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Oral history interview with Bertha Schaefer, 1970 April 20-22

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Bertha Schaefer on April 20, 1970 and April 22, 1970. The interview took place at her Apartment, 400 East 58th Street New York City and was conducted by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Bertha Schaefer and Paul Cummings have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

Paul Cummings: It's April 20, 1970, Paul Cummings talking to Bertha Schaefer at 400 East 58th Street which is your apartment.

Bertha Schaefer: Yes. The most unconventional apartment an interior designer ever had.

Paul Cummings: Yes, it doesn't look all organized like some.

Bertha Schaefer: Oh, I think it's terribly organized. Think of all the paintings and sculpture I have around.

Paul Cummings: But it doesn't look like some of them do. It's very different.

Bertha Schaefer: It's different.

Paul Cummings: It's filled out.

Bertha Schaefer: There's great organization in being able to have all these things.

Paul Cummings: Oh, that way! But it looks so different.

Bertha Schaefer: I have a strange time here because, when people from the decorating world come, they notice my furniture and what great quality it has and scarcely look at the walls, are afraid to look at the walls. But, when the fine arts world people come, they don't see the furniture; they go for certain sculptures and so on. And of course the great test is for the ones who know Foujita--he's this great sculptor who is not generally known. It's a very sophisticated fine arts person that knows Foujita.

Paul Cummings: Well, could we find out where you were born. I couldn't
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I would say to him, "Well, I couldn't have been so bad. I entered the filing department of the Division and I ended up assistant to your assistant. I couldn't have been so bad."

Paul Cummings: Did you study art or anything like that at college?

Bertha Schaefer: Yes. I've always--I have a special word for it--I've always "artisticated." If my brother saw a wonderful bamboo tray in a gift shop in Colorado Springs that was too expensive for him to give to this hostess he wanted it for, I would of course start painting him a tray with great flowers or birds or whatnot on it. It was much more beautiful before it was painted but....

Paul Cummings: Did you want to become a painter then? Did you study painting in college?

Bertha Schaefer: Yes, I studied painting in college. I did the tower of the old chapel building covered with ivy in pastels, this tall painting. I don't know whatever became of that.

Paul Cummings: Was your family interested in the arts, in music or literature or things like that? I'm curious how your interest came about.

Bertha Schaefer: My father was head of the board of trustees of the public school. Which didn't mean that he had education as a man who was a sort of refugee form Germany in the early days. I don't know just why but he was called Colonel Schaefer though he was a sergeant or lieutenant--I'm not sure--in the Civil War.

Paul Cummings: When did he come to this country? Do you remember roughly?

Bertha Schaefer: No.

Paul Cummings: This is just kind of family history.

Bertha Schaefer: I know. It was the time when many Germans left Germany when the Kaiser was acting up in some one of his obstreperous ways. There was a great exodus from Germany and that could be dated very well.

Paul Cummings: What was it like growing up in the South when you did?

Bertha Schaefer: Oh, it was terrible.

Paul Cummings: Really? I always thought it would be so nice.

Bertha Schaefer: Well, we did have wonderful magnolia trees in the front yard and fig trees in the back yard and all of that was beautiful. But I remember complaining terribly of the dust on the roads. When I came back after having worked in Washington, Mississippi seemed just dusty. But, as I'd always thought I should do, I came on to New York to study interior design. And I think a reason, and probably the chief reason, that made me think this way is that, when I was in the fourth grade at school, three-fourths of our town burned down, including the magnolia trees. The fig trees survived; the magnolia trees didn't. There was no church and no school, almost nothing left in this town.

Paul Cummings: What caused the fire?

Bertha Schaefer: Whether it was children playing with matches in one of the houses, or whether it had to do with mice that did something, there were all these tales going around. In any case our house was right in the middle of Main Street and my father was determined to rebuild. He sent to New Orleans for plans. And. as I remember it. my father and mother spent most Sunday afternoons studying these various plans and deciding which one they'd build. It was as simple as that to them. And they built a house that was rather grand to look upon as you walked down Main Street but it was the most devilish place to live in. It would have been all right in a way if it had central heating but my father said, no, this is the South and we didn't need central heating. So here was a house that had archways going to the upstairs and to the rear so there was nothing to close off. And what was supposed to be the breakfast room in the house became our living room. We lived and dined in that place because it was a room we could keep warm in winter. I think that when I got to Paris I realized the Paris and Mississippi were very much the same when it comes to climate. I think that I was never so cold anywhere as in Paris and in Mississippi.

Paul Cummings: Really! That's amazing because one always thinks of the South being considerably warmer.

Bertha Schaefer: Well, on those cold damp days with nothing to keep you warm, it was just like being in some of the palaces in France where we all got chilblains. But anyhow, this house became the thing that my mother and an older sister spent their lives working on. They adored it and they tried with all their vigor to do all the polishing and dusting and cleaning and scraping that this house required. And the more that I saw their work in keeping up a house that really didn't have any part of it truly livable for us, the more I realized that women needed to be guided in choosing plans. And that as much as anything sent me to the Parsons School where they entered me in--well, I guess it was the middle of the year--they put me into an interior architecture course instead of interior design.

Paul Cummings: Do you remember what year that was when you went to Parsons?

Bertha Schaefer: I'll look it up. The diploma is across the room.

Paul Cummings: How did you discover Parsons? Was that through the University?

Bertha Schaefer: Oh, everybody knew about Parsons. Even in Mississippi. I remember the day that Frank Albert Parsons told me that Mississippi was the only state that had never invited him to lecture. And then another day he told me that he had this invitation and he was going to Mississippi. And I remember how gaily I sent him a telegram when he was lecturing in Mississippi--that he finally had made it.

Paul Cummings: What kind of a person was he? I haven't interviewed anybody who knew him. Did you get to know him well?

Bertha Schaefer: Oh yes. He was a very warm person and very much different from William Otham who was his pal and his housemate. Mr. Otham was not so outgoing as Frank Albert Parsons was. The two of them supplemented each other.

Paul Cummings: It has become a very large school. Was it so large then?

Bertha Schaefer: It was certainly always important. I mean it was the place to go. Now there are other schools that are also all right to go to. But at that time if you wanted interior design or any of the allied subjects, it was Parsons. We didn't have Pratt; we didn't have the New York School; we didn't have many places.

Paul Cummings: How much time did you spend in Washington--that was between college and Parsons, wasn't it?

Bertha Schaefer: Yes. And that was at the end of the war. I remember that the work that I was doing in statistics was going to the Peace Conference. And that was the day I made a mistake of "one" and that "one" happened to be in the millions place. But I did end up as assistant to the head of the department.

Paul Cummings: But that didn't interest you after a while?

Bertha Schaefer: The people did. So it was very difficult to let go entirely and come on to New York to study something that might have meant that I would just be doing drafting the rest of my days. I wasn't sure as I started for New York. I remember the bright red sun that was setting in the west as I started for the train that day, leaving Yazoo City, Mississippi for New York.

Paul Cummings: How did you like living in Washington while you were there?

Bertha Schaefer: That was good. There was a family that adopted a number of us who were doing war work there and had us for I guess Sunday evening supper or Friday evening supper once a week. We learned to know very good people. There was Isador Lubin--I think that's the name--who is a great economist. There was another man who has been teaching at Princeton whose name I'm not saying right now. But it was a very interesting group of people, some of whom married each other. We kept up with each other for a while. But we haven't exactly in New York in the different world that I got into here.

Paul Cummings: How long did you study at Parsons?

Bertha Schaefer: It was a two-year course. I got a diploma.

Paul Cummings: And after that you went to Paris?

Bertha Schaefer: Then I was in Paris.

Paul Cummings: So that was in the early Twenties?

Bertha Schaefer: That was the early Twenties because I started my own office in interior design in 1924 and the gallery in 1944.

Paul Cummings: How was Paris in those days?

Bertha Schaefer: Oh, wonderful. The horse chestnut trees were in bloom. It was just too beautiful. It was everything. It was sheer heaven to me. I remember when I came back I would really weep for Paris. I couldn't stand not being there. Everything was just utterly wonderful.

Paul Cummings: How long were you there?

Bertha Schaefer: It was just five months--but enough to make Yazoo City seem very dull indeed.

Paul Cummings: Well, Paris makes a lot of cities seem dull.

Bertha Schaefer: On Sunday afternoons in Paris I had to do my laundry and I would think how terrible it was to be in Paris doing laundry on Sunday afternoon. When I got back to Mississippi on Sunday afternoons I was supposed to sit on the front porch and say hello to the people who came walking by. I think at that time I longed for a little laundry to do in Paris. It was very easy to get away from Yazoo City any time I could. Somehow I never had quite the same interest that the other girls had of walking down Main Street and meeting the soda jerk as he was leaving the drug store, or walking back home with a bag of peanuts or what not. I was always a little different.

Paul Cummings: You had an interest in art. Did you draw and paint a great deal?

Bertha Schaefer: Oh, yes. I was always doing something. But I wasn't home very much after M.S.C.W. and Parsons and Paris. I came on to New York I suppose it was directly from Paris. I got a job with Helen Criss, the interior designer, who couldn't keep me because there was a small depression at that time. It wasn't like the big Depression later but everybody was having to let people go. So I think my job lasted a number of weeks rather than months. I then became an interior designer on my own. I would do a few cushions for people. I remember the day that this woman gave me my first decorating job for a whole room and I was frantic until I saw the blue velvet couch in her room and I realized it really was right. I ordered it with great assurance that I was right and when the day came to deliver it I wondered what that great mass of blue was going to do. But it went on from there. Usually there was somebody who saw the job that I had done and wanted something. But later, when I got into more experimental things, I would meet people on the street who would say, "Oh, Bertha, I would have

loved to have had you do my apartment but I didn't want any of that new lighting you're doing." And in another year they would say, "Oh, Bertha, I would have loved to have had you do my new apartment but I didn't want any of that new art you're showing." I was always doing things that interested me. Sometimes my client came along with me; sometimes they didn't.

Paul Cummings: What was it like starting your studio or your office in 1924? Were there a great many people in the field at that time?

Bertha Schaefer: Well, supposedly there were. A friend of my brother's had told him not to let me attempt such a thing because there were so many decorators in New York already that it was nonsense to think that another one could get a start, particularly one who hadn't been brought up in New York and didn't have loads of friends to fall back on. But I remember the day that my brother looked at me sternly and said, "There's always room at the top." So I was glad that my brother was still alive when the Decorators Club of New York gave me their medal for achievement.

Paul Cummings: That's great. I can't really think of how you'd get a business going.

Bertha Schaefer: How did I get from there into the gallery?

Paul Cummings: Well, as your business developed I know you designed some famous pieces of furniture and various other things.

Bertha Schaefer: That was much later.

Paul Cummings: How did one develop a business in New York City?

Bertha Schaefer: Well, you know, that was 1929 all mixed up there. If you know 1929 then....

Paul Cummings: Well, that came really just as you were getting going.

Bertha Schaefer: It was my fifth year in business. I had been told that it took five years to get a business started. The first part of 1929 I was going great guns and, instead of organizing the business that made any real sense, I just took on another decorator so that there were all these decorators trying to work in a very small area--in too small an area for that many people. I didn't organize it but I had a proper bookkeeper and a proper draftsman and a proper shopper and that sort of thing.

Paul Cummings: Oh, I see. You had people working for you?

Bertha Schaefer: Yes, working for me on salary. And I was spending my time looking for a house or another place to move to. I had to move because there just wasn't room for us to do what we were trying to do. It had been my apartment originally. And I moved out to Allerton House; this was at 37 East 57th Street but the numbers were changed; there's no 37 now. I moved out to give Olga the office space. And I spent my time climbing stairs and looking at houses. In June 1929 I bought a house; I signed a contract to buy a house. I got possession of it in September and tried to get it altered in time to move into it in October. I did move in on October 31, the day of the great break. But in between the time that I took title to it and the time that the break came there were real estate men hounding my every step because they wanted to buy the house. There was someone who wanted to collect that corner. This was 129 East 55th Street and it was within the 100-foot plot of Lexington and the people who were collecting property on Lexington had to have that house. After October 31, 1929 no one tried to buy the house. And eventually, after various attempts at reorganizing the finances, the house was sold from under me for the amount that I had paid in cash when I bought it. I didn't realize what was happening. The bank probably thought they were offering it to me for this sum and my brother would have done it for me if I had known. But I've never felt that I could regret it too much because if I'd stayed in that house I would never have gotten a gallery. I would have continued to be enmeshed in interior design.

Paul Cummings: How long did you have the house then?

Bertha Schaefer: I had it for six years.

Paul Cummings: And everything worked out of there then?

Bertha Schaefer: Yes.

Paul Cummings: You had quite a number of people working for you, didn't you?

Bertha Schaefer: Yes, I did. That's when I first had my little puppy Buttons who was such a wonderful little Scotty. If I'd have a new maid walking the dog, people would say to her on the street, "Isn't that Miss Schaefer's little dog?" Little buttons was very well known. He was a wonderful little dog. He had a wonderful personality. He

did tricks and all kinds of things. Paul Cummings; Well, how was it from 1929 to 1935...?

Bertha Schaefer: Those were very difficult years.

Paul Cummings: They were very difficult. How could you maintain the business and the house and the people who were working for you and everything?

Bertha Schaefer: Well, it's amazing that I did. I heard on television the other night stories of the Depression reminding me of how difficult it all had been.

Paul Cummings: But wasn't it very difficult to find people who would spend money in redoing their homes and apartments?

Bertha Schaefer: Well, we just scrambled through. I had a wonderful colored maid who was a friend of the maid I have now who's helping me through things now. It's never been simple for me. I guess that particular time probably conditioned me for some of the times that followed. It was the actual day of he big break in the market that I moved in.

Paul Cummings: An auspicious day to start something.

Bertha Schaefer: Yes. And of course the Irish contractors who had taken the contract from me for altering the house had taken everybody else's contract and pushed those through. In the meantime they let me sit and wait. I didn't know enough to arrange the contract with them so that there would be penalties involved that would have kept them on my job. By the time I could get the apartments...I was using the basement for offices and the parlor floor for seeing clients and the floor above was my apartment. But there were two floors above that I was intending to rent. I missed the October first rental season. Now people rent at any time of the year but, at that time, it was always October first. And then what I thought was the proper furnace in the basement gave way and I had to replace that. That was a very difficult time. It probably conditioned me for the difficult times the gallery has given me.

Paul Cummings: What were some of the new things that you were doing for your clients?

Bertha Schaefer: Lighting was one of the chief things. I was the first person who used fluorescent lighting in the domestic situation. That was for the Percy Bloch's. And then a client in Washington let me use it. I've thrown away so much of that material...the Archives have asked me to look it up.

Paul Cummings: Oh, yes, we want everything.

Bertha Schaefer: I don't know what happened to much of the material. But I was still doing interior design when I moved into 32 East 57th Street, which at that time was as full of galleries as 41 East 57th is now.

Paul Cummings: Right. Across the street, yes.

Bertha Schaefer: It somehow got me into the feeling of what was going on in the galleries.

Paul Cummings: When did you move there?

Bertha Schaefer: It was twenty-five years ago. It was just at the time that my niece married and I think she's just had her twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Can I give you these date some other time? Can I fill that in?

Paul Cummings: Sure.

Bertha Schaefer: I came to the Gallery in various ways. I was this very loyal Decorator Club member. I took on all kinds of jobs such as the exhibition committee of the Decorators Club and the Fine Arts Committee of the American Institute of Decorators. And both of these things got me into putting on exhibitions.

Paul Cummings: Oh, that's interesting. So it came around subtly really.

Bertha Schaefer: Oh, yes. It was Hudson Walker who helped me borrow paintings up and down 57th Street and hang the reception area at the American Institute of Decorators for our program.

Paul Cummings: When did you meet Hudson?

Bertha Schaefer: Oh I can't remember. It seems to me that I've always know Hudson. And he's always been the most helpful kind of person. Except one day when he told me that one should send a painting that a man had asked for, one of the museum men had asked for, that it should go out collect. There's a difference in the terminology; in one instance they can pay for it the next day or whatever it was. And I sent it the wrong way,

that it had to e paid for on delivery. And the man didn't have the money. It was one of those things.

Paul Cummings: Yes. Billed instead of C.O.D. or something.

Bertha Schaefer: Yes, something like that. It was the wrong term. My office knows now which way you send those things but I've never learned how. It was all mixed up with the time that the National Gallery in Washington opened. I was there seeing a client of mine, having come back from the South, and ran into people on the sidewalks of Washington who knew that I had been doing things in relation to art with the decorators. And they said, "Oh, you should have been at the meeting last night of the American Institute of Decorators." (At the time the National Gallery opened the American Institute of Decorators held their convention in Washington.) I said "Oh, I'm going tonight." and no one would have thought that any decorator needed to have been there the night before. There was enough said that night; everything that was wrong with the fine arts world was the fault of the decorators. All these stories that were told about this being a downstairs painting and that being an upstairs painting. Juliana Force was there saying that somebody had said to her, "Well, why can't you teach the decorators?" And she said, "How can you teach anybody that doesn't come to you to be taught?" And Dan Rich, or Chicago then, was saying something about a decorator who had a Van Gogh reproduction touched up with oil paint to make it seem more like an oil painting. I remember these stories. At that time, if I had been a member of the American Institute of Decorators, I might have tried to answer some of these remarks. They were terribly unfair to decorators. It made me think of certain types of Jews that had given their quality to the conversation about Jews, you see. And it's just as unfair, you see. I spent that night writing first one letter and then another to these various people, writing in my mind these letters that proved how unfair they were to interior designers. I knew by morning that these letters would never be written; that there was no way in which the interior designer was less well prepared--I had to admit it--then in relation to contemporary American art. So I came back to New York and arranged that my fellow decorators would work out a little club to study contemporary art. We would meet in each other's houses in our best bibs and tuckers and have dinner and arrange a program. The program that we put on was one I'm referring to at the American Institute of Decorators.

Paul Cummings: What was the group called?

Bertha Schaefer: I guess just the fine Arts Group of the American Institute of Decorators. We'd put on these shows and everybody would turn out for the opening talk and a bit of sherry and biscuits that we served, and never come back. And at the same time the program was a little different at the Decorators Club. I was supposed to work up shows that different artists would pay to be a part of. There was the screen and table show that was so popular that we had made more money than we should have.

Paul Cummings: How much is that?

Bertha Schaefer: You see, we were a nonprofit organization and we'd gotten a little profit back. So I decided that I could try to meet the challenge--all of this was going on at the same time--by getting a great fine art show put on at the space that the Decorators Club had in the Squibb Building. I remember all the people who gave me advice about the artists that I should show. And I suppose it was a fairly good exhibition. In any case, I happened to be there when this tall man entered. I had never seen him before but I immediately said, "Good morning, Mr. Jewell." I mean there was no question this was the Jewell walking in; you knew him. The Decorators Club made the art page of the Times! That was my attempt to straighten the decorators out with all these museum people who were being so unfair to us. It all sort of petered out because I soon discovered that, when I stopped being chairman of these organizations, of the Fine Art Department of the American Institute of decorators, nobody else became chairman. By then I had moved to 32 East 57th and I decided that the thing to do was to hang paintings in the entrance area of my own place. And all I ever thought of doing was hanging paintings for clients of mine to see and to learn to know and to like. I had no thought of becoming...I didn't have this sort of ambition gallery-wise that everybody who starts a gallery now has. They always start with a properly designed letterhead and cards and all the paraphernalia. I wrote to museum people to come to see my shows on the stationery of an interior designer.

Paul Cummings: Did it work?

Bertha Schaefer: No, of course it didn't work. Well, yes, it did in a way. They came in. I remember one museum man who said it was a joy to come to me because I was the one dealer who really loved the paintings. He could feel that I had a great love for what I was doing.

Paul Cummings: Where did you find the artists whose work you showed at that time? Were they around and without a gallery?

Bertha Schaefer: It's never been difficult to find artists.

Paul Cummings: Oh, yes, I notice that.

Bertha Schaefer: I didn't know how much I showed them. Maybe it was more than I'm showing now for all I know. But at the same time I had this very good friend whose paintings you see on my walls--Alexander M. Bing. He would take me around on Saturday afternoons to the galleries. And my great desire was to be sufficiently intelligent about these paintings to be a proper companion for him. Of course when I started the gallery I was stuck in the gallery on Saturday afternoons and he brought other young ladies around to see the paintings. I've often wondered today with all that goes on how well he would have kept his head about what is right to be shown. And at times I've tried to be guided by what I would think he would have thought one should do in these strenuous times. I've never gone too far afield but I've never stayed too classic.

Paul Cummings: You did some interesting things. In 1946 you did an exhibition called "Directions in Abstraction."

Bertha Schaefer: Oh, yes, I did indeed.

Paul Cummings: I was trying to find something on that; I couldn't find a list or a catalogue.

Bertha Schaefer: Oh, I can tell you about that because I remember so well the way Genauer covered that show. She gave it two paragraphs. In the first paragraph she said, "This show with this ambitious title gets nowhere in particular." But the second paragraph said everything about that show that one could have hoped a review would way.

Paul Cummings: Really?

Bertha Schaefer: Yes. It said with this example it shows this; and with that example it shows that. I'm sure I must have a copy of that review.

Paul Cummings: That's marvelous. A complete shift.

Bertha Schaefer: It was just typical of what reviewers often are guilty of doing.

Paul Cummings: Who was in the exhibition? Which people were there?

Bertha Schaefer: I remember Vasilieff was the first departure from realism as I saw it. And I got as far as Albers as a complete abstraction. At that time I owned an Albers which I let get sold at auction one day for less money than it should have been sold for.

Paul Cummings: Did you start forming a collection?

Bertha Schaefer: That's my trouble. I'm much more a collector than I am a dealer. One of the important collectors came in to see my first exhibition and said to me as he went out, "There's no question of your taste but will you make a dealer?"

Paul Cummings: Why did he say that do you think?

Bertha Schaefer: There was great reason to wonder if I could make a dealer. What did I know about the business of dealing with artists? I tried to think that night where I could go to school; who had a course in this. Well, nobody had such a course as far as I know, even today; certainly they didn't have it then. But I've been going to that school ever since 1944.

Paul Cummings: Every day, yes.

Bertha Schaefer: And the way I look at it is that it's remarkable how much I've learned considering that I knew nothing about it except having a great desire to do a job for the artists, and to try to prove that I could do it.

Paul Cummings: I think before I get too much into gallery things, you've been very active in various things, the American Institute of Decorators (A.I.D.) and the Decorators Club and things like that.

Bertha Schaefer: Not recently.

Paul Cummings: No, but I mean for a long time you were.... BERTH SCHAEFER: Oh, yes, I was.

Paul Cummings: What about the Architectural League of New York? How did you get involved with that?

Bertha Schaefer: Yes, I belonged to the Architectural League. You know that building on 40th Street was a place where they wanted all the arts to be at home in. I'm not sure that they feel as broad about it on 65th Street as they did at 40th Street. And I wish they had members in the fine arts world that were the more worthy artists.

Paul Cummings: Did you find that once the gallery opened and got going that your decorating business changed a great deal?

Bertha Schaefer: Everything changed. But it was all so difficult. I'm using this word all the time I'm sure. The first show I put on in my gallery was a group show. The second show was by courtesy of Milton Avery who said to George Constant, "Let's help her along." So he and George Constant constituted my second show. I was always devoted to Milton, as you can well know. I think it was about that time that I learned to know Vasilieff from Ben-Zion. Will Barnet was the first artist I asked to come into the gallery.

Paul Cummings: He was with you a long time, wasn't he?

Bertha Schaefer: Oh, yes. I even took him back after he left the first time. But he knew after he left the second time that he'd never get back; that's certain. There was one time that Lekakis was recommended to me as a great sculptor. And I decided to go along and give Lekakis a show. In the beginning I had a few tables and chairs in this entrance area that pertained to decorating. But when I showed Lekakis, he asked me to send those out to a storage place and let him have the space just clean to put his sculptures in. And I did this; I paid to truck things out and to rent space. This was all about the time that an architect who had always liked my type of decorating was doing a very special job. He had a client who owned a nineteenth-century mansion overlooking the Sound around Rye that was going to be torn down to its pink marble floor and this modern house was built on that. Well, the man was very sensitive about his name and about seeing decorators. It was established that three decorators who had recent jobs in the vicinity would show him and his wife their work. And I was selected. Which was what the architect wanted all the time. It was quite wonderful that I was going to get this particular job. I had always wanted to work that way with an architect on a new, modern house. They came in to see me in my little office that was at the end of the gallery the day after the Lekakis show opened. This woman was so pleased to meet me. She said as soon as she saw this job and saw how the draperies hung she realized she never would have selected that fabric for the draperies if she hadn't already seen it hanging and, when she saw that, she knew that I was her decorator. The man sat there without opening his mouth. He took her out of my place and down to Lord & Taylor and gave them the job because of the Lekakis show. To him it was so much voodooism--these tall sculptures of Lekakis. And hardly had I gotten off the phone from hearing this and the architect jumped me and said, "Imagine my house being done by Lord & Taylor!" And then the next call was from Lekakis saying, "I'm sorry, Bertha, I can't stay with a gallery that's also doing interior design."

Paul Cummings: So you ended up with nothing.

Bertha Schaefer: I ended up with a hundred percent nothing. Which didn't mean that I didn't have expenses to pay. But what you would do in a case like that was somehow to tighten your belt and somehow manage to get through. I think that's quite a story though about Lekakis and the architect and the wealthy man whose name I never knew.

Paul Cummings: Really?

Bertha Schaefer: He was very self-conscious about his name. And I haven't bothered to ask the architect who was so angry with me who in the dickens this was. I felt the sooner I forgot that whole thing the better it would be.

Paul Cummings: Did you get interested in Alfred Maurer through Hudson Walker?

Bertha Schaefer: Yes. Through Hudson and through Curt Valentin who showed Maurer once at the Buchholz Gallery.

Paul Cummings: He was in the same building, wasn't he?

Bertha Schaefer: Yes. Oh, yes. You see, I would probably never have gotten as deeply into the gallery work if I'd not lost the house on 55th Street. So it's difficult to know what's good for one. Losing that house was probably the best thing.

Paul Cummings: Yes. It's amazing how a loss can be good sometimes. At the time you think it's a disaster but....

Bertha Schaefer: I remember my first Maurer very well because Hudson had moved into a new house on Long Island and he needed some furniture and that was the way I got the Maurer--by offering him a Chippendale chair for the Maurer. And I had a difficult time getting the chair delivered because my secretary would just not deliver it. "You're not going to give up that wonderful old chair for a painting, are you?" And I said, "Yes. And send that chair out." I had had to wait a good while to get that particular Maurer because Duncan Phillips had had a couple of Maurers sent down for him to choose and this was one that he didn't choose, and it came back and then it was mine. But it took him a long time to make up his mind and I was waiting.

Paul Cummings: That was typical of him often, wasn't it?

Bertha Schaefer: Yes--not always. He bought a Maurer from me one day just by seeing it hanging on the wall and asked for it to be sent down and it never came back. And that was the same day that Jackson Pollock had been in. You know, Jackson would come in so drunk that we didn't know what was going to happen to us and we were always so thankful when he went out.

Paul Cummings: And left you in one piece.

Bertha Schaefer: That day he had gotten as far as the elevator and he came back--he had seen this painting hanging in an entrance after he'd gotten out of the place--and he said, "That's the most beautiful painting I've ever seen..." or something as that. It was just a short time after that that Duncan Phillips said the same thing. This Artichoke painting of Maurer's went down to Duncan Phillips and it's in that collection. Which reminds me of one of the ways that I have purchased, that I have secured Maurers. The woman who had been secretary to Maurer's doctor had been given two paintings by Maurer. She had married a man up in Buffalo and thought of these Maurers when I was advertising a Maurer show one time and sent them down to me at a very high price for Maurers at that time. But she sent them down to me just in time. These paintings had been in the attic of her house, not in the house proper, and subjected to the cold of winter and the heat of summer, and they got to me just in time. These were two Artichoke paintings, one of which I still own and the other went to Duncan Phillips. There are wonderful stories as I sit here and think about them. I've had a wonderful time with the gallery.

Paul Cummings: How did you find Will Barnet? Or did he find you? It was such a long relationship you had, years and years and years.

Bertha Schaefer: Yes. At that time Will was with the American British Gallery that Ala Storey ran. And I saw a painting there called The Yellow Bed that I now own. I liked Yellow Bed so much that I think I got in touch with Will through that.

Paul Cummings: And Marsden Hartley you showed, too, at about the same time as Maurer.

Bertha Schaefer: Of course that came through Hudson Walker, too. There's an amusing decorating story that tied up with Hudson if you can stand one more of these.

Paul Cummings: Oh, sure.

Bertha Schaefer: There was a wealthy client whose husband had given her five hundred dollars to buy a painting to go over the bed in their bedroom. Well, it was the most difficult thing to find. We were in and out of every gallery several times until we got to the Hudson Walker Gallery. You see, this client had landscapes downstairs and they didn't want a landscape in the bedroom. They had a greenhouse. They didn't want a flower painting. They didn't want a portrait that would look as if it should have been a portrait of a member of the family and wasn't; it had to be fanciful enough not to look that way and still it couldn't be too fanciful. Well, one day this client and I were in the Hudson Walker Gallery and Ione [Walker] climbed up over the desk and pulled down an English painting. She broke a fingernail doing it. And here was the perfect painting. It was a painting of a woman and a jar of flowers near her. It was just fanciful enough and not too fanciful; it had all the right coloring for the bedroom. It was the right size and the right price. And do you know why she didn't buy that painting?

Paul Cummings: Why?

Bertha Schaefer: My client was president of the Garden clubs of America. The jar in the painting was transparent and the stems were crossed. It's wrong for stems to cross; that's against the rules of the Garden Clubs. So the president of the Garden club couldn't possibly hang that in her bedroom.

Paul Cummings: I'm curious about the jobs you had as a decorator. Did you find in the case of homes and apartments that it was the man or the woman who made the decisions? Which one do you think ultimately decided? Or did you not know frequently?

Bertha Schaefer: There was a time when I worked for a man and that was delicious. In one case there was a man who was a terrible old woman and when a man is an old woman he's awful. But the usual mannish man is a wonderful person to work for. They seem to understand that you have an idea you are trying to put across and they will let you do it; they won't put every stumbling block in your way.

Paul Cummings: Do you find some woman very difficult then?

Bertha Schaefer: Even women who don't have to watch pennies often do, very definitely. Oh, I've had beautiful women clients. One that I'm still working for is just ninety. She had me do over her apartment after twenty-five years. And that was probably about twenty-five years ago--I don't know just how many. But I'm still working for

her.

Paul Cummings: Do you do a project with somebody and then find that there are little things that keep popping up six months or a year later, or two years later?

Bertha Schaefer: There are certain clients that you keep on taking care of. And they sometimes go along with you when you become more and more modern than they started out being. But I don't often get to sell paintings to my own clients. This one I speak of that just turned ninety let me hang two paintings by Balcomb Greene in her living room and one in her dining room. So she really was an ideal Balcomb Greene client. She helped Balcomb and me very much.

Paul Cummings: Do you want to talk some more or would you like to stop for a while?

Bertha Schaefer: Let's stop. It seems to me I'm sort of running down.
[END OF SIDE ONE]
[SIDE 2]

Bertha Schaefer - April 22, 1970.

Paul Cummings: This is Part 2 and it's April 22. Could we just kind of recapitulate a little bit here. You had mentioned that a lot of decorators are interested in art; that over the years you've talked to various people who were interested in using painting and sculpture but somehow it doesn't happen very much.

Bertha Schaefer: It's very difficult to get the client to do it.

Paul Cummings: Yes. What do you thing the problem is?

Bertha Schaefer: I think it's a need for public education. Just what I thought at the time the decorator was being so scandalized at the American Federation of Art meeting in Washington--I still think it's not always the decorator's fault.

Paul Cummings: It's the same problem. It just takes more and more continuous education.

Bertha Schaefer: But I think it also could take a little more patience on the part of the decorator. [INTERRUPTION FOR A TELEPHONE CALL]

Paul Cummings: You were talking about the problem of educating the public and how it seems to be a continuing effort.

Bertha Schaefer: It certainly is. But in the beginning when I started the gallery I thought I was doing something in the name of the decorator to show that the decorator, too, did have an understanding of modern art and was able to put a real effort into it. There was a party I was at one night when a young woman painter said to me, " Bertha Schaefer, how can you do this thing?" It took me a few minutes to turn it over in my mind and know what she thought we were doing. I said, "You know, we don't put a painting on a truck for a client and say 'This is your painting' any more than we do a Chippendale chair." It's been amazing how many difficulties there've been. And with "The Modern House Comes Alive" I tried very hard to show the relationship between good interior architecture and interior design and showed the paintings hanging on the wall with a little replica of them in the model house and showed sculpture and pottery in the houses and there were actual pieces standing near the models. I thought it was all a case of bringing together these two worlds of applied and fine arts. But it's amazing how many misunderstandings you run into that way.

Paul Cummings: Are there many other people who've done this that you've worked with?

Bertha Schaefer: Of course Jack Larson has done a great deal with fine arts in relation to his fine fabric design. And Jack credits me as much as anyone with work of this sort. One day I took Mrs. Lloyd Goodrich to see a decorating job that I was very proud of where I had hand-woven fabrics complementing with their texture the hand-woven and hand-knotted rugs and working very beautifully with the paintings that we were able to use on that job. And what that did for me was that, when I took my brother to the Whitney the next time, Lloyd Goodrich said to my brother, "Oh, she's such a good interior designer." He didn't say that I was running a gallant fine gallery. Which is what I would have wanted him to say. You see, it's been a great stumbling block to know how to be loyal to my trade and still promote the gallery that was I suppose you would say my avocation.

Paul Cummings: Have you found that you clients overlap? That people who buy paintings would retain you as a decorator?

Bertha Schaefer: No.

Paul Cummings: They're two separate things?

Bertha Schaefer: It's almost always separate.

Paul Cummings: That's interesting because you mentioned that....

Bertha Schaefer: It has happened and there have been some very delightful times that this has happened. But usually it's been very much the other way.

Paul Cummings: There's no relationship? That's amazing.

Bertha Schaefer: No, it's almost a thing that destroys everything for you--the overlapping. One time a person said to me that it was wonderful that I had a famous interior designer as backer for my gallery. And she meant that I was backing my own gallery. But it wasn't that way. It was that the gallery almost destroyed the person that had been doing fine work in another field. It's an unforgivable thing.

Paul Cummings: But you kept them both going though?

Bertha Schaefer: I kept them both going. It's been a feat that I don't advise anybody else to try. I don't know how I've done it, except that I've probably had a few good friends who have helped me.

Paul Cummings: Are there any museum people that you've worked with over the years who are very involved with artists that you show?

Bertha Schaefer: Yes, certainly. There are several. Norman Geske is one of the ones who found me first. I think Norman is one of those who worried about me during those early years whether I'd really make it.

Paul Cummings: Was he interested in figurative painting at that time?

Bertha Schaefer: He was interested in Maurer particularly. And I sold him a Maurer out of my own collection. Which I don't do these days. The paintings that are here are quite separate from the gallery, though I have shown them over there. Greaver in Kalamazoo, Michigan has been very interested in all that goes on in the gallery. Of course David Scott when he was at the National Collection of fine arts was very interested in all the activities; and he still is. He's at the National Gallery now where they're not apt to buy these very contemporary people.

Paul Cummings: Right. How about the Whitney Museum: Because you've shown so many Americans over the years.

Bertha Schaefer: When John Borden was there I felt that there was a certain warmth. And actually Jack Baur came in last week to see Padovano. But it's not easy to feel that the young curators at the Whitney are interested in the people that I have.

Paul Cummings: What about the Museum of Modern Art? Have they been friendly? What about the artists you've shown?

Bertha Schaefer: I feel that they're friendly somehow. I don't know how it's going to be when Dorothy Miller isn't there. She isn't now. They've got to do things as they see it and I do things as I see it and sometimes I guess the twain will meet. I started very much, as you say, with American artists but I found that there was a division of thinking between me and some of the American artists at , one time. They thought they should do as the students for a Democratic Society are doing now.

Paul Cummings: In what way?

Bertha Schaefer: Tell me how to run the gallery; tell me what things I should be a part of and what I shouldn't. It was just at the time that many galleries were starting in New York and the artists who had some reputation were very much in demand by these new galleries. I was already an old gallery at this time.

Paul Cummings: When was this would you think? In the 1950's?

Bertha Schaefer: Yes.

Paul Cummings: In the mid- and late Fifties when there was that great opening of...?

Bertha Schaefer: When there was that great bursting out of galleries. But also about that time I had gotten interested in certain Europeans. I showed Kenneth Armitage; I gave Kenneth his first two American shows. And that was because I had met William Scott who was Kenneth's great friend. Kenneth ws coming over to meet

Martha Jackson and it was a moment that I could give him a lift out to the Hamptons where Martha was expecting him and I could give William Scott a lift.

Paul Cummings: Did you go to Europe very much?

Bertha Schaefer: Yes, I've been going constantly. And that of course means you enjoy very much meeting certain artists there and they can make Madrid and Paris and London a very different place for you than if you didn't have them. Lillian Somerville who is in charge of the--what is it?--the organization that is like our American Federation of Art?

Paul Cummings: The British Council.

Bertha Schaefer: The British Council. Lillian has always been very friendly; that started when I was handling Kenneth. It's gone on with other Europeans I've handled. I remember she was here at the time I opened the Patrick Herron show. It was Victor Waddington who came along just at the time that I was having some difficulty with an obstreperous American artist and he made the European artist seem very alluring. At that time I took on Pat Herron and Terry Frost and Elizabeth Frink. And they worked very well for me for a time.

Paul Cummings: How did you find their reception here? Were people interested in them? Because they hadn't been shown here much.

Bertha Schaefer: No, they hadn't been shown. I think we did very well with Pat Herron and Elizabeth Frink. But that sort of petered out as Americans became more and more conscious of American art.

Paul Cummings: It seems you've always had an interest in sculptors and sculpture?

Bertha Schaefer: Yes.

Paul Cummings: There's always been a fair number of them. A lot of painting galleries might have one sculptor in it but you have always had a number.

Bertha Schaefer: I think that that's one reason I moved from 32 to 41 East 57th Street, or I should say why I arranged the gallery the way I did--to have more floor space for the showing of sculpture. We had that very much in mind as we arranged the space at 32 East 47.

Paul Cummings: I'm interested in how you found some of the artists.

Bertha Schaefer: You know, six people come in a day to find us.

Paul Cummings: Yes. How about someone like Sue Fuller, though? Did she just walk in the gallery one day?

Bertha Schaefer: I suppose I saw Sue Fuller hanging at Hudson Walker's house first. Hudson Walker again.

Paul Cummings: That's interesting. You've shown her for a long time.

Bertha Schaefer: Yes, I have, for a long time.

Paul Cummings: How about someone like Cameron Booth who you've had for a number of years? Who's been teaching in Minneapolis for so long?

Bertha Schaefer: I don't remember when I first met Cam; I've always liked him. I must have found him a pleasant visitor to the gallery. We often find that artists can be very pleasant and the artists can be impossible. Who was it today saying, "How do you manage to work with artists? They couldn't be more impossible to work with!" But somehow the ones that become impossible to work with take themselves off and there's always someone that you've decided is a charming person.

Paul Cummings: What about Balcomb Greene? He was in your gallery for a long time.

Bertha Schaefer: Yes. And he's a great friend of mine. Something went astray one time and it shouldn't have. Though I think I was getting more and more modern for Balcomb. I don't think he liked all the people that I'd taken on.

Paul Cummings: He's a neighbor of yours now here on 57th?

Bertha Schaefer: Oh, yes. And we're neighbors in the country. I go to the Hamptons and he's in Montauk. And we see each other out there and we're very friendly. In fact he's one of the people who sent me flowers when I was ill this winter. I constantly have been friendly with Balcomb and with his new wife Terry.

Paul Cummings: Oh, yes, she's marvelous. Did you find people undecided between his landscape paintings and, say, the nudes that he was doing? Or wasn't he doing the nudes so much when you showed him?

Bertha Schaefer: Yes, he was doing them. No, I never felt there was any problem there. A person would turn from one to the other and just judge it as a painting.

Paul Cummings: You gave Knud Merrild a show.

Bertha Schaefer: Yes, I have one of the paintings that Mrs. Merrild gave me after Knud Merrild died.

Paul Cummings: You never seen them. They're terribly rare.

Bertha Schaefer: Yes, they are. And of course he did drip paintings I suppose before Pollock did. Speaking of Balcomb, before we leave him, I gave him a show entitled "Twenty Years of Painting" the year before the Whitney gave him a retrospective. In the space I had I couldn't give him a retrospective show but I came as close to it as I could. And that was the year before the Whitney's retrospective. And the retrospective was just before Balcomb decided to go to another gallery. So you can't decide when you've done right by an artist, when he's going to stay with you forever.

Paul Cummings: Marsden Hartley again is somebody you were very interested in, and still are. You have one of his in the office there.

Bertha Schaefer: Yes, I have a number of Hartleys.

Paul Cummings: Is that Hudson Walker again?

Bertha Schaefer: It was probably through Hudson that I met Mrs. Kootz. Certainly it was all around the same time. Adelaide Kootz had been a person who saw Hartley through all of his worst struggles and had received paintings from him in lieu of money. And Mrs. Kootz had been a Schaefer before she married and always had a distinct fondness for me tied up with the name of Schaefer. She was a lovely, lovely person and would come to me when she needed money for taxis and would let go another Hartley. And if I had the money I always bought a Hartley. But I don't think I've gotten any Hartleys from Hudson. I've got some Maurers from Hudson.

Paul Cummings: Well, how have you found the change in the market for Maurers? You've shown him for--what?--twenty years here.

Bertha Schaefer: I think people are certainly beginning to understand what a wonderful painter he was. Maurer had just a streak of bad luck every time he was shown. There was either a press strike or a blizzard or something that made it impossible for the show to take off the way it should. It was a year ago February that we opened the Maurer show on February 8 and on the ninth came this blizzard, the blizzard that just tied up not only New York but all the suburbs. Milton Kramer was working on the Maurer article on the Friday and Saturday before. We sent photographs to him at the Times and we assured him that the gallery would be open on Monday morning so he could see the exhibition. But again he couldn't get in; he was snowbound in Westport. The gallery was open; we managed that. So Hilton covered the Maurer show by talking about the Maurer story. I think his write-up would have been different if he had seen the exhibition. I think it would have been more of a critical analysis of the paintings. That's what Maurer still needs.

Paul Cummings: That's interesting. What about Hartley? People have always kind of known about him and I guess recently the prices have started going up tremendously.

Bertha Schaefer: Yes, they have gone up terrifically. At this moment one doesn't know whether to offer a Hartley or wait a few months.

Paul Cummings: When I talked to Hudson a few months ago he said, "Lord, what I sold Hartleys for twenty years ago and now there's no relationship."

Bertha Schaefer: Yes, no relationship. It's hard to keep up with what a Hartley is worth. I have some very fine ones. I'm glad I have them.

Paul Cummings: What about Armitage? This was in the early and mid-Fifties. How long did you show him?

Bertha Schaefer: I had two Armitage shows. The first time was not quite wrecked though it might have been because there was a great dock strike and we had to open the show without the new Armitage sculptures. We had borrowed a few things from collectors and from the Museum of Modern Art as a token gesture the day the show was supposed to open and remarkably we got the show in though it had been taken down to Baltimore where the docks were crowded enough ordinarily. I had everybody working for me in Baltimore to get the show up and everybody takes credit for having done it. The remarkable thing was that suddenly here were the

Armitage sculptures at my door.

Paul Cummings: That's marvelous. So you find that sculpture collectors don't necessarily collect paintings and the other way around?

Bertha Schaefer: No, I haven't found it that way. I think they collect both. Although there was someone in today who said he was not interested in paintings, just in sculpture. I think definitely there's an increased interest in sculpture.

Paul Cummings: Oh, I think so. In the last three or four years there are a number of galleries where the majority of their artists are sculptors.

Bertha Schaefer: If you were to come into my gallery at the time that I have a sculpture exhibition on--as now with Tony Padovano--you wouldn't think I had paintings at all because the paintings get slid into racks. You can't do that with sculpture.

Paul Cummings: What about Walter Kamys? You showed him for a while at one point.

Bertha Schaefer: Yes. But I don't think he grew at all. At the time he was with me I didn't think he did.

Paul Cummings: And Robert Cronbach, who was in your gallery for quite a while?

Bertha Schaefer: Yes. He's going to have a show next December and he's planning some very wonderful new sculpture painted in colors--not just a color but a number of colors on one sculpture.

Paul Cummings: Oh, really? He's done a great number of architectural commissions, hasn't he?

Bertha Schaefer: Yes. And commissions for synagogues. But he's got quite a lot of sprightly interest now.

Paul Cummings: Do many of your artists do commissions?

Bertha Schaefer: We try to get commissions for them. It's not always easy. Tibor Freund who does the paintings on strips of metal....

Paul Cummings: I can't think of the word.

Bertha Schaefer: They're spatial things. He has a chance of getting a big commission just now from a department store that's being built in the South. But these paintings made of little strips of aluminum can't possibly be furnished at the price of a canvas and his competition is a painter. We'll have to wait and see whether we'll win through on that.

Paul Cummings: How do you find architects to work with when one of your sculptors has a commission?

Bertha Schaefer: They're divine when they come in and work with us. But trying to get them in is so difficult. They'll come in one time and seem very enthusiastic about the things that are around and give you the feeling that they're surely going to come in the next time there's something happening in their office. And then you don't see them. Then you try to get them in and that means you can't. When I had this recent showing of William Pye it was the architects' heaven, I thought, big sculptures of stainless steel that could go out of doors. But almost none of them came in. It was a name they didn't know. They don't like working with new names. They have to do a lot of selling to their clients. It's much easier to sell Henry Moore, to sell the known name.

Paul Cummings: Yes, it's always easy to follow the herd.

Bertha Schaefer: That's what I find is happening in galleries around the country outside of New York. They almost never take on a name that isn't readily known.

Paul Cummings: I wonder if that means a conservative strain of activity.

Bertha Schaefer: It could mean that their taste is conservative but it also means that they're protecting their pocketbook because it's not easy to start a new person. This show that we're opening on Saturday contains a man that has not been shown anywhere before and a young woman who has been shown very slightly. But I think the work is very fine and I still am there judging by what my eyes see rather than by what they're supposed to be. I think that's one of the troubles with the art market, that there's been too much of going along with the name people.

Paul Cummings: Well, it is a problem because it means that people are afraid to venture to do something new and exciting, which is kind of bad.

Bertha Schaefer: And how exciting it is when they have won through!

Paul Cummings: What about Al Jensen? You showed him back in the late mid-Fifties.

Bertha Schaefer: You'd better not talk about Al Jensen to me.

Paul Cummings: You've had a typical Al Jensen experience I see.

Bertha Schaefer: At the time that Martha Jackson knew I was having difficulties with him she asked me if I wanted some help financially. I told her no, that I thought they had to work with me or not work with me. But Martha was very generous at that moment. And later she came to me and said, "Will you feel badly if I take on Al Jensen?" I told her I wouldn't tell her not to on such a reason as that but I would just tell her not to get into that kind of trouble. She told me later when he was no longer with her that she understood what I meant when I told her not to take him on. Of course I'm the person that started him doing the kind of work that he's made such a success of. When he first came to me he was doing figures and scenes from the....

Paul Cummings: Oh, mythology and Guatemala?

Bertha Schaefer: Guatemala, yes. I was in his studio one evening and saw these panels that he did as examples of his theory of art. I said, "Those things are beautiful." And for a group show that I was having at the end of the season he brought up a painting that was done in this manner that was very beautiful.

Paul Cummings: Oh, that was the one with the squares?

Bertha Schaefer: Yes, and we sold it at once to a young man who took on Jensen, at that moment became his sponsor. And that made it even more difficult for me. But Jensen got very much on his own. He was nobody for me to tangle with any more. But he's gone right along with the kind of work that I suggested that he so.

Paul Cummings: And they're very big now and very costly, too.

Bertha Schaefer: I don't go to see them. I have no interest in them. I even gave back to him one that he had given to me at the time he left the gallery. I wanted no reminder of Al Jensen.

Paul Cummings: That's very interesting. What about Charles Shaw? You've shown him for a while, haven't you?

Bertha Schaefer: Shaw has been ill recently. I hope he will recover his natural vigor very soon because he was painting in a wonderful way. I think he's had more vigorous and worthwhile painting for us in his older years than he ever did before. I think it's quite wonderful. I'm hoping that's true of Morris Kantor, too. Morris Kantor is one of my artists but he hasn't brought in one of his new paintings for me to see.

Paul Cummings: He hasn't shown very much recently, has he?

Bertha Schaefer: Yes, we've shown him.

Paul Cummings: Really? Has he had a show recently?

Bertha Schaefer: Yes, about two years ago.

Paul Cummings: It's hard to keep track.

Bertha Schaefer: Yes. He's such a wonderful painter in the use of the brush, how the brush puts the paint down. You have such a definite feeling about it. You know, painting as such has had a tough time lately. Have you thought of it that way?

Paul Cummings: Oh, yes. People like tricks and objects and all kinds of curious....

Bertha Schaefer: And it can be just flat painting. But that's not what Kantor does. He's a real painter's painter.

Paul Cummings: Oh, yes, that's true. You've mentioned Martha Jackson a couple of times. Did you know her for a long time?

Bertha Schaefer: I did some interior design for Martha before she started her gallery, when she first moved to New York.

Paul Cummings: From Baltimore.

Bertha Schaefer: From Buffalo.

Paul Cummings: Buffalo. Well, she lived in Baltimore at one point, too.

Bertha Schaefer: Did she, too? Somehow I always felt close to Martha. She's been a good friend. There were times when I should have watched my step more in business deals with her but I don't blame Martha for that. It was my own foolishness that I went along with her proposition too easily. And Martha and I have been together at different times out of town when we've gone to conventions. We were together up in Buffalo when the Albright-Knox opened their new building. It was very nice to be there with a person who knew the city. I was very fond of Martha.

Paul Cummings: Oh, yes, she had great charm. She would do all kinds of marvelous things. What about Girona, this one right here?

Bertha Schaefer: Julio Girona. Hirona I suppose; it is in Spanish. He's not painting at the moment.

Paul Cummings: Oh, really? I wonder why. I didn't know that.

Bertha Schaefer: He lost his wife a couple of years ago. She was a sculptor and hadn't gone very far in sculpture. Because I worked with him I hadn't noticed her sculpture too much. She died suddenly, it seemed to us. I guess it wasn't to the people who were around her all the time. Her great wish was that I would show her sculpture. So I did. And somehow Julio didn't go on painting at that time. Maybe he will again.

Paul Cummings: How did he come into your gallery? Did he just come in?

Bertha Schaefer: Yes, I think he just walked in. And that painting is a type that he stopped doing just at the time that he came to me. You may turn that light on to see it better.

Paul Cummings: I looked at it before.

Bertha Schaefer: He started doing much more fashionable things at that time. But they didn't take quite as well as I think the earlier work would have.

Paul Cummings: You gave Boris Aronson a show at one time?

Bertha Schaefer: Yes, I did.

Paul Cummings: That must have been fun.

Bertha Schaefer: Oh, yes. He even got Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Miller in; there was great excitement the day they came in. He's such a great scenic designer that he shouldn't have wanted so much to be a painter also.

Paul Cummings: But so many of them do. Oliver Messell is the same way. He paints and paints and paints. You know, fills rooms like this will stacks of pictures.

Bertha Schaefer: The paintings were too much Aronson, I guess.

Paul Cummings: Too much scenic design?

Bertha Schaefer: No, it wasn't quite that. But he continued being known as a scenic designer because he was so brilliant that way. He's such a darling person that you wish he could have been successful as a painter.

Paul Cummings: I met him a couple of times many years ago in the theatre and I was very fond of him.

Bertha Schaefer: You know I think Shaw would make a great person for the architect. He would do great drawings for the architect if I could make the architect sit down long enough to see.

Paul Cummings: Yes, because he has great sweep in his painting.

Bertha Schaefer: There's a new painting hanging in the gallery now. Yellow, Black and white. It's just off the Padovano show in the little private showing room.

Paul Cummings: He's very interesting. I did a marvelous tape with him. We had lots of fun.

Bertha Schaefer: He's just a very elegant person; a very elegant personality.

Paul Cummings: How has all the change in the art market affected you with the opening of more galleries and more museums across the country and more collectors and all of that?

Bertha Schaefer: I suppose it's affected everybody to a large extent, more than we like to believe it is doing. And

whether I was right to move into a building with such important galleries as Matisse and Marlborough I don't know. But I think it's good to be there.

Paul Cummings: Well, it can't really hurt, can it?

Bertha Schaefer: What it does for us I think is to get more and more of these groups that are brought around. One time a woman who came in with a group bought a sculpture.

Paul Cummings: That's the first time I've ever heard of that happening.

Bertha Schaefer: That happened; it certainly happened.

Paul Cummings: Because most of the time they just want an hour of entertainment and then they go somewhere else.

Bertha Schaefer: Well, you just wonder if any one of them is getting anything out of what they're doing.

Paul Cummings: I don't know--I've talked to two or three people who act as guides for those groups and they tell me that once in a while one of them will buy something but it really seems to be something to do in the morning or the afternoon. There are a number of dealers now who just won't let them in any more.

Bertha Schaefer: Well, that's probably what we should do. Or let them in in the mornings.

Paul Cummings: Yes. Well, there are a couple that do now Tuesday and Thursday mornings. They make it very difficult.

Bertha Schaefer: It must be difficult for the people who take them around. And in the end whether the people in the groups get anything out of it we can't see. But great was the amazement when this one woman bought a sculpture.

Paul Cummings: You've shown a fair amount of abstract painting. Do you find that there's a change in the interest of collectors now towards abstract painting? I mean after all the Pop art?

Bertha Schaefer: I think they're all more willing to look at a certain amount of realism today then they were. It's got to be a special kind of realism. I'm very anxious to see what Kantor is going to bring in when he does decide to let us see what he's been working on. That would be a special kind of realism.

Paul Cummings: You never had any interest in showing Pop art things, or the Op art people, did you?

Bertha Schaefer: I had Idelle Weber whose little drawing is there.

Paul Cummings: The little black and white, yes.

Bertha Schaefer: It came as close to it as anything. Well, this is A. M. Bing's influence staying with me; I've often wondered if he were alive today what in this market would please him and what would bewilder him.

Paul Cummings: Who did the colored shaped canvas?

Bertha Schaefer: That's Morales, the young Argentine. Which I brought here with such delight, at the time all my friends said you can't possibly take that into your apartment with all you've got there now. And I think it's done something quite wonderful.

Paul Cummings: It's marvelous. I just love the way it sweeps up like that.

Bertha Schaefer: Yes. I think it's opened up the apartment in a wonderful way. And I find that an interior designer friend agrees with me. And that's good.

Paul Cummings: You've got a convert.

Bertha Schaefer: That's the test. well, there are several designers now that do come in. They're not necessarily able to bring their clients as well. There was one in today that has bought more from me recently and plans to bring the same client back and it may be that we'll be able to place a Hartley with this client. It's not that the clients don't have the money to buy a Hartley if they wanted to; it's a case of making them see it in the right way.

Paul Cummings: I'd like to talk for a second about your designing. Before the tape started I think you mentioned the table here; it's--what? Two, three, four little tables that slide in underneath? And the chair. Have you designed other pieces of furniture?

Bertha Schaefer: I did many pieces for M. Singer & Sons. They called it Modern by Singer. At the time they were also working with Italian designers. So that Ponti and I were co-designers for Modern by Singer. And Ponti is one of the people who sent me a very delightful drawing just done for the occasion when I was in the hospital. Joe Singer happened to write him to tell him how ill I was. I often go to Milan partly to see the Ponti's. Domus magazine has shown works of my gallery. There's been a continued friendship there.

Paul Cummings: How long did you design things for Singer?

Bertha Schaefer: I guess it was about three years.

Paul Cummings: All kinds of things? How did that come about--to do furniture?

Bertha Schaefer: They saw a photograph that was shown of a job of mine. I think the photograph was printed in such a way that it made this couch look different from what it was. But it was the thing that made Joe think that I was a good designer--this photograph of a couch that wasn't right.

Paul Cummings: Had you designed the couch, or not?

Bertha Schaefer: I don't remember whether I had or not. But it was really quite aside from the point when you really came down to talking about what he wanted. And I hope that the fact that they went out of business was not due to my designing. Many people here said to me if they could only get some of those pieces now, that actually Singer was ahead of his time and that that particular type of furniture would go well right now.

Paul Cummings: This is a terrific thing for New York living where every inch counts.

Bertha Schaefer: And there was a particular dining table that I induced the boys to do as small as I wanted it to be and still it would open out to seat a good many people. It was small enough that four could be comfortable at it. It could be at one end of a living room for people who didn't have an extra area for dining; and it could open out for ten. It was a wonderful item. There are times when I wish I could get it now. But it all came at one time that somebody wanted to buy their big building where they did the manufacturing down on 19th Street and the lease was up at 57th Street; and there was continued struggle with the New York union. Imagine a firm doing manufacturing in Manhattan and trying to be in competition with people down in North Carolina. It was just terribly difficult. As Joe put it one time; it wasn't always the wages and the many holidays they wanted--they constantly wanted extra holidays for their birthdays and for every other thing. If they would just do three couches in the same time they took for two (and they could easily put out the three couches in that time); but they didn't. They really went out of business in order to get the New York unions off their backs. They couldn't have opened in New jersey or down south anywhere without actually going out of business.

Paul Cummings: Really? That's incredible. Did they re-open somewhere else?

Bertha Schaefer: No, they didn't. They went out of business and then the brother who was in charge or production went out to California where he had once lived and decided he wanted to live there. And Joe got interested in other things. It just never happened. The older members of the family were by then ready to retire.

Paul Cummings: So that was it then?

Bertha Schaefer: It just never happened again.

Paul Cummings: There was a Good Design Award at the Museum of Modern Art in 1952; what was that all about?

Bertha Schaefer: You mean since Kauffman was there?

Paul Cummings: Yes. He was there then I think.

Bertha Schaefer: He was the one who was in charge of the Good Design shows. I think he organized them. It was a little like me organizing shows at the American Institute of Decorators. When I stopped doing it nobody carried it on.

Paul Cummings: Do you think the effect of places like Georg Jensen and bonnier's and other places trying to show more modern things...?

Bertha Schaefer: There's certainly good modern coming through from those places. It's the same story that the person who pioneers the thing isn't always able to carry it on.

Paul Cummings: So at this point you still run the decorating and the gallery?

Bertha Schaefer: I'm not doing as much decorating, certainly not since I was ill this winter. When I was ill it was

quite wonderful to get flowers from one of the clients saying, "From your most obstinate but also most appreciative client.'

Paul Cummings: Well, you continue showing Europeans and Americans; quite a number of artists really. You have quite a large stable.

Bertha Schaefer: Yes. There was a time when I wouldn't think of anyone but an American. And then I decided that art really was not national.

Paul Cummings: And so you just went everywhere.

Bertha Schaefer: There are so many charming artists in Europe, and there are really charming artists in America, too. I've never had a written contract with any artist. The ones that want to leave me should heave. I don't think one should work with an artist if he's not satisfied with the way you're doing things.

Paul Cummings: Because all you have then is a lot of trouble.

Bertha Schaefer: I've decided that I don't want trouble with the artists any more. And I have a wonderfully appreciative bunch of artists. I just hope I'll be able to carry on for them. Joseph Konzal, the sculptor, is one of the people who has been with me. He's scheduled for a show next season. I've got 1970-1971 organized already. I think I'm going to show an Australian painter. It will be the first time that I will have gone that far afield.

Paul Cummings: Who is that? Is it someone we know? Or is it a new one?

Bertha Schaefer: It will be a completely new person.

Paul Cummings: Oh, great! We'll look forward to that, to see who it is.

Bertha Schaefer: It's not entirely certain yet. He's also a sculptor which makes him very much my type of person.

Paul Cummings: I was just going to say one more thing: are there any other things you'd like to talk about that we haven't touched on?

Bertha Schaefer: I don't know whether I've had too much to say about the artists that didn't act well, whether I've not had enough to say about the many artists who have acted charmingly.

Paul Cummings: Oh, that would be very interesting. You don't often get that.

Bertha Schaefer: Oh, yes, you do.

Paul Cummings: I mean on the tape. Sometimes you get one thing and sometimes you don't get anything.

Bertha Schaefer: Looking up at that little white painting up there makes me think of this man who is an architect himself who is also a painter and a sculptor who is one of the most charming persons to deal with. He lives in New York when he is not in Paris; he's chiefly a New Yorker. And that little bronze screen is by Francois Scali whose work I showed; I forget whether it was once or twice. But he's gotten very well known in France.

Paul Cummings: He does enormous things now.

Bertha Schaefer: Yes, he does. And it's not easy to bring him over. One of my very favorite Europeans of course is Eduardo Chillida.

Paul Cummings: Where did you find him the first time?

Bertha Schaefer: Someone told me that he was a good sculptor and I wrote him a note. Almost by return mail he was in my gallery. He was coming over to get an award from the Graham Institute in Chicago.

Paul Cummings: Oh, yes.

Bertha Schaefer: I came in from some errand and there was this tall handsome man. He stood up and told me who he was. It didn't seem possible that he could have answered my letter in person so quickly.

Paul Cummings: That was a fortuitous circumstance.

Bertha Schaefer: So I have put every penny I ever made I guess into Chillada. I have three early sculptures; this one and two that are at the gallery. I am constantly in communication with Gallerie Maeght in Europe who

handles him to see what else there is I can buy. If I get to Europe this summer it's probably as much as anything to come home with another Chillida. And then of course I never want to put a price on them. People ask me what the price is but it doesn't seem that one can put a price on a Chillida.

Paul Cummings: Really? Why?

Bertha Schaefer: Well, you don't know if you'll every get one again. He's doing these large things, great monumental sculpture. He has a commission to do one for the World Bank in Washington which will be probably the next time he gets to America.

Paul Cummings: The artist really has become a traveler in the last few years, hasn't he?

Bertha Schaefer: More and more and more.

Paul Cummings: Well, so has the dealer. I don't know how dealers manage who don't do a lot of traveling.

Bertha Schaefer: I've been traveling a great deal in the last ten years certainly. I expect to--hope to get over to Europe this summer. I remember the time there was the first Dokumenta in Kassel, Germany. The Gimpel boys, the Gimpel Gallery in London, told me I should go. I booked my reservations to go and got to Paris and felt that any time out of Paris would be lost. So I canceled all the reservations. And then had a change once more and went. And I guess that is the thing that started me being more and more interested in European artists. I never want to miss a Dokumenta. I was at the last one.

Paul Cummings: They stress sculpture, too.

Bertha Schaefer: Oh, yes, they do.

Paul Cummings: That's interesting. I wonder if there's a parallel between your interest in sculpture and the fact that you do interiors and move objects around in space and that sort of thing?

Bertha Schaefer: It could be. The fact that I'm very conscious of the object in space, just as you put it, the space in painting and the space that you feel in sculpture is very important to me.

Paul Cummings: But painting is different because it's usually flat or something, but here you've got real....

Bertha Schaefer: But if you look at a painting a while it isn't flat, you don't see it flat.

Paul Cummings: Oh, I know. But here you have actual three-dimension rather than illusion.

Bertha Schaefer: Yes, you have. I think it could be that I have a particular understanding of sculpture.

Paul Cummings: Because even the furniture design is very three-dimensional.

Bertha Schaefer: Yes. And of course the way I laid out the gallery. This gallery we built, you know.

Paul Cummings: It's a large room.

Bertha Schaefer: With a column. People sometimes ask me when are we going to get rid of that column, as if it weren't holding up the fuller Building. We're glad we have the column. It gives us place to hang drawings at times when the rest of the place is sculpture.

Paul Cummings: Do you think there are any other people or events or activities that you'd like to talk about for a while?

Bertha Schaefer: I'm terribly interested right now in this young John Safrey who is arriving from Memphis tomorrow who will be showing his transparencies with us on Saturday along with Mickey Benoff who has been known in New York, but it's a completely new thing for Safrey. He's known in Memphis but it's another thing to get him out of Memphis and put him on view in New York. I couldn't be more interested than I am in whether we'll do something right for him. And I don't know just what the problems are going to be in installing this show. There are four crates of things that have been received by the trucking place that will deliver them to us uncrated. They will come on Friday morning and we have an opening on Saturday.

Paul Cummings: So it's going to be a busy weekend.

Bertha Schaefer: A busy day to get the Padovano's out and the others installed. When museums take weeks to install shows...I hear that the Marlborough had two weeks for the installation of those great Henry Moore's.

Paul Cummings: And you have a day.

Bertha Schaefer: I wonder just whether one day is enough to undo one show and put up the other one.

Paul Cummings: Are you still active with things like the American Institute of Decorators and the Architectural League?

Bertha Schaefer: Yes, I am without serving on the committees. A.I.D. is having a convention in New York at this time; I just don't feel that I can take time from the gallery to go. But I'm still a member. I pay dues.

Paul Cummings: You're also a member of the Art Dealers Association?

Bertha Schaefer: Oh, yes. Well, that's very important.

Paul Cummings: Do you find that a really useful association from the dealer's point of view?

Bertha Schaefer: I think it's nice to know the other dealers, for one thing. And there are times when a bit of information sifts through, like how to handle the estate of a deceased artist, how to handle things coming through customs. I don't know that I've ever managed to take sufficient advantage of knowing what is the most economical way of getting things through customs because we got started with one firm and seem to go on with that firm.

Paul Cummings: It's very expensive sometimes. Customs charges and all of that.

Bertha Schaefer: Oh, of course! And when there's a dock strike it means that Kennedy International Airport gets completely jammed. Once we were putting on an English show and we just barely got the things out of Kennedy because of the dock strike. Things were piled up so at Kennedy nobody knew what they were doing there. We need all hands to be working. And then once in a while there a Teamsters strike. And sometimes there are these heavy snows that not only keep the people marooned but keep the trucks from working. Thank goodness we can't fear a snow storm for this Friday when we've got to get things in and out of the place.

Paul Cummings: It's supposed to be warm. Okay. Well, I really don't have any other questions unless, as I said, there are some other things you'd like to touch on which I haven't discovered here.

Bertha Schaefer: I'll probably think of everything that I'd like to record....

Paul Cummings: It's always that way. Three days later.

Bertha Schaefer: Yes. Or an hour later.
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