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Oral history interview with Robert Chesley Osborn, 1974 Oct. 21

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Robert Chesley Osborn on October 21, 1974. The interview took place at Robert Chesley Osborn's house in Salisbury, Connecticut, and was conducted by Paul Cummings 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

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's October 21, 1974 and it's Paul Cummings talking to Robert Osborn at his house in Salisbury, Connecticut. You were born in Oshkosh, Wisconsin in 1904.

ROBERT OSBORN: That's correct, October 26th.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you have a birthday pretty soon.

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes indeed and as you know, I said this morning, as we were lying in bed, you know, I'll bet that one of the things, Paul, that always is so moving to me, because I'm sure as a small boy, you know, I'm anxious as we're approaching the birthday time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

ROBERT OSBORN: Go ahead. Should I tell you that my father was a lumberman. Actually at one point he had made a lot of money, Senator La Follette loathed them, and I think at one time they even had a trust going out there. They'd cornered all the hemlock lumber in the Upper Peninsula, in northern Wisconsin. Luckily, he lost all that money or I probably would have ended up as captain on a team, just privileged and worthless. However, father lost his mother when he was six years old, he was brought up—his father remarried and his second wife really, I met her once, a terrible woman, didn't want Albert Osborn around the house, so he went to live with a marvelous uncle, uncle Samuel up in Waupaca, Wisconsin. He had fought in the Civil War.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was he an Osborn?

ROBERT OSBORN: No, he was a Chandler, and my brother's name is Chandler. Well anyway, father was brought up by them, he taught school in a little tiny country school when he was 14 years old. Incidentally, is this too detailed?

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, fine.

ROBERT OSBORN: Finally, let's see, I guess began reading law just in a law office, and his health failed. [00:02:03] He had a terrible time I'm sure, for lots of psychological reasons; stomach failures, and I think he had a nervous breakdown even, as a young man, sent down to Texas just to be outdoors and on a ranch, and then he came back and then began getting into the lumbering business in Wisconsin, and he and his brother would go out and just buy up tracts of land and pretty soon they were sawing it. I think father even told me that he and his brother would buy an acre of land, they would saw all the lumber on it, make it into a raft and take it down to St. Louis and sell this raft of lumber, come back, and they were making enough profit so that the next winter they could buy three acres of timberland and they would clear this. Pretty soon they were hiring men to do it, and I detail this because finally, building a sawmill of their own. I guess they had three sawmills at the end and ran into this frightful depression in 1926 and really just lost everything. He'd been too greedy about the price of one of the sawmills and instead of getting about a million and a quarter for it, he got something like $100,000.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Wow.

ROBERT OSBORN: Anyway, mother was born in Detroit.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was her name?

ROBERT OSBORN: Alice Lydia Wyckoff. Her father had been, I think just a newspaper reporter for Scripps-Howard Newspapers in Detroit and mother, a charming woman. At the age of 19, and this is quite amazing in those times, because this must have been around 1900, she set off for—[00:04:00]—she'd gone to a music school in Detroit, for teaching in a public school, and she went to Hurley, Wisconsin, or maybe it was Ironwood, Wisconsin, Ironwood, Michigan here, right across the river, to teach music, a girl of 19. Luckily she stayed with a

marvelous family called the Luther Wrights, whom I met later on, very decent people, I guess he finally became head of the state prison of Michigan, and I didn't like him as much as Mrs. Wright. Well anyway, mother stayed there and of course father had a sawmill up there and so they met. I think father was a friend of the Wrights and apparently fell in love. She was at least 16 years younger than he. I could get you all the exact dates of their birth and so forth, I have them written on my drawing table up in the studio. Then let's see, they lived in Hurley, Wisconsin. My brother Chandler was born up there and they concluded though, and this is very interesting and generous on their part, if we two were to get a decent education, they'd better move out of Hurley, Wisconsin, it was a really tough town. The main street in Hurley was composed of three solid blocks of saloons, there was nothing, no clothing stores, nothing, and of course all these lumberjacks would come in there and just raise the dickens. Edna Ferber wrote about this whole area up there in *Come and Get It*. And so my parents decided to move down to Oshkosh and I gather by this time, father is making quite a lot of money because they bought a really big house, I think it had 36 rooms in it, and here were these lumber barons though, the man across the street had a house twice as large, Mr. Sawyer, who became a senator. [00:06:03] The nice thing was that Oshkosh, if I may speak of this, as a place for a boy to grow up in, was just absolutely ideal here. Within three minutes on our bicycles we could be out in the country and there was a lot of shooting, there was fine fishing, and in those days I didn't mind killing all those bees, and so Seymour Hollister and I would get on our bikes and travel around. I had to admit, that we were living on the cushy side of things. There were plenty of Poles, Polish people, who were imported, really practically imported to work in the sawmills, the big sawmills in Oshkosh too, and they lived on the backstreets in small houses and here we were, having this marvelous time. In those days, the sense of class—

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was very defined out there wasn't it?

ROBERT OSBORN: It was very distinct but no moral compunction on my part whatsoever and I don't think on the part of my parents, just that those people worked there and then these gigantic profits came in and you had a four cylinder Packard car which father took care of, and he went to Detroit, or I guess to Milwaukee, to learn how to run it. There was a German gardener, Fred Hartman, he couldn't speak, he couldn't write his name, he had to put a cross, just the salt of the earth, a marvelous man. He was the gardener, he took care of the horses, they had two horses and carriages, and sleighs in the wintertime. Incidentally, this is the sort of background I should be telling isn't it?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right. You have only one brother then right? [00:08:00]

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes, Chandler. He tried to go into the lumber business and this is terrible, father shouldn't have crowded him into it. I'm sure he wanted somebody to carry on and Chandler was not happy. He was actually up in some of these small towns up in northern Wisconsin and he'd gone to the University of Wisconsin and he went to Harvard Business School to learn how to run the business, and totally unsympathetic to him. He should have taught economics at the University of Wisconsin, he'd have had a wonderful life and would have had been a marvelous teacher. Instead, he was forced into this, he married quite early and he went down to Milwaukee and got into banking, had a manager over him as a young man, a just perfectly awful man, and then Chandler got into the Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company but all he was doing is overseeing the investment of bonds, and his life just slowly came apart. Signal trouble or real problems were the alcohol and finally was retired early, before 65, and he and his wife, Katherine Markham, and about three little dogs which were always around, I don't think he liked them all that much, anyway they built a house up on the Brule River and that's where they are living now, feeding the birds during the winter, but it's all down at about that level, and what I do find really tragic is this man, the days of his life were spent this way you know, instead of thinking the way your life goes or my life goes, that we'd sit here in this absolute joy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's a fabulous day.

ROBERT OSBORN: That's right, and married to Elodie is marvelous, I hope you can see how rare a woman she is, but the thing of spending your life this way you know, doing all these things that have been such a pleasure to do, compared to Chandler, whose life was just misdirected and he was rather pigheaded about it and he would never admit. [00:10:18]

PAUL CUMMINGS: He kept right on.

ROBERT OSBORN: That's right. One time, when I was coming apart and I was reading a lot of Jung, Nancy Wilson Ross got me into it, and also Marian Willard of the Willard Gallery, but we'd probably better come to this later.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That comes later doesn't it, yes.

ROBERT OSBORN: However, I did tell Chandler, come now, why don't you start reading this Jung, it's so freeing up. Oh no, he didn't want to have anything to do with that and in fact there's that awful drive that he was going to run it his way even though the thing wasn't working.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So, you went to what schools in Oshkosh?

ROBERT OSBORN: All right, yes, marvelous. I went to a kindergarten there and again, here's that whole pleasant quality of Oshkosh life in which all of us tiny kids would walk down through the leaves and everything, the snow, and sleighs going beside us, or carriages, under these beautiful trees that filled out in the summer and the spring, marvelous color in the fall. I made a whole set of drawings on that, they come to mind now, of just walking, scuffing through the leaves and so forth. You went to this kindergarten, there were two—Ms. Henley was the main teacher there and you had such a good time, and then you got on up into the next grades, and there was a Ms. Boucher and a Ms. Marvin, no none of these people married, but they were just terrific. [00:12:00] I wrote to them right up to the end of their lives, just because they were so encouraging. One woman, Ms. Boucher, would say, "Robert, I don't see how you made that tiger's shoulder like that," you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Had you started drawing?

ROBERT OSBORN: I was drawing yes, and I'd better put in a word about mother. She had the sense to be buying me Arthur Rackham, Beatrice Potter books. Well, there was a man called Paul Branson, who did *The Wind in the Willows*, but these were being fed to me by mother.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There were all those great illustrated books at the turn of the century.

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes, and they were beautiful books and they were all down there, they really are down in the library, I'll show you.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They still are?

ROBERT OSBORN: Oh yes, the Rackham books. This is great you know, because it really was encouraging your imagination, I think this was quite important. Mother had a table made, about six feet long and only about four feet high, but so you could sit there and draw, and, I once told this to Teddy Roosevelt's wife, that because the lumber people out there, the three men, what they'd done was pronounce a trust, and so here was all—they had to disband. And so here was all this paper, you know the pink forms and yellow forms, blue forms and white paper, and it seems to me it all must have been moved down to Oshkosh, into the attic, because there was a room about half the size of this and my impression was, just piled up with paper and old Atlantic monthlies. But, the important part of this story is, it seems to me very important, there was absolutely no block whatsoever, about getting pencil, crayons, anything, and this endless supply of paper; there was nothing niggardly about it you see. [00:14:05]

PAUL CUMMINGS: All the old office forms.

ROBERT OSBORN: That's right, they were good enough for me, and the fact that mother, I'm sure was quite aware of this, so it was always there. I look at young kids you know in households, and either they give them some retched game or something, to color in, or it is so hard for them to just get the materials to work with.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were your parents interested in music or books?

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes, mother played, she played the piano, and the living room actually was two stories high, it was a real music room, a barrel vault with a balcony at the end of the thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Marvelous.

ROBERT OSBORN: The piano she played, it was a concert grand, Steinway, so here was this wonderful music, she played very well. It was very conservative of course but she was playing, and I don't think it was all that fine and the Mozart wasn't breathtaking, but you were having this while you were growing up.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was there, yeah.

ROBERT OSBORN: Right. Father, who never went to college, you would see him sitting down at the other end of that big room reading Shakespeare at night to himself.

PAUL CUMMINGS: With the music.

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes. At first you'd go through the *Daily Northwestern* newspaper, but for his own amusement, a lot of Dickens, reading Dickens. Here's a businessman with no education enjoying reading on that level, which was actually very—the whole ambiance.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you read books like that?

ROBERT OSBORN: It's very Middle Western, you can see. Talk to Harrison Salisbury about his family life out

there in Minneapolis I believe, the same sort of thing, but also terribly healthy, just I don't know. [00:16:07]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Good food, good air.

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes, and it was just a very pleasant time. A Danish cook, Amanda, and I'd say lots of creamed potatoes and ducks, wild ducks being served, and partridge, prairie chicken on the table, and this big garden out behind which Fred Hartman took care of. I'm just giving you these little points to show this terribly pleasant life. I think Robert Motherwell, if he was reporting his childhood, would give you something that's a bit more higher span because his mother was really, pretty something. She was teaching you about [inaudible] as a very young boy. My family were not, this was just coming along. Beside the piano was an enormous chromo [chromolithograph]. It must have been four-by-five, no not that big, three-by-four, but just one of those banal Corots, all done in brown, and all the frames, all that came from Marshall Field in Chicago, but it was pleasant and it was very warm, and you never felt conflict between the parents at all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It sounds as if you also had a lot of freedom to kind of follow your own imagination.

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes, absolutely, and you were doing this all the time, you were making drawings, of course place cards, and copying a lot of Palmer Cox *Brownies*, I can tell you, at Halloween, when you did all sorts of things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you do those things in school, were there many children who would draw too, go to parties and all the other childhood activities?

ROBERT OSBORN: Oh yes, absolutely, yes, yes, and but you enjoyed it and again, this playroom upstairs where Chandler and I had that table that you just always had parties, you produced various things at Christmastime, it was marvelous. [00:18:16] I guess the important thing is the outflow, there was so few constipating factors to the thing. Now this is just as far as drawing or painting, there was no real instruction except why don't we go now, from kindergarten up to first grade and so forth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

ROBERT OSBORN: This is the Oshkosh Normal School and again, a state school. It wasn't a public school, it was a little fancier and see here again, all the Polish children probably went to the Read School right down the street, and we walked a little bit farther and I'm sure the education was actually much better, the teachers were really excellent and they too, it seemed to me, were always rather igniting you. From there you went to the Oshkosh High School and by now, as I mentioned, Seymour Hollister, now Charlotte Chase appeared, this absolutely beautiful girl, I guess granddaughter of Mr. Sawyer that lived in the monster house across the street, but you're fallen in love with her, and Seymour was also in love with her. The three of us used to go around a lot and we'd walk to school, to high school together and come back, we'd play golf together, we played tennis together, ski together and even go out duck shooting. Father had this place on Lake Winnebago, this island, and Saturdays the three of us would go out there. This is all very gemütlich, except that Seymour won out. [00:20:00] I wasn't getting to first base really, as far as Charlotte went, but swooning away, playing a violin under her window, her third floor window, moonlight nights during the summer and as I say—and I think this really ought to come into it now, there were obviously terrible sexual inhibitions because I was beginning to have ulcers. This is about the age of 13 or 14, mind you, along with father, who was having terrible colitis, with his business problems, and at one time Chandler and father and I were in the Presbyterian Hospital in Chicago, all with various types of stomach problems. We were under Dr. Sippy, who invented the Sippy diet and poor mother up there in Oshkosh, she was a marvelous, bouncy wonderful woman, but with these three invalids on her hands, enjoying—she enjoying good cooking so much and here we were all sort of on cream of wheat and taking soda every half-hour.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh goodness.

ROBERT OSBORN: I've never been psychoanalyzed more than a parent, but there must have been very real blocks and inhibitions and rages that were coming out, you were taking them out on your body. Actually, the ulcers plagued me right up until 1930, I would say, about 1930, and we'll get into that later. But you were going along, let's see, let's hang this as the education as we go along, maybe as a structure. After Oshkosh High School, which wasn't as interesting as the Normal School, the teachers were—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why was that?

ROBERT OSBORN: Well, the teachers were not as interesting and it was a public school and they just weren't as igniting as the ones at the Normal School had been, in particular Ms. Boucher and Ms. Marvin. [00:22:10] You got through high school and I was just an average student I wasn't all that good. I tried to take Latin and after a half-term, this girl that had been helping me, "Pollock Girl" was her name, she moved her seat and so I had to drop Latin. It wasn't quite as bad as Teddy Kennedy but it was pretty much on that level I suspect, but all the time you were having this good time. My memory of it, even with the ulcer business, that all seems to have faded out,

your memory is one of really, a joyful childhood and up into youth. Pretty soon, by the time I get off to the University of Wisconsin in 1922, and you had no problem of course getting in. You had to pay $22 tuition to get in and let's see, I lived with a family there, everybody did freshman year. I guess I was taken into Alpha Delta Phi and I had a real struggle over there because Chandler had been a Beta, all this nonsense, and they said I had to become a Beta, and the Chi Xi people were after you. Listen to this snob note. Alpha Delta Phi, there were several people from the East there, and this note will now come into the pure snobbism I'm sure, and I just found them, a boy called Heinz Rubel, they were just more interesting, and I actually, out there in the middle west, I really hadn't run into anybody like this, the intellectual thing was now beginning. I think it was at this time, it may be one year later, I remember reading *The Dial* out there and *Vanity Fair*, those. *The Dial* actually was quite highfalutin and I'm sure I was reading it for partly snobbism, but for instance, Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, I didn't know what homosexuality was but I knew his writing was beautiful, and so here you were sitting alone out there in Oshkosh, this is probably in the summer. No, I now know when it was, all right, 1922, set off for the University of Wisconsin, there I did do very well, I had an average of 92 for that first whole year, but by now the ulcers were really causing me genuine pain, and so it was decided that I would spend a year home so that the food would be very good and again, I had a very pleasant time. I guess I had to stay in bed for six weeks, then pretty soon I was up and then there was duck shooting in the fall and I had a room up in the attic, which I guess I painted salmon pink mind you, but I could go up there and work and just draw. Oh, I was doing a lot of reading at this time, I had gotten into Tolstoy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of things now? Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT OSBORN: Dostoevsky, all the Russians for some reason.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you think college was such a more productive academic situation, I mean the fact that your grades went up and everything, in school?

ROBERT OSBORN: Well I don't know, I suspect it was starting to become competitive maybe and you knew that you had to work hard. I did very badly in Spanish, obviously, I was no good at languages, but everything else, and of course zoology with drawing, I think I had a 98 in zoology, and English I was enjoying. [00:26:04] I had a good young English teacher, I believe her name was Ms. Bayer, but she was encouraging you. Let's see, I wasn't reading great works in college but at home I was, when I was sick that year.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ROBERT OSBORN: And as I say, you got into the Russian thing and somehow I found these people very sympathetic and started off with *Anna Karenina* but then *War and Peace*, I just though was superb, but I think my impression was that I read it on a houseboat up at Butte Des Morts, that's a sort of enlargement of the Fox River, but in the summer, on a houseboat, Seymour and I had gone up there to sort of fish and to read, and my impression, of course it isn't true, that I got through *War and Peace* in about four or five just straight reading days just like this, eight hours a day, but again, having enjoyed doing this. After the year—yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, I was just going to say, how did you pick the University of Wisconsin?

ROBERT OSBORN: Oh, everybody went to the University of Wisconsin, out of Oshkosh.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's where everybody went.

ROBERT OSBORN: Let's see, I had a son of Mr. Nevitt, a lumber associate, lumbering associate of father's, he'd gone off to Yale and everybody thought why isn't Wisconsin good enough for you and this sort of nonsense. However, it's fairly important, because it did, I'm sure, plant the bee in my head that there were other places, but everybody, Steven Gould, Jim Gould, Seymour Hollister, Eleanor Chase, all these people went off to the University of Wisconsin, joined a fraternity and did medium work. [00:28:01] Chandler actually did very good work there at the University of Wisconsin, there were some fine professors. I had Rostovtzeff of Russia, whom I again had later on at Yale, an absolutely superb scholar, I mean you couldn't run into anybody better than that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did he teach?

ROBERT OSBORN: He taught ancient history, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, that whole thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have a major when you went there or was that just a liberal arts kind of thing

ROBERT OSBORN: No, I guess English was the major, but it wasn't being pushed very hard and on the whole, I don't know it wasn't really as high span at Yale. It became much better, but I had a fine zoology course, a good English course, trouble with Spanish and then this ancient history course that was fine. Oh, another thing, Frank Jewett Mather came on just to give three lectures on, I guess the impressionists, the post-impressionists, and I don't know, it seems to me there were three, maybe only two, but here again, because I was reading *The Dial*, I

knew what these movements were, and *Vanity Fair,* old Frank Crowninshield was actually, he was showing you a Cézanne or even a Modigliani. Anyway, I remember going to those lectures, they happened at five-thirty in the afternoon, but to walk up that long hill and hear this very intelligent talk, though it wasn't very inspired and I'm sure very conservative, but then I remember one time at the end, probably after the impressionists lecture—winding down and snow was beginning to fall here and you were alone.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], right.

ROBERT OSBORN: But it was a marvelous movement and you were so moved and again, I'm afraid this whole snob business that I was now into the impressionists and those roughnecks up there in Oshkosh, they didn't even know about this whole world. [00:30:12] Also, and this is true of Elodie, we compared notes a lot about this, when she was a young girl, a young woman, her interests of moving off toward this and toward Paul Clay, and none of her friends knew anything about this, and our parents didn't actually know, our parents probably stopped with Corot, with Anna Pavlova, who came to Oshkosh, and father stood up on the seat and waved and cried, and it was really great, but now we were beginning, as I look back, it occurred to me, of really putting together the interest, the area that you would be interested in, and I guess well, maybe now we'd better get me to Yale.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. How did that come about? Did you have any ambition to do anything particular?

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes. I thought I was going to be a cartoonist. I was of course, very successful on those college humor things and I drew better than most people did.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you do those in Wisconsin too?

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes, and got on the board the first year I was there, and I've forgotten what the name of the paper was called. Anyway, and if you looked up those drawings you would find they were pretty awful and all of them tended to be copies of something out of *LIFE*, the old *LIFE*, a small *LIFE,* but goodness, how do you start you know, except copy it. Don't say Norman Rockwell for heaven sakes, Rockwell can. I was making fairly close copies of that black and white technique, and I also, even out in Oshkosh I was now, during the summers, say 1922 to '23, I would be making drawings and sending them to *LIFE Magazine*, the old *LIFE*, just cartoons, I guess a couple of them were bought. [00:32:18] Anyway, through persevering and learning how to put a wash on—

PAUL CUMMINGS: What got you interested in doing that?

ROBERT OSBORN: Oh, I had this knack right from age four. Very good, I'm glad you asked, because the sense of motion, I could show you small drawings, three inches high, the sense of motion or the comprehension of motion even as a kid, was really quite exceptional. I was making jigsaw things in small wood, those animals, and there was always a sense of motion. I remember cutting out a robin once and painting it, wood painted with watercolors, but true enough, you look at it and the sense of that bird's leaning to listen for the worm is really, there it is.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's there, yeah.

ROBERT OSBORN: I take no credit for this, it was just plain there. While we're talking of this, mother had a brother in Detroit, his name was goodness, it wasn't Homer, he was the fellow that became a missionary, God help his soul. Well anyway, there was this other brother, a sensitive looking man, and he drew well, but is the only other person in the family apparently, that had any drawing facility, but mother said that he always drew well as a young man. As I say, the drawing thing, coupled with no blocks at all, you see?

PAUL CUMMINGS: It just would grow by itself. [00:34:02]

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes. It's like the violinist in a family of violinists, this is what you're doing, you do this all the time and pretty soon, and I think this is fairly important, pretty soon you get to be better than all of your peers, and now, so now you have this hold, again survival hold, and so then you begin to push and then you were doing all the posters and all this kind of thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

ROBERT OSBORN: All right, now to Yale.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you select Yale?

ROBERT OSBORN: Let's see, I'd been in the hospital, I'd been home that year, all of this reading and my family, I can see wisely, they didn't want me to go away.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So Yale started what, in twenty—

ROBERT OSBORN: Twenty-four, I arrived there in the fall of '24 and unbeknownst to my family, I had written, I guess even from the hospital in Chicago, Presbyterian Hospital, saying that I would like to come to Yale, I had these good marks at the University of Wisconsin. I subscribed to the *Yale Daily News* so that I would know what was going on and pretty soon, I found out who the admissions officer for freshmen was, I found out that he was interested in the Yale Band, and so I would decorate the letters with men beating drums and all this kind of thing, and by now, I'm back in Oshkosh from the hospital and one day, it must have been in the spring, late spring, this letter, an embossed letter, imagine, at the top Yale University, arrived saying that I'd been accepted. Well, I could burst into tears right now, and I'm sure in the course of some of these things I will and it doesn't embarrass me in the least, I was so overjoyed and I took it to my parents and said, "Look, I can now go to Yale," and father at once shut down. [00:36:01] He was sitting in that big living room down there and he said, "You can't go," and I know now, because he was afraid that again, the stomach would just fall apart and I wouldn't be eating the right food, and they wanted me close to home where they could see me, at Madison. Mother—oh let's see, this is one of those scenes in a household. Finally, I was in another, it was called a reception room, off at this end, and I was sitting there probably like this, and mother was going between father and me, trying to get some—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Being a mediator huh?

ROBERT OSBORN: Yeah, an absolute mediator, and finally father said, he just stood up out of his chair and clapped his hands and said, "All right you can go," like this, he was just mad, and I said, "No, you've got to say it decently," bringing down the old man mind you, and he finally agreed to let me go and the sweet thing was that when it was all over in four years, he wrote me a letter and just said you were absolutely right, what you got out of Yale, compared to what you would have gotten out of Wisconsin, because Yale was really, an extraordinary outburst for well, it's about like cauliflower it seems to me, what happens, that blooming. It wasn't all that amazing but for me it really was a genuine blooming.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Now you hadn't traveled very far until you went to Yale.

ROBERT OSBORN: Not at all. Let's see, there had been fishing trips and the family took us across the United States and Yellowstone Park, this is when you're 12 years old, fishing out there. No travel to the East.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Chicago would have been east.

ROBERT OSBORN: Chicago, oh let's see, that year I was home, I used to go back and see a nurse in the Presbyterian Hospital, and then I would go and see a play and oh, fine, that we get this in. [00:38:11] Father had a pass on the Soo Line, because he was some kind of a director, and so if I got up at four in the morning, I would walk down Algoma Boulevard, under those pretty trees, get on the Soo Line train, at say 4:30 in the morning, ride into Chicago, get there at about nine, and then I'd have all day in Chicago, the Chicago Art Institute number one, but then for instance, these Russian companies, see I can't call the name forth, but I would see the lower depths being played there, and Frank Molnar, things about like this. I was interested in the theater, I was also making small theater designs, again, pure copies of Kenneth McGowan and that other man that's illustrated in Kenneth McGowan's book—these are all probably Freudian blocks. [They laugh.] So, the copying was all there. Anyway, most important, and this was really a very crucial instant in my life, I'd gone down and was at the Chicago Art Institute, mind you again, I had read *The Dial*, so I knew who Cézanne was, but I came around the corner and here was that view of *L'Estaque*, looking out—it's from Marseille, it's looking out across the water and for the first time you knew that the blues were standing up like this and it wasn't just a painting of a scene in the way Torro would have done it, and all of those colors were working, and the sense of the blue being there for that blue, not to imitate a blue somewhere else, and really just, St. Paul on the road to Damascus, forget it. [00:40:11] I'm sure that these are what the revelations are, but it just came right over you just like this; if I had fallen on the floor you know, revelation form, but it was, it was just an absolute shaking experience and of course to this very day, Cézanne is my man. Just as Alfred Barr once said, I guess he told Elodie this, that always, it's the person that ignites you first, Matisse and Picasso for him, he said, that you go to the end of your life, and I think this is true, to go and see a good Cézanne show or to go see that boy in the *Boy in the Red Vest* that Paul Mellon owns, just absolute bliss, until you get up to Piero della Francesca. Oh, I know an experience, Elodie and I, this spring, went to the Barnes Collection. She never had seen it, I had seen it in 1929 I believe, but there's that large *Card Players* there, the *Card Players*, and I'm sure, beside a Titian or anything else, it would really maybe even challenge a Titian, that thing is so monumental. It reminded me of a Piero, this great painter, and the more I read about him or look at him, the more amazing, the haunting that that Cézanne put on, and the discoveries that he was making by himself, with the most awful pain I should think that well, you're just so grateful to have grown up in that period and actually died in 1906. I used to kid my family saying they could have taken me as a baby and I could have touched the hand of Cézanne. [00:42:01]

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was your intent at Yale?

ROBERT OSBORN: Well let's see, I think mainly snobbism. There were two nice older girls, Eleanor Chase, and

the Gould girl, who they actually were taking me up, I was about three years younger, but I was more sophisticated than most of those local boys, and they were encouraging me to go east. Ellen Gould had a lover at Harvard, John Wiest, who later ran *Vanity Fair*, I believe, in Paris. Anyway, they knew about Harvard and I think they were urging me to go to Harvard and really, because of this George Nevitt, who once sent me a calendar in the form of a shield, a leather shield that said "Yale" on it, Y-A-L-E, and I found the word Yale so beautiful and so strong and solid, that I decided to go there and I was accepted. So then you got on the train in October, maybe September, and this is interesting, mother and father came down, probably in the Cadillac, and let me out and we all shook hands, and as the train pulled out of Oshkosh, I suddenly thought Robert, you idiot, here you could have had a nice comfortable life here at home and good duck shooting and trout fishing if you go to the University of Wisconsin and here you are setting off. I was really scared, I'm sure I was just plain scared. However, once I got there—it's interesting, you asked about what I'd seen and traveled to. Getting to New Haven and seeing those three churches, I stayed at the Taft Hotel the first night, got up at six o'clock in the morning, I'm always excited when I'm in a new city, it's amazing, London or Paris. [00:44:07] The first two or three you're up, you're really out there walking around. No but it must be something going on in your psyche that a new city does. Anyway, I got out there and saw those three churches and I had not seen even a rehash of a European building as those are, those three churches, not the real ran church, but I just knew at once up there in Oshkosh, the main street of Oshkosh, that you never had seen proportions like that or spaces like that. I went to register that day and the head of the Yale football team, his name is Timmy Bonnell, I'd read about him in the newspapers that I'd taken for a year, and he said, "Are you looking for something?" I said, "Yes, I'm looking for the registrar." Imagine, suddenly you found that the head of the Yale team was discarding you to register, and so you wrote your family about this and it was only when you began dining at the big dining hall, and here were people throwing baked potatoes around and I thought oh dear, I'm in with another bunch of vulgarians, but impressively, there were good teachers. There was a man called John Archer Gee who taught English, freshman English, just superb on Shakespeare and Falstaff in particular, who of course had become a great favorite, and the man who taught it, John Gee, he was a very fat man but at two-thirty in the afternoon you would go in and hear good talk about Shakespeare. Let's see, I can't go through all of them. There was a man called Alex Witherspoon, I suppose did the most interesting and exciting thing in which he took 17th century prose and poetry, and Alex would start with the history of broadsides, but he would trace it all the way through. [00:46:11] It was the first time that I had seen the interrelation of all these things. This sounds pretty rudimentary, but when you were 22 or so, and as I say, these were the things that really were making you bloom so that you were beginning to be able to think in these terms. Again, the Spanish was just impossible, I barely passed it, and the man who taught it said "Osborn, the symbol of Yale is the bulldog, the bulldog holds on. Osborn, are you going to hold on?" This man was just this oh, most awful person, but he was the one really poor one that I had. [00:46:56] Marvelous courses in geology and mind you, we had to take courses. There was no business of my going in there and just picking the ones, I had to have a number of sciences. I had zoology and I had geology, taught by a marvelous man, and then there was a Professor Lull, a very elegant man, game wonderful lectures, Robert French, who taught me Chaucer and you had to do some kind of a thesis for the course, and so I elected to draw all of the pilgrims, Canterbury pilgrims, within the Tabard Inn. Most of the drawings are all out on horseback, you learned a lot like this, and I laid out this whole inside of the thing. I was writing to the Library of Congress and finding out what salt cellars, 14th-century salt cellars, were like, and I got into this. Mind you, all the characters, the actual drawings, copied from Ralph Barton, which served the purpose and it was pretty thin going. [00:48:11] However, everybody graduated and I was still there in New Haven, but having a pretty good time doing this thing, I think I finished it about three weeks after everybody had left. Mind you, I could stay in my room, a biddy would come in and clean up the room, the university didn't say you have to pay more, nothing, but again, think of how lovely and relaxed, this, and so the whole thing was okay, and good Whatman paper to do this. I didn't make any bad mistakes with it, using India ink and watercolor, but because I'd made all the costumes correct, as Chaucer described them, finally the thing was such a hodgepodge of color, no sense of tonality at all. However, Robert French hung it there and I think it's probably still hanging somewhere in the English department. Why don't we talk about the *Yale Record*?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ROBERT OSBORN: I drew for that. Dwight Macdonald, Jack Jessup, with *LIFE Magazine* later, Geoffrey Hellman, we, the four of us were on it at that time. Let's see Peter Arno had been there before and James Williamson, who drew quite amazingly but the draftsmanship is rather unimaginative. We used to go down there and put this thing together, it wasn't all that good, but mind you I was copying Heath Robinson, an Englishman, and Ralph Barton, and then then one time later, I began to get into Boardman Robinson. [00:50:01]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, right, yes.

ROBERT OSBORN: When I began doing ponderous subjects about man supreme and so forth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was Boardman Robinson.

ROBERT OSBORN: I would just pinch that Boardman Robinson because he drew well and he had weight to it,

and you were putting these things out. Oh by this time let's see maybe it was this year, father wrote and said that the lumber business—no, it was 1926 this happened, it would have been later. I graduated in 1928, but the last two years, I was having to draw cigar ads at five dollars apiece, just drawing anything to make enough money to get along. Chandler asked managers to send me—oh, he'd gone through Harvard Business School and he was blowing $2,000 a year, which was a hell of a lot in those days, and I suppose he felt a little bit guilty so he's sending me $35 a month and however, you eked it out and it wasn't too bad. One of the very nice things was the Yale Elizabethan Club. Let's say Dwight Macdonald and I were both taken in sophomore year, which lots of people had to wait until senior year, but we were kind of snappy, bright people, and I'm sure original people. I was voted the most original man in the class, I've forgotten what Dwight was, but he was certainly funny and knowledgeable and well read, and some of these older professors like Chauncey Brewster Tinker, they spotted us at once, and so I think they were pushing to get us into these various clubs, and you would go over there afternoons and drink tea, and of course literary talk like this, but that was marvelous, that was the most pleasant experience. [00:52:02] I went around at the Alpha Delta Phi place you see, because I had been out of Wisconsin, they said you must now join here. I went in this damn dark tomb, you went down three flights into the earth and it was so appalling and depressing that I just never went back there again. I was elected to Keys, which was fun, it didn't do very much for you. We had to write literary papers but we had good food and all of this, very snobbish, only 15 men were taken in, but the thing I really enjoyed again, was the Elizabethan Club, and notice that this is running off towards those particular tastes, which Elodie and I admit, way over half of the pleasure of our life lies and lie together, come from things, aesthetic things. Just the way I enjoy sitting here looking at those hills out there and the light, and the general feeling of the thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were there people at Yale who became friends of yours, other than the ones that you've mentioned?

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes, and I've seen all those people, particularly Dwight Macdonald, Jack Jessup, I've seen the most wonderful fella called Wilder Hobson, who finally drank himself to death about ten years ago, used to work for *Newsweek*, oh he was just marvelous, a volatile mind and fooling, and played a trombone and terribly knowledgeable about jazz. Later on he wrote, apparently early, 20 years ago, a definitive book on jazz, but he was a really wild man, he was Thornton Wilder's nephew or something and terrible on family relationships, probably because so many of father's relatives used to descend on us out there in Oshkosh and stay for missionaries and things like that, that I wasn't too keen about. [00:54:13] Now go ahead, if you can think of anything else.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm curious also, how many years were you on the *Yale Record*?

ROBERT OSBORN: Right from the start, I made it the first year, and Dwight and I, by the time I was a junior, normally the art directorship is given to a senior but I was obviously—and I hope this doesn't sound too lacking in modesty, but I was obviously better than anybody else drawing and I was drawing about half the magazine, which was great fun incidentally, to see your work in print, that's quite important.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It makes a difference doesn't it?

ROBERT OSBORN: It really does.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What's the difference, how would you define the difference?

ROBERT OSBORN: Well one, I think it's kind of an imprint, okay, this is good enough to get printed. If you're just holding it in your hand, no matter how good, you're not sure and then again, I think the whole ego thing, here's this Osborn drawing there and all these people are looking at it, and I don't think it advances things very much but I know what an experience it is.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you do with the Drama Club at Yale?

ROBERT OSBORN: Let's see, first there was a thing called the play craftsman and I designed sets for that, again, just copying, Lee Simonson is the man out of that stagecraft book, and I forget if I owned the book or not, but anyway, probably in *Vanity Fair* magazine, I'd seen those things, and so I was doing sets for O'Neill, but just absolutely uninspired, pure copy business, and you'll notice that when we get to Paris, into the painting, this rather interesting problem in relation to me. [00:56:14] When I finally got to doing what I felt what I was good at, of course the instant I did, everything just took off just like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

ROBERT OSBORN: While you're copying, while you're trying to do the correct thing, perfectly useless and such hard work also, without any results.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Real laborious.

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes. Okay, well also, I was acting in plays. Incidentally, I was quite fat, I weighed 192 I think, when I was at Yale, really plump, and as a little boy I was very fat. I used to say that mother would go down to Marshall Field's and she'd buy woolen trousers, woolen suits, little Norfolk suits, and I was so fat there would be a shine on the wall, so that coat had a shine just from having been stretched over these little fat legs. Anyway—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have a particular interest in the theater and getting involved with the Drama Club?

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes, I enjoyed it and just the way I'd go down in Chicago, I'd gone down there. I didn't see Meyerhold until I got to Paris, but you did see theater and I found it very moving. I think *Vanity Fair* magazine was very keeping you up with actors and plays, which mind you, O'Neill was coming on right now. My first Christmas there I didn't go home, I was so happy to be in the East mind you, at Yale, just to feed plays and starting about November, I rode down to all these theaters in New York and got tickets, theater tickets, and I'd send them always a drawing of a column saying, "Please don't place me behind any of those columns," and consequently, you always got marvelous seats in the center, any variation, you must lead such boring lives that the slightest variation always brings quite a response. [00:58:10] Well anyway, you were able to see O'Neill plays, first run O'Neill plays, the Theater Guild was going very strongly, and as I say, I spent two weeks down there. I lived at the Alpha Delta Phi Club in New York, that was a club mind you, it was just like the Harvard Club or something in the sort, but I would go matinees, I'd go in the evenings, and doing that almost let's see, a little bit of going to art galleries but not that early. Later, Mary Reinhardt, who is now Mary Lasker, she was working and my mother had known her mother out in Wisconsin, Watertown, Wisconsin, and Chandler had known Mary, so when I came down from Yale, I used to go around to the Reinhardt Gallery, which was very good in those days, and you could have bought a Renoir about like that, for $15,000, but she was very good. Remind me to come back to her and also, a Mr. MacDonald at the Bignou Gallery.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh right.

ROBERT OSBORN: Because both of these people gave me tough criticisms and they were right. All right now let's see.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you study painting or drawing or anything at Yale?

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes, very good. Why don't we just finish the theater thing, because then there was the Yale—darling, is it what?

ELODIE OSBORN: No, I just wanted to say one thing. Do you want a bottle of wine, I'll go out and get it for you?

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT OSBORN: Monty Woolley was there. George Pierce Baker had come down from Harvard and there was a terrible confrontation with him, between the Yale Dramat and this bunch of outsiders, and Monty Woolley was the coach of the Yale Dramat. [01:00:12] I acted in quite a few plays and also designed a set for *Coriolanus*, again an absolute steal, on and totally uninspired, but this is fun and at Christmastime, this is probably junior year and senior year, we'd all set out on a train with a play and go to New York and Buffalo and out as far as Minneapolis, and of course all these loyal Yale people would come and watch these, sort of like the Princeton Triangle, Hasty Pudding stuff, but they were fun to do. The other thing was though, it was during prohibition as I recall, and one night we all thought we were going blind from wood alcohol that a black porter had bought and given to us. I don't know, it wasn't very productive, the whole acting thing, but it was good fun. As far as the drawing went, I was doing cartooning, I was, I suppose, I was just beginning to get the idea of maybe being an artist rather than a cartoonist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Ah-ha.

ROBERT OSBORN: Yeah, that's right, ah-ha is right . Incidentally, there was a boy there, he was two classes ahead of me, Jerome Hill, who found moviemaking and I fell in love with his sister, and so I was spending time, even at Christmastime, up there in St. Paul, in the Hill house, and again, not getting to first base with Maude Hill. She was in love with a football player from Stanford called Larry Dorsey, and they of course finally got divorced but that was all too late. [01:02:04] Anyway, Jerome was terribly knowledgeable about again, about Vincent Youmans, Cole Porter, all of this sort of thing, also classical music. You'd go up to his room and we would sit around and play Mozart and this again, was all elevating as far as a boy from Oshkosh was going, and I owe a great deal to Jerome because in the education, and there were about five of us around him—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who were the others?

ROBERT OSBORN: Let's see, there was a boy called Roger Stearns. Mind you, all of these people—no, let's see, Jack Barrett, who finally I think ran the Bollingen Press. It's amazing, at the age of 22, I didn't know what homosexuality was. Two of these people at least, became rampant homosexuals later on, but the nice thing was

that here you weren't having to go out to football games, this is rather a feat, probably kind of people must have thought of us as sissies, but you were really packing in this knowledge, it seemed to me, aesthetic knowledge. For instance, I was reading Roger Fry very keenly on my own and Clyde Bell. Clyde Bell, I began with, but then I found Roger Fry more interesting, but I'll bet that Jerome Hill is the person who put me on to Roger Fry, again maybe Frank Crowninshield.

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PAUL CUMMINGS: This is side two. You're at Yale, and we're going to talk a little more about the drawing and the painting.

ROBERT OSBORN: By this time I was thinking of becoming an "artist" in quotes like that, and I'm sure you know, you imagine this whole life and Paris, and you were rather becoming disdainful of cartoons, there was something kind of cheap about it, I don't feel this at all through now, but that's the way you felt as a young man. You were looking at Cézanne you see, and yearning toward this sort of thing, I suppose really because you enjoyed looking at those surfaces so much. I don't think I told this, that I tried, with Dean Meeks, who was running the Yale Art School, if I couldn't just have some freehand charcoal drawing, and he kept putting it off, putting it off, and to escape calculus as a freshman, which I knew I couldn't do, I had taken mechanical drawing even.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh really?

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes. I did perfectly well but I was miserable, I thought a waste of time and I would like some freehand drawing. Sophomore year, I wasn't accepted, junior year finally, and I had gotten to know Meeks, this marvelous, plump little dilettante really. He said that I could come and take a course with a man called Dietrichson and so I bought this enormous portfolio that you could tie in three places.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh the strings, right.

ROBERT OSBORN: And you really thought you were an artist, and bought charcoal and even bought a charcoal holder, and I guess some kind of a gum eraser. [00:02:08] Well, I showed up the first afternoon and they brought out, Dietrichson set up one of those plaster casts of a head, it looks rather like an egg, set on shoulders, no features whatsoever, and he said, "All right, we will draw this," and I started in and I really didn't draw that sort of thing that well, and I struggled with it. We had three classes a week for about an hour I guess, in the late afternoon, and at the end of the week, my favorite was just brown, it wasn't black from the charcoal it was brown from burnt charcoal, going over and over it, and I was bored stiff with that, and that was that and I thought well, Monday, probably we'll have a nude figure or something. I got in there and Dietrichson set up the same head and said, "All right, we will now proceed, for this week, to draw this." Well, and I of course was so arrogant and impossible, and I put a moustache on it and a beard, and made it into George Bernard Shaw and actually, you see I should have known, it was a very good caricature of George Bernard Shaw, and probably terrible drawing in the French sans, and Mr. Dietrichson came by and said, "Young man what's this?" I said, "I don't know, I'm tired of that faceless face," and he said, "Young man, I don't think we want your type here," and so I lasted just one week and I had to get out during the midst of the class and those wooden easels, and then tie my paper up and my great big portfolio, pick up my charcoal and ease my way out through the different students, and that was all of the art training I had. [00:04:02] Oh, I did take two courses in the history of art, one given by a man, an older man, and I notice that I block out his name, when he got to Cézanne, the slide came on, one slide mind you, in the history of art, there was one slide of Cézanne and this man said, "Cézanne, he painted apples like brass doorknobs, next slide," and that was all that was given, this was terrible. But then there was a fellow called [Theodore] Tubby Sizer, and he gave a history of art course and I must have repeated practically the same thing. This man, he was a very good, lively teacher, also pointing us toward our own period. I remember the last lecture he said look gentlemen, it's perfectly easy—a lot of you are going to have money, it's perfectly easy to go out and buy a Rembrandt, but the hard thing is to pick out the good people of your own period and buy them. It seemed to me that was a very nice point to make. [00:05:13] All right, we're now getting to the end of senior year and I was thinking about what to do. Jerome Hill had gone off to Rome the year before and was studying, again, I think just studying drawing and oil painting in Rome. He told me the name, it was called the British Academy, and I got to Rome, the Hill family, Mrs. Hill—

PAUL CUMMINGS: What happened after Yale, I mean between this?

ROBERT OSBORN: Between Yale and going to Rome? Well, good question.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You couldn't get on the train I guess.

ROBERT OSBORN: No, no. [00:06:00] I told you that my father, his lumber business came apart in 1926, the Depression came and the crash in '28, but the lumber business fell apart earlier and so he just said that he—and I think I've told you this. So I was drawing cigar ads and everything and keeping going, but I had drawn cartoons for the *Yale Daily News* and these were sort of semi-political, but I think mostly local, campus political cartoons,

and in those days those papers, and the same for the *Yale Record,* made quite a lot of money. If the *Yale Record* hadn't put up a building, I would have gone away with something like $2,000, just dividends, which is a lot in those days, but they were building a building, so I got almost nothing from them, but I got something like $500 from the *Yale News*, and I took a job. I replaced a fellow by the name of Al Faud [ph], who had had a job tutoring kids during the summer and teaching them sailing. I learned to sail out on Lake Winnebago, and so I could take this with the Boston family, at Cotuit, on Cape Cod, the Woods, Mr. and Mrs. Woods, and I think three small boys, and I taught tennis and sailing, and just was around.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Good healthy things.

ROBERT OSBORN: Pardon?

PAUL CUMMINGS: All the good healthy things.

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes, but it was very pleasant you know, and I think that they, maybe they gave me $1,000 for that whole summer but that seems a little high, I think that was another time. Let's say $750, so I went off to Europe, but my memory is with $1,500. I bid the woods goodbye and got on a boat, *American Farmer* it was called, and it took ten days to go from New York to London, and the only entertainment was the medicine ball, which I proceeded to, the first afternoon of playing a game, to shoot it, and it went down the railing for a long way and then went off into the ocean and that was the end of entertainment for ten days. [00:08:20]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, great.

ROBERT OSBORN: Anyway, I got to London, I was absolutely intrigued. Mind you, I had taken Arthur Rackham's *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* along with me for the year.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Marvelous.

ROBERT OSBORN: I was absolutely delighted by London, by the museums, I think mostly by the parks, and it's fun to think okay, here's the boy from Oshkosh being exposed for the first time, to really serious culture, and when we got to France and Rome I felt it was even greater by a longshot.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How long were you in London?

ROBERT OSBORN: Not very long. I went to Anderson Sheppard, which Jerome Hill's younger brother had put me onto, and I used to go around to Rosa Lewis's Cavendish Hotel but it was so expensive I couldn't stay there. Of course, she was ordering champagne for everybody and you suddenly found you were stuck with the bill, so I left there and I stayed about ten days, had two suits made up at Anderson Sheppard, one was plus-fours mind you. They're both hanging there in the closet about 50 years later, no 45 years later, and one of those suits is the most beautiful suit I've ever seen, the material is the most beautiful material, I've never seen anything to even approximate it since, and when I had the fittings done, I went out to Croydon, got on a Handley Page, open. No, the cabin was closed but you could see all the longerons, everything, just canvas on the sides, we took off, probably about eight people, going to Paris, and put down at Le Bourget, oh and again, it's marvelous, you know, to be flying over France for the first time, you could see a totally different pattern. [00:10:17]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Had you flown before, this was your first time?

ROBERT OSBORN: No, I'd flown in Oshkosh. Oh, we really ought to put this in because I've always been intrigued by planes, from very early, and I built lots of them. When I was young, I made a three-foot Blériot airplane which Chandler broke, because he wasn't very good—I'm not all that great as a carpenter but Chandler was worse, but I built planes all the time, I'd drawn them. I saw a Blériot plane over Oshkosh in about 1913, I'd say, up at a thousand feet, the port wing came off and the plane just went down like that and everybody rushed in, pulled the cufflinks off the aviator, his name was Niles, as I recall. Anyway, airplanes had always fascinated me. I went out one afternoon with the Packard, to go and pick my mother up at a picnic, mind you, get this, a picnic which here are these ladies with veils and all that, they had set up a card table out in Omro, the park in Omro, to have a picnic and two chauffeurs sort of hovering around and then Fred Hartman came back and I was to go out and pick her up. That very afternoon, I turned completely only in a Dodge Station Wagon with Jim Kimberly of that Kimberly-Clark Company, and I guess he became a racer and fooled around with Ginger Rogers. Anyway, imagine turning completely over and let's see, there should be a small scar right there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. [00:12:01] [Laughs.]

ROBERT OSBORN: I was covered with iodine, we'd hit a cow, and we were going down to sail, down at the Oshkosh Yacht Club, and we were going alone, a mother cow jumped out, trying to get to her calf, we hit it. She held the front of the car and we just rolled down into a ditch. I came off with the top of the car, this wooden top, and was lying there like a sea sled and Jim was there trying to put the steering wheel back onto the post. But

mind you, having gone through this and lucky to be alive, I wasn't aware of this at all, on the way out to pick up mother and her friends, Mrs. Morgan and Neely Brown, Mrs. Radford, there was an airplane, a Curtiss Jenny out there and if you paid five dollars you could have a five minute ride and darn, if I didn't stop. Luckily the airplane wasn't there, I probably would have gone right straight in, but I really was intrigued and again, I'm sure there's a kind of fantasy escape thing in the airplane that's quite different from the locomotive let's say. Well, out at Croydon, and you got on this plane and really kind of floated along and put down. Let's see, I stayed at the Place Vendome, Hotel Vendome, I guess, and I can remember that first night, just going out and walking the streets and walking way late, just overpowered, imagine, coming out of Notre Dame or Tuileries or Pace Vendome even, and intrigued by this. I hardly spoke any French. I remember I ate chocolate, chocolate bars or heated chocolate, and going along and eating actually in English tea rooms, I did the same thing later in Rome, until you finally got going, got on a train, went out to Chartres. [00:14:10] My history professor at Yale, John Allison, had laid out a whole sort of gothic, Romanesque tour, gone through France just town by town, [inaudible] places like this. I bought a bicycle and I was simply bowled over by Chartres Cathedral, I saw it the first night at eleven o'clock and I guess there was a moonlight or something. I went out from that charming little white hotel there, a good dinner and came on this Place and this structure, and we looked at it all the next day. I was drawing capitals and things like this, carrying notebooks again, artist business. [00:15:00] I got on this bicycle, started off towards Châteaudun, I won't bore you with all the towns but Gond-Pontouvre, Angoulême, to Loos, and boy I'd had it, amazingly, don't ever try to do a thing like that on a bicycle. Then again, my legs got so muscular that I could hardly get the Anderson Sheppard plus-fours off and on. Mind you, I was travelling all alone and a lot of the time, I really was just traveling alone and living alone and working alone, perfectly content. You were having such a good time you know, imagine this whole world opening now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right. Every day was brand new.

ROBERT OSBORN: It's funny, Oshkosh to Chartres, but this is really what was happening and finally, when you get out to Budapest you know and all of this, that you are being exposed to these marvelous cultures that you simply hadn't had as a young man. [00:16:06] You got on the bicycle and you were drawing as you went and finally to Loos, sold the bicycle, got on to a train and started off for Rome and again, I love to go on trains incidentally, and be able to just look out and watch the landscape drifting by. There's a terrible young Italian coming back from Paris and he had a bottle of perfume, and it was practically a magnum of perfume, he was singing opera at the top of his voice in his compartment and I just took an absolute loathing to him and I'm afraid I still feel this for most Italian men, these bombastic idiots, they're always sort of showing off and throwing their weight around when they really shouldn't be. [00:16:54] At Rome, I stayed at the Hotel Russie I guess it was, and it was very near the Piazza di Spagna and registered at the British Academy, again for drawing and painting, and pretty soon, an English woman there said why don't you come to—Prince Volkonsky runs a [inaudible] here, and incidentally, Volkonsky, a descendent or relative of Tolstoy, and so I thought that would be fun, and it was this marvelous big bedroom, 12-foot ceilings and wonderful Italian servants around the table. The prince sat at the head of the table and one night, going around the table, there must have been about 15 different people just living there, there were 26 different languages spoken, and this is good fun, and Prince couldn't keep the bills straight, sometimes it would be $108, the next month $58, he was a most awful, impractical man, you could see why they've all been thrown out of Russia. [00:18:09] He used to tell me stories about these high boots that he would have, polished by some serf for a year before he even put them on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh my, well.

ROBERT OSBORN: Or if his sister was there, and she was a tall, thin, delightful woman, and she started teaching me Italian. We'd sit around this green vase table in the afternoon. You would draw from nine in the morning until twelve, you come home and have lunch, and then I would go out and go to museums, and I was doing it all very much in order, all the cosmetic work and stuff like this, so really it wasn't just haphazard, it was almost a period, I guess, starting off with the Etruscan probably, but this was just marvelous. Rome is like a small town, this is 1929, I'm sorry '28. I'd left Yale, the summer job, and okay, in the fall of '28, to be immersed in this. In the back of the Volkonsky's was the Hertziana Library that had wonderful art books, and I was going there, no longer looking at Heath Robinson but Daumier and Goya.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where did you find them, how did they come into this?

ROBERT OSBORN: They just happened to be—the library happened to be there. I guess Tubby Sizer gave me a letter to the head of the Hertziana Library, a German, and he couldn't have been nicer and just gave me rights to go there and sit, a wonderful library. Then, live on the Piazza di Spagna, the Spanish steps and the flowers and everything, good times. [00:20:04] When February came around, I bought a thing called Primavera Siciliano. It cost $14 and you got on a second class train and went down through Naples, crossed on a boat, all around Sicily mind you, and back up to Rome, $14, including hotels, everything.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, fantastic.

ROBERT OSBORN: Oh, glorious, again, for a student. I don't know, it wasn't a poor life and I remember I read Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* on the train, you had a compartment by yourself, second class, but I'm trying to set the key, and then you would get off in [inaudible] something like this, and look at these marvelous monuments, back up to Rome. I think by this time, Jerome Hill, his—

[Audio Break.].

ROBERT OSBORN: And her daughter called Dodie Hill, no Maude Hill, the girl you see, that I longed to see, wasn't there, but Jerome, with all this money, hired a chauffeur and a car, the chauffer was out there in front, uncovered, in uniform mind you, and we were all in back, but then we just started from Rome going north, and this is when you got to see Piero della Francesca for the first time and of course staying at the good hotels. I was paying as much as I could, I was paying what I normally would have paid each month, I would just hand this into the kitty, but it was this very high life let me tell you. However, you were seeing these things and Jerome was much more knowledgeable than I, that he actually, he was teaching all of us a great deal, I don't know it's rather mean to say that I never, until that very last film, felt that his work really had any bite to it. [00:22:10] I don't know if it was lack of necessity or what, the painting is charming and all this, the movies, but the *Sand Castle* doesn't look to me like much. I think Mr. Bresson's films, Dovzhenko or Ernst or something like that, which seems to me you ought to be up there at least trying that. That's a difficult judgment and perhaps I shouldn't even pass it, however the last film, I hear it's splendid, it's of his whole life. Let's see, you got up to, I believe Florence. My impression is that then, one got on a train and went up to Paris.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How much time did you spend at the British Academy then?

ROBERT OSBORN: Oh, that was actually, sort of almost a year. Now wait a second, because at the end of that year—no, we went from Florence, we must have been on a train, because I don't remember driving up there, and mind you, the British Academy was just plain drawing, a terrible teacher.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you remember who was there?

ROBERT OSBORN: No. Oh, I'll tell you a nice thing. There was some fellow, an Englishman, there, a young Englishman, I'd love to know what his name was, he would have a good piece of paper, probably 12-by-10, no bigger, and while we were all there holding up the thumb you know, and measuring it, I didn't even know what that meant and yet I was doing it. Mind you, I was going through these motions and then putting down something, everybody else was measuring out there with that thumb. I literally was doing this, however, that nonsense, oh and the bravado of the drawings and not coming to blows at all with anything of how does it really go, which was the whole purpose of the thing and would have been most valuable. [00:24:12] Here was this Englishman with a small piece of paper, I'll be a six-eighth pencil, just looking say, at the calf of the leg of this male model or female model whatever, and making this small section of maybe just the calf or a joint, an elbow, or something like this, and erasing it and going back and back, and of course we all just laughed at him, just that he has no dash, nothing, and yet he, I am sure was really learning, you'd love to know that it was Sutherland, you'd love to think it was Henry Moore, but I know Henry, Henry Moore, so that I know he was into something quite different from that, but here was a man really studying and looking. All right, Florence, let's see trained in Paris, and I think that Mrs. Hills, this is Jerome's mother, must have appeared in Paris, yes, and Maude Hill was there, and another girl called Georgiana Slade, who was a cousin, but they had taken a big house, a big apartment I believe, in a Rochefoucauld house at 6 Rue de Seine, just off of where the institute is, and so from there, Jerome and I used to set off every morning to the Académie Scandinave, it was oh, I'd say about three blocks from the dome, and I forget the small street, but anyway, this was run by Scandinavians, but the marvelous thing about that was these different artists would come in, Despiau would come in and criticize painting and they really passed it around. [00:26:07] Léger had a small school down the street, Othon Friesz was giving criticism and very good criticism may I say, but if somebody couldn't come, they'd phone somebody, Matisse, my impression is that Matisse came around, a man called Waroquier, lots of these, just they'd call up and say, "I'm busy, would you mind going around?" and they'd only come Friday morning and stay for about an hour and a half just going around from one person to another but boy, their criticism was just marvelous. Here were men talking to you about the logic of light, how logical always, it was never illogical, and it's reflecting, it's just as logical, and this of course was very Gaelic I'm sure, this marvelous formalizing principle, but it seemed to be very good painting and teaching. Nobody was doing sculpture but we all were painting. There was a fellow called Gruber there, who was really a drunk at age 17 and I guess he's in the Modern Museum in Paris, but they look pretty thin going. There was a young girl called Jeanne Daour, a Romanian, and she knew Brancusi, she'd studied with [inaudible] and she was at this academy and we used to go around and look at exhibits together or go to Brancusi's studio, a filthy bathtub as I recall, and he'd sit on the edge of the bathtub saying that you have to love life and all this. [00:28:00] Well, those were great days except by now, I was starting to run out of money, though I still didn't doubt my ability to become a great painter

PAUL CUMMINGS: What were you doing, I mean were you just doing drawings or painting from models?

ROBERT OSBORN: Paintings, paintings from models and oh, I wish you could see them, just they would make you perspire to look at them. Luckily, I haven't got many of them left. There wasn't really any honestly, I have a few oil paintings in which the vision was at least honest. I've done a couple portraits and an interior, which later, quite a bit later, before I finally dropped it all. Anyway, as I say, for instance, with Jeanne Daour, we'd go out to the Rodin Museum and maybe draw from those Rodin things, and at least you had a rhythmic sense of what those figures were about. One day, I went, I believe it was through Durand-Ruel, and I asked, there was that big Cézanne, quite big, the good one, *The Boy in the Red Vest*, it was up there on the wall, it's one that Paul Mellon now owns, $616,000, and I think it was something like $32,000 at that time. I asked them if I could just, would they mind if I sat there and made a watercolor from it. Of course, I'm sure I just produced a fake Cézanne watercolor with no understanding whatsoever of why he had done this, this and this, but how nice it was that they never—

PAUL CUMMINGS: They let you do that.

ROBERT OSBORN: Just let you sit there and people were looking, again, you're so pleasantly relaxed. There was a lot of going to the Louvre on Sundays and looking at that little Watteau, it's about six inches high but magnificent, and you finally got so you had these favorites down in the Greek sculpture or Egyptian, and you'd go and look at these small little plaques. [00:30:07]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you draw in the museums much?

ROBERT OSBORN: Oh, a bit but not as much. I think you were drawing so much during the week—

PAUL CUMMINGS: You just wanted to look.

ROBERT OSBORN: —that you wanted to look. But on spring afternoons I would go, and this probably is another time when I'm impressed, I would go to the Luxembourg and just sit there and do watercolors and again, this is really all kind of tragic, because the advancement, I should have known. I should have known in 1929 that this really wasn't going to work but I didn't. Imagine, the self-delusion you know, and dreams of glory.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Of course, that's the time to have them, right? [Laughs.]

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes. Oh yes it would have been terrible if I had gone to the *Chicago Tribune*, as I though, as a small boy, because I used to send them ideas, into Briggs, and he'd use them, really, you'd see R-O-O down at the bottom of a Briggs cartoon, you were 12 and 13 years old and this is pretty heady stuff I can tell you. But it had been awful, that you had gotten into this, and I'd guess I better say this, probably the most important thing of that whole exposure to France, to Rome, and Spain at one point, was I think that I learned to draw. Mildred Lyons once said, "The nice thing about your"—is that it showed down at the Century Club, and there were about 78 big pictures in my whole life there. She said, "You know, what's nice is you go down and look at all these things, you can see that you had a European training in drawing," and as much as I like Jules Feiffer and laugh with delight in him, you're absolutely appalled at what is accepted for a rest, and I think a lot of the force goes out of the picture. I can show you a little Charlie Chaplin down the hall that I'm sure is based on French training or the comprehension of the figure or the aplomb of the figure, of how the gravity really goes down through that figure and this, may I say, has been absolutely invaluable, drawing the cartoon out of the farthest—wildest [ph] [00:32:18] as a chaplin out in the studio now that goodness, it's only about four or five lines but again, I'm sure it has to do with knowing how that hip articulates there, what the gravity will do in motion.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you ever draw from a skeleton or any of those things?

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: All the bones and all that.

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes. Also let's see, in Rome, I used to study how muscles attached and how one folded under one another, and that I don't think was time wasted. When you're being the artist, in 1870 you would have had a big black beret about 14 inches wide, during those efforts and interests, it seems to me at times just absolutely blown away. Well, now still in Paris, it's probably the summer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Now, at the Académie Scandinave, that's really a place where you just work by yourself and get the criticism once a week isn't it?

ROBERT OSBORN: That's right. You had a model who would appear Monday, and I guess we used to go to Grande Chaumière in the afternoon some time, during the winter, and that would just be drawing and maybe 15 minute sketches which again, is just too much bravado, just showing off and not really studying. This was terrible but there were moments at the Académie Scandinave, thanks to those good men, and you could see what an artist was like and you could see how he approached things, this really was very valuable, that a modest

little man like Despiau would come in and just you understood the sensitivity that actually went into the work of a man like that. [00:34:11] I don't think he's all that great, Mayon [ph] it seems to me, is way beyond, but you at least were coming in contact with those people. At one time I thought Segonzac was good, now I look at it and it's just terrible again, just bravado.

PAUL CUMMINGS: This is the first time you met people who were really full-time professional artists.

ROBERT OSBORN: That's right, that's right. Also, that whole life up there. I knew Jean Bouchet, who ran a gallery there, and I don't think Lipchitz, she was dealing with Lipchitz and I probably saw him and we know him just gently, and Lipchitz hangs down over there and he's always nice and cordial to us, but that you were—seeing people of this oncoming stature. Picasso used to come into Fonee's [ph] to buy paint and we would be standing there with our probably little 10 franc note, and this guy, this brash man would pull up in his Spano I believe, and we were all probably sitting in the back. He was sitting up with an open, exposed chauffer, but he'd come up to the thing and just literally, just go like this, and we would all practically be knocked on the floor, and he'd buy this paint, that deep you know, boxes of it, and we would have to wait for our violet de mars or Maria con Lar [ph]. I mention those two things because those are box colors and they were the two colors I found so rare and I enjoyed so using them. I think you can still buy them in France, you can't get them at the Empire Art Company, where I bought my material, up on Lexington Avenue for about 40 years now. However, marvelous colors and box colors. It's a pity to think of those beautiful colors which we just ruined one week after another, the texture, everything about it was just great. [00:36:03] I had run out of money in Paris. I wired, I think, or wrote a letter maybe, to George Van Santvoord, Headmaster of the Hotchkiss School, because at Yale, one day I had been up at Tinkers, Professor Chauncey Brewster Tinker, with whom I used to send drawings, in this again, sort of lesbian club, but making drawings of Amy Lowell smoking a cigar and Tinker loved it. I'm sure that he and John Allison were homosexuals, again, absolutely naïve about it, but they were asking me up for tea in the afternoon and as I look back on it, that doesn't sound to me totally normal. Anyway, Sanford said that afternoon said, "Now, if you ever want a job teaching art let me know," and so here I was, I think I was down and out of about, it seems to me, $75, and I wired and nothing came back and then by Jove, about two days later back came a wire. I was in the Tuileries Gardens and I opened it up, I picked it up at Morgan Company, opened it up and it said yes, we'd love to have you come, school opens on September 19th, something like that. Really, I must have gone right up through those yellowing trees and terribly exciting. I was living with the Hills then because I remember the night before I left, I read Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, it was Maud's copy and she was leaving or I guess I was leaving, and so I sat up all night and read *All Quiet on the Western Front*, got on a train, got up to a boat and I slept the first night in—[00:38:00]—I bought my railroad ticket to come up to Millerton, and I had two cents left, literally, in my pocket, and I wasn't going to ask my family for any money and I slept in Grand Central Station, a policeman would come back in every two hours and whack the bottom of your soles and your feet. I came up here to Hotchkiss, it was fall and magnificent country that we're in right now, and start putting together an art course in—let's see, I had to teach art history in conjunction with the history courses that were being given, and you could get slides from the Met as I recall, and the Carnegie Institute. I finally got a grant from them for pictures, but also, I was coaching football, it was fun to get out there and you were in good physical—let's see, you were young you know, and all that, you loved so, getting out there and doing that. I taught, or supervised, I didn't really teach, skeet shooting, you know, which you go out to shooting stations, all these rich boys were there and I was wearing a gray Burberry coat and again, this fake sporting world, you know, but not is it that you're moving through all these different areas and yet, from Hotchkiss, I was going down and seeing Mary Reinhardt, and seeing that first show at the Museum of Modern Art, in the Heckscher Building, to just stay at Hotchkiss briefly, down in the basement they had his house, with a ceiling six feet high, about the space of this room we're in, and it had a little stove down there, which I thought was a marvelous studio, and so I started painting classes down there. [00:40:01] Bill Kienbusch, William Kienbusch, was one of the students that I taught and there was a boy called Rossback, good heavens, he went into banking and well, he had money coming out of his ears. He had the most extraordinary sense of taking plasticine and doing a head, but just unfailing plastic spatial sense and really, I think it is a pity that that boy didn't go on. I'd never seen anything like it, the rapidity with which he would comprehend what Despiau down there—

PAUL CUMMINGS: It just happened.

ROBERT OSBORN: Oh, within 20 minutes he would have the essence of that head right there, and if he wanted to go on he could, but he went into banking, the Rossback family bankers.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did you start collecting?

ROBERT OSBORN: This was years later, after I sensed that I could draw good cartoons, and we began making a lot of money. Then, as we got money in hand, why we'd buy the Calder and there should be a great big Nero down there where that Marini is, the head that big, which is in Paris being cast now, we hope it will come back in one piece. We can talk about that later if we want. At Hotchkiss, the one thing that I did do was I got a long corridor and oh, I guess I put up some Hanfstaengl prints and boy, no reaction whatsoever you know. My favorite Degas, Cézannes and all that, and the kids didn't look at these things for a moment, and so I had a tack board or

stuff that you could put pins in, mounted it all along the main corridor, which must have been about 70 feet long, and I just began going back to very fundamental things that would interest them; an airplane, an airplane propeller, and an automobile, and I was showing them very fancy Italian automobiles, but started showing them how beautiful the propeller was, as I'm sure this came out in the Bauhaus. [00:42:16]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ROBERT OSBORN: I had some of those books. But the thing that was, I think pretty good, I was drawing cartoons to back it up, cartoons about the Bulgarian American businessman who doesn't know about art and all of this. At the end of five years, I had those kids, you put up a new exhibit and it was really packed with 3-D for these kids, just looking at these different things and after a while you could get them out. I said you all should go from a propeller to a Piero della Francesca.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That must have been tough, right?

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes. All the stops in between. Not getting them to design boats or anything, but to get them involved, and lots of them, see I'd run into them every so often and they're really great, some have become collectors. But see, up at Andover, and I've forgotten whether Charlie Sawyer was up there? No, it was the man—American Academy in Rome, a friend of Elodie's.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, Bartlett Hayes.

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes, Bart Hayes, he was up in Andover and he had a very fancy program but when I'd go out there and look at it, it didn't look to me as though it had the real channel that this thing did, which was really quite simple and pictures torn out of magazines, and granted a lot of European magazines. This, I did think was pretty ingenious on my part, and I was earning, I guess I was getting $2,300 a year, which you were getting your key and all that, and I was having a good time, wonderful, shooting again and fishing. [00:44:15]

PAUL CUMMINGS: You always get back to the real thing.

ROBERT OSBORN: Well let's see, it's true you know. This afternoon, I'll be on the top of the mountain, there are partridge I know waiting there and I don't think that I can go up there and shoot them anymore, you just don't want to kill them. I'm sure this is post-Vietnam War. Also, I think my wife said this morning that as you get older, the very preciousness of being here, alive and 70, well, maybe you shouldn't be taking it away from anything else.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like teaching there, I mean you were there for five, six years about.

ROBERT OSBORN: That's a fine question. The first year it was great. Incidentally, America was going into the Depression, and this is late 1929 I believe, and I had gone to a Yale football game in the afternoon, and the stock market really, like you got on a streetcar and it was just going down like this. So the first year there was glorious, the next year I was becoming a better teacher. The third year, I was probably at my peak and I could lecture well by that time, on Egyptian art or something of the sort, give a really decent lecture, gothic, Romanesque probably better than not. The fourth year, I was beginning to feel very compressive, and you know that not enough was going on. Also, psychologically, I'm sure that yes—about that, what are we now up to '34, I guess. Psychologically, things were beginning to come apart. [00:46:00] I was not being respectful of—I was trying to do it with my mind and not with my inner guts, and unconscious and all of this, I really was suppressing those so much. For instance, I once said to a woman I was in love with, Fred Astaire, that's just cheap, and then I was talking about Diaghilev, I'd seen all the Diaghilevs in Paris you see, imagine, and Meyerhold, and Desbeins [ph], but being disdainful of that, these simple things, and my body was beginning to really revolt again. I think this is spring of '35 probably, one morning, having eaten some kippered herring, by about 10:00 I had this frightful pain across my middle and the ulcer had perforated. Again, here's this whole suppression instead of like this.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you doing any of your own work at this time?

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes, oh good that you ask. I was painting the most awful fake Cézanne's you ever saw in your life, but egregious, again, ruining this good paint and the mannerisms which you were studying so carefully, there must be 20 books on Cézanne down there and I sure was poring over them, but imagine, an adult man affecting this thing and again, wasting time and materials, and I'm glad that we put it in now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Don't you think it's part of a learning process?

ROBERT OSBORN: Well I'm afraid so, but I call myself a slow learner. I guess I asked Mary Reinhardt, Mary Woodard from out there in Wisconsin, if I could bring down some pictures and she said sure, so I bought a great French hamper, one of those wicker things, about that big, and I could barely carry it, I had so many pictures in there, and went up to the Reinhardt Gallery and went into a back room. [00:48:02] She couldn't have been

sweeter about this, and so I pulled out one and then another, and she said, "Yes, but didn't Cézanne do it better?" And wham, just like that, it felt like a small Pintado [ph] dagger. So then I brought out another sort of little—it had been done on a wooden panel about that big, very dark, of some violets, very discrete, about five violets and two leaves, and she said, "Yes, but didn't Manet do it better?" Boy she was right on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You were a pin cushion.

ROBERT OSBORN: I surely had Manet in mind, likely I wasn't imitating Degas, whom I liked very much as a drawer, but that was, I'll tell you, was a very shaking experience, suddenly. Oh, and sweet Mary said, "Now, do you want me to really tell you the truth or do you want me to just be nice?" I said, "Tell me the truth, no question about it," and it was such a shaking experience, I tottered back onto the train, got back here and for six months, I was really just, I couldn't paint, I couldn't do anything, because everything you did, you knew at once, you see, it was an imitation and it wasn't the real thing. Well, I don't know whether this all comes together at this time, but the ulcer perforated, luckily the doctor down there got me into an ambulance, got me up that road, you can see down there, Pittsfield. The doctor did a purse string suture, he'd never done one before, and they just pull that out like that and tie it off, in your stomach. Well I survived that one and yet, this is really quite—well by this time, you said how long did you stay on, I could see that the whole thing was falling in. The paintings, incidentally, which I find very interesting, were becoming smaller and smaller, trying to have command over that thing or the brush stroke or the color, or what, but did lots of paintings in that last year or so, that can't be more than four inches by eight inches, little wooden panels and not very good. [00:50:27] Oh there were a few, I guess, those are done a little later, bullfighters. Let's see, I took some time to recuperate from that operation and by then I'd decided to go back to Europe. I applied for a scholarship to the American Academy, and I painted three pictures. I had to paint a nude, so I painted a nude of myself, I had a very good figure in those days, I really did. [They laugh.] I was posing and doing this thing, and then I had to do a little figure, or landscape of some kind, and I guess some drawings had to be sent in. Well damned, if I didn't send these in and nothing, I was turned down, but I had saved enough money because I really wasn't spending very much, and set off for Europe and France.

PAUL CUMMINGS: This is what, '35, '36?

ROBERT OSBORN: Thirty-five or '36 maybe, I think the end of '35. I'm back in Paris and now painting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, before we get to Paris, I want to ask you, how did the Edward Weston exhibition come about? I've seen that pop up here and there and it doesn't—

ROBERT OSBORN: How marvelous, okay. Probably the second year teaching at Hotchkiss, Maude Hill and Jerome, and Corty [Cortlandt], the younger brother, and the family, I suspect were out in Pebble Beach, California, where they had a big house, and they asked me to come out for spring vacation, which I was having here, and so I went down to New York, got on an airplane, flew I think to Cleveland, and then you got off at Cleveland, you're put down right beside the train and you got onto the train and rode all night on the train and you got up the next morning and there would be either a Fokker tri-motor or a Ford tri-motor right there, you got on and flew on to San Francisco. [00:52:53]

PAUL CUMMINGS: There was no night flying really.

ROBERT OSBORN: No that's right. They came out and picked me up and incidentally, I was terribly funny in those days, I really joked a lot, and I think the Hills loved to have me around because life was so sticky with Jerome's father you know, who was really into the alcohol. Is it mean to say things like this?

PAUL CUMMINGS: No if that's what happened.

ROBERT OSBORN: However, that whole Hill family have been so generous to me and were really so important, between Maud and Jerome, I really feel very grateful. Also, I'll put in a woman who lives down here called Mrs. Herbert Stovall, and while I was teaching at Hotchkiss, she was terribly supportive of me and lived in this fine house down there, but she was always into the latest thing, she also built a Buckminster Fuller mast house right up the road from here. This woman must have been, I guess about 45, I was around 29 or 30, I would guess, but a real rapport, but the main thing was that she was having Virgil Thompson come out here and give just an evening down here at the house, or Iris Barry came out and lectured, she was this bright and zippy and rare woman as that, and we'd all go in to Hartford and see *Four Saints in Three Acts*, when it was 26 below that night, and the chauffer was sitting out in the open with a LaSalle, and we had all crowded in back. [00:54:36] I was kneeling on a seat, jump seat, so that my legs might get a little warmer. Again, I think it's good to tell these things, because the excitement of that period, and this really was happening in New York and around, but thinking, think of all that. Actually, you had the feeling that the American thing was getting going for the first time, not necessarily the painters but think of Virgil Thompson putting this out, or I've forgotten, Watkins designing the thing, and it wasn't into the great American period but I do think it was the beginning of it. All right now let's see, back to that question.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Edward Weston.

ROBERT OSBORN: Here we were at Pebble Beach and right there in Pebble Beach, I think is Carmel, Edward Weston had his studio, it was rather simple, small, he was living with some terribly nice young, somewhat younger girl, but you'd go over there and there would be a note stuck on the door saying, "Darling, I've gone away for 15 minutes, I'll be back. Love, Edward." This would be stuck on the door, a terribly nice man, and he had these pictures he wasn't selling very many, and I just said, I have this gallery that I've rigged up, it was just really a beaverboard sort of thing, but I'd love to have a show if you could send them, and he must have sent oh, I'd say 25 Westons, I think, the three up there. [00:56:09] I have a Weston of Maude Hill that he took and one of Jerome, turned face down may I say, they're probably foxing badly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's terrible, yeah.

ROBERT OSBORN: At least you were—I don't know, these had a certain spritely quality to it as far as I'm concerned.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Does that get any reaction from the neighborhood?

ROBERT OSBORN: No, absolutely not.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did they know who he was or what it was all about?

ROBERT OSBORN: No, none, none. Oh, absolutely.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why did you do that then?

ROBERT OSBORN: However, you knew, I knew at once, as soon as you looked at them, and I didn't know Ansell Adams at the time and I still don't, but somehow, compared to Ansell Adams, you see—wait, I mustn't put him down because I liked looking at those pictures, but these things of Weston and nobody you see, had gotten down to that 64 aperture, I believe it's 64, and they had this wonderful quality. Now there you see a marvelous personal vision, but I think he got going fairly soon via, I think a show, but I'm sure it was two or three years after this thing out here and I packed them all up carefully, sent them back, and he gave me two out of the show. I'm sure I didn't sell one.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It couldn't have been very much money then.

ROBERT OSBORN: No, oh no, $25 apiece if that, I'll bet, $15 or $25, I'm sorry I don't remember.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You said you wanted to say something about the Bignou Gallery.

ROBERT OSBORN: Okay. However, I think we'd better save this just for a bit, because why don't we go back to France and here painting, studying there, and then I went down to Portugal and visited Mrs. Scoville, down there at the Quinta da Bacalhoa. [00:58:08] Well let's see, she had just bought this house, after the Villa Lante in Italy, oh it's the most beautiful private house I've ever seen, and she had bought it, I think she paid $26,000, not even that, $16,000 maybe, for this extraordinary place, all rather in ruins, between Setubal and you had to cross the river, the Tagus River, on a boat, and then you went down about 15 miles and here was this Quinta, which is now near, unfortunately, near an active traffic road. The roof had all fallen in and just marvelous stonework, there's a chance that Sansovino even worked on this house, and she started in, her husband was a lawyer and he was in New York quite a lot of the time. I know the son had done a book with Pete Scoville, a good atomic scientist. [00:59:08] Well anyway, here she was, working on this, I was up in Paris, and I came down, one to see it, to visit, and we set off in a small Ford and went to Spain, it was bullfighting season, but you were looking at that time, El Greco. Funny, I had expected Velasquez to be the man, and I thought, just seen painting, imagine, I've seen him since, where I just almost come apart, I could sit there for hours looking at it. Anyway, here we were, breezing along, Toledo, one town after another, having a marvelous springtime, and looking at El Greco, who impressed me deeply, and you were seeing a lot of them. [01:00:04] I'd forgotten, we parted, I believe, at Gibraltar, she went back to the United States, I went up to Paris, to go on painting, and of course now just painting El Grecos, for God's sake.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You really picked up everything you looked at.

ROBERT OSBORN: Oh, this is just terrible and this is really now, it's getting to be kind of a cliffhanger, because there will come a moment when I finally see the light. Jeanne Daour was there, and I've forgotten whether—I think I took her down to—this is highly platonic, down to South of France, Cassis, where all of us had gone any time during the summer we'd been there, or earlier, oh Jerome and Maud, Jack Barrett and George Ensley, we'd all gone down and stayed at the Cap d'Antibes, at the Eden Roc Hotel, $6 a day, everything, food, a lot of tennis, but a lot of painting, we were painting, we weren't lolling around. We were swimming, we were in marvelous

shape, but six hours of painting, but again, I'm sure faked, you know here's stone pines, oh yes, I know how to paint stone pines, and the palette wasn't quite as—well, no, I can show you some beautiful Osborns. This is going to be good at the end.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But now how was the Depression affecting you?

ROBERT OSBORN: Well, because I'd been at Hotchkiss, I actually had saved a decent amount of money, $2,300, and I had a Ford that had cost me $15, and I took the kids around, so we'd all go out painting in. [01:02:00] Well let's see, I could sell just about $500 of oil paintings every year and I actually was living on about $500, and I'll show you a small house that had no central heat in it, just one stove in the bottom of it, and of course you weren't married and there weren't any children and really, you could get along on quite a little.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Keep the costs down.

ROBERT OSBORN: Very little. Anyway now let's see, to finish Spain, and back up to Paris and then let's see from there, I came back to New York.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Now, how were you in New York this time?

ROBERT OSBORN: Gently in love with Marian Willard, and I suppose it's fair to say that goodness, this would have been a ghastly marriage, oh just awful. Luckily we both got the word. However, I was there in New York, and I had an apartment at the end of 72nd Street, East 72nd, it cost me $17 a month for four rooms, I guess this explains how you could get alone, but I was happy as a clam. I'd looked for a view that I would like to paint, and if you go to the end of 72nd Street and here's the hospital, but you look down the river.

PAUL CUMMINGS: All of that, right.

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes. I spent four months making an oil painting, which must be there somewhere in the basement, unbelievable, the thing was getting so flat instead of going back like that, oh it was just tragic. Nevertheless though, I was painting every single day on it and it was about this time I think, that I'd run into this —[01:04:00]

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PAUL CUMMINGS: This is side three. Now, we have you painting the view.

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes, in New York, and asking Mr. MacDonald, his name was Duncan MacDonald, at the Bignou Gallery at 32 East 57th, and it was a good gallery, they had foreign paintings. He was really very nice and again, you know you go in and strike up a conversation, and I think they knew that you knew a decent amount about these various paintings, and so every time you would go in, you'd talk to him, and I guess he asked me to lunch once and I asked him, because I hadn't had any criticism now for some time. Imagine, taking the needed criticism.

PAUL CUMMINGS: From a dealer.

ROBERT OSBORN: Well yes, or no, that you just didn't know, at this age that all right this is good or I reject this, or plow on or something, and I took these around and it was exactly like the thing with Mary Reinhardt. He'd just check these things off, one after another in looking at them, he said, "Look this is"—again, that whole act of do you want me to really say? I said, "Yes," and again, this dagger right through you, and this was very shaking but very good, because, having gone through this twice. Oh let's see, it was just about this time, here we go duck shooting again, I'd gone duck shooting down here on the coast, with George Storm, and as a thank you letter, I just wrote 16 drawings, because I knew duck shooting so well, of all the experiences. He took that, or it may have been, it must have been George Storm, but I guess a fellow called Kenyon Boocock saw these drawings, took them to Tim Coward of Coward-McCann, and Tim responded once and said, "Well these would make a fine small booklet, do you know anything about quail shooting?" [00:02:22] I said, "No, not a thing but I know somebody who does." A fellow, the headmaster of Salisbury School, filled me in, and I knew a lot about trout fishing. I made one on how to shoot quail.

PAUL CUMMINGS: On how to, yeah, that's the way it came about.

ROBERT OSBORN: How to shoot ducks, how to catch trout, just a thank you letter really, but imagine my utter surprise when the first year, those three little books sold 40,000 copies. Well let's see and this one, meant money, and this is worth having gone through all this laborious thing, France, Paris and so forth. The lesson was so obvious that here, you go back to just drawing cartoons, that you've always had this knack for doing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were these in the same style that you had drawn in or did the style change here?

ROBERT OSBORN: Now there's an Osborn, now they look like Osborns.

PAUL CUMMINGS: By this time in '39.

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes. I guess I'd been writing thank you letters to Maude Hill and stuff like this, and drawing a lot down there at Hotchkiss you see, just as you were teaching art, but they were cartoons. I drew one of a kid down there, but they were drawn in cartoon fashion, just showing how he was finally going to be in the business and what was he going to do and all that kind of thing, so I probably was learning how to cartoon there. However, with these things, it was just so obvious and by now, we must up to, fairly close to the war. [00:04:08]

PAUL CUMMINGS: About 1940.

ROBERT OSBORN: Okay. Incidentally, I'd worked hard. I had seen Hitler in Austria one summer and just knew that this man was absolutely frightening and you could just see him going along. I was working for the Committee to Defend America by giving aid to the allies, and Lewis Mumford was working on it down there, I guess first of all, trying to get destroyers to England, and you were working hard on this. Let's see, before this though, I had had to get into the whole Jung thing and beginning to read. Do you remember when we were talking about Fred Astaire and the intellectual thing, because this should come in here, that you were reading this, and I think that somehow, this is fitting in also, with the whole cartooning thing or what you were—it must have been, you see. You weren't having to be up on this horrible intellectual level, you could just be turning these things out, things that you felt and knew about and felt deeply about.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Had you been making drawings about current events or people or situations?

ROBERT OSBORN: Not too much.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No.

ROBERT OSBORN: Let's see not even Hitler, who I knew that I just loathed, this man as I said, I heard him speak and it was terrifying. I had made some rather grandiose cartoons about England being attacked and brought down, all these kind of things, but not very good, and they were still drawn in the French Beaux-Arts kind of nonsense, but the thing is as the war got closer and closer, oh and you'd raised 14 tons of tomatoes down here and canned them with local people and set them in England, so getting involved this much down on Mrs. Scoville's property down there. [00:06:22] Finally, let's see, I'd tried to enlist in the Canadian Air Force even though I was quite old, and they told me that I could be a batboy, that means that at my age, I was about 40 or so, that I could take care of an aviator, a younger aviator, who would go out there and smash things up, and I said no that was silly. I guess it was after that, that I then came back and we put together 14 tons of tomatoes, just local people around here, to help England. I had gone up to Fort Devens, I think the summer before, in '39, to Camp Devens, just to train for one month. There were a bunch of businessmen or just people went up there and trained, and this is the last time I was in really fine shape I suppose, but you can see that now you're getting involved against this Nazi thing. I'd seen Mussolini and that whole business out there in North Africa and you knew you disliked them. Oh at one point, I forgot to say that I'd gone down, tried to enlist to fight Franco and again, now this was down in New York. I went to the Spanish Council and they asked about my medical history and I honestly told them about my ulcer, there are two great scars here, one at that time I guess, and they said no, you actually would just be in more trouble for you to worry about there. I told him I was a good shot, imagine? [00:08:00] But all the time this was rather frustrating I'm sure, that you couldn't do anything. Finally, Pearl Harbor just took all the pressure off. Let's see, I think two days later I went down to New York to try and enlist in the navy, I didn't know you can be an officer, and I was just willing to go in and just do the job and they said no you can't enlist here, you come from Connecticut, you have to go back to New Haven, New Haven said no, you have to go to your local post office down here, imagine?

PAUL CUMMINGS: After all that traveling.

ROBERT OSBORN: They said no and at this point the Agar brothers, who happened to live right across from Mrs. Scoville's, down the road here about a mile, Herbert and Bill, I guess it was Bill said Herbert had been working hard, in a really sophisticated way, or trying to get America to be fighting the Nazis. Bill said that he knew a naval aviator from World War I, I believe, down in Washington, and he gave me a letter and he said take those books, notice this, and I walk in there and there was a marvelous man. He was very bright in that he looked through these and instead of saying no, he at once sent me to a Luis de Florez, who was a terribly bright man, he was a civilian, back into the navy, and then Luis sent me to a thing called training literature. These men were captains and they were anything but stuffy I can tell you, and there was a fellow, I guess he was a lieutenant or probably commander, Arthur Doyle, and he just jumped, imagine, at these cartoon books, but because I'm sure he'd seen, in the RAF, that they were using cartoons for training, and even though with this ulcer history, he said oh we can waive that, and I said I would gladly waive any—[00:10:09]—I was so anxious to get into it, that I said I'll waive any benefits, anything, I'll take full responsibility for this stomach problem. I was sent out to Floyd Bennett Field and oh, there was a terrible officer out there that said, "What is this miracle that you're going to

work?" Really. I could have punched him in the nose, what a horrible statement, because you could see there was sort of pressure being pushed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Somewhere, yeah.

ROBERT OSBORN: Going on, yeah. And then I waited about a month and sent Arty Doyle pictures of me cooling my heels, but you were also having such a good time cartooning and here you were at ease and you could do it well, and every one came off, the ideas were just flowing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But this is already the style and everything.

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes, the style was pretty good. I'm amazed, I don't like to look at those particular drawings. Some I like very much to look at a little bit later, but imagine, after all this struggle in having to work as though you were paddling up Niagara Falls, the Falls, suddenly here you were, sailing along in this canoe and you could hardly make a mis-move. I got down to Brooks Brothers, bought a whole set of uniforms, really handsome ones, and Wellington boots, I saw in the regulations, you could wear short black boots, which I thought were better looking than some of them. So, I got down there and at once, let's see, we devised his character called Dilbert. Captain Radford was sitting there, everything was in such disarray—if you don't want too much of this just say so.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, I'm just curious about how the characters came about, something about the procedure. [00:12:02]

ROBERT OSBORN: Okay, mind you everything in such disarray that Captain Radford, later head or chief of staff or something, a really wretched man. You had a board, you didn't happen to have a chair, you just had a board across and the drawers pulled out, and I guess it was the very first afternoon, Admiral King, who was head of the whole navy department, I believe, called down to Arthur Doyle and said, "Have you got anybody that could color a map," and Arthur said, "Why sure, we've got a man here," and so he said go upstairs. Here in the main room, where they were doing all their planning, was a map as big as that, and they had a box of Crayola crayons, literally, and he said, "Now I want every—" oh, he was a terrible, dour man, that I want every country colored a different color and when you get over here, then you go back to the original, do the same thing, so that when I look at a country I'll know this is a different country. Well I started in this after lunch and I finally got downstairs and I said, "Arty, look, I didn't come in." Imagine. I was saluting with my left hand, like this, I saluted.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You didn't have basic training or anything.

ROBERT OSBORN: No, just this from up there, none at all, except that thing up there at Fort Devens. There was men up at Fort Devens that said out of 32, they said they wanted Osborn to be the corporal of the company and here are all these high powered businessmen, it really was marvelous, sort of you know, just the support of your ego, because if you will read back through all this, you'll see that there's a rather wavering, reading Jung, all this kind of thing, writing out all my dreams until I could write six pages of dreams in a morning at least, but trying to get Osborn in shape is really what it was, and it meant that this other thing wasn't working and this perhaps, the whole interior was more important and all of that. [00:14:02] Well, to get down there and tell Arty that I hadn't come in the navy to color a map and he said well, you just hang out, I guess you go back up there this afternoon and we'll get a seaman to do it from then on. But, with the same Arthur Doyle, a marvelous Irishman, we sat down and did a character called Pilot Officer Prune in RAF, and he said let's work out something like this, and so I sat down, literally in the morning, and drew a character, but again, because you drew well, or you felt what the stupid man is like, and we must underline this, that I do have this ability to simply feel a thing like that and then to be able to get it into lines. Well, presently I have this character called Dilbert, and Doyle said why don't we call him—he said you know to make a mistake is called to pull a dilly and he said why don't we—but he had another name beside Dilbert, but with planning, it just naturally went right down to Dilbert like this. Then, I must have made in all, some—of all the sketches and everything else, and finished work, and I was doing posters, about 10-by-14, some of them had seven color overlays, and I was making all the overlays down in the basement of the navy department and they were printing them, and there was no question of money, and I designed boxes with perforated holes, so again, I had learned this down at Hotchkiss, so the thing was changing, it wasn't just put out there and left, so that these officers were having to change these things all the time. [00:16:02] But I figured out, when the whole thing was over, that during that time, during the four and a half or so years in the navy, that I probably made literally 30,000 different sketches or finished drawings or whatever and consequently, as Herbert Bayer's wife once said to me, she said, "You know, you came out of the navy just so they had trained you, really trained you to draw." Because I could practically draw a perfect circle with my eyes closed, when that was all over.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because you had to draw equipment and people, and everything.

ROBERT OSBORN: Oh yes, that's how I made a lot of sketches, of equipment, and again, I had this ability to take an airplane and pretty soon, I was making the airplane, feeling sorry for the airplanist, she was just being abused

by this terrible careless man, and airplanes begging on their knees, but the face worked. Not Art Zebeshev [ph] or whatever his name is, which I loathe. These, somehow they were linear enough and some of them were pretty good drawings.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you work from though, did you look at some things?

ROBERT OSBORN: Oh, I went out, and then I started to move around. I told them, I have to—they had to teach me to fly, so I was sent down, right soon after the war started, I went down to Atlanta, Georgia, and then to Corpus Christi, I believe, these are air stations, and the Army, air stations, and these are all the first stages of training, a place called Chapel Hill. I would watch what was going on and again, old man modesty here, I do have a knack for looking at what is going on and getting very rapidly, to what the important thing is. Now this is just, this isn't a trained thing, and then you would ask these people if this is true, what about this, and they would tell you. [00:18:07] I'd make sketches, then, very often, once I came back to this little tiny house down the road here and just drew. I said it's more efficient if I'm at my drawing table producing these things. Some of those sets, one against submarines, and I had to go out into the Atlantic to figure out what life on a submarine was like, and I was scared to death, may I say, five hundred feet under water, but this was to show aviators who were fighting German submarines what all the problems were, but all being done in cartoons. Some of the ideas were absolutely wild, I mean no magazine would ever—oh, they have Dilbert hanging in the air and they're testing him and all this and nothing is going on, but again, the good thing was that we were getting people to look at the messages that we wanted and while we're on this, since the war, I've drawn a thing called Grampaw Pettibone, which was invented by the idea of drawing this old aviator, just you give the accident, tell why it was caused, and then this old aviator, and they've had seven of them since the war, and I've drawn to these seven then, once a month, and he makes some very pungent remark about the thing and apparently, this has the highest readership of anything that's put out in the Navy, but it's again, it's purely because—well, in naval aviation, I don't know about the other branches, but purely again, because you actually are getting at one, the problem, or the feeling, or then finding some means to transpose this normally into a slightly comic thing of either the plane saying oh not again, but sometimes also there's terrible drawings with death riding on the tail, and this Posada practically, stuff. [00:20:14]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Now, were you given a list of problems?

ROBERT OSBORN: No. I went out and found out again, just by going around and talking and asking, there's some that are terribly obvious, but then, well I'd go out on the Pacific, on a carrier, and come back with maybe as many as 400—really, problems that could become very serious if anybody makes a mis-move, and then I'd show them to a nice officer down there in Washington when I'd get back, his name was Minn Miller. He finally went to Hoekstra University, I think he's out there now in some capacity, but he was marvelous in that he just was beckoning you on all the time and there was no saying do this, do that, and always full of encouragement. Incidentally, in the same office, under this man, Stiken, sat next to me all during the war, his desk was right on my right, thank heavens. We used to talk about Rodin [inaudible].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh yes.

ROBERT OSBORN: However, the whole killing thing, the business of killing Japanese wasn't as horrifying. The Vietnam War was absolutely repulsive, but here were the Japanese and the Chinese and all this kind of thing, it would be interesting if we had gotten into a battle with the Russians, what I would have thought then, with Tolstoy, who has always been this—anyway, you were getting these things out and they were succeeding in teaching. [00:22:02] Of course they were giving you these medals, and oh, horrible, after one tour out in the Pacific, on the USS *Essex*, and the ulcers were beginning to—I suppose they're ulcers, limburger cheese, complete perforation, limburger cheese. My cabin was under the waterline, there were Japanese submarines out there. I'd married Elodie, who had come in to see Stiken, and I knew at once that that was the woman right there, no question, and we'd gotten married. We spent our honeymoon down Paul Mellon's place in Upperville, thanks to his first wife, and I'd had to leave her to go out there and this again, was beginning to tell on me and when I finally got back and came up 57th Street in New York, where Elodie was, she said I was absolutely delirious from the lack of moisture and all this, and they got me out to St. Albans Hospital, some doctors friends in New York, and I said well you just give me about a week to rest up because it always goes away when I rest, and the x-ray man, after a week, just took one look at this barium again, and haven't they operated on you yet? Again, you know, these moments of obvious truth, and so I just gave up until a nice captain, career, Ferguson, whom I kept up a friendship after the war, was marvelous, he must have been a superb surgeon. For six hours he labored, undoing the whole—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh goodness.

ROBERT OSBORN: Lesions, adhesions.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Redoing it.

ROBERT OSBORN: Redoing it. It's just worked beautifully since and a martini at dinner, no problem. [00:24:03] But now we're getting to the end of the war and incidentally—

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did this do for you in the term, in terms that you know—you've really kind of discovered your style and something to do, and a place to go and obviously it was everywhere you went, I mean you must have seen your drawings in booklets and posters, I mean everywhere you went.

ROBERT OSBORN: You mean during the war?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. What kind of terms of your own—

ROBERT OSBORN: Not as absolutely everywhere, because I was rather directing where all these things would go, the stations, but getting them printed in real volumes, it was marvelous, you know, that you could get them sent out. We as civilians would have a terrible time doing what was able to, a seven overlay drawing of a swamp.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But I mean in terms of your own kind of rewards and fulfillment.

ROBERT OSBORN: I'm afraid just that you felt you were doing a decent job. I knew I was doing a decent job and working very hard, drawing from two o'clock in the morning, just night after night, getting these things out, but also imagine, being able to draw. Here, finally admitting, you see, that I was a drawer, I called myself, a drawer, a drawer rather than a cartoonist, because I always, when I'm drawing, I'm always thinking of it as a drawing, much more so than as a cartoon.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you mean?

ROBERT OSBORN: Well let's see, Jules Feiffer, I think of those two faces and marvelous, a marvelous observation that he's putting in, mostly with words, but that those actually are just cartoons, the two faces that are facing one another. Let's see, I could go and get you some books.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [00:26:01] No, but I'm just curious about how you draw, what the line does, and defining, you know the spaces.

ROBERT OSBORN: How it flows, yes so what lines I can get along without, I think this has been my real preoccupation, say in the last 10 years or so.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Cleaning out the lines.

ROBERT OSBORN: Well you would love to get it down to, as I said, as I lie dying, wouldn't it be great if you could make one line and people say oh, marvelous.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Minimal art. [Laughs.]

ROBERT OSBORN: No, but expressive, so that it's expressive, but also just to get rid of all the extra, the unnecessary lines, and it's of course been marvelous to watch Matisse doing this, cutting out those great colors at the end and really getting it down to fewer and fewer things, if you went back to his early work. I think during the war, you just were pleased to be given this job and to be able to do it, and I thought I was doing it better than most people, oh modest Osborn, but when I looked at the army drawings from the same area, it just found them abysmal and also really cheap and vulgar, and I don't think mine were and again, I'm sure way, way at the back is France. Now let's see, did we tell about Stiken sitting there and he doing this marvelous job in photography and Elodie came in to see him. Imagine during the war, the Museum of Modern Art had to be raking in a killing, because every time you got into Chicago or anyplace like this, I'd always go out and look at that Cézanne or anything purely as respite from this hideous thing that I'm sure your unconscious must have been perfectly aware, that you're killing other human beings and at least for a few years now, we seem to have this quiet thing, so you can sit here and review American policy, and there would be actually shooting, these other poor little tiny souls. [00:28:19] Go ahead.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who knows where the CIA or somebody is these days [laughs]? Have you kept up a relationship with the navy after?

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes indeed. Let's see, they gave me some distinguished service medal, the head of the navy pinned it on me, and I passed him later in Chartres Cathedral and I said, "How do you do sir?" [They laugh.] You could see his mind going through all this—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where have I seen that face?

ROBERT OSBORN: Just a vagueness, because we'd spent about a half a day together but it was marvelous. Anyway that and they were so appreciative of what I'd done, and this of course makes it that you end on this

pleasant relationship, but this thing that runs in *Naval Aviation News*, it's just a page, I make three drawings a month for it, again, still on flight problems, and I said I wouldn't draw anything whatsoever to do with Vietnam, I said you can just let me go right now. This, I think is debatable, but I happen to believe this, I don't hate the Russians, in fact I like them, but as long as the United States and Russia, like two little small boys, keep confronting one another, I think it would be rather stupid to finally say we scrap our navy, because I know enough from Harrison Salisbury, about these top three hundred guys in the Russian army, navy, everything else, that they just think those idiotic Americans letting their guard down. [00:30:06]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ROBERT OSBORN: I find it so lamentable, may I say, the amount of money that is poured into this nonsense between these powers, because they can't resolve within themselves, they can't require any generosity toward other human beings, that this I think is the real tragedy of the latter part of my life, that in the number of billions that have gone into this nonsense, which again as an adult man, I think you have to face and say okay. They can say we're doing it, but then you go and try to sit down, the SALT talks, and I know Pete Scoville very well, and we'd talk about it a lot, that it's just nonsense, the small amount that they give away, and rather meaningless that they mouth all these things and yet, don't really make a genuine effort at each meeting to say all right, if they could, they could get rid of this and that and that, and finally, they might be spending as little as $26 billion a year, and on both sides. This really just boggles the mind, to think that adults are out there doing this.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's the same old who's got the most marbles.

ROBERT OSBORN: Yeah, but it's even—I wish it was marbles up in the head, okay. See but the Navy thing has gone on and as I say, seven different men have written that page. This afternoon I have three ideas and they sent me two stories, idiotic stories, these aviators, one doing a barrel role over a lake and in he goes, with a plane that costs probably around $890,000, and his wife or his mother or somebody is left with this terrible thing. [00:32:07] So, you might make a really horrid drawing about that boob out there doing this.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They still keep doing those things.

ROBERT OSBORN: Oh you bet, just endless, and it's getting more and more expensive.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about those supersonic, $12 million planes?

ROBERT OSBORN: Oh, it's going to be exactly almost the same.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The same kind of—

ROBERT OSBORN: Well, something, a man taking off and something fails and that's it, $12 million, just blacked out, just like that. Well, you know it's been an interesting thing with the navy, because we haven't touched on—maybe we'd better go on with the fact that getting out of the navy, then, well friends of Russell Lynes at *Harper's*, I think he was the first man, I think he asked Elodie, who was at the Museum of Modern Art, saying would your husband be willing to draw for us when he gets out, and they had seen him. Just the way when I was drawing at Yale, Harold Ross used to write, from the *New Yorker*, came up to me as an undergraduate, saying he'd obviously seen the drawings, he liked them, and then Harold would write these sometimes three typewritten pages, single spaced, suggesting ideas, and then I would send down the drawings and then he'd write back again, two typewritten pages saying no this isn't quite right, this, this and this. I can see now, that he's trying to groom me and obviously, again, I should have been bright enough about this to see that I'm not, that isn't the way I draw. Actually, I suppose I'd draw much closer to Posada's approach, I hadn't thought of this before, which is rather abstracting of things, the horror of it, the terrible humor of it. [00:34:02] Incidentally, when I got out of the navy and Saul Steinberg, Eleanor Roosevelt had gotten him into this unit that we worked in, Saul very sweetly took me around to the *New Yorker*, and I think the man's name was Garrity [ph] and Robert Lewis Taylor had been in our unit there and I guess we had lunch with Garrity, and he said, "Now all you have to do is to develop one area." They didn't say Charles Adams or this new man who was coming along called Booth, but you see then, when they put the magazine together and they can count on this, it probably makes it much easier.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, it's contrasting.

ROBERT OSBORN: Yeah, that's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Variety.

ROBERT OSBORN: By now, you see I'm getting a little bit brighter. I said, "Well, I honestly think that is wrong to do, that you ought to be just taking anything," I said that I think it's very diminishing for a man. Charlie Adams would have been a lot better if he had been allowed to just range over architecture, anything you wanted to

draw. You used to make marvelous drawings.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about somebody like Thurber?

ROBERT OSBORN: We knew Thurber towards the end of his life and what a marvelous man, lived just down about 30 miles, 20 miles down the road, and we used to spend long evenings with him and he was just glorious. I'm so pleased to have known that man and really, what a genius, what he was able to bring together, a lot of past feelings, his drawn line, all of this, plus the humor and let's see, *The Last Flower*, I find that one splendid, really splendid books, but again, this man, a true genius and if he'd just done nothing but writing, we would have thought of him as not quite Joyce-ian but pretty good, in an American realm very good. [00:36:15]

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's fascinating, in the last two or three years, people have been seriously collecting Thurber's books, which has never happened before.

ROBERT OSBORN: Really?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh yes. I mean you get now, his—I get a lot of book lists and I noticed that certain Thurber books are $30, $40, $50, and they all used to be $3.50.

ROBERT OSBORN: That's amazing, there's a whole pile of them down there and as I say, *The Last Flower*, again, the synthesizing that that man succeeded with in that particular book.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's a classic book—

ROBERT OSBORN: It's a great series of ideas and a marvelous light touch. Incidentally, I don't have the light touch, as Russell Lynes said, it's as though you get out there with a damn sledgehammer, it really is true.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You've got a double-barrel 10 gauge.

ROBERT OSBORN: Oh, that's a riot, practically, on this swivel mound, the boat goes backward when you shoot it off, but you know this is terrible, and Elodie speaks of this, I assume this is all pertinent. Even a book about getting people to stop smoking called *Dying to Smoke*, good heavens, I go over it four different times, practically the same thing, and Scoville down the road here, I'm like a little dog with a cloth, you know, and he's just going, and just worrying this thing, but instead of this marvelous light touch that say, Saul Steinberg would have, really you're getting in there, the ones on the atomic and hydrogen bomb.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did all the books start?

ROBERT OSBORN: How did what? [00:38:01]

PAUL CUMMINGS: The books begin, I mean you did *The War is No Damn Good*.

ROBERT OSBORN: Well let's see, I did that just, that was done right after I was—I think that I had probably gotten out of the navy and we were living, Elodie and I living on 57th Street, 437 57th Street, and I just sat there, I think it was there, no by Jove it wasn't, it was 63rd Street. I just sat there all day just drawing these things one after another and the interesting thing in that book was somehow transposing them all into helmets, just so that I would abstract the thing just enough that two or three places, that it rather breaks down into a bit more realistic thing, but I'm sure this is purely to get this whole war thing out. The atomic bomb thing, I'm rather pleased that within two weeks of Hiroshima, I'd done about four drawings against that wretched thing and again, this fairly perceptive feeling that you knew right off the bat, that as soon as you—I had talked to one man who had come back from there, that all mankind was in deep trouble with this force loose, and so again, quite a lot younger, which just probably made 20 or 30 drawings and finally, you get two or three out of that or get it distilled down, yeah distilled I think is the word.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you work on an idea in a series of drawings or is kind of each drawing—

ROBERT OSBORN: No, no, I tend to, and it's interesting. For instance, there's a whole series, well take that one, called the *Assassins*, this is after John Kennedy was shot, and I was so horrified, that you'd point your finger at me and I would cry for about three months, not pointing at the revolver, just if this thing came up, I would just absolutely burst into tears. [00:40:11] I'm sure that we were all hanging so, on this promise, I'm not sure that it was there, but we were hanging on it at the time and suddenly, to have it removed and that's the first time that kind of hideous man calculating, or whoever is calculating, and putting the bullet right through the head and all this kind of thing, and this was so shaking an experience to me, I couldn't do anything, I couldn't draw, I couldn't do anything, and then slowly I began to do a set, just called the Assassins and they're all—I think there must have been about 152 of them, and probably about four or five that seemed to express the terrible horror of this thing. Okay there's that, but then around the corner there, there's a matador, a skeleton dressed, just with a matador's hat on, and probably 200 of those were done, and I'm sure, when I turn 50, suddenly the idea that life

was not endless, but then the skeleton of course is abstract enough, just the outline, just the great black masses, so that you turned those out. I was turning out maybe 10 of those at night, up there in the studio and working very often until two o'clock. Elodie would be in New York, working on movies or something, and I'd be up there and really, just pouring it out though, I don't do this anymore, I find it's far too tiring or the next day it's kind of blown as a result, so turn them out. I'm just drawing small airplanes. Actually right now, I'm drawing a series of sort of the development of the airplane and making pictures that I like, but going from a marvelous, fragile things that you could really, birdlike, you could see through their wings, to these ghastly tonnage things that are just fire, by the thrust of those engines, are just fire, pieces of lead really, fired through the skies, and I'm just doing this whole series [00:42:19] and nothing may come of it at all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: More like cannon shells—

ROBERT OSBORN: They really are. Thrust was coming out of the back end of the shell.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ROBERT OSBORN: However, it's been mighty interesting, to have gone from the Wright Brothers, to getting on that 747, the lumbering monster that actually—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Isn't that a terrible airplane?

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I can't stand those planes. What kind of work schedule do you follow, has it changed a great deal?

ROBERT OSBORN: Well it has, it has tended to change, and we discussed this, when I get onto the thing from *Harper's*, in which slowly, you began to be known and I always used to sign them "R. Osborn," I believe, and then pretty soon finally, you were just signing them "Osborn," but the telephone was ringing steadily and let's see, the first time *LIFE* magazine, the large *LIFE*, used the drawing that I made of a man with a hangover, who had a nail go right through his head like this. I don't think he even had an icepack on his head, yes I guess he did. Sandy [Alexander] Calder, once made me a nail that you could hook right on, it was a horrible thing, Sandy brought it out there. Anyway, you made that drawing and then pretty soon you're illustrating in *LIFE* and then *Look* magazine would ask you for something, and this thing was slowly spreading out. [00:44:00] I did a picture of Bill Buckley in *Esquire*, but you were having a good time and it wasn't really extending you very much. Occasionally, for instance during the summer I'd be drawing a landscape. Well, one summer, we were up visiting Wilder Hobson and Verna Hobson, and about 10:00 at night I was out drawing a moonlit landscape, with good pencil on good French Arches paper, and this thing absolutely happened, it was a brand new rhythm, I never had done it before and it's been present ever since, and it would happen like that. That I find a developing step, there haven't been an endless number of those. Another thing that on the whole I really enjoyed drawing, though it's ghastly, you know that you can get up there and earn a very decent living at one stage. I won't tell you what it was, but it was enough so that we had the sense to sort of put it away. Well I don't know, we put it into the stock market and various bonds and things, which I think it would be great you know, if it all just gently vanished away and we ended up, you know, right on flat ground, Elodie and I, I think we could have a perfectly good time anyway, but I think it would be marvelous to go on again, I won't tell you what the figure was but it was quite high at one stage, and then to have it sort of volplane back and finally, as you die, you come in there, this crash, two-point landing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In your busy, busy years, did you have an agent?

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes, a horrible one, I guess I better say horrible because let's see, Herbert Bayer, Joella Bayer, at the end of the war, they were both in New York, she said, "May I be your agent?" I said sure, and she said, "Here you had this career, just there on a platter." [00:46:00] The terrible thing is, the first job she got me, the people wanted a drawing and they said they wanted it to be like a Peter Arno and darn, here we are right back, you see? Instead, why again, I should have said—but I didn't have sort of $1,000 and in those days, Elodie and I didn't—Elodie was earning $7,200 I guess, and she was earning more than I when I got out of the navy, and so you undertake this drawing, just perfectly awful. Well that taught me quite a lesson, just that one, but then she went on for about two years and they moved out to Aspen and darned if Marian Willard, she had a husband who was then an art director, called Daniel Rhodes Johnson from down south, and this was just—he, I'm sure never sensed this, this is one of the most unpleasant relationships. He would phone and again, lots of money was made and a decent amount by him, and there's rather, sort of an inertia. Here these jobs are coming in and I think I should have told him way earlier, but then Marian Willard, whom we like as a friend, seeing her this way, that you don't want to say, "We don't want your husband around." But I tell you it was just pure agony, to listen to this southern man give you all this nonsense. I don't know, Boyers [ph] like him now, I saw him at dinner the other night. I wrote Connie and I'm cruel enough to just say gosh, "Marian, fine, but that man?" Oh, and then he finally just ceased being an art director and now is probably head of the Art Dealers Association or something.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He sits in the gallery sometimes. [00:48:02]

ROBERT OSBORN: Does he go to the gallery? I don't know it's terrible to have gotten into this and always, oh the excused, it's almost too awful to talk about it, it's southern molasses.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm again, still interested in the books that you've done what, quite a number of now, every couple of years you seem to pop up with a new one.

ROBERT OSBORN: Well, not too many. Incidentally—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, one, two , three, four, five—

ROBERT OSBORN: If we finished on the whole—the drawing for the various magazines and I suppose out of those, slowly come, and there were a lot. There were times when you know, the jobs are just piled up there and I was probably drawing too much. I think I'm having much more fun drawing now and every once in a while I get a drawing that I'm really terribly proud of. Anyway, you were doing those and then pretty soon some publisher, let's take John Keats, the *Insolent Chariots*, it was about automobiles, and they would send up a text. You didn't get paid very much for drawing those books of other authors, and yet I had a good time and a fellow called Ferry, whose father used to be head of Packard Motor Company I believe, and was out there with Robert Hutchins, he said that two of those books about automobiles really affected the people out in Detroit. I never sensed this, that what you were saying and what John Keats was saying, or there's been another one recently, but I think it was the John Keats, and the drawing of the fact that they don't really know what they're doing about the body of a car, they're just changing it. I made it like a cancer cell, this outline of the thing, but he said that—and kidding them about all the chrome and the nonsense, the really not knowing. [00:50:16] He said that there's designers out there who it really made them very uneasy, and they knew about this book apparently.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh sure.

ROBERT OSBORN: Well, you do that and then something else would come along, and I suppose that slowly, the social concern of—and Marian Mullis would write a set of poems, I guess for Ascoli's magazine down there, the *Reporter*, I believe they appeared in. Those are put together, Braziler [ph] gets the two of us together, and that of course was terribly nice and he did this, and I had a fine time making those drawings, there are about four drawings in there that I really am terribly proud of *Dulles on the Brink*, you look at it and it's a pretty simple line and yet I think says it, and uncle Sam sitting on his fat behind.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I notice you did a cover for *New Republic*, of Richard Nixon once, years ago.

ROBERT OSBORN: It wasn't for the *New Republic*. The best one was for *Harper's*.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's a long time ago.

ROBERT OSBORN: Okay, that was, I think for *Harper's*, and Aline Saarinen said that it's probably the best drawing I ever made. I don't think so but anyway, the cover, it was just this outline of Nixon's head and the eyebrows were there but that was all. There wasn't another feature, there wasn't an ear, there was a little bit of hair coming down in sort of three waves, and you couldn't miss it, even in those days, that it was Richard Nixon, this real rascal. Imagine that man—let's see, let me dwell just for a moment, so the venom won't pile up. Imagine that man getting up in these last years or so, and saying that he didn't know anything about it when actually he knew. [00:52:03] A man lying like that—I just gave a drawing to the American Civil Liberties Union, a sale that's just called, *The News Tightens for Those Who Lie*, and it's Nixon being—oh, it's a big thing, it's as big as that, and here's this man just standing, this black figure, and incidentally somehow he's going like this, but his head is oh, this terrible red, a flash of red, and his head is just really being lifted off his body. Here again, you know, you make that drawing, I'm sure it was almost after the disclosure, but it's really a horrible drawing and the only reason I gave it to the ACLU, because somebody might feel as horribly about him as I do, so.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I'm sure there's more.

ROBERT OSBORN: And this was just to raise money for it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you always work in a large size or do you scale change things?

ROBERT OSBORN: No. Let's see, and this was nice you know, as you made—oh, and I must speak of Will Burton at *Fortune*, and Leo Lionni. Here were two art directors and they would call up, and Will Burton, well both of those men, Will was so intelligent about calling forth any drawings, and those drawings, they were only about oh, 10-by-14 maybe, and they were done with good French pencils, and then watercolor and good Windsor Newton that doesn't fade quite so badly, and then you would have such fun. I drew lots of jobs, say, for Will Burton, he expects to use six drawings and I probably send him 46, fully worked out things, but I've had a good time doing

them. Also, then I know that he's really gotten a decent presentation, but then he would always be intelligent about the ones he chose and the way they were placed on the page, and the same thing was true of Leo Lionni, who sent me once, out of the Missouri Basin, I was skeptical of doing it, it was on the whole damming of rivers out there, and I came back with something. [00:54:09] I was utterly exhausted and used to wire him, and he'd send back joking wires that made me go right up through the ceiling, but at the end—

PAUL CUMMINGS: He knew how to keep it going.

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes it was amazing. I probably did something like 120 drawings of landscapes and dams and people and faces and all that, and I can see now, I think that was one of the really good jobs I did. Incidentally, the money was coming out of jobs like that, which when you were going well and you weren't just doing advertising, which incidentally produced the largest sums, I mean half a day, $1,000 just like that, but the jobs that were fun were the ones that produced a decent amount, well they paid $1,500 for a job, but that you had fun making the drawings. Very often, I would learn from making the drawings, something would take place, of which I discovered a quality of line or a quality of color, and then you were also left free to draw for the *New Republic*, and it had practically no money at all, and you could do them eight pages of drawings on Eisenhower, something of the sort and get paid $150. So notice that the balancing of all these things, and I could have been absolutely pure, but I suppose that the whole experience was the painting it taught me, that it was silly to not go up there and really, in a rather rough and tumble way turn out these things, so that I was getting expressed out of me, so that at least what I wanted to express was getting done, plus doing these others. I don't think I could have gone up there and spent my whole life drawing things like these airplanes I'm doing now, because I think pretty soon it will get rather la-di-da, and there would be the problem of Gil Harrison would call up and say all right we've got there, now what can you do for it? [00:56:20] Sometimes I'd make good drawings and very often, I did a cover of John Kennedy that was appalling, it was so bad, I just missed it, but Gil was satisfied. Oh, and I did one of Teddy Kennedy that I thought was a brilliant drawing and Gil thought it was brilliant, this *New Republic*, but the two other editors couldn't tell who it was, so that got scotched. You get the feeling of my going up there to the studio, maybe we can just go up and peek in, this Collyer brothers place up there, but to sit down at that drawing board, once you've gotten going, either you've swum in the morning or I'd go out and job, really to get the circulation going, and then you go up there and there's this kind of nervous necessity begins, and you just turn these things out and very often, you'll go to four o'clock in the afternoon. Between four and five very often, the very best drawings come forth, or the best ideas, or I can lie there in bed in the morning, two o'clock in the morning, and just think of ideas just like that, like Jules Feiffer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you make notes?

ROBERT OSBORN: Sometimes I do, because once I thought of what I thought at two o'clock in the morning was a brilliant idea and by Jove, I got up in the morning and I couldn't, for the life of me, recover. I thought, "Oh, that's a really brilliant solution," and I thought it was so brilliant that I wouldn't have any trouble, and I got up and nothing, I never could recover, and it probably wasn't all that brilliant either. [00:58:07]

PAUL CUMMINGS: I wanted to ask you about this house. How did you pick this part of the country, to come and live here?

ROBERT OSBORN: Oh that's easy, because I taught down at Hotchkiss, I knew the country was beautiful. As you come out from New York, when you get to say, Sharon, and then over here to Salisbury, you can see the scale of the land is really marvelous. It begins to take on a nobility. Holy smokes, it's a wasp.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT OSBORN: Let's see, how we got to be here. The scale of these, and I do find them beautiful and the studio looks out on them, and Elodie actually selected the site, again I find this is such nice country and the deer come by, and partridge, and lots of geese now, and all of that I find just terribly restoring really, I'm not that much of a city boy, having come from Oshkosh, and sweet Elodie came out here, I think now that she probably feels okay, she has a beautiful rock garden and all that, she has adjusted to it, and the Film Society. It's really, I find it extraordinary, a mode of life. Goodness, when I think of Jules Feiffer and yet Jules wouldn't want it any other way I'm sure, he's a good city boy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He's in love with the chaos down there.

ROBERT OSBORN: That's right, but I wouldn't last two weeks with that kind of thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you find the architect?

ROBERT OSBORN: Ed Barnes, Edward Larrabee Barnes married to an absolutely superb woman named Mary Barnes, a really rare woman, I think, next—after Elodie, I find her just pleasant to be with and a really remarkable woman, she worked at the Museum of Modern Art at the same time that Elodie did and they were

good friends and I think they were very respectful of one another, it's nice to watch the two of them. [01:00:20] She married Ed Barnes, this is right during the war I think, yes the middle of the war. He was working on a submarine design out in San Francisco and that was all over. He'd gone to Harvard, Gropius/Breuer, he started out as an architect. I told you that we had asked Mies to build this building, which we knew him down at Curt Valentin's, and of course it would have been the utter horror, probably been the end of this marriage after 30 years. Anyway, Mies turned us down and let's see, we actually looked at Breuer, and it's very strange, because I'm very fond of both of those people. And [Marcel] Lajos Breuer, I think was about as lucid a man to talk to as I've known. His explanation of an idea is so beautiful and it's such a pleasure to hear him produce it. Anyway, right at that period, he built that house in the Museum of Modern Art's garden, and it had swags going up for railings and all this and it's very funny and marvelous buildings, and you see them all the time and all this. I just simply couldn't see that. Now let's see, when we asked Mies to do the thing and he came back and said, "No, you don't have enough money." We had $33,000 just sitting there in the checking account, which we had earned and saved, and I said, "Come on now Mies, you want to"—I didn't say it as casually as that, in great, heavy German. [01:02:08] I said that out in Oshkosh, Frank Lloyd Wright had built a house about a block and a half down the road from our house in Oshkosh, it was a little simple bungalow, probably about twice as big as this room that we're sitting in. I took Elodie out there once, to see my mother, and as we were driving up the road, Elodie suddenly set the brakes on this lone car, I believe, and said, "What's that?" And I suddenly recall that that was Frank Lloyd Wright had built this small house and Seymour Hollister and I used to play around the foundation and all this, and I'm sure that Wright, probably in those days, you didn't have too much work. I suppose we were probably looking at Frank Lloyd Wright.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The houses there.

ROBERT OSBORN: Anyway, didn't convince Mies, and then Breuer, we weren't happy that moment about and so we went and saw some buildings of Ed Barnes, one he'd done for Reid, Whitelaw Reid I believe, a very large house, but the proportions are absolutely almost unfailing, not too daring but marvelous proportions, and so we asked him if he would do this and he undertook it and it all went terribly well, right to the bitter end, except when the water started coming down the drive and he said he'd have to rethink it, and so we got into a slight hassle for about $17, but now we're the very best of friends and we go out on swan tours with him to Greece, and I am very fond of both of them. Think of this house being built for $33,000, that doesn't count the end up there beyond the library, which we added, and the studio is something else. [01:04:01] Incidentally, we built the studio. He wanted to have it go up in a point.

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PAUL CUMMINGS: Okay, this is side four. You were talking about the additions in the studio, the roof.

ROBERT OSBORN: Let's see, the central part and the wall that goes around the house, I'm sure Ed, I think he was thinking of that Corbeau House down in the South of France, I believe it is, built right out in a vineyard, and that's about eight feet off the ground. I think he had, and in fact he told us this, that he thought of this house being raised off the ground, and he was rather disappointed when we got here and really in the front of it sits this low on the ground. Incidentally, a marvelous Italian stone mason, Mr. Brisali, who used to make his own wine, and by the end of the afternoon, he wasn't making the wall quite straight, but Pablo Brisali, '81, built all this stonework and it's really very nice and it's just what we wanted. Then, that and the two boys starting to grow up in that playroom down there, with a great big blackboard, incidentally, the whole wall was a blackboard and these two boys, where they would climb on chairs and benches and everything and make figures eight feet high with colored crayon and chalk, it was just glorious, to see the degree of pictorial creativity that I think these—I think all young children have this but here it was, just demonstrated every day, and then you'd get out there with erasers, and I was photographing all these monsters and everything, going up. But then, without any problem at all, they'd fill it all with a landscape, a sea with fish underneath in different sizes. That was pretty big too, it must have been almost 10-by-10, that blackboard, and when they got larger, then we built that wing out there for them and turned that into kind of a library and it's where Elodie works, where she has a decent desk. [00:02:07]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Great.

ROBERT OSBORN: Incidentally, what do you do about the books are really causing us a problem here, you keep acquiring them all the time and you hate to throw them out, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

ROBERT OSBORN: Finally, we built a store—Nicholas built a storeroom out behind the garage there and the ones that you don't think you're going to use, you just move out there, and the Roger Frye still sits there. It's pretty awful, the way they are flowing over.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They get to be a problem, books, yeah. You had some exhibitions at the famous Downtown

Gallery, with Edith.

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did they come about?

ROBERT OSBORN: Edith asked me if I would join her gallery and of course I was so honored. It was just out of the blue. I've forgotten now, whether it was through Ben Shahn maybe, but anyway she asked me, which was very touching, and of course I was very excited. I've forgotten whether we—I think we put on one first show and actually it sold very well, and then we put on another show and I believe maybe that was *Assassins*, just all of them out of this, that whole set, and of course this is after Kennedy, and that sold very well. However, they weren't terribly expensive, they were about five, $600 a drawing, as I recall, but it meant a decent amount coming in. I believe she took 25 percent, I don't think she took 33, or I guess she did take 33⅓ percent, but again, I was just pleased to have this outlet. [00:04:00] The next one, the next show, which was called Clowns and—it wasn't criminals, but I was combining Charlie Chaplin with Hitler, and all of these, I just had a whole set of these drawings, I thought I'd make a show. Brian O'Doherty gave that such a panic, he said this man has a long way to go in learning how to draw, he's practically back to a Reinhardt/MacDonald statement, because I didn't think that was true.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ROBERT OSBORN: I can show you, I could show you some drawings from even that show. Actually, it began to be arrogant, because some of those drawings that I make, I just simply know are very good drawings, I mean I can set them alongside lots of Frenchmen. I would hate to get it up alongside of Pisanello maybe, a first class Pisanello, but I just know that I draw well. Perhaps it's inventive or something, but at least it's a drawing. Well anyway, that was quite a shock, to have old Brian O'Doherty—actually, I went out to Ben Shahn's that week, with Leo Lionni, and I guess Nora, and I told Leo on the way out that I was just shaken, you know, to see a review printed in the *New York Times*. It's rather as if all your clothes were removed right there and there's a nude of Osborn, and it isn't very complimentary. I don't know, maybe some people, de Kooning, may just go sailing right on through, not the least bit upset and of course he's a strong man, he doesn't need to be upset, but for me this was quite a blow. And then I believe there was one other show after that and I suppose that you know, Edith was beginning to come apart and I don't think this is too mean to say but this development in her brain took place and she might well have died much earlier. [00:06:08] There was a kind of horrible quality merged in her character. She's always been good and tough, a slam, bang Odessa girl, which I rather liked but toward the end, I must say became very different.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's how I knew her, yes.

ROBERT OSBORN: Okay. It's too bad, because I don't think she'd had a very good start, but it was kind of awful, and she'd phone and say you had to have these four pictures down for some show and they had to be right down there, and never a moment of generosity or politeness, I suppose she was just incapable of it and yet, let us say it very clearly, I was deeply honored to be asked by that woman to join that gallery.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's a famous gallery, you know, for years and years.

ROBERT OSBORN: I don't know, I was at ease, you see, with the people that she had, Ben, Ben and she had a terrible time at the end, you know this, and I think he finally moved out and went to Kennedy or something. It's too bad because some of these things can be so pleasant to do and then others, it's a terrible, scratchy business and all the fun goes out of it. That's why I mentioned Will Burton and Leo Lionni at *Fortune*, and Charles Tudor at *LIFE*, and Alan Hurlburt at *Look Magazine*, Russell Lynes at *Harper's*. I hope I haven't forgotten the other decent souls, but it was always such a pleasure, there was never any sending it back or saying redo it, or something, it was always going up and working.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I wanted to ask you about Calder, who works well after that idea.

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have you known him for a long time?

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes. Elodie knew them both when she was at the museum. I had an interesting experience. When I was teaching at Hotchkiss, I went down to the Matisse Gallery and here was Sandy on the floor, I didn't know him at all, he was folding up a show he hadn't sold, just mind you must have been 1933, '34, he hadn't sold a single thing, a sweet man, was down there on his knees putting these things, mobiles, into newspapers, down on the street, it was either a Mormon, an open Mormon, or an open Packard, I never can remember which, I think it was a Mormon, and he was taking that whole show, just putting it down in there, probably even leaving these pieces down in the open car while he came up and wrapped up some more, taking them back up to

Roxbury. Slowly, let's see, after the war, I've forgotten, we'd go down there for lunch or ask them up here, we knew Mary Rower, and then we'd go to France and stop at the Sachet, and liked both the Davidsons and liked the kids. Incidentally, the boy, Willie Davidson, is going to come up here in about three or four days, on a bus from New York, and spend the whole day, because he wants to do cartooning and he wanted to talk to me. I told him that I'd love to spend—you know, really good fun and goodness, I must phone him for sure and tell him to bring samples of what he's done just to see. Isn't it fascinating? He's even thinking of going to the Art Students League, I think in relation to Sandy. Well anyway, you just found Sandy and Louisa just terribly sympathetic, and we used to go over there to dances. They lead this wonderful simple life, essentially simple, and no side to it whatsoever, and they're just fun to be with. [00:10:15] Louisa is a little gloomy now but Sandy, good heavens, it's really like Vesuvius, that at this late date in his life, still out or coming to these things. I said to him the other day, how marvelous it is that now, either over there, in Torr, I believe it's in Torr or down here in Waterbury, the old Segre, that these men now know how to put these things together, so you can practically take that small model in Segre down here, Sandy told me, has learned now, how to blow these things up. Sandy said he used to have to do all of the calculating and all that to get it up to 56 feet, a red flamingo, and now Segre did that flamingo, did all the enlarging for that, a small one, I guess a six and a half, six-foot model, up to, I thought it was 80 feet high and Sandy told me now, it's only about 56 feet. Incidentally, I think that's magnificent, the way those legs thrust up, and then that plate that sort of stops everything like that, and then another thrust goes off. It's just absolutely beautiful. Well let's see, all the humor, so an awful lot of kidding goes on, and letter writing and Louise is sweet. When she's in France, particularly during the whole Vietnam thing, we'd get letters very often from here, which I suppose all have to be given to you people, outpouring against the evil of that war. They really are such decent, very decent souls. [00:12:00] These things around here, let's see these that we bought. The one down there, the black and white one, this is down in Roxbury and I guess they were going back to Europe and Sandy said well—we were looking and there was another high one that we weren't certain about and Sandy said, "Well why don't you just take that home," I guess, and there was another one, he said, "Why don't you just take it home and try it," well of course we'd had it about six months and we could no more part with it, but the glorious thing was all those, they were, they were terribly inexpensive, and kind and giving us things, models of other things. [00:12:48] I'll tell you a funny story about that canvas over there. One day we were up at Sayerd's up in Cambridge, and I guess we were waiting for the Calders to appear from Europe and they came in and here in Sayerd's house was a beautiful long, small canvas, long, and Elodie said that she wanted it—this one has been very hard to somehow get things to work together. Just a moment.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT OSBORN: She said to Sandy, while we were there and the Sayerds,"Sandy, could you possibly make just a long design and I will sew it." I don't know what degree of point it was going to be and he said, "Why sew it? Why don't you just get a piece of canvas and I'll paint it." I said well I'd had some elaborate canvas which I'd had before World War II, so Elodie and I stretched that and we took it over here to Roxbury, and it was very funny because now you were into it, it's rather like going down into a maelstrom because what if it didn't work? [00:14:09] One day he'd call—so I got it in the car, went over, and I was so nervous about looking at it that I didn't even look at it in front of him and he said, "Aren't you going to look at the canvas?" So I looked at it and you can see it's very jolly, really it's a little facile maybe but actually it's in great fun and if you look at it from outdoors, it really does solve the whole—this whole wall. That one down there incidentally, that is being auctioned for Toby Moffett, we do not own that one, but Sandy sweetly gave us that for Toby Moffett, and they're going to raise prints from that picture. Norman Ives gave a poster which got sold for $50, Sandy's unsigned $25, and then you took chances on this, sort of $100 you get a chance on this, and there were some others, signed, $500, but they made something like $34,000. Toby Moffett's political fees had been covered by this one gift from Sandy, isn't that nice?

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic.

ROBERT OSBORN: To go into politics, and they did they the same thing for McGovern, Louise and Dolly Pearl [ph] said, just was always phoning in and saying give this person or that person one of these things. You never have seen him do those because it's really quite extraordinary, at Sachet, he'll go down and turn out five or six of those in the morning with no problem at all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He loves it.

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Great.

ROBERT OSBORN: It's been marvelous knowing those two people, it's been one of those sort of joys of life, that you were just granted the acquaintanceship with those people. [00:16:04] Let's see, the same goes for Arthur Miller, whom I suppose we got to know through the Calders, but just such fun; however, there must be a certain sympathy. Arthur and I kid a lot and a lot of joking, but I just like him very much as a man, and Inge, this

delightful, sensitive person.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I haven't seen her. I see him around once in a while, here and there.

ROBERT OSBORN: Let's see, she's really Austrian, a good photographer, her married her after Monroe. Of course she was out working while *Misfits* was being shot and I don't know, it's just an interesting family. Her mother comes over and they go over to Austria for Christmas, and they go out to Israel. I have really great respect for Arthur, I mean this man has been a thoughtful man, and we might say this, that knowing these various artists, like knowing Ben Shahn, Breuer, let's see here, I can't go into all of them, but to have known these various artists, it seems to me, has been a great joy, that we've spent time with them, rather than bankers. I mustn't be too rude about the bankers, but somehow, when I've gotten to them, there's no real exuberance about life, and these other people, you just find are steadily enriching.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Shahn certainly had exuberance.

ROBERT OSBORN: Who?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Shahn.

ROBERT OSBORN: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Ben Shahn.

ROBERT OSBORN: Absolutely. Good. Now, have you any other questions?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well. [00:18:00]

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT OSBORN: On building the studio, the first building was supposed to become very vertical, that's what Ed Barnes wanted, and I said, "Ed"—oh, it was going to go up something like 28 feet and be 16-by-16 feet, and I said, "It adds so much to my life, my hands have been cold, when I was living down in this little tiny house down the road that cost $2,000, selling two pictures for $500, a year." As I said, I was always cold and I would love to have the thing sort of low so the heat is really staying around my hands, and Ed was most unhappy about it, and Ed actually built quite a few buildings after that in which he set forth these principle as rather his own. Anyway, we put up this thing and it looked like a block house, Ed Barnes said so, "Well, we'll make it really like a block house, with wonderful old brick underneath, which is storage space, and then this room up above." I've forgotten, it's about 16-wide and 20-feet long. I said, "I'm sure that's enough, I just sit in a little corner over there, drawing," and Ben Shahn said, "Oh you're crazy," he said, "You'll have to enlarge that in no time at all," and sure enough, pretty soon, in particular when I started doing those larger pictures, which I wanted to walk back from, we had to put on a whole other addition and this little raised addition, I think cost more than the whole original house, but you finally got this done. Incidentally, when I'm drawing those larger pictures, I just put the paper on the wall and use architect tape around it and just have at it. I think Russell Lynes has some fairly good photographs of me doing it and most of those pictures are purely done, particularly since not going back to Edith and not really having a gallery, are done for my own pleasure; however, most of them you'll notice are drawings. [00:20:09] I did one of Greta Garbo the other day, it looks almost like a silverpoint, there isn't much too it and yet, I feel it looks very much like this woman that I've always—let's see, she was part of the mystique in the period I grew up in.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right, true. I had a couple questions. You went to Yale in 1960 for a few years.

ROBERT OSBORN: Let's see, four years, I was an undergraduate you see.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, no, no, no, I mean in 1960.

ROBERT OSBORN: Oh, you mean serving on that committee.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ROBERT OSBORN: I've forgotten it. It was called the Yale Council. I think Charles Sawyer invited—well they were putting together this Yale council in which people from all sorts of disciplines, for instance engineers, forestry people, graduates, would be brought back and would sit around for about three days, I believe, looking at these various schools with a hard eye, as outside professionals, and then make recommendations. I think Witt Griswold is the fellow that started that, well this is fine. I think the first committee, Charles Sawyer asked Leslie Cheek to be the head of it and Leslie invited oh, about six of us to be on that committee, and we'd go down there. In those days, I enjoyed very much, going around and looking at what was happening, and I thought the Yale Art School was pretty depressing, may I say, in those days. Finally, Eero Saarinen took over as head of that

committee and we would be the committee looking at the particular school, and then the chairmen, such as Leslie or Eero, would then report to the Yale Council and would sit in with that body. [00:22:11] I thought under Eero, we made real progress and Albers took over the head of the, actually I think it was the entire school, Art and Architecture, but mostly art, and it was extraordinary, to see the way that school, the quality of the students' work rose under that marvelous teacher, who was a real teacher who couldn't help but teach. When we were walking through as a committee, he would fall back and Leslie would say where is Joseph, and you find that he already had a body of four students and he was really teaching them, it was just great, but the effect on the school was really quite extraordinary. Well let's see, the Bauhaus and Harvard, under Gropius and Breuer, and then that performance, and I suppose we have to put in Black Mountain, which I really didn't know, but it's amazing how splendid a school can be when you get these forces working and somehow sympathetic with the students.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was the experience for you like, going back to Yale after all these years now, in a totally different position?

ROBERT OSBORN: Well very interesting and actually, and this is rather contradictory, when I left Yale, well let's see about two or three years out of Yale I thought oh they're stuffy, stodgy and all this, again rather puerile. Going back later, and I finally replaced, I guess it was after Eero died, I was made chairman of the Yale Art School, and I had to report to the council. I didn't think we did a very effective job and it seemed to me the school was really coming apart and couldn't get good teachers. [00:24:09] However, you wrote these reports and I wrote really tough reports, and I guess we all did, just trying at least, to get these things to work, although that doesn't do it. It takes the mystical—

PAUL CUMMINGS: It takes—yes.

ROBERT OSBORN: That's right, there's a mystical thing that goes on with a really good teacher, a man like Gropius say.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's true, and I don't think you can manufacture those either.

ROBERT OSBORN: No, you really can't. Now, when I go back to Yale, or occasionally, I'd seen Kingman Brewster and Eugene Leake has asked me to again, to serve on a committee down there. I even tried to resign at one point because I said this is when I was on the Art Council Committee, I said I honestly don't know and getting old, you really get out of touch, you ought to have younger people in there, somebody like yourself, really in touch, to bring back these older people; Archibald MacLeish, a terribly nice man but good heavens, we don't sense the pulse and I think we ought to know that we don't.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I've talked to other people who have been on those committees and that idea comes up frequently, that they should have kind of a younger group, so that it's closer as well, because they all seem to be such entrenched images you know?

ROBERT OSBORN: That's right and this is a sheer disaster. Let's see, on a committee that I served on, another one I guess it was down there, Ivan Chermayeff, at least Ivan you felt, and he was sort of half my age, you knew that he knew what was going on in art or in design or in architecture, and consequently, anything he said, it seemed to me was much more pertinent than anything I—[00:26:18]—you'll notice on these tapes, that I've been talking about really, a whole past, and actually I've been talking right back to Cézanne.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right. I heard somewhere you were involved, or a member of the World Federalist?

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes indeed. Yes, and I used to draw for them and also SANE, I made a booklet for them, there were a couple of drawings I liked in it, Alan Hurlburt, *Look Magazine*, laid the thing out and he was talking really, about sanity and world affairs, and the World Federalist. When I got out of the navy, I simply couldn't believe, you see, that people, after this ghastly experience in Europe and in the East, I naively, and still in blue uniform, thought surely now people are ready to join hands and to set up a world government. I honestly couldn't believe that you could have this reversion back to these small isolated things, the Russians fighting the Americans, the Russians fighting the Chinese, but sure enough, and you watched it happen and it was very disillusioning may I saw, but heavens it's the way nations and people are, and no escaping. However, what leaves us in a poor state and a terribly costly state and all these other things that should be need dealing with and the food problem and population problem, they really aren't being dealt with at all whereas the military thing is being dealt with right up to the hilt.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's profitable.

ROBERT OSBORN: Yes but also, it's scared boys nudging one another and chips on shoulders and all this. [00:28:07] Elodie and I talk a lot about this, how really frightfully immature it is, that men running those governments still nudging, and particularly by and large the military.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Okay, well let's see, is there anything you think you should talk about we haven't touched on?

ROBERT OSBORN: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That would you like to go into?

ROBERT OSBORN: No. Absolutely, the vessel has been poured absolutely empty. However, as I said to you earlier, this has been a real pleasure, mainly because you have asked the right question at the right time, and this must be a real knack on your part, you know to be thinking ahead, maybe those two whirling wheels are doing it but you've been thinking of what the next right question is.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I try.

ROBERT OSBORN: You probably ought to be on a talk show.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Okay well let's—

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]