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Oral history interview with Mordi Gassner, 1982 Apr. 16

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Mordi Gassner on April 16, 1982. The interview took place in Washington, DC, and was conducted by Estill Curtis Pennington for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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

Interview

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: It's Buck Pennington from the Archives of American Art, here today interviewing Mr. Mordi Gassner. Now, Mr. Gassner, we're going to begin today with just some basic facts of your life. When were you born?

MORDI GASSNER: May 27, 1899.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: And where?

MORDI GASSNER: In New York City.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Could you tell me something of your background? Where your parents lived and what they did, and what the situation was like when you were growing up.

MORDI GASSNER: I was born in Harlem, at the time when the buildings which are now slums were still being built. In fact, my first anti-social act was to burn down the fence around the city block, which had not yet been built across the street. I was, at that time, four.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: [Laughs.] Could you tell me when you first started developing an interest in art?

MORDI GASSNER: My interest in art seemed to have been more or less self-conscious, or unconscious, because I was drawing all the time, but I wasn't aware that that made me an artist until after I finished high school, at which time the choice came of carrying out what had been planned for me, for me to go to Cornell to study forestry, or to go to art school, which was my mother's desire.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: When you were in high school, did you take art classes, and did you attend public high schools in New York at that time?

MORDI GASSNER: I don't know why it was that I went to the Manual Training High School in Brooklyn, New York. It was a public high school. I did not take any special art courses, but I became art director of the magazine while I was there.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Then, you say, you decided you would go off to Cornell and study art?

MORDI GASSNER: No, I was going to go to Cornell to study forestry. My father had a sense that this country was wasteful of its resources, as early as that, and I suppose, with an instinct which was, we call it now, ecological, thought it would be a career for me, since I loved to be outdoors, to become a forester. [00:02:13] And I was directed, and I had already signed up when I graduated to go to Cornell, but during the summer vacation between times, my mother persuaded me to give art some consideration, and I did. Now, that's, in its own self, an interesting thing, because on a walk we took at the time I had just graduated, she told me—she said to me, "Mordi, there's something I owe it to you to tell you, since you've decided to go into something which isn't according to what I had dreamed for you. And this matter of dreaming is literal. When I was carrying you, when I was pregnant with you, I prayed that I might have a son who would be an artist. I was hoping that when you graduated school, I could persuade you that you do have a reason for being an artist, in the sense that you have some talent. Why don't we go and look at the art schools and see what they have on view, and make up your mind?"

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: So you looked in the art schools in New York?

MORDI GASSNER: Yes. We went to all the art schools, which had, at that time, exhibitions of students' work, and we landed, finally, at 80th Street and Broadway, where the so-called, at that time, New York School of Fine and Applied Art had a whole building, a studio building, which is still there. And Frank Alvah Parsons was the very much alive founder and proprietor and the principal of that school, and on his death, it became known as the

Parsons School.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Oh, that was the beginnings of the Parsons School of Design, then?

MORDI GASSNER: That is correct. I graduated in 1919, which was, of course, when we were at war. There were some interesting things about the school, very interesting things. [00:04:01] It was a school which had wonderful classes in interior design and interior architecture, and it had illustration and fine art, and it also had advertising art. By some adverse principle or other, I was directed into the advertising course, but it seemed that I sort of rolled all over the map and sort of took everything. Now, when I was in my second year, there was a scholarship called a Liberty Loan scholarship, which was to be voted for by both the faculty and the student body, and I happen to have been chosen for that. I tried to reject it, because financially, we didn't need it as much as others, but they didn't take that as bonafide, so I went through my last term on a scholarship.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Your last term at the art school?

MORDI GASSNER: That is correct.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: When you left the art school, by this time, it would have been 1919, and the First World War was coming to a close. Did you begin a career at that point?

MORDI GASSNER: I did. It happened, unfortunately, that my father, driving from St. Louis, where we had our second home—we had a home in Brooklyn and one in St. Louis—was killed in the Poconos in his own car. And that changed our lives a bit. But I did open a studio at once, on—I think it was 254 West 34th Street, right near the cut through 34th Street to the Pennsylvania Station in Manhattan. I found a little room in the front of a loft building, and I was there, I think, for two or three years.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Were you just doing commissioned work, or doing your own studies, or?

MORDI GASSNER: Well, several things happened in that place. First, coming in with me, though I was the one who took the studio without him, was a fellow student who was not so well-off. We made him a guest, and I took the studio, and he became sort of a quasi-partner. He was a sign writer and showcard person. We got the Strand Theater on Broadway to let us do those lovely signs, which had stylized lettering and little decorative spots. [00:06:03] I did the decorative spots and learned to do the lettering, but he did most of the lettering. That established a style which is now looked upon as a kind of nouveau art poster style, and we were in on the beginning of that.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Oh that's very interesting. So was it from New York, then, that you decided that you would go west to Hollywood on your great trek? Is that correct?

MORDI GASSNER: Yes. I had, in the meantime, between graduating art school, establishing my studio, and going on that trek—it was 1921, I think, before I went on the trek. In that interim, my father, Leopold Gassner, having been the most eminent expert in furs in the world, was influential in my meeting and being commissioned by Otto Kahn. Not the banker, but an extraordinary couturier furrier, who then engaged me to make wild animal paintings for his salon. And he also wanted these to be as prints for his calendars to be sent to his very exclusive clientele. It happened, also, that I had overstrained my eyes at art school. I had been rather unwise in the use of my time, and there wasn't much sleep, and I had, therefore, the risk of losing my eyesight unless I got outdoors for sustained periods. And my ophthalmologist insisted I get outdoors and stop working close for a while, so I decided I would go through the Southwest on foot and make the studies of native animals, and make paintings of these for Mr. Otto Kahn, which I did.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: And that's what led you to California?

MORDI GASSNER: That was the reason for getting to California. I walked from El Paso, Texas to the Grand Canyon, but there was frost, and there was ice, and the foresters wouldn't let—the forest men wouldn't let me go in there. [00:08:06] They said, "Not even the donkeys can hold their feet." So I walked down to Phoenix, and happened to meet a relative I didn't know I had, and stayed at his house, and made some paintings of those studies I had made. Then I went across to Los Angeles, and there, I, as always, took a hotel and began to do some work, when I met Douglas Fairbanks at his studio, through a series of events which seem to be irrelevant. But nevertheless, they led to my meeting Douglas Fairbanks, and he made me his art director at that time. So I began—

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: This was in 19—

MORDI GASSNER: This was in 1921 or ['2]2. Late in 1921. It might have been 1922. He had just done *Robin Hood* and was planning *Thief of Baghdad.* And so, I told him—when he said, "Would you stay and be our art director?" I said, "I don't think I know how to be an art director. I don't even know how—I've never seen a film

made, and I don't know how you can possibly have me design something I don't understand." He said, "Well, we understand it. You design it." And that was the way it began.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: And so you stayed on in Hollywood and worked with Mr. Fairbanks for a while?

MORDI GASSNER: I did, and assistant to me was Bill—well, let me see—William—I can't remember—the credit for the film, because I was rather unhappy with working in that kind of a [inaudible]. I couldn't get quite used to the double-jointed elbows which kept patting each other and themselves on the back, and I didn't feel I would thrive as a fine artist in that atmosphere. William Cameron Menzies, who was my assistant at the time, and made the miniature models, with Ed Langley, who was the technical director—I left, and Mr.—and the credit went to my assistant, which is all right with me, but the designing, I had mostly done. [00:10:05]

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: And you also met Mr. DeMille at this time, is that true?

MORDI GASSNER: Yes. At the time that I was with Fairbanks, the elder brother, the oldest brother—there were three brothers. There was Douglas, and there was Bob Fairbanks, his younger brother, who was production manager, and his brother John Fairbanks looked as if he might have been a Churchill from Downing Street. All English and financier. He really ran the business. And he had a stroke, and so there was a pause in production. The director suggested—he wrote letters—wouldn't I go over and see DeMille and others, because he would like Hollywood to keep me here. And so I met Cecil DeMille, who became very much interested, and we corresponded, and I did occasional things by correspondence and long distance with DeMille ever since, until he died.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: So you only stayed in California for a while, and then you decided that you would come back to New York. Is that right?

MORDI GASSNER: Yes. I came back to New York—I think it was early in '24, or sometime in '24. At that time, I was induced by a person who was one of the social workers with the delinquency problem, a social worker with the Big Brother movement—inducted me as a volunteer teacher of a group of delinquent boys. Though I had never taught, I did teach this group of 14 boys, and we had an exhibition which seemed to make the headlines, and changed the whole attitude in this country toward children's art. The *New York Times* gave it a two-column spread on the front page. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, which then published, had a double-paged spread on the middle of the Sunday edition. It got into some magazine, and before we knew it, a department store in Florida, Miami, Florida, had closed down its [inaudible] and sent us all that stuff for the kids. Some of them still have it, I imagine. One of them became a teacher of art at the Brooklyn Museum, and the others—it seems rather remarkable. [00:12:03] The psychiatrist of the Big Brother movement felt that if these kids, who had done what they did because they wanted attention, had something which would draw attention legitimately, and if they showed an interest in art, this might settle them into a career, and it did in all cases. In fact, it's looked upon as a rather remarkable experiment, because all 14 found their way in art.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Oh, that's very interesting. So, by the mid-to-late '20s, you were teaching and working on works of your own. Was this the time that you applied for the Guggenheim?

MORDI GASSNER: The teaching was very incidental, but it was more an act of friendship. And those students, though I did teach them, I taught them something that most artists of the time didn't know: the preparation of their materials for permanency's sake. And they, therefore, were in a position to teach that, too, as well as to do work. So I did this teaching very incidentally and informally, but at that time, I had already formed the notion, when I was in Florida, of doing a major opus, which would be a multiple work of art, based on the Renaissance, the Italian Renaissance Not as a period in and of and for itself, which I greatly admired, but because it was the vestibule, I thought, into the 20th century. And so, my view of the 20th century is as if it were the product, still in process, of fulfilling that promise of the Renaissance, the dignity of man.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: That was your idea for the *Mural Monument to Modern Culture*?

MORDI GASSNER: Yes, that was the basic motivation, and that was the principle, and that became its theme. And I, therefore, did apply, not under my own initiative, but on the initiative of Henry W. Kent of the Metropolitan Museum, who, by a series of events, suggested, and more or less pushed me into applying, and then became, in a way, my mentor for a few years in that respect. [00:14:00]

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: And you actually won the Guggenheim, didn't you?

MORDI GASSNER: Yes, I won the Guggenheim Fellowship. Though I wasn't free to accept it at once, because I had a mural commission in Brooklyn which had to be completed, and I also had a commission with—what is the name of the—Squibb, Squibb Pharmaceuticals. Mr. Weicker, the father of the present senator, was at that time in charge of Squibb, and he engaged me to do fantasies based on the themes of the titles of some of the perfumes which were to be issued, as he had bought over for Squibb the Lentheric perfumes. So I had that commission

which kept me here, and I had this mural commission which kept me here, and I accepted it the next year. I accepted it for the year later. And I was away, because I re-won the scholarship with—the fellowship with a different jury.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: So you were then in Italy from 1929 to '31?

MORDI GASSNER: Yes. I was in Italy—I was in Florence for two years, and the authorities there put at my disposal, which was very gracious and very helpful, the upper galleries of the Accademia Museum in Florence. Downstairs were the original *David* and some of his unfinished marbles, and upstairs they cleared everything out, and I had five galleries, each 50 feet square [laughs] and 30 feet high, with no windows, just skylights. I was there for two years and could have stayed indefinitely, because they wanted me to stay beyond my fellowship. In the meantime, my wife of that time had borne a child, and she wanted it to be brought up in America, so we came home, into the Depression.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: My goodness. What did you feel you most learned in Italy? Was it there that you first learned how to use the egg tempera process?

MORDI GASSNER: No. I had occasion to use the egg tempera process earlier. [00:16:02] In 1927, I believe, I received a commission to do the murals for the Hotel Granada. The Hotel Granada was aspiring to become, as far as the builders were concerned, a replacement for the St. George Hotel, the only first-class hotel in that part of Brooklyn. And I was engaged to do the murals for the main dining room, which I did. Now, since the large walls of that main dining room were against the kitchen stoves in the other room, I realized that oil paint would peel off in two weeks, so I did research and came upon a book, or a little article in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* by Church, one of the early paint chemists, on egg tempera, which I had never heard of. I got Mrs. Boni of Boni & Liveright who was a book sleuth, to advertise in Europe, because the books were out of print. And she got me books on the subject of egg tempera, and I think I reintroduced that medium into this country.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Oh, how marvelous. That's very interesting. So, what would you feel that you had most learned while you were in Italy?

MORDI GASSNER: I had already formulated my program of ideas. In fact, the themes are listed, and I think you have those in the prints that you have. But what I wanted to do was to be in the ambience, in the atmosphere, and where I could go further into the detail of the qualities which made the Renaissance unique in Italy. And so I did, I really breathed in the atmosphere of Florence and of all Italy. I had toured for six months in order to be better qualified to see things in the south of Italy, and I developed friendships which enabled me to learn more than I could have possibly on my own.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: When you came back to America, as you said, it was the Depression, and you moved back to New York City. And what did you take up at that point? Was it back to commissions, or did you have other projects in mind? [00:18:01]

MORDI GASSNER: Well, not answering your question explicitly in the terms you've asked it, when the Depression struck, I was in Florence, and I knew, as soon as the 1929 toll took place, that there would be no building, as had been promised me, which would frame—I had designed a building schematically, and that building was planning to be built, but there was no prospect of it being built. And there I was, only a few months in Italy, and my project virtually aborted. But I didn't allow it to be—I continued to work on it, because it was in my mind, but I realized that I would have to do something, if I wanted the ideas it represented and its mission to be performed, in some other vehicle. Having had some experience of the film—and I had, at the time, already begun to generate special effects in the film—I thought in terms of possibly translating my visual into a verbal form, which then could be retranslated into the cinematic form, and I therefore set about finding and developing a theme which would carry out both the idea and the mission of my project as a mural artist. And I have been working on that ever since.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Once back in New York, and taking up residence there, you were painting, correct?

MORDI GASSNER: Yes, I was painting, but to tell the truth, it was a very difficult period. We had lived thriftily in Florence, not because we were especially thrifty, but because the difference between the lira and the dollar made it impossible to spend all our little stipend. So we had a full year's stipend left when we came home, which disqualified me for getting on the projects which were then forming. But at the same time, they made me a supervisor. I got the same big salary, $37.50, as the workers got, for being a supervisor and planning and helping them do their work. [00:20:06] Most of them didn't know where to begin with a mural.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Oh, so you were working on the WPA for a while?

MORDI GASSNER: In fact, after they found that I knew a little bit about things, they made me supervisor of

design for the National Youth Administration of the region, metropolitan area, during the period when it was formed. But I left that soon, because I had a call to go to Hollywood, and therefore, I didn't have a continuous profession as a director of design for the National Youth Administration.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: So you were called back to Hollywood to work on films as an art director again. Who did you work with there?

MORDI GASSNER: The problem at that time was, again, a residue. We were still in the Depression. The Depression apparently clung, until we began to produce for the war purposes of our future allies in the World War II. Until the war industries began, really, to mesh with the war effort, there was virtually no money to be had which wasn't in the possession or control of the banks. As a result of that, many of the projects which I was called upon to undertake never reached the film—never reached the screen. For instance, there was a project which was at RKO, which was in the hands of the bankers, because they had not been able to pay for their sound equipment. And the film was to deal—and Orson Welles was to be the producer/director, and he engaged me, on a promissory verbal basis, to be the art designer—in fact, the production designer—of *Rip Van Winkle*. Now, that *Rip Van Winkle* was to be the story of a person who emerged with the promise that Wilson made, the war to end all war, and for 20 years, he believed it, and he, well—but he fell asleep. [00:22:07] He woke up in time, and found that he was in the company of the Hitlerites and the Mussolini gangster approach to society. This Rip Van Winkle, in other words, discovered that the 20 years of his sleep hadn't really made the world what Mr. Wilson had thought safe for democracy, but seemed to impregnate it with a new danger. And so this was to be the theme of the *Rip Van Winkle* story, for which there was a script, and which Orson Welles, when he finished *The Talkingtons*, was going to produce. I was to stay in Hollywood. I needn't—I shouldn't dare go away, and I was to do it. But the man who was in charge, at that time, of the film, of the film company—his name was Schaefer—happened to have very strong German sympathies, and was a Bundist in his spirit. In fact, he got rid of all the—if I was told correctly—I was told that he got rid of all the Freemasons, and didn't permit them to do anything which might endanger the good purposes of Mr. Hitler. And so Mr. Orson Welles, though this is not generally known, found himself outside of RKO after he finished *The Talkingtons*.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Oh my goodness. So then you went back to New York?

MORDI GASSNER: There was not only this as a reason for my being there. The gentleman who was the man in charge of the Disney Studios had come east to meet me, in order to have me design for them, in the way in which *Snow White* was doing, *Don Quixote*. It was to be both—it was to be both—what—the form which is the automatic form, and comic-strip form, and at the same—animated. And it was also to be live. I was to design the key moments of that for Disney. When I got to the Disney Studio, the studio was on strike for a year, and it didn't open until it was then turned over for war purposes, to do visuals for the armed services. [00:24:05] There was another reason for my being there. Ernest Schoedsack, who had done *Chang* and *Grass*, with Cooper—beautiful, beautiful epic films—had come east to engage me to do a design—be the designer for *Green Mansions*. But they ran into an enormous script problem. They didn't have the sense to take the book as it was. They had to change it, in order to do something which would be in terms of what they considered suitable film criteria, which is nonsense. The film itself could have been based immediately on the book. They engaged Madame Trubetskoy. They engaged the man who wrote—something *Horn—Trader Horn*—and they couldn't get a script which seemed to them right, so they never produced it.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: When you got back to New York, after this Hollywood experience, you had some involvement and some insight into the whole situation of Diego Rivera painting his mural at the Rockefeller Center, and I wish you could tell me something about that.

MORDI GASSNER: That whole episode was a very mixed blessing in my life. First of all, I had received a letter from John D. Rockefeller Jr., who wrote to me in Italy, I suppose at the behest of Henry W. Kent, who was executive secretary of the Metropolitan Museum, who told him about me, probably, or Mr. Henry Allen Moe of the foundation had possibly done so. In any case, it seemed that I was the only artist on the horizon who had dealt with the sciences and the contemporary culture as such, and this happened to be the idea wanted by Harvey Wiley Corbett and Raymond Hood, who were the mentors of the architecture for that building. They were both deans of American architecture. And so, when I returned to New York, and I came on invitation to Mr. Henry W. Kent at the Metropolitan, he immediately called Harvey Wiley Corbett to make an appointment for me. [00:26:12] "I was doing us both a favor," he said, by introducing Mr. Corbett to an artist qualified to do what he wanted, and by helping me become the artist in this terrible time, of having a commission to do something. From that, Mr. Corbett called me about three months later, and told me he would like to see my work. And I came with a portfolio of things, and he immediately decided, this is it. They were, at that time, planning to make a penthouse, kind of a pavilion, on the roof of the tall RCA building, and this would have a structure which would be decorated by my work, and then you had a walk-around, a parapet, which would enable you to get a conspectus of a really metropolitan area, a metropolis in the 20th century vein, telling you everything you need to know, because this city did everything that was 20th century. And in that way, there would be a consonance and perfect relationship to what he and Raymond Hood wanted. And so I seemed ideally suited, as if by

serendipity, for the job, and I was, therefore, introduced by him to go to see Mr. John Sloan of Sloan, Robertsons, Todd—of Todd, Robinson, Todd—excuse me, John Todd of Todd, Robinson, Todd, who were the engineers building, at that time, the Graybar Building, and who were the delegates for Mr. Rockefeller to take care of everything that went into the Rockefeller Center project. But Mr. Todd didn't like Jews. I happen to be Jewish, and he told me so. He said, "We don't have Jews up here." And so I was not even looked at as a possible artist. Well, some months later, this came to the attention of a gentleman who had put his name to the introduction to an exhibition, a one-man show at the Brooklyn Museum, which had been arranged by Mr. Kent of the Metropolitan Museum. [00:28:04] And this Mr. John Sloan, an architect, had quite a different view, and was enough—was chummy enough with Mr. John Todd to say, "Let's go together to see this man. I don't see how he can do a thing like that. First of all, he's not religious. I don't know why he should pick on you because you're Jewish. Second of all, there's no other artist in view who should be doing this work, and I'll tell him so." So he made an appointment, after selecting from what I had, a portfolio of things that had just arrived from Italy. Nobody had seen them yet. They had come late. And he then took me himself—he carried the portfolio—wouldn't let me do that—from his penthouse on the building on the—which had been over—which straddled the Grand Central Station—down to the 30th floor, where John Todd was. But immediately on his seeing me in the doorway behind Mr. Sloan, he got busy with trifling telephone calls, have his trash basket emptied and things of that sort, and kept Mr. Sloan red-faced, standing in the doorway, with me still out in the hall. Mr. Sloan lost his Irish temper and said, "Come on, John. This nonsense has to quit. We have important things to do with our time. Let's go into the conference room. Come follow us and we'll show you some of Mr. Gassner's work. Because if you don't have his work, you just have some more art. This is what you need. Come." And he followed us like a schoolboy going to school unwillingly, like Shakespeare's kid, dragging his feet to school. And we got to this enormous boardroom. Immediately, Mr. Todd dashed for a corner telephone far away, a mile away, really, in that room. Mr. Sloan said to me—he was red as a beet, and angry, and he said, "Don't lose your temper, Mordi. Just keep calm." [Laughs.] "And let this man see your work and see what he's insulting." So he said, "Open up to any page you want to explain." [00:30:01] The thing he referred to was the 32-page—I think it was 32-page—Brooklyn Museum brochure on my *Mural Monument to Modern Culture*. So I did so, and he then went over and virtually pulled Mr. Todd away from the phone and said, "Sit down here like a gentleman and look at this work, which you need—you need him more than he needs you." He sat down and looked. And I had begun to explain, as Mr. Sloan told me to do, one of the works. I think it was on biology—I'm not sure. But he put his hand on the book, and closed the book on his hand, and said, "I have other things to do," and left. Now, as a result of this, I was virtually foreclosed as far as he was concerned. But later on, there was put in charge of a gentleman, Lincoln Kirstein, the arrangement of an exhibition of works by artists he would select as possibilities to do the murals and other works of art, sculptures and everything else. And he would arrange for the Museum of Modern Art an exhibition of these things, and it would entail each of us doing a special piece of work for that purpose. And I did a triptych, which was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, but apparently I was passed over, and I had no chance to do anything for the project. Now, as far as Rivera is concerned, I had meanwhile made the acquaintance, through my wife, who knew him, of one of the eminent artists in America, who became an assistant to Rivera. And also, there was Lucille Bloch, the daughter of the composer. Ben Shahn was the artist, who got to be very friendly with me. [00:32:01] And he was engaged by Rivera, first of all, because he was competent, and second of all, because he spoke English, which Mr. Rivera didn't, and understood Spanish, and so did Lucille Bloch. They were his assistants. At the time when it was first revealed that the portraits of Lenin and Marx, and Engels were in this fresco that was being painted—the sketch by Rivera had blank faces, as if it was to be decided who they would be. But meanwhile, there were four people with blank faces, and the one to which they most strenuously took exception isn't even mentioned in the press, but this I learned from an authority, no less than one of the partners, Todd Robinson. Todd was also—the younger Todd, who was the end of the name, was also a partner of John Sloan, which was Sloan and Todd. And so, he told me in confidence that the real reason—they didn't care about Marx. They didn't care about Lenin. They didn't care about Engel. But they very much objected to Margaret Sanger, whose portrait was the other celebrity. The reason they objected was that the Catholic Church let them know there would be no South American embassies in that building if that mural went up. So they decided to destroy the mural, and they did. But before the mural was destroyed, the press heard that it was to be destroyed, and they tried to get in, but they blocked the press, and they wouldn't have any press. Lucille Bloch happened to be pregnant at the time, and so under her smock, she hid a camera and took pictures, which she gave to the *New York Times*, and the secret was out. That was the beginning of another thing which happened. This was deep in the Depression, bear in mind, and times were one in which there were no other places for art to be commissioned. [00:34:00] And this had been an act of vandalism which was really unacceptable. Now, my work had been used by Rivera, because he hadn't the slightest notion of the modern sciences. And so, at the Brooklyn Museum, he borrowed from me the actual symbology, which became the basis for his sketch, though he changed it into his own style. And this was acceptable to him. Now, though I had been plagiarized, and what you might say wronged, I didn't take this personally, but I felt that this vandalism was something which was unbearable, and should not be publicly allowed. My view was that a work of art by a major artist, which had its intention to reach the public, belonged not to the person who commissioned it, but to the public, and therefore should be sacrosanct from destruction. I was one of those who was willing to be organized into a protest group, and that group did protest this action. That group, then—

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Was this the beginnings of the American Artists' Congress?

MORDI GASSNER: No. This was not the Artists' Congress, which came later. This was the beginning of what was then named the Artists' Union. I had never any notion of unionism. I didn't know what it was about. It was the subject about which, though it's important in American history, I was yet to study for my *Mural Monument to Modern Culture*. But it isn't one of those things which you take a long time learning in a Depression, and I had the opportunity to learn a lot about it, because we lived in Sunnyside Gardens, which is probably where the densest intellectual population in the country lived in a small place. And every movement, at that time, sent its splinter representative to teach us what they represented, so we had a schooling in Marxian economics, in Marxian sociology, of all splinter groups. Though none of us—I don't remember any of our group that joined the movement—nevertheless, we were informed. [00:36:00] This union, while it was largely left-wing in its origin, took in the whole community of unemployed artists. And there were about 1,100 at the time who became members. I was appointed, because I was articulate apparently, and became a member of the executive committee, as Ben Shahn did. Now, my work having been vandalized, amongst [laughs] other things—I won't talk about that right now. But my work, having been vandalized, too, I was subject matter as well as director, but my project—my problem as a member of the committee was to get more artists employed, and so I conceived projects. One of the most interesting of those projects was the new subway branch, which was to go to the potential, then-forming World Fair, New York World Fair at Flushing Meadows. And the Sixth Avenue subway was built to conduct people to that place. I conceived the idea, as an anthropologist might, that the stations of the whole subway system were ideal for places for the works of art, which could use many, many more artists. So a man from Washington by the name of Daniels came down, representing the works project, and I put this idea in his head, and the Museum of Modern Art arranged an exhibition of works which we should get done as to how he would deal with this. And I formulated the subject matter for this thing. It was encyclopedic. Let me give you an example. I designated that every station should be tiled in a definite local color, so that you would know where you were by the color, unless you were colorblind. You couldn't get off at the wrong station. You would have, in other words, a complete spectrum through the subway of background colors, which would be the ground color for any other thing that went on. The entrances would be treated as plazas might be treated, with sculptures at the portals, and the tile. [00:38:01] And we developed the technique—I, with a paint chemist, developed a technique which was to be used later on, taking it from us—and we helped them with it—by Rivera and Siqueiros and the other artists of Mexico, painting in silicon ester, which was a form of concrete painting, which had—which, if Titian and Giorgione had known about it, their frescoes on the outside of the Ducale Palace [Doge's Palace] would still be like brand-new. And so, with the man who had written a book on the chemistry of paints and painting, I helped others develop sketches for murals, which were then exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art. But we had a very sad session with respect to those works of art. There was a gentleman by the name of Jewell at that time, who was the critic for the *New York Times*. I don't like to use the word "critic," because he had no criterion, but he was a reviewer, let's say. And that is what I find that most so-called critics of the newspapers are: they are reviewers, and their criticism is based on a changeful criterion—with every movement, they are a new critic. In any case, Jule happened, that night, when we had a symposium at the Museum of Modern Art, getting the city fathers to finance half of this, and the federal government would finance the other half—it would be a partnership, you might say, between the metropolis and the federal government. Mr. Jewell got up, and he was a little bit inebriated, and he made a speech. "For God's sake, is there no place you can duck into where you can't see art?" I said, "Yes, Mr. Jewell. You can go right back to the *New York Times*. There's very little art there."

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: So by this time, the '30s were winding down, and we're right at the edge of the Second World War, and you've been involved with various movements and groups, and have been doing some painting on your own, and getting commissions here and there. [00:40:00]

MORDI GASSNER: And I was moved into the job of design, supervisor of design, for the National Youth Administration. But I also, at the time, was doing work on my own, though I was finding, here and there, small things to do. When I went west, for instance, I did several portraits out there to support me, one of a federal judge, and as it happened, the Metropolitan Museum, which, at that time, had a bylaw which forbad them to have a one-man show of living artists, but Mr. Kent bypassed that by arranging exhibitions in other cities. That's how the Brooklyn Museum exhibition took place. As a result of that, I was brought down to Richmond, where the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts was being built. It wasn't finished. They couldn't house such a big exhibition. But Mr. Cole [Colt], the director, and others on the board, and others interested in—

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Thomas Colt.

MORDI GASSNER: What's that?

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Mr. Thomas Colt.

MORDI GASSNER: Yes. Became—yes, that was his name. He found a place in town, which was the Frame Building, a whole building was turned over to a one-man show, at what was then the Richmond Academy of Arts

and Sciences, which was founded before the Revolution. And that led to my being commissioned to do a portrait of a very important doctor there, who founded the St. Elizabeth Hospital. And that led to [laughs] my doing a portrait later of the chief justice of the Supreme Court of Appeals of Virginia, Henry W. Holt. And that somehow enabled me to sustain myself over this period—such things, during the period when there was really a blight on patronage of art.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: So this is getting you off of the '30s and wrapping up that, and—

MORDI GASSNER: That's in the beginning of the '40s.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: That was at the beginning of the '40s.

MORDI GASSNER: No, wait a second. No, I'm wrong. [00:42:00] That was 1936 and 1937, and ['3]8.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Nineteen thirty-six and 1937 and ['3]8 for these activities. What about your involvement with the American Artists' Congress? How did that come about?

MORDI GASSNER: The American Artists' Congress was an offshoot of the Artists' Union. The federal government decided that its works should be seen, and so it decided to help finance and circulate, if I'm correctly informed, the work which was then being done by artists under its auspices. And so the Artists' Congress was formed to encourage this activity, and it, therefore, selected one of my paintings to be one of those which would travel with the show. We were asked to do a painting especially for it, which I did. I did a night workman with the wife and child outside, indicating this was a pretty hungry period for workers. And that was about the leftist I ever got in respect to work. It was much of what was being done at the time.

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ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Continuing with Mr. Gassner. This is side two.

MORDI GASSNER: I think there is something of interest to be said, since we're approaching the problem of talking about World War II, that I had happened to do during World War I. When I was still at art school—bear in mind, I didn't graduate until 1919—we were already engaged. There came to our school a rather important officer of the navy, who was interested, somehow, to protect shipping, and someone had thought that if they could disguise ships officially, they might occasionally be missed by the torpedoes of the U-boats. So he had with him a subaltern, who carried two big, massive bags of ships models, all sizes and shapes of merchant marine and naval ships, and he left these here with the instruction that we should sort of try, with optical illusions and such things, see if we can't make it difficult to hit these ships. And he pointed out on each one, with a star, where the machine room was, which was the essential part of the target. So he asked for volunteers. None of the girls in the classroom—they were the pondering sort, that was their affair. But there were five boys in the class who did decide to help. It dwindled down to about two of us, George Cutler and myself, by the time we were finished, because it was very difficult, trying work. And we developed what later became Op art in a much later time. We didn't look upon it as art. We did those things which would befuddle the senses as far as we could, but we even went to superstructures. We had them build false smokestacks and parts of ships as if they were askew. Anything. You see, they didn't, at that time, have infrared photography, which could see through the deceit. [00:02:00] And so, we did beguile and save many ships by beguiling the gunners, who, through their crosshair, could only see what looked like the engine room but wasn't, because the direction of the ship and the position of the engine room was masked.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: By an optical effect?

MORDI GASSNER: That is correct. Now, as a result of this, as we ourselves got involved in World War II, I tried to enlist, though I was past the age of enlistment, in the camouflage service, since I felt I could be of help in that department. And I then was directed—and somewhere at home, I have a letter, which introduced me to the man in charge of camouflage then. He sent me to the man, the commandant, in charge of camouflage in Washington, where I went. And we had a very interesting, brief interview. And he asked me a number of questions. He was extremely interested, and they were real problems, because in the interim, infrared photography had become effective, and you couldn't paint things and hide them with paint. He said to me, as a challenge, "For instance, what would you do if we had desert warfare, and we had oil tanks on the desert?" He thought that was a stumper. I said, "I would bury them." He then sent me a lovely letter, thanking me for volunteering, but said, "You're too old for field duty, and we can't use you. Thank you just the same."

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Well, that gets us up to the Second World War and the middle of your career, I think. So I think we'll stop at this point and postpone our conversation to a later date, at which time we'll try to cover the beginnings of your involvement with ABC, and the—

MORDI GASSNER: With all of the networks.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: —and with all of the networks, and the classes that you taught in special effects at the school, and that aspect of your career at that time.

MORDI GASSNER: Well, there is also an all-important aspect of my war activity, because I became art director and production manager in the preparation of visual aids for the armed services, indirectly, through the engaged subcontractors that I did work with and for. [00:04:11]

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Great. Thank you very much, Mr. Gassner.

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ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: This is Buck Pennington of the Archives of American Art. This is Buck Pennington of the Archives of American Art, resuming part two of our oral history interview with Mr. Mordi Gassner.

[Audio break.]

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Mr. Gassner, we're going to pick up again where we left off, just as World War II started, and talking about your career at that point. You have come back to New York, and are working in various places, and I'll let you pick up from there.

MORDI GASSNER: As we come to the period of the World War II, we come to a complete deviation from my normal way of life, because I was prepared, on someone's suggestion, to qualify to help in the visual aid program for the armed services. I had—I don't know if I mentioned it in the earlier part of this review—been—I made an attempt to volunteer to be of service in respect to camouflage, insofar as I had been one of the originators of maritime camouflage in the First World War. But on being interviewed after going to Washington on purpose by one of the people in charge, my age mitigated against my being accepted, although some of the problems, I did, at the moment, in an interview, helped to solve. For instance, I was asked by the military gentleman, "What would you do in view of the fact that infrared photography makes mere painting of things useless at this time, in the event that we wanted to do something about gas tanks in the desert?" And I simply responded immediately, "Bury them." Which he wasn't prepared for. He had thought, as an artist, as a painter, I would think in terms some masquerade. [00:02:02] But the obviousness of my reply hadn't occurred to him. From that point on, I was then moved to be of help, since I had some memory of having learned mechanical drawing and the things related to it. I was soon ready, and I became one of those in the activity of preparing visual aids for the armed services. And within a few weeks, it was discovered that my qualifications were such that I was put in charge, in New York City, in a private enterprise which was under subcontract to do this kind of work, an engineering firm. And so during the period of the war, I was very much occupied with the production of manuals for the various armed services, and for, such wool charts [ph], as would be the reduction to a single image, with slogans, and with captions, of a total manual. In that capacity, one of the first things I had to do was the oil-pumping system—the fuel-pumping system and oil-pumping system of an aircraft carrier, with its lines of pipe and its tremendous array of pumps and meters, and the suspension, which had to take into account the possibility of shock due to bombardment. From that—having done that first as merely a draftsman, with somebody else supervising, they lifted me up to direction of the activities. And at that point, I was responsible for the manuals for a whole series of things on aircraft instruments, including, for instance, the autogyro pilot controls. And I had to do with the carburetor of the B-29 bomber, and with the propeller controls of that same airplane. And these were highly elaborate things, in which I had the opportunity to introduce certain innovations, which have since become normal. [00:04:00] For instance, with the success of pages of transparent plastic, which becoming a book, at the same time as overlays provides you through them a complete image of the situation within a motor, and on turning the pages, you have the phases [ph]. That became something which was then applied to anatomy and other things. But these, at the time, were completely anonymous, and in fact, they were so classified, we never saw the books when they were issued. The other thing which I had an [inaudible] in helping to produce was for the signal corps. They wanted a camera, for some reason, independent of signals, which would photograph the internal tissues in response to pain for the purposes of surgery. I was brought down to Borough Hall, where their headquarters were, and asked to design the housing for the camera, which could be swallowed, and which had a stroboscopic lens, with about a one-three thousandth of a second speed, in sync with the light itself, which would take continuous film, shot through by film. And I never heard of it again after having designed it, until some years later, when *Life* magazine issued a double-paged spread on that camera, and I recognized it. I had done it, but nobody knew who had. Now, I don't know what else it is that you might like to know.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Well, moving on from the World War II experience, in which you were working with camouflage and that sort of thing, you're still settled in New York, and then beginning to pick up your career again. When exactly did you begin to go to work for the major networks in the art directing capacity?

MORDI GASSNER: Well, before I had the sense to get out of the technical thing, which was not really my métier, though I had succeeded in doing it fairly well, I had as my studio—I took some of the people from my staff and

we began to do privately—I developed a whole line of radios. I developed the first—one of the first microfilm apparatuses. I did a pistol scope for the police of New York. [00:06:03] I did the first of the microfilm—one of the early microfilm apparatuses. And I was in what was called, at that time, industrial design, until I caught myself and waked up and realized that my vocation was art, and not making money at being—and *Fortune* magazine, at that time, did have—engage me to do certain things on fractional horsepower motors and such things. But I realized that though I could do this, this was not my reason for being, and I went right into art. Now, since I had had some experience in moving pictures, RKO seized upon me to do posters at first, and then, gradually, I was called upon. For instance, Ernest Schoedsack, who worked with Cooper in the production of *Chang* and *Grass*, two really beautiful epics of their kind, and who later is better known for *King Kong*, which I loathed, was, at that time, concerned to produce *Green Mansions* by Hudson. Now, it happened that Scribner and the Museum of Natural History had, at one time, selected me to do an illustrator's edition of that, but a confusion of copyrights had intervened. Nevertheless, the research director of RKO picked me up, Harold Hendy [ph], and sent to Schoedsack a notice that he'd better come east to meet me if he wanted an art director in sympathy with that kind of book. So I was chosen by Schoedsack to be the production manager. Then they ran into the typical problem with the script, which would be as sensitive as the book, and yet as graphic as movies must be, and they failed to achieve one. Madame Trubetskoy, who was the daughter of Tolstoy, and the author of Franklin—of Frank—Frank Horner—I'm not—*Trader Horn*—these people had all been tried, and nothing arrived, so they decided not to produce it. But I was nevertheless requested, because the man in charge of the Disney Studio, by the same Harold Hendy, was adduced to come to meet me. He wanted me to design *Don Quixote*, in the same vein and métier that *Snow White* had been done, mostly animation and then live. [00:08:09] And I went west as a result. When I got west, the Disney Studio was paralyzed in a strike, which lasted for a year, and didn't reopen the studio until we were already in the war, and they then gave their efforts to the war effort. But while I was there, I met Orson Welles. Orson Welles was, at that time, riding the crest, because he had just done *Citizen Kane* and was now busy on *The Talkingtons*, but he had in view a script for what was called *Rip Van Winkle*. The Rip Van Winkle of that story was the awakening of a person who'd fallen asleep with the promises of the world safe for democracy after World War I, and woke up to find himself in the métier and ambience of Hitler and Mussolini. This was something that Orson Welles requested me to stay west to be the designer of, but it happened that a man by the name of Schaefer was the man representing the banks who had taken over RKO, because it couldn't pay its bills for that Depression time for the sound systems and so on. So he, being inclined toward the Fascist and Nazi ideology, refused to allow Orson Welles to produce that thing. That was the end of Orson's relationship to RKO. So I came at a bad time, apparently, and these things remained undone. But in the succeeding periods, and even before that, there was always some sort of a correspondence between Cecil DeMille and myself, as I think I may have mentioned earlier. And until his death, there are letters to show for this correspondence, though at one time my studio was burglarized, and they happened to be in the attaché case that I had letters from him. So much of that correspondence is gone, but a few letters remain. In that relationship, I made suggestive ideas for both *Samson and Delilah* and *Ten Commandments*. [00:10:01] Our ways of thinking were as different as the *Saturday Evening Post* and Milton. But somehow, he had a gravitation toward me, and I toward him, and we felt very frequently like twin stars [laughs]. Very different of magnitude, and very different of kind, but somehow we were always, somehow, in correspondence.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: So, when did you come back from California to New York, then, in the '40s?

MORDI GASSNER: I did this in New York. In fact, I didn't go to Egypt with DeMille, because I was in a hospital at the time with phlebitis and I couldn't be moved. So I did the sketches which I did at that time, and which are in a portfolio, which I think you, Mr. Pennington, have seen, in a hospital bed. When I did them, the nurse thought I had in mind, when I asked for a testament, to shrieve myself, but I only shrieved myself insofar as I wanted enough information from that to do something with the texts.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: When did you begin your work as an art director in the field of television? And comment on some aspect of your special effects work.

MORDI GASSNER: I'll be glad to do that. Television was suggested to me, and I then applied for an opening as art director when Robert Bright had moved from WPIX, which is owned by the *Daily News*, to ABC as one of its art directors. I think it was he who suggested I go to fill his place. And I went down there, was interviewed by the engineer, and we were in a segment of a kind of a corridor which had a partition down its center, and on the other side were some offices by the windows. I didn't know that at the time. I learned it later. I was being interviewed by this engineer, and he had pretty much agreed that I was suited to the position, when a voice came from over the partition: "Is that Mordi Gassner?" I answered yes. He said, "Wait a minute. [00:12:00] I'm coming over." This was Eddie Nugent, whom I didn't know, but who knew me, because he was the stand-in for Douglas Fairbanks Sr. when I was art director there, and he remembered me and my voice all those years, back to the '20s, which is phenomenal, but he's that kind of a person. He told this engineer that if he didn't hire me, he'd be a dope, so the dope engaged me, and there I was at WPIX for a short time. Then, later, I went to ABC. And already at WPIX, it became obvious that the influence of radio was deterring the development of television, because those people in charge, being accustomed to sound, felt panicky if there was silence. As a result, even though a visual sequence could carry the emotion better than sound, they would yell into the mic, "Get

somebody talking! Get somebody talking!" I, at that time, began to recall many of the possibilities of the screen medium, whether it be television or anything else. At that time, the camera was still bound by its umbilical, you might say, which was the cables dragging across the floor. One of the first experiences that impressed me was, when I was at WPIX, Gloria Swanson intended to become an actress again after years of having not been on film since the silent times. By now, she was a little grandma, smart, immaculate, and very charming. But there were signs of having been older than she should have been. I managed—though these cables prevented us having lights on the floor, which meant that only top light was available, I got rid of all the hollows and pits by riding two vertical boxed lights in such a way that these lights shot up at various angles and filled all the cavities, and she came out looking like a doll, and got the lead in *Sunset Boulevard* as a result. [00:14:05] And these things, which were the reminiscences of the use of the film, that was just far more sophisticated than television at that time was, soon had me busy with television design. I was then engaged by ABC, and Chuck Holden was the production manager. I was assigned a theater, which had been a moving picture house, but now had an enormous apron [ph] added to television purposes. In there, all the productions which were to be done, I was to supervise as an art director. When he came over at six o'clock one evening and said to me, "Mordi, you're going home. You're not working tonight," I thought maybe I'd done something wrong and I was being fired or something. I asked, "What have I done?" He said, "Nothing yet." And I said, "What am I to do?" He said, "I've engaged myself"—this is Chuck speaking—"to give a series of 30 lectures on special effects, but I ran out of information after the first, and you know this stuff backwards. Why don't you take over and lecture for me?" I said, "Chuck, I haven't given that thought since I was in the movies years ago." He said, "You know that stuff. Go and give my lecture." Since I had no choice and he was my boss—this was six o'clock. At eight o'clock, I was on the platform, giving a lecture. And as a result, the school laid claim to me, and I gave that series of lectures on special effects for stage and screen, 30 lectures of 40 minutes a piece. Before I was out of there, I had already given lectures over a period of about two years, I think it was, on special effects for stage and screen, which were the first one. Lighting, studio lighting, camera optics, advanced direction, building and painting of scenery, and goodness knows what else. Those courses, I forget some of them, but I can go anyplace in the industry and find my pupils in positions of some eminence at the present time, due to that period. [00:16:03]

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: So then you stayed on in television, then, through the 1950s, and watched its evolution?

MORDI GASSNER: I was not only watching, I was participating in it, and was chosen to be part of a symposium of an international institutes on color—on television, which happened in 1950, at the *New Yorker*. And I was assigned a position on two panels. One on special effects, because that was the subject matter wanted in a discussion for small station producers, who, at that time, did independent, creative work, as now they do not. And then I was to be the man who would carry the chief subject matter of color in television, because I was recognized to be rather familiar with color theory, and might have something to contribute. And in that respect, was fortunate enough to be able to dictate certain principles which became the basis for all color television operations since.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Now, did you work on any particular shows, or were you just in charge of overall technical operations?

MORDI GASSNER: Oh, I worked on shows. I wasn't in charge, really, of overall operation anywhere. I was wanted, after the Mino [ph] commission had examined, by CBS to do that, but that never succeeded, because the portfolio of plans that I had was stolen the night before my appointment with Stanton. I didn't seem to have much luck in that respect. But I was then—I had many assignments. I had *Blind Date*, I had *Bride and Groom*. I had all—so many. I was also doing commercial things, because they were merged at the time. A Thomas Dorsey show and other shows of that sort. I did the commercials which went with the shows, as well as doing things with Karloff [ph] and various productions which were dramatic. Oh, there were so many. I don't remember them all.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: So you stayed on in—then New York was just your permanent home all through the '50s and '60s?

MORDI GASSNER: Yes, but then I became part of the Metropolitan Opera staff. [00:18:01] Around 1950, I believe it was, I was taken on to do some work, and they decided to keep me for a while. Ever since, between 1950 and '71, when I retired, whether or not I was on staff, I was on the job a great part of the time. And it turned out that, in some cases, my hat changed from that of a scenic painter, which I loved to do on that grand scale, and at other times, when they ran into crises, because of my design background, I would take over for mistakes made in the design and become the troubleshooter when they had problems. So, my relationship with the Met was both beautiful and sporadic and full of tensions, because the deadlines, when there were crises, were always yesterday.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: So you worked on designing productions for the Metropolitan, then. What were some of the productions that you actually did sets for?

MORDI GASSNER: Well, let's take, for instance, *Andrea Chénier*. *Andrea Chénier* was a production which deals with the French Revolution and the great French poet, who was guillotined later by the revolutionaries, with whom he sided, though he was an aristocrat. The story is very simple. He fell in love, and a girl fell in love with him, who was the daughter of an aristocrat. The scene opens with a beautiful concert going on at the party at her father's mansion, or palace. Then this love affair develops, and we find him, at the end, in the dungeons, and on his way to the guillotine, and his sweetheart joins him, and both are guillotined. That's the story, essentially. Giordano's *Andrea Chénier*. A very fine designer—I'd rather not mention his name—had been given this assignment, who, at the same time, was art director and designing for Sid Caesar in television. The claims of Sid Caesar were so great that he did a bad job for the Met. When I took my daughter to the first dress rehearsal, with the scenery already up, they had to hire 10 extra crewmen to move it, and a few of those men had their backs broken by the size and weight of the scenery. [00:20:07] It was impractical, and it took 52 minutes to change the first scene, something like 46 to change the second, and by the time we went home at five o'clock, they hadn't finished the first act. On Monday morning succeeding—this was on a Saturday—I got a call just at the beginning of the workday from Mr. Herman Kravitz [ph], who was the business manager of the Met, and who did the engagements and that sort. And my superior, who was in charge of the scene dock, Stanley Griffith [ph], was very upset that, at the time when he needed me for these changes in the scenery, which he thought would be done by painting, I was called down to redesign the set. I went down to Mr. Kravitz's office, and there was the designer, with open arms, and sort of laid a red carpet for me to become the designer. I wouldn't get credit, because the programs were already printed. I wouldn't get paid more, because the fee for an assistant to the designer was the same as a scenic artist. But I said, "Where will I work? I have a studio down"—"Oh, no, you'll work upstairs in the carpenter shop." I said, "How? With the lathes and the hammers and the saws?" "Yes. We've cleared a lathe for you. That will be your desk." So for two weeks, I was working on the rebuilding, according to my specifications. The whole set system of that opera, and what had taken us virtually six months previously to produce, we had finished in time for the next dress rehearsal.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Um, and so you were quite a Jack-of-all-trades in that area. When you were at the opera, did you by any chance come across Leonid Berman and any of his designs?

MORDI GASSNER: Eugene Berman was a marvelous designer, a beautiful artist, and a very tempestuous and learned gentleman. And that's one of the operas I had to help on. He was in Rome, staging an exhibition of his work as a painter. And as a result, he wasn't free to do a consecutive piece of design on an opera by Mozart. [00:22:04] I can't remember what it was. It might have been *Così fan tutte*. I don't remember. It might have been *Don Giovanni*. I think it was *Don Giovanni*. In any case, he did it piecemeal. And he would send the plans, and the carpenter shop would begin building. Then, when they got two pieces on the stage, they overlapped by about 15 feet. They had different perspective points. They were not the same design. They were done as he found it possible to do under the stress that he was living under. And so I was called upon to redesign this in such a way that it would be drawn in a single kind, and it was done, and it worked.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: So all, then, through the '50s and '60s, you were working on various design projects with the opera and television. And let's wrap up your career at this stage, in the '60s, and talk about what you were doing through the '60s before your retirement.

MORDI GASSNER: I didn't retire from activity with the Met until '71, in which case I had already worked on six operas at the new Metropolitan Opera. And there was one which might be interesting to the general public, as almost a legendary instance of the way in which a Metropolitan-er works. That was when we did the potpourri of Verdi overtures, which he himself had composed and which bore the title of *Victoria*. I don't remember whether it was to be done fully as mime and ballet, or whether it was also to be sung, but I do know that they had engaged a young Spanish surrealist to design the set, and he had never learned perspective. And we had to build, from his designs, a practical grand staircase and a [inaudible] ceiling, which would rest on the set, which set the norm for where the disappearing points would be in perspective. But he'd known nothing about that, and he must have had at least 14 different points on his compass to which things disappeared, so it had to be redone. There was another person on that staff at the time. [00:24:02] His name was Gilbert Hancock, a marvelous artist and a beautiful person. And Stanley entrusted us to redesign this so that it would make sense and they could build it and paint it, which we did, but we took two days off, and Stanley was very restless, and we were under pressure to get it done. But we did, and therefore, we became the lead men instead of the chief scenic artist being so. We had to guide people in doing it. It was an elaborate Venetian palace, done surrealist style, with no single inch that wasn't adorned with something or other. So it had to be done. When we had finished, this Spanish artist, who found himself completely over his head, came in with two big cartons of champagne at noontime, and one of us—not me—went home drunk. [Laughter.]

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: When you decided to retire, you decided that you wanted to leave New York, and you began looking for a place in the country. Could you tell me something of that story, and how it led to your coming to live at the Old Friendship Church down near Drakes Branch, Virginia?

MORDI GASSNER: Yes. First of all, in this interim, my daughter had happily married, and is still happily married

to Herbert Schlosser, who was, at that time, a young attorney, and became, in time, president of NBC. And then, from that, became, as he is now, a very important executive vice president of RCA, the mother company. He has, now, several departments reporting to him. In that interim, I had—will, you can re-ask the question. I've lost the track of thought.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: I was saying about when you decided to leave New York and look for a country place.

MORDI GASSNER: Oh yes. In view of his position, he frequently, and with him, my daughter, traveled as if they were commuting to Washington. [00:26:00] So when my wife, Marion, and I decided that we would rather not live in New York—which, from the point of view of culture, was magnificent, but from the point of view of residential security for older people, we felt it was not what we liked, though I was born there. I couldn't help that. Nevertheless, we went on to look for a place. Since he was to be—that is, Herbert, and Judith, my daughter—were to be frequently in Washington, we thought it would be easiest for them if we came within a 75-mile radius of Washington someplace. Now, it happened that there is a town called—what is it—Front Royal in Virginia, which is 72 miles due west from Washington, which seemed to us convenient. And we went there, and there was nothing for us which we could afford, because it had become, somehow, the second bedroom and retirement place for the capital's bureaucrats. And so, though we made an established, good relationship there, and I was invited as a guest speaker at the college and so on, we decided we couldn't live there and went home. But when we got home, there was a new real estate catalog which we consulted, and found in it that down south, in the south side part, the central south side part of Virginia, there was an offering of a church, which might seem to be a suitable place for a studio. So we came down south and we fastened ourselves upon that church, and we're living in it happily ever after.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: And you began living in the church in what year?

MORDI GASSNER: We moved into the church in October of 1974, and we have been in it since. It was an old Baptist church, with a Baptist bath, we assumed, under that liftable platform on the podium. We dared not open that. We didn't know who was in it all that while. But when we did, we found that it was essentially empty, and we were safe.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: [Laughs.] Doubtlessly, your life has changed a great deal from the time in which you were doing your designs and living in New York, to where you've picked up this rather pastoral existence down in Virginia. [00:28:12] And I wonder if you could just generally comment on how you view those changes, and the amount of activity with which you're involved now, and the nature of your own projects.

MORDI GASSNER: I must say, first—it may have been mentioned earlier—that many years before, in 1936, the Richmond museum—the Virginia Museum of Fine Art—had arranged an exhibition in Richmond of my work, a one-man show. And that led to several portraits which I did of eminent people, and for that reason there, it became established between myself and the community of Virginia, some sense of old friendship. As a result, I warmly believed in the possibility we might be at home, and we felt right, that we were at home amongst the Virginians, even though we leaped over suburbia and moved into rusty corner. We have found that though our point of view and our mentality, which is completely cosmopolitan—and, it must be added, scientific as well as artistic—was at great variance from the general conditioning of the southern Baptist and Methodist and religious mind, nonetheless, there has grown between us a true empathy. And there's an affectionate bond between us that has no relationship to the passages of mental confrontations between us.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: So you have enjoyed the southern Virginia atmosphere, and you've worked on your own projects while you've been in the church?

MORDI GASSNER: The relationship between us and the people is indicated by the fact that though we are not a member of the Baptist church, there's one around the corner, you might say, from us, and when we came, as we did occasionally, just to show solidarity with the congregation, the minister, whereas he would shake other people's hands as they left, he would embrace and kiss us. [00:30:01] And there was a very warm and cordial, brotherly feeling between us. Now, as to the work that engaged me. I have always, since I know myself as a mature, creative person, been writing. Writing was a kind of reciprocal way of rest from the visual work I was doing. And so when, in the Depression period, my project was more or less stifled, had it expected to have a real future, that building I had designed for the *Mural Monument of Culture*, I nevertheless went on and translated that into a moving picture script idea. I have been working on that sporadically ever since, evolving it into an eight-part what you might call history of the influence of woman, and of prophesy, upon history. It has been a major opus, amongst others, that have engaged me. Now, this led to the work on which I am now, in a committed sort of way, engaged. I happened to choose and create a theme which was a storyline for that, which was the interplay between Aphrodite and Prometheus. Insofar as Aphrodite was that creature of indulgence who was the idea—leading to the ideal eloquences of a great period. But once that was achieved, with some luxury, she became the goddess of ruin, because there was then the degeneration into a period of excess and

overindulgence, and it would then be marched into by some invading, stronger force. And this happened periodically, and I say it literally, periodically. So I decided that I would take the career of Aphrodite and Prometheus, who in attempt—who in his love for her, and an attempt to temper her influences, failed to do so through all the millennia, one might say. So we move from Greece to Byzantium, from Byzantium to Carolingian, Rome, and Aachen and from there to the Gothic period under Suger of France, with the inception of the Gothic cathedral and such things. [00:32:13] And then into the realm of the Italian Renaissance, which had its own culmination, and then from that into the [inaudible] which landed on the guillotine platform. Then we crossed the Atlantic into this latest of the eight periods that I did deal with, which I called the nuclear age. In this age, finally, Prometheus, by the threat which are war qualifications now posed to the extermination of mankind, and through that, the end of the immortality of the gods through there being no further believers to believe in and to worship them, compelled and frightened Aphrodite into becoming entirely more benign and involved in the attempt to help form what I call a humane era, in which there would be a natural, prosperous basis for a piece which would be self-perpetuating.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: So then your vision of the future is quite optimistic at this time, you would say? You feel that a golden age may lie ahead?

MORDI GASSNER: I only know that there is the potential of a golden age in man. I don't know what the Reagan administration will allow of it to happen. When we have a $1.5 trillion-dollar military budget to be split up amongst 200 million people, which means that $7,500 over a period of five years is the debt of each individual from infancy to the grave over those five years, I don't know if we are not too committed to the possibility of self-immolation in a nuclear war, to survive until that golden age which is latent in human nature and humankind. [00:34:00] I do know, though—and this is what I meant before to the present commitment which I'm in—since it was Prometheus who was punished for having stolen the fire of Zeus for the sake of man controlling, in some measure, and prospering in nature, I therefore had the problem, how do I—now that we are ready to use what really wasn't merely fire, but lightning, how could I solve the problem of enabling man, actually, to derive benefit from lightning, which was essentially the prophesy of Prometheus? And so, for the last three years, I have been working, and I believe I've solved a great portion of that problem. And that's why, yesterday, I was at the patent office.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Patenting your ideas on lightning?

MORDI GASSNER: I didn't actually patent anything. I was getting information as to classifications and how to do it, and I must say that if the government were as good as the beautiful people who serve it, there would be no problem, and we would have no crisis such as now exists.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: I want to take one second.

MORDI GASSNER: I haven't talked about my parents or my family or anything. Is that of any interest?

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Well, I think that's something we can really get to in a little more detail at a later date, as a kind of reminiscence. It might also be the kind of thing that would be best written down. This is more about your career. I think what we'll wrap up with for this session, for this beginning session—I think what we'll do is wrap up with some of your attitudes about art, and you can comment on art and its role in culture.

MORDI GASSNER: I would be happy to do that. I think that's an excellent idea.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: I think we'll end this beginning session, in which we've tried to chart the events of your life and of your career, and get some basic facts down, with some of your observations on art and the role that you feel that it serves in culture, and your own participation, and how you view it at this time. [00:36:03]

MORDI GASSNER: My views on art are a little bit hard for the generation which accepts what they call abstractionism and non-objectivity to understand. I feel myself to be part of that continuity of history which looks upon language as the slowest to change of all of the expressive modes of humankind. Peoples are traced by language more than by their physical artifacts, and so it seemed to me that it would be unfair to the great following periods after this enormous and significant period of what, to me, is the most diverse and profound and significant period in the history of the human mind in which we are living—I feel that it is incumbent upon the art community, though I haven't found any sympathy for this attitude amongst other artists and amongst other critics and connoisseurs, that it is wise to undertake, if one can, to give visual form to figurate, if one can, those salient ideas which identify this remarkable period in all its aspects. And I set about to do that way back with my project, and I undertook in the interim another one, and my view on this could be stated fairly briefly. I look upon art as primarily a form of messenger. I find that the eloquences, as they were called in the Renaissance, must be more than mere rhetoric, which is the manner of that communication. And I find that my period is drowning itself in rhetoric, in the shape of things, in the ways of things, in the syntax of arts, without content. [00:38:00] Though McLuhan did state that the medium is the message, I wouldn't trust him in a freight yard, because it would make no difference to him if the freight went out empty or loaded, and I wouldn't want to entrust this

period's remembrance by posterity to a McLuhan-conditioned thinker, who went to his art with an empty head and expected his audience to review it and enjoy it in the same manner.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: So art remains for you, then, a force of powerful message, and a force of powerful content?

MORDI GASSNER: I do agree that there must be an associated emotion which drives the individual to what he does in expression, and moves the receiver by a kindred emotion to participate in that message, and to thrill and live it, rather than merely to listen to it or see it. In other words, the participation must be total. I don't think that there was planted in our skull a cerebral, material producer of thought, and of ideas, whether it be on the left side or the right side of the brain, which was not part of the natural experience of the individual through his awareness. And this has nothing to do with what the cerebral cortex, by its feeling alone and its instinctual responses, autonomous responses, must also be engaged in. I don't believe that we can trust to accidentalism, we can't trust to the phenomena which happened by trial and error, because most are error. And I don't think that we have to be, as Edison was, subject to an illiterate approach to the combination of mechanical things. Had he known—but he was too ignorant to know—the periodic scale of the elements, he wouldn't have had to try 40,000 substances to arrive at tungsten. [00:40:00] As now, when, for instance, the bomb was wanted, they scheduled two years, and on the date of the second year, they had it delivered, because science now operates within the compass of an aware frequency of ideas. And that's the way in which I believe, in this 20th century, advances are made.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Thank you for your enlightening comments today, Mr. Gassner. Well, I think that's a good beginning, because I think that covers the basic territory. Then I will go ahead and work very hard this afternoon to get this material scheduled for microfilming, so it can be returned to you and see to that.

[Conversation continues off-mic.]

MORDI GASSNER: I want you to realize that you're as free as your—to do what you need to. I have no desire to pressure you.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: I understand.

MORDI GASSNER: My only reason for wanting it back is that there are those back home who would like to see—

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Oh, certainly.

MORDI GASSNER: This assemblage, which I prepared today is better than any that I have previously done.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Oh, yes. It is quite good, and it's very good material, and we do want to see it.

MORDI GASSNER: I know that. So don't feel encumbered by any pressure that I give you. Because you work, as you do, very earnestly, very sincerely, and as completely as you can. And you are ragged with fatigue from chasing around when you ought to be sitting still and doing your writing.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Well, I think about that a lot, but, you know, you have these intermediate stages in your career, when you have to do the job that's given to you.

MORDI GASSNER: I appreciate that. And all my life, I have supported myself in what, to me, ought to be incidental and [inaudible]. When I accepted my Guggenheim Fellowship, I gave up $25,000 a year to accept $2,500 a year as a stipend.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Yeah, so you could write.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]