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Oral history interview with Louise Nobili, 1978 June 22

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Louise Nobili on June 22; June 23; June 30; and July 7, 1978. The interview took place in Detroit, Michigan, and was conducted by Linda Abramsky, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The Archives of American Art has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

LINDA ABRAMSKY: June 22, 1978. This is an interview with Louise Nobili, for the Archives of American Art.

[Audio Break.]

LOUISE NOBILI: Mrs. Nobili, could you please tell me a little bit about your background, where you were born.

LOUISE NOBILI: I was born in Detroit.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: You were born in Detroit?

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And what kind of family did you have, did you come from a large family or a small family?

LOUISE NOBILI: Medium, three girls.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Three girls?

LOUISE NOBILI: Right. My mother was German, my father was Swedish. We moved out of Detroit when I was very young, went to New Jersey, Pennsylvania and then New Jersey, and I was brought up there. Came back to Flint when I was about ten I guess.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Ten years old.

LOUISE NOBILI: I went to the Flint Public Schools, loved them.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Oh really? Oh I didn't know that.

LOUISE NOBILI: Hated Flint, my mother hated Flint, every bit of it.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Because it was a small town?

LOUISE NOBILI: No it wasn't because it was small, it was just, just everything was bad about Flint, except the schools, which were fantastic, especially in music and art, which were my first two loves and what I think kept me together.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Do you come from an artistic family would you say?

LOUISE NOBILI: Not in the sense of professional artistic, but my father was a very creative engineer, I think everybody referred to him as a creative engineer. He did go to college in Germany but he was you know, part of the pioneer group of men coming to America to start on the automobile thing. He started off as one of the four, they called them the four horsemen, I know for something, of Chrysler; Zeder, Skelton, Breer and Axel Jansson. [00:02:03]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So he's an engineer and a designer?

LOUISE NOBILI: Kind of an inventor and a very good one, he was. My mother was a marvelous housewife and drew little pictures in her cookbooks.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So they kind of nurtured or fostered a type of artistic spirit would you say?

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes, I would say they did. I don't know, I try to remember back sometimes, all I can remember is that if—you know, we used to draw or paint on Sundays as we were growing up, all three of us would get around

the dining room table and draw and paint, but if we didn't behave during the week that privilege was taken away from us.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Oh so this was really this kind of artistic time that was set aside.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah. Now how that came about I can't remember, probably my oldest sister had the initiative or maybe my mother did, I don't really know, but I remember that as a regular thing on Sunday afternoons after church, that was what we wanted to do more than anything.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: You know, I'm thinking back on things that I've read about you and one of the things that stands out in my mind is the Sunday afternoon musicals that I remember reading about, and thinking that was—where you got together with your sisters and your husbands and you all had a kind of concert, a musicale.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes. Well see my sister studied violin and I, I used to paint on one side of the bed with you know, the dresser or chiffonier, which you called them, used as an easel and my other sister sat on the other side of the bed practicing her concertos with her violin stand, and then everything went under the bed, [laughs] you know that was the storage space, under the bed, and as we got older, it got kind of filled up and then my mother would throw things away or clean it out, and we'd start over again. [00:04:04] That was kind of something that I grew up with.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Did your parents also participate in these Sunday afternoons?

LOUISE NOBILI: No. My father used to sing German, you could call them lieder songs, some of them were lieder songs and some of them were like university songs, or school songs, and little sentimental German things, and my mother used to sing German songs to us when she was sewing, and those German things are really, you know in us. My father studied in Germany, I suppose that's why.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Did you speak languages at home too?

LOUISE NOBILI: No, because no it wasn't the way it is now. If you were German, you tried to conceal that, you tried to be an American as quickly as possible, but my mother never, never lost her German accent. My father lost his accent but he would throw in a few little grammatical errors you would say, like he would say, "I catch them." But very few and he really sounded like a native American otherwise, but my mother had a very thick, thick accent and it was really quite beautiful though. She was a very tender person and very tenacious at the same time, very agile, a very hard worker, oh a fantastic worker, and then the love of music was there, and so they encouraged music lessons for all of us. Yes, we used to get together then as we got married, you know, then we'd meet at the house on Sundays.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: This became something that almost was not institutionalized, but became a regular habit every week.

LOUISE NOBILI: That's right.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Sundays, you would all get together.

LOUISE NOBILI: That's right, that's right, and then my father was I guess on the board of the Scandinavian Symphony and that became very important in his life, as a kind of hobby. [00:06:09] He had all of those musicians come to the house and they would bring everything, from the violin to the base violin, to horns and everything, and they would be in our living room, playing you know, and it was great fun and my mother would put on a feast and was always beautiful.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So that was a very strong influence from when you were a child.

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh yes.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And throughout your adult life. When you look back at your childhood, can you reflect upon some early interests and other influenced that you think affected you as an artist, in your work?

LOUISE NOBILI: Well, I reflect on my childhood quite often, which is part of my Germany background I guess, it's sort of a nostalgia sentiment, and I think Germans, Nordics are more sentimental I think, than like blacks are but I'm not sure about that. Maybe Europeans are more nostalgic than Americans, but I do have a lot of nostalgia about my family background. I don't think it was like anybody else's. it was very European, it was very strict in one way. I had adorable parents, but like we didn't get away with anything and we didn't have the freedom that our contemporaries had. We had our duties and sometimes we didn't even understand why we were doing what we had to do.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Your parents just told you this was what—

LOUISE NOBILI: That's right, like there was the concept of behaving, you do what you are told. I think about that quite often because I remember not so long ago, I said something in school, I was referring back to my childhood, and somebody said, "How old were you?" [00:08:03] And I didn't answer because I realized that it would be kind of funny.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Because you were so young?

LOUISE NOBILI: Well no, because I was old enough to be more independent in their eyes.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: I see.

LOUISE NOBILI: And yet in a way, I treasured that fact now, that there was a certain kind of obedience there.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Because it gave you a certain amount of structure in your life do you think?

LOUISE NOBILI: I think so. For example, we weren't encouraged since we were, you know just little tots, to—yes we were thought to think for ourselves about a lot of situations but to do for ourselves that was different, very different.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So it was a very, would you say close-knit, kind of nurturing feeling that your family fostered?

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah, I think so, I think we could call it that. I know it was different, it wasn't the way the American youngsters are brought up, I know that.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Well how so, how was it different would you say, because of that nurturing quality?

LOUISE NOBILI: Well partly, like we had certain things that we did, you know like we embroidered doily every day and if there was a mistake in it, we had to rip it all the way back to the mistake you know, and it had to come right.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Oh really? And that was part of what, your responsibilities would be.

LOUISE NOBILI: Well that was yeah, part of—like my mother I think thought it was a great joy to do that and to learn to do it. There were certain things she didn't teach us to do, like she never taught us to knit or to crochet, because she just had so much of it when she was a child, but she still had to have some carry over I guess, of her own existence. I'm not sure, I've never figured it out, but I remember these doilies stacking up and you know, she would draw them out and we would embroider them and you know, we were just little, little things that could barely hold a needle and we would do that. [00:10:00]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Is that your first remembrance of working with color and shapes and forms?

LOUISE NOBILI: I don't know. I can remember always in school, always, all three of us always came home happy about the art thing. Oh the teacher said this was good, you know, or it was pointed out on the blackboard, it was put up you know, it was seen, it was shown, it was made a little fuss over, and so I had a mother who would say, *Ooohhhhhh!* You know, she had these little expressions and you know, like if she picked grasses or flowers, little wildflowers, there was always a sense of like making us look at them, you know, her appreciation of little things was enormous and I still have that.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So that sensitivity or that awareness of shape and form and color was something that was fostered very young.

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh yeah, appreciation of little things, because we didn't have any big things to enjoy, we really didn't, we had very little. My father was, I think for his day, like a good wage earner, but he was also a good spender, like we never had a lot but we always had money coming in, and we always ate good meals. My mother was very thrifty and you know, my clothes were always handed down to me from my sisters, I hardly ever had like a dress to call my own, that was bought for me.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Did your mother make clothes?

LOUISE NOBILI: Everything, everything, right from the under—well not the underwear, no, but slips quite often, and dresses and coats, jackets, everything.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: You design your own clothes now too don't you?

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh I have done a little bit, but not a lot. I did for a while, when we were married, I thought that was very important and Marco got me a Necchi sewing machine, and I tried to fit it in but I finally, I finally tossed

that out. [00:12:04]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Too many things going on.

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh, too many things, yes.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Do you remember when you first became interested in art, well you said that when you were very young your—

LOUISE NOBILI: Well, when I was in sixth grade I wrote a paper you know, my profession you know.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Oh you knew in the sixth grade that you wanted to be an artist?

LOUISE NOBILI: I didn't know it but I thought I knew it.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: What was that all about?

LOUISE NOBILI: I think we had to write a paper in school and it just seemed as though that would be the thing I would want to be.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: You wrote about how you were going to be in art, a painter?

LOUISE NOBILI: An artist, yes. I remember drawing a little circle on the cover of the paper you know, like making a fancy cover, and I think there was like a drawing or a painting of an artist with a palette or something in his hand, something kind of trite, you know at least to make it special, I didn't just turn in a paper. I think my sister might still have that thing in her house.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Are your sisters artists also?

LOUISE NOBILI: My one sister is a violinist and my other sister, she probably would have studied art, but she was in Flint at the time that she graduated and they didn't have art in the junior high school there, in the junior college, so she studied, I don't know whether it was math or German, but anyway, they live up in Ann Arbor, and she has, I believe a masters in German and a masters in math and a minor in art.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: I see.

LOUISE NOBILI: She did have interest, yes, she had an interest in art.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So did you spend the predominant part of your childhood in Flint growing up?

LOUISE NOBILI: About eight years, about eight years, but it was a very, I think a very impressionable time for all of us because we were—like I was ten and my other sister was 13, the other 16, and those are years when everything means a lot to you and we fitted in, we fitted in very well because of our interest in art and music, and in music you know, they were always in the national competitions. [00:14:11] In high school, they won all of the national music competitions. My sister was first violinist, I guess. I was in the junior high school and I was, I guess had first chair, second violin or something like that, and that position always seemed to carry around. I didn't advance as far as my sister did, I started late.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Oh, so you also were playing violin.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah, I studied violin.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So then, was there some competition there?

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah. You know I didn't—I don't think I ever expressed it to anybody but I felt it. My sister started before I did, she was older than I am. As a matter of fact, she started when she was five, with a little violin she got in you know, I guess my father put a nickel down, what did they call it?

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Pawn, is that a pawn shop?

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah, she won it. I don't know what you call those, you put a nickel down in a square and a little window goes around you know, stopped at her number seven or something and she won this violin and so she went to school with it in a paper bag and took lessons, and then later he bought her a violin for $75, which later became mine, when I was ten, I wanted to study too and strangely enough, I didn't want to study piano and now I wish I had. But we studied together for a while, until there was no money, and then one of us had to give up, so naturally it was me, and I could study with my sister.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: She would teach you.

LOUISE NOBILI: That's right and then that didn't work.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: But your parents thought it was important enough, that they would invest the money in lessons. You went as long as the money held out.

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh yes, yes. Well actually, yeah, it was the Depression with that, and it just was too much for him to keep up, so I was the one that gave up my violin lessons and I studied with her for a while but it just didn't work. [00:16:02]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Is that when you started taking any kind of lessons in art, drawing and painting?

LOUISE NOBILI: Well, I'm trying to think of when that was. I didn't—I'd had all of my art studies in school. In high school, I just seemed to do very well in art.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So you were encouraged though, when you were very young.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes, always encouraged you see. I don't know how great I was, but I was encouraged, I really was.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And did you have any informal trainings in art, painting or drawing?

LOUISE NOBILI: Informal training?

LINDA ABRAMSKY: At home, with anyone who was—

LOUISE NOBILI: No, no. My oldest sister probably just was an encourager in a way, also a discourager sometimes, you know how older sisters can be. They say, "Well, if you can't think of an idea too bad," you know sometimes you know like when I was very young, I'd see her going at it and there, I'd sit and, "I don't have an idea!" You know and it was like a major tragedy, it really was.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Oh, and she would say, "I'm not going to think of ideas for you, you have to think of them yourself."

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah, that's right, and once in a while she would but not too often. I think she was good.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: But she was there to serve as a model.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah. I think it was good in a way. Unfortunately, I think she had tremendous talent and couldn't follow through, I really think that's what she should have studied. I think she would have been fantastic, but she has an intellectual capacity that's you know, enormous, reads continuously.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Now why would you—how would you attribute your following through with it, in contrast to your sister?

LOUISE NOBILI: Well I think it was like first of all, that's what I was encouraged in. Then I guess there was a moment when my father wanted to send one of us to Germany because his parents died over there, left him some money, and the only way to make use of it was to go over there and spend it. [00:18:04] I remember, I was a little young and my other sister as maybe just about right, well no I think we were both old enough, come to think of it, especially—oh yes, we were both old enough to go, but it was a moment when I could go to college but my other sister hated school, my middle sister, she had a lot of problems in school, physical problems, psychological problems I guess, and no one identified it that way. She could go and study music and I could stay here and go to a university, so it seemed natural that she would be the one to go to spend the money, and my mother of course went with her and I'm just realizing now, that she must have been certainly 22, 23, something like that, when she went and my mother still felt it was important for her to go with her. It wasn't like well you go off.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And she was 23.

LOUISE NOBILI: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Also of course, my mother wanted to see her family, there were a lot of reasons I suppose, but my sister studied with Kulenkampff, which was Germany's greatest violinist, and I was proud of her but also wishing it were me, and I thought I'd never ever go to Europe, you know I thought that would be impossible. But anyway she went two years and then the war broke out, so they had to, after twice going over there, I guess the third time they had to go through Sweden and back home. My sister didn't enjoy it at all because the Hitler business was so bad in Berlin at that time.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: What was it like living in this country, you being an American of Germany parents during the war? [00:20:03]

LOUISE NOBILI: Well I didn't feel that there was anything so terrible about it. I only think now, in retrospect, that that was terrible, because my mother came over here, well before the First World War, and at that time of course, she didn't dare speak German, you know it seemed to be a bad thing to do, to be German, and so she tried to—all her life, she wanted us to help her with her grammar, she took courses, she did everything. She never got rid of her accent but she understood grammar a lot better than I did. She'd write a beautiful letter, but when she spoke, then you could feel that it didn't come natural, that the accent plus the few grammatical things that she had all her life.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Were you working, painting and drawing during all this time? Can you remember always?

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah, always, on some basis yes.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: What about your formal training? Your formal training didn't really begin, I mean in terms of art instruction, painting or drawing, until around junior high school and then high school, you took all art classes.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah, I always took whatever art I could, art and music, art and music, all through high school. I was in the orchestra right straight through, I was in art all the way through, and there were many times when I wondered which to get into more strongly.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So you really vacillated between the two.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: When did you make your decision?

LOUISE NOBILI: Well I think it naturally wandered into the art more because my sister, I didn't want to study with her anymore. I did love her and she was very sweet to me but the problem was that she had recitals and it was very difficult for two of us to be practicing at the same time and I would scream and say, "How come she has a right to practice, just because she has a recital?" You know just because I'm studying with her, you know I'm not supposed to practice until the time is free? [00:22:03] It was really a big thing, and then I remember running up the steps from the basement one time, because I went in the basement to practice and she was on the second floor practicing, and on the way up the stairs, you know I got my bow caught in the treads of the steps and it broke, and you know I think there were little things like that, that I think—

LINDA ABRAMSKY: The frustrations.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah, psychologically cut it off as being the most important thing. Then too, I think I wanted to be different, like if you study music I think I'll study art, and so at the time that I graduated from Cooley, which was not too bad, but you know after coming from Flint, I went to Grosse Pointe High, that was a disaster.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: You mean the adjustment that you couldn't make.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah, it was terrible. There was a snobbishness I wasn't accustomed to, the orchestra was unprofessional. I would say Flint was really professional in art and music, it really was, it meant business, they had real conductors who cared and they were after—a reputation, a real reputation, and they won national awards and it was that kind of thing, and you were struggling for that competitive kind of thing and that seemed to work with me, trying to get into first chair, the tryouts, all of that. I went to Grosse Pointe and everything was different. Two of the students were sitting on the instructor's knee, I'll never forget that, that just, that threw me. I wasn't accustomed to, I never as a child and never will, get accustomed to the playing around part.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So you set very high standards at a very young age, for yourself.

LOUISE NOBILI: Well, whether you called them high or low, I don't know, but they certainly weren't our bag, we just didn't—to see informality of that kind and personal relationships thrown in with school, it was just a trauma, really a trauma. [00:24:08] It so happened that my sister did some soloing for Grosse Point High, also got to be first chair violinist in no time, but there wasn't any—like there was no doubt that she would have to be that and that I would be first chair, second violin.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So you didn't feel the stiff competition.

LOUISE NOBILI: There was no competition at all, we just automatically placed there, but there was no fun in it, no drive, a supercilious conductor, very young, flirtatious, and we weren't accustomed to that. We were like babies coming into Grosse Pointe. We felt like on one level, way over the others in maturity, and on another level so shy and so you know behind the kind of Grosse Pointe dilatant atmosphere of students who had plenty of money and who just threw all of their time away, with no seriousness and we couldn't deal with that. The art was a little better at Grosse Pointe, and I think that might have had another something to do with it. I was highly encouraged at Grosse Pointe, but strangely enough, I never felt on the top. I shouldn't say strangely but in other

schools, like in Flint, I felt like I was up you know, really on the top, but in Grosse Pointe there were a few that were encouraged, I think far more than I was, and I'd look at their work and it was absolutely fabulous, all these little strokes, you know and that impressed me because I had never learned techniques like that. Then later, when I had my first class at Wayne, this brother and sister team from Grosse Pointe showed up in my night class and the girl was the only girl in the class, except me, and the rest were men, and I was teaching a live drawing class. [00:26:02] These two people showed up and then I could see that they didn't have it, and you know this is difficult to deal with.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: But you had so many other things that got in the way.

LOUISE NOBILI: I had time in between, where my evaluation sense changed, because at that time there was no value sets, I just did what I—it was kind of like busy work, it was like making something and having something and getting a slap on the back and my mother saying *oooh, ooooohhh*. And my sisters, you know, we would compare each other's work and my mother would put things up and at school it became a major issues you know, to be important. I didn't care whether I was top of the class in English or in anything else, I wanted to be in the top in the art.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: That's your self-esteem.

LOUISE NOBILI: There must have been a reason for it but I don't know what it was, probably just encouragement.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Yeah, self-esteem, that's really how you defined yourself.

LOUISE NOBILI: I suppose. We all had it.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Well then um, then you went on to Wayne, was that where you first went to college?

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes. I might have gone someplace else but my father had a freak accident. He really didn't have an accident, but he was taking me to Cooley, it was you know, the last winter of my senior year and very foggy, we were going past Marygrove College and we couldn't see anything, ice on the street, and all of a sudden we heard a big crash up ahead and my father knew something had happened but he couldn't see, so he turned his wheels. He slowed down and turned his wheels, just hit a tree, no dent in the car, anything, not even in the license, and he got out and he started to direct traffic. Anyway, what happened was that a girl was thrown out of a car and hit by a hit-and-run driver, and when my father found her on the road, he immediately went to the closest house, called the police, called the ambulance, he took care of everything, really a good Samaritan. [00:28:15] And then a year later, you know after he had really almost forgotten about the thing, that girl sued my father for everything he had. So at that time, my sister said Louise has to go to college no matter what, and so she was doing substitute teaching at the time and she made sure that I'd get through that first semester at Wayne, which I did, but otherwise, I don't know, I think I might have gone away to school. We hadn't gone yet, into the choices, but I certainly never even thought of Wayne. As a matter of fact, we used to drive by with the bus, and when my sister said well, you go to Wayne University, I started to get frightened, I said but I go by that building in the bus and no one ever goes into that building, and do you know that I refused to go there for registration because I didn't know how to register and I had to have my older sister come with me. I was just petrified, absolutely petrified.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Now this was in the early '40s, right?

LOUISE NOBILI: Well it was back a little before that. [Laughs.] Yeah.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: But there was no question, for example you're a woman and going to college at that time, in the late '30s.

LOUISE NOBILI: I didn't think of that as being like the—like being a woman was that different.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Because that was never something that you questioned, education was stressed, regardless of your sex.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah, that's right. No, we never talked about that at all, never.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: But you did go—how long did you go to Wayne?

LOUISE NOBILI: I went six years.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Six years, because I know in between, you also went to University of Wisconsin.

LOUISE NOBILI: [00:30:01] I went to the University of Wisconsin and I went to Gloucester, Massachusetts and

studied with Thorn, but I can't remember his first name. Helen May studied with him, she's the one who said you go and study with Mr. Thorn. I really didn't like him very much but I can't say that it was all together a bad experience, there's always something you learn, but I just didn't like the man.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: I see, you just didn't—personality clash.

LOUISE NOBILI: No it wasn't that. As I say, I was kind of a little girl about a lot of things and I didn't go out with boys, and I didn't understand certain worldly things at all. I didn't even understand that there were certain things to worry about, that didn't get into my consciousness at all, and when I got to Gloucester now, I can think back of how those big brown eyes were rolling at me, but I thought he just thought I was a real nice person and he didn't have any more rooms left in the dormitory, so he gave me another room, and then I found out it was right next door to his room. And then one day I came out just innocently walked down the steps of this old fashioned white house, when this woman that looked like a witch in my eyes, with black hair, said, "What are you doing in my husband's house?" You see? And then I realized that she was a divorced wife of his and that he had had a relationship with Helen May, and apparently with others I guess. But anyway, she was going to see to it that no one would live in that house, and of course that's the last thing I wanted, but I didn't even understand it.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: You were rather naïve about it.

LOUISE NOBILI: I was really naïve, I really was, considering that I was going to college, but I didn't think, I just didn't think in those terms at all. [00:32:00] I was perfectly happy being the way I was, but that, I just, I quit the class after that episode and then I just enjoyed Gloucester, I went someplace else.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: You went to the Chicago School of Design too didn't you?

LOUISE NOBILI: And I went to the Chicago School of Design and studied with Moholy-Nagy, but I did that during my first job, my first position when I graduated from Wayne was, well at the university theater. It was called a scholarship to me, but it turned out that it was part-time faculty and that I was in charge of all of the stage designing for the Wayne Theater, and the productions were at the Art Institute.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Now, were you teaching stage design or were you actually doing the design?

LOUISE NOBILI: I was supposed to be teaching it but when I got that so-called scholarship, which I don't know why they called it a scholarship because the money came out of the teaching fund and I had to go to faculty meetings, it was real weird. But I was in charge of all the sets and I was supposed to teach, and I was supposed to have a staff, but there was such envy from the theater group, when that went to me, that they just refused to be of any help, and I needed help desperately. I had one person, Bob Suchek [ph] and you probably heard of Charity Suchek, well that was her half, half son, what do you call it? Anyway, that was the son of her husband's first wife.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Oh, stepson, maybe a stepson.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah. So anyway, he kind of pulled me through on that position and I'd stay up all night, you know painting sets until my father would pull me out of the university. Anyway.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So was there—[00:34:01]

LOUISE NOBILI: I was always over-conscientious, I still am terribly so. I managed to get every one of those things to come off, but I went through hell. I was lucky I was young, you know, because when you're young you can take a lot, staying up all night for example and then going to school the next day and going to classes.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And that was really your first professional job, even though it was combined with the scholarship.

LOUISE NOBILI: Well you know also, after my first semester, or I think after the first semester at Wayne, when my sister paid, then to continue, I was going to the National Youth Administration and I just did odds and ends around the art building.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Let's back up just a little bit and talk about what life was like in school, what the artistic environment was like.

LOUISE NOBILI: At Wayne?

LINDA ABRAMSKY: At Wayne and also, I'm very interested in what Moholy-Nagy was like, working with him.

LOUISE NOBILI: At Wayne, it was wonderful and I was in heaven. First of all, when I was a freshman, I was just

frightened to deal of course and I was really a little girl, and I think I was mature in some ways that other students weren't, more mature, like in my appreciation of things, but I was just a little girl as far as other, other matters were concerned. I suppose I depended on friendships from the art area, I didn't seem to know how to cope with other people, I didn't know how to cope with too much sophistication.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: What was the artistic climate like, who was there at the time?

LOUISE NOBILI: Well, there was Henrietta Lang, Lillian Newman, and Pete Conover, and Kate Conover was head of the Art Department, and all three of those women were wonderful and immediately I had a course in life drawing from Lillian Newman and an oil painting class, and I had a design class from Henrietta Lang and I had a design class from Kate Conover, and immediately I was thrown into things that like right now, no student could take. [00:36:18] You couldn't take oil painting right away.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Because it's too advanced.

LOUISE NOBILI: Nor life drawing. I mean, maybe they've changed that a little bit under certain circumstances now, they might allow you to get into a life drawing class but I don't think they encourage it. You take basic drawing first and basic design. Well, I was thrown into those and I really felt that now, I'm really you know, I'm going to wash right out of art.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Now this is the BFA Program.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes, but I knew nothing about BFA, MFA programs. I didn't know what that meant, I just blindly went to school, I wanted to study art, I took what I was told. I had to take English, I had to take these things, I didn't do too badly but my love wasn't there.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: But that wasn't your love.

LOUISE NOBILI: That isn't what I lived for. Anyway, it was strange because I didn't feel up to the rest and again, you know, well we worked in a huge room at Old Main, which was the Art Department, and there were three desks, you know old fashioned desks about that size in the front and in the back were some drawers, wooden drawers, and students were assigned to drawers to put things, and then there were little desks on which you—desks and tables, to draw and paint on, and there was one easel in there.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: One easel?

LOUISE NOBILI: One easel, and anybody using the easel was putting on a nice act. The guy who used the easel was Henry Coloff. I don't know whether you've ever heard of him or not, but he became a builder, but at that time he was a dedicated artist, he came from Cass Tech and he knew how to draw, and no one ever expected that they could compete with him. [00:38:07] In a way, it was a little sickening in a way, for me, because I could immediately see that I just didn't have it.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Or you thought you didn't have it.

LOUISE NOBILI: Well, I was thinking of technical facility and I really think that's what I wanted, but I didn't have it. The other thing, I was so shy that I used to get into a corner and then put something up so nobody could see me work.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Did you work with nude models?

LOUISE NOBILI: Well if the teacher—no, no, we had no nude models. We had girls come in, boys come in, that posed just as they were, but one day by accident, a professional model came in and Lillian Newman almost had a heart attack, because she started to drop her robe on the floor, and she immediately went up there screaming and covering her up, and she said you know I had a costume there in the closet for you, that you were supposed to put on. So the girl came out in this little ballet outfit and I remember that I was terribly shocked, I thought that that was a terrible thing to do.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So then what would you say the training was like there?

LOUISE NOBILI: It was excellent.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: It was excellent.

LOUISE NOBILI: I really think it was excellent.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: In terms of your gaining that technical ability that you were looking for?

LOUISE NOBILI: No, no, I don't think it was that. I don't really know exactly, but I think there was a spirit there and I remember you know, that all of those women were very old and I suspect that they were close to 70. At the end of my first semester, I worked at home a lot because I wanted everything to be perfect before it would be turned in, and I'd struggle so. [00:40:01] Lillian Newman called me in and said, "I had no idea darling, that you could work like this." She said, "You know you were the only one I gave an A to," and I told her, I said, "I don't believe it, what about Henry?" And she said, "No, he didn't get an A," she said, "He's just a technical genius," and that was the first time I heard that, because there's a difference. I didn't know it was not to be counted in, to be simply technical. Somehow or another she said you know, "Technique is all right but that's all he has," and that was very strange because I never heard of that before.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So she was now giving you encouragement and praising your creativeness.

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh yes, that's right.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And your ability.

LOUISE NOBILI: And then you see, at the end of that first semester also, Wayne Claxton came in as the chairman of the department, to look things over, he had just been hired, and he came into the—the first room that he came into was the design class of Kate Conover and she had peppered all over the walls, the class. And he went along and he looked at all this. Do you remember him? Well no, you wouldn't remember him, but he had a very sharp kind of—that kind of a look, and I remember I was palpitating inside when he stopped to look at this little thing that I did and he, he just stopped and that was the only thing he pointed out and he said, "Who did this?" Kate Conover said, "This little girl over here." So he called me out and he said, "You know, you have talent," and I didn't understand that either, but anyway, that was morning. Then later on in the day he came into the drawing class. He did the same thing, I didn't have my name on it or anything. He went right up to all the drawings, "Whose is that?" So he said, "Well, this seems to be kind of a pattern, you seem to be really up there," you know? [00:42:06]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So would you say then, that the thing that was good for you about when, the fact that classes were small and that you got a lot of individual attention.

LOUISE NOBILI: I got a lot of encouragement but I would say also, the instructors really cared. They were also not—they were, I'd say if they appeared right now and taught again, they would fit in, because Henrietta Lang studied with Brach and was really an excellent artist, and she did those old watercolor wood blocks, you know, worked with the oriental paper and a spoon, and she taught that to me and I still am glad that I know that, and she learned that from Brach. I don't know who the other two studied with, Lillian Newman was an East Coast person, but I would say that her paintings were very comparable to somebody like Burchfield or Hopper, somewhere in between, and the Hoekstras have one or two of her watercolors and I can still look at them and admire them. As a matter of fact, I admire them more now than I was able to at that time.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Then.

LOUISE NOBILI: Kate Conover, I had to admit, I never saw any of her work, but she did come through years later. She went to California after retirement, she came through, she remembered me and she was something like 88 or 89 years old, and she said, "I just decided that I would spend my cremation money," and she said, "I went to New York, I had a one man show." She studied with Hofmann.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Oh really?

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes. And all of that, you know after she retired. Her teaching was good. You know, I still have notes, like mimeographs, that I think are just fantastically good. [00:44:04]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Were they aware then, obviously, if one studied under Brach and Hans Hofmann, they were aware of movements that were going on not only in this country but around the world.

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh, absolutely, and this—you know what was great? There was a big stimulus about modern art and the—how, how the more academic art had moved, like out of the renaissance tradition and coming into a new kind of attitude, and that was really talked about all the time, and not much different than what we're doing now.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And particularly, the emphasis was on what has happened since the beginning of the 20th century.

LOUISE NOBILI: That's right.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Art history, was that something that you really thought about or was it—

LOUISE NOBILI: No.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: —in terms of technique and different styles?

LOUISE NOBILI: No, art history was, it was just something I had to take and I had, what was his name? He's still, I think in the museum work, Perry Rathbone, and I didn't know why I didn't like him, but I think I kind of know now and I think he was very superficial, but at that time I didn't—I couldn't put my finger on it. I used to operate slides for his classes and so I got quite familiar with his way of teaching, and we had all black and white slides, no color, and facades, and that wasn't his fault, but he was just kind of, I think bored with what he was doing. You had to memorize slides, where were these things, who did them, when were they done, and it was kind of just something to memorize, not something to feel something about.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: But your studio courses really incorporated art history in terms of the actual being with someone like Brach or Hofmann.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes, that's right, that's right, absolutely.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Integrated that.

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh it was like everything in the world was opening up, it was just stupendous, I was just like really, I was bursting with joy. [00:46:04] I couldn't wait to get down to school. I would come down with Cyril Miles, you know, seven o'clock in the morning, paint two hours before classes started. If we didn't have something to paint, we'd paint each other painting each other, but we were busy all the time.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And the spirit again, was that there was a closeness among the students.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes, we were at 5155 Cass, you know Old House. Well first we were in Old Main and then the second semester we moved with the new chairman and we had a house and we had the first floor of a house and the garage, and then later we got the second floor and later the third floor, which was an attic, and that just seemed to be about as big a school as you could ever imagine, you know. To see it grow was marvelous to see.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Are there people that you have studied with that you now have maintained contact with—

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh yes. Oh, absolutely.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: —or have become also people that you work with and have become colleagues. Who were some of those people?

LOUISE NOBILI: Cyril Miles, Thad Brykalski, Elizabeth Walkitz [ph]. I don't know where she went to but she was extremely talented and we were with each other all the time, and then somehow or another she got bitter about a lot of things and her life kind of busted up and went in strange directions and I had to break the connection somehow. But I'm still curious about her, because she had such a lot of talent.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: What about Alden Smith?

LOUISE NOBILI: Alden Smith came to Wayne when I was working on my masters, that's right, I guess yeah, I was working on my masters, or else senior year. I'm not sure.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So the thing that you really liked was the camaraderie that you had with the other students?

LOUISE NOBILI: I guess so. I didn't know that it was different or special but it certainly is, from what we have now. [00:48:03]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: How did it compare to the Chicago School of Design, what was it like working with Moholy-Nagy?

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh, that was another excitement.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: What was he like?

LOUISE NOBILI: He's a wonderful man. I've heard, like I've talked to Wayne Andrews a few times and he—and Wayne Andrews for a long time, was just saying negative things about the School of Design, and then one day I told him that I really enjoyed it and then that at least allowed us to—

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Did he also go to the Chicago School of Design?

LOUISE NOBILI: No, no, but I guess in his studies he found out that those people disagreed a lot more than I

would have liked to have known, and that they were fighting a lot and that throwing all these people together was not the best thing in the world. Also, I found that there were a lot of people criticizing, and still do criticize, the School of Design, that those principals hung on too long, that one should have broken sooner. But I still feel that that—I still feel that that's the basis of everything. Moholy-Nagy, I thought was a very firm person, but he was not at all dictatorial. For example, the very first day we were there in a class, he had a method of familiarizing us with all of the shop tools, without us becoming specialists in using them, but just telling us the safety measures and so forth and letting us loose with a lot of wood, to drive into those machines and to try whatever we wanted to, and somebody just there to make sure that you know, we wouldn't get our hands in the machines. But to experiment, the whole idea of experimentation, the idea of rhythm, a rhythmic doing, and that fitted in with the courses that I took with Marge Claxton, Marge H'Doubler Claxton, she was the founder of dance education. [00:50:10] Mr. Claxton insisted I go and study with he during summers, so while I was a student at Wayne, I would go there in Wisconsin for summer schools and study dance, and I was the only one who knew nothing about dance, knew nothing about even physical education. I never moved in my life, I never had any sports in my life, and suddenly all of this thing was happening to me and that made a big difference in my life.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Movement in expressed with the body.

LOUISE NOBILI: Body movement.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: It made you more aware perhaps, of movement.

LOUISE NOBILI: Body movement and the idea of rhythm and what it means in terms of the whole artistic creative thing. I became terribly conscious of it. She taught a course on rhythmic form and analysis and though it was mostly for body movement, she related it to other kind of activities. You see then, I followed that up with Moholy-Nagy's course and he also talked about like you know, if you drive a piece of wood into a machine at rhythmic intervals, you know that then what kind of a thing do you get out of that. Like he didn't say to experiment at random, but he did stress rhythm. He stressed like finding an order in the experimentation.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: But it was a total activity.

LOUISE NOBILI: And then trying to discover what would occur, seeing if in that occurrence of doing, you could find uses or maybe no use, just a quality. And then at the end of the year, I remember there was a big exhibition that he had, of his own work plus some of the instructors works at the School of Design, and I went in to compliment him and he said, "It's a big disaster," and that's when I learned a great deal, because I had a long talk with him and he said, "This isn't at all what we're after, this is not art." [00:52:10] He said, "Unfortunately, the press calls it art, the museums call it art," but he said, "This is a way toward art, it is not art in itself." He said, "I'm a failure."

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Oh my.

LOUISE NOBILI: You know he said, "This is a complete failure," and I couldn't believe it, like a man of his stature, you know I had learned about him in school, Buford Pickens, Alden Smith, Claxton, you know the School of Design, the Bauhaus in Germany, and there I was with a connection there in Chicago and suddenly this man was considering himself a failure, and that was a new experience and that's been carried with me a long time too.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Would you say that he's been a very strong influence in perhaps your attitude?

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh yeah, I think he had—I think between Margie Claxton and also Mr. Claxton, who failed me in a way later on, and his wife, that those people really opened up not only avenues but resistance. You know the first time, like I had to think and find resistance, you don't just do, you know that you have to fight.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: There's a tension.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah, there is tremendous tension. I didn't think of those things before, and they didn't teach you that, they just—you experienced it. Having a man that's been with this all his life and who is famous, to say I'm a failure, that just oh, knocked me for a loop.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Did you come to believe that what he said was true?

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah, I still think so, I do very much. He echoes in my mind every time I go to New York, walking into a gallery and maybe seeing ten or fifteen huge sheets of paper, each with a pinhole in another place. [00:54:05] That gets pretty boring to me, even though I can understand why one might do it, but that may be something toward art, and I don't know where one begins and the other leaves off. I'm sure there's that argument always, but the fact that I think there's a fetish in experimentation becoming art, I think there's too much of that.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Too much emphasis on process?

LOUISE NOBILI: I think process is extremely important, I think it is the primary thing in a way, accompanied by of course other things, but I think process can become like a fetish, it can become very superficial, it can be a quick way. If you know that that is art, why then go any further? I think it can get very, very shallow. I think it has a right maybe, to be called art, if you have an all-encompassing definition of art, but I think it's sad that, that people don't draw their own line. I have trouble once in a while with students that way. I don't have that trouble right now, I just have a group of people who are way on the other side of it, they're quite technically proficient, but I've gone through students who want to skip over everything. I think discipline, whether you start at one end or the other end, I think it's very important, some kind of discipline.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So would you say then, that along with this very creative spirit that you had during this time as a student, there was also a good deal of traditionalism in terms of learning how to draw before you go on to other things. [00:56:02]

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes and no. I think that I would say Wayne Claxton was like a shot in the arm for me, when he came into the department, because after all, he was discovering me the first day. Then he came and he introduced a nude model and that was traumatic with me, it was with everybody though, I wasn't the only one. It was real, a real thing, everybody was on edge, nobody spoke to each other for a couple of weeks, and then finally you know, we relaxed over the situation and of course the deans of the university were very upset. That was a whole education, but there was a lot more to it than that. He was a very vital person, he was very young, he had so much vitality. He, well his encouragement, of course right from day one, was something I didn't understand, I was sort of taken under his wing. He was fantastic for me. I suppose it was that he paid so much attention, but also, now that I think about it, was that I loved it so much that I just wanted to be there morning, noon and night, and I think now, you know students who are that way, how one can't help but give them more attention, so you know it kind of makes more reason now.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So then your experience at Wayne was—

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh, it was good.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And it was probably the most influential in terms of your training?

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh yes, there's no doubt about it, there's no doubt about that. I'm not so sure that it was so absolutely marvelous, but I did love it, and Wayne Claxton had a lot to do with it, unfortunately maybe too much to do with it, for over too long a period of time. [00:58:00] First it was all give: give, give, give, you know, to give me the awareness of what it was all about, but I would say the other instructors still played a big part too and between all of them, it seemed to be adding up to a wonderful, wonderful thing for me, you know like life itself, just opening up. He was good to me as a person, he helped me grow up, he and his wife perhaps both did things for me my parents couldn't do.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Like?

LOUISE NOBILI: Well, like I'd break down and cry.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: You were able to feel.

LOUISE NOBILI: I was very nervous about a lot of things. I can remember the time when he said—I did all of the decorations for Beaux-Arts ball, so he said, "I'll see you tonight," and I said, "Oh, I'm not coming," and he said, "You're not coming, you have a date don't you," and I said no. Oh, he said, come on, he said, "Don't you date?" You know this kind of thing, I said no. Well, he said, "Well you come anyway, because if nobody dances with you, I will." I said, "I don't dance." You know there were all these things, I don't dance. Well you know, he began to worry about me and he began to take me into his office and talk to me.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So he really took you under his wing.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah, and then he got me to study with his wife during the summer and then we had this big secret between him, I had with him for a while, and then finally he told my father and my father kept it from my mother for a year, almost a year, and then finally we had to you know break the news. My mother was really thrown by it, what do I have to go to Wisconsin for, you know to go into a dance class? You're not a dancer.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: That was hard for your mother, to accept the fact that you would go.

LOUISE NOBILI: Well she, yeah, was, but then she came through, she always came through. If she had time and if you explained something to her, and by the right people, and I remember Wayne Claxton came to the house. My mother was a fantastic host and she treated a lot of the faculty to dinner quite often, you know here were all

these marvelous people in my life, that was all life consisted of for me, all these people that were so good to me, that cared, so they were invited to the house for dinner and then they got to communicate with my family and so there was like a whole opening up there. [01:00:24] I went to Wisconsin then, every summer, and you know, I had fantastic experiences. After my first year at Wayne, Lillian Newman took me to Gloucester, my second year, what was her name, Helen Heavenrich took me to Vermont. They all thought I had talent so they were going to give me some special experience.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And it was at that time, the department was small enough, the classes were small enough, so that you really could get that individual attention.

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh yes, and then we all knew each other. We'd come in the front door and say, "Anybody here?" Thad, are you here? That's kind of thing. Well nobody does that anymore, like one big family, and it was, I think an enormous, a beautiful way of learning.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: It was really a unique experience and very special.

LOUISE NOBILI: Well I'm very happy about it, I really am, and then of course we had Dr. Scheyer finally, who opened up the art history. He was so strict at first and he would beat on the table with his stick and he'd call people stupid. Ooh, you know, like if you couldn't pronounce a French or German of Italian word, he'd call everybody stupid, and then finally you know, the complaints got to the chairman and then finally he was told to simmer down a bit, and then he did, he learned. I learned so much from him.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Were there classes then, in art history, with Dr. Scheyer, were they informal and small?

LOUISE NOBILI: They were not informal by any means, Dr. Scheyer's classes were never informal. You had to be there on time and he would pound on that little lectern. [01:02:07]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Podium.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah. And you listened. You started to talk or to get informed during a lecture, you just get out. So there was a kind of intensity there, but I was used to that because my mother was German and you know, and that's really in a way, when I felt comfortable, I still do in a way. I've broken down a lot, I know I can't expect it but you know that's where Marco and I differ a great deal, because you see I like that up to a point. Of course one thing, I don't like to be bossed but I like order. I can't stand to be bossed, I can't stand to be told that I must do something, but I love having a structure.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Would you say that spills over into your work?

LOUISE NOBILI: I k now it, more and more. I'm going crazy right now you see, because the structure has been broken down.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: In looking back and thinking about those years at Wayne as a student, was there any particular way you could characterize the kind of work you were doing then, and attribute any strong influence in terms of style?

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah, I could, I could. I think what was stressed more than anything, that is if you could find a common denominator, was the idea that for drawing or painting or anything, was to get to the essence of things, and in that sense the idea of abstracting from reality was the big thing.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: That was the idea or the concept that was stressed.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes, I think that would be the one thing that followed through, and different teachers stress different things. Lillian Newman, who hung over a little longer than the others, still stressed a certain amount more of real rendering kind of things, but she was not at all aloof to the other impulses that were coming out. [01:04:12] Wayne Claxton definitely stressed movement, movement and this abstracting, not so much pure abstraction, Henrietta Lang stressed pure abstraction a great deal and between the three of them it just seemed as though—

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LINDA ABRAMSKY: This is a continuation with an interview with Louise Nobili, for the Archives of American Art, June 23, 1978.

[Audio Break.]

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[Audio Break.]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Mrs. Nobili, we were talking and when we ended our conversation, about the period that you were a student at Wayne, and I was very interested in hearing about your experience with Frank Lloyd Wright. Could you talk a little bit about that?

LOUISE NOBILI: Well, Wayne Claxton, Marge Claxton, apparently were very good friends of Frank Lloyd Wright and I was there for a summer. I was at the University of Wisconsin for several summers and I believe it was the first summer that I went there that I went up to the Claxton summer home and one day they said look, we're going to have a very special treat for you today and they took me to Taliesin, where they were having a concert. These were, I believe the students of Frank Lloyd Wright, that would give a little chamber music every Sunday and it was a very small intimate audience in one of the structures of Taliesin East. [00:02:11] So, I was sitting there in the audience when Frank Lloyd Wright tapped Margie Claxton on the back and he said, "After the concert, come over to the house." So we spent the entire afternoon together, the three of us. He took us all around the grounds.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Oh it must have been marvelous.

LOUISE NOBILI: He showed us the windmill, the famous one, talked about his work, talked intimately about other things, music, cultural things, and just his idea of nature, showed me a lot of those things that he enjoyed, spoke to me personally, and just the idea that I had studied about him in school, it was like—

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Left an impression.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah. It just became one of those big days in my life and I don't forget it, I never will. And of course I had studied practically every building of Frank Lloyd Wright.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: That was the other thing, I know that architecture is very important to you.

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh yes. I studied with Buford Pickens, studied the development of modern architecture, several courses, and then of course Wayne Claxton was very interested in architecture, probably that's what he loved more than anything, because he was anxious during the summer, to get up to his Wisconsin area and design on his house. He bought an old house and he kept making it into a more modern home all the time and every addition, I was in on in some way or another and it all added up to this excitement that my family took on, and so they built their first modern house, the first modern house in Detroit.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And this came from your influence.

LOUISE NOBILI: That's right, and then that's where I had a little studio, but my sister still used the bedroom. [00:04:04] We had a bedroom together with twin beds and she had a little space. The bedroom was made a little bigger so that she would have room to practice, and so I went to sleep every night with violin music.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Lovely.

LOUISE NOBILI: And I miss it, I miss it very much.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: That's lovely. We were also talking about the style of your work at that time, and you were saying that abstraction, that this was emphasized in different degrees by your various teachers.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah, different degrees.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Can you talk a little bit about your own work at this time and how would you characterize it, aside from abstraction?

LOUISE NOBILI: I guess I would look at it very different now than I looked at it then. I would say I went through school like in an exciting daze, you know, doing was very important. I picked up concepts here and there from my instructors, I guess that's what students do do, but I think I struggled awfully hard to avoid being like somebody else, but without anything to substitute it for, like I didn't know what I wanted to look like. Somehow or another it just seemed as though I got encouragement. I really don't know how to characterize it. I remember the first things—well the first painting that ever got into the Michigan Artist Show, was done in class with Helen May, as of watercolor, and I remember being ashamed of it because Tommy Woodward gave me a frame and in order to get the painting in the frame, the head had to be chopped off and part of the feet, and that seemed you know, just terrible, but it was the only way. I never believed that it would get through competition like that but it

did and of course people complimented me on it and it was a great feeling. [00:06:08] I was among other artists you know, that I thought the world of. How that painting would look if I saw it now, I have no idea. I vaguely have a recollection of it, but I'm not sure whether I picture it accurately. Then, you know I studied watercolor and I studied oil, and I think one thing that I still have to bear up with is that I don't want to paint the same in oil as I paint in watercolor, and I find that most artists, if they paint in two media or three or four, that they have a certain kind of thing that carries through everything, and I'm not so sure that that has ever happened with me. For example, I may think of something to paint and I'd just be dying to paint but somehow or another it falls into a category, I'll paint that in watercolor. If somebody said why don't you paint it in oil, I couldn't.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Because you have a feeling that it should be in watercolor.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah, and the same thing goes for oil.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Well that's one thing, again, in reading about you, I know that you've had kind of this love affair with watercolors all of your life, in terms of a medium, and yet, there's also that element of always wanting to experiment with new materials.

LOUISE NOBILI: Well you know that's sort of a myth and maybe it's true, but part of that's a myth, because I think that was read into me a lot, and then I sort of took it on and now I'm beginning to be aware of the fact that that was taken on by being driven to that kind of idea.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Oh really?

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes, because what I really, really was in love with was oil painting, because I think that to me, when I was growing up at Wayne, that oil painting meant being a painter. [00:08:08] And I did love Helen May as a person and I had other teachers for watercolor too, and I liked the class and I had encouragement in it, but what I really wanted to get to was oil painting. And then I remember when the first one man show was arranged, but before the first one man show, it's true, I did my first exhibition of paintings, I think it was a group of five watercolors that went down to the market, and Flossie Davis and Wayne Claxton were the ones who said you've got to put those down into the market. I believe they had a price on them, for $25 or $35, which was then an enormous price, and at the end of the day, when the show opened, Flossie Davies called me up and said darling, you're a smash, something like that, and you're taking me out to dinner. I remember not understanding what it was all about and she had to explain to me that all five went and that I was rich.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: They were all sold.

LOUISE NOBILI: And that I was going to take her to dinner. And so finally said of course I would and she said oh, darling, you know I'm going to take you to dinner, I wouldn't think of using up all your new cash. So she said you know, you were such a smash hit, you're really going to make it, you're really an artist, and I felt I had tremendous promotion, but I didn't know what the word promotion was, I didn't use that word at that time because I didn't think of being promoted. I just thought golly, what you know, they're so nice, you know they like my work and it did encourage me to keep going, but I always had a feeling that I had to please them. [00:10:05]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And that's why you pursued watercolor?

LOUISE NOBILI: No, no, I don't think that was it. I think that I was then working equally with oil, but that encouragement came early, with the watercolor. Then there was a one man show arranged for the artist market, and I don't even remember the year, but I brought half oils and half watercolors.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Well why then, why has this myth emerged?

LOUISE NOBILI: Well at that time, when I brought half oils and half watercolors, there were too many to hang.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So they hung the watercolors.

LOUISE NOBILI: And they all said darling, you have to decide on whether you're a watercolorist or an oil painter, and I just practically with tears in my eyes, I just, I didn't want to do it that way, I would have like to just putting up my favorite paintings. I remember going to Flossie Davies and Wayne Claxton for help, what'll I do, I don't want to, you know I want to hang them all, "Well darling you can't hang them all, you'd better decide, I'd suggest your watercolors, I think you're really special in watercolors." And so the watercolors went up and the oils didn't, and I think that was a good choice, but in terms of what was burning inside of me, I just wanted to be a painter and I still do, but I think that's what started off the myth that I was in love with watercolor beyond anything else, I think people wanted me to be in love with it. And so anyway, that show went up as a watercolor show. I remember selling almost everything, Tannehill bought things, you know, Valentiner, people like that, it was exciting, but I didn't know that they were famous people, I had no idea. [00:12:04] To me they were wonderful people, not famous.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: They appreciated your work.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes, I didn't realize what stature they had. I was many times with Dr. Valentiner, who encouraged me so much. As a matter of fact, there was a painter he wanted of mine, for the museum, and I had just given it to Dr. Scheyer, and he had it in his home for years. Those are incredible days, Margaret Stern remembers back in those days, did remember back, and I remember when I got one of the first watercolors into the Michigan Artist Show. Margaret bought one and then Newberry gave an award. Those paintings, in my standards now, wouldn't have held up, I don't think they would.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Do you look back at paintings that you've done years and years ago?

LOUISE NOBILI: Some of them yes, but you know the best ones sold, so the ones that are left are always, you know the leftovers, like the ones I didn't show, because at that time I had an enormous success selling and it was kind of a follow-up. People were asking for my paintings and I didn't know quite—I still was in a kind of dream state about it. And I had ideas, you know that money wasn't important, that you don't paint to sell, and then when I sold something, it had to be on the condition that they wanted the paintings, not that I would have them for sale.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: They appreciated your work.

LOUISE NOBILI: I had to be pushed. To this day I've never asked for a show anyplace. Now I am finding that that doesn't work.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: You have to be a little more aggressive.

LOUISE NOBILI: Well I mean I'm beginning to wonder what to do about it. Now they're asking young people to have shows, and my pride is there, I don't want to say look, I want a show. [00:14:07] If somebody doesn't ask me, well that's too bad, and so paintings are stacking up. Well it's like that, and my prices are a little higher because I suppose because I work a lot longer on a painting too.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Getting back to watercolor.

LOUISE NOBILI: I get drifting away, way far out.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Would you say then, that you really have not gravitated more to watercolor than oil or mixed media, or all the other materials that—

LOUISE NOBILI: I just like painting. As long as I'm painting I'm happy. As a matter of fact, I just wish I could be an octopus, I wish I could be a lot of people all at once, and I think there are a lot of things about me that no one will never understand. I don't like to sound like a real case study, but if it were a healthy way to live, I wouldn't mind just being shut behind a door all day painting and doing what I want to do, but I wouldn't want to give up for example, Marco.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: I wanted to talk about Marco.

LOUISE NOBILI: You know I wouldn't want to give up those beautiful things, but there are times when I secretively wish that he could be a little bit more German and I could be a little more Italian, that I could have a little more of his whole idea that art is life, that it isn't just taking yourself into a corner and making things, but I'm obsessed that way, but I kind of get a balance from him.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Let's clarify. Marco Nobili is your husband. [00:16:02]

LOUISE NOBILI: [They laugh.] That's right, I hope, I'd better think so today.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And you met him about 27 years ago?

LOUISE NOBILI: No. I met him five years before that, so that would be about 32 years ago. I met him in November, I think, of 1946 or '47.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So that was when you were first at Wayne, teaching.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes. Just—

LINDA ABRAMSKY: It was when you started your job in design.

LOUISE NOBILI: Part-time teaching.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And he is trained as an architect is he not?

LOUISE NOBILI: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Italian.

LOUISE NOBILI: Mm-hmm [affirmative], very, as he would boast, since 1200 he's been Florentine.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And we're talking about the influences in your life, strong influences. Would you say that your husband is a strong influence, has been a strong influence on you as an artist?

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh, yes, a strong influence in many ways, like both in my painting, maybe also making me aware of not being as good, of being critical of my paintings, from day one, also complimentary, but I was accustomed to not being criticized. I had a group of people all adoring everything I did and suddenly it was somebody who would take time to look at something and didn't say wow, you know right away. He'd look at a painting and mm, mm-hmm, that kind of thing, and that threw me. Also, he was that way about just the relationship, there was no relationship at first, it was like an acquaintance. [00:18:06] We were introduced, it was by a fluke in a way because he met Buford Pickens in Italy, in Florence, and he was his interpreter, so it was natural that when he would come to America and especially to Detroit, that he would look up Buford Pickens, but since Buford Pickens wasn't here, Buford had left for another university, that his architectural friend, Hawkins Ferry, would take over taking Marco around on what happened to be a visitor's visa. So the first place he took him was the house that Buford Pickens designed for my mother, so my mother actually met him when I was in school.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And that was really before you met him.

LOUISE NOBILI: That's right. And then later, you know he made this arrangement to go out to dinner, and I thought Marco was married to this *contessa*, who was married really, to another architect. But we had a beautiful dinner together and then we were going to a concert afterwards and I couldn't go, I had responsibilities, and I had to back out after accepting, and I don't think any of that party thought I was being very polite. I thought they thought I was being rude, but I did have a responsibility at school. I had somebody on the staff that had reminded me of it and said you are not getting out of this, and so I came back and worked on that and when Marco was finally—finally came up to Wayne University, just to see the building and to meet Mr. Claxton, he was asked if he would teach. He didn't go up there applying for a job, he had a little job in an architect's office downtown, Smith, Hinchman and Grylls, whatever that was, a part-time job, and then he was asked, would you mind teaching here? So he took on a part-time teaching job at Wayne, but at the end of the year he had to forfeit all of the money because he wasn't on the right visa to accept pay. [00:20:02] So he worked for a whole year in this country without being able to receive pay. He received it and then had to return it, and then I guess he borrowed money from Hawkins to leave the country and he went to Sweden and he worked in an architect's office over there and then came back. When he came back, he didn't throw himself at me, that's for sure, nor to anyone, but he had a lot of friends. Somehow or another he had letters of introduction, but he met the people without having to use them, and there happened to be a lot of people who owned my paintings and people who knew me.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So did you know of each other before you met?

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh no, oh no. No, no, no. And I remember when Hawkins brought Marco up to the art building, he was in the office with Mr. Claxton for maybe an hour or an hour and a half, and when he came out, he immediately was taken over to my little area, was the office of Helen May, that I shared an office with, and I guess with several other instructors too, that were doing part-time teaching, and Mr. Claxton introduced us and I said "we've met" and that threw him, but they said right away, "Show Mr. Nobili your watercolors," and I took them out, you know and I expected him to say oh, that's very nice, but he didn't. He'd look at these and say "Mm-hmm [affirmative]."

LINDA ABRAMSKY: With a critical eye.

LOUISE NOBILI: And Mr. Claxton would try to point out all of the fantastic things about them, and Marco wasn't very fast about being complimentary or outgoing about it. It was as though somebody were pushing this, this kind of thing down his throat and he's a person that doesn't like that, he likes to have his own mind, and that was a new experience for me. [00:22:09] I wasn't so sure that I liked it but I think it was good for me, and it was five years later that he popped the question, but he went very slowly, just like he did with the paintings, like he believed in me but he—he's that way now too, he's not immediate always, about judgments, he really examines a painting.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: He stands back and waits before he—

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes, and he looks at it. Once in a while, he has a more immediate judgment than he does on something else, but he doesn't go and say oh, like I do. I'm just hit with things, and then I try to figure out why, and sometimes I'm, how could I have liked that, but I'm terribly spontaneous.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And he is much more reserved in his nature.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes and yet in his life, he's much more outgoing in a restraint way, how do you explain that?

LINDA ABRAMSKY: I know that you have worked together on projects, you worked on a joint project for a church in Grosse Pointe, did you not?

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh yes, we did.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: You did the triptych painting and he designed the altar?

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: How is it like working with him?

LOUISE NOBILI: I don't know, I haven't gone back to see it and I don't—I think artistically speaking, I could find it a little trite right now. I think that what I was—there were two things that I was trying to do in that triptych that maybe I would still enjoy. One was that I was trying to make various abstract color patterns through the thing, which I would still be immersed in that, and then working on the wood, and I never painted on wood before, and so that restricted me to something more abstract and sharp edged than what I was like attuned to do. [00:24:14] My things always had a certain feathery edginess to them and then suddenly, I didn't feel that I could do that on wood and trying to get a pigment. I don't remember whether I ended up with oil or enamel, but something that I could control, and I felt that I had to be edgy and so it has a kind of regularity, it has like little trite sort of motifs, religious motifs floating through it.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: What was it like working with your husband on the project?

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh it was nice, because we were not married for so long and everything was so exciting, to just be near each other, you know doing something, and then also it was the big year when I learned to use gold leaf, you know they didn't have acrylic paints at that time, and it was very difficult for me to use gold leaf in combination with wood, let alone canvas or anything, and I had begun to use metallic in some of my watercolors. I remember I was in Connecticut, at the house of Giovanna Bowers, I don't know whether you know her or not, the sister of Nando Cinelli, and I was doing a painting of the *pallio* and I needed desperately to have something shiny in there, so I wrote to Garth, saying do you have any shiny silver paint. Well he sent what he had to me and it turned out to be dull radiator silver and I didn't use it, and then I went down into her kitchen one day and I saw this Reynolds aluminum foil for the time in my life and I said, "What's that?" And she said, "Oh, haven't you heard of this, this is the most wonderful stuff, you know you can use it in your broiler, you can use it over again," and all of that, and I said, "Can I borrow some?" [00:26:08] "Oh, take all you want." So I took off a strip of it and up in the bedroom where I was working, there was like a glass-top table, and I smoothed it all out, took all the little wrinkles out.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: This is the early '50s right?

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah, '54. I used it with rubber cement, you know, in a watercolor of the pallio, and that was the first time that I ever saw my husband, Marco, just sitting up in bed before we turned the lights off, and saying, "Louise, you've got something!" You know he said, "You've really got something!" and the enthusiasm was just enormous and I couldn't sleep all night, I was just, I was so turned on, like I had made a discovery, you know there were strips of this shiny aluminum, and then I worked with opaque paints because the opaque was the only kind of paint that would go over the aluminum, so I could carry the motif.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: That was painted [ph] on Masonite?

LOUISE NOBILI: No, it was first on watercolor paper, and I remember having to go to smooth watercolor paper too, which bothered me but that's the only way I could keep the aluminum smooth, and I had it so under control, like a new thing was happening, and it didn't look like anything else I had ever done. Also, the Italian experience you know, was coming through all of my paintings, to the point where my old chairman was getting nervous. He'd leaf through my works for exhibitions and he'd say, "That's not like you, you're a blue/gray person, you're not a red/orange person," and I was beginning to talk back, I was beginning to say I'm not a blue/gray person, I went to Italy, and of course he began—he had prejudices about Italy and Italians and maybe that shouldn't go into the tape, but we did have a really traumatic thing there as a matter of fact. [00:28:04] It's a tape which shouldn't be recorded, but that was a big factor in my life, that I had this wall.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: It influenced your—it had to influence your style.

LOUISE NOBILI: I had a wall of resistance with another breakthrough, in an area of great love, which was Marco, and the Italian experience, and the whole European experience. And also, like the opening up of life, I mean everything was happening to me. After all, I was a kind of a naïve little girl, and so there I was, I wasn't so you know, I wasn't in my 20s anymore, I'd just hit 30 and here I was, having this fantastic romance. Well, the romance started in my 20s but you know.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: It blossomed. And this had a lot to do, a lot of influence.

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh, it had an enormous—so here was a new person believing in my work while the other one was envious and resisting and working almost against it, and I had this terrible struggle, but I think it was the best thing that ever happened to me, but it was also hard, it was hard on both of us. Marco was half the weight he is now, eh lost weight, he became extremely ill, we both had to give each other shots to stay alive. We went through a real trauma, because a great friend in our life was going the other way and we never really lost that friendship within ourselves but he couldn't stand it, he really wanted to break it up, he did everything to break up our marriage. But anyway, we pulled through and he, to this day, he still is very warm to us. As soon as he had accomplished what he wanted to, which finally I guess he became satisfied that we were teaching in two different schools, and then he came to, things were mended. [00:30:11] He even came to the house later and bought a watercolor for $600. I couldn't believe it but it was like saying I'm sorry. That was a traumatic thing and it lasted much too long, but somehow or another, that our marriage could hold out through all of that was amazing. But we did do projects together, we did the triptych in the church, and we worked close together you know, right in the same room.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Well you've got a lot of common interests don't you?

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah. I think the architecture thing brought us together in a way. For one thing, he saved my life. I was teaching interior design at Wayne, see because my first position, what I really was applying for was either painting or stage design, but with number one painting. I remember doing part-time teaching at Wayne and then Wayne Claxon said, "Louise, you can never really progress here at Wayne, you'll be a part-time person for the rest of your life. Go out and get a full-time job someplace else, I'll give you high recommendations." I said, "But I don't know how to do that." Well, he showed me how to do it and there I was, busy writing letters and answers came back. I had one job in stage design offered to me at William and Mary College, another one at Oklahoma, for teaching painting, and each time a thing came through, I was always told that's not good enough for you. They were offering $1,600, up to $1,900 a year, those were the salaries, and finally, he heard of somebody getting married at Northwestern University, a friend that I knew. He said, "Look, there's an opening in interior design," [00:32:02] I said, "But I'm not an interior designer." He said, "Look, you can outdo any of these people." He knew that I had worked closely with Buford Pickens on the house, I wove the rugs for the house, not all of them but all the small rugs, you know I had some feeling for it. So he insisted that I had more ability than what I knew I had, and I was asked to apply for the job at Northwestern. Well I got it and I was an assistant professor right off the bat. That was the biggest break I had professionally. I taught there for a year and I worked so hard I never in my life worked so hard. I was up half the night every night and I had a group of spoiled rich students, some of which were very talented, but among those I had an Icelandic student, who was on a scholarship, fellowship, an exchange fellowship, and she was a genius, and we stayed up all night together, I don't know how many nights. I learned from her, she learned from me, at least she claimed she did, but at the end of the year we had a show that was so—it was so fantastic, I couldn't believe that it could happen, and Wayne Claxton came with his wife to see the show and he said, "Louise you've got to come back, you've got to teach interior design at Wayne." I said, "No, I'm a painter," He said, "Well darling, you're teaching it here, so you could teach it here too," and I said, "No, because what I really want is to get into painting."

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Painting.

LOUISE NOBILI: And he said, "Look, you'll never get into painting here, they will never promote painting in this school to any big level." You'll always be second, you know, it will never—well, I tested it out. I went to the chairman and he said no, we don't think of the studio arts as something we want to develop very highly. [00:34:01]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Oh really?

LOUISE NOBILI: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. No, they didn't want to do that and they still haven't done it. It's relatively small. They tried even very good new chairmen, who haven't been able to promote it, it's just a bugaboo, they can't, they just can't get the administration to feel that is important. They have a fantastic Art History Department but not too much of the other. So anyway, I was everything in interior design, I ran the department, I got the first slides, I had money to spend for a decorative arts collection. I went out and bought Dorothy Liebes fabrics and Orrefors glass and an Archipenko sculpture, and they were right in my office there,

and so I had a great experience and then—what was I getting to? Oh yes, and then I was begged to come back. Until I was promised, after he found out that Lillian Newman was going to retire, he said well okay then, you can have Lillian Newman's job.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So you persevered and you got finally, what you wanted.

LOUISE NOBILI: So finally, I said well if I can have painting I'll come back, but when I came back, they shoved me into interior design and I was heartbroken. But then the class went so good at Wayne, he didn't want me to leave that. He said look, you can always be a painter on the side, this is where you should earn your living, you should have a little interior shop, you should this. And I began to find that he was running my life and I know I was not a businessperson, I never will be, never could be, but you know he was still encouraging me. But you know, he wanted out of me what he needed and I was beginning to feel that, and so I was quite adamant. I kept saying, I want to get into painting, that's what you promised. He also wanted to take my status down, and I began to talk back. I said, "You don't demote me." He said, "Well, Tommy Woodward and Bill Allen, they will be hurt." [00:36:02] I said, "Well if you don't want them to be hurt, why don't you give them a promotion?" I said, "I don't care if you make them full professors, I'm not going to take a demotion."

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So then you were finally made assistant professor in painting.

LOUISE NOBILI: I was an assistant professor then again, as I came back to Wayne, and when Marco came to apply, well he didn't apply. When he was asked to teach, he took over the interior design and I finally got my painting, and I was teaching oil, and then I taught oil for years and we taught, you know little houses, and then there was a while I taught oil and watercolor, and then there were times when I was shifted around, like I'd have design and oil, or drawing and oil, or watercolor and oil, or watercolor and design, watercolor and drawing, always a different combination. And then finally, committees were formed, we were beginning to get bigger and bigger, and then decisions were made about—finally, by the time Wilbert came, decisions were made about a painting area as distinct from the way we were doing it, where we were jumping around and trading off with people.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Would you say you were on the ground floor in terms of developing the studio department at Wayne?

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes, although I had a big problem there and it started with Claxton. I got very hurt one day because I was so overpraised about my work and about my position at Wayne, that I was so great, and I finally said how come you never asked me to be on a committee? In those days, he just appointed people to be on committees. Perhaps a few people that were on kind of maybe a personnel committee thing, I think that was the only kind of committee they ever had, made up of men, I remember saying many, many times, all through my years, early teaching years at Wayne, why am I never on a committee? Oh darling, you're too much of an artist to be on a committee, you're not the committee type, stay with your painting. [00:38:05] Way back in my mind it hurt me.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Do you feel like that's because you were a woman?

LOUISE NOBILI: I'm not sure, I didn't think of it that way myself, maybe I should have, but right up until the time he left, that was irritating me. And then after he left, no one wanted me on committees because they felt I would be prejudiced. Marco and I had had such battles with what had happened, you know getting married was just the worst thing we could have done for our profession. So then I learned to stay clear of that, and so in some ways I wasn't part of the policy forming, but in another way I was very much so because I was always taken out to lunch by the chairman, even after things got bad. What do you think about this, what do you think about that? My brains were picked a lot.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Do you think that you—

LOUISE NOBILI: I think in a way, yes, I think in a way I had something to do, but we had other people too, that came in, that were very strong, had ideas about that, that maybe I never would have thought about.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Like who?

LOUISE NOBILI: Jack Bailey for example, started the block program. He said this is ridiculous, we are the only university in Michigan that doesn't block the program and guarantee people some time for creative work, there's no reason that we should be dealing with a teaching program on this jumping basis, coming in the morning and another class at night, and the next day coming down in the middle of the day. He said the university owes us a decent schedule.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: What about the attitude, the approach to teaching, how would you describe that today at Wayne? [00:40:05]

LOUISE NOBILI: I don't think that's ever been changed, except as areas have changed them. The idea of the area being a strong unit in the department, I think is what has changed the teaching more than anything, because each area might have decisions. I know that within the area I'm in, painting, it is very much the same as it's always been, that each instructor teaches, takes over his class as he so sees fit, and the only big difference is perhaps that you have to have in the office, a mimeograph sheet of what you intend to cover, so that if a student complains you can say well look, that was in black and white, you knew that you had 25 paintings due, or ten.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Is there a predominant philosophy that—

LOUISE NOBILI: I don't believe so, in a way, maybe there is. I'd say that in drawing, I'd say it seems as though there is a strong philosophy, it seems as though, just from seeing what is turned out, that they stress very much, very, very careful scrutiny of form, and getting right down to the most minute essentials of surface form. No, surface form does not mean that they eliminate anatomy, because they've thrown in more intensive courses on anatomy and so forth, but I think they stress very much, how the anatomy affects the outer appearance of things, and I think they've done a marvelous job. But there must be a philosophy of like deciding that students have to have this, this and this, it seems to show up. Not too much seems to show up in drawing as a you know, kind of a basic, that deals with drawing the way I had it, whereas movement and getting into the core of the figure and into the inner action, just stressed so enormously, I don't think that is stressed as much. [00:42:19] Also, in my time, drawing was very much in a spirit that went parallel with painting, issues, so you didn't feel that they were two different things. I would say now, if I had a criticism, it would not be against drawing or painting, but that they don't relate as much as they ought to. The drawers are technical achievers and as the come, feed into the painting area, I find they're so good that way that they can very easily bridge into painting on a technical basis again, and I'm all for it if that's their choice, but their choice is based on an experience which has been limited to that. Well, I asked one of my—I think he's kind of a genius, he's just really, a tremendously talented young boy and so serious about his paintings, works in watercolors, you know with like a slow methodical technical skill that's unbelievable, and I said to him, what would you do, how, how would you approach a painting if I said look, do that in one hour instead of eight, or in even 20 minutes, what do you do? He said, "I wouldn't," and I said, "Could you?" And he said well I never thought of that but I wouldn't. He said, "I think it would be wrong."

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And that's the difference you think.

LOUISE NOBILI: I think yeah, and I find that it explains to me why that happens. [00:44:00] Now some students who have, happen to have one or two instructors along the line who made them understand freedom, like there are two or three young girls I've had as many as five times in succession, and I stressed so much freedom right from the beginning, that they got the freedom and now the other kind of processing with it, and now they're beginning to give up that too and they're getting very creative, very creative, something is really turning on. But the people right out of drawing, I'm almost jealous of how—the finesse they have in watercolors, it's the best stuff in that respect that I've ever had out of a class.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: But when you talk about it, I'm thinking of your own work now, and you talk about that sense of freedom, that spontaneity that you're talking about is something that I think it's been very essential to your work.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah, and there's a big fight going on there now with me, you know because I want both. But I don't know, I really don't want to explain all of those things for my own work, and I think it makes me admire it more from my students. I'm not in competition with my students actually, I just love what they are doing, it's as though they were all finding themselves, but I do know that some of the disciplines bridge out of that drawing discipline and only a few have like all of a sudden they say, "Oh, watercolor is so fantastic," because in one wash, I already have the shape of that figure down. I don't have to draw around it, I don't have to come to it by all these kind of roundabout means.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Do you feel in your own work, that you had to break through that discipline, but you had to go through the discipline, but break through to get that freedom? [00:46:03]

LOUISE NOBILI: No, I never went through that kind of discipline. I went through a different discipline.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: But that not that kind of rigorous.

LOUISE NOBILI: As soon as we would get too tight with examining the little things, we were not encouraged too much for that, like it was always stressed that there was a force behind everything and you had to get the large general thing first and finally get to the detail, but if you had it all said before you got to the last wrinkle, leave that last wrinkle out and see how few strokes you could do it in. People like Kollwitz was a good model, you know one that was stressed a lot.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Käthe Kollwitz?

LOUISE NOBILI: I don't mean Käthe Kollwitz, yes we studied her, but there's another person, starts with a Kolbe, the wash drawings of Kolbe, those became sort of idols, and there were many others, the German painters.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: The German expressionists?

LOUISE NOBILI: The German expressionists, Kokoschka, there was something more than scrutinizing, the appearance. In other words, we did not anticipate Chuck Close, you know there was none of that. As a matter of fact, we tried to move away from that, but there was discipline, because sometimes I found it was easy to get into that kind of scrutiny, and the minute we got into that it was that that really wasn't enough. You know try to condense that, try to see it all like how can you pick out the most essential thing from that.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And capture that.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah. It's too easy to just copy everything you see. I had my discipline but it wasn't that what the discipline is now, like how many planes are in the upper lip. [00:48:00]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: You were more interested in capturing the feeling that you got from the subject. Let's talk about some of the other things that have really been an inspiration to you as far as your work. I know that traveling has been a very important part of your life.

LOUISE NOBILI: Since marriage, yes.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And it also has served the basis of the—the source of imagery for a lot of your work. Can you talk a little bit about how that has influenced your work, your travels.

LOUISE NOBILI: Well apparently it did, because when I came back from Italy and I had my first watercolors you know, first of all there was a that's not you kind of thing, but then people said oh, what Italy has done for you. I didn't realize it, but then when I compared yes, my color was changing, the forms were changing, the ideas were changing.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: How so, how would they—how would they change, how were they transformed and what do you attribute it to?

LOUISE NOBILI: Spirit, well a spirit. I really was, I think ripe for something new to happen too, and then Italy gave me the excuse and I can look at it that way.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: You keep going back to Italy, you've gone to Italy so many times.

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh yes, and it probably will always be part of my life, it's like home again. The first time I went it was like a blow to me, you know to see stone buildings coming right down to the sidewalk, no grass, nobody out in their shirtsleeves on Sunday cutting grass, you know to see everything old.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Architecture too, again, is something that you will take a detail in architecture.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: That becomes translated.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes, in a way, when you asked me how has something affected my work, I suppose that's okay, it definitely has the color I would say was the biggest thing, because I was seeing color differently. You see all of the things that inspired me before were like Gloucester, with its silky blue hazy water, the gray piles, the gray clapboard, the white shingles, sometimes the gray shingles, then Wisconsin, the bay, and I went to the University of Wisconsin too, did some things from the water there. [00:50:26] So all the—those were of the first things that inspired people to buy things, and those first paintings, which in my memory I'm still fond of, I have one or two slides and I still say oh, you know, I wish I could do that again in a way, but you could hardly see them on the paper, they were that delicate. Lots of little etching things and little feathery strokes, and the strokes kind of remain somewhere between the edge and the space.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: But these are watercolors that you're referring to.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes, very delicate things and that was my inspiration, it was atmosphere and it was always whether I was up high or down low, I always had a high point of view and I never realized that.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Did you paint on the spot, sketch on the spot?

LOUISE NOBILI: I only did when I was with Thorn's class that one summer in Gloucester, but usually I had to sketch outdoors and then get indoors, and I'm still that way. Now I have a class that has decided that the studio is too much of a classroom thing, and in the spring they went out and I said to the you know, I haven't tried that for so many years, I'm going to try it again, you've made me think that maybe there's something in it. Maybe I will have the courage to try it. I don't think I would get what I want but I think it's a good experience. I think I'm a studio painter, I take notes. [00:52:02] Some people say but how can you take notes, don't you have to do a complete drawing? I say no, I'm so accustomed to just making a few little lines, just something to remember something with.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And then you will write notes.

LOUISE NOBILI: And then I work from that, trying to kind of—I suppose that's how I'm different. But I'm beginning to think maybe that isn't enough at this moment, I don't know, like I'm doing a lot more examining now than I used to, and I think the students do teach me a lot. Through the years, I would say that if you added up my years of teaching, that students have taught me a lot more altogether than I've taught any one student. I give them credit for just about everything now. There was the enthusiasm that I got in years back, and certainly from basic training, that was wonderful, and I still refer back to the School of Design and my early training at Wayne, but most of what I've learned lately is from the students, because there's a big interchange of concept and idea, and you know you say something and it feeds back and you get all kinds of comments and now, I get to the point where I'm actually making charts about the way I think. It's amazing.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: You know I was thinking about that, because I wanted to talk about your ideas about your role as an educator. Do you see yourself, I mean there must be that, it's almost a conflict, between Louise Nobili the painter and Louise Nobili the instructor, or professor.

LOUISE NOBILI: I absolutely love to teach and I love to paint and there's no conflict. My only conflict is now really with the—all of the extra things that take me away from my painting time, plus the socializing that I get from my husband's associations, which I love, I have to admit I love them, and I think life is made richer through them, but it tears me away. [00:54:10] And I'm really going through a trauma right now, right now sitting here, in a sense, because I want desperately to be painting. In recent years, the graduate program has developed so much at Wayne, the extra committee work.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Are you very much an intricate part of that graduate program?

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh yes, oh yes, and also I'm—

LINDA ABRAMSKY: In terms of the planning and development.

LOUISE NOBILI: Also, I'm now coordinator of the painting area and there are duties, a feeling of responsibility, and I'm still learning. I'm really not in the groove yet, I'd better get with it, you know next year is my year to get with it, this year was for understanding it. When Robert Wilbert comes back, he may take it over again and he may not, I'm not sure, and I have to decide this year too, whether I'm going to stay in that position, whether it's worth it. I have to, you know have priorities, and I know my first priority is painting but right along with it is teaching, I think it's just as creative.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: But you put it, but you made it too.

LOUISE NOBILI: In a way yes, in a way, but I'd say you know it's part of my painting, simply because it's continuously feeding me. I don't think there's a week that goes by that something from the teaching stimulus hasn't sort of affected my impetus in painting, and maybe the fact that I didn't paint much this year is going to be good, I hope it will be good. I would like to feel, as a painter, that I'm not held to being what people expect me to be, and that's basically the philosophy that's been developing over all my life. [00:56:03] When people say how do you paint or will you give a demonstration, I no longer will do it, because I do not want to define myself. I want to be free as a bird. I know I'm not, but I'd say that part which is not free, is that part of me which I have no control over, it's that part that's going to ride me, it's that part that is me, but I want to feel that if I should want to paint all in grays or all in whites, or in black and white or in red and purple, if I suddenly am obsessed by that, that I, I'm free to do it, and if I feel differently I can express that. I don't want to be pigeonholed.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: I think that that is what really, at least things that have been written about you, Joy Colby's articles and so forth, the thing that stands out is a quality of freshness, a spirit.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes, and sometimes, like I think she's been right about that and maybe it will follow me all the way down the line, because in a way, I know that that's part of me. It's a spontaneousness, it's a joy of life going on, but I also feel that if things affect my life that aren't always that fresh, is the whole world going to go against me? I've had my blows in life and I've had still peaks of great thrill and excitement, but like when my father died

and then when my mother died, those were just not ordinary things in my life and there were times I wanted to weep it out in a painting, and my habits were there and I found that those habits were so much there that there was no way for me to part from them, even while I was crying inside. [00:58:14] But I don't know how long, like I still just want to be free and if I turn out to be what people expect of me all right, but I don't want—I want to retain the integrity of doing what I must do, that's very important to me. If I define it ahead of time or if I even give a demonstration, like see I even refuse to say there's a certain way I work. Like students say, "Mrs. Nobili, how would you do this?" How would I know how I would do it, I'm not doing it.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And that really accounts for your willingness and your having to be able to experiment with new materials.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes. There was another reason for that too. I wondered about myself while I was in the midst of wanting so desperately to paint a certain way, I wouldn't be doing it.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: You'd be experimenting with something else.

LOUISE NOBILI: That I would be doing something else. I found the School of Design reentering into me, all these things, but I'd say that one thing that happened several times in my life and we don't have to go into it explicitly, but there were times when I was either sad or emotionally torn up, when it would be impossible for me to paint in the usual way, like to go into my studio and paint like that, but what I could do, I could lay out something and work on it as though it were almost a craft, and do something tonight, put 30 old encyclopedias down, to weight it down for the night, come back the next night, take off the encyclopedias, put another swatch on, and build up something over a three or four month period, or paint a sheet of paper per night, that was another strange experience. [01:00:28] I was tearing up my mail, you know those booklets that come in the mail, and I was going through a kind of trauma with myself, with everything, the whole painting thing, not being able to get to it, and I was tearing things up, even answering the telephone or just, just saying what's all this trash here, you know all that stack of mail coming in, all these little pamphlets, who wants to read them? I found myself tearing them up and making pieces of sculpture and I would get so excited about them that I put them up in the kitchen and Marco would come home and say, "Hey, you've got something there." I'd say I know, you know but it's paper, it's magazine, it's trash, you know, I said, "But aren't they exciting?" I'd say, "You know if only I were a sculptor," and he'd say, "Well be a sculptor." I said, "Well I don't know enough about materials," you know, he said, "Well do it in paper." I said I know, but you know Marco, I discovered, I can't do that big because if I would do it big, you know, the scale would go off the paper, would flop. And so that was a big traumatic thing for me, you know like here I was being appeased during a traumatic moment, by doing this busy work of tearing and getting some excitement in that, on a completely remote level from what I was supposed to be doing according to my will, and getting thrilled about it.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Didn't that, um, I'm thinking about your show in 1976, your collections.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah. [01:02:04]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Wasn't that the watercolors.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah, and it started two or three years before on that scale, and by the time my sabbatical actually happened, I was beginning to think that there ought to be a way I could get that into a watercolor, but I'd given it up. And then I wanted desperately to paint in oil and I started on the reflection thing, and the reflection thing came from the Venice experience and looking into a door in that palazzo across from another palazzo, of a reflection, and I said, "Marco, look at that, that's like my *Byzantine Splendor* that I did, with all the string and everything," I said, "You know, I never realized that the *Byzantine Splendor* was a reflection," you know it was really crazy because I had done it first and then I saw it, and then I decided that that's what I would do and it really turned me on, and so I started with the oils on the reflection. Then I kept tearing up this stuff in between, you know, and thinking—I would say to Marco, "Why can't I do that in a watercolor?" I don't want to do sculpture and besides I can't—well then I was putting his slides away one night and I had—I got to the slides of *San Zeno*, you know in Siena, the doors of San Zeno, and when he came home that night after a night class, I said you know what, I'm going to use that new way of working. I'm going to do the doors of San Zeno, and he looked at me in the most weird way and you know, the picture of him is still there and he said, "Well I don't know what you're getting at," but he said, "I won't interfere, do what you want to do," you know like that. [01:04:01] And I think I really wanted him to, to initiate and encourage it, still must be spoiled from way back. Marco doesn't do that that easily.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: But you actually use that because you actually tore pieces of watercolor.

LOUISE NOBILI: Finally I did yes, because I was trying to do something with it and I felt that I didn't want to make little teeny things. And then the blow was that I finally did three, four, five little things like this, and I had them on the counter again, for Marco to look at, about this big, and they were reflections, they actually were, you know I tore—well, what happened first, I threw this thing in the wastebasket, "My God that's a reflection!"

You see, so then I thought oh, I can take the paper idea and make some reflections, and so I started to paint the watercolor surfaces you see.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And it became a type of relief sculpture.

LOUISE NOBILI: That's right. So I did the little ones and Marco thought they were just terrific, so I entered two of them into the 12-inch by 12-inch show at the market, and our young colleague, part-time, who, what's his name —

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LINDA ABRAMSKY: This is a continuation of an interview with Louise Nobili, June 30, 1978.

[Audio Break.]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Mrs. Nobili, the last time that we met, we were talking about the reflection series that you had done in the '70s, during the '70s, and right now, I'd like to go back and perhaps take a look stylistically, at your work, and how it evolved. Perhaps we'll look at the work from the '40s and '50s first. You had mentioned to me last time, that in this Reflections Series, in this particular work that you were doing, you had discovered the reentry of the wash came into your work. Would you say that that was what was emphasized in your early work, you know from the '40s and the '50s?

LOUISE NOBILI: I guess, I guess it was. We had idols like John Marin and Demuth and Feininger and the German expressionists and the mainstream of watercolors that came up through Germany and France and then America, and those were our idols, and we were taught how transparent a medium it was, yes, and I guess how fluid, but I don't know that it was stressed the way I would have stressed it when I went into my teaching. It wasn't organized in my mind that way. I just assumed that by using the medium itself, it would be transparent and washy, and I really had to be reminded by my own students, when I first started to teach, when they would say oh, I love the way you work with all those little patches, for example. [00:02:04] I didn't know I was working in patches, I had no idea, and I had to go down and really look at my work at one time, when it was in a show, and see that I was doing that. Perhaps some of the first, early things were done with a wash, but mostly because I was filled up with atmosphere and I would put what I considered to be atmosphere, all over the sheet of paper, like blues and grays and little whispers of other tones, and then I would begin to work into that, sometimes with graphite, sometimes with another color, and then they would all have a kind of mysterious atmospheric all over-ness, and I liked that but I wasn't saying to myself wash. And then I think when I was up and against it, to paint a lot of different subjects, I started to—perhaps it was that I went into subjects that were broken up, because I went into things like the orchestra, went into things like a lot of little people on the street or coming down the steps, or promenading, even whole precessions of marching people in a parade, that kind of thing.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NOBILI: That's when people started to say that I would—I did my work all in little patches, and the first time I became really aware of it, to the point where I didn't want it, was when I was in a show with Packman, and somebody came up to me and said, "He's copying you!" And you know I didn't want to say anything against Mr. Packman, but I didn't like the painting at that time, and I didn't at all associate it with my work, and when somebody said that he was copying me, I really didn't understand it and I had to look at it and then I saw that it was this kind of thing. [00:04:19] And I still will have people refer to that, oh I used to love the way you used to just pile up those little patches of color, and I really don't think that my consciousness was working the least bit like Packman's, and that's what's strange about making comparisons, because they were looking at the technical surface, and that was far from what I was doing. I was really thinking of the subject, I suppose, and letting the process kind of take care of itself, but goodness knows, I really don't. But when I say I came back to the awareness of the wash, I think what I meant by that was that when I first started to teach and was asked to give a demonstration or a lecture or something, to the Art 100 group, which was newly formed, a newly formed art course at Wayne, and it was a course where all the faculty sat in, that at that time, I tried to figure out how to tell the students what watercolor was all about without showing them how you do a watercolor. I was determined, like I am now, that my position as an instructor is not to say this is the way you do it, but to show the principles of a medium. And so there I was, determined that I was going to make this a really good thing, and I had to go home and I said well watercolor is a beautiful jewel-like medium, it is transparent, it's fluid and so forth, and I wrote down all of these words, the descriptive words which I had learned, and I really wrote like an essay about watercolor, and then I wanted to show the students what that meant, and I thought I would do it through slides. [00:06:08]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NOBILI: I can't tell you how I sweat over that, because I found for example, that it wasn't easy to show that watercolor was fluid in any natural way. I tried to let's say pour the paint, and it didn't make a puddle. It

didn't just go fluid, it went into like a river and little streamlets and by pushing the paper around like this, it didn't pour down like this over the paper, it collected and went like this, and I still have the slide that I took of that, and many others of course since, but it shows that it was not naturally going to make washes, which I thought it would strangely enough. So then I really did discover the wash, because I knew then, that I had to drag it down, some tool, with my hand or brush or something, had to come and push those rivers down over the paper, and some papers would do it differently than others, and that was when I discovered the wash. I also discovered the drip as a controlled element, not as an accidental thing you see.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Well this is much later?

LOUISE NOBILI: Well this is was just when I first started to teach, part-time at Wayne, and it was the when the introduction of the first Art 100 class in that institution, which at that time was to bring a little bit of art history, not much, by the art historians, and something about each of the different areas, and to coordinate it in the student's mind, as to what underlying all of that was art, you know.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Were you aware of any other artists who were working in this manner at the time?

LOUISE NOBILI: No, no. I was simply told you know, we want you to do the best thing you can do on watercolor.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So this was just your own exploration. [00:08:05]

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes. Well, anyway, I made the drip, you know, I made the river, I made the wash, and then I had to show that it was transparent and I went to all those artists that were considered transparent watercolorists; John Marin, Feininger, and I realized that the paper was coming through, but I said how do you explain that to students. So there I was, I worked for weeks, trying to make transparencies, but I never made them consciously before.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: I see.

LOUISE NOBILI: So I would put a wash down and I realized for the first time, I had to wait for those washes to dry, and then I put another one over it. Well, strangely enough, by breaking up my ideas about the medium, or what I really learned about the medium but couldn't find slides to make punchy statements about, I was making my own slides, and it was the first time that the camera got into recording anything for me. And I remember, after I got the whole series done, I had to get the photography instructor at Wayne to take pictures of it, and I came into that room frightened to death but very excited, believe me I was very excited, because it was my first presentation with the faculty and it was the faculty that I was frightened of, not the students, but I had a standing ovation from the faculty when I got through, I really did.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: That must have been exciting.

LOUISE NOBILI: I had an avalanche of people trying to borrow my slides and at first I loaned them, but I don't loan slides anymore.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: You don't get them back.

LOUISE NOBILI: But it has been, that was the beginning of forming a basis of my teaching, but also it was like—

LINDA ABRAMSKY: That was the first crystal of organization, in order to—

LOUISE NOBILI: That's right.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: —talk about what watercolor is.

LOUISE NOBILI: Also, I would say that what was much more helpful than the way it helped me teach, was what it did for my own painting. It was like for the first time I really, as I say, I began, began to understand the watercolor medium. [00:10:10] No matter how much might have been taught, I think it was all rather vague, because I had Helen May for example, and Helen May, I adored her and I thought her paintings were magnificent. I was shocked that she'd wash her paintings off under the sink. I'm not shocked about that any more, I think it was fantastic, but I mean I was shocked that she did that to get her effects, and yet I remember trying it and I didn't do it as successfully as she did, she was very successful at it, but when she taught it was more just a big warm human feeling coming up over you and her making gestures, like pantomime, like if she couldn't stand something, she'd just sort of push your hand away. Somehow or another though, to explain what it was all about didn't enter into it. I think I learned more from her, just from her as a person, seeing the way she dressed even, her joy of color, her robust way of putting paint down and looking at her work. Lillian Newman, I had her also for watercolor, and I'm trying to think. I guess a lot of her rubbed off too, but in terms of organizing what the medium was about, no. From Wayne Claxton, he taught me Feininger, he taught me John Marin, and that whole exciting school. Ernst Scheyer in Art History certainly got after the Norwegians and the Nordic

moderns, and the German school, and that was a tremendous enrichment, but it didn't organize yet in my mind until I was forced to do something to explain it to somebody else.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And it was having that presentation and thinking about presenting watercolor to students. [00:12:11]

LOUISE NOBILI: That's right. The only thing that I can remember, that's really potent in my mind, like about washes, was Jimmy Hops, who was there part-time, and he used to go over to the sink and just, you know even after he started to make a watercolor, let water just gush over the surface and he'd say, well you know what I really like to do, I like to go down to the beach and just put my paper into the lake or into the ocean, and then paint on it. I was shook up from that but I thought how exciting, and all of that was part of back here.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Stored away, that you kept and would use later on.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah. And then when I wanted to tell people about it, I had to have a way of saying it, and having the results that made it meaningful, and I still have a few of those slides. One by one they'd crack or you know, disappear, somebody wouldn't return something, but I still have a few and I still use them.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: It's interesting, the adjectives that you use to describe watercolor, are the adjectives that many critics have used to describe your works during the '40s and '50s—fluid, poetic.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes, I guess so.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Intuitive, highly personal, I mean all these things I'm thinking of, are things that have been written about your work. The emphasis on atmosphere and even the fact that the figures that you use in those works are always small in contrast to the atmospheric effects. So unconsciously, that's really what was happening. As you develop into the '60s, in terms of your work, there is a shift isn't there, in terms of your direction?

LOUISE NOBILI: I think so.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: In looking at your work, I think there was more of an emphasis on texture would you say? [00:14:02]

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah, there were two things that I think happened. One was it sort of started I guess, earlier than that, because I was married in '51 and we went to Europe in '52, I began to see Europe. It was the pallio, you know, things that had red hot colors, you know brilliant colors; also there's a kind of high contrast of light in Italy, particularly on the Adriatic you get this fantastic contrast. Each summer that we went to Italy, I was getting filled up, so that when that really started I don't know but certainly, in the first sabbatical after the—after I was married and went to Italy, that was in '56, then I know people began to tell me how much I've changed, but I had realized it too. I had also had some friction at Wayne, that I think I mentioned, and it wasn't really friction against me but it was friction against some kind of a condition, we'll put it that way, and I really was determined that nobody, nobody, absolutely nobody was going to determine who I was, and I think I pushed real hard the other way.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: What do you mean by that?

LOUISE NOBILI: Well, I know I just didn't want to be identified as a blue/gray person. I thought gosh, I'd felt and seen other things, and if I could only work on some of those things, but sure enough, after I did do that series, the criticism was you know, firsthand criticism was that it was too, too different from me, that I was really a blue/gray person. [00:16:02] That offended me more than it would today. I think in many ways I am a blue/gray person maybe, but when I say that maybe I am a blue/gray person, I think that in my choices of things to live with and so forth, I like softness, I like mutation, but whether that's blue and gray, I would really debate that to the nth degree. If it's blue/gray atmosphere that I'm looking at, it certainly would turn out that way, but Italy is far from being a blue/gray kind of country and it's like another home to me now, and it started to be that. The first impressions were more opposite the blue/gray than they are now. I don't know where one's color comes from, whether it comes from within or it comes from without, I'd say it does both. But I'd say now, my choices come most from within, but at that moment it was like Italy was really changing, changing me, and I did, I worked also with something—I had notes of Baron's [ph] lecture on John Marin, and those notes affected me terribly when I came back from my sabbatical, because I remember he was at the museum. I also read his book and there was a great deal said about John Marin's exploration into the whole orchestration of color and why that really got to me, and I felt that I had only touched a little fraction of color in my experience and I really made that the big issue. I was going to go into yellows, I was going to go into reds, I was going to go into greens, I was going to go into blues and shrieking blues if I wanted to, and I was going to go into browns and blacks and contrasts, anything I wanted to do, and it's still in a way as though I wanted to investigate, you know the whole issue of color. [00:18:10]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Color.

LOUISE NOBILI: The whole issue of color, the whole issue of medium, to the point where you break it down and reverse things, like that's just as important as the conditioning that comes from the experience itself. So I was, I'd say for the first time that started to enter my thinking.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Did it affect your concept of shape and form as well?

LOUISE NOBILI: Well of course I think it did, but you know you're still you, unfortunately sometimes. I suppose that would deed somebody a lot more powerful to figure out. I think I'm a little complicated compared to students today and by that I mean that among even my most fantastic students, I really had fantastic students and they sort of really can outdo what I did when I was a student, and I have great hopes in them, but I think there's a tremendous influence, things that I never even thought about, like the importance of how you get someplace. You know how do you get into the New York scene, how do you get into a big show, how do you get into a gallery, how do you start making money, how do you get famous. Some of the answers are begin to focus in, get all the extras out of the way, channel in on something and then really develop it in series. [00:20:05] Especially now, as you're getting close to the MFA thing, you've got to have something that's consistent, you have to have something that makes a statement, that is one, and so they spend four years and then finally another year or two, to culminate everything together toward this statement, you know, and the more everything in the room looks alike, the more it seems to be a success.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: You didn't have what you would consider to be a statement, when you were—?

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh, I don't know if I did, but I think that there's a consciousness now about it, it's a taught thing. My own feeling is still very different. Yes to a point, I'm all for looking at this consistency, in a different way though. I don't like to see a student trying to copy from a Japanese one day and from Rembrandt the next and Picasso the next, and so forth. I think if that goes on too long they're going to go crazy. But I would say, keeping the eyes sharp you know, and trying to understand what your world looks like, and of course you look at a lot of magazines, but in a way I think magazines, you look at magazines to find out who you are not, not to find out who you are. Those things have been done, they are what somebody else is. They give you courage to investigate yourself, as they've investigated themselves, and of course now the magazines are so full of those who have been influenced by those that have been influences, that there no longer is, in the majority of young people's work, some kind of a real spirit that comes from consuming life. [00:22:16] It comes off the cuff like I'm making art. I don't know how to say that.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So you think that today, there is much more of an emphasis, although students have a lot of technical ability, there's much more of an emphasis on trying to shape and define their style.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes I do. I think—I'll correct it to a degree. I'd say the majority of students yes, are very concerned about this, particularly when they're entering the graduate school. However, I have one class now, which I have had a good nucleus of that class over a period of a year, a year and a quarter, who are very exceptional, they don't seem to be so terribly concerned about finding a style immediately, they're just interested in looking, and I think they're a very healthy group of students. They are at the point where they've had introductions now, and some shakeups by some of the guest artists in New York, because they're taking oil concurrently with watercolor, and they're beginning to realize that just imitating is not enough. It will be exciting to see where they go. I'm terribly interested in this group of people that I have right now, they're just oh, just tremendous.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: How does it contrast with your feelings and your attitudes and your spirit?

LOUISE NOBILI: Contrast? How is it different?

LINDA ABRAMSKY: You were saying that this was not something that you really thought about all that much.

LOUISE NOBILI: Well when I was a student, I definitely was not as skilled as these students are for their age, in terms of recording the image. [00:24:10] Because we, right from the beginning were, the instructors were emphasizing such things as total movement and so forth, which I still do try to instill into the students, but I also, I leave them alone. I talk about the possibility of that, I tell them that this is part of what's very important to me, the fluidity, the wholeness of a figure moving together and so forth, but I've also, I realize now that all of the art in the world has been made that way. I do have several students who start someplace and just creep out, and they're just really exciting, beautiful, and I encourage it.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: In looking back again, at your work during the '60s, would you say that your emphasis on texture also was something that just happened, it wasn't—you said that you wanted to emphasize color.

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh, texture.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: But now was this emphasis on texture also an affirmative stance to experiment and explore a different kind of method?

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes, I think that—I'm trying to think of where that first—oh the first textural thing really, was what I told you last time, with the pallio and the aluminum strips, which later had to be turned into gold leaf, you know because I got a commission out of that from the *Ford Times*, and they said could you do something like this in gold leaf. No they said look, is this permanent and I said well, it's not permanent, the aluminum is already falling off and they said could you do it in gold leaf and I said well of course I could. I didn't know how to do gold leaf. It took me one year to learn see, but that's when I began to add things. [00:26:02] That took a year and then I really feel like an expert on gold leaf now, you know how to use it with watercolor, how to use it with oil, and in those days it was a real secret, when I found that I could use Elmer's glue, which is really like an acrylic base, only more brittle and put it on paper. Now, with acrylics and you know that's not such a big issue, but then it was a real discovery and I wasn't about to tell everybody, and it was exciting for me. Anyway, that started that, then I believe collage was kind of sweeping around and always kind of coming in. Also, the effects of art history, like Brach and Schwitters, and I remember you had a big, big show at the museum, was it—I think it was, was it Schwitters? No it wasn't Schwitters. Who is the one—was it?

LINDA ABRAMSKY: The *Merzbau*?

LOUISE NOBILI: A fantastic painter who deals with a lot of collaging of things and oh, I was really turned on. And then, I don't know how it got into that but yes, little by little I was—oh, I do remember, I do remember what happened. A student of mine came into the class one day with some pieces of tissue paper from the Art Education Department, she was an art education student, and you know they get quickly into all the kinds of busy things that little children like to do, all these pretty colors. She said, "Would you mind if I'd work in these," and I didn't say, "In those gaudy colors?" I just said what would you do with those and she said, "Well I'm going to collage them," and I said, "Well you can try them out if you want to," but I was really a little—I felt a little sickening. [00:28:08]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Now this was in the early '50s.

LOUISE NOBILI: I believe so. The girl was Joyce McDaniels, who is doing very well in watercolor right now and I think she's teaching in a public school system, works a little Matisse, quite a talented person but perhaps doesn't throw her whole life into it the way she could, she could make out very well if she did. But anyway, she was the one who brought in those tissues and then lo and behold, I stood behind her and I saw her using the Elmer's glue mixed with water, and they had learned this in the Art Education Department. I said, "Gee, I never saw that done before," and so she showed me how, what she had learned, and I said, "You know, those colors bleed so," and she said, "Yes, but isn't that beautiful, it makes it look so much like watercolor." And I said, "Yes but you know there's something a little cheap about it," and she said, "But I love it." Anyway, I was very fascinated with it technically and I asked her if she had any samples of that stuff. So she reached into her bag and she had a big sample book of all those things, and I picked out—I asked her about buying some and she said, "Well we can go in together, I happened to like all the bright colors, I happen to like fewer of those." And so we went in on an order for two of us and for years, I had these tissues that I took to all these more tonal qualities, grays and beiges, and some bright colors too, and then I came into my class and I showed them what I had learned from another students and I said we can you know, play around for one or two weeks on this. [00:30:02] And do you know that after that, I came into Mrs. Bigler's class and they were all working with tissue papers, and as a matter of fact, she had learned from somebody in my class that they were doing it. Then, when I saw that, I couldn't stand it, because I never can stand the thing that becomes like mass, everybody's doing it, it turns me off, and so after my students worked with it two weeks, I tried to pull it away from them and it was very hard. I managed though a little sooner, but with Mr. Bigler it was going on for two or three years, I swear to it. They no longer made washes, they just put—if they wanted a pink wash, they'd put a pink piece of tissue down. That started the collage theme at Wayne State. I was determined to change it so I began to get other materials.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Did Mary Jane Bigler come into the department at the same time you did, or was she after?

LOUISE NOBILI: No, no. I was hired part-time, before I went to Northwestern, and then I was full-time at Northwestern. When I came back from Northwestern, they did need somebody to take Helen May's place, and they had three openings in a way, they had Helen May. I'm not sure whether I have even the dates straight, so that's not documentary, but there was a moment when Helen May was ill and had to leave. Lillian Newman, of course I guess had already gone and then Helen Heavenrich, a lot of people leaving. Claxton had come in and he had hired several other people, I don't know the order of them even, but they did need finally, someone to replace Helen May, and it was kind of a gradual thing because as Helen May became ill, Jane Bigler substituted and sometimes Cyril Miles substituted, but more often it was Jane. [00:32:17] Then, Mr. Claxton wanted to know from me, which of those two he should hire and at that time, and for many years later, I was too shy to ever give advice to a chairman and I remember sort of folding my hands and I kept on saying well how would I know. And

you know it sounds very strange, to have this go on tape especially and I hope it would never get in print, but I didn't want either of them, and strangely enough, Cyril I was very fond of, we worked together for years, you know coming down as students early in the morning. But I think I didn't have anything against Cyril Miles. I think I was afraid of her tremendous aggressiveness or something. I felt that little me would be just squelched out, I don't know what it was. Also, I suppose I was shocked a few times, at Cyril Miles. Cyril Miles was much more worldly than I was and at that time I wasn't accustomed to certain kinds of things, even entering into the art, as pictorial theme, it would just tighten me up. Now I don't understand it but I can still recall, I can still recall certain images that shocked me, and they would be so mild now.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: You mean images in their work?

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes. But anyway, I suppose what I was after too, I wanted somebody different, like somebody that I hadn't been working with, but I just said I wouldn't know. [00:34:02]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Then it wasn't on the basis of any kind of clash that you had in terms of philosophy towards teaching.

LOUISE NOBILI: I had no clash with Cyril, I really did like her, I still like her, I think she's just a terrifically warm person and I don't think we've ever had any kind of thing that would be at all distasteful. With Jane I did and perhaps still do, and still there is this warmth there, that we do have a friendship.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Is this based on your attitude about teaching and your attitude about—

LOUISE NOBILI: No, yes, both in a way, because—and it has a lot to do also, with just growing up. It has a lot to do with, I suppose being a person that took a long time to kind of—I was one that took a long time to be able to say precisely what I felt. I kept it in and there were things that would hurt me deeply and I didn't have a way of expressing it, and I was deeply hurt several times, on a personal basis. So in some instances, it was my feelings were turned off on a personal basis, and then later it took on a professional kind of meaning. How can you, you know, break those two things apart, you can't, they're there. I understand them better now. Jane was teaching in the public schools of Birmingham, she was getting a very, very low pay. Oh that's right, the watercolor situation did come up before I went to Northwestern, now I know that it did, because she became pregnant with Ginny and then she wanted to—she suggested I take her job. [00:36:09] I was looking for a full-time job and I went out and applied, and I suppose, just needing a job, I might have taken it and Mr. Claxton said to me, my God Louise, don't you realize she wants you to take her job so that she can get yours. And you know I said, "Oh?" I mean really innocently, feeling something there for the first time and then beginning to think about it, I guess she does, because when she was brought in, in my presence, you know the two of us were brought in the office together, shall I hire Cyril Miles for this position? And I stood there with my hands in my lap, or sat there that way, just shy and didn't say a word, and Jane said, "If you hire Cyril Miles, don't ever count on me here again," you see, then something opened up to me. She said Cyril is the cause of Helen May's breakdown, you see this, so it was terrible, that has to be erased. But anyway, that happened and it was on a very potent level that Cyril had been stealing out the students of Helen May and teaching them every Saturday and therefore, she had no respect for Cyril Miles and if he would hire her, count her out. She said, "I would never help out in this university."

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Did you study with Jane Bigler?

LOUISE NOBILI: No.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: No.

LOUISE NOBILI: No. As a matter of fact, I took watercolor with Helen May but in a different class, and sometimes I was even asked to take over the class when Helen May was sick, but in the other classes Jane Bigler was. But I never asked for pay, for example, and then later I found out that other people that were substituting were asking for pay; that never occurred to me. [00:38:07] Then this was a big blow to me, I began to hate Cyril. I thought if Cyril did that to Helen, I just could never forgive her. I paid no attention to Cyril anymore. Cyril opened a little gallery, I didn't even go to the opening.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So there were a lot of personal conflicts.

LOUISE NOBILI: Well I just, it was principle to me, that if Cyril would do a thing like that, I would not have anything to do with her. Strangely enough, all of a sudden, Jane Bigler had an announcement, she was opening up with a one man show at the Cyril Miles Gallery, and Mr. Claxton came to me and he slammed that thing down in front of my face and said, "All right, what do you think about that and two-facedness?" And that really got to me see, so I'd say it's personal and it's professional, and then I realized too that the job maybe had been trying to be pushed out of me, and she was desperate for a job at Wayne, but strangely enough, Jane was already in on a part-time basis and Cyril was out, and then she was there all those years and we did get along, we did get

along, until I became engaged, and then I was hurt. To this day, I have never let her know how hurt I was. She did some strange things like what does he see in you, you know it was a little worse than that. Well, she helped stir up great gossip about Marco.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Which only intensified the conflict.

LOUISE NOBILI: Well, she could have saved us because she was one person who knew our integrity, she knew Marco's integrity, and she knew that she would have had it in her hands and in her power, because she was a powerful woman. [00:40:00] She had it in her power to say the truth about Marco and me, and instead, she kind of developed, she grabbed each little situation and did something with it to blow it up, and that made for sort of enemies.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And that of course, that had to have affected you professionally.

LOUISE NOBILI: But that is what pulled her in, you know not full-time, because by the time she was ready almost, to be hired full-time, when her husband took on a job in the Chemistry Department and the nepotism law had become strong. Now, the nepotism law was used for Marco and me, but it was pushing it, because before we went to Europe, the year that things got so bad for us, we had checked it out and it said you know, you two became married after your service at Wayne had been fulfilled, so we were told there was no problem. But anyway, the nepotism law was still sort of pulled in on that, but with Jane, she could no longer have a full-time job at Wayne, so she was kept on part-time, so she resented me very much and she showed it. On the surface, we sort of seemed to get along, but there was no doubt that we felt a strong, like she felt strongly envious of me, I had the position that she wanted and yet she could never really get it, as long as her husband was there. But then when he came down with terminal cancer, that is when she walked in and told Mr. Claxton that her husband was going to die within a year and she needed to have some security and then she was put on full-time. That was around, it must have been around 1957 or '58, because Mr. Claxton left in '59 already and this was just before that.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Have you been able to resolve your personal differences so that perhaps there's a common philosophy now. [00:42:19]

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes, we did, we resolved our personal differences and as a matter of fact, we became very good friends and Marco was very instrumental in it. Many situations that came up, it was Marco who said, "Louise, you know life is such a struggle in a way," he said these—he said, "Have you tried to understand what she's gone through?" "Love her," you know, he said, "Don't hold anything against her," and he said, "You know we all make such mistakes," he said, "We've made mistakes," and I said, "What?" You know that's the way I was because I was particularly trying to protect my husband because I couldn't see that he did make mistakes at Wayne, he just always did too much. You know every time he got hurt, he came back and did twice as much as he needed to, and you know this latest sculpture, you know these things in compression, tension compression, who is the guy that is just in all of the magazines now? Well, that's what Marco was doing when he came to this country, it's getting into the magazines now. It doesn't have Marco's name on it, that bothers me, because he was laughed at, he was ridiculed. He did so much, you know he did so much, you cannot imagine; the TV shows, you know 24-something TV shows every Saturday, designs for a living, they were fantastic. He was complimented by President Hilberry. Every single Saturday, he was called up in the afternoon and the program was fantastic, that kind of thing. He taught under strange conditions. He had twice the number of courses to teach, everything to prove that he would do anything to stay on, but this little poison you know, was floating around very undesirably. [00:44:09]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: The idea of nepotism was the thing that caused—

LOUISE NOBILI: Well of course that had a lot to do with it, there was an envy that two of us were very happy. Also, Mr. Claxton was lonely, we were both such great friends to him, and after we were married, I said to my husband I said, "Marco, look, let's have him over more often." He said, "Okay, I think it's a good idea." So we'd either have him over or we would take him to dinner, something like that, or he would take us to dinner. Finally, Marco just laid down the law he said look, you know, "Are we married to each other or to him?" So we lessened it and then he was hurt, and then you know, people would get together and you know, making trouble.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And that caused him a lot of split professionally, with you and other members of the department.

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh, well they were forced to, they were told you know. I had, one by one, come to me, separately, never together, "Louise, I'm so sorry about this, you know that I have full faith in you and Marco, but I'm not allowed to express it." I'm sorry, I could never have him to my house anymore, I could never have you with the rest of the department. I have had to sign on the dotted line, I had to sign to keep my own job, my family would need money, we need a job.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So when things would happen, as you say, in terms of professionalism, like arriving at collage in your classes, it was independent. You and Mary Bigler would come—arrive at this discovery and introduce it to your classes, but it came not from sitting together and talking about this is something we should do. [00:46:00]

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh no we never talked about it together. There were times when I thought how unnatural for us. There were times I'd say, "Jane could we get together and discuss what we're doing," and there was usually [clears throat] a clearing of the throat. Even when we got an office together, I would say, "Jane, why don't we go upstairs and decide on which drawers are whose," and the answer would be, "I've already decided on which drawers are mine." I couldn't believe that, you know, and so then one day I really got her right there in the office and I said Jane, you know I feel guilty, I have this cabinet that was assigned to me, with beautiful great big drawers, and I said and you have the same amount of space but they're little shallow drawers and they are shorter, and I said, "If you'd like to, you could me half of yours and I'll give you half of mine, so that we—" she'd say, "Look, I never had anything that was completely assigned to me and those are mine," and so I said, "Well, I just thought I'd check it out." There's just some kind of a thing.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So there was a great deal of conflict and this is a strong contrast to the faculty that were the cornerstone of the department when you came as a student.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: A lot more communication.

LOUISE NOBILI: You know too, I would say we always had a strong department but yes, there were. I don't know how you put that, those are ugly things to talk about because I would say there was the rise and fall of a kind of dynasty there, you know we had a powerful man and he really did do things for our department and he was a human being above all and he had feelings like all of us get, and what those real feelings were very hard to understand. [00:48:08] He hated certain people, like Dr. Scheyer, he hated, and those hatreds began to get so developed.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: It really affected the whole approach to teaching.

LOUISE NOBILI: They affected him more than anybody because for example, I was so in love with Marco that we went through all of this terrible thing and we still got married to each other and we still had a happy time. He got sick, all of this, but we were still pulling together, but this man was miserable.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: How did this affect your work?

LOUISE NOBILI: Well, it made me work very hard and I would say that also it made Mr. Claxton work very hard to try to prove that he wasn't prejudice toward me, and I will never figure out half of it. When he went through the work he started to toss out things and I put them in the show anyway.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: This is a time of—the late '50s and the '60s is a time for you, of a lot of experimentation with new materials.

LOUISE NOBILI: New materials, yes.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: You're working with net.

LOUISE NOBILI: I was working with net, little punctured things.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Gold leaf and aluminum foil, as you've stated before.

LOUISE NOBILI: And sand.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And sand and all of the elements of collage. So it really is a time of extreme exploration on your part as well. Do you think that this all has to do with what was going on in your life?

LOUISE NOBILI: I don't know it could. [00:50:00] I'd say there are forces that come from all over. Also I suppose I've always been just in love with painting, it's been very important to me, and I suppose I took it dead seriously too, and also I wanted so much to keep up the belief that people had in me. Mr. Claxton certainly, he did so much for me in one way, and the people he knew, the people he knew did a lot for me, and they continued to no matter what he said. I can remember when he came to my mother's house and he looked at three new watercolors and he said, or it was his wife that said it and she knew that I was in a bad way and she said, "Well, Louise, sometimes you have to go backwards in order to go forwards." I thought that is the worst thing she could have said, I know those paintings are better than anything I've done. Why that remark? Strangely enough, he bought one of those paintings years later, never realized it was one that he was against. He was a complicated

man but he was good while he was good, and he recognized he was tearing himself, he was obsessed with, you could say with a demon, but maybe obsessed with an unhappiness within himself, some insecurity. I remember he went almost into like panic when he found out I got into that Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Academy show that was at the museum. I believe I was the only one from Wayne and he came down and he said, "Is it true that Wilbert is rejected and Tom is rejected and David is rejected, and I'm rejected and Mary Jane Bigler is rejected and you got in?" [00:52:13] And I said, "Well, I didn't know you were rejected but I did get in." Well, that turned him off, it hurt him. Now, originally, he would have been so proud of me.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: But then this all had to do with all the personal things.

LOUISE NOBILI: It was sort of like a thing. And then later, after he left Wayne, he did come back to Detroit for a reunion of some sort and he saw my new work and he just went out of his mind, and he still—I had to send him slides of my whole sabbatical this time, he was so anxious to see my work.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: To focus on your attitude, your attitude towards painting, it's been said that there's really no predetermined styles in Louise Nobili's work.

LOUISE NOBILI: That's the way I want it.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: That you can't really say I'm going to so a watercolor, I'm going to do a dreamlike, surrealist type of painting, because you really don't know exactly what you're going to do until you sit down and do it.

LOUISE NOBILI: Most, although in a way there's a certain kind of—of course, like certain things turn you on, so as you're in the spell of something you can say I'm going to, you know, this is something that's affecting me right now, but I don't want to—I don't want to be labeled too hard, too close. I would say that I can't go beyond what I am and who I am, I do have my limits, I know many of my limits, they're there. [00:54:01]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Do you have any work habits would you say?

LOUISE NOBILI: I suppose I do.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Can you tell me, can you talk a little bit about how you start, you know what is the germ, how do you start working on another piece?

LOUISE NOBILI: Well I know, I guess just by noticing what my students do and how it drives me up the wall, and then I great really, a little envious of it, but then I say you know—anyway, I think the biggest difference is that most of my students—and it has something to do with classwork, and I keep reminding them what are you going to do when you get out of school, but they come in and they know that something is going to be there. Oh, that's what we're going to paint today or who is the model going to be, or don't we have a still life Mrs. Nobili? You know that sort of thing. And then they take out a sheet of paper and it doesn't matter how much I harp on it, if I say look, come prepared with 30 sheets of paper, we're going to go through 30 sheets in one day, because I want to get something going, they come with one. Some of the better students might come with two or three and wonder why they need to spend that much money, and I say well, you don't have to spend that much money, bring some scrap paper, bring ordinary drawing paper, bring anything, anything to get warmed up on. They don't know what warm up means. They start and no matter how well or how bad they start, they're going to go on with it. Now sometimes I think that's good and I could get a little of that, but I can work for weeks and weeks and weeks warming up, and I am so excited about warm-ups.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Well, what is a warm-up to you?

LOUISE NOBILI: To me it's feeling out, like starting with an empty head and making a mark and letting it lead to something, and then finally there's a figure there, and then I think well what could I do with that figure. [00:56:03] It's just like I could put the figure there and what I could surround it with this and I could not surround it, and I could leave it alone, and could I develop it just into a single wash? What would I do if I were going to develop it further? And I try all these things.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: I remember reading about that.

LOUISE NOBILI: You know, to settle for something in my mind and then just do it, I'm just not made that way, I just can't do it.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: I was fascinated by the statement that you made about some of your paintings, those early paintings that you did of Assumption Day in Santa Prisca in Taxco, and I got the feeling—you were talking about a wrought iron gate and how it separated inner and outer planes of color and form, and I got the idea that you sat there and you watched what went on for days and days, before you started to actually paint it. Is that what you would do, usually do?

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: You will let these things sift in.

LOUISE NOBILI: I drew a picture of the cathedral, I drew a picture of the gate, I drew, walking around and so forth, and then when I came home, I played around with it, you know I showed it with the church and the gate, and then later I just decided on the gate alone and people through the gate.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Is that usual, that you will let a sensation stay in your head for a while before you—?

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh, oh yes. Yeah, that is where I really differ, because it's been a long, long time since I put something up or arrange for a model to sit right there and paint it. I have had a model come down to Wayne and I make a few diagrams like this, I say all right, lie down, and I make a diagram like this, just five minutes. Would you move over, another five minutes, another five minutes, and then I'd go home with those sketches, maybe I'd go home and start painting and maybe those sketches come up in five years, five years later, and you usually every few years I go through my sketches and throw a lot away because they don't mean anything anymore, and some I think gee, maybe I could still use that. [00:58:15]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: It was also written about you that you'll tear up 20 watercolors before you—there's one that satisfies you.

LOUISE NOBILI: I'm afraid so.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: That's still true today.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Is there a particular time in the day that you like to work or is it any time that you're inspired?

LOUISE NOBILI: I don't know any more, because my schedule gets kind of torn by school, it gets torn by obligations, it gets town by a husband who definitely is a night own type, and I kind of go along with that, and in the sense, I like working at night but I hate having to get up if I'm working at night. There's something about the night hour that begins to turn something on, but on the other hand, I don't know, I've never analyzed that. I just, I would like to have a very—I would like to have my painting like organized, so that I would just know that I could have ten hours every day to paint.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: But it's not that way.

LOUISE NOBILI: No, it's not that way. When I work for a sabbatical, like the last sabbatical, I don't know I was working more than that every day, but I was really—but I just decided I wouldn't give a hoot about anything else, but how long can you not give a hoot about anything else, you know like there's a point after which it kind of collects. But I'm sort of getting to that point now, where I want to let everything else go. [01:00:05]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: What are you doing now in terms of your work?

LOUISE NOBILI: Doing warm-ups with watercolor.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: You are working in watercolor right now.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes, but I'm anxious to get over to the other studio to start working with oils. What I will really do, I don't know for sure, because the latest thing has been a reflection thing, and I really, I don't really want to let that go because in a way, it sort of seems to be what I've been about all along in a way, although not so consciously. But it seems like reflection in the memory sense has always been part of my, my work, like not painting right on the moment and on the spot, but like as it comes through, reflected kind of imagery.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Well now there are two, really two parts to that show, Reflections and Themes, there are one paintings, the watercolors, which took on a kind of surrealistic quality, bizarre shapes and forms, and then the torn up pieces of paper hat stand up as being almost like relief sculpture. Are you still working in that new kind of technique with watercolor, as demonstrated on that—

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes but both simultaneously.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Can you talk a little bit about that technique, that new technique that you introduce in that series, layering of paper I think.

LOUISE NOBILI: Well, just I think I told you last time how it came about, and so I won't go through that.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: But the technique that you're using with watercolors.

LOUISE NOBILI: Well, actually painting one sheet at a time and then turning them over and painting on the other side, and it's very time consuming. [01:02:01] And then once in a while I fall in love with the painting and I feel really guilty about tearing it up, but so far I just have done it. Of course some sheets, I don't feel as bad about as others, I feel they're more like the tone, with maybe—I try not to make them just a flat tone, because I don't like anything that looks—I don't want it to look as though I just layered colored papers together, because I could do that with colored papers. As a matter of fact, I did try a couple of little samples that way and it in no way is what I want. I want, like I don't want every third layer to come up—like every time I pull a layer, a group of layers up, I don't want the third one to be red, you know I don't like that, and the second one is going to be green and the next one gray. I want the red one maybe to come up only once someplace, so there's that sort of planning, and then sometimes it's very hard to figure out what sheet goes on the stop, and sometimes I have to hide my best ones because the one on the top can't be the best, because it has to pull up the other colors, you know, so there's that kind of thinking that goes into it. I have to, like if the thing works too well as a watercolor on the top, I would not want to tear into it, so usually the ones that works best as a watercolor would be buried underneath.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So you would layer these sheets of watercolor and then actually pull them apart and tear them at different places?

LOUISE NOBILI: No, no, usually I tear it in the same place, but there's a little bit of the other that goes on, but the basic thing is all together, you know. [01:04:00]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Could you describe a little bit of the technique that you do?

LOUISE NOBILI: Well, each, each sheet of paper is painted, seven, eight, nine, ten sheets of watercolor paper, painted on both sides, each one almost becoming a painting and in some cases certainly being a painting. The best one, as I say, it was usually buried underneath.

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LINDA ABRAMSKY: This is a continuation of an interview with Louise Nobili, for the Archives of American Art, July 7, 1978.

[Audio Break.]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Louise, the last time that we met, we were talking a little bit about your technique or not really your technique but your attitude towards painting and I have read that you are a perfectionist and that you would tear up 20 watercolors before one really satisfied you and that you would rework a painting years after you had started something, in order to completely express what you wanted to say. Is that true?

LOUISE NOBILI: Part of that might be, but I don't believe I've ever reworked a painting years later.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Oh you haven't?

LOUISE NOBILI: No, I can't really recall doing that, but I think if there is a way that I work, in a more general sense of the word, that it might be that I work up toward a painting. I start, you know maybe on scrap paper or something, and I do all kinds of things until I kind of warm up to something that's getting to me, and then I might go through several and then finally come out with one. Sometimes though, I go back to the first one or go back to the third one and find it's better, even though I've been trying and trying and trying to outdo myself or something. I think there was a stage two, when I tried to just do a painting better and better, whereas now, I would more—and for a long time, I would just keep letting it grow, not imitate a painting, not try to make it over again, just better. [00:02:16] It would be just simply getting involved in a theme. And I think that where I differ a lot from what's happening today is that when you go into most exhibitions, you see the consistency so much that you find that a whole exhibit will be like one painting, and I could conceive of going back now and making an exhibition out of one search, but that's never been the way I've worked. It's always been to find one out of a whole series and that would be hung, and then another one out of a whole series. Now I would say that the tendency would be to be very critical of my work because there's too much variety.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: I see.

LOUISE NOBILI: Quite often, each piece that goes up is one of many, and I can only explain it that way.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So the paintings that work up to that, you consider just are explorations, reaching a certain goal?

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes, yes.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Can you describe your attitude towards composition? Is there an attitude that you have?

LOUISE NOBILI: Not anymore, no. I think that is the creative solution to an idea, a pictorial solution to an idea, and one has no right to define that before one starts. There was a time when I was in school, when something about composition made a great big dent for me, and I can't even explain it, but I do remember that I was supposed to give a demonstration on composition and I was told how to do it, and it had to do with you know, one thing counteracting another, like this, and I was doing boats. [00:04:21] And you see darling, it goes like so, if this boat goes this way, then this one this way, until you sort of equalize that. For a while, I thought that was a solution and then I went through Clyde—is it Clyde? Well anyway, Loran's book on Cezanne's compositions, and I thought that was it, you know all these little arrows outdoing each other and equalizing each other and coming to come sort of balance, and I suppose when I had a composition class at Wayne, way, way back, with Henrietta Lang, we had to do something like a composition like Gauguin, a composition like Matisse and a composition like somebody else, and so forth. And then at the end of the term, we did a composition of our own, and we had a subject, and I hadn't the faintest idea, when I got through with that, what composition was about, but I must say I learned a lot. It was a very stimulating class because it was a stimulating teacher, and I was excited about the things I painted and they sort of sidetracked, they didn't really do what I was supposed to do. Composition now, is a very exciting term for me, it's not a formula word, it's not a thing that has a solution. It's the creative part of pictorial—

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Invention.

LOUISE NOBILI: You're dealing with something here and what you do with it is what you do with it, is the creative part of it. [00:06:03]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So it's thinking that out in your own mind and not sticking to the formula.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes. I can't think the way some people do, about composition.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: How is that?

LOUISE NOBILI: Well, in terms of a way of doing it.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And how do you relate this, your own viewpoint, to your students?

LOUISE NOBILI: I tell them that. I tell them that that's part of their problem, that they have to work it out, and try to expose them to how other people have solved their problems. I try to indicate that if you know, I try to show them if, if uh—now let me think of somebody. If Cezanne had been studying Leonardo, he would never have come up with Cezanne's compositions, you know and so forth, and we just simply go on that way, explaining that what in a way makes an artist is his own inventive or creative powers that make him different from somebody else, and that is tied in not only with technique and the strike and penmanship, handwriting, but it certainly has something to do with your choices. Right now, a lot of the things that are being done compositionally are a denial of what's been done before. Much is learned from that and much is sort of diluted that way too.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So you really stress being creative and coming up with your own solutions, but benefiting from it.

LOUISE NOBILI: Open solutions, yes.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Let's talk about your role as an educator, we've gotten into that a little bit. How is your work affected by the fact that you teach? What kinds of influences?

LOUISE NOBILI: I wish I knew. I often wonder what would I be like if I weren't teaching, and I'm not sure what has the strongest effect, whether it's my teaching or whether it's my husband, or whether it's the kind of life I lead. [00:08:04] I am certainly a frustrated painter, there's no doubt about that, because I have this force inside of me that wants to be working all the time.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So you're frustrated in the sense that you've taken to other, having to do other things aside from painting.

LOUISE NOBILI: Not only having to but I live with a man who doesn't—who is an artist, and that was very important, that we were both working as a team. But it seems, more and more, when there's a little like time, that he thinks of like tie off as a way to get away from your art and feels it's very important to get away from it in order to come back to it. I begin to see the sense in it but it's not in my makeup. My makeup is to just keep—you know to be with it, and when I'm not with it of course then each time I have a chance to get to it, like right now, I go up to my studio and nothing is happening, absolutely nothing. I come home and Marco says, "Well

what did you accomplish?" I say nothing and he says but you've been gone all day. Now of course that's just two days since I've been back, because I had these pills to take that make me sleepy, so I didn't get into the studio since school has been out, but I'm dying to do this and it's just taking so long for me to settle for a kind of direction, any kind of direction. I'm not saying I would be consistent once I get in it, but just to get myself going. I can't make myself pick up that brush and I'm not basically a drawer. I think I felt this a long time ago, I wouldn't admit it until now, but I have to think with a brush, but there is also something about starting in with a brush and oil, and feeling that I ought to be kind of doing some little diagrams or something, you know, at least to— [00:10:06] I have a sort of very general vision now, of what I want to do, but it isn't clear.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Because you have to start actually working in order to get it clear in your head, what you want to do.

LOUISE NOBILI: That's right and I only know that it's not clear by the fact that when I start in, you know it isn't there, there's just some vague, vague thing, and sometimes when I work, that thing goes off and then maybe a few years later it flies back in again. Some things have been you know, sort of stunted. I remember when I started my last sabbatical and it was, Marco was a little bit like detached from me in many ways at that time and it bugged me a lot, but he was just so wound up with a lot of his own matters and I was working diligently on both dancers. It always has been a subject that's appealed to me and even a few friends came and said, "Oh wow, that's fantastic." I was way up on a cloud you know. Marco walked in and he said hmm, you know, nothing, and then he'd say, "Well, ready for lunch?" And I'd think well you didn't even say anything, because your own husband, you want some response, and he said, "What in the hell are you doing all of that for?" And then I'd say, "Well but why not?" You see, why not, and he'd say oh, I'm so old hat you know, and I'd say but I'm not doing it old hat. I know but you know. Well, if you want to do it go ahead, you know, and then of course later he'd talk to me and say I'm sorry, I didn't mean to discourage you on that, it just struck me wrong. That would get inside of me and sometimes I would be determined to work at it no matter what, but inside of me something was hurting and so finally, I took seven or eight of those and just covered them all over and started something else, I guess the reflection pieces, because I had one reflection piece started and I don't know whether it came from Marco or from me or where, but somehow or another it did excite me and that's when I decided that I could have the strength to just wipe all those other things out. [00:12:34]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: It's important to you though, that you have his approval.

LOUISE NOBILI: In a way, theoretically, I would say that that's not important, like I would say to my students, don't ever let anybody tell you, you know, that you should or shouldn't do this. But you know to be truthful then, I know that it has had an effect, because I begin to examine my work and then I begin to think, you know maybe, maybe that is old hat or nobody's doing figures today, nobody's doing oh, sentimental, you know, or I think of suppose a graduate student were coming up with that kind of work, what would the graduate committee say? They'd say my God, you know, what are you doing folk dancers for? You know? And yet, yesterday, I was working in my studio, diagramming some reflective things, but with some new additions, and all of a sudden you know, I happened to look down at a slide of one of my starts, of this folk dancing thing, and I got all excited, and then I'm all torn again. That subject has come up again and again and again, in my watercolors, in my oils, and each time I throw it out and sometimes I take fragments back again and I fall in love with them.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Old motifs and your design, like costume.

LOUISE NOBILI: And things and like and what they mean in terms of bringing vision back into my mind, of what I sort of want and I don't know, I'm a complicated person I guess. I know that once one finally gets to something that's really good, nothing in the world matters, no matter who says what, but you see, you don't want to be exactly existing out of the whole realm of activity, because you know you're going to be just—

LINDA ABRAMSKY: What if Marco had been so excited and so enthusiastic about it, do you think that would have made all the difference in the world, in terms of your ability to go on?

LOUISE NOBILI: I'm not sure because that's happened in a few cases, that can also destroy me a lot because he'll come in and be very excited about something and say, "Louise that's just terrific, it's terrific, terrific, terrific." And then you see, when he leaves, what's really terrific about it, what does he see that's terrific, is it what I'm seeing that's terrific, you know, and trying to live up to what he thinks is terrific. Like sometimes he'll say that's terrific, you know the way you put that in there, and then I would say but that is what I was going to cover up, you know, so sometimes this just bugs me even worse.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Works against you.

LOUISE NOBILI: There's something about the fight, of having these resistances you know, and things to deal with, like comments to deal with, but there are only a few people whose comments I would really listen to. Marco's is one, you know, he has an exceptional honesty about the way he looks at things and he's not easily brainwashed, and he'll go to the most far out contemporary shows, and I really think he's a very good silent

critic. [00:16:11] He's not a noisy critic, nor does he go into big wordings or speeches about it. John, for example, John Egner is you know, you could say that—and this maybe could or could not be quoted, but the way I see John, he has a very sharp eye but also, he can take a thing which is almost uninvolved and make such beautiful articulated speeches about it, that somehow or another, you begin to listen to that more than to the painting, and there have been times when I really have been well, fooled for a moment and then gone home and said you know, why didn't I speak up?

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So John Egner is another one whose opinion or whose advice you take very seriously?

LOUISE NOBILI: No, I think that he's a person whose advice is tremendously important at Wayne right now, because he's powerful and he articulates himself very well, he knows how to phrase things, and I'm never quite sure whether it's something he feels personal about, like whether that student is somebody he believes in and therefore, he will find ways of supporting the work, or whether he just sees that much more in it than I do, but he certainly voices a sort of powerful opinion and you know critics are that way. [00:18:01] Now I don't think John doesn't consider himself like an expert critic I don't think, we all have to take that role. I think I'm a good critic, I really do, but I usually take a little more time. I'm turned on [snaps fingers] like that, on or off, but if I'm turned off, I usually then take a little time to look at it. If I'm turned on, I begin to question it too, like do I really like it that much. But I do think I'm a good critic, I really do, and it's kind of interesting because I've been with art now so long, I've looked at so much, I believe in not just because I'm older, but because we've done a lot of traveling and because we've made it a business everyplace we've gone, to look at art, and Marco and I do talk about a lot of the art that we look at, and we've gone to, I guess five of the documenters, no four of the documenters, another one we almost got to, but four of the documenters, we went to the Biennale almost every time it happened, we went to all kinds of exhibitions all over, the Triennial, and of course mostly in Italy and here, but looking at a lot of stuff and very far out stuff, and really trying to make sense of it. But I find that sometimes an awful lot of sense if made out of very little, and I'm one who loves simplicity, I really do, despite the fact that I went through a period of a lot of little things in my paintings, but I do enjoy simplicity and I'm sick of simple pie stuff. I really want to have something happening to me and to go into a whole show and say that the whole show is about one little thing which is not even a thing in itself, it's a little part of a thing.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: What are you referring to now? [00:20:05]

LOUISE NOBILI: I'm referring to things like ten sheets of paper, one with maybe the corner turned up here and another one with the other corner turned down and the other one turned back and you know, this sort of thing, and another one with a little pinprick in each, or some—which I don't say is stupid in the lab, to deal with that kind of thing, I don't think anything is stupid, I'm really all for anything one has a need to do, but I'm not for you know long lengthy speeches about so little and huge galleries full of one's exercises that should be getting to something, I don't mean necessarily pictorial, but I would say something that is an enrichment, if you could just make it as simple as that.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Whereas you would look at all this as someone's getting to a point.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yeah, yeah, sure.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And then perhaps exhibiting a final product.

LOUISE NOBILI: I think it's very important. I think it's very important and I really admire a lot of artist because there's so much to do about so little, although I think a lot of that is not existing all over, certainly there's a lot of involvement in society, but I think I have some sort of beastly attitude about the fact that New York is bowed down to the way it is. I do believe there's a lot of action there, I do believe that it can turn a person on or off, it has the best, it has the worst, it has everything in the middle, all of that, I believe in it, but that so much of what constitutes taste and constitutes a way of looking at something is dictated a few, very few critics whose word absolutely becomes God and I think each artist is a god in a way and Detroit and Cleveland and Michigan and every state in the United States should certainly have those people who are respected by the people in New York. [00:22:36] The critics, they should be able to develop a power in any state, equal to New York.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: You think that there is an elitism?

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes, and I think there's, I don't know whether you want to call it elitism, unless we have different definitions. Elite to me means something very superior and I don't think the New York critics are necessarily any more superior than ones that might occur in other places, and the same would go for art. I think it should be encouraged for the artist to make out wherever he is, and I don't believe like in regional art, I can't believe some of the speeches I hear by good people, so called good people, and people who are good maybe, but I don't agree with most of them. They have discussions on regionalism against the mainstream. I can't believe that.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: The mainstream being what's happening in New York?

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes. Who has the right to tell you what the mainstream is and who has the right to tell me I've got to look like a Michigan artist? [00:24:01] I refuse, that just drains every bit of integrity out of me, even you know, I've mentioned how a word by my own husband would have some kind of sure, like I've become alert to it, to think I get even shook up, but at least that's a situation that is close and I listen to it, and I listen to somebody else, but what that allows me to do is to think about it for myself. That's quite different than wondering what my Michigan look ought to be. There's a Chicago look, I recognize it now in the few that got together, and of course they became like a team, they decided, as I suppose a club, they decided to investigate what the comic strips and cartoons as a source of art, and so you have what I guess now is called the Chicago School. Does that mean if you're going to live in Chicago, that you can't be any good if you don't fit in with that group? I don't see that at all. I have difficulty lately, dealing with the fact that art has been taken away from individual integrity and into something like a kind of magazine integrity, like I guess I believe, and I do tell students, go look at all the stuff, get all the magazines, read it, but then don't eat it up.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Absorb it.

LOUISE NOBILI: It's to combat your own ideas against, you know to check against, but be critical, be critical of those things, but the jargon and the—[00:26:05] I don't know, there's almost a sickness in art, in certain phases of art excuse me, because I think art is far from being sick. See, I like to not only like to think of it but I think real art is far from sick, but I mean there's a lot of sickness called art, a lot of just indulgence in getting there quick.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And doing what you think you should do in order to be in the mainstream.

LOUISE NOBILI: Mm-hmm [affirmative], getting there real quick.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: I'd like to talk to you a little bit about the significance of Michigan and Detroit, if there is a significance that's reflected in your work. You were born here.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes, I know.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And you've grown up here. Is there anything about Michigan and Detroit, that you can think of, that has influenced your work?

LOUISE NOBILI: It has, yes.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Or has created a certain type of—

LOUISE NOBILI: I did a lot of city themes that were decidedly Detroit city themes, I did a lot of marches, parades. I never missed a Thanksgiving Day Parade until the last few years, I was just like one of the children, I couldn't wait to get down and get here a five o'clock in the morning, on the Art Institute steps, and see them gather. And then you know a lot of those didn't come through as exhibit pieces but some did, but yes, Detroit has had an influence but in a way I would say that since I've been married, that the continuous traveling to Italy and to other countries has influenced me a lot too. I would say that an artist can work anyplace really, anyplace, but I don't think it's important necessarily, to paint what's next door or to paint what's right there, but I think it's interesting. [00:28:04] I think there's no excuse, if you're an artist, not to find subject matter. One doesn't have to travel to Italy, one doesn't have to travel anyplace, one can just travel within one's own house, one's own room, your closet, you know it's there.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Is there anything about Detroit, other than the subject matter of a Thanksgiving Day Parade, or I remember you did also, the symphony orchestra.

LOUISE NOBILI: Well there's a waterfront, you know Lake St. Claire and the view of Detroit from Canada, the bridge, all of that entered into my work for a while, and the fireworks, and then of course New York fireworks got into it. I think the New York fireworks is what set up the fireworks thing, and then I began to go after it in Detroit. So I did do a whole series of things that were really, I never thought of them as Detroit.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: It was just subject matter that was—that surrounded you.

LOUISE NOBILI: That's right, I never thought of being a regional painter or wanting to be, or I don't think it has anything to do really, with what I'm about, any more than I don't think even Italy is what I'm about.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: What are you about?

LOUISE NOBILI: Doing what I have to do when I have to do it, that's what I'm about, and I think subject matter could—subject matter, you see, has something to do with relating one thing with another, and when you see the scale in Italy, it's different from here, and the light is different from here, and certainly, those are general themes that do turn me on, and there are shapes there that I think excite me more than what I have here. So I think that if I lived over there, I wouldn't be coming to Detroit to get my subject matter. I think there definitely is

more going on in terms of shapes, there are more arcades, there's more of the low and the high, there are more, well you could call it decorative, decorative forms, there's more enrichment, there's more sense of scale, the sense of space, the narrow little streets, the wide piazzas, the people that are living outdoors, it's a marvelous climate for understanding the figure. [00:30:28] It's a theater, it's a theater that is staged morning, noon and night before your eyes, there's no way to run out of not only subject matter but stimulating subject matter, and for some reason or other it gets into me. I'm interested in what some artists are doing with—like Jim Dine coming in on the ordinary objects, things people wear, that had never been isolated from the person before. I'm interested in that but he's doing it and I have to admit, I wouldn't have thought of that, but you know my feeling is that if somebody is doing it, all right they're doing it, taking care of it, and I don't know whether I would have thought of doing that. I do think each of the artists that come up that you admire, they sort of, they get in there somehow and they change your way of thinking and looking, and they open up ideas for you, even if you're resisting them. It gives you courage to see fresh, to see new and to see if you can discover something just as fresh as somebody else did, whether I do or not, I really don't know.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Did you ever think about, did it ever enter into your mind, the fact that you live in a highly industrial area, did that ever play any influence? [00:32:02]

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes, yes, not that way. I didn't say I live in an industrial area so I'm going to paint industry. I would say in a way, I don't think I'm made that way. First of all, I don't live near industry, secondly, I have never—well, I went through the Ford Motor Company tour thing many long years ago and I saw kind of what it was like, and it was a time too, when I got—I was young, very young, and saw the Rivera Court murals, and that just turned me on, I loved the murals by the way, I really did, much more than other people did, but for some reason or other, that didn't affect me one bit as what my art would want to be. I am not a part of that kind of industry, I do not work close to industry. At times, like going through Gary, Indiana, I was very turned on by the smokestacks, the look of it, but not the um, not the hardness of it, not the sweat of it, the magnificence of it.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Shapes and forms.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes, absolutely, and I find that that's part of what I'm about I guess, because I—sometimes I think I'm an escapist, but I don't think it's that. It is that my life in itself is not involved in furnaces and in mass production and it never has been. It's been, my life automatically, has been protected from that, if you want to call it protection. I haven't been involved in that kind of thing. I remember talking about the Detroit scene, some of our Grosse Pointe girls who would probably die if you knew they came from Grosse Pointe, and would play it down a great deal you know, so forth and all of that is their problem. [00:34:17] But renting a room in the sort of most skid row part of Detroit so they could paint the reality of the city, to me that is so false. I can see that a person burdened with the reality of the city would turn to it, and I can see also, that there could be a shock impact of being protected all your life and then going down there and seeing this and having to get it out somehow, and in a few instances, some interesting things were done. One of the Grosse Pointe girls, not by any means what you call—and I don't use the word hippie as a bad word, but very sweet angelic girl, went on the Italian trip, and she was so shocked, not by the beauty, but by the corrosion, by the—well, some of the things she heard about, the sinking of Venice. She saw the filth more than she saw the magnificence, and she did some old iron grills with splatters over them, she did even some you know, sort of pollution things, with cigarette butts stuck in the holes, burned into the paper, all that, and she really did it out of some kind of a tremendous feeling for what was happening over there. The students were angry at me because I wanted to put some of those things up into the exhibition. They called it shit. [00:36:00]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: It really affects them doesn't it?

LOUISE NOBILI: They rebelled, they rebelled, and they were the best paintings in the whole exhibition. She never lost the dignity though, the paintings were not shitty, the subject matter was about like the beauty of a place that was being destroyed by—

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Corroded.

LOUISE NOBILI: —pollution and by all of these weird elements, and neglect, and of course part of that was I suppose, that she was looking for that too. I think students learn, they're taught to look for certain things. Now don't look for beauty, you know? As a matter of fact, I tried to use the word pretty, like you know get away from all that pretty stuff, and I know that I've gone through my pretty stage. What would not have been considered pretty at that time would be considered pretty now, like a John Marin would even be considered pretty, many of them would be, that was very robust painting in my time. And I like, I think one can express anything as long as it doesn't become, you know, sickeningly pretty or sickeningly repulsive.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Or contrived.

LOUISE NOBILI: Or contrived, yes. I'm sort of in a battle I think, I think you can tell that I'm battling through some of this.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: We were talking before about your role as an educator and how this affects you. Would you say that constantly being exposed to the freshness of an artist who is just coming to train, is that something that really influences you as an artist?

LOUISE NOBILI: You mean like young students just coming, do they influence me as an artist?

LINDA ABRAMSKY: In terms of their—being, being exposed to this eagerness and being exposed to their going through the same things that you went through years ago. [00:38:09]

LOUISE NOBILI: They don't go through the same things.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: They don't.

LOUISE NOBILI: Absolutely not. Of course there are overlapping things, for example right now I would say they're beginning to repeat a lot of what I had when I was a freshman, like there's a period the students really enjoy looking again. You don't have to scream at them, you don't have to insist, they expect it. They expect something in the room to look at and it's very strange. If you decide that what they need is not to look at something because well, you know, I try to encourage them to bring what they want to look at, I allow that, do you know what happens? They come the first time without anything. "I forgot, Mrs. Nobili." So they know that if they forget, I'm going to set something up, so there's laziness involved in this. Then, if you insist that you are not going to set up anything, they'll put an onion in their purse or just anything they can carry in their handbag. One or two people might bring a little more than that but not much more, maybe two things, and then they'll just put it down there and they'll pick at that, and like a chore, like, "Oh, she said I had to do this," and I have to remind them I didn't say you had to do this, I said you bring something you desperately want to paint. And then of course they say, "But I do want to paint that," but then later on they complain, "Why didn't you have any still lifes" and you find that if I put up a beautiful still life every day, I really have been going at it, the way I did when my teachers put up still lifes and I expected it, and I think it's all wrong, I really do. [00:40:06] I think students should get involved in setting the stuff up, but, you see, that's one reason why the figure painting now, there is a world now of wanting to look again. I don't know whether that's really current, whether it comes up with the new realism group, but they want this kind of thing, a great many of them do, and they come into the figure painting classes because there's a model there every day.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So that now has taken on another—there's a resurgence in that interest. How would you appraise the Detroit area in terms of an art center? We were talking before about New York and regionalism versus the mainstream, which you thought was so—

LOUISE NOBILI: I think it's as good as anyplace.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: What are some of the—

LOUISE NOBILI: I do, I really do.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: What are some of the influential influences here would you say, in Detroit?

LOUISE NOBILI: You mean the influences, the environment, or do you mean the—

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Institutions or things, places that you find exciting.

LOUISE NOBILI: Detroit or Michigan?

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Michigan and Detroit.

LOUISE NOBILI: Well I think our university departments are doing a good job, I think Wayne is exceptional. But no, to be really honest about it, I think every art school and university here excels in an area to above maybe another school. I think Wayne has a very good painting department, I think it has a very good—let me think. I think sculpture has slipped, despite the fact that I like the people who are teaching sculpture there, but I think it has slipped somehow. I don't know how, why, it just doesn't seem to have the zip that it used to have, you walk into that room, nothing seems to be happening in the same sense that it used to. There seems to be a lot happening in painting, I think a lot happens in graphics, I think too much is happening in graphics, and by that I mean that many, many students are taken out, and when I say taken out, I don't mean that somebody takes them out, but they are taking themselves out of their what could be a specialized area, into printmaking, because it's so popular. [00:42:38] And they're fascinated with the process, with machines, and they can deal with the effects of those machines and the processes themselves, and it's kind of like an escape for many. For those who really take it seriously it's a great thing and we do have a good Printing Department. I feel bad that Aris left.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Aris Koutroulis.

LOUISE NOBILI: I think he was very strong. I don't know why he was so strong, because I never watched him teach, but he was strong and he must have been a dynamo because it really, it did things for our department, or for that department. I think our Drawing Department is very strong too, extremely strong Drawing Department. I think it has a lot of versatility but the versatility is like on that side, where rendering from here, A to Z is in there, but not so much that kind of drawing that relates strongly to like say big painting issues, but I think in a way, for several years, the Drawing Department was built up on the basis of developing drawing majors, and more and more and more, it seems to me, from talking to David Becker, that the drawing people really want drawing to prepare for other courses, prepare for sculpture, prepare for painting, prepare for graphics. [00:44:07]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So it's taking more of a traditional view.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes, but there are those people who develop just drawing skills. I think we really have a fantastic area.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And what about painting?

LOUISE NOBILI: I think very good. There are—because I'm in the painting department, of course I am both highly critical of it and highly protective of being too critical. You know, like if somebody came up and criticized our Painting Department, I would just jump right on them, and particularly when somebody says something like don't you think arts and crafts is better in painting than Wayne, that's very difficult because I have a loyalty toward all schools in a way. I suppose it has something to do with the fact that I realize that the school has nothing to do with it. I do think that Wayne does have a kind of outlook basically in painting, which I am very strong about, where—and it's dangerous to say this because I don't know who the people are even teaching the arts and crafts now, but I do know who is teaching in watercolor, I adore Richard Jerzy, he was a student of mine. His dedication to painting couldn't be better and he is an artist, I really think he is. He has his little limited world, but I, I debate his approach to teaching painting, it's a debatable thing. What I think Wayne has is we don't have people teaching their skills, they're not prima donnas teaching how to do it. [00:46:06] They're teaching people to dig and I really think we have a fantastic department that way. We do have, I mean some areas or some aspects of it that I can be personally critical of it, but they might be dangerous to talk about, I don't know. There are the kind of things that when you get close to, when you're real closely involved, you get mad here and there and so forth, but as an overall theme, I would say the worst thing about our department is, and our area, is that which is also bad about Wayne right now, that it has been short-changed on money and that it's had to let good people go. We need those extra people, we need many more people in painting, we need more points of view, we need to level off the kind of hypnotic power that let's say John has as an educator. He's very good, I really respect John, but he is—and maybe I shouldn't even say but, I could say and he's, he's hypnotic in the sense that after everyone digs out of himself, John always has the final conclusion, this we need other people that strong. There's a tendency for people to finally agree with, and that's wrong. It could be right, that it finally convinces everybody, but I think what bothers me is that when I go home or when I think about something and I begin to realize that I too was convinced out of a moment, a very high powered verbalization about something and I get troubled with that.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: He's very persuasive. [00:48:10]

LOUISE NOBILI: And I begin to wonder is that really the last word on this?

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Is there the sense of control then, now in the department, as there was when you were a student?

LOUISE NOBILI: The sense of control?

LINDA ABRAMSKY: I had the feeling that it was a very close-knit group.

LOUISE NOBILI: Well it was, it was a very close-knit group and of course we were all disciples of Wayne Claxton, and many of us would get together once in a while and say what are we going to do when we get out in the world, we won't have anything to say except what Wayne Claxton has taught us. But that wasn't true because I think we became aware of that as time went on. You know the fact that we talked about it, and like students begin to learn a lot from other students. You begin to talk about other possibilities, other priorities, other ways of thinking, and you combat an instructor, we combatted him. He had to then deal with that, and that kind of process still goes on. We had let's see, three painting people when I arrived at Wayne, and then each time one left, we had replaced, and we have had let's see, how many people have we had on our staff? We had me, we had Mary Jane Bigler, we've had Robert Wilbert, we've had John Egner, we've had Tom Parish, that's five, and then plus that, two or three or four part-time people. Now it's hardly possible to have a part-time person come in, except now they're deciding to get rid of full-time people and replace them with part-time. It's just a disaster. I think that's my biggest criticism, I see no reason to short-change us. It starts with the state and then it goes on down. I don't know, I just cannot believe that things are that bad, I can't believe it. [00:50:23]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And how would you compare, let's say to other institutions?

LOUISE NOBILI: They get more money. I do know that it is a problem throughout the country, that enrollment is going down, that middle class people are not going to college, they can't afford it, and you either have to be poor to get a scholarship or very rich, and of course if you're very rich, you go to one of the other bigger universities, with the big name, not an urban university. A few do, because that's what they want, they like the reality, they like the urban kind of sense of you know this is real life, they don't like the ivory tower. But too many of the rich people do go out to an eastern university or one in the west, Berkeley or something like that, and I don't think they're any better; on the other hand, I don't think they're any worse either. I don't know enough about their structures to be critical, and certainly good things are happening all over. I think our department has a student body that is the most impressive part of our department. The painters that I deal with, the students, I just think the world of them, and that, it's the material we're working with that I think makes teaching inspiring. We have our differences as a staff, but I think we all respect each other. [00:52:00] Tom sometimes is oversensitive maybe, Tom sometimes sways along with John, but Tom has a lot of integrity within himself and he's really an artist, and he has fantastically good ideas, sound ideas, John too. They're different and the two are really great to have there, only we need two or three more. Robert Wilbert of course is very strong and powerful and very good. He has problems with prejudice and you just have to accept it, he does.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: What kinds of prejudice?

LOUISE NOBILI: I don't want it on the tape.

[Audio Break.]

LOUISE NOBILI: What time do you have, 11:00?

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Five to.

LOUISE NOBILI: All right, okay.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: I'd like to talk about the issue of women in the department. When you first came to Wayne, it was very strongly dominated by women who were instructors.

LOUISE NOBILI: It is interesting isn't it?

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And now, you and Mary Jane Bigler are the two.

LOUISE NOBILI: Mary Jane Bigler isn't there anymore.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Oh she's not there.

LOUISE NOBILI: That's right.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Actually then, you are the only woman full-time.

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh in painting, yes.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: In painting, in the department.

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes. We do have Olga Constantine in design, who is a marvelous person and a terrific teacher. Maybe she teaches too hard, you know that's what some of the criticism is, but she's just terrific really, gives everything she has to it. And then we have Pat Quinlan and who else? We have several in art history, you know Lang in Oriental art and we have several that I don't even know their names. [00:54:08] But in the studio arts, no we have, we certainly have just a handful of women compared to the men, that's come into our staff meeting, you know they're men.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Would you say that the department is dominated by men and their philosophy?

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Do you feel any issue, do you feel that there are many, many times, areas where you are not perhaps as—how could I say this?

LOUISE NOBILI: I think in one way, that's a difficult thing for me to answer. I would say that there might be one or two members of the staff that have personal prejudices against women. They would not say so but they do, it's obvious. It's obvious from every aspect of their life, that they may love women in a certain role, but they don't think of them quite fitting into the role of university professor, but that's aside from the fact that I think

most people relate okay to women, but there have definitely been, through the years, the women in the same rank or underpaid, paid less than men hired at the same time, in the same rank, the same other circumstances being equal.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: What about policy?

LOUISE NOBILI: Well, naturally men tend to vote for men, but on the other hand, we do have Olga and Pat Quinn are on many policymaking decisions and I'm not on too many. [00:56:06] I have been but I have a feeling and I'm trying to figure it out, I've been there a long time, I think that I would be good at it, in one sense I would be good at it, but I don't think people like me because I really do vote very independently. I'm not sure, there are several reasons, for example, that I could feel personally almost persecuted on that basis, I mean people seem to like me like on a painting level, they seem to respect me on my teaching level, but one is that everybody knows of a certain background that they believe would make me prejudice you see, so. I'm not sure whether it has anything to do with it but it could be, I try to figure it out. The other thing would be that I always speak up and once in a while people just, you know, believe it, and that is not good.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Do you think if you were a male instead of a female, with the amount of years that you have been at Wayne, you would be more—

LOUISE NOBILI: Oh, I have no idea. Yes, I think maybe in a way, yes, I'd probably be a dean, president. No, I'm not made that way. Part of it is because I'm a woman too. I think women do deal with life differently. For example, I'm not the least bit political minded, I have difficulty, I have to be forced into political thinking, and when I blurt out with something it's often considered personal prejudice. And I have met with colleagues at times, in order to have them get me to vote a certain way. [00:58:09] It's not an incorrect procedure primarily, it's done in national presidential elections, to have meetings to brainwash people, but you know usually you see, I resent that, but I amused myself a few times by you know, I find out how things work, by allowing myself to be pulled in to one of these little get-togethers, and then quite often the way I plead anyway and then all hell breaks loose. You know, if I were in any other position of no tenure, I would never get my tenure today, and I often wonder why I'm so stupid as to do that. I remember my father, it's the only thing I can think of is that was my father's shortcoming but also his strength, it's what I loved about him.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: And that was his independence.

LOUISE NOBILI: Absolutely, walking out of a position that he had to tell a lie or holding any kind of political prejudice because it would you know, help some situation that was superficial, he just wasn't that way. I find this is a natural thing in me, I think it comes from having seen this in my mother and father. They went into bankruptcy one time and you know, and then they paid all their bills.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: So there's highs and lows.

LOUISE NOBILI: they were forced into it but they still paid their bills, even though they were all canceled out, I mean I saw that happen. I saw them never choosing sides on the basis of anything other than what they felt was right and that's the way I do it. [01:00:04]

LINDA ABRAMSKY: This is what guides you.

LOUISE NOBILI: You can't be—you can't have a political job if you do that. I remember several times when I was on important decision making committees. I didn't recognize it until after I got on them, but I was there for a certain reason. Somebody wanted a promotion or somebody wanted to make sure that this kind of thing got through. We want you because we want you to do this and that, and then I wouldn't. I can't go along with that kind of thing, I just can't. I have no really excitement about being on policymaking decisions simply because of that. As a matter of fact, if it were for me, I would have every single person vote on a sheet of paper, with his personal reasons and even my signature, signatures put down, and then it would be reviewed.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: But that's not the way it's done.

LOUISE NOBILI: You know if everybody is listening to the strongest voice and the most influential voice and the one that's going to put himself in a better position, you can see that you'll never have the right answer that way, never, it's all—and we do have a certain amount of that I'm afraid, and I think it has something—I would say that it has a lot to do, not so much because I'm a woman. It's partly naiveté, but it isn't really, you know it could be considered naïve. I remember somebody saying to me a long time ago, "Don't be so naïve," and I retorted, you know I said I'm not being naïve, I know exactly what I'm doing. It's considered sharp sometimes, to be with the winning group. [01:02:03] I'm not with the loser, I'm not with the winner, I'm just with what I believe, and I stand by that, and I am that way in my painting. Sure, it's influenced by other sources and people, but ultimately I make my own choices, how to deal with that.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you feel that you have a following, that you have a public?

LOUISE NOBILI: Well I guess I do, however some of it's been broken. At one time I had, what was his name, Whitford, do you know him, Whitford? I wish I knew more about him. Every time his wife had a baby, he came out to buy one of my paintings, to give her a new baby gift, and he said I bet I have more of your paintings than you have. They had, I don't know how many babies, but I guess he bought a few in between too, and he always picked something favorite of mine. And I know that he moved to New York, so that sort of finished that, but he must have 15 paintings and when Tannehill was alive, he bought, I don't know how many paintings, you know he bought a couple for the museum, he bought things for other little collections around, he bought one or two for himself and then he bought—you know he used to say I just bought a few of your watercolors and I'm going to give them away, you know as presents, and it was very flattering. He was one who encouraged people to buy my work. Now that era is over-with. It was strange, when I had my last show, my own colleagues were very complimentary, particularly the men and particularly the young men, which pleased me very much, like John Egner, he said, "My God Louise, this is great," and John wouldn't say one word if he didn't think so.

LINDA ABRAMSKY: This was the Reflection Series that you're talking about? [01:04:13]

LOUISE NOBILI: Yes, and of course he was very excited about the torn paper things before I had the show, but he was very kind, and so was Rosenthal. But you see, the younger people supported the younger people, there's some enigma.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]