, and in fact he played piano with a group that was organized some years later called the Gut Bucket Seven, which was a Dixieland jazz group, and we played for many of the functions for the Art Center and in the community.

PHILLIPS:

How long did Mitch stay there?

WOELFFER:

Mitch was there till '53.

PHILLIPS:

Then Jimmy Byrnes came?

WOELFFER:

Then Jimmy Byrnes came.

PHILLIPS:

And Jimmy came from the Los Angeles County Museum then?

WOELFFER:

Right, right, right. Then we became very close. And they had many of their dear friends stopping off on their way from coast to coast whom I met, and then Jimmy left, I think, in '55.

PHILLIPS:

And then there was that famous summer when I think we all met for the first time. Bob Motherwell was teaching there, was he, at Colorado Springs?

WOELFFER:

He taught there that summer. He came out with his wife, Betty, and we went...

PHILLIPS:

Had his fiftieth birthday. No, fortieth.

WOELFFER:

My fortieth birthday, at our house. And I think we all went to Aspen; I think we did a trip to Aspen one weekend. Bob was quite miserable out there; he didn't like it, for some reason.

PHILLIPS:

Then Rothko was teaching at University of Colorado.

WOELFFER:

At Boulder. And he came out with Mel; he took a trip up to see them one weekend. So it was quite a coming and going of interesting people, celebrities.

PHILLIPS:

And I remember, the summer that we were there, Ynez Johnston and Rothko had just been there....

WOELFFER:

Right, and Ibram Lassaw I think was there.

PHILLIPS:

And the Motherwells were there, and I think it was Bob's fortieth birthday, and it was at the Byrneses' house.

WOELFFER:

It was my fortieth birthday.

PHILLIPS:

Your fortieth birthday.

WOELFFER:

Yeah, because we just talked about that last year at his sixtieth birthday, and he told his daughter there, who's a beautiful young girl, "You were conceived after a party at Emerson's fortieth birthday in Colorado Springs."

PHILLIPS:

And the winters must have been long, though.

WOELFFER:

They were long, especially when we were building the house. First year we didn't have an inside toilet. We kept warm with a coal stove. The man we bought the house from had just finished siding the whole house with logs, half-split logs, and we were taking 'em off as fast as we could, burning those to use to heat the house for that first winter, which was quite rough but very nice. Many times we were snowed in for two and three days; and, at that time being a smoker, I would climb the walls for a cigarette. This was the beginning of the sports car club of Colorado Springs, and we started collecting all the automobiles. We had the AC and we had the Daimler, and we had the MG, and all sorts of things. We had the rally at Aspen in the summer. That's when we got to know the Bayers quite well, going up to Aspen.

PHILLIPS:

During this period, did you get to look at much art, outside of the Colorado Springs Museum? The Taylor Museum must have had an influence. The Santos, and Spanish colonial art.

WOELFFER:

Yeah. And of course, many weekend trips to Taos and Santa Fe, which wasn't too far away, which was wonderful. I think one of the areas I really like most in the Southwest is around Taos and Santa Fe.

PHILLIPS:

What other American painters were you following then, or were you even looking at what other people were doing?

WOELFFER:

No, I was quite involved at that particular time--moving to the country--with that whole series of paintings I did of the birds, the whole bird series of

paintings, which lasted for a couple of years. And no, nothing from the outside. Oh, in '53, with the Byrneses, we took a trip--my first trip, Dina's first trip—to California. We'd never been out here before, which made quite an impression--the fact that there was greenery all year 'round, you know. We went to visit you and Gifford and had our first contact with the Weschers [Paul and Mary], and I said, "Wow," you know, "this is quite a place out here." And Paul Kantor and the galleries—it was really coming into life again. That's when I became associated with Paul Kantor, and he started to show my work.

PHILLIPS:

Before we talk about Paul, I have, in this biographical data here, that you received an honorary degree from the Institute of Design in Chicago in 1950.

WOELFFER:

Oh, yes. Moholy thought anybody that had been with the school for ten years should have some kind of [laughter] honorary bachelor's degree, which is the first and last one I've ever heard of.

PHILLIPS:

Yeah, you can always say you're a college graduate. And then you were in a "Six American Painters" show at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston.

WOELFFER:

Yeah, that's Fred Wight.

PHILLIPS:

Fred Wight was running the ICA in Boston then?

WOELFFER:

Right, and he came to Chicago and he saw my work and included me in that exhibition.

PHILLIPS:

You didn't get back for the show, did you?

WOELFFER:

No, No.

PHILLIPS:

Then in 1951, you had the one-man show at the Art Institute of Chicago.

WOELFFER:

That was an exhibition of drawings and prints.

PHILLIPS:

And in 1952 you were in a "Four American Painters" show at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and also at the Carnegie International in Pittsburgh. Now, that was probably a great honor to be asked to the Carnegie then.

WOELFFER:

Yes, it was, quite. I was invited by Vadov Vytacil, who was a fabulous painter. He's still painting; he still teaches at the Art Students League in Chicago. Vytacil came out to Colorado Springs the year before Jimmy Byrnes came. I knew his work for years as one of the avant-garde painters in the early Chicago national exhibitions, when Leon Krull and the regionalist painters were so popular. Vytacil was a very abstract painter. Today you mention his name, and nobody knows about him. And he brought his assistant out. Vytacil was an assistant many years ago to Hans Hofmann in Munich, Germany, along with Ludwig Sander, and Vytacil would not teach anywhere unless his buddy, his assistant, Ludwig Sander, came along. And Ludwig Sander was a little stocky guy who came out for two years to Colorado Springs. I remember one summer we took a ride down to Santa Fe, where we met Ed Primus's first wife, Marjorie Primus, who used to do the captions for the cartoons in the New Yorker magazine. She used to send in these captions, and then they would give them to the cartoonists, Steig and Arno, and then they would do a cartoon around them. And somehow Ludwig knew her, many years previous. Ludwig was a wonderful guy. He taught one of the basic drawing courses. But nobody felt there was any vitality with Ludwig—nothing was ever going to happen with Ludwig—and then all these many years later, Ludwig became quite an important painter.

PHILLIPS:

Yeah, I met him in New York and he was really very well thought of. I know Clement Greenberg was quite interested in him. Then he was doing this very minimal flat color painting.

WOELFFER:

Very classical kind of architechtonic, abstract painting.

PHILLIPS:

And he died about two years ago.

WOELFFER:

Yes, I just read this in a magazine. At that time I knew he had a heart problem; he always carried nitrate pills. That was the last time I saw him, was in 1952.

PHILLIPS:

Then in 1953, you visited Los Angeles with the Byrneses.

WOELFFER:

Right, we drove out.

PHILLIPS:

Right, we drove out.

WOELFFER:

And did you stay there then?

PHILLIPS:

We stayed at Ynez's.

WOELFFER:

You met Ynez Johnston through the Byrneses. And Ynez was away, in New York or someplace, when we arrived, so she gave us her apartment to stay in, which was next door to Paul and Jo Kantor.

PHILLIPS:

That was at the Sepulveda Park apartments.

WOELFFER:

Right, where the front garden is now the San Diego Freeway.

PHILLIPS:

One of my memories from Colorado Springs that summer was a tablecloth that had been painted by Rothko, Ynez, and, I guess, you. And it was draped around Jo Kantor, and she posed for a picture for me.

WOELFFER:

That's right.

PHILLIPS:

So you stayed at Ynez's apartment. I remember we used to take painting lessons there from her.

WOELFFER:

That's right, that's right.

PHILLIPS:

And then did you move into that house of Dick Ruben's, the painter?

WOELFFER:

No, that happened after two and a half years of Italy. In '57 we had about had Colorado, and the trustees wanted to revert back to the good old days. They gave me a year's notice, so we got the house in perfect order to rent and got rid of all our automobiles. [laughter] We had met Stephanie Tartarsky and her then-husband, Aldo Paliacci, an Italian painter, and they suggested we come over to Europe. So they were living on the island of Ischia, and we thought that would be a wonderful idea, so we started off on that trek. Jimmy Byrnes was director, I think, or assistant director, under [William R.] Valentiner of the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh. This was 1957. They were going to have a modern show, and they were choosing a jury, which was made up of Dorothy Miller, of the Museum of Modern Art, and Harry Bertoia, Valentiner's son-in-law. Jimmy knew we were coming East. By having us on the jury it would help defray some of the expenses going to New York to catch our ship to Europe. So again we packed the car with the... This time we had two dogs, left the cat behind. And off we went, and stayed with the Byrneses, who were

remodeling a house that they purchased in Raleigh, juried the show, and then started off for New York in order to get prepared for Italy.

1.4. TAPE NUMBER: II, Side Two (March 18, 1976)

PHILLIPS:

As I remember, we left off last time with your leaving Colorado Springs and going to Ischia.

WOELFFER:

Oh, yes. I think we got rid of the stable of automobiles, leased the house, with the cat. At that time Jimmy Byrnes was having a juried show at Raleigh, North Carolina, so he invited me to be on the jury along with Dorothy Miller of the Museum of Modern Art and the sculptor, Harry Bertoia, which would enable us to cross country on the jury fee. So we packed our things in the Chevrolet and took off and arrived in Raleigh, North Carolina, about three days later, where we spent several days with the Byrneses, Harry Bertoia, and Dorothy Miller. It was agreed that when we got to New York, we'd leave the car with Jimmy Byrnes's brother, and on our return from Italy, we'd pick the car up in New York.

PHILLIPS:

How did you decide to go to Italy?

WOELFFER:

Aldo Paliacci and Stephanie Tartarsky from Denver, people we knew. He was Italian, and they were going over there to live, and they suggested that we should join them there. That's the reason we chose Ischia.

PHILLIPS:

That was a good time for you to go on a trip, too, because the years in Colorado Springs had terminated.

WOELFFER:

Exactly. But we didn't know how long we would stay. As it turned out, we did stay two and a half years. When we left North Carolina for New York, we drove nonstop all night long, arrived the next afternoon late, and arrived at

Lenore Tawney's studio, where she put us up, down on Conti Slip, which is now SoHo, in New York. We got in touch with Bob Motherwell, and that evening we went out to do the town. Lenore took a taxi home, and Bob, Dina, and myself—we had the two poodles with us, locked in the car—we went to the Cedar Bar and stayed till late hours of the morning. We decided to leave and go back downtown, and Bob decided to stay at the Cedar Bar, so off we went. After an innumerable amount of drinks and losing a night's sleep driving up from North Carolina, somehow we were going uptown rather than downtown, and I dozed. And there was a tunnel coming up, and I didn't see the tunnel, or I didn't see the road going up or down, and I hit the retaining wall, and the next thing I knew I was awakened at the Bellevue Hospital. Just a few scratches on me, miraculously. The dogs were intact; Dina was intact. And the police told me I'd better remove the car the next morning off the street. So we took a taxi back down to Lenore's, and I got up early in the morning to see if I could move the car. But I had to call a junkyard, and the car, they said, was worth six dollars. It was completely, totally destroyed. So with that, I went to the Italian Line and found out when their next boat was leaving New York for Italy. There was one the next day, the Saturnia, so we booked passage on the Saturnia, which was a three-class ship. It was built in 1936; it was an old tub. And Ray Parker came to see us off. And our stateroom was so large we had to put the chair out into the vestibule for Ray to sit on. [laughter] And after a few drinks he left, and about five o'clock, the ship took off, and we discovered that our berths were right behind the pistons of the ship. It sounded like someone beating on the wall with a sledgehammer. We heard the bell for dinner and started down the hall for dinner, and we discovered that there were 350 undesirable aliens being deported back to Italy, and Dina was the only female. It was quite a thing on a third-class Italian boat. So we went to dinner, and we started to reach for something on the table, bread or wine, and it was completely gone. So with all this disgust, I went up and saw the purser, to find out whether we could change to cabin class, second class, which with some money under the table was immediately arranged. And we found ourselves up in second class, which was much more desirable. We met some interesting people aboard ship, and after twelve days, we arrived in Naples, where the Paliaccis were there, waiting for us.

PHILLIPS:

How did you feel during this time? Were you excited about going to the new place and having new experiences?

WOELFFER:

Very exciting.

PHILLIPS:

Were you apprehensive at all about it?

WOELFFER:

No, not at all. We took this little vessel which goes from island to island, and it was about an hour-and-a-half ride on the little ship to Porto d'Ischia. Porto is the main town on this island, at which point we got in a taxi, and in another fifteen minutes we were in the village of Ischia, where we parked our gear and dogs and went down the stairs to the beach restaurant called Filippo's. Filippo was an American who had married an Italian woman so that he could start business on the island, a restaurant business. He was quite a character. He was an old Hollywood character, played in several movies, and he tended bar and his wife did the cooking and the serving and everything else, and he just sat at the bar and got drunk every day. It was quite a place. Sir William Walton, the British composer, had a group of houses on the island that he leased out. We became quite friendly with him. And from time to time there 'd be various people coming on the island. There were many actors. Dylan Thomas's wife used to live on the island. Carlyle Brown, the painter, lived on the island. [Leonardo] Cremonini. Matta, the painter, had a house on the island. And I met Sir Laurence Olivier; he used to frequent the island. We had two and a half years, two very cold winters, the first one being the most terrible of all because we rented a huge, beautiful ten-room apartment on the top floor of a building which was the tallest building on the island which overlooked the sea, and the only heat was charcoal braziers that you put charcoal in, and you put them under your chair and fanned them to keep warm. And we found out later that the trick was to get an apartment where the windows faced the west, so in the afternoon you keep the windows open and get all that beautiful sun inside. As soon as the sun goes down, you completely, immediately close the windows so you trap that nice warm sunshine air into your house, which is supposed to last for the evening.

PHILLIPS:

How cold does it get?

WOELFFER:

Well, we had snow. We overlooked a mountain called Mt. Epomeo, which wasn't too tall a mountain. It was a volcanic remains from an earthquake they'd had many years before. From time to time, there was snow on the mountains, so it was quite cold. We had a bombalo--a butane tank which we used to put on the stove burners in order to have heat for cooking.

PHILLIPS:

This was your first trip to Europe?

WOELFFER:

Yes, first trip, and of very primitive means.

PHILLIPS:

Did you get anyplace other than Ischia?

WOELFFER:

After about six months there, a friend of mine, a photographer, was over in the south of France on a Graham award—Graham, the architect from Chicago. And he was staying in a beautiful house that belonged to Andre Mason, the French surrealist painter. So I went to visit him. I took off for a couple of weeks, took a train from Naples to Cannes, where he met me, and then we drove from Cannes to Aix-en-Provence, this beautiful little village in Cezanne country—it's where Cezanne had his studio, which still remains. There is a popular music college there in Aix-en-Provence. It's one of the most beautiful little towns I've ever visited. So I stayed there with Harry Callahan, the photographer, for about a week and a half, and we went out with them several times on photo trips. At that time another Chicago photographer by the name of Arthur Sinzabaugh was there, and we took some trips to Marseilles and Monte Carlo and many of the little towns in that area, and when they were driving me back to Cannes to catch the train for Naples, I suggested that we stop in Antibes, which they had never been in. I'd heard of Antibes, the Grimaldi fortress there. At the end of the war, Picasso was living

there and painted and drew enough work to cover all the walls of this old, medieval fortress in Antibes. He left the work there.

PHILLIPS:

Did you see much older European art, high European art, like Renaissance, baroque, and so on? I ask that because it's the sort of thing I'm sure you'd gotten a lot of in art school, and I wondered how you reacted to it.

WOELFFER:

I saw some in Rome, but the best examples are in France and other countries, it seems, and in this country. In Naples, they have that museum, Capa de Monti Museum, and it is mostly, I guess, what one would call fifthhand sixth-rate work, Italian impressionism. They have one wonderful painting there by Brueghel called *The Blind Leading the Blind*, which is the best thing in the museum. And after you see that painting, you walk into a little area where you sit down and have an aperitif, which is very sensible. Most museums don't have this sort of thing. After a year and a half there, a friend of ours from Denver came and bought some of my work and suggested that we should come to see her. She was then living in Madrid, Spain—bought a beautiful apartment there, so she suggested that we come to see her. So on our way, we stopped off in Rome, where I saw Afro [Basaldella] the painter and Turcato the painter, and met Giorgio de Chirico, the surrealist, one of the fathers of surrealism.

PHILLIPS:

He must have been quite an old man then.

WOELFFER:

He was in his, I guess, late sixties. He's still painting up a storm. The paintings aren't too good, but anyway, he's still painting. His painting reverted to the earlier style which made him famous—metaphysical kind of painting.

PHILLIPS:

Did he speak any English?

WOELFFER:

No, he spoke only Italian, and the people that we were with spoke both. There were Italians who spoke some English. Oh, there was another painter there—offhand I can't think of his name, but anyway, I'd met him in Colorado Springs. He was born in New York; at the age of two months, they took him back to Italy, where he remained. When he became of age, the government came to him and said, "You want to be an American or Italian?" He said, "American." They said, "Fine, you're drafted into the army." And they sent him to Colorado Springs, where he painted signs for the officers, did their portraits. He was there six months, and they sent him back to Europe and then mustered him out of the service. I met him in Colorado Springs, and of course we saw him in Rome, where we also ran into Jo Kantor, who was over there at that time.

PHILLIPS:

Were she and Paul getting divorced then?

WOELFFER:

They were getting divorced. Yes, she was over on her way to Paris to meet Wright Morris, whom she later married. And on our way to Madrid, we took the train, and my gosh, I could hear the conductor yell, "Arles!" And we looked out and we saw van Gogh all around, so we jumped off the train in a hurry and spent three days in Arles looking at this beautiful van Gogh country.

PHILLIPS:

Are there any van Gogh paintings in Arles?

WOELFFER:

They have a little van Gogh museum, and there are reproductions out of their magazine, which is comparable to our Life and Look magazine. They're cut out, and they're put in little, cheap picture frames, and the caretaker of this little museum with the reproductions said, "You know, they're all over in your country, all the good paintings."

PHILLIPS:

There's a Gauguin museum in Tahiti, and it's filled with reproductions, too.

WOELFFER:

Yeah, the good pieces are all gone. So we found that Hugo Weber was living in Cadaques, Costa Brava, so we took the train from Arles and went to Barcelona, where we got off and immediately took a bus to Barcelona down to the Costa Brava, where we saw Hugo Weber and his wife, Ann. Hugo had a wonderful, huge balconied space above a bar on the beach. Many of the French painters go to the Costa Brava in the summer because it's not anywhere near as expensive as the French Riviera. Hugo dropped his paintbrush and greeted us lovingly, and we went down immediately to the bar for a drink, and there was sitting Marcel Duchamp, whom I met for the first time. Hugo and he became quite friendly. Duchamp spent his summers in Costa Brava. Also, Salvador Dali has a beautiful home on the coast, right on the sea, a little inlet bay where his wife, Gala, every day goes out to skin diving. So through Duchamp and Hugo, we met Dali; I had met him many years earlier in Chicago. The Franco regime condemned all the land for a couple of miles around Dali's house so nobody could build there, so he'd have complete privacy. He was a very exciting character.

PHILLIPS:

There's a new book out on him. I was reading the review by Bob Kirsch, and he seemed to think that Dali was really a genius. You think it was his energy he was referring to?

WOELFFER:

Well, you know Bob Motherwell thinks he's an awful painter but that he's a fantastic writer, fabulous writer. His writing is, I think, very good, very exciting, very stimulating.

PHILLIPS:

And he has that strange, unusual mind.

WOELFFER:

He was here in Los Angeles many years ago. Walt Disney called him up to come over and work with him on the movie Fantasia. But both of those men having the same kind of temperament and the same kind of ego didn't hit it off at all.

PHILLIPS:

That's a funny juxtaposition—Salvador Dali and Walt Disney.

WOELFFER:

Yes. And so he stomped out of there and left. I first saw Walt Disney's things on the wall of a gallery in New York City, the Julien Levy Gallery, which at one time was the gallery for surrealist art, and here was an exhibition of [Arshile] Gorky, Max Ernst, and Walt Disney.

PHILLIPS:

Cartoons?

WOELFFER:

Walt Disney's cartoons, because the surrealists immediately accepted him as one of theirs, because imagine, you know, here's a mouse that talks. This is really quite surrealistic. So they idolized Disney.

PHILLIPS:

But you don't think that Disney had any of the intellectual foundation that they had.

WOELFFER:

No, he didn't want to. He didn't want his stuff to be in fine arts. I think his very early pictures were quite terrific, much better than his later ones. [tape recorder turned off]

PHILLIPS:

When you were in Ischia, were you painting?

WOELFFER:

Painting constantly. Yes, I had all this space. To my great surprise, I discovered how horrible the Italian art materials were. I thought, of all places in the world — the history of great painting--they would have the finest brushes, paints, and canvas. They were just absolutely horrible. The best materials came from France. But I was able to get a man—there was a man on the island who would go to the mainland every day and bring back whatever you needed in the way of supplies. Because after a while, as nice as that boat ride was to Naples and back, it left at five-thirty in the morning, in the dark, and you got

the boat coming back from Naples at three in the afternoon. And everybody was gay in the morning, drinking and talking, and then when it came back, everyone had done their business in Naples. At three in the afternoon, everybody was sleeping, [laughter] But there was this man--he was a courier, and he would get whatever you wanted for you. I'd order a canvas and stretcher bars, and he'd bring them back to me. I did find one thing on the island—that was a canned white paint, oil paint, oil paste paint, and it was the finest white I've ever run into. It never, never yellowed at all. There were some other painters on the island. There was Count Borgrauve; his brother is at the Belgian consulate in Washington, now. And then there were some lesser-known painters. Every night we'd meet at Filippo's and eat and drink and talk. It was sort of a ritual.

PHILLIPS:

Did you paint during the day or at night there?

WOELFFER:

There I painted during the day because if you put too much light on at night, it would blow the fuse. The fuse was made out of a little, fine piece of wire. And when they'd have an electrical storm, all the lights in the whole island would go out. And the electricians for this island were terrified to go up on the light poles when it was raining. So you'd have to wait till it stopped raining the next day before they attempted to go up it. So we painted in the daytime; and at night, most of the time, we were with candlelight.

PHILLIPS:

You usually paint at night here, don't you?

WOELFFER:

Yeah, I like it at night here. It's quiet, peaceful, and very relaxing.

PHILLIPS:

When did you start doing this?

WOELFFER:

I started doing that along about 1940, I think. I used to have jobs in the daytime, and it's a natural thing to paint at night. I got into that habit, I guess.

PHILLIPS:

You mentioned earlier that when you stopped painting for several weeks, it was hard to get back.

WOELFFER:

Yeah. Starting a painting, I think, is the most difficult thing; it's as difficult as stopping. You build up a sort of a tempo that you go to.

PHILLIPS:

And when you're working on something, you're eager to get back to it?

WOELFFER:

Right, right.

PHILLIPS:

How long does it take you to paint a painting?

WOELFFER:

Anywhere from maybe a half-hour to several weeks.

PHILLIPS:

I assume that when you struggle, it takes several weeks.

WOELFFER:

I think when I'm moving into a different direction, there's quite a bit of struggle. And then afterwards, the struggle ceases for me, and then I try to move on to another area, where I can start a struggle all over again.

PHILLIPS:

Do you feel that a lot of your painting is automatic?

WOELFFER:

Yes, very much so. This is, I feel, my kinship with the surrealist painters. I paint first and think afterwards. Some people think and then paint. I think after I paint.

PHILLIPS:

So when you approach that bare canvas, with the dripping great brush—you just start.

WOELFFER:

Whatever happens to be, and I just start. I look at the jars of paint, and I think, "That's a nice color," and that's the thing that starts it off. You're not always successful when you work that way. There are many of them that are destroyed. The selectivity begins, I think, after I have done quite a few of them. I set them out and go through them. I rework some, and others I completely destroy.

PHILLIPS:

What kind of paintings were you doing in Ischia?

WOELFFER:

They were mostly black, ochre, and white, and sort of Naples yellow, which is an earthy kind of yellow. The name comes from Naples because the buildings in Naples are all this color. That's where the word Naples yellow comes from. And the people on the island—there's not a week goes by without a funeral procession. Used to come down our street very sad, people in tears, everybody walking.

PHILLIPS:

And all wearing black.

WOELFFER:

All wearing black—black, black, black. The men with black armbands, the women in black dresses. And they'd have to stay in mourning a year, and by the time the year's up, there's somebody else in the family that has departed, so they're constantly in black. Many times people have asked me, and I've thought maybe it's a rationalization. Maybe it isn't, but I feel that my paintings reflected that in Italy.

PHILLIPS:

So you are, quite naturally, influenced by your environment.

WOELFFER:

Oh, very definitely. Out here, we have flowers and colors; there's no sunshine like it out here. My color is much lighter, my pictures are brighter.

PHILLIPS:

And I know the paintings from the Colorado Springs period...

WOELFFER:

The birds.

PHILLIPS:

The birds and the jets and the sky, around 1956.

WOELFFER:

Right, and then the early ones before that, the jazz pictures, from the jam sessions in Chicago.

PHILLIPS:

When you were doing the paintings that were influenced by the jazz sessions, were you conscious of it at the time?

WOELFFER:

No.

PHILLIPS:

It was afterwards.

WOELFFER:

I still paint sometimes with music on, but a little more quiet music. But in Chicago it was jazz music constantly playing while I was working.

PHILLIPS:

And I know that some of those paintings are titled things like Birdland .

WOELFFER:

Right, yeah, what was happening at the time. Homage to Danny Alvin, the drummer; all pertaining to the jazz era, the jazz scene.

PHILLIPS:

But was it after you had completed a large group of these that you realized that they all had to do with jazz, and so you gave them those titles?

WOELFFER:

Right, the titles come about only when I'm asked to exhibit the painting, or someone wants to purchase one, or someone has to put one in a catalog or write about it. That's when I think of the title. But I never title them — in all of my new ones here, I don't have any titles on at all. For my last show in New York, it was a task I had to do—to title these things. And sometimes the titles are very misleading, have nothing to do with the painting, but they have to do with the situation, the place and the time that they were created in. I think one of the greatest talents to title paintings was Paul Klee—very, very poetic. He was a poet and musician. His titles are just pure poetry, And other painters put numbers on theirs. They didn't want the title of the painting to influence the viewer.

PHILLIPS:

And you've always done a lot of collage.

WOELFFER:

Yes.

PHILLIPS:

And playful things as well as painting. For instance, right now you're working on this setup for your movie. The electric toy trains.

WOELFFER:

That's a diversion of some sort. I think when it gets all finished, whatever I do with it, it will probably be covered up. I'll have had my fun and enjoyment with it, and I'll give it to some children, or something.

PHILLIPS:

Well, it certainly seems that a lot of artists have a very playful side to their activity. Picasso certainly has.

WOELFFER:

Right, right, yeah. Picasso and his hats, and his getup and everything.

PHILLIPS:

And the found-objects sculpture. [Alexander] Calder with his toys. And I know Picasso is somebody you admire a lot.

WOELFFER:

Yeah, I think that he was quite unique. I don't think in our lifetime we'll see anybody else like him.

PHILLIPS:

Are there periods of Picasso paintings that you like better than others?

WOELFFER:

Not particular periods, but particular paintings.

PHILLIPS:

Which ones? What's the first Picasso painting that you remember that had a big influence on you, that really struck you?

WOELFFER:

It was when I was going to art school, and the loan collection from Chester Dale in Washington, D.C., came to the Art Institute. At that particular time my work was pertaining to the figure, because all we painted in art school was the figure. So therefore I was very much struck by these huge paintings, by these classical paintings of Picasso, the Greek period—the big hands and the big feet, sculptural paintings. They really... and then, of course, they had the big painting the Saltimbanques, that huge, beautiful painting of the circus people. And I was very much influenced by those figure paintings. Not so much by the distorted ones. When I was going to art school, it was at the time of the Spanish civil war, so there were a lot of things of Picasso being shown—the Dreams and Lies of Franco, and all those studies for the Guernica, the big painting, which when it came to Chicago was the real shocker to me, because I...

PHILLIPS:

Did that travel around the country?

WOELFFER:

Yes. That was at the Arts Club in Chicago.

PHILLIPS:

It's a fabulous painting.

WOELFFER:

I walked in, expecting to see a big colorful painting, and I flipped. It was just in black and white and grays. I didn't realize it was not in color.

PHILLIPS:

How was it that you became an abstract painter? I mean by that that you worked with colors and planes and moods, and that there's no recognizable literal imagery in your work.

WOELFFER:

I think it's because of the shows that I hung for Katharine Kuh--all the shows she had were that, and the things the Arts Club used to show at that time.

PHILLIPS:

That was what was going on then among the avant-garde.

WOELFFER:

And what was going on in American painting at that time was the social realism and...

PHILLIPS:

Regionalism.

WOELFFER:

Regional, [Thomas Hart] Benton, [John Steuart] Curry, and that sort of thing, which didn't move me whatsoever. It seemed to me much more illustration, and I liked the adventure of this not-knowing kind of thing.

PHILLIPS:

That's certainly an idea that the surrealists put across, wasn't it?

WOELFFER:

Right, right. Where everybody else was busy finding a particular kind of mixture and then kept putting it in the same bread tin and baking it and cooking it and baking it all over again, you know, repeating themselves too much. They found a formula; it became a formula kind of painting.

PHILLIPS:

[Joan] Miro was also someone you admire a lot.

WOELFFER:

Oh, yeah. Miro very much so, because I have quite a few of his lithographs. I think today he's really playful. That "Fifteen European Painters" show at the L.A. County [Museum] —those paintings with the buckets hanging on them. He's in his eighties.

PHILLIPS:

He's always had that very playful element in his work.

WOELFFER:

When we left Barcelona we took a horrible third-class train to Madrid, an all-night ride. We had first-class tickets, but somehow I didn't show the tickets for a particular seat on the train, so they ushered us into a third-class car with wooden benches. And Dina and I got on there with the wooden benches; there are six people on each side.

PHILLIPS:

Terrible things were always happening to you in Europe. [laughter]

WOELFFER:

All night long. And then there were Arabs and all kinds of people sleeping in the aisles of the train, and you start to doze off and then the government men would come around and shake everybody to see their passports, because in Spain you can't go from town to town without permission. And it was an, oh, horrible ride, nothing to eat or drink; it was hot. But anyway, when we arrived in Madrid the next morning, we were absolutely beat, and Josephine Taylor, the gal who we were going to see, who had been to visit us in Ischia, had her man there with the car to pick us up, and took us to this fantastic, beautiful apartment in Madrid, where they had run hot tubs for us.

PHILLIPS:

That's great. I remember one night years ago sitting in—I think it was Peter Matisse's backyard in Westwood, and Paul Kantor was there, and Gifford and I, and you and Dina, and Peter, and you were enumerating the six painters that you thought were the best modern painters. Let me see if I can remember. One was Picasso....

WOELFFER:

Yeah.

PHILLIPS:

One was Miro. And I think [Alberto] Giacometti.

WOELFFER:

Right. I...

PHILLIPS:

Though he's a sculptor. Motherwell...

WOELFFER:

Right.

PHILLIPS:

[Willem] de Kooning...

WOELFFER:

De Kooning.

PHILLIPS:

I'm forgetting somebody. If there were six; maybe there were just...

WOELFFER:

The sixth one, I recall, was myself.

PHILLIPS:

The sixth one was Emerson Woelffer, yes, yes, yes—I remember it well.
[laughter]

WOELFFER:

My, what a memory. Well, we spent a week and a half in this luscious apartment in Madrid, just anything we wanted, and we did the town every night. Of course, in Spain you don't start until nine, ten o'clock at night for dinner, and Josie said, "I have to go up to take my car up to France; it's registered in France. How about coming along?" I said, "That'd be great." I'd never been to France. So we got in the car and drove, and got up to St. Jean-de-Luz, that area up in there, and on into France. And when we were in the south of France, I said, "Josie, we are very close to the Lascaux Caves--now this is something we must see." And she said, "I'm sorry, my dears, I'm not in the mood for caves this morning." And we drove past the Lascaux Caves, and now they are sealed up again. But we stopped at Le Mans, and we stopped—where is it that they make the mustard, the great mustard?

PHILLIPS:

Dijon.

WOELFFER:

Dijon. And right into Paris. I was at the wheel at that time. We hit Paris and we hit one of these circles where the Arc de Triomphe is. When you once get in that circle, you have a hell of a time getting off the circle. So it was quite an experience. And Hugo Weber had told me to go see his concierge—he was living on rue de Maine in Montparnasse—and that we could all stay at his studio because they were down at Cadaques. So the man said, "Here's the key, but you go in. I'm not going into that apartment." I said, "What's the matter?" He said, "Never mind." Well, I said, "Come on, okay." He said, "I won't go in. You go in, you can stay there." So I took the key, and the three of us walked into his apartment. It was two floors, and all we saw were things jumping this high off the ground — fleas, by the thousands.

PHILLIPS:

Ugh!

WOELFFER:

All you could see was a ray of fleas going up and down. So we ran out of the apartment quickly and gave him back the key. And he said, "You see what I

mean." So I immediately wrote Hugo, because they were due to come back in a few weeks, so he had some exterminator come in, I guess. You see a lot of that, fleas over there, for some reason, and they bit. So we found a little hotel near the Montparnasse railroad depot, where we stayed. And it was the time of the Algerian crisis, and there were all these gendarmes going up and down the street with submachine guns, It looked like warfare. But I stayed, oh, two weeks in Paris, which wasn't very long, but it was really...

PHILLIPS:

Did you go to the Louvre?

WOELFFER:

Went to the Louvre.

PHILLIPS:

How did you react to all that stuff?

WOELFFER:

Fantastic, just fantastic.

PHILLIPS:

In a more general vein, what were your overall impressions of Europe and all that culture and heritage?

WOELFFER:

Usually, when I'm going someplace, I overvisualize the greatness of what I'm going to see, and many times I'm disappointed, but Europe wasn't that way at all. It was much, much more than I really expected. It was a great experience. And then we went back to the train and went back to Ischia. By this time, we had rented another house. A man had a house where the windows and doors faced the west, and he had a garden, big garden, with fruit trees, and said, "Just help yourself." So that last year there was much more desirable. And we had many friends that came through to see us.

PHILLIPS:

Who came through?

WOELFFER:

Fred Wacker and his wife, Jana, from Chicago; they came through on their honeymoon. A friend of mine, Ray Trail, from San Diego, came through and saw us, and an innumerable amount of people. Offhand, at this moment, I can't place them all, but it was almost like Colorado Springs--people coming across the continent always stopping in Colorado Springs to see the Byrneses or ourselves. There were all kinds of cliques, of course, on the island. And there were some contessas, and King Hussein's daughter came there and bought a house, and there were some fantastic parties.

PHILLIPS:

And there were lots of homosexuals.

WOELFFER:

And there were of course cliques. We threw a fantastic party. It was very inexpensive to throw a party there because people only drank wine, and wine was plentiful, so a few loaves of bread and a case of wine and some cheese, and everything was fine. Christmastime was very interesting. The bagpipe players from in the hills of Palermo would come to the island. They had their legs wrapped in burlap sacking, and they played wonderful Christmas music on their clarinets and bagpipes. There were bagpipe players from the mountain villages. It came time, after two and a half years of this, time to return, and where to return to was the question. There was no sense going back to Colorado Springs, but Jimmy Byrnes wrote and said, "Why do you not write Mitch Wilder, your old director from Colorado Springs? He's the director at Chouinard Art Institute." I said, "Gee, that's a fabulous idea, because I'd had that one visit out to Los Angeles when we visited you and the Weschers." I said, "This is the place where you have green all year around." So I wrote Mitch, and Mitch wired back, "You're in." So I had a job at Chouinard.

PHILLIPS:

And what year was that—1959?

WOELFFER:

We arrived back here...

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PHILLIPS:

You were talking about your leaving Ischia.

WOELFFER:

Yes. When the position came about from Mitch Wilder, we then readied ourselves for the long journey to Los Angeles. So the first thing we had to do was to book passage, and we thought this time we wouldn't go back on an Italian liner, but we'd take a nice American liner. So we booked passage on the Constitution, and we were supposed to leave the following week. And that was delayed because the Constitution, on the way out of New York, had an accident with another ship. And that put a hole in it, so that took a couple of weeks. We were two weeks delayed. In the meantime-- sometime before this I had to get a show ready to ship back to New York, to the Poindexter Gallery, which was something, because wood is not available like it is here. You don't go to a lumberyard and get all the wood you want to build the box.

PHILLIPS:

How did you happen to be showing at the Poindexter Gallery?

WOELFFER:

Well, on my way to Europe, I had met Ellie [Elinor Poindexter] in Chicago through the photographer Aaron Siskind. And when I got to New York, Franz Kline wanted to see me. And we saw him with [Matsumi] Kanemitsu at the Cedar Bar, and he made an arrangement with Ellie Poindexter, and we all got together. Ellie was rather skeptical about giving me a show. She hadn't seen my work, and Franz Kline assured her that it'd be a beautiful show. "Don't worry about it at all. He's going over to Italy. He'll paint you a show and send it back." So Franz was very nice to do that. I did; I had enough paintings and I sent them back, but getting the box made was something. Nearly everyone in the island was involved in this. We had to get government permission, and then when the paintings were boxed and were taken over to Naples, the customs people in Naples wanted to open the box there to see what was in the box because they felt maybe it was taken off of a ship, in the bay, and there's contraband coming in or something. Then we had to get clearance

from the museum director in Naples that there were no old masters in the box being shipped back to New York. By the time the paintings arrived back in New York, the green wood of the stretcher bars—the paintings were all warped, and the gallery had to send the paintings out to be restretched on new stretcher bars. But anyway, we were all set to come back, and there was party after party for us, and the townspeople were very, very unhappy that we were leaving. In the beginning, when we moved there, they were quite cold, and they had a half a dozen different prices for everything we bought. They thought we were just vacationing. And after they knew we were going to live there, the prices just suddenly came way down. And from time to time, a painting, maybe, wasn't sold, or my dealer wasn't sending me money, and I had no money, so the people, the grocers and the butcher, everyone said, "Don't worry about a thing, you know. We don't worry about your money. Take whatever you want, whatever we have." They were just beautiful people. And most of the people there paid their bills once a year. So it was time to debark, everybody in the village—the bread man, and the fruit man, the vegetable man—everybody came down to the port.

PHILLIPS:

Had you paid them by now?

WOELFFER:

They were all paid by then. We just were loaded with fruit and candy and cakes and wine, and they were all so sad we were leaving. Well, we got the boat over to Naples, where the Constitution was waiting. It was going to take off at four that afternoon, so we had a good five hours, six hours on board ship. We had our two poodles with us, and the accommodations for the poodles were much nicer on the Constitution than they were on the old Italian boat, the Saturnia, where the kennels were dirty and they gave the dogs spaghetti instead of bones and meat. And the Constitution even had a veterinary on board ship. We took off, and we went tourist class, but the ship was so empty, without any additional passage they moved everybody up to second class. And we had second class on the Constitution--which was very nice--and made some new acquaintances on board ship.

PHILLIPS:

That's the ship that's used by State Department personnel, Americans working for the government.

WOELFFER:

There's the Constitution and the Independence; they're sister ships. And we arrived back in New York, and again Lenore Tawney was there to greet us. We had boxes and boxes and boxes of paintings and everything else, and while I was watching the customs men making people tear their boxes and suitcases apart I said, "Oh, we're going to be here for several days." Well, the customs man, a very gruff man, said, "You're next." I said, "Yes." He said, "What do you do? How long have you been there? What have you been doing over there?" I said, "I'm an artist, a painter." "Oh, a painter," he said. "Oh, once I had a friend that was a janitor in the Art Students League, and he used to let me come in at night and look in the door and see the nude models." So I went along with him, and he loved to tell me the story. He was marking the boxes, "Okay, okay," and we had to open up nothing whatsoever. And we saw a facino—not a facino; that's Italian, a man that pulls your bags in. He took us out front to where there was a truck we'd leased, and we put everything on the truck and went across to New Jersey to the Denver-Chicago Shipping Company, where we shipped everything to my mother in Chicago—that's where we were on our way to. We spent a couple of days in New York. I think it was one of the last runs of the Red Carpet service, or the New York Central, the Twentieth Century Limited. We put the dogs and the baggage on the Twentieth Century, finally took off for Chicago where we arrived the next morning, and went directly to my mother's where we stayed a week or two, trying to decide what we were going to do, how we were going to get to Los Angeles, etc., etc. The first thing was to purchase a set of wheels. So my mother knew a man at the grocery store whose brother sold Chevrolets, and we went and picked out a brand-new Chevrolet. I didn't have any credit at that time, having been away for that length of time, but I had him call the vice-president of the bank in Colorado Springs to verify me and everything else, a wonderful man there by the name of John Love who eventually became the governor of Colorado. And he said, "Anything Woelffer wants, just give it to him. I'll stand behind him." So we got this brand-new beautiful Chevrolet and packed it and started out for Los Angeles, where we arrived many days later.

PHILLIPS:

Before we go into the Los Angeles section, let me ask you a few questions. (That's an interesting story about John Love, in Colorado Springs.) How do you react to the art system that we have in this country, with the commercial galleries and the selling of paintings, and the role of the dealers, and the role of the curators? And how much do museums do for painters? And do they do enough, do you think?

WOELFFER:

I don't think they do enough. It differs in this country, much more so, I think, than it does in Europe. I think, over here, we're much more fashion-oriented.

PHILLIPS:

More trendy.

WOELFFER:

Trendy, always looking for a new item or a new model, whereas Europe, you'll still see the galleries showing Giacometti, although he's been dead for several years now, see much more of a love for the art than over here. It seems to be more of a thing of merchandising, which is okay, in a sense, for the artist because he wants to sell his work. It has to be merchandised if it's going to be sold.

PHILLIPS:

In a way, what happens to the artist in this country is just a reflection of what happens to everything in our economic system.

WOELFFER:

Right. Because there are so many of them--I go through my old journals I have here, and I say, "Oh, for gosh sakes, look at this painter William Congden. Why, he used to be on the cover of Art News every other month. What happened to him? Where is he? I know he's not dead, you know." They work you over for a while, and then you're gone -- which I don't think is right. I think if anything is good, regardless of its concept or style, it should be able to live. I think you can put all good things together, even if they're from different periods, and they will work out quite well with each other.

PHILLIPS:

Jimmy Byrnes has meant a lot to you in your career.

WOELFFER:

Yes, he's done a lot for me, and we've been very close to him and Barbara.

PHILLIPS:

He's an example of the curator who's done a lot...

WOELFFER:

Done a lot and loved art, bought art, collected art, helped out artists.

PHILLIPS:

What tends to happen, I think quite naturally, is that curators and critics are very helpful to people they know well--with whom they learned about art, and with whom they had early experiences.

WOELFFER:

Right. And you find that many of them are on the move. When they get a new position, they always seem to have their left eye on the next place they're going to go to--in other words, moving up in society, moving up to a better position. Sometimes I find many of them use art for their own thing, their own...

PHILLIPS:

... advancement.

WOELFFER:

... advancement. I know some people in the feminist movement—I will not mention any names--who use it for their advancement.

PHILLIPS:

How do you feel about the current feminist movement, and especially as it relates to art?

WOELFFER:

I think that it's fine for those who want to become a part of it. I know some who are very strong in it, and I know some who don't need that, who've made

out quite well on their own without the movement. I certainly believe that women should have equal rights, you know, as man does. I can't see women on the front lines with a machine gun, although that's been done before. I can't see women on the third floor of a building, a burning building, on a stepladder, carrying a 200-pound man on her back. I think there are certain things where it's carried too far. But sometimes you have to ask for the whole pile in order to get half of the pile, you know.

PHILLIPS:

I think it's true that women haven't been encouraged to be artists in the way that men have been and often have not been looked on as serious artists.

WOELFFER:

I've heard all sorts of stories to the effect of a woman taking her paintings to a gallery and being refused an exhibition, and then, some months later, a man taking the same paintings in—I don't know how true that is. Well, I'd rather not say. [laughter]

PHILLIPS:

Now, there are a lot of cultural values that we grow up with and grow accustomed to that got started in places like Ischia. [laughter]

WOELFFER:

Kanemitsu once told me he became a painter because when they look at his paintings, unless they see his name below there, they don't know if a woman painted it, a Chinaman, a Japanese, who painted it. And this way, he could be kept out of it completely. Where otherwise, if he's doing a job where he is there, they say, "Oh, he's a Japanese," you know.

PHILLIPS:

Yes. How do you feel about art critics? Is there any critic who you feel has really understood your work well and written well about it?

WOELFFER:

Well, number one, Gerry Nordland has, always has. And Tom Messer of the Guggenheim Museum likes my work very much. And Clem Greenberg—I'm

much more excited when another painter whom I respect likes my work. That is much more meaningful to me.

PHILLIPS:

Another person who has written beautifully about your work is Paul Wescher, I think.

WOELFFER:

Yes, Paul. Yeah, he is one of those rare—they don't come along too much anymore. I find most critics, when they write, they reveal more about themselves than they do about the artists they're writing about.

PHILLIPS:

It must be terrible to have someone writing about your work who really doesn't understand it, doesn't feel for it.

WOELFFER:

Right. We were talking the other night about — Gerry knows a lot about art. So-and-so knows a lot about art. But when we were all together with [Alberto] Burri, the painter, he understood me much more than Gerry does. And I understood Burri much more because I'm another artist. Not that I don't respect him [Gerry], but I think that it's a different thing: the guy is creating, doing it. He's so much closer, understands, has a little extra edge, or something.

PHILLIPS:

It pleases you when other artists respond to what you're doing.

WOELFFER:

Yes, that means quite a bit to me. Yeah, like [Robert] Motherwell, he wants to trade with me; he likes my work. I have some beautiful letters he's written me about my paintings. Kline—I have some nice letters from Franz Kline.

PHILLIPS:

You liked Kline's work a lot.

WOELFFER:

Yes, very much.

PHILLIPS:

Yeah.

WOELFFER:

Liked him--he's a very terrific, honest individual, not pushy, not going to extremes in order to "make it," you know. He avoided the social scene, you know—being seen here and being seen there in order to further your career as an artist, which a lot of today's socializing is all about.

PHILLIPS:

Who are some of the dealers you admire? That you've liked over the years.

WOELFFER:

Charlie Egan, von Neumann, the dealer in New York, Peggy Guggenheim.... Of course, these are dealers of the near past. Today they seem to come on and go off the scene quite rapidly. They don't seem to have that kind of dedication, Pierre Matisse, I think, is very good. I always liked the things Julien Levy used to show--Julien Levy Gallery.

PHILLIPS:

Well, shall we stop? Okay.

[Interview resumes March 23, 1976]

PHILLIPS:

Emerson, you wanted to add some things about the Chicago years before we go on talking about your move to Los Angeles.

WOELFFER:

I think we should mention, in December 7, 1940, I met Diane, and married Diane.

PHILLIPS:

The same day? [laughter]

WOELFFER:

No, no, no. Several months later. We were married on December the seventh. And she lived several blocks away, and moved into my studio, which was on Pearson Street, just west of the water tower in Chicago. And I continued working at the Institute of Design with Moholy-Nagy. At that particular time, the school moved from the Chez Paree building to another building. And I was continuing showing. I hadn't at that time had my first New York show yet. It was two years later, I think 1947, that I went to New York and had my first show at the Artists Gallery. Correct me—did I say we were married in 1940?

PHILLIPS:

Yes.

WOELFFER:

We were married in 1945, December 7, 1945.

PHILLIPS:

When was Pearl Harbor? Speaking of December.

WOELFFER:

It was December 7, 1940.

PHILLIPS:

Yeah, that's what you were thinking of.

WOELFFER:

While we were in Chicago, I think I had two shows in New York, was continuing showing at the Art Institute, at the Whitney Annuals, and I was invited to the Carnegie Institute, the Carnegie show, I think in 1947, '48. That's right.

PHILLIPS:

I think we talked about this last time, but you gave me those two catalogs of shows. Were they from the Carnegie Institute?

WOELFFER:

That was the University of Illinois.

PHILLIPS:

The Urbana shows.

WOELFFER:

It was then a yearly show.

PHILLIPS:

It was interesting to see how all of the American painters who were included in that show--some of whom went on to be very famous, like Jackson Pollock—were doing that same postcubist thing in their paintings.

WOELFFER:

Right. That was very strong at that particular period. I think one of the leaders of that was Karl Knaths and Max Weber, who were out of Cezanne and cubism. They had had some trips to Paris and were quite influenced, as was Diego Rivera when he came back from his first trip to Paris. His paintings then were very postcubist.

PHILLIPS:

When one looks back, it's easy to see all of the influences, and I suppose for many of the things that are going on today, a different set of influences are exerting themselves, but they're still there, and there's a "look" to the avant-garde material from any period.

WOELFFER:

Right.

PHILLIPS:

At the same time, someone like yourself has become very much your own man in how your paintings look.

WOELFFER:

I don't feel that the younger painters of today are being influenced by the old, super masters because the masters—such as Picasso, Matisse, and all those people — are gone. And we don't have people, let us say, weathering as long or as heavy as these people did, and they're not making the strong impact.

PHILLIPS:

Like it's not a life of painting. Someone like Pollock, who was so influential, was gone, or....

WOELFFER:

It's a much lighter thing, and it's much more fleeting. There are so many more people involved today.

PHILLIPS:

There have been radical changes in art-making, in directions. Not necessarily with individual painters. Someone like Bob Motherwell, there's a very...

WOELFFER:

... there's a definite...

PHILLIPS:

.. there's a definite progression there.

WOELFFER:

Right, but he's rare, and he is one of the people of our particular generation who is still working, and there are very few of them at this point.

PHILLIPS:

Yeah. But what's going on with art-making with, say, people under thirty-five? There are people who are still painting, people who are very involved with that. But there are all of these other directions going on.

WOELFFER:

Yeah, conceptual, and the process art, and the video, and all of these things.

PHILLIPS:

You see a lot of that, teaching?

WOELFFER:

Yes, all over the country.

PHILLIPS:

Yes, and what's your reaction to it?

WOELFFER:

Well, to me, video is rather boring, and I'm told that is because I'm used to the fleeting moment of television, commercial television. But I find in the video and performances a great lack of professionalism, which doesn't exist. It's very amateurish. Video things look like home movies.

PHILLIPS:

But the language of painting is a very slow process, and not fleeting, certainly, and you've been used to that quietness that goes along with looking at painting and making things, which is very close to meditation.

WOELFFER:

There are still many painters today, young painters--it's amazing how I find many of them say, "I'm going to start work in oil paint." We all started painting in oil paints, and the younger people, they all started painting in acrylics, and now they're going from acrylics to oil paint. But I find in much of the work a major interest in the surface of the canvas, in the painting, rather than in the imagery. It's a kind of a painting that I think Pollock had a big influence on. It's a kind of a painting that had no beginning or no end, so you can turn out miles of it.

PHILLIPS:

It looks like an exercise.

WOELFFER:

An exercise, very interesting—the surface and the feeling of the texture of the paint, and so on.

PHILLIPS:

Whereas in a painting by you, or by Bob Motherwell, one has the feeling that there's a definite imagery and subject matter.

WOELFFER:

Right, there's a certain symbolism that is in the work.

PHILLIPS:

It's not part of the series.

WOELFFER:

Right.

PHILLIPS:

It could stand on its own. Well, you wanted to talk about the jam sessions in Chicago.

WOELFFER:

Oh, yes, at this particular time, from '45 on, Hugo Weber, the sculptor, and myself had a commission to do a club in Chicago called Jazz Limited. In fact, it didn't happen that way. They came to me and wanted to know if I had any students that would do an interior of a club. And Hugo and I thought, well, it's quite a challenging thing; let's do it ourselves. So we did the whole thing ourselves. And the club, which is now defunct, was called Jazz Limited. We used to frequent it, I'm sure, at least once or twice a week. We met many of the musicians, and the musicians used to come over to my studio. We'd have Sunday afternoon jam sessions, where we had everybody from Momma Yancey, Jimmy Yancey, Chippie Hill, Bunk Johnson, Bill Reed, Al Tabasco, and just literally dozens and dozens of musicians. And our place got to be known as a place to come after hours, and there wasn't a week going by when some musicians who were in town wouldn't come over after work. One of them that frequented our place was Pee Wee Russell, the fabulous clarinet player. It was the sort of a place they could come and really play the kind of jazz they wanted to, and then Sunday, as I said, we'd have open Sundays, and whatever musicians were in town would come over, and literally hundreds of people would come. So we had quite an active studio for jazz.

PHILLIPS:

Is there anything else you want to add about those Chicago years?

WOELFFER:

When we left for Chicago—I think it's on the other tape—we took off for Yucatan.

PHILLIPS:

All right. Well, then, let's go to 1959 and your arrival in Los Angeles.

WOELFFER:

Yes. I had a position waiting for me at Chouinard Art Institute, through Mitch Wilder. And it was through Paul Kantor, who was my dealer, that we rented Richards Ruben's house and studio in Mt. Washington. Dick was another painter. So we came directly from Chicago to the house and studio on Mt. Washington, where we stayed about three years before we moved to the place where we're now sitting.

PHILLIPS:

What was Paul Kantor like in those days, and what was his gallery like?

WOELFFER:

Well, Paul was showing at that time a painter by the name of [Douglas] Snow, Richard Diebenkorn, Elmer Bischoff, Ynez Johnston, Jules Engel, and myself. I think this made up the gallery. And this was just before Paul started getting into the German expressionist painters. I think he started out with Ernst Ludwig Kirchner. And then from there, he moved into some of the French and some of the New York painters, and he started working with the big blue-chip painters, and this is about the time when some of his gallery people started leaving. I was next to the last to leave, and I went with [Ed] Primus and [David] Stuart. I think Ynez was the last to leave—she stayed on till the very end, when Paul was not dealing with any contemporary California painters.

PHILLIPS:

What was he like when you first met him, in terms of his response to contemporary art? I mean, he was really very involved at one time.

WOELFFER:

I met him in Colorado Springs, when he came out to visit the Byrneses. He was very excited about my work, and, in fact, he gave me my first show out here. And we did quite well. He sold quite well for me. In fact, he kept us in Europe for those two years. When I came back, to move to Los Angeles, I had a big

show there which was quite successful. The only thing Paul didn't do for his painters was to try to get an Eastern and a European exposure.

PHILLIPS:

Do you feel that that's been a continuing problem with California painters? I mean by that people who happen to live in California and paint.

WOELFFER:

Yeah, that's the same thing that happened to painters living and working in Chicago. It's still happening, And Paul had some very good shows. He had Raymond Parker, who used to come out here. And right next to Paul's gallery on Camden Drive, there was Frank Perls, who had a gallery, who showed some California painters—Robert Chuey and the like. Also Picasso and Matisse and Giacometti, the French.

PHILLIPS:

Perls showed the more conservative, traditional, contemporary painters, didn't he? Those California painters who were more academic?

WOELFFER:

Right, yeah.

PHILLIPS:

Were you aware of the influence of the so-called [Rico] Lebrun school?

WOELFFER:

I was very aware of that. That was very strong — Lebrun, Howard Warshaw, and the Herbert Jepson school. Herbert Jepson had a school with Lebrun, and I think Warshaw was a teacher, and they were all in that vein of heavy a la Picassoesque draftsmanship work.

PHILLIPS:

I'm sure you thought it was a more conservative approach to art-making than yours.

WOELFFER:

It was very conservative to me.

PHILLIPS:

And they were very influential with students and certain collectors and critics in town.

WOELFFER:

Right, right, yes.

PHILLIPS:

What other galleries do you think of that were open when you were here, and did you go much?

WOELFFER:

There was the Ferus Gallery. And there was a gallery that opened across the street. Henry Hopkins opened a gallery or worked for somebody, directed a gallery. And he didn't stay very long; he went to the County Museum of Art. There was the Felix Landau gallery, and Ralph Altman's gallery of primitive art, which was quite wonderful. And I was then with Primus and Stuart, who eventually broke up, and it became just the David Stuart Gallery. And I went with David, where I remained until about 19-, oh, '65, I think, or '66, somewhere in there. In the meantime, Herbie Stothart, Mary Wescher's son, had a school in Puria, San Memeta, just out of Lugano, in the Italian area of Switzerland. And I spent, I think, two summers up there teaching.

PHILLIPS:

Before we talk about the Puria experience, let's go back to your early years in Los Angeles. What other artists did you see during that period? Who else was teaching at Chouinard?

WOELFFER:

Richards Ruben was there, and Robert Chuey, Nob Hadeshi. It was, oh, a little later on when Matsumi Kanemitsu came from New York. He took my place when I went to Europe on a Guggenheim. Billy Al Bengston used to come around quite a bit. We used to have lunch with him and Bob Irwin, and that was about the art circle I was in at that particular time.

PHILLIPS:

I know it was a different time, but how did it compare to your life in Chicago, the life here?

WOELFFER:

Well, in my postschool days, the WPA, there was much more of a camaraderie with the painters than there was out here. Of course, I think one of the things—the distances in Los Angeles make quite a difference. In Chicago, most all the painters lived on the Near North Side. Nobody ever thought of owning an automobile in Chicago; everybody walked to where they were going. It was so closeknit—the Near North Side, which is sort of like the Village in New York. Los Angeles is so spread out, and people live here and there, and I feel this is one reason why we don't find this sort of thing of the painters getting together. Well, there was the Barney's Beanery at one time, where the painters used to meet. But Chicago, there was Ricardo's Restaurant, and always the Art Institute. Out here there are many galleries. In Chicago in those days there were only two or three galleries, and they did not show any of the local people. There weren't any galleries in the forties that showed local painters.

PHILLIPS:

What was your reaction to the Los Angeles County Museum when you came here?

WOELFFER:

The museum at that time was in Exposition Park, and my whole thing, after living somewhat in New York and Chicago, was not being able to see a great collection in the museum.

PHILLIPS:

It was disappointing to you.

WOELFFER:

Very disappointing, yes.

PHILLIPS:

How do you feel the growth of the museum has been? Do you feel there's a great collection there now?

WOELFFER:

I think that it's coming along very slowly, but I don't think they have the space at this point.

PHILLIPS:

Was there anyone who was working at the museum that you had contact with? Did you know Jim Elliott?

WOELFFER:

Yeah. Jim Elliott--we became quite good friends and I'm glad to see that he's coming back now to San Francisco, But when they had the juried and invitational show, I think it was quite exciting. They'd have the openings, and all the painters would get together. One thing I recall was Virginia Kondratieff had her gallery, the Dwan Gallery, and she threw some fabulous affairs where all the painters could come to meet—but the scene today is a completely different one, which is to be expected. Things don't always stay the same. The new generation of painters, they come on much faster. It used to be ten years; now I think it's every three or four years, there's a whole new group coming on.

PHILLIPS:

And so many more of them.

WOELFFER:

So many more of them, right.

PHILLIPS:

And having shows...

WOELFFER:

Constantly.

PHILLIPS:

... first year out of art school.

WOELFFER:

Right, right. Or while they're in art school.

PHILLIPS:

And showing at small shows at the Pasadena Museum or the County Museum and not being heard of thereafter.

WOELFFER:

Right.

PHILLIPS:

That happens very quickly. I know one thing I wanted to ask you: what did you think of the Ferus Gallery? Did you go to many of those shows? Did you know Irving Blum?

WOELFFER:

Yes. I knew Irving and Walter Hopps, and I remember the first big Richards Ruben show, the black paintings that he did with a broom.

PHILLIPS:

The Claremont series.

WOELFFER:

Claremont—very impressive, very good painting. And then there were some very rich paintings of Bob Irwin at that particular time. And then everything, all of a sudden, started to get very cool and minimal, very precious.

PHILLIPS:

That was happening all over the country.

WOELFFER:

That was happening all over the country, sort of a lack of vitality--maybe not a lack, but a different kind of vitality, a kind that I was not used to. And then, of course, came the hard-edge painting. Then came pop art, which Virginia got into quite heavy with [Claes] Oldenburg and Andy Warhol. And Arman [Armand Fernandez] and Martial Raysse, the French painter from Nice.

PHILLIPS:

Do you remember any shows at the County Museum or particular shows at galleries that struck you?

WOELFFER:

Well, the County Museum had a great Miro show which I thought was quite fabulous. And then the Greenberg show that I happened to be in was quite an interesting show. This is about the time when the kind of antivigorous painting was coming about.

PHILLIPS:

It was called "Post-Painterly Abstraction."

WOELFFER:

Right, right.

PHILLIPS:

And you were included in the show?

WOELFFER:

I was included in the show.

PHILLIPS:

Did Greenberg come to your studio?

WOELFFER:

No, Greenberg just called me up and said, "Put a couple of things in." I don't know how disappointed he was, but anyway--they were flat paintings, but they were pretty thick. And then the Dwan Gallery had some very exciting exhibitions of Yves Klein, who came out here; he was quite an exciting individual. And in a completely different direction.

PHILLIPS:

Yes.

WOELFFER:

And Paul [Kantor] had some very good shows of some of the heavies.

PHILLIPS:

The de Kooning show.

WOELFFER:

Right.

PHILLIPS:

Well, let me ask you what your own painting was like during these years that we were talking about. What kind of thing were you doing in the early sixties, for instance?

WOELFFER:

I think they were pretty expressionistic, as they remain, as they are today. I did have a phase, or a period, between what I'm doing now and those paintings, which was a lip series, and a series that came from my torn paper collages, which were when I first went into working with acrylic paint and found that they weren't as manipulative as the oil paint. And my painting at that point, the lip series, and the torn paper collage series took on a much flatter look. And I was being accused of being a hard-edge painter, and they weren't hard-edge at all. They might have been a little more severe, but they certainly weren't hard-edge in the sense that we talk about hard-edge painting, such as McLaughlin, or some of the Larry Bell paintings, and those sort of things.

PHILLIPS:

I know that Clement Greenberg always liked your painting, because he said so, and he's liked your shows in New York.

WOELFFER:

Right. Yeah, he came to my show last February in New York, and Dina talked to him. I left early, but she spent some time with him.

PHILLIPS:

What do you think about his influence in American painting--and, let's say, the role of the critics in general?

WOELFFER:

I think he's quite influential with the group of people that he works with, Helen Frankenthaler and [Kenneth] Noland. I've heard from people that he now and then says to Noland, "Why don't we try something like this?" or, "Let's go vertical," or, "Let's do something like that." And he tends to mold, or he's like the conductor of an orchestra who has all these people and makes various suggestions to them, in what direction to go, etc.

PHILLIPS:

He has been accused of being very manipulative of painters whom he's supported. A lot of people are critical of him. But he does have a great eye, and he has a theory.

WOELFFER:

Right.

PHILLIPS:

And he is about the only well-established art critic who does, whether you agree with it or not.

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PHILLIPS:

Last time, you were talking about when you'd completed a series of paintings, that you'd put them up against the wall and decide which ones had made it, which ones could live, and I wonder what goes on in your mind when you begin evaluating your own work.

WOELFFER:

Well, I guess I weigh one against the other, in relation to color, form, shape, whatever. And it's--well, I don't know. It just happens.

PHILLIPS:

It's a feeling.

WOELFFER:

A feeling you have. This one goes; this one stays, you know. Just like when I go in a gallery or a museum and look at paintings, I say, "This is it, and that one isn't." I don't know.

PHILLIPS:

And it's hard to justify the basis on which one does that.

WOELFFER:

Right, right. Some are more exciting than others.

PHILLIPS:

I think it's hard to justify how one evaluates abstract paintings because other people want you to put it in a very verbal fashion.

WOELFFER:

Right.

PHILLIPS:

And that's really not the language.

WOELFFER:

And then I look at them in relation to where they came from in my own work, you know, whether I've gone back or whether I've really gone ahead or whatever. So I don't only see them in relation to each other, but I see them in relation to my whole body of work.

PHILLIPS:

Yeah, and that's a felt knowledge that's been developed over a lifetime.

WOELFFER:

Yes, right.

PHILLIPS:

During your early days in Los Angeles, did you run into Betty Asher?

WOELFFER:

Yes, I ran into Betty Asher, I think, during the days of the Primus-Stuart Gallery. She just started at that particular time becoming interested in California painters, and I think that she said my big painting The Kiss, which she just gave to the Newport Harbor Museum, was her first major purchase. And she said it was quite something for her. She's always been enthusiastic about painters and painting.

PHILLIPS:

And did you see Leonard Edmondson during those years?

WOELFFER:

Yes. When I arrived, I was asked to become a trustee of the Pasadena Art Museum, which I did.

PHILLIPS:

That was during the period when they had artists on the board.

WOELFFER:

They had artists on the board as well as other business trustees. And I think Jules Langsner and Leonard Edmondson and myself were the artists.

PHILLIPS:

Artists' representatives.

WOELFFER:

Artists' representatives. And we sort of worked with Mrs. [Eudora] Moore in making decisions and reviewing people submitting work for one-man shows, and I think we were the jury of that sort of thing.

PHILLIPS:

What was the Pasadena Museum like in those days?

WOELFFER:

I've always enjoyed it, but they couldn't always have all the Klees up. But Tom Leavitt was, I think, the first director.

PHILLIPS:

The first director you knew.

WOELFFER:

The first director I knew, yes. In 1963 I had a retrospective show there, with about seventy-five works, loaned from myself and borrowed from collections around the Los Angeles area mainly. And then June Wayne and Clinton Adams, Tamarind litho workshop, got their grant from the Ford Foundation. I was invited. I was given a grant there to do several editions of lithographs. I think that was in 1961, 62.

PHILLIPS:

What was June like in those days?

WOELFFER:

Well, I'd known her from the early days of Chicago, on the WPA artists project, and the Artists Union, and she was just a little more intensified than she was then. But she always was a spokesman for the artists, seeing that the artists had a fair shake, and always interested in art in relation to the community, etc. And it was a real wonderful thing, this revitalizing the art of lithography which had been dead up to this point.

PHILLIPS:

She really did that, didn't she? She was the one.

WOELFFER:

Yeah, she did that. Not only did she invite painters to do lithographs, but she trained people to become master printers for other artists. And they went back to their various hamlets, wherever they came from, and would usually open up their own print workshops and serve the artists of those various communities.

PHILLIPS:

Tell me about Chouinard when you began teaching there. Who was there?

WOELFFER:

Mitch Wilder was the director, and Richards Ruben was there, and Don Graham, and Herbert Jepson, and Edmond Kohn, and John Canavier, the sculptor. And it was quite an exciting period.

PHILLIPS:

Were the students good?

WOELFFER:

The students were very good. There was a wonderful feeling amongst the students. I had students--I had Pat Blackwell and Larry Bell, Ed Ruscha, Tom Wudl, and who's the boy that does...? Charles Arnoldi. And the boy who does the big...? Ron Cooper. I had all of those people who are today some of the younger important painters and sculptors in Los Angeles.

PHILLIPS:

Were there one or two of them that you got to know especially well?

WOELFFER:

At the time of school, and then when they left school, they moved to various parts of Los Angeles, mainly Venice, and I only run into them occasionally at openings at LAICA or something like that.

PHILLIPS:

When did Gerry Nordland come to Chouinard?

WOELFFER:

Gerry Nordland—I think there was an assistant director who was at one time the head of the foundation out at Will Rogers Park. What was the name of that? Ynez [Johnston] had a grant up there.

PHILLIPS:

Oh, the Huntington Hartford Foundation.

WOELFFER:

Right, and he was a musician; he was assistant director for a while. And then he left, and I introduced Gerry to Mitch Wilder at your house.

PHILLIPS:

You'd known Gerry since you first came to Los Angeles.

WOELFFER:

I knew Gerry before I met Gerry. He saw a painting of mine in a show that Jimmy Byrnes put on, an American show, invited show, at the County Museum. Gerry was quite mad about it and wrote me—I was living in Colorado Springs-- and eventually he purchased a painting. It was some years later when I met Gerry—very enthusiastic fellow about art, and he became quite a museum director. He was at Chouinard, I think, for about two years. When Mitch Wilder left, Gerry became the director of Chouinard, and then I think that lasted two years, and he went to Washington, D.C.

PHILLIPS:

But he's someone you've always been very close to.

WOELFFER:

Very close to, yes. He has his feet on the ground. I think he's one of the last of that kind of museum director.

PHILLIPS:

Who's really interested in the artists and painting.

WOELFFER:

He has that look of the old museum director out of Yale or Princeton; he has that look in his dress and everything else.

PHILLIPS:

Ivy League.

WOELFFER:

Yeah.

PHILLIPS:

Yeah, yeah. Well, let's go through your Los Angeles chronology. After Chouinard closed, then what did you do?

WOELFFER:

I stayed on at Chouinard for the last year because there were some students who'd signed a contract that they weren't going to go to Cal Arts. So they had to keep the school open for one year, and Kanemitsu, and myself....

PHILLIPS:

Chouinard phased out and eventually closed down and became part of the California Institute of the Arts.

WOELFFER:

And before that, in 1967, I received a Guggenheim grant and had to find a replacement because I was going to go to New York for some time. So I had contacted Kanemitsu in New York, and he was delighted to come out here and take my place because his wife was from out here and they were about to have a child. So on my way to Europe, I saw Kanemitsu and wished him good luck, and he came out here, and he's been out here ever since. And he's now at Otis, working with me. But when the school was phased out, I went the first year of the new campus up at Valencia, which was this huge, huge, factorylike building. Paul Brach had become the dean of the art school. Paul, whom I'd known many years-- I met him when he and his wife Mimi [Miriam Shapiro] were graduate students at the University of Iowa. I went out there to jury a show in, I think, 1946, when I first met them. Then I met them again at Tamarind when he was on a Tamarind grant, he and Mimi, and then he became the dean of the art department of California Institute of the Arts.

PHILLIPS:

What do you think his contribution was during his four years out here? Do you think he made quite a substantial contribution to the school?

WOELFFER:

I don't think so. The art school was always the weakest part of the institute, and it still is. I think they're down to two teachers. Their enrollment is very small. The strength of the school is the music and the theater and the film department.

PHILLIPS:

I've heard you before on the subject. I think you feel that the art department was too unstructured for the students, that it was too hard on undergraduate students..

WOELFFER:

Right, right.

PHILLIPS:

... to be in such an unstructured environment.

WOELFFER:

A student would come in, and for the first day of meeting with the students, they were told that they were artists, go ahead and do their thing. They were completely lost. Many of them were just out of high school. It was much different in the music department because before you went into the music school, you were trained in some kind of instrument, and you really had to know how to play the instrument and prove it before you could get into the music school.

PHILLIPS:

And your lifestyle did not entitle you to be an artist. [laughter]

WOELFFER:

Right, right. Before I went to Cal Arts, I think I had another couple of sessions in Europe with Herbie's school in Switzerland. I think it was in 1971, David Stuart called me and said somebody from Arco was coming here from New York. The building was then in progress of being built, and they were inviting a group of painters to show their work, with the idea of purchase. And I had just completed three large canvases from my collages I had done in Paris, and Lee Morgan invited one of them to a show at the Philadelphia Museum. It received an award, and when that came back, I sent that plus the other two paintings to the Atlantic Richfield viewing, and they purchased all three of them—which immediately took us back to Europe again for a certain length of time.

PHILLIPS:

When did you first go to Puria, to teach at Herb Stothard's school?

WOELFFER:

Nineteen sixty-two was my first summer. And I think '64 I went to Puria, and then in '65 we stopped by there because I had a grant from the State Department to go to Turkey for six months.

PHILLIPS:

Now, Herb Stothard had a school in Puria, in a small village, and he had American students.

WOELFFER:

Yeah, mostly students whose parents had business interests, or their companies, around Europe. And Herb taught art history and I taught painting.

PHILLIPS:

Those must have been quite delightful summers for you.

WOELFFER:

They were very nice. They were very light-- nothing heavy. And most of that was very enjoyable.

PHILLIPS:

And the Weschers were there.

WOELFFER:

Paul and Mary Wescher were there.

PHILLIPS:

And Paul's a wonderful person with whom to be in Europe.

WOELFFER:

Right, right. And we had some wonderful trips together. When I went over there on the Guggenheim in '67, the French government gave me a studio a block away from the Notre Dame-- the Cite Internationale des Arts, a building that somebody put up for artists all over the world to come in and work. I spent a couple, three months there.

PHILLIPS:

What other artists were there while you were there?

WOELFFER:

Some artists that I didn't know of. There were some from Czechoslovakia and some from Italy. I didn't know any; nobody seemed to get together. Everybody went up and went into their room and closed the door, and there wasn't any kind of get-together at all with the people.

PHILLIPS:

And what other artists had been there in the past, do you recall?

WOELFFER:

I don't know; they never handed out a list or said so-and-so had been here or anything else. Afterward I recommended other painters going to Europe to see if they could get a space in the building.

PHILLIPS:

I'm reminded of something else, which is your great interest in primitive art, and I suppose you began collecting when you came to Los Angeles in a heavier kind of way.

WOELFFER:

Right. Paul Kantor had some pieces, and we made some swaps.

PHILLIPS:

David Stuart.

WOELFFER:

David Stuart and Primus. And then almost every trip we had to Europe, we always picked up pieces when we were there.

PHILLIPS:

And there was that beautiful show that Jimmy Byrnes put on in Newport Beach just recently that involved you and Erie Loran and Lee Mullican and Richard Haley, "The Artist Collects." It's a beautiful catalog, and there's a wonderful statement from you in that, on your feeling about primitive art and its relationship to your work.

WOELFFER:

Yeah, right. And then I also picked up much of it when we came back from our last venture in Europe. I was asked to be artist-in-residence at Honolulu Art Academy for four and a half months. So we went over there in 1973, and there were several collectors over there. In fact, one man was about to put his collection of Oceania on auction in New York at Parke Bernet, and I was able to pick up many good pieces from him. So it seems wherever I go, I find something here and there. And on all these trips while we were over there-- this is when Dina started to do her series of tombs of artists and writers and musicians and theatrical people around Europe, mainly in Paris.

PHILLIPS:

Yes, she took pictures of tombs of famous artists and other creative people, and from that she's made several museum shows.

WOELFFER:

Right, she had a show that started with Gerry [Nordland] at the San Francisco Museum and traveled, I think. to six or seven other museums around the country.

PHILLIPS:

Yes, and finally ended up at the Jodi Scully Gallery in Los Angeles. Let's see, do you want to talk a little more about your reaction to that summer in Honolulu?

WOELFFER:

We arrived there, I think, about the twentysixth of January and came back about the first of June. When we arrived there, we were put up in some kind of a motel. And we stayed there two days, and I luckily found a wonderful apartment in the Colony Surf, right next to the Outrigger Canoe Club--fifth floor, looking down at the beach and out at the fantastic sunsets every night. Honolulu Academy gave me a wonderful studio, which I think I put my foot in once. They were quite disappointed in me. I spent all my free time lying on the beach. [laughter] I did some island hopping and gave some lectures at Kona and a few other places.

PHILLIPS:

You enjoyed the people there quite a bit.

WOELFFER:

Oh, yes, they were very warm. It was wonderful. And the food and just everything was just great. I don't think I could do it as a steady diet because I don't think I'd get any work done, really.

PHILLIPS:

They talk about Southern California being soft, but it's even softer in Honolulu.
[laughter]

WOELFFER:

Softer in Honolulu. A lot of painters over there, and the work is not very vigorous.

PHILLIPS:

You do feel there is a connection between the environment and the stimulation and the quality of work.

WOELFFER:

Oh, very definitely. I think that the French impressionists, they really started in Paris, and later on, when they were established and found their way, their direction, then they moved on down to the French Riviera, as you know.

PHILLIPS:

Yeah, and true of the New York abstract expressionists, too. They all put their time in in the big, hard city, and then they moved out to Connecticut or Long Island or wherever.

WOELFFER:

Gauguin did it in Paris, and then he went to Tahiti.

PHILLIPS:

And you, in a way, put in your time in Chicago.

WOELFFER:

In Chicago, right, and then came out here. So that environment, I think, in the very beginning is really needed. Many times I suggest to my students, you know, when they get out of school, to go to New York for a year or so, or go to Europe and try something out there.

PHILLIPS:

Tell me about that experience in Turkey, because that was interesting.

WOELFFER:

Let's see, on our way to Turkey...

PHILLIPS:

You were appointed by the State Department, and it was for six months, and you were to go to Ankara.

WOELFFER:

I went to Ankara, arrived in Ankara, with my work.

PHILLIPS:

What was the purpose of your visit?

WOELFFER:

Well, the idea was mainly to contact the painters of Turkey and tell them what is happening in our country. And I took hundreds of slides with me, which I left to the library in Turkey, and dozens of books on contemporary art.

PHILLIPS:

Slides of American contemporary art.

WOELFFER:

American contemporary art. And I lectured on that all over Turkey. And when I was in Ankara, they had somebody design a building, an art gallery and theater, which was completely unfunctional. If you were on the left or right side of the theater, you couldn't see the stage. And if you were in the balcony, you were just on top of the stage--it was terrifying, like you'd fall down three stories. And the art gallery used cement walls that you could not put nails into, so I redesigned the whole art gallery, made it functional.

PHILLIPS:

In other words, you had to bring them a lot of very practical knowledge about how to place lighting and how to put nails in the wall.

WOELFFER:

I did the whole thing. And then after that was over with, we went to Gaziantep and to Ismir and to, oh, many, many places--to Istanbul and lectured on American painting, with the slides. I lectured in English, and I had a translator, who translated in Turkish. And it was quite interesting, going back into the villages, where the women still wear the veils, and the men wear these jodhpur pants, you know, expecting to catch Allah. When he comes back the next time he's going to come from a man rather than from a woman, and they wear these jodhpurs with the big seats so they can catch him when he comes out. And we went to the American Hospital Institution and School in Gaziantep, and on our way to a lecture one night, some little lady said, "My, you look just like my Uncle Ernest." And I paid no attention to that, and after the lecture, we went back to the American Hospital, and they had coffee and cake, and I said, "What did you mean--that I remind you of your Uncle Ernest?" She said, "My Uncle Ernest was Uncle Ernest Hemingway." Because Hemingway's brother was a missionary. Hemingway's brother was a missionary for years and years in China, and this was his daughter, who was still a missionary,

PHILLIPS:

You saw some of the prehistoric ruins in Turkey.

WOELFFER:

Oh, yes. We went to Ephesus and many places. They were just absolutely fantastic. Many of them were destroyed because the Ottoman Empire, you know--it was against their religion, the Moslem religion, to create man in any other form, so in their wars many of these beautiful statues were just destroyed.

PHILLIPS:

That had been left by the Greeks and Romans.

WOELFFER:

Right. The noses were off, and the heads were chopped off, and so on.

PHILLIPS:

You find travel very stimulating and refreshing.

WOELFFER:

After I get there, but not the getting there, [laughter] We haven't been anywhere for quite a few years at this point.

PHILLIPS:

Do you want to go back to Europe?

WOELFFER:

Dina's ready. We were thinking about it. Hans Wengler was here a few months ago, and he is on a grant from the German government. They are building a building designed by Gropius many years ago which is going to house the archives of the Black Mountain College, the Chicago Bauhaus, the Weimar Bauhaus, and the Ulra Bauhaus. And he was out here interviewing people who were a part of the Chicago Bauhaus and asked if I would send them a painting that they would eventually want to purchase for the Chicago archives. He also was wondering whether I would like a grant to Germany this coming year, to talk in Germany about the Chicago Bauhaus, which I said I'd like very much.

PHILLIPS:

So do you think that'll come through?

WOELFFER:

I hope it will.

PHILLIPS:

But what part of Germany will you go to?

WOELFFER:

Berlin. And I hear there are some fabulous museums there, collections I'd like to see.

PHILLIPS:

Oh, yes. And you can see your friend George Rickey; he has a studio there.

WOELFFER:

That's what I understand.

PHILLIPS:

And Ed Keinholz.

WOELFFER:

Ulfert Wilke just returned, and he has an apartment-studio which he keeps all the time in Munich, and we're completely welcome to it at any time.

PHILLIPS:

That would be really exciting for you. One person in Los Angeles you must have run into over and over again was Fred Wight.

WOELFFER:

Oh, yes. Well, I ran into Fred Wight long before he came out here, and before I came out here. My first meeting with Fred Wight was in Chicago, when I had just returned from Yucatan in 1950. He came to visit me in Chicago. He was then with the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, and he was organizing a large show of about six painters, and I was one of them. And that's when I first met Fred Wight. And the next time I met him was about 1952 or '53 in Colorado Springs. He was one of the people interviewed for the position of director of the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, so I had another occasion to meet him. And then in many shows that he had put on, I was always included.

PHILLIPS:

So you felt that he was supportive of your work.

WOELFFER:

Yes, very much so.

PHILLIPS:

Do you have any comments about the UCLA art gallery and its functions during the years you've been in Los Angeles?

WOELFFER:

I think it's doing a magnificent job.

PHILLIPS:

You liked that Matisse show.

WOELFFER:

Oh, yeah. I think it does as much if not more maybe than some of the local museums, really.

PHILLIPS:

In terms of modern art.

WOELFFER:

Right, right.

PHILLIPS:

You've liked the shows.

WOELFFER:

I liked the shows. They had the great [Jean] Arp show, the Matisse show, and then Gerry put on the show of the sculptor, Gaston Lachaise. I think they really serve the art community admirably out here.

PHILLIPS:

Good. And Fred was the founding director of that.

WOELFFER:

Gerry's carrying on. [tape recorder turned off] The exhibitions I had out here in this period, I think, started with the rather large one, the first summer I was on a teaching grant, at the La Jolla art center.

PHILLIPS:

Were you living down there all summer?

WOELFFER:

I went all summer, and I filled up all the galleries. I had a semiretrospective exhibition.

PHILLIPS:

Who was the director there then?

WOELFFER:

Don... Brewer. And Guy Williams was teaching down there. I first met Guy and another fellow who was assistant director who's now a painter in New York. And Malcolm McLain, the sculptor, who is now a poet.

PHILLIPS:

Do you remember what year that was, in La Jolla?

WOELFFER:

That must have been '61. I'm pretty sure— '61. And then the following summer I taught the summer class at USC.

PHILLIPS:

And how was that teaching down there? What impression did you have of that art department?

WOELFFER:

I had mainly football players in my drawing class.

PHILLIPS:

Was it an easy course? [laughter]

WOELFFER:

They had to keep their grades up, so they had an easy course.

PHILLIPS:

Were there any people in the department who impressed you?

WOELFFER:

No, the summer school was very light. There weren't too many people around at that particular time. And I think it was '65 that I had again a one-man show at the Santa Barbara museum.

PHILLIPS:

Who was the director there?

WOELFFER:

I think Tom Leavitt was the director there. He moved from Pasadena to Santa Barbara. And then I also had a show at a commercial gallery, the Quay Gallery in San Francisco, in 1965.

PHILLIPS:

How did you like Tom Leavitt, and what sort of person was he?

WOELFFER:

I like him very much, very sincere person, who had quite a hold on himself—very similar to Gerry, in a sense.

PHILLIPS:

Did you feel he had a good understanding of contemporary art?

WOELFFER:

I felt he did. I don't know what happened after that, because this was in the earlier period. I don't know where he is; he is in the East someplace.

PHILLIPS:

Cornell, I think.

WOELFFER:

I know he had a large sum of money to put together a permanent collection. But what happened after that with painting—this was an earlier period. I don't know what his tastes were, whether they continued to grow or not with the newer kind of concepts and ideas that were coming in.

PHILLIPS:

Did Henry Seldis give your show a good review in Santa Barbara?

WOELFFER:

Yes. He always seems to give me a good review; Seldis does, yes.

PHILLIPS:

What do you think of Henry and his role at the Los Angeles Times?

WOELFFER:

I like him. I think that a lot of people feel he's too old-hat, but I don't think so. That's why he has Bill Wilson. Now he has another Miss Isenberg on his staff. With that group they cover all the ideas and concepts pretty well.

PHILLIPS:

And it is, after all, a newspaper and not an art journal, so they have to be reportorial in what they do.

WOELFFER:

Exactly, right, right.

PHILLIPS:

A lot of people have complained that there have never been enough art writers in Los Angeles.

WOELFFER:

Well, I think that's true in relation to the national and international art magazines. Jules Langsner for a while wrote for Art International, and then for a long time they had no coverage of California or West Coast painting or art. And now recently I see that Gerry Nordland is writing for Art International. And Arts magazine. And Artforum, which started out quite strongly as a California magazine, and then was taken over and moved to New York. Now they seem to cover Los Angeles fairly well, but only a particular kind of art.

PHILLIPS:

What do you think of Peter Plagens?

WOELFFER:

I know Peter; I read his things. They're very difficult for me to read. Sometimes he doesn't make too much sense about what he's writing about. He seems to reveal quite a bit about himself, more about his personal feelings than about his subject matter, which I think happens frequently to art critics.

PHILLIPS:

Did you read his Sunshine Muse?

WOELFFER:

I haven't. I've just glanced through; I haven't sat down to read it yet. But I think it's a good thing-- it's needed, showing the history of West Coast painting. At this point, I don't know how accurate it is, but from what I've glanced through, he seems to have covered quite a bit of everything, all the artists.

PHILLIPS:

Some people feel that he hasn't done too well in terms of covering the past.

WOELFFER:

Well, he is quite young, and.... Jules was a good critic, I think--Jules Langsner.

PHILLIPS:

Yes, I agree. Do you want to talk some about your shows at the Jodi Scully gallery?

WOELFFER:

I had, I think, two shows there. Those were my last shows. My last one was, I think, two, maybe three, years ago. Now the time goes so fast.

PHILLIPS:

Do you feel that they've been a successful gallery in Los Angeles, have added much to the life here?

WOELFFER:

I think they have for certain people, for a certain kind of art. I'm no longer with them. I'm laying low for a while. [laughter]

PHILLIPS:

One other chronological thing was the show you had at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. The works in that were part of the show that had been at Newport Beach.

WOELFFER:

Yes, that was quite exciting for me, that show. In fact, we went to Washington to see the show. At that time, I had received a National Endowment [for the Arts] grant which enabled us to stop in Chicago, Washington, and New Orleans. So we stopped in Washington, had a wonderful afternoon with...

PHILLIPS:

... Laughlin Phillips? Gifford's cousin, [laughter]

WOELFFER:

Gifford's cousin, and the assistant...

PHILLIPS:

... Richard Friedman, who was the curator of the gallery, then.

WOELFFER:

Right. And we went out for lunch, and we were taken through the whole collection, which was quite beautiful--I think one of the very, very fine collections. And it was through that exhibition that I got a show the following February in New York at the Poindexter Gallery, because she [Ellie Poindexter] went down to see the show and wanted to have that same show--which was impossible because most of the works were from private collections and the pieces had been out for some time. But I organized another show of newer works that went to the Poindexter Gallery.

PHILLIPS:

Good. Can you think of anything else about the years in Los Angeles that you'd like to mention? We always have time to do it later, if you'd like.

WOELFFER:

Not offhand. It's very comfortable working here. I like the feeling of the place and the people. I like the contact among friends, and I seem to be able to produce quite well here, and I think that is probably the main thing.

PHILLIPS:

You talked about "laying low." That leads me to ask you some more philosophical questions. What do you see ahead as things you'd like to do?

WOELFFER:

Not really anything that I can think of at this particular point, but just to produce a fair body of work. I'm anxious to get my things back—they're on their way back now from New York, from my show there--and get all of my things together, my works together, and sort of look them over, and make some kind of decisions--about what I don't know. But I have no interest, desire, to have another three-week exhibition in some gallery out here--it comes and it goes. Sometimes you feel it's a three-ring circus going on: all these galleries having a show for three weeks, and somebody else comes on and somebody else goes down, and it's whatever happens. I'd like to be a little heavier than that. I really don't know, as I say, what, at this time.

PHILLIPS:

It would be nice to have a big retrospective.

WOELFFER:

It would. The biggest one was at Pasadena, 1963. Maybe it's too soon for another one; I don't know. I really don't know. I haven't in fact even been thinking about it. I just sort of feel relieved I'm not attached to any gallery at this point.

PHILLIPS:

Do you want to continue teaching? Does that contact with students at an institution and other faculty members mean a lot to you? Or have you had enough of it?

WOELFFER:

I've had enough of it, especially the way things are going today. Things are so diverse, with so many students going into what they call performance and

doing what they call installation pieces and conceptual art, and mostly going into this area. I don't find the kind of seriousness as I have in the past in teaching with the students, and I understand that's not unique here but that's all over the country.

PHILLIPS:

Nor unique to art departments.

WOELFFER:

And I do have to retire in three years. It's mandatory. And then if that happens, I might do some spots here and there, maybe a semester here or a semester there, something like that. But it's never interfered in my work. I feel very much like Dick Diebenkorn does--he likes the contact with the students. I'd like to work with a dozen very, very serious painting students. In fact, this next fall, I'm thinking of having a second-year class of just figure painting, in oil paint. For very serious students. And in three years when I get out, I don't know what I'll do. As I say, I'll just continue painting. I'll be on a slight kind of retirement affair—not too much because I haven't been with the county for ten years. I never worry about what's ahead of me. I take it as it comes.

PHILLIPS:

As you look back on your long and creative and productive life, how does it all seem to you?

WOELFFER:

Just fine. I could have done more work. I think most people feel that. They look at their things; they say, "That's fine, but I could have done more, you know, could have worked more." But I think probably it is a natural thing.

PHILLIPS:

Do you wish some things had gone differently for you?

WOELFFER:

Yes, oh, yes. I imagine when I did the move to New York with the idea of staying and sticking it out in New York when it was quite difficult, just after the war--I suppose we should have stuck it out there even with the difficulties. I think things would have been quite different staying on the scene in New York,

which I find you have to do. If you're not there, it's quite difficult. That's in terms of, you know, fame and fortune and that sort of thing.

PHILLIPS:

Yes. Which is, after all...

WOELFFER:

Which is a part of it.

PHILLIPS:

Which is part of it, but only one part of it.

WOELFFER:

One part of it, right. There are people who get it when they're young. Some of them would get it in the middle; some of them would get it later in life; and some would get it, as Duchamp says, after life. So, whatever. That's the way it is. That's the way it happened.

1.7. TAPE NUMBER: IV [video session] (April 30, 1976)

PHILLIPS:

We're in Emerson and Dina Woelffer's living room in Los Angeles, with Rita Woelffer, Emerson's mother, and Dina Woelffer, Emerson's wife, and Joann Phillips, interviewing. Emerson, we're sitting in the midst of this marvelous, magical, primitive material, and I wonder if you might tell me when you first became interested.

WOELFFER:

I think it was when I was about ten or eleven that they used to take the kids from school down to the Field Museum in Chicago, mainly to see the dioramas and the stuffed animals. And I would wander off, because I wasn't interested in stuffed animals, to the other halls, where they had the fantastic collection of New Guinea, Oceania, African—things from New Hebrides, New Ireland, from all those various areas. And the sort of magic of these things used to really intrigue me.

PHILLIPS:

When you were a young artist, first learning about painting, what was going on in the art world of modern painters at that time was very influenced by primitive art.

WOELFFER:

Yes, Vlaminck and Derain were the first to collect this material from an importer who would bring things over. They brought over some material from Africa, and then they introduced it, finally, to Braque, Matisse, and Picasso, and some of the other modern painters. And it influenced their work greatly.

PHILLIPS:

Do you think that because it was a new kind of material that they hadn't seen before that there was something very playful about it?

WOELFFER:

Well, I think there was a definite relationship of the simplicity of the carving with what they were also trying to do with their own work. The cubist painters were great collectors of African art, whereas the surrealist painters collected the work from Oceania because of the more magic content of the material.

PHILLIPS:

I know that Picasso's cubist drawings were very influenced by the structure of the African sculpture.

WOELFFER:

Yes, the great painting. The Women of Avignon, they all seem to look like they were wearing an African mask, as you recall. Picasso, himself, put himself in a painting and painted his face like it were an African mask.

PHILLIPS:

And now we're all very accepting of the influence of this kind of material, but near the turn of the century, it was a brand-new thing that hadn't been seen before.

WOELFFER:

Yes. Now it has become a status. It's on the market, just as stocks are, and of course when this happens, we find many fakes today. Some of it's even being

made in Japan, and it's aged. It's put in the ground so the termites will get it, so it's very difficult in purchasing any pieces today unless you know what collection it came out of because they're really not producing great pieces today.

PHILLIPS:

Do you find that the people who are interested in primitive art from the anthropological point of view and archaeological point of view tend to be more interested in the classifying and the description of the material rather than the magical quality?

WOELFFER:

Yes, yes. I find that very much, where I'm not really interested in the piece in relation to the museum quality of it or its age, but more the aesthetics of it, the beauty of the carving and the patina of the wood, etc.

PHILLIPS:

So it doesn't make too much difference to you whether it's a very old piece or a very important piece; it's more the emotional quality a piece exhibits.

WOELFFER:

Right, right, exactly.

PHILLIPS:

When you were living in Yucatan, what was that period in your life?

WOELFFER:

That was 1949. We were living in a village, Lerma Campeche, on the Bay of Campeche in Yucatan. We lived there for six months. And we went out on some of the digs, and we brought back quite a fair collection of that material also.

PHILLIPS:

And you became, I imagine, quite conversant with pre-Columbian things during that period.

WOELFFER:

Yes. Well, wherever we seem to go—we were in Turkey for the State Department for six months a few years ago, and I collected things there from Cappadocia, Roman lamps and Greek things.

PHILLIPS:

Do you feel that this kind of material and living in the midst of it this way has had an influence on your work, on your painting?

WOELFFER:

Oh, very definitely, very definitely. I think some sort of work both ways, in a sense. It influenced my painting, and also the painting, in another sense, turned me on to greater adventures in the primitive arts.

PHILLIPS:

Would you like to point to a couple of the pieces here that have special meaning for you? How about this Bambara piece?

WOELFFER:

Well, that's a very nice piece. It's part monkey, it's part dog, and it's part antelope. They had a way of combining the various animals all in one piece, and the third here, the Senufu bird, and then we have the Senufu figure back there that also has the head of a bird on it.

PHILLIPS:

And are all of these things Senufu here?

WOELFFER:

No, this is a Mali piece back here, this particular one here, and they go up, sometimes, to twenty and thirty feet tall. And this one, this just made it here—without touching the ceiling.

PHILLIPS:

Do they wear those things on their head in a dance?

WOELFFER:

Yeah. If you notice, they're a mask. And then in the back of the mask, there's two holes that go through that they put a stick through, and they hold that

stick in their mouth in order to balance the mask. This one, of course, is worn on the head. It's got a hollow piece underneath the base, and that's worn on the head. It's quite heavy to move around with. And of course they all have cloth coming down from it or raffia, in order to hide the body.

PHILLIPS:

Have you ever been to Africa?

WOELFFER:

Never.

PHILLIPS:

And what about this piece, next to you?

WOELFFER:

This is Middle Sepik River, New Guinea. It's an orator's stool. When they are talking, the orator will take pieces of branches and pound them on the back part of the stool to bring about attention or quiet or whatever. And these are mainly in the men's houses in New Guinea.

PHILLIPS:

Do you think we should send one to any of the political candidates?

WOELFFER:

Oh, yes, yeah. [laughter]

PHILLIPS:

I wonder if we might talk about this Robert Motherwell lithograph that's here, in the midst of all these objects. I notice that it's the only painting in this part of the room, and in a true Japanese modest style, you haven't put any of your own things in this room.

WOELFFER:

Well, I had one of mine that always existed there, and last year, when we were in New York for my exhibition. we went up to visit Bob in Connecticut. And this was just coming off the press at that particular time, and I felt really it was a beautiful lithograph, and we made a trade.

PHILLIPS:

While the camera is focusing on the things within the lithography here, it's a takeoff on one of his collages, except that it's not real collage material, is it?

WOELFFER:

No. The cigarette wrapper was placed and photographed, and then that was blown up through a photoprocess and it was then transferred to the plate.

PHILLIPS:

Yes. And the splatter quality comes out of his indebtedness to surrealism.

WOELFFER:

Yes, yeah, the automatic, the chance. That's quite a large plate, and the paper printed is a handmade paper. It had to be made to order in France.

PHILLIPS:

And is that a cigarette wrapping?

WOELFFER:

Yes. That's a brand of cigarettes, Bastos.

PHILLIPS:

And that touches on his indebtedness to European heritage.

WOELFFER:

Yes, right. He's right out of the cubist persuasion.

PHILLIPS:

Yes, and coupled with surrealist elements.

WOELFFER:

And collage, right.

PHILLIPS:

And what is it that holds you to a painting like that, that you find so appealing?

WOELFFER:

I really don't know. It's one of those things. when I see a work, whatever I see, it hits me immediately, positively or negatively; and this hit me immediately positively, as I said, to the point where I felt I had to have one.

PHILLIPS:

And he gave it to you, did he?

WOELFFER:

Right.

PHILLIPS:

Did you exchange something?

WOELFFER:

I had a painting that he saw in a catalog that I called Homage to R.M. that I did many, many years ago. And I sent it to him, and some weeks later I got a call from a framer out here. He said, "We have a Motherwell for you." And he shipped the lithograph out here and had it framed for me. It's beautiful. This is the way he wanted it, the way he wanted it presented, with this kind of frame.

PHILLIPS:

Now that we've seen the primitive objects that mean so much in your life and in your painting and have talked some about the Motherwell lithograph up here, and before we go down to your studio to look at your work, there are a couple of women here in your life that I'd like to speak to. I wonder if we could talk to Rita, your mother. How are you feeling today?

RITA WOELFFER:

Pretty well, considering.

PHILLIPS:

Well, how old are you, Rita?

RITA WOELFFER:

I'm eighty-eight now, and I'll be eighty-nine the seventh of May.

PHILLIPS:

Well, that's wonderful. You're looking very well. How long have you been living with Dina and Emerson?

RITA WOELFFER:

I think it will be nine years this coming June.

PHILLIPS:

Yes, and did you find Emerson an exceptional child when he was growing up?

RITA WOELFFER:

He never told me that he could draw, never. He never drew at home or anything. And one day his teacher came to visit me, and she said, "Do you know that Emerson is quite an artist?" And I said, "Why, no. He never draws at home." She said, "Well, he won a scholarship, and they sent him to the Art Institute on Saturdays." And that's the first time I ever knew that he painted.

PHILLIPS:

You must be very proud of him now.

RITA WOELFFER:

I certainly am.

PHILLIPS:

Well, thank you for talking with us, and it's good to see you. And I'd like you to see Dina Woelffer, Emerson's wife, who's here. Emerson, is there any more that you want to say about any of the objects in this room?

WOELFFER:

No, I think not.

PHILLIPS:

I think we got some good pictures of everything. Good, well, thanks very much, then, and we'll go down to your studio now and look at your paintings. We're in your studio now, Emerson, and you and I are looking at a very recent lithograph of yours [untitled]. Would you tell me something about it?

WOELFFER:

Oh, yes. It was completed about a month and a half ago. June Wayne called me one day. She had some space and wondered if I wanted to come over and do a lithograph, and I said fine. So I went over and took some acrylic-on-paper pictures over to see the master printer Richard Hamilton--excuse me, Hamilton. I don't know his first name. It's not Richard--that's the English painter. [Ed Hamilton] But anyway, we sat down and discussed—he saw my work, so he could make some suggestions on how to approach its technical things, and we came to a decision. And I went over the following morning, and he had a couple, three zinc plates ready for me, and I went to work. And in about an hour, I came up with some stuff on three or four of the plates, and he etched them. And we made some combination test proofs, and I made a decision on a combination that I liked. I came back the next morning when he had the colors mixed up that I asked for, and we made a color test, and I then signed the Bon a Tիրer, which means if they're all like that one everything is fine and the printer keeps that for his own collection. And that was it. And I came back some weeks later and signed the edition.

PHILLIPS:

You mentioned facetiously earlier to me that this was your Bicentennial product because it was red, white, and blue.

WOELFFER:

Yeah, that was sort of an afterthought because in the past, recent years, I seem to be working with these colors. Ever since I was in Paris, I did a series of collages based on the tricolor, which is the same colors of our flag — red, white, and blue or blue, white, and red.

PHILLIPS:

And that came from seeing all of the French flags and kind of a European influence. I noticed too that very smashing image in the middle of that lithograph is almost like the Black nationalist fist.

WOELFFER:

Yeah, it sort of gives me pleasure to take a big brush dipped in a lot of paint and smash it down on a plate or on a canvas.

PHILLIPS:

That happens a lot in all of your paintings all of the way through.

WOELFFER:

It's a one-shot kind of thing. It either satisfies you or it doesn't. This particular case it did, although I did go over and make some slight little changes, and the thing is difficult to make these changes without having them appear to the viewer that there have been changes made because it wants to have that initial oneness, that impact, which I felt that this one did.

PHILLIPS:

You feel that each one of your pictures should stand on its own.

WOELFFER:

Yeah. I'm not interested in a serial image or a series of this or a series of that. If it comes out that way, fine. If it doesn't, that's fine, too. I'm interested in the particular attack on the thing I'm doing at that time.

PHILLIPS:

Shall we start with some earlier paintings now?

WOELFFER:

Yeah, we could do that.

PHILLIPS:

Go on through. You're going to start from around 1942?

WOELFFER:

Yeah, I have one in here I'll bring out, and I don't exactly know that—can you still hear me?

PHILLIPS:

Yes.

WOELFFER:

I'm back in the catacombs here trying to find something.

PHILLIPS:

This painting from the forties was done while you were a student at the Chicago School of Design.

WOELFFER:

Which one?

PHILLIPS:

The one you're bringing out.

WOELFFER:

If I could find it. Here it is.

PHILLIPS:

Good.

WOELFFER:

We're on our way out. I've got a wine cellar back here, too.

PHILLIPS:

Oh, yes.

WOELFFER:

This is one of my first paintings on black, and I don't know, but I think it's about '40, '41, somewhere in there [1943], I've always admired Miro quite a bit, and it has some of that symbolism and some of that flavor, you know, Miro's painting called The Circus, with all the little animals and things on it. It's a casein painting, painted with casein paint, which people don't seem to use anymore. Acrylic has taken its place.

PHILLIPS:

Had you seen Miro paintings at the Chicago Art Institute?

WOELFFER:

No, they didn't have any at that time, but I saw a Miro show at the Arts Club in Chicago, I think, if I recall, I don't see anything, but I think it was called, if that's of interest to you. Tight Rope Walker.

PHILLIPS:

And were you teaching at the Chicago School of Design, then? Or were you still a...?

WOELFFER:

It was then, I think, called the New Bauhaus, at that time, and it changed its name to the Institute of Design. No, I think this was done just before I started working there. Shall we go on to another one?

PHILLIPS:

Yes, let's do.

WOELFFER:

You can see it's old by the back.

PHILLIPS:

At that time, the prevalent American painting was a regionalist painting, wasn't it?

WOELFFER:

Very regionalist—John Steuart Curry, Grant Wood, that sort of thing. Here's another one. This [Twins] on the back says 1947, so I really I like the black paint. I use the gloss black and the matte black.

PHILLIPS:

I can see a lot of Max Ernst in that.

WOELFFER:

Oh, yeah.

PHILLIPS:

Had you seen Max Ernst by this time?

WOELFFER:

Yes, yeah. I always had this affinity with the surrealists. Max Ernst and Matta and some of these people. And I think I have another one. Oh, this one's a

little earlier [Figure on Beach, 1945]. This one's about a couple of years before that one. But it's—it's one of the few horizontal canvases I have. I've never—I very seldom paint a horizontal painting. They're always vertical, but this one was a person on the beach, reclining, so it has to be horizontal if they're reclining, I guess.

PHILLIPS:

Had you seen much Picasso by this time?

WOELFFER:

Oh, yeah. My last years in art school, it was a time of the Guernica painting, and the Dreams and Lies of Franco, and all of this period of Picasso, of the Spanish revolution. This one has coffee grounds in it, a little added texture to it. And another one from the same period [Figure, 1947].

PHILLIPS:

What were you being taught in art school prior to this period? This kind of painting at all?

WOELFFER:

No. No. In art school, we drew a charcoal drawing of the models three hours every morning, five mornings a week, the same pose for one week. And then in the afternoon, we painted the figure for one month, the same pose every day for one month. Absolutely. They'd take us up to show us Titian. We had to paint like Titian and those people. But, see, where do we go from here? We're in the forties someplace here. Let's move down to Yucatan, or something like that, when we went down to Mexico.

PHILLIPS:

You were down in Yucatan from 1949 through 19—?

WOELFFER:

We were just there some few months. [August 1949 - January 1950]

PHILLIPS:

Yes, living in a very remote fishing village, where you probably had lots of time to paint.

WOELFFER:

Now, I don't—yeah, there was a fellow... We were in Black Mountain College on our way down, and there was a Canadian boy that wanted one of my paintings, but he didn't have dollars. But he had canvas, so he gave me several rolls of Belgian linen, and Ramon Shiva gave me several hundred pounds of paint.

PHILLIPS:

Had you gone to school with Ramon Shiva?

WOELFFER:

Oh, no. He was much before me. He helped dig the Panama Canal, which was long before my time. This is, I think, a Yucatan painting [Inner Circle, 1949] — but anyway, it's that particular period. By using the verticality of the figures-- the figure always has remained in my work, whether it's a segment of the figure, or... There's always a subject matter. My work is never purely what you might say nonfigurative.

PHILLIPS:

You've always had a very strong sense of design and color, and I think it's apparent in all of your...

WOELFFER:

And we came back from Yucatan, for a short stay of a few months, and a friend of mine took up a deserted house he was remodeling, and I did a whole series of paintings on-- this was from a dresser drawer [A Talk]. We painted on everything that they were ripping down from the house.

PHILLIPS:

It's painted on wood, in other words.

WOELFFER:

Wood, and even the frame is the last thing from the ceiling, so it's got all of the.... This is one of the first spray paints that came out, silver spray paints, and then the rest of it is drawn with the tube. I draw with the tube of paint, squeezing the tube of paint. And I was there a few months, until we took off

for Colorado Springs, and we have one following that, a continuation of the figure. Except when I got out West, the color became heightened quite a bit, from this darkness of Chicago to a lot of the color of the West. This is part painting, and part collage, as you can see.

PHILLIPS:

Do I see a bird image up in the upper right-hand corner there?

WOELFFER:

That could be because right after this, I went immediately into the bird period, which I will show you an example of after this particular one.

PHILLIPS:

And that had something to do with those clear blue skies in Colorado and seeing all of the jets and birds there.

WOELFFER:

Yeah, beautiful, yeah.

PHILLIPS:

Why don't you leave that there just a minute. You've always done a lot of collage.

WOELFFER:

Yes. I continue to do collage. Even today, I do collage. Sometimes it's collage purely as a means to an end and sometimes it's in combination with my painting.

PHILLIPS:

Right, okay.

WOELFFER:

This was 1950-something, there.

PHILLIPS:

Does that have a title?

WOELFFER:

I think it's called The Conversation [1951]. Yeah, that's right. I have a good memory.

PHILLIPS:

Tell me your attitudes about titles while you're getting out this next painting.

WOELFFER:

Well, I never title them till I'm going to have an exhibition, or sending the work away where it has to have some kind of an identification. The abstract expressionist painters, for a long time, were using numbers, which were very nice, because they didn't want to influence a person looking at the painting to what the subject matter was because their subject matter was the painting itself. And I couldn't quite go that far, because I still had my attachment with the surrealist thing, where there is a subject matter. You talked about the birds in the last one, and here we go with the birds [Magpie in Egg, 1956].

PHILLIPS:

The bird in the egg.

WOELFFER:

Right, I did for two and a half, three years a whole group of paintings of the bird image.

PHILLIPS:

Do you think of that top, horizontal line as being a horizon line, or was that just something that happened in the painting?

WOELFFER:

We had kind of a fence out in front of our house in Colorado which was a feeding platform for the birds, and maybe that is it. When Dr. Valentiner came to visit us, he saw the upper shelves of our bookcases with Indian artifacts on it, and he sort of used that as a way to explain the horizon line. So I think one is as good as the next one, you know.

PHILLIPS:

Do you think of those images in the top as being calligraphic in the...?

WOELFFER:

Yes, very definitely. Maybe the frieze on the Parthenon, or something like that.

PHILLIPS:

And you were in Colorado Springs for nearly seven years?

WOELFFER:

Right. Teaching.

PHILLIPS:

Teaching, entertaining friends passing through.

WOELFFER:

Right, and working. Seven years is just right, right time to leave there. We left Colorado in 1957 and took off for two and a half years on the island of Ischia in Italy, and when I got over there, I was influenced quite a bit by the walls on the buildings and so on from the last war. They had a V for victory... [Forio Napoli, 1958]

PHILLIPS:

Why don't you just leave that back so it won't wobble.

WOELFFER:

... V for victory all the time, the triple V, and all. But I still retained this horizon line and I think, until I got back, here, California, 1960, when we returned.

PHILLIPS:

The triple V comes from Italian graffiti?

WOELFFER:

Yeah, on the wall from the war--victory.

PHILLIPS:

Yeah. I remember your earlier talking about a quality of paint that your teacher, Boris Anisfeld, wanted his students to get into a painting. Do you feel that a painting like this has achieved that?

WOELFFER:

I think so, but he never thought so. When he saw me several years later, after I left school, he said, "You still paint lilce a housepainter."

PHILLIPS:

Well, he was from a different generation.

WOELFFER:

Yeah, he used to work with Diaghilev, and he did sets and costumes for the Ballet Russe, the Monte Carlo. Let's see what else I can find. This thing started to--maybe some of this movement becomes quite kind of abrupt here, but when I came back, a new image sort of came about. Not really, in a sense, but this kind of shape, which is not too unlike, maybe, what was happening, in a sense, with these pictures, or some of the early sculptures.

PHILLIPS:

That's right. That very simplified—and it was also a period when American painting was going into a more minimal image. And everyone's kind of influenced by what's...

WOELFFER:

And I still kept the horizon line, as you can see. It's still there. Only it took a form of some kind of actual message, if you want to say. ..

PHILLIPS:

And that's Hommage a Danny.

WOELFFER:

Yeah. Danny Alvin was a Dixieland drummer friend of mine.

PHILLIPS:

And that was done in '63, that painting.

WOELFFER:

Right, '63.

PHILLIPS:

And that's when you were back in Los Angeles.

WOELFFER:

Right. And then they got a lot simpler and simpler, and I have an example here [S.H. Painting #2, 1961]. Because I was interested in the brushstroke, I thought I'd really make the brushstroke, which I did, and it came to this simplicity, still, this egg form or whatever and the single brushstroke. This is getting a little less on the top up there.

PHILLIPS:

How do you decide which paintings to save? How do you decide which ones are successful?

WOELFFER:

Gee, I don't know.

PHILLIPS:

Why don't you maybe leave that up while you're getting the next one, so the camera can get a look at it.

WOELFFER:

Many times, Dina helps me make that decision by saying, "We're going to keep that one." So I give it to her; she has her own collection of them.

PHILLIPS:

But you can always tell when you look, when it works.

WOELFFER:

Oh, yeah. When it works or not. I'm showing you just one at a time of these. You know, there are maybe a few hundred in between each one of these you see, so all I'm giving you is a kind of a flavor of the whole shebang. And then we came into the continuing brushstrokes, but something else has been added

at this particular time. It's a big brushstroke plus the hands, and it has sort of the power of this last lithograph, in a certain sense. [Violet Hands for Albert] But you notice that it still has retained that...

PHILLIPS:

... the horizon line.

WOELFFER:

The horizon line is still up there. And then when I went to Turkey, I let the hands go just quite a bit and went on to working with just the ...

PHILLIPS:

Fingerprints.

WOELFFER:

... the fingerprint sort of thing. And then working from the fingerprints. See, this is a hand, but these are just thumbprints. [Ten After Three, 1966] And the horizon line starts to go around the border of the whole painting. And then I started with acrylic paints. I'd never used it before, so it changed the character of my work to the point of my paintings began to get a little flatter.

PHILLIPS:

This painting with the fingerprints is a very primitive approach to art making. You think of the caves.

WOELFFER:

Oh, yeah. The first painting was done with the fingers. And then I went from the fingers to the lips—not literally [Lips, 1968]. But as I said, I started to work with acrylic paints, which are completely different character than oil paint. These were first collages, from the torn paper.

PHILLIPS:

When was this painting done?

WOELFFER:

See, it's never left the studio, so it doesn't have any identification.

PHILLIPS:

But it would be in the sixties.

WOELFFER:

I would say '68, '69, in there, '70, I don't know. But the character of this paint is to work very flat. And when I was in Paris, I did a whole series of the collages-- which, if you want to see one, I could pull one out here. [Untitled collage: Sky series] Being over in Europe, it was such a hassle for shipping and everything. So I just worked with the.. .

PHILLIPS:

That's very nice.

WOELFFER:

... the torn acrylic paper, see.

PHILLIPS:

I know you have an Arp woodblock of the lips. Was that sort of an inspiration?

WOELFFER:

It could be. That, and the Man Ray...

PHILLIPS:

... the Man Ray lips.

WOELFFER:

But the paintings started to take on the character of the collage, even to the fact I showed the torn paper, even. And then the lips went on for a couple of years, till I came back with something a little more to the total figure again, returning to my early paintings, almost. I mean, there's not too much difference between the characteristic of this [Figure, 1975] and the ones of the forties. And still further, even going back to the black background, such as the early paintings were. [Figure, 1975]

PHILLIPS:

And this is acrylic paint?

WOELFFER:

This is acrylic, yeah. I was able to master to the point getting the paint feeling as oil paint, and I liked the fact that it dries so rapidly. And then we come up here to the very late ones, where the total figure is back in the painting again. And that one, and the other one which I have here. Yes, this one.

PHILLIPS:

I notice that the painting we just looked at is entitled Poem for Minotaure [1973].

WOELFFER:

For Minotaure.

PHILLIPS:

Yeah.

WOELFFER:

Yeah, Minotaure—there were eleven editions of a magazine published by Skira many years ago, a surrealist magazine, and I thought this was a nice one to end with, because it matches me [Figure, 1976].

PHILLIPS:

[laughter] It's a beautiful painting.

WOELFFER:

Surrealism, maybe a little erotic. I don't know. Some people accuse me of being erotic in a humorous kind of way.

PHILLIPS:

And this was done in '76.

WOELFFER:

Yeah, this is quite—still warm.

PHILLIPS:

Yeah. I know that you spent a long time with Moholy-Nagy in the design school when you were teaching, and I feel all through your work a very strong sense of color and design and taste. Do you feel you owe a lot of that to that training you had with him?

WOELFFER:

I think so, yes. My first teaching job was with him, and he stressed a certain, you know, perfection, even, you know, in automatic working. So that gives you an idea—the run of everything.

PHILLIPS:

All right. Well, it's been good going through all of these things and seeing the early beginnings, and where you are right now. All right, is there anything else that you...?

WOELFFER:

No, I think we've got the history book all completed.

PHILLIPS:

All right. Well, thanks very much, and I think that'll be the end.

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