Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Isabel Bishop, 1959 April 15

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Isabel Bishop on April 15, 1959. The interview took place in New York City, and was conducted by Warren Chappell, Henrietta Moore & Mary Bartlett Cowdrey for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: For the recording of Isabel Bishop, I have just put on the machine the new one and one-half mil. Mylar Audiotape, which is said to have great tensile strength. After lunch, Henrietta Moore will conduct an interview with Isabel Bishop and Warren Chappell. Today is April 15, 1959.

[PAUSE]

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: The recording is going. Today is April 15, 1959.

HENRIETTA MOORE: The place is the office of the Archives of American Art in New York City. We are happy to have the opportunity of talking with Miss Isabel Bishop, one of the most distinguished American artists, a member of the National Academy and of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, Society of American Graphic Artists, and the Philadelphia Water Color Society. You have also been a teacher at the Art Students League, Miss Bishop?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Another United Artist is here to talk with Miss Bishop, Mr. Warren Chappell, of Norwalk, Connecticut, whose ability and fame as an illustrator are greatly admired and enjoyed. To identify my voice, let me only say that I am Henrietta Moore, who has assembled the material Miss Bishop loaned the Archives for microfilming. Miss Mary Bartlett Cowdrey, the director of the project in the New York area, is here to keep everything under control, and also to take part. It would seem that both Miss Bishop and Mr. Chappell are blessed with the gift for verbal expression which is often unusual in artists. And so, shall we start the ball or rather the tape rolling by discussing a few things about your pictures, Miss Bishop, the methods and techniques you use in creating them. You maintained a studio at the northwest corner of Union Square for . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: Twenty-five years.

HENRIETTA MOORE: . . . twenty-five years, I believe, which accounts in part for the continuity of your subject matter.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Well, let's take a recent painting like the "Subway Scene" which is in the collection of the Whitney Museum. You kindly offered the Archives some of your sketchbookss, leading up to this. What follows the sketchbook stage?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, I started this subject on probably about five . . . some panels and some canvases. And I . . . probably only two, three versions of the subject were finished

HENRIETTA MOORE: This is the last version?

ISABEL BISHOP: Version, yes. The third one to be finished. I hope it's the best one. I think it has in it more of what I was aiming at. I was trying to express something that I feel about the subway and it isn't exactly what one sees when one goes down there. It was very hard and especially as my experience had been only with figure painting and the figures in this are almost not discernible. And this had to be so, because when I tried to figures and nail them down, the whole subject froze and none of the meaning that I wanted was present. And I came to feel that in order to convey any . . . but what of my feeling had to be about the subject. There had to be above all a none fixity in the situation literally portrayed is a prison. I didn't know this until I began to create and I began and I drew it and I drew the . . . and I drew the uprights and so on, and it became a prison more and more. This isn't what . . . why I go down there and draw the place. It isn't . . . to my mind, it isn't a prison. So I got to see that the only way I could convey anything about it was to . . . hardly to create the figures in trying to suggest their being part of a kind of map of life or whatever. In that it's there . . . the appearing and disappearing in this situation that makes the charm of it for me.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Well, it's a remarkable achievement, I would say.

WARREN CHAPPELL: I haven't seen it but I can sort of imagine what it might be and this idea of the coming and going of figures is the notion of somebody . . . nowhere and yet it . . . .

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, yes.

WARREN CHAPPELL: That dissolving and reappearing is part of the Rembrandt technique; I'm sure he taught it practically.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

WARREN CHAPPELL: He never said anything about it; he never got himself into any situation like that.

ISABEL BISHOP: No.

WARREN CHAPPELL: We were saying earlier, one of his students wrote about it, one that one never heard of, but he never did.

ISABEL BISHOP: Who did?

WARREN CHAPPELL: Well, I've got his writing but it's . . . if you can read Dutch you can get it. It hasn't been translated yet.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Do you use glazes or do you use painting one color thinly on . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. I'm sorry to say that I do use a very complex technique, not by . . . not because I wanted to be complex but just because in this effort to make it speak back to me, that I'd simply resort to anything. And I do begin them in tempera just because it dries immediately and one can go on and one can change one's mind with tempera, too, quite easily by washing it up.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Yes.

ISABEL BISHOP: And then I do oil painting back to tempera on top of the oil to some extent. And do use glazes.

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: Then it must take you a long time to complete the picture.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. But the trouble isn't in the technique, the trouble is my imagination is . . . works slower.

HENRIETTA MOORE: With whom have you studied in the past?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, my principal teacher was Kenneth Hayes Miller, whom I came to, I believe, when I was 18. And stayed with him for two years and then left me for five years and went to Rome and came back to composition class. In the meantime, I worked with Du Bois. Did you know that?

WARREN CHAPPELL: No, I didn't know that. I knew him.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, I did work with him at the League and also in his studio and was very attached to him as a teacher.

WARREN CHAPPELL: Very interesting. I didn't realize that you had studied with him.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Well, they were the two perhaps that had the most scheduled persistence.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, when I came to New York to school to learn illustration. I didn't get that far but there a life class in the school that was called The New York School Applied Design for Women and, when I went there, I told him I had already had a great deal of experience. Because I had had a year of work in Detroit during high school, last year in high school at the Walker Art School. I told him that I was an experienced student and I went into the life class and skipped their commercial steps which I've not been glad of since. I'd like to have learned how to.

WARREN CHAPPELL:

ISABEL BISHOP: No, I left at the age of two, so . . . .

HENRIETTA MOORE: Well, while you were a student, what was the art like?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, when I came here, the world was airy and churning of tremendous turmoil. It was . . . you see, the Armory Show had been in 1913?

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: '13.

ISABEL BISHOP: And I came here in about 1918, at the age of 16. And it was a very exciting business indeed. The school I went to was academic . . . gave an academic training but I read about the temporary developments in Europe and went to the Societe Anonyme and I felt that really it was extraordinarily vivid at the time.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Looking back on it, do you feel the same way?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Had the festivity in Europe had all been . . . ? I mean when you were studying, did you go to Europe and look at the Museums and paintings and . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: I think the influences of Miller was that he opened his eyes to the other forms of studying the old masters. So that when I went abroad, I only went to the Museums and didn't make any effort to see contemporary European work. Which I think was reasonable, a reasonable thing to do.

HENRIETTA MOORE: When was that, the first trip approximately?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh dear, I don't remember.

WARREN CHAPPELL: You told me, I remember that. Kenneth Miller was the one who suggested to you that you ought to try drawing smaller, cutting down the scale, or something like that.

ISABEL BISHOP: That's true.

WARREN CHAPPELL: And of course, the drawings now are drawn in the scale much closer to the way that the masters worked. I mean, they never drew all over the side of the place, you know. To begin with, they wanted to keep their drawings and they would have been hard to put them anyplace.

ISABEL BISHOP: That's interesting, I hadn't thought about . . . .

WARREN CHAPPELL: Some of them were but not too many.

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: The paper was expensive.

WARREN CHAPPELL: That's . . . . Yes. So that actually by this suggestion of Miller's, you came. . . you were going in a, I think a . . . as a logical scale for the pen.

ISABEL BISHOP: I think I began drawing very small after that, and very few artists did. I think it was about 1925 or something, after I had been abroad, and had done a little sketching with a pen in Europe, and Miller, I think, said that this seemed to indicate something. And so I went on with that not quite so tiny. But did find utterly nourishing, getting my whole nourishment, it got through drawing with a pen.

WARREN CHAPPELL: Well, it's a great need . . . .

ISABEL BISHOP: relation to anything that I see and start drawing. Small . . . .

HENRIETTA MOORE: When was your first one-man show? That was about 1934 at the Midtown Gallery?

ISABEL BISHOP: I think . . . I'm not quite sure. Maybe 1934.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Yes, I think the Midtown opened in '32 and . . . .

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, then it probably was about 1934.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Yes. How does an artist become attached to a gallery, that is, do they select you or how did you meet . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, in those days, it was a little simpler, of course, than it is now. I took a portfolio of work. I didn't take photographs; I took actually little paintings and things under my arm and I went around. They didn't even have to make an appointment; you walked in and said "I'd like to show you a few things." And I went into a gallery called the Dudensing Gallery which was then on 57th Street and they took a slight interest. And they came down to my studio and then, I didn't have a show there, but they showed small things in a group show. Well, then the Midtown meantime, began, it was not the . . . begun show with Dudensing. It began and they were looking around, I suppose they might have seen one of those before. Anyway, they did say bring something in if you're interested and our gallery which was then a cooperative gallery in which you paid a certain amount every month and they showed things every month. Then that ended. Cooperative aspects.

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: Was Mr. Ruskin connected with the gallery?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, he founded it. In the depth of the Depression.

HENRIETTA MOORE: As cooperative?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. It was down on 5th Avenue in the 40's. It was the most dreadful place; didn't have anybody clean it. It was very dirty. But he kept on it in the depths of the Depression.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Shall we move on to the subject of the Art Students League, perhaps? Maybe Mr. Chappell can help in filling there.

WARREN CHAPPELL: You said that you were there about 1918, first.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

WARREN CHAPPELL: And then when you came back and you found . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, it must have been a little later. I came to New York in 1918, worked for two years in the School of Design, and then the 1920, I guess?

WARREN CHAPPELL: 1926. Were you there off and on that winter? That was the first winter that I spent there at least.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Was that for the PTA?

WARREN CHAPPELL: No, that's when I went there to study and then after I got there, about 6 months after I got there, in about 3 months they made me a member of the Board of Control and then I was that going to October '31. I taught there in the 30's later. But as far as going there, I seem to recall you being in the . . . .

ISABEL BISHOP: I must have been.

WARREN CHAPPELL: And then I thought maybe you had come to work . . . . Well, I was just trying to think of the people who were there. Marsh came back about that time, it seems to me.

ISABEL BISHOP: I came back to this composition class; it was called mural class. That's probably what it was. That was an interesting time at the League, that first period I was there, especially, much more so than the second period. There was a whole group of people who later became very well-known were just finishing their time or had just been and were still being talked about. Kuniyoshi, Brook, Blanche, there are a number of . . . perhaps more than that . . . .

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: This is the 50th celebration at the Art Students League in 1935. It picks the instructors and the boys right on through to 1922; those names may recall some interesting memories.

WARREN CHAPPELL: Yes, and they . . . this of course . . . .

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: Kenyon Cox.

WARREN CHAPPELL: I know, but this one's done by Lewis.

ISABEL BISHOP:

WARREN CHAPPELL: Yes. But actually . . . .

HENRIETTA MOORE: Would you mind describing things for . . . ?

WARREN CHAPPELL: This is the 50th anniversary Art Students League prospectus, history and exhibition . . . . This time in the mid '20's the League was going very well then. It was an exciting place and quite extraordinary, it seems to me, as to the number of older students who were constantly coming back. It was not unusual to have students, of course, were well, sort of getting back after the war, even as late as that. The man who had lost his right arm who was learning to draw with the pen and paint with his left, and doing a marvelous . . . . He had studied in France but he was doing this at the League in the mid 20's.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Then you both had taught . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP:

HENRIETTA MOORE: Mr. Chappell taught . . . .

WARREN CHAPPELL: Yes, I was teaching the Graphic Arts; I never taught painting.

HENRIETTA MOORE: No. And Miss Bishop was teaching . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: Life class.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Life class.

ISABEL BISHOP: And then at the end of that year had a job to do murals. So I took a leave of absence. Yes.

WARREN CHAPPELL: Oh.

ISABEL BISHOP: Something I had no experience for at all.

WARREN CHAPPELL: Oh, is that so? Cincinnati?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, it was a place in Ohio where the mural is. A little town called New Lexington, Ohio. I went out there and drew. One revolutionary soldier and varied people, Mrs. Sheridan . . . . All these people came . . . .

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: You mean you put about 100 years of time in one picture?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. Because their history was little and spread over a long time.

WARREN CHAPPELL: You know, knowing by your . . . the way that you work, I was wondering about what you do to keep drawings and paintings from knowing that you are . . . The big game hunter, that's the first thing that he . . . that you learn is that he knows how to get face. He can face a lion and he doesn't . . . he actually isn't afraid; they can't smell him and he. . . the drawing or painting, keeping it from being afraid of you.

ISABEL BISHOP: The way that I can keep them from knowing that I'm afraid of them is to put a piece of tracing paper between us, you see. Trace a drawing of mine and trace it on top of the painting often with graphite paper. And because it can't see me, it doesn't know. Sometimes I can get a fresh drawing into it. But I never could take a brush with it staring me in the face.

WARREN CHAPPELL: The method that Pascin quoted to Ernest Fiene who was known quite well in Paris, Pascin bought a new fresh ream of paper and cost him a devil of a lot of money, he felt. He took the first top ten or fifteen sheets and just scribbled on them and threw them in the basket. And he got so that he wasn't afraid, at 50 cents a sheet.

WARREN CHAPPELL: How do you get on top of the painting so that the thing isn't . . . so that you're not afraid?

ISABEL BISHOP: I have another way. I lay it flat. If it's standing in front of me, it can see . . . I lay it flat. You know, and painting it as if it were a floor.

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: Like Jackson Pollock.

HENRIETTA MOORE: May I read the ad in the paper of the New York Times this morning? I'm glad Mr. Chappell saw it. You may read the whole thing later on, but it's a questionnaire, yes. Fill out the following questionnaire and mail it with your entry. One of the questions is, "Can you look at contemporary paintings without blushing . . . ?"

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Another question is, "Can you look at contemporary people without blushing?"

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

HENRIETTA MOORE: "Do you know how to dislike a canvas brilliantly and with authority?"

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. [Laughter]

WARREN CHAPPELL: Well, this business about contemporary art which came into this conversation . . . I was wondering, what . . . how . . . if you feel more or less as I do, this notion that so many people have when they discover abstraction? How do you feel about that because, for instance, the abstract qualities Brueghel infinitely more vast than anything that Picasso has ever done, little pieces of it often at a . . . ? There's more of architecture, more of everything than any of these people monkey with. Now, for them to feel that suddenly they have invented abstraction . . . . What they have invented, which is to look at things freshly, and . . . .

ISABEL BISHOP: True. Truly. That I do think.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Would you care to . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: I was very much surprised to get someone to come and discuss a painting with me at one time . . . . This was for the "Art News" and this young woman, who was much younger than I, had no idea that I . . . infinite art, the whole modern movement has gone under way. I mean this young woman, you see, to her, the modern movement was today 10 years old or something. It's gotten to where a person working figuratively had been born into modern movement . . . modern milieu. Modern art was existing it was, on the basis of everything. It was the art of then. So, as you say, the then going to study with a teacher, as was born into this time of 1918 or 1920 or something, and going with a teacher into the class of the teacher who pointed the old masters as I see in reading Sloan's book on Sloan by the books now. I think that Sloan felt that his most important eye-opening early was what he got from Henri, much more than anything else from Henri, was simply to look at . . . . And that was so limited that to look into the past was his leverage on his own creativeness. And Miller's most important factor, I think, most important was in teaching, in pointing to the old masters. So that being born into a world of the new art which began about 1912 and then to be directed to the old masters, well, it seemed to be a kind of relationsbuip to art that any person coming up now would have then now or any time.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Yes.

ISABEL BISHOP: Just the same. In other words, I don't think the situation now is different. I don't think . . . . new, new, new All these words tend to make a difference.

WARREN CHAPPELL: Words aren't really new, bcause they used the word "new" then . . . .

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: What about the cubist art of the . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: The Cubist art now looks like Renaissance Art.

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: I meant the art you would have seen in 1918, '20, Gris . . . .

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, now that period now does look classic, doesn't it?

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: It was something that didn't affect you, particularly. You probably saw a lot of it but it wasn't anything that had an impact on you.

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, it had a tremendous impact as a final result but it didn't occur to me or any of my contemporarties, that one would begin with this but these men obviously had derived this creatively from their contact with the traditions. So that my contemporaries imagined that they msust go with traditions. And pick something out for themselves. They didn't think of this as imitative.

WARREN CHAPPELL: Continuity is the heart of the thing, that's it.

ISABEL BISHOP: And these masters at that time always pointed out that they . . . that this had come from their experience of today out of the past so that said to be done again. Is being done again. I think the art of now is very, very sound, I think in general, as it was then, as the new art was then. Nobody has trouble now, seeing the virtues in early Braque or Picasso in that period. Nobody has any trouble with it. Even a Nude Descending the Staircase looks like a Renaissance painting, I think.

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: It didn't in 1913.

ISABEL BISHOP: modern art now, nothing, of course it didn't, in every work done equally sound as every other work done, today or then. But the work is sound now and the work was sound then, but the talk is terrible now. The verbalization now is just maddening work; I don't know.

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: It's far pleasanter to be able to look at things without listening.

ISABEL BISHOP: It is importan,t I think; sound criticism would be very helpful.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Well, you have been very generous in your jury duty and therefore you've been on panel discussions, and working with not only artists but when you see people . . . .

ISABEL BISHOP: very verbal unfortunately.

HENRIETTA MOORE: But you do, you are responsible, though, just the same . . . .

WARREN CHAPPELL: Of course, looking at this League booklet here, one realizes that the League had everything happening there.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

WARREN CHAPPELL: At all times.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, it did.

WARREN CHAPPELL: And there was somebody sitting next to you who was doing something that was really pretty good . . . .

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

WARREN CHAPPELL: Almost every way that people were trying to do . . . .

ISABEL BISHOP: There was no tolerance at all, as I remember. Each class of all classes were abominable . . . which was fun.

HENRIETTA MOORE: So it was great benefit by association, which perhaps doesn't take place now. But I'm looking in the great scope of the younger generation who were working more independently . . . nothing rubs off on them.

WARREN CHAPPELL: In the 1920's when Gifford Beal was president and was vice president, their associations brought to the League very good contacts and so the people on the board in general, they had at least two or three older people on the board, who were very influential. And it was a definite proposition, I mean it was not really a question about cell. It wasn't a cell, a sight, it was an art school, run by the people who were going there. That's what it was supposed to be. And they had very good people as instructors.

ISABEL BISHOP: Weber was teaching there when I first went there, and I went into Weber's class and I just couldn't seem to connect. I couldn't . . . but I went into Miller's, just happened to . . . but Weber was teaching, Miller. There were excellent academic classes, Nicolaides was teaching.

WARREN CHAPPELL: He was a very successful teacher.

HENRIETTA MOORE: DuMont.

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: Stewart told us the other day that DuMont, looking back over his teaching career, that he really had a great number of successful students. None of the students painted like the teacher but DuMont had a philosophy that seemed to help his students.

ISABEL BISHOP: He was a very popular student. I studied with him for about a year . . . . DuMont was a very educated man and the students . . . .

HENRIETTA MOORE: Have you followed the career of any more students?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. Well, I saw one of his in the Rockefeller collection.

WARREN CHAPPELL: Didn't . . . study with you? He was . . . that's funny, I was so sure. I don't know what he's doing now.

ISABEL BISHOP: I really didn't teach very long, you see. I had to substitute a little bit on other teachers. There two weeks ago, loved being in the place.

HENRIETTA MOORE: How about this matter of art criticism and critics? I think Miss Cowdrey had something in mind to . . . .

[END OF TAPE 1]

HENRIETTA MOORE: How about this matter of art criticism and critics? I think Miss Cowdrey had something in mind to query you about.

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: Well, I'm just trying to get Miss Bishop to sound off on some angle of art criticism. That is, do the critics help an artist? Do you feel that a critic who might issue a severe statement understands what he's seeing? Do they have a right to criticize?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, I think criticism is a sense of formulating all the time. I mean they become so important I feel that it should be attempted, and it would be important if it were developed. I saw something just yesterday in the "Art News" that interested me. I don't know who Bennett Goodman is. I don't know whether he is a painter or not, perhaps you know, but he wrote a piece, a very serious piece of criticism, which was answered in the

same issue by a painter named Milton Resnick. And something in the Resnick piece -- Resnick seemed to be furious, he may be a good and serious , but he seemed to be furious -- saying, "Goodman, on what side are you? Are you not on our side, and how can you feel that the gesture you say cannot be contained in action painting?" And he raved on in a way that seemed to be very much in line with my convictions -- that this is a very romantic theory. The article by Goodman was not romantic. It was a serious consideration of the problem of aesthetic space. The answer, in making the issue a personal one in the matter of taking sides, seemed to me puerile in the last degree, but really very romantic because it was all a matter of ruffled feelings. The Goodman was an excellent, excellent piece. It just seemed to me if others would attempt to go into this consideration, such a consideration as aesthetic space. This is what the experimentation is, experimenting with aesthetic space, with the range of ambiguity that is possible, or impossible. It's wonderful. I think it's a lovely time. I love Klein making those gestures in black shoe-blacking on a white thing. It raises the right questions which is quite a different thing from the kind of evaluation given which, to my mind, can be extremely exaggerated.

WARREN CHAPPELL: Well, the piece that you did -- remember about the attachment and composition and the Rubens as a figure moves out of reach?

[WC and IB both talking at the same time]

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, that was a piece that I did many years ago about edges. Well, yes, that was an attempt, and I've tried a few times over the years, an attempt at least to examine.

WARREN CHAPPELL: Well, the explaining of that notion of the difference of the edges in a da Vinci, let us say, and in a Rubens, the figure, the foreground and the background.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, the way that I wanted to do it in this piece -- it didn't come out quite that way -- was to do it entirely with pictures. I wanted to say "Look at this picture which I have reproduced on the page," and not lead up to it all. Just say, "Look at this picture, and then ask it to move. Ask by looking at it, and see what happens with what is next to the figure." And this -- it was a long time ago --I still think that it's an important consideration, and a kind of real key to one kind of form as distinct from another kind, from the other major kind, I think, which is a separation, the term for the other major, well, separation in form, yes. And that's where the box-like space comes in, but I didn't think of that until years later. But that's one of the most amusing things to me, is that many persons who write about art today, mentioning the past, assume that the whole Renaissance, the one point perspective of the Renaissance, you know. And this is illiterate; this is really illiterate. Truly -- in that I think you can see very easily by just looking at a few reproductions that the box space is a very little-used one, an exception to the flow of the painting forms, and it is almost the only literal one in which aesthetic space is literal to its character. Well, Velazquez -- I guess Velazquez painted with a box-like space. I suppose he is. I've asked myself that question in front of the " Ninas." I think he is.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Well, perhaps now we could have an anecdote or two. How about commissions?

[HM and IB both talking at the same time]

HENRIETTA MOORE: other than the mural I was thinking.

ISABEL BISHOP: No, I don't take them.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Do you have any anecdotes about commissions? You haven't had any specific commissions except for portraits and so on?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, and those are very few.

WARREN CHAPPELL: I made a set of illustrations for Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice. It's in the sale of the Book of the Month Club, and they stopped and didn't get the second, I should say Emma done. It was to be a two-volume thing. It was about 1945, wasn't it, or something like that? And unquestionably the best drawings ever made for Jane Austen. It's a shame. That book ought to be done sometime, and I think maybe some English publisher ought to do it because it ought to be printed somewhere on the continent where they can use Coldtype, and maybe even have good enough engravers to get some of the lines, pull some of the lines out. I was just thinking, the other thing that was done at the same time, though, was several illustrations for Tom Sawyer that Harry Wickey did. Harry Wickey was born in Ohio and he had never read Tom Sawyer before, and it just bowled him over.

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh, that's wonderful! Well, Warren Chappell did the Jane Austen, six novels of Jane Austen in two volumes, and they're beautiful. Stunning!

WARREN CHAPPELL: Well, that's . . . .

HENRIETTA MOORE: Yes, I also looked him up in Who's Who in American Art before this interview and discovered his accomplishments.

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, for an anecdote -- this is a silly thing that happened a long time ago. It hasn't great significance, but it was rather shocking to me. I had gone to Union Square where I had been for years of making little pen drawings because I found them so refreshing to me, and I was doing this and a drunk who was next to me said something which I didn't answer. I simply went on drawing, whereupon he got up and collected a mob, and this was a most appalling thing because I had been drawing over there and he went and got this man and others and they surrounded me like this and he said, "What do you mean by drawing my picture?" And I and he pulled my book, and his hostile crowd gathered around me, and he said, "She sells them to 'Life' magazine." And I told them no, and there was no use arguing with them. They really were very hostile. So I tore the page out and gave it to him and rescued the book just simply for the sake of my own sense of things and progressed slowly toward the edge of the park. I posted myself by the side of a bench where a neat-looking man was sitting, and I began sketching again because I felt that this is my square, and if I simply shrivel -- I mean I'd be routed and it would be no longer my square. This is an issue of the greatest importance. So I drew again with these people hovering around and saying , . Whereupon this man I was counting on, you know, to stand by me, got up and joined them, and "What does she mean? Lets run her out of the square. What is she? Is she the capitalist or something equally obnoxious?" So I did leave the square and approached a policeman nearby and said, "These people have prevented me from drawing in the square." And he said, "Do you have to draw in the square?" And he wouldn't come back with me or do anything about it. So I felt deeply hurt and, though I still live there, I don't draw as much in the square for it just simply hurt my feelings.

HENRIETTA MOORE: That's why you went underground?

ISABEL BISHOP: That's right. I was driven underground. I find no one watches me at all. I draw down there and nobody notices me.

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: Don't you get jostled?

ISABEL BISHOP: They jostle me and push me around a bit. They don't feel anything about it.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Well, it's good to talk with an artist who is objective about painting, and especially, as you were speaking a moment ago, about looking at pictures. I dipped into one or two of your talks which we had to put on microfilm, and it must have been nice to be in the audience because you explain things in such simple terms which are understandable to us as laymen. For example, in one of them, you were discussing abstract painting, and you offered a test for the presence of form in a minimum sense. The test begins, as you said, by bringing a picture into your senses as an object. I couldn't quite follow . . . .

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, the trouble is I had examples. I had slides and I had little things to show, and that's why these few little efforts I've made aren't anything in words because I've tried to make them for a little demonstration.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Yes, but the abstract . . . I mean it was clear to me that abstract also contains form.

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, yes, I was trying to express an idea about basic form. I had a little piece of canvas, and I took it out of the frame and I put it into the frame, and I turned it around backwards and so on to try to make it into bringing the senses of the people I was talking to that if a picture manages to be expressed in these terms, not in spite of them or not abrogating them or making them less or ambiguous, but in those terms, that it had basic form. Whatever else, it really had basic form. Then I showed examples, don't you see, of pictures that did and didn't have it, as I think.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Yes.

ISABEL BISHOP: It is very hard without the examples.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Oh, yes.

WARREN CHAPPELL: Well, yes, I don't know whether I could add anything; I can't . . . .

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, no, you have to have examples. There's something that I've thought of that perhaps doesn't come in at this point at all but only that I want to bring it up and that was the matter of artists on juries. Just this morning came the program of the Brandeis University ceremonial recently in which they had given certain medals and prizes, whatever they call it. I noticed there was no artist on the jury. There was no artist. I've been on that jury, so there was one, but this year there was no artist on the jury. I think that it is deplorable. I don't think the choices were wrong. I think the choices were those which would have been agreed to by an artist, but I think that a practicing artist should be on any jury of . . . .

HENRIETTA MOORE: Could you indicate the individuals? We did not see the . . . .

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, it doesn't matter who they were. And they weren't artists.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Oh, I see.

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: That will be a footnote on the tape, on the typescript.

WARREN CHAPPELL: There is of course this thing, something that was being discussed earlier at lunch, about art becoming a hobby. Curiously enough, it is perfectly possible that in ten or fifteen years that anyone who wants to learn how to paint or do certain things of that kind is going to have to get it out of books, all from some special place, because art is going to be used as a medicine, you see. It's going to be the curative. It's going to be a hobby. It's going to be something for the person who has had a heart attack, or to keep him from having it, and it just happens to be that that is happening to such a degree that the professional is sort of caught in this picture. Now I was wondering what you might want to make available to the future. Not just that.

ISABEL BISHOP: No, I think that the line to be drawn between amateur and professional is of the greatest importance. I think that perhaps it hasn't been defined -- at least as far as I know -- very well. The usual criterion is that it is selling, which is perfectly ridiculous.

WARREN CHAPPELL: No, no.

ISABEL BISHOP: The amateur sometimes sells beautifully and sells everything they do, and the most serious professional perhaps sells nothing or almost nothing. So that's absurd, but I think that for the criterion to be the amount of the life that goes into it. I think that is the right criterion; the amount of the life is minimal. I mean it must be. If it became major, they would be professional, whether they know any technique or not.

WARREN CHAPPELL: Well, the principal thing that has happened -- and if this goes on, naive expression. Thurber is a very interesting man, but for his drawings to have really made the impact that they have made is a very strange fact. Mark Twain did things quite as amusing, but only a few of those are around, and they are at the Morgan Library. They weren't published, as such.

HENRIETTA MOORE: I didn't know he drew.

WARREN CHAPPELL: Well, he did a very good portrait of J. Pierpont Morgan Sr. and left out the nose.

ISABEL BISHOP: That must have brought him everlasting affection with the Morgans.

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: Perhaps Thurber is greatly helped by appearing in "The New Yorker."

WARREN CHAPPELL: That's it. I've just finished recently reading Thurber's galleys about Ross. And of course it is really about Thurber; it's not about Ross. It's really about Thurber and how White had made them take these Thurber drawings. Then there became quite a cult, but the naive in general is highly respectable.

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, I don't think he's very naive.

WARREN CHAPPELL: Well, that's just around the corner from that.

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, I mean you've seen earlier drawings of his that were very conventional and no good. They were no good at all, but they were conventional drawings. But I did read, and you did too, that Thurber said that he -- when he began to show these in "The New Yorker," he himself hadn't thought that they were publishable, but they were published, and he got letters from women saying, "My six-year-old son or daughter can draw as well as you do," and send some examples, don't you know. And he'd write back and say, "Your six-year-old son does indeed draw as well as I do. The only thing is that he hasn't been through as much."

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: Have you any prediction to make about the lasting power of Thurber, that is to say twenty-five years from now? Do you suppose that society will appreciate Thurber drawings the way they do today?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't think they will change in their valuation, but probably their valuation would be lower, but I think they would exist and be valued. My opinion, I would guess that. I would predict that they would be, but they wouldn't be so high.

WARREN CHAPPELL: Smart, they wouldn't be smart.

ISABEL BISHOP: They wouldn't be smart.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Well, one of the first hobby Sunday painters was Rousseau.

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: But he remained a primitive.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Yes, and you don't consider him in . . . .

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, the amount of his life-stuff that went into it was tremendous. I don't think he was a Sunday painter, do you? I mean, it's true that he had a job, but I think that he painted . . . I mean it was more of a life.

HENRIETTA MOORE: I see. Yes, that's a very good term.

ISABEL BISHOP: Don't you think it is?

HENRIETTA MOORE: Yes, I do.

ISABEL BISHOP: And that could be hours or it could be not having the hours, just the intensity or something.

WARREN CHAPPELL: And he wanted to be a painter all along. It's quite possible. I don't know too much about his life, but I dare say that he always wanted to do it, and it's not therapeutic; it wasn't therapeutic. In fact, art is anything but therapeutic, and that's the thing that I would like to get over to the . . . .

[IB, BC and WC all talking at once.]

WARREN CHAPPELL: . . . they are destroying us with their pills, and if they send everybody into art, they are going to really kill them.

ISABEL BISHOP: They would kill them.

WARREN CHAPPELL: Yes, I think that art should be . . . . I'm sure that you try to discourage everyone that you can from going into art.

ISABEL BISHOP: Certainly, certainly.

WARREN CHAPPELL: Certainly I am.

HENRIETTA MOORE: That brings to my mind before I became associated with the Archives, I was working up at the Fulbright headquarters helping to process the Fulbright awards, and the hundreds and hundreds of paintings, samples, that were sent in was rather discouraging. Have you ever been asked to be on that particular jury?

ISABEL BISHOP: I've been on it for years. I was on it for three years.

HENRIETTA MOORE: In a sense, don't you think that some of these young people should not be encouraged?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh, yes, I certainly think so.

HENRIETTA MOORE: What can abe done . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, they don't get Fulbrights. That's one thing.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Yes, but that doesn't discourage them from trying the next year.

ISABEL BISHOP: No, and the worst thing of all seems to me that they get something called a B.F.A. That is dreadful. You know, they not only have bad work, but they have a B.F.A.

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: Ask her what she means by B.F.A.

ISABEL BISHOP: A Bachelor of Fine Arts degree.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Are you a B.F.A.?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. No, this is discouraging, and I must say it is taken as not a good omen by the jury when these people present their B.F.A.'s.

WARREN CHAPPELL: Well, you see sons of B.F.A.'s.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, and one of the funniest things was that these persons applying for a Fulbright Grant have to have recommendations from their college and so on, and after all for artists, practicing artists, and the

recommendation from the college was, "So-and-so wrote excellent pieces on Van Gogh," or something.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Well, I feel like a missionary. I would like to be a missionary in that respect -- to help lead these, to not encourage them and lead them into more fruitful avenues.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

HENRIETTA MOORE: They're being given too much encouragement.

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: Mr. Klonis said that right after the war the attendance of The Art Students League boomed, and it is still very big. The fees are more than enough to carry the school. It is affected by the would-be artist.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, it is a fight I understand now at the League among those on the Board as to whether the League should be rearranged for accreditation so that a person studying there can get . . . .

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: A B.F.A.?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, and so far they have withstood it, thank goodness.

WARREN CHAPPELL: Yes, alertness credit is the only thing that they have ever given, and that means that you were there.

HENRIETTA MOORE: That means that you were there.

WARREN CHAPPELL: They are willing to report that you have been in attendance.

ISABEL BISHOP: They don't even do that any more.

WARREN CHAPPELL: You can't? They don't do that either?

ISABEL BISHOP: They did it for a while.

WARREN CHAPPELL: I thought that . . . .

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, they did for a while, and they had some arrangement about the G. I.

WARREN CHAPPELL: Well, they didn't use to back in the early Forties.

IB; Oh, they did. Oh, I see.

HENRIETTA MOORE: It seems to me that you make a splendid bridge between the National Academy and the Fulbright.

ISABEL BISHOP: The National Academy is deplorable. Some of the Fulbright grants are excellent. The National Academy is zero minus.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Really?

WARREN CHAPPELL: The only difficulty, though, about any of these things where a person gets a prize and goes somewhere is that he looks back at the Prix de Romes of the last century, and sees those who got the Prix de Romes and went and those who were refused and didn't go. He will stay home. Obviously he wouldn't try for any sort of a thing because the ones who didn't were Renoir and Renoir . . . . Have you seen the showing of the Prix de Rome things and the year that the Renoirs and so on were turned down?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, I wouldn't say that's a hundred percent true, sir.

WARREN CHAPPELL: well, you can't name very many people who have won prizes and studied on awards . . . .

[HM, IB and WC all talking at once]

ISABEL BISHOP: You get some that are very wonderful, without doubt.

WARREN CHAPPELL: Yes.

ISABEL BISHOP: But the Academy in Rome we did visit last summer and were very impressed with it this time. I think it's in excellent shape. I mean that there was a tremendous amount of creativeness shown there in painting and in sculpture.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Who was doing some sculpture, do you remember?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, there was a man named whom I saw in "Life" magazine last month. A very young person -- just back from Rome, teaching now in Minnesota or somewhere.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Do you remember the names of any others who you happened to . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, Hebald and Laurent were working there, but they weren't young. I mean they both had studios. But some . . . oh dear, I can't remember the names . . . .

HENRIETTA MOORE: Who are some people who were the painters that impressed you?

ISABEL BISHOP: I can't think of their names. Oh, it was extremely lively.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Oh yes, we were at the Academy for a year.

ISABEL BISHOP: Didn't you think so?

HENRIETTA MOORE: Yes. But that was just after the war, and those who had not been able to take up their fellowships during the war years were there.

ISABEL BISHOP: Arthur Osver was the artist-in-residence. He was just finishing last summer.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Do you know Franklin Watkins?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh yes, certainly.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Do you like his work?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, I do indeed.

HENRIETTA MOORE: He doesn't produce . . . .

ISABEL BISHOP: He hasn't shown anything lately.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Would you like to turn it off and try?

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: Perhaps you people would like a breather.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: All right, we'll stop for a few minutes.

[PAUSE]

WARREN CHAPPELL: One of the best ways, perhaps, that you could indicate some of your feelings about art is, of course, in anything you'd care to say about your contributions to your fellow artists. Your house, you know, is full of your contemporaries, and there are no Bishops in it at all, and among the people that I really got to know -- not at the meeting but at your house -- was Reginald Marsh, and I think that something should be said about Marsh's dedication to his work.

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh, yes, I think Reginald Marsh is one of those whose stature will grow as time passes. I personally would believe he was a little older than I thought he was older. He's a graduate of Yale, and during the time that Yale drew I believe for a paper, a college paper. When he came out of college, he got a job on "The Daily News" reviewing vaudeville acts and evaluating them with a certain number of stars or X's or something and in this he got invaluable practice in graphic methods for putting down ideas, but his longing even then was to paint, and he came to The League with the greatest humility. Believe me, he knew nothing about art. I think he studied under Sloane and some with Miller, and this humility he kept always. He was a brilliant painter, especially in transparent medias, but again he felt that this was not what the greatest masters had used exclusively and so he determined to learn to paint opaquely. All this showed his humility of attitude. His greatest work perhaps to my mind is in the transparent medias and the pen and etching needle. His relation to art is extraordinary. He was successful in that he really, I suppose, made a living in it by illustrating and partly by selling paintings. His tremendous love for art had nothing to do with success, and he would abandon a method by which he had got to be known because he felt that seriousness required that he start again at the bottom of some more complex method. I think this was unfortunate in the end because he became the pupil of a man who never, in my mind, showed enough respect for Marsh's paintings and who was a megalomaniac himself, a person with pedantic ideas and methods . . .

WARREN CHAPPELL: Technique.

ISABEL BISHOP: . . . technique.

WARREN CHAPPELL: Rhythm.

ISABEL BISHOP: I think he did Marsh no good. It was Mr. Jack Maroger, but even so Reg survived this to the extent of painting a few . . . he painted many pictures in the Maroger medium which I think were not his best, but a few that were superlative, one of which I am glad to say we have. It's that Coney Island picture. He had a studio on Union Square, and I probably saw him about once a month, I should think, and he was great spiritual nourishment ot me.

HENRIETTA MOORE: You say you have one of the Coney Island scenes in your own home?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Can you tell us what other artists are hanging on your walls?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, we have a collection, I'm glad to say, of Chappells. That's really the backbone of it. We have a couple of , I think. We have two Renoirs, I'm glad to say.

WARREN CHAPPELL: A Fragonard.

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, I think it isn't a Fragonard, but it's thought to be.

WARREN CHAPPELL: Fragonard like all people who are busy who didn't sign everything they did.

ISABEL BISHOP: No, I don't believe it's a Fragonard. Mr. Maroger very kindly cleaned it for us, and he said he thought it was a hundred years later than Fragonard, and I think that's true.

WARREN CHAPPELL: That would about put him out.

ISABEL BISHOP: We have Marsh and we have quite a few graphic things of Peggy Bacon, and we have a Harry Wickey. We have a Schnakenberg drawing.

WARREN CHAPPELL: Miller, Locke and Denys Wortman.

ISABEL BISHOP: A lot of Denys Wortman, I mean a number of them.

WARREN CHAPPELL: Her house is literally pictures.

ISABEL BISHOP: Katherine Schmidt.

WARREN CHAPPELL: There is no space between pictures, is there?

ISABEL BISHOP: Someone said that, if we get another picture, we'll have to hang it on the outside of the house.

HENRIETTA MOORE: Well, I think the tape seems to be . . . am I right, Miss Cowdrey -- running out?

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: Yes.

HENRIETTA MOORE: I want to thank you very much for coming and giving us this opportunity and for suggesting that Mr. Chappell join us. Perhaps we may have the pleasure of interviewing him in a like manner some time, but in the meantime our heartfelt thanks for the Archives of American Art.

MARY BARTLETT COWDREY: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

PERMANENCE IN PAINT WARS WITH ESTHETIC AIMS, SAYS
ELIZABETH BISHOP

"I think the whole problem of durability in painting is so complex because of esthetic needs not being exactly coincidental with the need for permanence," said Isabel Bishop during a recent recorded interview. "They must be made to coincide as far as possible, but they are not identical . . . . I mean you have an impulse to lay on paint because of its speaking back to you in a certain way, but then you have to take pains to see that it isn't going to go bad. But the impulse toward permanence is one thing, and the impulse toward whatever modicum of expressiveness you have are different."

Miss Bishop uses Windsor-Newton paints, but not Windsor-Newton varnish "because it has no analysis on its label." She also uses Martini egg emulsion tempera. She paints primarily on prestwood panels, the surface of which she "roughs up with a sharp instrument... so that it loses that firm, resistant surface and becomes more absorbent."

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