Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Robert Beverly Hale, 1984 Mar. 7

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

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 tape-recorded interview with Robert Beverly Hale on March 7, 1984. The interview took place in Newburyport, Massachusetts, and was conducted by Robert Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. This is a rough transcription that may include typographical errors.

Interview

ROBERT BROWN: This is an interview with Robert Beverly Hale in Newburyport, Massachusetts, Robert Brown, the interviewer. This is March 7, 1984.

Your father was an architect, but both of your parents had some interest in the arts, didn't they?

ROBERT HALE: Yes.

MR. BROWN: And you mentioned they--I guess when you were very small, or even before you were born, they had studied art, or had been to Europe, and sought out art and artists.

MR. HALE: Well, my father graduated from Harvard in 1888. It's amusing to me, because my son is going to graduate from Columbia in 1988. And after that, he went to the Beaux-Arts in Paris. And by that time he'd married, and he took my mother with him, you see, so they were immersed in the Paris of that period.

MR. BROWN: Now he went to the Beaux-Arts and--for architecture?

MR. HALE: Yes.

MR. BROWN: And who did he work with, do you know?

MR. HALE: Well, what is that?

MR. BROWN: Who did he work with there?

MR. HALE: That I don't know.

MR. BROWN: Now what was his name, your father?

MR. HALE: My father's name was Herbert Dudley Hale. He came back to America and became a partner in the firm of Hale and Rogers. Rogers went on to become very well known, built all those things at Yale, and other places, you know.

MR. BROWN: Oh, yes, yes.

MR. HALE: But my father died in, I think, 1908.

MR. BROWN: But when your parents were in France, did your mother paint, or did--what was her interest in the arts?

MR. HALE: Well, they liked the artists very much, and they were very close to the impressionist group, as far as I can make out, and they spent a lot of time in Giverny with those people.

MR. BROWN: Did your mother ever talk about them?

MR. HALE: Oh, yes.

MR. BROWN: And do you remember things she said about those impressionists?

MR. HALE: No, I can't seem to remember much, it was so long ago. But they were brought up in that left bank atmosphere as far as I can see, at that time, and that was the family outlook in a way.

MR. BROWN: Do you mean the arts, the, sort of, free life, or--

MR. HALE: Well, it was, I suppose, the bohemian life. And then, you see, my father died very young, and my

mother married another architect, another Beaux-Arts architect.

MR. BROWN: John Oakman.

MR. HALE: Yes. And the house was always full of artists.

MR. BROWN: You've said that your mother and your stepfather fairly soon went to Paris, and that--you said that they got to know some of the avante garde artists of the early twentieth century.

MR. HALE: Well, indeed they did, and the [inaudible] outstanding was Duchamp, who was really a great friend of the family, and a great friend of mine, Marcel Duchamp. But I kept up my acquaintance with Duchamp until he died. I was very fond of him.

MR. BROWN: What was he like, as you remember him?

MR. HALE: Oh, he was very amusing and witty, and [inaudible], charming.

MR. BROWN: The--you said also, at one point, that your parents--your father--your stepfather and mother were involved in some way with the Armory show in 1913. In what way were they involved with it?

MR. HALE: Oh, I'm afraid I don't know exactly. They knew all those people, you know, and certainly Bellows and [inaudible]. All their generation used to be at the house all the time.

MR. BROWN: What were those at homes like, that your parents had for artists?

MR. HALE: Well, they usually would start about 5:00, and there was, I'm afraid, a lot of drinking, a lot of drunken intellectuals, really an incredible number as I look back. I mean, people like Bertrand Russell and Julian Huxley, as I remember. And all kinds of people turned up at my mother's--you could almost call them salons. They were rather informal, but they took place almost every day.

MR. BROWN: Did you participate a bit as a youngster?

MR. HALE: Oh, I was pretty young.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. HALE: I was a little too young for them, I think.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. HALE: But my stepfather was very fond of artists, and so they often came to the house.

MR. BROWN: Do you have any that you particularly remember or--

MR. HALE: Well, I just mentioned--

MR. BROWN: Duchamp.

MR. HALE: Duchamp and--

MR. BROWN: Bellows.

MR. HALE: Waldo Peirce was a great friend of theirs, and Bellows was a great friend of theirs.

And in a sense, there were artists in my family. There was--my mother's sister married Henry Oliver Walker. I don't know that you ever heard of him, but I think he painted some of those murals in Washington. But he was a professional painter, and a very charming old man, as I remember him. And I say old because he was about my age when I was a child.

MR. BROWN: Well, you yourself, as you've said, largely studied science during the years you were at Columbia. But about 1929, you went and studied painting at Fontainebleau.

MR. HALE: Yes, I did indeed.

MR. BROWN: And what was that school like? Was there--what did you think of it?

MR. HALE: Oh, I liked it very much. As a matter of fact, I went over there to study architecture, but I got so intrigued by the painting studios that I turned towards painting. But it was--oh, it was a very cheerful and

pleasant place to be. I became a trustee of that place for many years afterwards. I was all tied up with the Damroschs when I was young, in my 20s, that is, and they had a lot to do with the founding of that school, as you know.

MR. BROWN: So did it have a fairly international student body?

MR. HALE: It was pretty much American as I remember, pretty much American. But a most delightful life, I remember. It was such a pretty place.

MR. BROWN: What was the teaching like?

MR. HALE: Well, I was probably too unsophisticated to really know, but it certainly was not quite academic, it was more impressionistic, I think. I was only there, oh, I think, part of one summer and a little of another, as I remember.

MR. BROWN: Did you do easel painting or what?

MR. HALE: Oh, yes. There was a--the instructor was named Despijot [phonetic], as I remember.

MR. BROWN: Would he lecture, or would he simply move around among the students?

MR. HALE: There was a model there, and it was just like an honorary art class. And I remember splashing away, and--with great vitality, not knowing anything at all, and he was very pleased with my work. I think that's where I got the bug of art from.

MR. BROWN: You decided you might want to be an artist.

MR. HALE: Yes, no--and no. No, I was really directed towards architecture. You see, I went to the Columbia School of Architecture, and--I guess in 1929. And I took, I think, two years and two summer schools. I'm not sure, but I think it was about that. And then the Depression hit, as you know, and I had to go to work, which was a terrible thing.

MR. BROWN: But was architecture--did you really take to the study of architecture?

MR. HALE: Well, it didn't seem to me to quite fit me. I was looking around for something that fitted me, and--but it was pretty close, I thought.

MR. BROWN: What ways didn't it fit?

MR. HALE: Well, I think I wanted the freedom that was in the life of the artist, probably.

MR. BROWN: In the '20s, you'd also spent a good deal of time in Paris, I knew.

MR. HALE: Oh, yes, I would often go to Paris in the summers. That's because my mother loved to go to Paris, and I'd go with her usually. Unfortunately, she'd often take me out of Columbia before the end of the school year, which was a little difficult when it came to getting a degree.

MR. BROWN: But those things didn't bother her? I mean--

MR. HALE: Not in the least, no. She thought that--I think she thought that an education was ridiculous, I don't know why.

MR. BROWN: Well, what had made you persist in going to Columbia?

MR. HALE: Oh, I was so fascinated by the courses, I think. I actually went to Columbia from 19--let me think--I think 1916 to 1931, and specialized largely in biology, which is why I was able to do that artistic anatomy. Oh no, my education helped me in all sorts of ways.

I mean, when I got to the Metropolitan, the architecture was invaluable in hanging exhibitions and things of that sort. Took about a year at the business school. You would hardly know it by looking at my desk [inaudible].

MR. BROWN: So in each of these things, you plunged into them. I mean, you studied fairly intensely.

MR. HALE: Yes. Well, I was fascinated by these things. I mean, I was fascinated by science, because my stepfather told me that this would be a scientific century, as it has turned out to be, [inaudible], I think.

MR. BROWN: Were you as even a young man, quite disciplined?

MR. HALE: Well, evidently in terms of studying, yes.

MR. BROWN: When you were in Paris, where as you've said earlier, you were with Waldo Peirce and his circle a lot--

MR. HALE: Yes, that's true.

MR. BROWN: --did you pursue any studies, or what was your--during the '20s, I'm talking about, before you went to study painting at Fontainebleau.

MR. HALE: Oh, I took a few courses.

MR. BROWN: Well, what did you chiefly do there?

MR. HALE: Oh, I'm afraid I chiefly just ran about town, and had a good time. I'm not sure the--enjoying Peirce's friends very much. Peirce, of course, was a great entertainer of people, and a big personality, as you probably know. I, in a sense acted as his secretary, that's what I really did. He was always thinking up poems and writing letters, and things of that sort, and I used to help him out.

MR. BROWN: You yourself were writing poetry weren't you, among other things?

MR. HALE: Well, I seemed to be very successful as a poet, and I've never taken it very seriously. But I think I won the gold medal of the American Poetry Society when I was about 25 or something. I wrote a lot of poetry for the Columbia Jester it was called, I think.

And then in the early '30s, I began to contribute to the New Yorker. I've hardly ever had a poem turned down, except this last week the New Yorker sent one back. But I've never taken my poetry career very seriously. But the New Yorker wrote me the other day that some great book--rule of literature was coming out, and they were putting one of my poems in it.

MR. BROWN: Why did you write poetry? Do you--amusing?

MR. HALE: Well, it just amused me. I also spent a lot of my time playing the piano. And I played the piano pretty steadily until I was about 35. And I think the music and the rhythm in the poetry was associated with that.

MR. BROWN: But poetry and--has been a, sort of, a just by the way thing.

MR. HALE: Oh, of course, yes.

MR. BROWN: You were--then married for the first time around that time, or somewhat later?

MR. HALE: No, I didn't marry until 1941.

MR. BROWN: Oh, so it was considerably later, yeah.

MR. HALE: That's because I didn't have any money.

MR. BROWN: No, the Depression, as you said.

The--and you've said that you once went to Hollywood. Your sister was going to be in the movies, and you went along as well.

MR. HALE: Oh, yes. My sister was what they call a starlet. She was--my sister--she was my half sister. She was John Oakman's daughter. She was incredibly beautiful, but she became ill in Hollywood. It was appendicitis. And she didn't like Hollywood at all either, she thought it was vulgar. But I think perhaps she had something there, I don't know.

But I stayed on, I stayed on. I was having a very good time there. I wrote a movie script, I remember, with a man named Bohm [phonetic], I think his name was, but we couldn't sell it. It's curious, this movie script sort of visualized the atom bomb, as I look back on it. It was called Death Breaks Loose. But we weren't able to sell it, though this man Bohm was a very successful script writer.

And I know there I did quite a lot of drawing, too. I used to draw the Hollywood starlets, or stars, or whatever they were.

MR. BROWN: Could you have settled down there, do you think?

MR. HALE: No.

MR. BROWN: Why?

MR. HALE: Oh, because of the people. The--as a matter of fact, they were very charming people in the movie industry. They were, sort of, the people behind the movies, the writers, you know, and the directors, and the cameramen. I was a great friend of the writer Phil Wiley [phonetic], I remember.

MR. BROWN: Was he a man with many ideas, and good--

MR. HALE: Oh, yes, yes. He was a marvelous conversationalist. Oh, that's so long ago. I can scarcely remember the people.

MR. BROWN: When you returned to New York, is that when you began at the, sort of, at the Norman Adams antique shop?

MR. HALE: Yes.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Where you began reading about anatomy and so forth?

MR. HALE: Well, it had always been a kind of a hobby of mine, I think from the biology, perhaps. And I realized that in order to draw figures out of your head, you'd have to know it very well, you see, subconsciously, actually. But I regret to say I'm afraid I spent a lot of time drawing it in Norman Adams.

MR. BROWN: Then you were able to enter the Art Students League.

MR. HALE: Yes. I went to the Art Students League, I think, in about 1936. And I found it extremely sympathetic. The Depression was still on, but the artists were all so poor anyway, they didn't realize it was. And they were very kind to me, and I got on the board of control of the Art Students League, and got interested in their affairs. And I think that what I did actually was to run the publicity department.

MR. BROWN: What were you trying to publicize?

MR. HALE: Oh, the League, you see.

MR. BROWN: To potential--

MR. HALE: What's that?

MR. BROWN: To potential funding sources, or--

MR. HALE: Oh, no, we had to--

MR. BROWN: To get students?

MR. HALE: Students there to keep the place going.

MR. BROWN: But as you did this, you were also taking courses? You were still studying?

MR. HALE: Oh, I was--oh, when I went to the League, of course, I became a student. I was a student of George Bridgman's, and then I finally settled down with McNulty.

MR. BROWN: William McNulty.

MR. HALE: William McNulty, who was very sympathetic to my point of view, and could draw beautifully out of his head, and taught me how to do it, actually.

MR. BROWN: And you found you could do it--

MR. HALE: Yes.

MR. BROWN: --right off.

MR. HALE: Well, it took me about four years, but finally I got so I could do it.

MR. BROWN: Yeah, preceded by a study of anatomy and life studies, and so forth? Figure drawing?

MR. HALE: Oh, figure drawing and perspective, and light and shade, and all those things. He was very--McNulty

was very good at those things, and very sympathetic to me. His wife was quite a well known painter. Was her name Anne Brockman, perhaps?

MR. BROWN: Possibly.

MR. HALE: Do you remember that name?

MR. BROWN: No.

MR. HALE: The American scene painter, very charming woman. She would often take over the class when he was ill.

MR. BROWN: What was Bridgman like as a teacher?

MR. HALE: Well, Bridgman was a martinette and not too sympathetic to me. He used to scold the students and was a great disciplinarian, as you probably know. And also, McNulty felt that he interrupted the style of his students, that Bridgman did, and that the style was too catching and I guess McNulty talked me out of his class.

MR. BROWN: But in fact, you found McNulty was much better for you, as a teacher.

MR. HALE: Well, that's the great thing about the League. You pick out somebody who is sympathetic to you, you see. And if you don't like him, you move to another class. And the League at its expansion, had something like 50 instructors, I think, so you had a great choice. But the League was fairly small in those days, you know. The League owes its present size and influence entirely to Stuart Klonis, I believe, who built it up from a school of 4 or 500 to one of 3,000 registrations. And of course, Klonis was there when I was there just starting out. And we worked hand in hand together, you see. And I had a lot to do with the League affairs. I--my special job was running those great costume balls they had in those days, and doing all the publicity for that, you see.

MR. BROWN: You enjoyed that, didn't you?

MR. HALE: Oh, very much, yes.

MR. BROWN: That involved you with the entertainment world and--

MR. HALE: Oh, yes. And they were huge affairs. I think the League ball was practically as well known as the Beaux-Arts ball given by the architects. But times have changed, and those things don't happen anymore. It's very strange.

MR. BROWN: Did the balls have considerable affect on the finances of the League too?

MR. HALE: Do you mean did they--

MR. BROWN: Yeah. Did they make money on them or--

MR. HALE: They never made very much.

MR. BROWN: No.

MR. HALE: You see, I think probably I got my job at the Met because the Met was having a drive for funds, probably in about 1945 or something. And we decided it would be very funny to give a ball for the benefit of the Metropolitan Museum, knowing that we always made so little money on them. And so we gave a ball entitled A Night at the Museum, or the Metropolitan Comes to Life.

And of course, in order to do this, we had to get in touch with the museum, and I used to go up and talk to Francis Taylor about it. And I suppose that was my first connection with the Met. The ball was very successful, and we did make, I think, $600, we sent them, I'm not sure. Taylor, who loved to dance, came to the ball, and was very pleased with it. And it was a great costume ball, with people dressed up as mummies and Renaissance pictures and all the rest of it. It was a beautiful sight.

MR. BROWN: So you think indirectly this led to his asking you to come to the Met.

MR. HALE: Well, I don't--I really don't know. I'd known Taylor before. I don't know. Though I've always been a little confused as to why they gave me that job, though I guess I understand some of the reasons. I knew all the artists by that time, because I was very intimately acquainted with the instructors at the League and their friends, you see. And I had already worked for quite a while as a critic on the Art News magazine. And I was very much, as I say, mixed up with the running of the Art Students League, and it's various problems.

And the job Taylor wanted to hand out had to do with contemporary American art, you see, which I was very familiar with. You see, there was--at that time, there was enormous criticism of the Met among the artists, because they didn't buy any contemporary work.

MR. BROWN: And you and Taylor were able to change that.

MR. HALE: Were what?

MR. BROWN: You were able to change that, weren't you, you and Taylor?

MR. HALE: Oh, very much so, yes. I think the Met's contemporary collection now is very wide and full. It didn't appear to the trustees though at the time, in the least. The trustees at that time seemed to me were pretty Victorian, and they didn't approve of contemporary art. They thought it was communistic, which always seemed strange to me, because the last thing the Russians would allow would be a free expression of that sort. But I was frequently called a communist in those McCarthy days, especially by Wheeler Williams, and at a great dinner, I remember that he accused me of being a communist.

MR. BROWN: There was no arguing with those people? They were--

MR. HALE: Not very much, no. Oh no, you--it's hard to understand these days, the irritation that the academic world felt at the contemporary artists. But you've got the beginning of it in the Armory show, of course, when Theodore Roosevelt said that they were the lunatic fringe.

MR. BROWN: But Taylor would back you up, wouldn't he?

MR. HALE: Yes, he did, he did. He did indeed. Oh, the political situation there in regard to contemporary art was very difficult. The board would have nothing to do with it. But Taylor solved that problem very adroitly. He's attracted from the board of trustees three men, Sam Lewis and Edward Root, and one other--

MR. BROWN: Walter Baker, was it?

MR. HALE: Yes, Walter Baker.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. HALE: Who were interested in contemporary art. Lewis, in particular, he knew all about it. He knew much more than I did. And he persuaded the board to give them the power of purchase, so things were much easier after that. But prior to that, we had the most terrible fights on the board. This sort of conversation irritates the older board members, if they're still alive, I know. But it's true, I'm afraid. I could give you stories about it that are quite shocking.

MR. BROWN: But they were the predominant element on the board at that time.

MR. HALE: Oh, yes, very conservative group.

MR. BROWN: It was only by Taylor's getting them to agree that three of their number, who were interested in contemporary art, would have the principal say so on those purchases, that you could get anything done.

MR. HALE: Oh, there was a lot of political maneuvering. It was very difficult to get that American department started. You see, Taylor wanted me to start the--an American department with an accent on the contemporary. Prior to that, you see, all the American objects were in the European wing, and they were considered Western European art, which indeed they were.

MR. BROWN: There was already, though--in the decorative arts, there was an American section, wasn't there?

MR. HALE: In what?

MR. BROWN: In the decorative arts.

MR. HALE: Oh yes, there was the American wing, of course.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. HALE: But they weren't particularly modern, as you know.

MR. BROWN: No, no.

MR. HALE: But I may say that my training at Norman Adams, the furniture shop, helped me greatly in my

relations in the American wing. I used to know my furniture very well.

MR. BROWN: But you really didn't have to work with the American wing people much.

MR. HALE: Oh, they were in my office.

MR. BROWN: Oh, they were. Was Joseph Downs [phonetic] still in charge, or--

MR. HALE: As I remember, yes.

MR. BROWN: Yeah. You mentioned at one point you attempted to contact the collector Joseph Hirschhorn and--with the Metropolitan possibly being--becoming a beneficiary of--

MR. HALE: Yes.

MR. BROWN:--from his collection.

MR. HALE: Yes, yes, but they wouldn't follow up on it.

MR. BROWN: No?

MR. HALE: And that again was some sort of conservatism I don't quite understand. Well, I think his collection is fairly modern.

MR. BROWN: Yeah? Well, you've said before that you felt one strength you had as a teacher and also as a curator was the fact that you had gone through the process of making art and architecture, having studied it, and doing it. And did you feel that was a shortcoming of other curators, they'd never done anything but study the history of art?

MR. HALE: Oh, I do indeed. I do indeed. Again and again, there would be little technical problems with pictures that were easy for me to understand, and they couldn't understand them at all.

And also I think you get an eye for pictures if you paint yourself a great deal. I mean that there were to me four or five obvious fakes at the museum, but I couldn't do anything about it, because I really didn't have the facts. But just my eye told me that this is a fake, and that is a fake. And later on, they were proved to be so. But that's what you get from painting yourself, you see. All technical things, always, I think, perspective and light and shade, and things of that sort, you notice immediately. It's subconscious to a good artist, you see, or to an artist, yes.

MR. BROWN: So would you have occasional heated discussions with some of your colleagues, then, therefore?

MR. HALE: Well, occasionally, yes. Yes, occasionally.

MR. BROWN: Who were some you worked best with?

MR. HALE: In the museum?

MR. BROWN: Mm-hmm.

MR. HALE: Oh, some I was very fond of, of course. Alan Priest, the curator, I was very fond of, and many others. But it's so long ago, the names escape me now.

MR. BROWN: How about Albert Gardner?

MR. HALE: Oh, Al was in my office, yes, for years. He was a great expert on American art. Oh, I was very fond of him. I remember going to his funeral service there, and being very upset.

MR. BROWN: Now Taylor, you--Francis Taylor, you worked very well with. Is that right?

MR. HALE: Oh, I would say so, yes. I think so.

MR. BROWN: What about Rorimer, his successor? How did that go?

MR. HALE: Oh, that went all right too. Rorimer died about the day I retired, that--another thing upset me terribly. Of course Taylor died 10 years earlier.

MR. BROWN: And then were you there still, or right after you left, came Henry Geldzahler. Did you get to know him a bit?

MR. HALE: Oh, Henry was in my office for quite a number of years, as I remember.

MR. BROWN: What was he like to have worked with?

MR. HALE: Oh, well, Henry, as you know, is very amusing and quick witted, an intelligent character.

MR. BROWN: How did you take to the coming of abstract expressionism and the rapid succession of styles in America?

MR. HALE: Well, I was very much in that group, and knew them very intimately, and it all sort of emerged about the time I went to the Met, as you probably know. I had an enthusiasm for it. I remember Time magazine collected the works of a great number of them under the age of 35 or something, and I managed to persuade the trustees to put a show on of that work in the big gallery above the main entrance. That was way back.

MR. BROWN: And how was that received?

MR. HALE: Well, it all depended on people's point of view.

MR. BROWN: Yes.

MR. HALE: The moderns thought it was marvelous, and the academics thought it was horrible.

MR. BROWN: Can you discuss some of the people you--those artists you knew particularly well?

MR. HALE: Well, Pollock was a very intimate friend of mine, and many of the others--my memory is going to such an extent, I can't remember too much. But I knew them all, as a matter of fact, just to say hello to, and some of them I knew quite well. But you see, Pollock lived next to me in East Hampton, or Springs, to be accurate.

MR. BROWN: What was it you liked about him?

MR. HALE: Oh, I loved his vitality. Of course, as everybody knows, he had a tendency to drink a little too much, and that was rather bad. In fact, it upset my wife terribly, so I used to sneak over to his studio in the mornings, when he was usually sober. And he taught me a great deal about painting. I mean, these paintings I did in later years were tremendously influenced by Pollock. I mean, I should be a straightforward academic painter, but most of the work I've done has been more or less like the abstract expressionists.

But I do think that in order to do that sort of thing well, the abstract expressionism, or what they call modern art, you have to have a very good straightforward grounding, you see, which is what kept my spirits up in teaching this conservative anatomy.

MR. BROWN: You mean because you'd had that grounding, teaching anatomy seemed reasonable to do, a reasonable thing to do.

MR. HALE: Yes.

MR. BROWN: But for your own work, you eventually went as--with the abstract expressionists.

MR. HALE: Well, more or less, I mean, but my work at the museum was so arduous that I wasn't really able to give my life to painting, of course.

MR. BROWN: No, no. In fact, you've said Taylor didn't want you to paint, did he?

MR. HALE: Taylor didn't want me to, no. In fact, I don't think I had a show until he died. I didn't want to upset him.

MR. BROWN: Would Pollock talk much about his work, or would he mainly just show you what he was doing, and--

MR. HALE: Well, he would mainly show me what he was doing, and let me do things with him. But I don't want to stretch that too much. I don't know that I went over there too many times, probably not more than 10 or so. But I knew Pollock very well, because he lived right near to me.

MR. BROWN: Did you ever go to the groups of artists that would gather to discuss things of concern to them, like the Club, some of those gatherings?

MR. HALE: Well, I went to the Club once as I remember, but of course, down in Springs, in East Hampton, the artists would all get together at parties again and again. The [inaudible] of them were there in Springs, you

know, in East Hampton, so I knew them all.

MR. BROWN: Why do you suppose they gathered there, apart from it being fairly cheap?

MR. HALE: Well, I guess that--well, it's very beautiful, of course.

MR. BROWN: Beautiful.

MR. HALE: You see, East Hampton was an artist colony way back in the 19th century.

MR. BROWN: Yeah.

MR. HALE: It had always been associated with artists.

One of the great elements of old age, I don't like it in the least.

MR. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. The artist's really weren't as--

MR. HALE: Is that off?

MR. BROWN: Let's see, you were telling about--

MR. HALE: Sure, anything you want.

MR. BROWN: Telling about an artist. Go ahead.

MR. HALE: Is it on?

MR. BROWN: Yes.

MR. HALE: Oh, I was saying that old age, our memory does funny things. And in relation to artists, it's very hard to remember their faces, or their style, or the individual pictures they've painted. It becomes a vagueness. I mean, you mention a name to me now, and I know the name perhaps, but I can't associate all the thousands of connotations that I used to.

MR. BROWN: Mm-hmm. But when you were at the museum, an artist was mentioned and you had a detailed knowledge.

MR. HALE: Oh, yes. Yes, because I not only--I really--I knew personally about every fairly well known artist in New York. I had probably been to their studios or their houses in many cases, and I knew their wives.

And I found, as a matter of fact, that if you want to buy contemporary art, I would suggest you go to the artists who have a very clear understanding of their fellow artists and their possibilities, their styles and so on. I found them much more valuable than, say, art critics and others. And because of that, I was able to buy a great many incipient geniuses, you know, just because I talked to all the artists, and able to buy them for practically nothing. I think my first Pollock I bought for $800.

MR. BROWN: Were dealers of much use in trying to--

MR. HALE: Well, the dealers are so self interested, as you probably know, that it makes it difficult. But they have their ideas and their values, and they vary so much.

MR. BROWN: Did you find the artists had pretty honest appraisal, pretty frank appraisal of each other?

MR. HALE: What is that again?

MR. BROWN: They made pretty frank appraisal of--

MR. HALE: Well, I would say honest appraisals. You see, you can't really be sure a dealer is making an honest appraisal, but you can make sure that--you know that artists will automatically.

MR. BROWN: And you could buy work directly from the artists, or would you often have to go through dealers?

MR. HALE: Well, almost always you go through dealers, because it costs you more to do--you wanted to--you had to work with the dealers all the time.

MR. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. What about any--were there any critics that you could work with at all, or whose advice you would respect?

MR. HALE: Oh, yes, but--of course. Of course, if you had the kind of a life that I had, you moved with all the critics and the dealers, and the artists, and the parties, and all the rest of it, and pick up gossip here or there and the other place. And of course, you--naturally, you would read the criticisms all the time.

MR. BROWN: And certainly having been a writer in the Art News back in the '30s, you got to know them all.

MR. HALE: Oh, that was a wonderful education, yes. I often think probably Taylor thought of that a lot when he hired me, I don't know, because I had really been working for a good many years on that paper, you know. Yes, you'll find my wife has a beautiful idea of contemporary art from her job on the Art World in New York.

MR. BROWN: Now you've had to go look at an awful lot, talk to a lot of people.

MR. HALE: Oh, heavens, yes. I mean, that's what you do.

MR. BROWN: Make judgments.

MR. HALE: Oh, yes, and write a criticism.

MR. BROWN: Right.

MR. HALE: I think I'd done it for about 10 years before I went to the Met.

MR. BROWN: Were you in some way involved in the early years of artist's equity?

MR. HALE: Not very much.

MR. BROWN: Not much, no. Did you think it had a very important role to play or--for artists?

MR. HALE: Well, I'm afraid I wasn't too deeply interested in it. It's hard for me to say now.

MR. BROWN: In your teaching--when you taught anatomy and drawing at the League, did you have much to overcome in the way of preconceptions on the part of your students?

MR. HALE: Usually they are not too well informed, you know, about the art world.

MR. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. So most of the students, you could--you were taking them as fairly unleavened bread, so to speak. They were--

MR. HALE: I would say that, very much, yes.

MR. BROWN: And what would you--and how would you encourage them to approach, say, drawing?

MR. HALE: Well, I'd often try to encourage them to go to the galleries and see the work of other artists. And--oh, you have to start at the bottom and bring them along. I mean, they--of course, very few of them have any knowledge of art history whatsoever.

MR. BROWN: And at one point, you've said that drawing chiefly resides in the mind.

MR. HALE: Did I? Well, I think it does. I'm afraid--that's one of the hardest things to teach your students, is that it's a creative business. They have to create their light, and they have to create their perspective, and they have to create all the planes on the body, you see. These--I probably said to you last time, the nude model is an ideal thing to draw, because human beings are not covered with fur, and the planes are very subtle and innumerable. And if you can master those, you can master anything.

I mean, a thing like that table is so simple after you can draw the nude, you see. And I guess that's why it's been used for so many years. But at the same time, if you're going to draw the nude, you have to actually create the planes yourself, you know, and come to a decision as to the shape of all parts of this body. And that's why I think it's so much in the mind, perhaps. And--but that may be just a Renaissance ideal, I don't know.

But if you draw the body, you have to--to draw it well, you have to break it into planes. And that would be, you know, convex plane, concave planes, and you have to know how to light them. You have to be able to think of what creates them. I mean, take the external oblique group on the side of the body, between the rib cage and the pelvis. That has to be drawn. You can't draw it until you have a mental conception of its shape. You may arrive at that conception by thinking what is the shape of the ribs above, and what is the shape of the pelvic crest below, because the muscle runs from the ribs above to the pelvic crest, you see. Well, that will give you an idea of the shape, if you happen to know the shape of the ribs and the pelvic crest, you see.

Then you have to think of its function, what it does. And one of the things it does is to rotate the rib cage on the

pelvis. And that will help you as far as shape goes, because you know that any rotator has a spiral quality. And so on and so forth. That's why I say it's very mental.

You finally come to a decision of what the shape of this mass is here, you see, and you put it on the paper. But you have to be able to give the illusions of the planes that contain the mass, in order to give it proper shape. And all of that is very difficult, but was terribly well understood in the Renaissance. And if you can do that, you can draw anything under the sun.

And that's why I think that that basic training is good, even for the wildest, most modern artist, because he can put down what he wants to, what his mind dictates, you see. God knows I've probably trained hundreds of them, I don't know. Pollock, of course, was trained by Benton, who was the most academic artist. And if you know that, you can see an awful lot of Benton in Pollock's work.

MR. BROWN: What, the rhythm, the interaction?

MR. HALE: Well, just the personality of the thing. It has a touch of Benton in it.

MR. BROWN: Would you say of your students, that a pretty good percentage succeeded in some understanding and ability to realize it on paper?

MR. HALE: Well, not a very large percent, no.

MR. BROWN: No.

MR. HALE: Not a very large percent. But you always have two or three that seem to understand what things are about. But not many more out of a big class of say, 50 or so. Then you have a lot--many who will never understand. It's very hard to teach people, say, over 50, you know, these creative conceptions. I've really taken certain people above 50 and concentrated very hard to see if I could teach them, and I've never been at all successful.

MR. BROWN: Did you see over the years any change in the quality of students at the League?

MR. HALE: No, they all seemed the same to me.

MR. BROWN: You were also--I gather after you left the Met, you were occasionally a consultant on the development of art collections, particularly the Chase Manhattan Bank.

MR. HALE: Yes, yes, I worked very heartily with the Chase for many years. I think that work of David Rockefeller at the Chase had a lot to do with the activities of other corporations who went into it. And I have a great respect for David Rockefeller's knowledge of art.

MR. BROWN: Well, why did he begin doing it for his bank?

MR. HALE: Why did he begin--

MR. BROWN: Yeah, how--why did they do it?

MR. HALE: Well, I suppose he had the say, and he loved art, and they just did it.

MR. BROWN: Oh.

MR. HALE: But I think it was one of the very first that did. But he had a lot of power on that committee. He had power, and others, you know.

MR. BROWN: What was Alfred Barr like to work with?

MR. HALE: Well, he had his own ideas and conceptions. I think Barr was a little blind to--I did a picture that wasn't extremely modern as a matter of fact, but those he loved.

MR. BROWN: Did you and he work together pretty well?

MR. HALE: Well, not too well, no, frankly, because I'd--I had investigated the whole history of American art, and was very enthusiastic for the whole thing, you see. But Barr just thought anything painted after 1940 wasn't worth looking at, in a sense, so to speak.

MR. BROWN: You've always felt--you said you felt since--for many years that as we--as the twentieth century progressed, art would change at a more rapid pace. Did you feel there was some kind of a momentum within itself that would cause this to--change to accelerate?

MR. HALE: Well, I suppose I did. I have a feeling the change has slowed down now, which is strange, because in technological matters it has been progressing. But it doesn't seem to me that there's been any vast excitement in American art since the abstract expressionists. Of course, I've been a little out of touch in recent years.

MR. BROWN: Though you so much liked the abstract expressionists, do you also like the fact that, say, in the last 10, 15 years, there's been a variety of art forms that have been admired and collected?

MR. HALE: Oh, yes, yes.

MR. BROWN: A greater variety than was the case, say, in the late '50s, early '60s.

MR. HALE: Oh, yes, I realize that. But I think they broke down the barriers to a great extent, and allowed that to happen perhaps. It's awfully hard at this date to look back and realize what the barriers were now, and how much excitement went on because people didn't follow the academic tradition, you know. But it seems to me that in almost any picture you look at, there's an awful lot of the academic tradition.

MR. BROWN: What do you mean by that?

MR. HALE: Well, I mean any picture that in any sense gives the illusion of reality, it's working on academic methods, to a great extent, and in ideas of rhythm, composition, all that sort of thing often show up in most contemporary pictures, which is what I mentioned before, that that gave me a certain feeling that I wasn't altogether leading my students astray, because I think an academic training will help you in any direction you wish to go.

MR. BROWN: You mentioned that you'd thought about maybe resuming writing, or you've had in mind some additional writing beyond your books on drawing and anatomy.

MR. HALE: Oh, well, I'm always flirting with poetry and fiction, but I--

MR. BROWN: But what--there was a--something further with drawing or the like that you did have in mind.

MR. HALE: Oh, well, right now, actually Terence Coyle is putting together my lectures for a book. And I myself here, am writing a bit on figure drawing. But I'm not very well, it's very hard for me to do it.

MR. BROWN: What more, in general, do you want to say about figure drawing?

MR. HALE: Well, you get, if you teach it through the years, you get ideas that you can put into print, perhaps, you know, clarify problems of courses, and what you try to do, because the problem is that light and shade are extremely difficult, and hardly any student can grasp them. Because the idea of creating light, which is a Renaissance idea, of course, is just too much for them. And if you make it easier, why so much the better.

And through years of teaching you get ideas as to how you can make it easy for your students to--easier for your students to do these things. Oh, I've had lots of ideas since 1970. I thought I might be able to put them in a book. Now I'm not sure that my health is good enough.

MR. BROWN: Have you found that the problems of light and shade are perhaps even more difficult than those of anatomy, for a gifted student?

MR. HALE: Well, all these things are difficult. Anatomy is terribly hard because it's no use unless you can express it subconsciously. I mean, if you have to stop and think about muscle groups and the silhouette of bones, and things of that sort, it takes the spirit out of the drawing. And you can see that immediately if you can--if you look at the old masters, you can see that their anatomy was utterly subconscious.

In fact, just the other day I was looking at the fourth metacarpal here, which on the three fourths is concave, you know. Now in figure drawing, there are very few concave lines in the body. And the few that there are, the artist has to know exactly what they are.

And I was looking at this, I think it was a Degas, and he came down by heavens when he did that fourth metacarpal, it was concave, you see. He was drawing very fast from the looks of the drawing. That just must have been subconscious.

The same is true of the metatarsal, the great toe, on the three fourths, you've got a concave there. And these concaves are so rare in drawing, the figure, that is.

MR. BROWN: Is composition also something that has to become subconscious too, doesn't it?

MR. HALE: Well, I think so, yes. Composition I always found rather hard to teach. I would have various ideas,

but it has a lot to do with following through on various lines that in themselves make a good composition. But there again, I think the academic training is superb, no matter what you're going to do.

MR. BROWN: By academic training, you don't necessarily mean the way it was taught in the old academies, but simply thorough grounding and observed fact, and studying the examples of the masters?

MR. HALE: I think so, yes.

MR. BROWN: When your lectures appear in printed form, what will that mean to you? I mean, what--

MR. HALE: You mean the--

MR. BROWN: What do you think the body of them that Terence Coyle is compiling--

MR. HALE: Oh, they're very much on anatomy. They haven't too much to do with the general subject of drawing. And my classes, of course, were not given over to anatomy, they were given over to drawing in general. But these lectures, which I gave on--that I gave at the League, would come in the night once a week, for 10 times, I think it was. And they were very much concentrated on anatomy.

MR. BROWN: So their main value will be in your detail, exposition of the inter relations of the parts of the body.

MR. HALE: Well, I think so. And various bits of theory about grouping muscles of similar function together and things of that sort. It's a very hard subject to teach because it takes enormous application on the part of the student to understand it. It's the very thing I was saying a moment ago, that the understanding must be essentially extended to subconscious, or else it doesn't do him much good, you see. And very few people are willing to give that amount of time to do the study. I suppose that I was lucky because I'd done so much biology at Columbia that a lot of it was just natural to me.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated...February 26, 2013