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Oral history interview with Clay Spohn, 1976 January 9-February 5

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Clay Spohn on January 9 and February 5, 1976. The interview was conducted at Clay Spohn's studio in New York City by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

PAUL CUMMINGS: It is January 9, 1976 and it's Paul Cummings talking to Clay Spohn in his studio in Grand Street. So you were born in San Francisco, right?

CLAY SPOHN: That's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Had your family lived there a long time and did you grow up there?

CLAY SPOHN: Just a moment - is it necessary to talk above this?

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, no, that's fine.

CLAY SPOHN: Is that all right?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Shall I tell you about it?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Please do.

CLAY SPOHN: My father was born in Pennsylvania near Philadelphia. His ancestors came about 1700 and settled there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where were they from?

CLAY SPOHN: From Germany. My mother was born in California but her grand father, let's see, he came from Germany but we are a mixture of French and German. In the Revolutionary War he was an American colonel but he was of English descent. So I'm rather happy about this combination because I feel it's antagonistic but still has to so I feel that the ideas I work with are something like that, they're all interlocked and sometimes conflicting and so forth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did he come to go to San Francisco?

CLAY SPOHN: Well, as a boy he went to work for the Hile Hooper Company. He went to work when he was fourteen. When he was eighteen Mr. Hile sent him to the Pacific Coast as Pacific Coast representative for the company. So he built up his own business being a manufacturer's representative and having an agency for the various products such as Carnation Milk. He introduced Carnation Milk to that market. He was the first person to do it. In 1909 Mr. Stewart, the President of the Carnation Milk Company asked him to come to Seattle to pull—to save the company from going into bankruptcy. My father was considered a very good salesman. He went up there as sales manager for six months. Let's see, in 1906 I was about eight years old or something like that, So he did that. And Mr. Stewart said to my father — my father's name was John Harry Spohn — "John, you'll never have to worry. You'll always have Carnation Milk as one of your principal items." But anyway, years later Mr. Stewart became blind and deaf and he didn't know exactly what was happening. The man who became sales manager of the company—well, something happened and he said I'm going to fix John Spohn. Which he did. They took away his position. It broke my father's heart and nearly nearly killed him. Especially right after the Crash.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you live in Seattle for very long, or was it just for that six months?

CLAY SPOHN: Just for that period of time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And then you went back to San Francisco?

CLAY SPOHN: Then back to Berkeley. We were living in Oakland. I was born in San Francisco and we moved to Oakland. Well, it was a wonderful experience, as a boy. We lived in this wild, wonderful old Victorian house that was sort of going into a state of deterioration. There were wonderful gardens. It was called the Hunt estate. It led up to upper Piedmont but was just below. There were several old estates there at the Bay that were quite

old. Mr. and Mrs. Hunt were living there at the time; they were in their nineties. We moved over there I guess when I was about four years old. That was before the earthquake and fire.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you there at the time of the earthquake?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. You see, I was born in 1898, November 24. We had animals and birds. I was living in this wonderful wild country with fields and groves of trees. There was a long lane leading from our house, the lane went from our place across the Bridge with a little creek and then past the Hunt house and then up to the street. The place was gradually being sold - what's the word for it?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Cutting up the sections - development.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. So we were in just before that. It was a wonderful experience. And it was an inexpensive place. My father had a partner Tom Cook. Their territory covered Los Angeles; Portland, Oregon; Seattle; Salt Lake City, Butte, Montana, Denver and, let's see, well, anything west of Chicago; it included the Hawaiian Islands and whatever.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic. Do you have brothers or sisters?

CLAY SPOHN: I have one brother that's all in Virginia. He was an inventor and a bit of a scientist, a combination of many things really. A good friend of his, a man named Cornelius Keller who was the chief metallurgist for the Metals Separation Company of America you know they have mines all over the world, I don't know what's happened to him. But anyway, Mr. Keller was a very brilliant man, he was an intellectual. He said that my brother was a walking encyclopedia. My brother is older than I, he's a wonderful scholar. I was a very poor scholar because I was interested in immediate living and life. My brother was always planning for the future and became a wonderful scholar.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you start drawing as a child, were you drawing things?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. My mother bought me a drawing board with chalk and you
turned it—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes, with pictures ——

CLAY SPOHN: I began by copying things. I loved nature and animals. That's the thing I'm working on now. I'm working on a new approach, something I – I should have gotten to it years ago. I did a little bit but right now I'm – as soon as I get back – I'll work with it. I'm terribly excited about it because it's working out beautifully. I'm writing on it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's great. How did you come to go to the California College of Arts and Crafts at such a – what – at about the age of twelve?

CLAY SPOHN: I mother was for it because she was a painter. She won prizes when she was eighteen or something like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was her name?

CLAY SPOHN: Lena Schaeffer. Her grandfather crossed the Plains in about 1853. Then he sent for his daughter from Pennsylvania – who was my mother's mother – I think she was thirteen at the time. He didn't want her to go across the Plains because that was dangerous at that time. So she had to go by way of the Isthmus of Panama. You would take a boat to the Isthmus, cross the Isthmus, and pick up a clipper ship on the Pacific side at Balboa and then up to San Francisco. She was a wonderful person. She used to tell me stories about early San Francisco. Fantastic stories. I have photographs here of all this, not for the subject matter but wonderful photography taken in about 1916, 1917. I don't like to talk — I feel as though — well, it doesn't matter — but I feel I should tell everything, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I'm Interested in — you know, what was that like, because a ten-year-old, twelve-year-old I guess when you started going to the School of —

CLAY SPOHN: Oh, yes. It was run by Mr. and Mrs. Meyers. It was called the Berkeley School of Arts and Crafts. And then later it moved just across the Berkeley line into Oakland and now it's called the California School of Arts and Crafts, I think; or is it called Oakland School of Arts and Crafts. I think it's called California School of Arts and Crafts. I think it affiliated with the University of California. But the fact that my mother had been a painter, well, she did it just for the love of it, in those days there wasn't any such thing as competitive spirit if there is such. She always said that I was artistic and she wanted me to go on with it. So I went to Arts and Crafts. During the months of the school year I'd go on Saturdays, weekends; during vacations I used to go during the week. I remember we worked with watercolor; I didn't get to work with oils at that time. I remember making designs,

working with designs in linoleum and creative things. I got a great deal out of it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What schools did you go to — elementary, high schools?

CLAY SPOHN: The first school I went to was the Piedmont Grammar School. It looked like a big Victorian type of architecture I guess. It was in Oakland before you get up into Piedmont. Do you know that area? Of course, it isn't there any more. Well anyway, I had some wonderful experiences there. But I don't want to get – I could tell you so many stories about … You know, like in painting, I feel that I have a lot of things to say, or things that I want to get off my chest, or record, or share with others or something like that. One of my basic interests or philosophy in regard to art is the idea of sharing, the idea of sharing, exchange. That's something that would take a long time to go into. My idea in writing or painting, too, is to share. I believe that in my painting I'm aware of the fact that I'm sharing something. There from my point of view it's a certain kind of communication. I know a lot of artists - Dugmore at one time said that art is not communication. A lot of people have said that. We1l, it's not communication in the literal sense of communication but it is as far as its communication of aesthetics and feeling meaning, feeling associations, things you – well, maybe not consciously so but —

PAUL CUMMINGS: We1l, but it comes out.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. If somebody gets something from it the thing communicates something.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. That's true. Let go back to the schools again.

CLAY SPOHN: My first school was the Piedmont Grammar choo1. There I fell in love with a little girl. No, the first girl I fell in love with was a little girl by the name of Pinky who lived near the Hunt estate. That was when I was five. Then when I went to grammar school I fell in love with another girl.

PAUL CUMMINGS: All the way through.

CLAY SPOHN: I took music lessons. My mother was enthusiastic about cultural things. She wasn't a social person at all; she had no interest in social life or anything like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of music was around? I mean if you took piano there must have been some —

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. I'll tell you about that. Do you mind if I smoke?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Go ahead.

CLAY SPOHN: Of course, at that time I didn't know anything about music. As a matter of fact, I didn't know the difference between good music and classical music. I don't think I was aware of the difference. I'm not sure. But anyway my mother sent me to Mrs. Wilson's School of Music which was a few blocks from where we were living, south of where we were. My mother wanted me to study cello. I said, "oh no, no, that's too big." She said, "what about violin?" I said, "no," I'd feel as thou I were a sissy because I was an outdoor person, very active, extremely active, fond of running and so on. She said, "what about piano?" I said, "all right, I'll settle for that." I didn't know anything about music. But this was a wonderful experience. It was a progressive school. The first thing she did was to get us to compose with chords, work with chords. I didn't stay there very long so I didn't learn very much. Actually I didn't have a natural feel in for music I think. But 1ooking back I regard that as a nice memory, you know, the idea of working with, beginning with fundamentals rather than talking about it. So I finally gave it up. I don't know what – let's see – well, there was an interruption. That was before we went to Seattle in 1909. When we came back we moved to Berkeley. Let's see, yes, I was still going to Oakland. We went to Berkeley, we lived on Prince Street just the second house from the — there was a vacant lot then a house on the corner, I mean next to the corner of Prince Street and Claremont Avenue in the section of Berkeley called Claremont; there was a residential section there. Oh, yes, Helen Willis, the tennis player, lived near there and she used to practice on the tennis courts near the Claremont Motel. That was years later. Then my father built a house on the street that was almost opposite Prince Street called Wildwood Avenue — Wildwood Drive or Wildwood Avenue. It was number ten Wildwood. The house is still there, I guess. I'll show you photo of it later. Both my father and mother had wonderful taste in every thing — well, I mean in material things. They weren't terribly knowledgeable in the ways of the world but they had this great love for the beautiful, you know, in every sense, ethically and all that. My father had a wonderful reputation I found out later on. In San Francisco years later when I was at the University of Califonia I had students tell me that their fathers told them that my father was considered one of the best business men in Sa Francisco. Which made me feel wonderful and proud.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you o to the University to study?

CLAY SPOHN: Well, let's see, can we lead up to that?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Okay.

CLAY SPOHN: In Berkeley I went to the Grammar School which was near the deaf and dumb asylum. I don't remember the street. When I was in the eighth grade they sent the eighth grade students to the McKinley School, I forget whether it was called preparatory—it was part of Berkeley High School. I was there for a year or a year and a half. Then I went to Berkeley High. Then I was at Berkeley High I lost interest in studies I was too high-strung, became terribly high-strung. I had to be active.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you interested in sports or anything like that?

CLAY SPOHN: I was but — oh, yes, we had a little football team, a rugby team. Let's see, what was the name? Well, we had a little fraternity, a secret society when I was in grammar school. Yes, that's right, there was one in grammar school and one in high school. It was against the law, you know, you weren't supposed to have secret societies. The one in grammar school had a football team. I wasn't good at baseball but I loved football because I used to run; I loved to run; I was pretty fast I guess. Then I went to Berkeley High. I should have gone in for sports. I've forgotten why I didn't. The society in grammar school was called Sigma Kappa. The secret society in high school was called F.F.U. In college it was something else. I don't believe in fraternities especially in college. The kid stuff was all right. But the initiations were terrible. I had to hold a match upside down like this. I had to hold three of them till they were completely consumed. Oh, gosh, it was awful.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's always an excuse for somebody else's fun.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. There was real hazing. There's a law against it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was the Augusta Military Academy

CLAY SPOHN: Well, I wasn't getting along well in high school. I was riffing. I had some good friends but they were out for fun, just fun. I was wasting time. I said to my parents I want to get away from this, please send me away some place, I must get away from my good friends. I was skipping classes and all that in high school. So they looked around at ads in magazines. My mother read about Staunton Military Academy in Virginia. It's where President Roosevelt went I think, or he was there?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Maybe. I don't know.

CLAY SPOHN: It a well known school down there; the Military Academy was well known. So we went there. This was in 1916 or 1917, it was the year before the United States got into World War I. We were in the hotel and my mother was talking to the manager at the hotel, the manager or whoever it was, and he said don't send him to Staunton, they beat the kids at Staunton. Why don't you send him nine miles up the pike here to a military academy run by the Rollers Brothers – the Rol1ers Augusta Military Academy. So she went up to see them and took me there. I should have gone to the other place because the football team beat me up.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It didn't make any difference.

CLAY SPOHN: It didn't make any difference. A year of that was enough. I won't go into it. We had some wonderful experiences there skiing and all that only instead of skis we used ice skates. I don't know how we did it. We used to go skating, we'd run ice skates on the road, you know, there'd be these ruts and one leg would go up this way and the other leg would go that way. I tried skates on the hill, oh, we used washtubs and anything that would slide. I almost killed myself on skates.Anyway, then I returned home. Let's see, where were we living then.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Back to Berkeley?

CLAY SPOHN: My father built another house over in Piedmont, they were building it while I was away. After I came back it was finished. So then I joined the Navy. By that time the country had been in the war for some time. My brother was in the Army. I went in the Navy, but I was only in for four and a half months and then the war was over. Oh! I remember! Yes, when I came home from Augusta, let me see, I went to — I was planning to go to the University of California. It was during the summer of 1918. I've forgotten what happened in the spring because I left Augusta Military Academy at the end of 1917. So I was out of school during the last part of the winter, and the spring and summer of 1918. I went to work in a shipyard in Alameda where I was a checker, I was checking materials. Then when the school term, let's see, oh, I needed more credits to get into the University of California. Oh, no, I enlisted in the Navy and signed up for electrical school. In four and a half months the war was over. The armistice was signed November 11, 1918. But I didn't get out of the Navy until December 3, 1918. So I was in for about four and a half months. Then I needed extra credits. So I went to prep school in Berkeley to get some more credits at a place called A to Z. I went there until the fall of 1919.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's when you went to Berkeley to the University?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes – let's see, the university classes started in the fall, anyway I started in the middle, so it must

have been in the spring term.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, the winter?

CLAY SPOHN: The winter, yes. So I was a half—year late on that. So I was behind a couple of years anyway.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you intend to study at Berkeley?

CLAY SPOHN: I would have preferred to take general courses of some kind; I would have preferred to take literature. But the fact that my father was in business both he and my brother worked or me to major in economics. Which I did. Which was a big mistake. Obviously it was a waste of time. So I just took the courses I liked anyway. I didn't care, so I took courses in literature and art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you study painting with anybody there?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, Pernau and Jensen. He had a class in illustration. I realized that I'd have to earn a living sometime so I thought well maybe I'll just become an illustrator and paint on the side because I considered painting a private thing, whereas to be practical I thought that maybe I'd become an illustrator. I didn't like the idea of commercial art. Commercial art I thought if I had to, I would. All this time I was going to art school in San Francisco on Saturdays. After I left Arts and Crafts in Berkeley, I was about twelve years old. On Saturdays I went to Mark Hopkins Institute of Art; actually it was the California School of Fine Art but they called it Mark Hopkins Institute of Art. It was part of the original San Francisco school started in 1880.

Oh, yes, then I dropped out of college for one semester. I said I wanted to paint. I spent one spring semester at the Mark Hopkins Institute of Art. It was where the Mark Hopkins Hotel is now. It's on the ruins of the old Mark Hopkins estate. You know, Mark Hopkins was one of the men who financed the building of the Southern Pacific Railway. There was the Big Four - Hopkins, Crocker and Huntington Stanford. Well anyway, then one summer I went down to Monterey and Carmel to study under Armin Hansen, a painter. I think he's Swedish, quite a guy. And somebody by the name of Breen was down there. That was a nice experience. That was one summer. I painted every chance I got, you know, in time off. Let me see now. Oh, yes, I remember I took a course in commercial art I think it was at the Mark Hopkins Institute. Then the following summer I got a job at the outdoor advertising company that does business all over the Pacific Coast. Somebody named Kleiser?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. They have all the billboards?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you do for them?

CLAY SPOHN: I went there and applied for a job. They said they didn't have any opening. I said, well, I'm studying art and I have to have, I need experience. They said well, we don't have a place for you. I said I'll work for nothing as I need experience. I kept pestering them. Finally, they said, "well, we'll try you out." I just did flunky work for a week or so. Then they started giving me something. I was doing billboards for the valley towns and other towns. They gave me a whole list of these things. I did one of these at home at night after I did my day's work. After I did the day's work at the place I'd take these home and I turned out – let's see, they paid me only fifteen dollars each. I think I made six – whatever it was it amounted to ninety dollars or ninety-five dollars. I'm slow at figuring. But it was ninety dollars for one week. I was exhausted because I had to be there at eight o'clock in the morning for work and at home I'd work until three in the morning.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You went to the Art Institute there at one point? That was a little bit later, though?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, well, it's called the Art Institute now at that time it was called the San Francisco School of Fine Arts. Well, anyway, at Foster and Kleiser I just got fed up with it. I became so exhausted. The reason I mention this fact is it has to do with things that happened later and the reason that I decided to become a painter instead of an illustrator or a commercial artist. It all had to do with this experience of getting tired. I worked too hard. I knocked myself out. Now is it all right if I —

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, keep telling me more about it.

CLAY SPOHN: Because I could give you a summary of the whole thing but then it wouldn't make much senses this way I think I can put more meaning into it. So then I just got fed up. —

PAUL CUMMINGS: You went to the Art Students League sometime then.

CLAY SPOHN: That's what I'm getting to but let me see, something happened before that. My parents were going East and they asked me if I wanted to come along with them. They were going through the Panama Canal on a... Oh, yes, that's it they were going to New York on a Pacific mail liner boat with Tom Cook, my father's partner in

Los Angeles. You'd get the boat at San Francisco, the boat would go to Los Angeles and then down the Coast and around. So we went through the Panama Canal, stopped in Havana. That was a wonderful experience. Let see, how was it? When I was working at Foster and Kleiser that was before I went to Berkeley to the University. That's right. Then I went to Berkeley. I was taking courses in Southwest history and things I liked. I was taking some economics courses, too. But the dean called me up and said, "You're way behind on your proper credits that you need and you won't graduate as you should." I said, "Well, should I change my major?" He said, "no, it's too t late." I had been there for two and a half years, I was in my junior year. So I told my parents; I said, "I want to study art; I'm going to flunk out of college anyway." My mother said, "well, what about your father's business? Don't you want to be in your father's business?" I said, "no, I want to study painting." So they were taking this trip through the Panama Canal. To backtrack a bit, when people would come from different countries arid so on to visit San Francisco, my father would meet them and he'd have me drive them around and San Francisco show them the San Francisco Bay area and the University arid all that. I met one man, Doctor Riveria from Cuba. So when we took this trip we stopped off at Havana. We had wonderful experiences which I won't go into. But we were driving in a carriage just seeing the countryside and we passed a golf course. I said, "Stop the carriage! I see a friend over there." They said, "Well, you don't know anybody around here." I said, "Well, I know this man, this is Dr. Riveria who visited us in San Francisco." So we stopped the carriage and he was so happy to see us and he begged us to stay over but we said we couldn't. But anyway that was another prize experience of that trip. So we boarded the boat again and started toward – we were supposed to stop at Baltimore and then to New York. We got into a hurricane. It was the most terrible, frightening experience I've ever known. Everything broke on the ship, the cargo shifted and listed. We finally got through it. I'll never forget passing Cape Hatteras. Oh, gosh, I could tell you more about it... Oh this is all applied to art. There was a family aboard, they're gypsies, their name was that writer, the author who used to write stories about the gypsies the life of the gypsies. He himself was a gypsy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you mean Leon Uris?

CLAY SPOHN: No, it begins with a K. I'll think of the name sometime. I met the son and the family, the mother and father. The sisters were small youngsters but the son was about eighteen or nineteen, the time these stories were appearing in magazines.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I can't think of the name.

CLAY SPOHN: I guess he's been forgotten. He's Romanian. They were gypsies. The reason I mention this is because later on I met the son in Paris. Otherwise, I wouldn't bring this up.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Anyhow, you finally got to New York?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Well, the boat couldn't go to New York because we came in to Baltimore harbor and it was a risk; it almost capsized. Nobody wanted to go on. So we said we'd take the train to New York which we did. I said I'd like to look around at the schools the Art Students League and I'd like to stay here. So they went back and I stayed. They agreed to put me through, gave me an allowance. So I stayed two years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How was the League and what was it like in those days?

CLAY SPOHN: Wonderful. Wonderful. Very good. Now I know Clyfford Still mentions the League. He went to the League . Well, maybe it has changed from that time. When I went there it was fine for me. But this was before he was there – I guess he was there in the thirties.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, he went there later.

CLAY SPOHN: But this was 1922.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you decide what you wanted to do at the League or who you were going to study with?

CLAY SPOHN: I just inquired with Mrs. Webber. She was a wonderful person. I think she was Max Web wife. I'm not sure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You don't remember offhand.

CLAY SPOHN: She was at the desk downstairs. I don't know how I decided. But the first man I studied with was Guy Pene du Bois, a great, great fellow in many ways. He was also a critic. He told us wonderful stories which I won't go into.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was he like as a teacher, though?

CLAY SPOHN: As a teacher? Well, the thing that he emphasized was three dimensional form. He emphasized

making objects look solid, kept talking about: solidity. I became interested in reading the writings of critics like Clive Bell and – but I didn't go along with Clive Bell and – or let's see, did I – wait a minute, there are two of those critics that are well known that wrote books—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, Roger Fry?

CLAY SPOHN: Oh, it was Fry I didn't care for. Clive Bell was all right because he spoke on "significant form". Well, but I had to redefine that; I redefined it for myself as being – which definition I preferred – "significant arrangement of form". At that time I wondered what is "significant form". Well, anyway... And then I read *Sticks and Stones* by Lewis Mumford. I got a great deal out of that. Oh, yes, and then Havelock Ellis's book *The Dance of Life*. And between those two, oh I got —

PAUL CUMMINGS: A lot.

CLAY SPOHN: So I felt, well, I wanted to get a variety of attitudes. I studied with George Luks and Kenneth Hayes Miller. And I did some etchings with Joseph Pennell. And I took scu1pture. Let's see, there was a man by the name of not Leonetti but something like that, I've forgotten the other names. One person I avoided was Bridgman.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why?

CLAY SPOHN: You know people who were there just looked down their noses at Bridgman; it was so corny, all by formula. I'm against formula that is conscious.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of classes did you have with Pene du Bois, was it drawing or painting?

CLAY SPOHN: Painting. He liked very much what I did. He used to invite me up to his place at Westport. I went up there and met his family and his daughter. It was his second marriage, or his wife's second marriage so he was a stepfather. Beautiful children. And than one of the boys I guess - I don't know if it was his son - I think he went into the theater or something. And I met him and his wife later on in Paris when I was there. How much time do you have?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, it's fine.

CLAY SPOHN: If you want me to I could cut it short.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No. But who did you meet at the League that was - did you have any particular friends there?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Most of them were sort of nuts. I don't know, I always was attracted to the unorthodox and the sort of person that's kind of unconventional. I was a sort of fun-loving guy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. You know, in California at that time was there a museum in San Francisco which had very much in it or not?

CLAY SPOHN: At that time? Well, when I went back – I was here for three years – I went to work. I was a winner and did a mural decoration. In 1924. I got a job from an architect, from a real estate company and made a diorama. It was in a window on Fifth Avenue at the corner of 42nd Street. It was there for years. It was of a place called Melba Farms out on Long Island, I guess the name has probably been changed to Flushing or something like that. But I made this diorama of a golf course with little men on it matchsticks this big driving and everything. I did the whole thing in ten days. It almost killed me; I worked night and day. They were in a hurry for it. It had a big painted backdrop and it had to have houses, casts and automobiles, toy automobiles reduced in size and perspective and under a bridge with a train trestle and then the diorama the sky in the background and this golf course. I just can't do this kind of work; it would kill me. I just couldn't meet deadlines. Oh, before I got this job, the way I got this job as a winner I had photographs of this. But then I had been working for the New York World as an illustrator. I got a job here. I was making little drawings of a fellow, the human pathos of everyday life, you know. I was ready to throw them out. I was doing them on my own, free-lancing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were those subjects they would assign to you?

CLAY SPOHN: I used to submit thumbnail sketches and bring them down and they'd select the ones they wanted. They'd select a few and then I'd go back and draw them up, and take them down. I think I got thirty-five dollars apiece for them. Then I got the job with the real estate company and that knocked me out. I thought, well, I'd like to be a mural painter if I had to make a living. I'd do big murals instead of commercial art. And I knew I had to make a living because I kept getting letters from my mother telling me, "you have to get to work, you have to find a job for yourself; we can't support you for the rest of your life," and all that sort of thing. So I had the pressure on me. But I kept getting these ideas about little verses – I still have some somewhere – about people, and I was thinking of having my own column for a newspaper. So I was torn between a literary existence

and painting. And now I realize that it's all the same thing. I resolved it that way. What's the difference between whether you paint or write? It's all art. Or live properly. So I'm very happy about the outcome, that it happened this way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I want to ask you a little more about the League. You were there for about two years?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about George Luks? What kind of classes did you have with him?

CLAY SPOHN: Well, he had a classroom next to du Bois and I used to hear everybody laughing. I used to go and watch him, you know, just to find out about techniques and things. So I learned something from that, too.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you study with him long?

CLAY SPOHN: Just a few months. Du Bois was the first man I studied painting with and then George Luke and Kenneth Hayes Miller. Kenneth Hayes Miller was an intellectual type, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was Miller like as a teacher?

CLAY SPOHN: Fine. He talked in poetical terms. For instance, a girl was painting a little pot, a still life and to get her to see it as a point of view he said, "Look how it holds its head." Which was a rather nice statement, you know, so that she wouldn't think of it just as a literal thing but as a sort of poetic circumstance or situation or condition. I remember I kept asking him a lot of questions. He said, "The trouble with you is you think too much."

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mean Miller?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. He was rather angry about that. And I started doing abstractions, you know, and contriving—

PAUL CUMMINGS: What started that?

CLAY SPOHN: Oh, I did that in 1915, I saw the Armory Show. It was out in 1915 – the California Exposition – The Panama –

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, The Panama Exposition, yes.

CLAY SPOHN: The Panama Pacific Exposition.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That had the Futurists in it, didn't it?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. It had everybody. It had Leger, Picasso, Matisse and everybody. I don't know whether the whole show went out there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But that show was different from the Armory Show though.

CLAY SPOHN: Was it?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: Well, it was right after it. The Armory Show was 1913 and that show was 1915. So maybe it was imported directly from Europe – I don't know. That's right, it wouldn't have been the Armory show. No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, because that went to Chicago and Boston. I didn't know that you had seen that exhibition.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. In high school I used to work with abstraction. I was doing abstractions. I thought they were sort of fun. These were sort of fun things. I started to work in abstraction in 1915. Because they were in the papers all the time. I had a lot of fun doing those. It was like inventing, you know. My brother was an inventor.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did Miller say if you were doing abstractions in his class?

CLAY SPOHN: I made some drawings and showed them to him. He said, oh, you can do that at home; don't do that here. Oh, I remember some thing interesting. Years later I came back and visited the League. I just went around and looked in the classrooms. This was when I was coming back from Paris, I guess it was 1928, or the end of 1927. I happened to pass George Luks and Miller coming out and I overheard Luks tell Miller – he said, "I told the students how to paint an ear, I told them to do it in three strokes and the damn fools believed me." He thought that was humor.

Oh, when I was at the League I met Calder. We were friends there. And other people, I don't know what's

happened to them. Jack Ford. There was one fellow who had particular ability, he was studying with du Bois, he was from Pennsylvania. I wish I could think of his name, I think it was an Italian name. He and I were good friends. He was the monitor of the class. He was an awfully good painter. Du Bois was all for Rubens; he liked Rubens very much. And Titian and so on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about Boardman Robinson? Wasn't he there?

CLAY SPOHN: Oh, yes, I studied drawing with him. He was good. I learned a lot from him. I loved his work. I had seen his work before I studied with him, some illustrations for the Bible. Very impressive things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He was very popular in the twenties, wasn't he?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, yes. I liked him very much. He was a Canadian.

PAUL CUMMINGS: let me turn this over.

[END OF TAPE 1 – SIDE 1]

[TAPE 1 – SIDE 2]

PAUL CUMMINGS: This is Side 2. Somebody else that I—

CLAY SPOHN: We haven't finished with the League yet—

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, but I was going to ask you about Nicolaides who—

CLAY SPOHN: Oh, Nic yes. Let's see, I get mixed up. Now Nicolaides was a sculptor, wasn't he?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Drawing. He wrote that book The Natural Way to Draw.

CLAY SPOHN: Oh, yes, that's right. I liked his attitude. And then who was the other one, the sculptor? I can't think of his name.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I can't think who would be teaching sculpture then.

CLAY SPOHN: I took a lot of things, I took courses in animal anatomy.

Oh, before I forget about it, when I was with Ezra Winter we were working on—Do you know who he was?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes.

CLAY SPOHN: I think he was head of one of the art departments at Yale, mural painting. I wanted to study mural painting when I was at the League. Du Bois spoke of Fontainebleau, the murals. I thought I'd like to do murals then.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What interested you in mural painting?

CLAY SPOHN: I thought I could make money at it, make a living. My big concern was making a living. I was suffering through that because I'd get these letters from home; my mother used to write such things as the dollar is your best friend. So corny. Oh my gosh. So I was torn between these two things: the thing that I instinctively wanted to do, and the thing that I had to do from a practical point of view.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who else did you know at the League? What other people were friends of yours in those days?

CLAY SPOHN: Well, oh, yes, there was one fellow there that was wonderful - Fiske Boyd. Did you ever hear of Fiske Boyd?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes.

CLAY SPOHN: Whatever happened to him? He was the most talented, the most avant-garde student in the school. He was great. He was picked up by the dealer that handled Albert Ryder.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, Frederic Newlin Price? Ferargil Gallery?

CLAY SPOHN: No. Montross.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, Montross, yes.

CLAY SPOHN: I think Montross handled Ryder; or at least he had him --

PAUL CUMMINGS: He handled him at one point, yes.

CLAY SPOHN: But anyway Montross handled Fiske Boyd while he was a student.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic.

CLAY SPOHN: He did wonderful things, fantastic; he was sort of a combination between abstract and surrealism – although he wasn't aware of being surrealistic. But fanciful, wonderful stuff. Gosh. Landscapes that looked half like women and so on. Some of the students were interested in Blake. I was, too. Everybody was. Albert Ryder was wonderful. He still is – one of the greats, I think. How do you feel about him?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Sometimes; sometimes not.

CLAY SPOHN: Of course, Van Gogh and his color and all. I just mention that because --

PAUL CUMMINGS: You went to Paris in 1926, right?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What happened between l924 and 1926?

CLAY SPOHN: Well, I'd like to speak about that. But now I want to say some thing about the League before I leave it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Okay.

CLAY SPOHN: I remember what I thought I liked, I remember the days, the times, the occasions. And all that clicked that is for me as far as my attitude was concerned. Well, Fiske Boyd - I'm not quite finished with Fiske Boyd yet.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Okay.

CLAY SPOHN: Now I didn't know him - well, I knew him but not intimately. Oh! Yes! This is all leading up to Binion and other people. One of my friends at Berkeley High School was John Howard. Do you know who he is? He went to England.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh - he has a brother Charles?

CLAY SPOHN: There's a Charles Howard. Do you know the Pacific Coast artists very well?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Some of them, yes, through the Art Association.

CLAY SPOHN: Well, there's the sculptor Bob Howard, that's his brother. Then there's Langley Howard who was going to the League the same time I was. I remember he always looked like he was starving. I took him to lunch one time and paid for it. He was sort of embarrassed but he finally accepted. He was a very close friend of Fiske Boyd. I mention that because the Howard family are all artists and they're wonderful. Bob Howard married Adeline Kent who was a sculptress. Betty Parsons used to show her. She was killed in an accident a couple of years ago. The father was the dean of architecture at the University of California. He designed and built many of the buildings. The library and campanile I guess he was responsible for. And all those buildings I think are very handsome. Do you know those buildings?

PAUL CUMMINGS: No. I've seen pictures of them.

CLAY SPOHN: I haven't seen Berkeley since those days anyway. The Howard family lived in North Berkeley. The father was an architect. Bob was a sculptor. Charles became a painter; he did some writing at first in Paris, then went to painting. He was a great friend of the McAgys and all. Charlie and Langley are artists. Langley Howard married a Phillips, I think it was, a sculptress. And they had a sister who was an architect and married an architect. The whole family were all artists. And, oh, yes, there was an older brother, the oldest one, who was an architect in San Francisco, I guess he's still there. He married an Italian woman who was an artist. Isn't that odd? She was well-known out there. I haven't heard about her for some time now. She was a painter. She was well-known out there during the forties. But you can find out by... Of course, Langley Howard now lives up in Nyack or some place.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, does he?

CLAY SPOHN: And his wife sculpts. But he has turned into an illustrator. He's extremely talented. I saw a painting of his one time. I think it was based on a scene in a short story *The Open Boat* by Stephen Crane. Have you read that?

PAUL CUMMINGS: No.

CLAY SPOHN: It was considered the most wonderful short story ever written by the Short Story Club in London. It was very crude but wonderful, full of feeling. He started out as a wonderful painter. During the WPA days he did some fine murals, frescoes, and some fine paintings. I think he had a nervous breakdown. After the nervous breakdown he went into illustration and did a number of covers for Scientific American; probably still does. Then Charlie went to England and married Madge Knight who was a commercial artist. They lived in England for a long time. During the war they were in San Francisco. Then after the war they went back to England and from England they moved to Italy and Charlie is now in Italy painting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh!—

CLAY SPOHN: I used to communicate with him. I have letters from him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I've been trying to find him I knew he wasn't in England any more.

CLAY SPOHN: I can find out - I know how to get in touch with him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, terrific.

CLAY SPOHN: I'll tell you later. Madge died a short time ago I heard from somebody in San Francisco.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What happened between being at the League and deciding to go to Paris?

CLAY SPOHN: Well, before I leave this I want to tell you something about Calder. May I?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, sure, fine.

CLAY SPOHN: Everybody was amused by him. He was a wit, you know, a great wit. He'd come around having fun. He'd make cartoons and he'd show them to people. That was when he was making those drawings for *The Circus* as an assignment. People would be sitting there very seriously and he'd come around and show them his cartoons and make them laugh. He'd spend a lot of time in the cafeteria. The playboys would spend a lot of time in the cafeteria. I took him seriously. Oh, I was going to write a book, a scenario for a film. It would be serious. I had a long story. It goes into Paris. If I ever had the time I'd do it. I've started it, I have the beginning some place. It's all fact, it's all based on fact. It would be serious because his father was so serious. His father was sort of ashamed of him. I had it from a girl in Paris who knew the family. In his own biography he mentions this girl's name. I met her in Paris. She said she was supposed to look up Calder. She asked me, "What is he like?" I described him. She said I don't want—But I admired him. He had something, he had an awful lot later, but not at the League. Nobody could have seen what the possibilities were for his future. But one thing he did while he was at the League. Norden – I think that was the name of the man who was monitor in du Bois' class, who was a friend of mine, he was such a good painter in the old tradition, he could model forms with ease, he had a great deal of talent - but anyway, I think he was the one who told me that Calder never had a feeling for working on a painting in the school. But he would take a canvas and go out on the street some place, he'd take a set of pliers, wire, hammer, nails, tubes of paints in his pocket, brushes, everything he needed; and if the wind was blowing he would nail up the canvas to a telephone pole and wire it up so the wind wouldn't blow it and with a big crowd around he would happily paint.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, marvelous.

CLAY SPOHN: Now I don't know how I found that out. I can't remember whether it was Norden who told me, but I think his name was Norden. He disappeared; I don't know whatever happened to him. But if any body at the League would have become a good painter it would have been this fellow. But anyhow, I wanted to mention this because it gives you a picture of what Calder was like in those days. He was so darn likable, friendly and all. But he was just having a good time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He still does.

CLAY SPOHN: Oh, yes, sure. Well, anyway, you asked what happened between then and the time I went to Paris. Oh, I worked – I didn't attend many classes the last six months I was at the League— I worked on the ceiling for the new Chamber of Commerce Building in Washington, D.C. We had a section to do. We worked on the lettering of the columns, you know, the Roman lettering. And here's an interesting things Stanford White's son who is an architect came over and showed us how to do the Roman lettering – lettering about like this – to be stenciled. But it's rather interesting that he was Stanford White's son.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, Bob.

CLAY SPOHN: Is he still around?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, he's a sculptor now.

CLAY SPOHN: Oh, really? But he was an architect then or was with the firm. Well, I thought that was rather interesting. He had a studio at the top of Grand Central Station, a wonderful place. When I went there to get the job he said he didn't need anybody. I showed him my things. He seemed rather interested. I said, "I'll work for nothing." I didn't know any other way to get the job, to get in. He said, "Why would you do that'?" I said, "I want to learn I have to about mural painting. I have to serve an apprenticeship some place." He said, "Do you mind sweeping the floor?" I said, "No." So for the first few days I swept the floors and cleaned the bird cages. But it was wonderful, right up on the roof.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? I've never been up there.

CLAY SPOHN: There' s a catwalk, I used to go up there and take the catwalk and you could see the people up there behind the glass, you know, that glass to the east end when you're downstairs you look at the big glass thing - from the catwalk you can see people walking across. They had this big studio, the penthouse studio, a great big place and sun and light and birds, wonderful. They had a staff of about 300 or 400 people and myself. Then they had an Italian fellow who painted dry fresco, you know, what they do in Italy on a building. I learned something about that technique. That was why I was there, I wanted to find out all about this stuff. I was there all summer. I had became ill. I had become a health nut. I was going on all sorts o fad diets. I wasn't eating properly, wasn't getting the right nourishment. I was eating in restaurants, eating vegetables that were canned vegetables and I wasn't getting the proper nourishment from them, I was terribly run-down. By the end of 1924 I was just knocked out. I said I'm not even going to work that summer, maybe I'll go home to San Francisco. So I left. I remember I had to wire my folks and tell them that I had to come home. I went out by way of Canada.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? Across the top?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. By way of Quebec, Montreal, Winnipeg.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Pretty open barren territory.

CLAY SPOHN: I stayed at Banff, but not at the big hotel, but at a little hotel called The Homestead that some Canadian people told me about that was inexpensive. It was near the railroad tracks. I used to go up to the hotel and swim in the hot water baths. This was in the late fall, October or November and to have snow all around and these hot baths! And, oh, the Canadian Rockies are wonderful. The train had an observation car.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, terrific.

CLAY SPOHN: By the time I got home I was just terribly ill. I got so that no matter what I ate it didn't agree with me. I was reading books on fasting. So I started to fast. I got so I couldn't walk from the front room back to the bedroom in the apartment. The family was living in an apartment in San Francisco at that time; they had sold the house because they wanted to live in San Francisco, it was too much of a trip back and forth. My mother said, "You'd better have the doctor." Finally I gave in and she called him. He came. He said, "What do you think you're doing? What's happened?" I told him. He said, "Do you think you know more than the doctors do?" He said, "You've got to stuff yourself for a year, lay off the vegetables, eat plenty of protein, meat, chicken and so on; not too much fat." So I did. And I got so much energy I hadn't smoked...We1l, when I was in New York I didn't smoke. Before that I smoked, the wild, fun-loving kids I went around with used to drink a lot at weekend parties and so on, and for a young kid that's not good when you're still developing, it's the worst thing in the world your health. I became a health nut. I used to run about twenty miles a day when I was at the League, well, not really run, part run and part walk. I used to get up at five o'clock in the morning, take a cold shower in the middle of winter, go out and walk five miles before breakfast, come back and have breakfast, then walk again, and try to work. And I'd be so nervous I had to keep running to get over my nervousness. I was in a state of gradual starvation and I didn't know it. And it made me nervous. So after two years I had used up all my energy. In other words, everything I did was extreme. So I didn't smoke during that time, I didn't drink anything. So when I went to San Francisco and the doctor told me I had to stuff myself for a year, I did so and I began to feel wonderful. I had so much energy – you know all those San Francisco hills? –Well, when I'd come to a hill I'd run up the hill and walk down. I had to. And then I found myself running for a streetcar instead of walking. I kept running all the time. I thought maybe if I'd start smoking again that maybe it would calm me down. So I did. I started to smoke. I remember I worked two weeks at trying to get back into the habit. I couldn't. It took me ten days to two weeks before I could get accustomed to it. I did get accustomed to it and it did calm me down. The family was taking a trip to Los Angeles. They used to do that a lot, go back and forth to different places, New York and so on, I mean for business reasons. They were going down to see Tom Cook and so on. They asked me if I wanted to take the trip along with them. I said all right. We went as far as Carmel. Do you know Carmel at all?

PAUL CUMMINGS: No.

CLAY SPOHN: You know, Pacific Grove and all that. It's an old Spanish town, historical. At one time it was the capital of California during the Gold Rush days. So when we got there I said: "gee, I'd like to stop off and do some painting." So I stopped off there instead of going on to Los Angeles. I stayed there for a month or two. And then – no, wait – I'm not clear about how I got there. Let me think – that's right, they came back through Carmel after I was there for a few months doing some painting and drawing. Oh! Wait! May I go back?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Go ahead.

CLAY SPOHN: When I first went home to San Francisco and began to get my health back I made two paintings. I have a photograph of them. I don't know where it is. You see, that's why I can't throw things out, I have to go through everything piece by piece to find these things. But I still have a photograph of it, the painting has been lost. It was one of the best paintings I ever did. I'm more proud of that painting than of anything I've ever done since. It's a painting of the City Hall, it was very, very simple, but gosh. It was about this big. People wanted to buy it. Later I took it to Paris and people there wanted to buy it. I wouldn't sell it. Finally I gave it to a girl thinking it was just a temporary thing. I left it with her for years; then a few years ago when I sent for it, it was gone. She sent everything else back. You see there were a number of girls who lived just across the street from me, they were high school teachers. They had this wonderful place in the country down at Woodside outside of San Francisco. They used to have wonderful parties, you know, invite a whole lot of people down. They had room enough for everybody. It was a hundred-year-old farmhouse and a barn. We fixed up the barn for them. They had a section for the men, sleeping quarters for the men and a place for the women. They'd have a hundred people come down. So they wanted me to lend them - help them decorate the barn. They had a dance floor in the barn and a bar. So I lent them some of my best paintings. Darn it, I have a few of the things that were returned a few years ago. But this one she said was lost. Well, somebody stole it paintings were missing. Gee, I'm sorry about that painting. Maybe it will turn up.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, pictures do.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. I think the gardener got it, or somebody where she lived later in another town when she retired. So, let's see, what am I referring to here?

PAUL CUMMINGS: The time before Paris – between the League and Paris.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. I made this painting and a few others – but that was the – I have a drawing here on canvas, I made a little drawing, I drew a charcoal sketch – it's better that way. I still have it. It was returned to me finally. But, you see, this was years later when I lent these things to those women. It was during Prohibition. Prohibition was in the thirties, 1930, 1931, 1932. It was after I came back from Paris that I lent these paintings. That was a big mistake. It was my own fau1t.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But what happened before you went to Paris though?

CLAY SPOHN: Yea, that's what I'm trying to think…After I went home to San Francisco and filled up and got well I went to Carmel - my folks were going to Los Angeles, they asked me if I wanted to go along, I said, yes, they picked me up, so I went down there. When I got down there I said I wanted to stay Hollywood because I wanted to get a job in the film industry, in the technical end of it. I had some ideas I'd like to work with. You know, I still had this idea in mind of trying to make a living for myself. I was sort of ashamed of – the family were very decent, they were wonderful, generous helping me out. But still my conscience was bothering me. I thought I should be on my own. I thought maybe I could make some money in Hollywood. So I got to Hollywood and stayed there. I got a place on Highland Boulevard across from the Hollywood Bowl. It was on the corner of La Cienega and Highland, it was called the French Village. There was a series of houses from different periods of French architecture. The architects were Davis Brothers, young fellows, who designed these houses. Are you sure you don't mind this?

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, go ahead.

CLAY SPOHN: You see, I never did use anybody to help me get a job. For instance, my father's partner Tom Cook was the best friend of Douglas Fairbanks. I never once used him. I could have used him to get into the technical end. But I wanted to do it on my own because that was part of the fun. And I've found out that in anything of that kind it's much more fun to do it on your own. And I wanted to see if I could, too, you know. So I went all around to different studios applying for jobs and all. I remembered that when I was on that boat trip to New York when I was going to the Art Students League I played golf with Jack Fairbanks who Douglas Fairbanks' half-brother. All of us did. We went up to the Flintridge Golf Club. So I knew him slightly. He remembered me. He had had a stroke and couldn't talk. But anyway, Tom Cook brought him over to my place and he said, "Do you re member Clay?" And he explained things. Of course, the man couldn't respond but Tom Cook thought it might help him to have a visit or something like that. So I was in one of these French Village houses. There was a

series of them on Highland and then up toward the intersection of La Cienega and Highland was a tower on the tower house. A man from Sweden by the name of Eric Stockduster lived in it. He was a former moving picture actor brought over from Sweden by Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks; they invited him to come over. He became my best friend in Hollywood. There was a stream, a little creek running down in back and lawns and trees, and houses back over there. Just south of me next door was a fellow by the name of Chisholm; he was a landscape architect. Next door was a woman who was from Texas. I can't remember her name. She has been mentioned in writing as being a very close friend of Gary Cooper's father, Judge Cooper. Gosh, I'm terrible at remembering names. I've done pretty well so far. But I keep forgetting them. I can't remember her name. But anyway, she was there. Then there were a couple of other houses; there was a young woman living by herself. Then in a house in that section lived Mitch Leissen who was assistant director for Cecil B. de Mille. And if you'd go up - well, there was a way of going up into the attic in these two-story houses, go through the attic and down into the neighboring house. I never did. I didn't know Mitch Leissen too well. He had his own crowd. But he was there. Everybody there was real friendly. This woman next door was a widow. She had a baby that, oh, I guess was maybe nine months old or something like that. She gave parties. She'd invite Judge Cooper and Gary. That was when Gary was first getting started, he was in but he wasn't known; it was at the very beginning of his career. This was in 1925. I moved in to this place in the late summer of 1925 and stayed there until January 1926 when I decided to go to Europe. So while I was there I went around to some of the studios with ideas. I had some good ideas, I think. They still haven't done them the way they should. They've done a little bit, not from my suggestions, I don't mean that. But I think they've progressed a little bit from what they were doing at that time. But anyway, Stockduster had been a cartoonist during the Balkan wars. He was very skilled in folk art, folk painting, you know the sort of thing, except that he had his own style. He had decorated the interior of all these houses to pay his rent. He didn't have much money. The thing was that when he came to Hollywood he became ill, he had an ulcer, he had to be operated on, part of his stomach was removed. So he said he didn't want to have anything more to do with moving pictures. And from then on he didn't. But he had all and others these friends. There was a whole Swedish colony. Oh, just two weeks before I arrived they gave a big party for Greta Garbo out in the garden, al fresco so to speak, under the trees on the lawn, big tables out there and all. I never met her. I see her here once in a while. We look as though we know each other. No, really, I believe - I've run across her two or three times on the street and I've thoughts why don't I go up to her and say, whatever happened to Eric Stockduster. He was married to a beautiful blond Swedish woman. They had a little boy and a girl. I have a photograph of them some place. That's why I have to keep looking, I have all these things filed away - a photograph of himself written on it to me also with — Ilse was his wife's name or was it his daughters? His son's name was Puck.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But anyway, you finally decided to leave there and go to Paris, right?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. He was working as a contractor painting houses. I hate to be – I seem to be name dropping but, you know, I mean this is all factual so why not—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

CLAY SPOHN: But anyway, up on Whitney Terrace he had contracted to paint, decorate this house for the woman who lived next door. It was just newly constructed and hadn't been lived in. This man did the most fantastic things. Now his paintings inside were trivial, things over the doorway like, oh, cherubs, Leda and the Swan, little love stuff, ribbons, all that stuff that was trivial. But he painted over the door...the main room was a gabled window thing – roof, you know – I don't know the technical names of these things that come down to support it and there was a beam between the peaks of the gable or pitched roof -

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, I know.

CLAY SPOHN: Anyway, he painted all that and it looked like majolica ware, brilliant colors, beautiful stuff. He gave it an enamel-like quality. He painted the garage doors in three colors, three tones: green and red and yellow and, I think, blue so one color comes through another. It was one of the most rich things, a real true visual sensation. Well, the woman didn't like it. She thought it was too gaudy. So my job was to paint a mural on the entrance. The entrance was, let's see, there were steps here, then there was this corridor, and this was an arched column which opened out. See, the street was here, three arched columns here, and this long wall, and then the entrance doorway here. So I made three arched panels to coincide with the three. And so I paint — I developed a technique of my own. I couldn't use fresco because the wall was already there and I didn't have the time. But I developed a certain technique. I painted three panels representing, let's see; theater, music, poetry. Then in each one I incorporated a little bit - a symbol - philosophy - medieval illuminations, that kind of configuration, Terpsichore, you know, a little bit of Greek; and then *Hamlet* on a stage, a small stage, speaking *Hamlet*; and, oh, then for the playwright, I had a little inspirational thing with wings, angel wings coming down, inspiration, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, a Muse.

CLAY SPOHN: I enjoyed doing it. I still have a few of the drawings for that around some place. But I didn't take photographs of these. I'm a nut for not having photographs of things. It never occurred to me to take photographs until some time in the fifties, I guess. Well, I did take a few photographs in the thirties. Gosh, why I didn't have photographs made I don't know because all this was destroyed later. Now this was next door to Valentino's house up on Whitney Heights or Whitney Terrace. A lot of the moving picture crowd lived up there. Well, that's why I mention all this. I hope you don't mind my dropping names because I didn't know those people anyway. But they were there. So this woman tried to get Eric to stop because at the entrance way Eric had design of Leda and the Swan making love. She was shocked by that. It shocked everybody. They were mostly from the Middle West and were rather puritanical in their type of mind. So anyway Eric was supposed to pay...He wasn't paying his crew because he was in debt. He was terrible that way in paying, in meeting his financial obligations. He paid me something, he was supposed to pay me every week. I got sixty dollars. I was supposed to get $900 for the whole job. Oh, and I had furniture brought down from San Francisco to furnish my place. I had a pair of oil and a Japanese tonsu and stuff arid I lost it all. The Swedes swiped it when I left for San Francisco to make arrangements to go to Europe. When I came back it was all gone. I had to stay at somebody else's house, a house that Stockduster arranged for, another Swede, actually Armin Hansen. He was killed, otherwise he probably would have been well known by now I guess. So I paint it. And, gee, I liked it. But the woman was shocked by all this, just shocked. She was from the Middle West, maybe Oklahoma or some place like that, I don't know. She was a nice person. But anyway, I don't know whether she did it or whether said the neighbors did it – she said that the neighbors were complaining. One of them got up a petition, he came around, he came to me and said: "you see I have all these names, they're all famous, well-known names and they want to have this eliminated." You know, they couldn't take it, they said it was too bright. I thought it was beautiful. It was a happy thing. Of course, it would get by today. And so it had this petition and Stockduster couldn't me pay me and my money was running short. You see, I had saved up a little money from – well, I made a bit of money when I was at the League on that lettering job I told you about. And I saved it. I didn't tell my folks about it. They didn't know I had it. I had about $1,500 saved. I was trying not to spend it. I had the idea in the back of my mind that I wanted to get to Paris. So I was working on this. Before I finished it I went to the Fox Studio with an idea. I thought, gee, maybe I can get a job. I felt I wanted to get in to get an interview. So I called up the directors' society or whatever it was and got a list of names. Jack Otto was one of the directors. So I took that name. I think that was the name. I took that name and went to the Studio not knowing whether I'd get in or not. They had a cop outside the door. I went to the information desk. He came over and wanted to know what I wanted. I told him. I had it all cooked up. The cop said: talk to the girl. I told the girl at the window – I don't remember too clearly – who I was. She had a telephone and she said, "Otto is in conference right now. Is it important?" I said, "Yes, it's very important." She said, "Well, just a minute. What's your name?" I told her. She phoned in. He wouldn't know whether I was somebody important or not. He said, "Well, ask him what he wants to see me about." I said, "Tell him it has to do with stereoscopical motion pictures." I had an idea for creating sets in such a way creating the illusion of three dimensions. A couple of years before that I had seen the film The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari and I was so impressed with it; it really sent me. I thought, gee, maybe I could do something like that; I don't mean distortion as much but maybe to emphasize the situation. I had some good ideas. I said, "Tell him it has to do with stereoscopic effects in motion picture." They couldn't get me in faster. They were in conference, a big board meeting of about twelve people. They asked me to explain it. I started talking in art terms. They didn't understand what I was talking about. I said: all I want is to get a job and work on the sets. I said I can't describe it without doing it. I said I'd like to have a job and I can show you. I could have done it. He said, "Well, our backers won't allow us to hire any body unless there's some proof or evidence. We're in the middle of production right now. We'll be over in three months. Can you make a set or something, a model showing this?" I said, "Yes." And I could have. But I didn't intend to. So I went back. Well, at least I thought it over afterward. I thought, well, gosh, in 'three months my money will be all gone. I was getting some allowance from home. I was under some pressure to get a job. So I thought, gee, should I stick this out. I visualized the whole thing. There were so many phonies down there. The whole place was a phony place. That's another story I know. But the whole place was such a phony place. Gosh. Everybody was faking it. Big shots all talking big shot talk. So I began to think about it. If I get a job I'll be stuck and I might never get back to painting for several years. What should I do? Am I going to be a painter or am I going to be a businessman or whatever? So I thought, gee, I'm going to go to Paris before it's too late. I heard about a ship that was leaving from New Orleans, a French Line boat called the Chicago. It belonged to the French Line. It might have been bought from the United States. Well, anyway,

I got in touch – I wrote my folks. They told mea come on up and we'll talk about it. I went up for two weeks and we talked about it. I bought my passage. My mother wept and my father had a twinkle in his eye, he liked the idea of big adventure. They said, "How are you going to live?" I said, "I've got a little money saved." They said, "What happens when that runs out? You'll be starving." I said, "I don't know. But I'm going." They said, "Well, we can't let you go over there without any money." As a matter of fact, at that time from the $1500 that I had, I think I had left only $335. I bought French francs with it. They were down 25 to a dollar approximately. They said, "We can't let you go over there and take a chance on starving. We'll send you an allowance." I said, "I'm not asking for it but if you do I'll accept it." If my money did run out and if I had to come home or something they would have sent me enough to get home, I imagine. But anyway, I was encouraged by this landscape architect Chisholm. He gave me introductions to people there. Chisholm when he was going to college he paid for his

college…May I tell you the story about how he did it? Is that all right?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I'm more interested in what you were doing really.

CLAY SPOHN: He was sent by the Indian Motorcycle to advertise it and they paid his expenses every summer and so he met a lot of people and so he gave me a lot of introductions. And there was a man in San Francisco, an artist, I can't think of his name, who gave me a letter of introduction to some artists, to people living in the Latin Quarter. So all this was good.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

CLAY SPOHN: So I arranged to go. I went back to Los Angeles and cleaned up everything there. My mother was supposed to call for the furniture but she wrote me that the Stockdusters had it and wouldn't give it up. So I lost everything there. That wonderful Japanese tonsu that I had since I was a kid. Do you know what they are?

PAUL CUMMINGS: I don't remember offhand.

CLAY SPOHN: It's a chest of drawers of wonderful whitish wood with black metal. I had had it since I was eight years old so I was very fond of it. But that was all right. But the Swedish element and Stockduster were like that. I was supposed to get in touch with him, but I never did. In those days I couldn't write letters. Anyway, I went to New Orleans, was there for two or three days touring around while the boat was getting ready. I went to the boat and walked around. People were coming in and cancelling their passage; they simply wouldn't take it, it was too old a boat and too small. It was one of those tourist boats. I think there were about seventy-five or eighty-five people who had signed up for the trip but only twelve went. Wouldn't that make a wonderful title for a book, *The Twelve Who Dared*?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Or *The Twelve Who Sailed on the Chicago*.

CLAY SPOHN: Oh, gosh. What torment. One of the reasons I wanted to go this way was because they were going to stop at Havana, the Canary Islands, the Azores, I think Biarritz in Spain. It would have been a wonderful trip. But since so many people cancelled passage as they were leaving the captain forgot about all that and cancelled a lot of the food. This was sort of a bad omen. I should have known it. But I thought what the hell, I was all set up for it and I wanted to travel. So I went aboard. There were two young fellows from the South, college students going, they said they were going to go anyway. They were trying to save money so they were going in steerage. It was a cabin class boat. Cabin class didn't cost very much though, I don't know, maybe about a hundred dollars. It wasn't expensive. It was the most inexpensive way of going that I could find. So I lost the bureau. Stockduster hadn't paid me. I knew he couldn't afford it so I forgot about that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But this boat got you to France though?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. But before we got into the Gulf the boat caught fire – at least we thought it did. We could see smoke just pouring out of the air ducts. We never found out whether there was a fire or not. Anyway it was put out before we got to the Gulf. And we got into bad weather. Ships were sinking all over the Atlantic. It was a storm but I don't think it was a hurricane. It was a bad storm with waves fifty feet high and the boat had to steer into them. It was awfully bad. In the middle of the Atlantic one of the engines broke down. They had to take it out and put it up on deck, had to repair it. There were two hundred people in steerage and twelve passengers. The captain had the two young college students come up, he invited them to stay upstairs instead of being in steerage. Which was decent of him. There was supposed to be an orchestra but they didn't have that; all that was cancelled. The purser had one of those cane guns and he used to shoot seagulls. I hated him for all that stupid stuff. They were just fooling around, they had just enough power in the one engine or motor or whatever it was to keep headed the right way and not capsizing. They were flopping around there for about three days until they got it fixed. A direct crossing should have taken - I don't know, maybe about nine days or something like that but it took us about two weeks. We were all shaken up by the time we arrived at – let's see, was it Le Havre or Cherbourg? – Le Havre, I guess. I stayed overnight. I took the train to Paris the next day. I couldn't speak French. In Hollywood before I left I did, try to take a few lessons in French but I'm terrible at languages, just terrible. Oh! to go back about studying music I had taken some lessons in ragtime and that was sort of fun but I was never good at it. Now I have ideas about music. I just wanted to bring that in. I'll tell you about them some other time. So I arrived in Paris. And, gosh, I was depressed. I don't know what was – it was rainy and dark and drizzly and I was alone and I couldn't speak the language. All I had was an address where to go. Somebody said, "go to the Hotel de Deco in the rue de Deco across from the Dome, it's cheap, it's not expensive." I don't know who suggested that. Which I did for a couple of nights. And then I ran into a couple of young French guys. I'll tell you about that. Do you want to hear about that?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, who were they because we only have --

CLAY SPOHN: Jean Pierre de Cartier - he was a baronet, I just mention that because he said it - and two of his

friends. They wanted to learn English. I met them the first night I arrived. I'll tell you how it happened, I should tell you this, I think all this is important; but I don't like to digress into something that you don't think is useful.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There's only about a minute left on the tape.

CLAY SPOHN: I could tell you on the next one. Anyway I got into Paris. I was alone. I got my trunk and other baggage. Why I brought a trunk over I don't know, I guess I had some paints or something in it. I don't remember. I got to the hotel and got signed up. Then I went out. I had the names of these people to look up. One was Nina Hamlet or Hammett, an English writer. And Jack Breen [Green?] was another one I kept asking about. I went around asking English speaking people if they knew these people. They said "yes, Jack Breen [Green?] was here but he's not here any more" or "he left, he's out of town" things like that. They told me to go and ask somebody at the Select Cafe or at the Rotund or some place; look around. I kept looking around trying to get information. I felt so alone. Gosh, I was desperate. I thought: what can I do. Oh, I met this woman, I think it was Nina Hamlet [Hammett?] or somebody that knew her. She said, "Why don't you go to Dely's and have a good time for yourself?" or something like that. I inquired about it, I asked where to go and she said Dely's, that's where all the Americans go, it's on the Right Bank. She said you'll meet some people over there and later on you can come back and meet people at the Select or the Dome, and so on. I said I thought I'd do that. I got a taxi, told him to take me to Dely's. I got there, it was jam packed crowded. It had a chorus, a floor show and people, big crowds, just jammed with young American guys, French people, everybody, young people. There was a bar there. I was drinking at the bar and talking to people and having a good time. See, before I left the United States I had read James Branch Cabell's book *Jurgen*. I wasn't going to tell this but I guess I might as well. What? It's all factual stuff.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, we're just about down to the end of the tape.

[END OF TAPE 1 – SIDE 2]

[TAPE 2 – SIDE 1]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Let me say this is February 5, 1976 — Side 3 [side 1 of second tape] - Paul Cummings talking to Clay Spohn in his studio on Grand Street. I think on the last side we had gotten you to Paris in 1926.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I want to ask you how you - you went to the Academie Moderne at one point?

CLAY SPOHN: Academie Moderne, yes. Well, the reason I went there, I knew what I wanted, I was really inspired, you know, had been for some time. I knew what I wanted to do but I didn't have a place to work, I couldn't find a studio. So in order to – I was painting in my hotel room temporarily – I went to the Academie Moderne.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why did you pick that one - for a particular reason?

CLAY SPOHN: I couldn't stand those other places. Well, for instance, the Colarossi was nothing, nothing but a sketch place.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

CLAY SPOHN: After the Art Students League I couldn't stand up to that. You know, the League in the twenties was really something.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was more, it was better --

CLAY SPOHN: It had something to offer. And then Andre l'Hote, you know, was a popular place where all the students without talent went imitated Andre l'Hote. That was a pain in the neck.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Learned a formula.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, a formula. You could tell them. Everyone in the place was just filled with little Andre l'Hotes; all over the place. So I heard about this place operated by Léger and Othon Friesz. I didn't know Friesz's work at that time and I didn't care especially care for l'Hote. But that was all right. I mean it was a bit far out in a way. So I went there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was a place where you just painted - right?

CLAY SPOHN: You painted and there was criticism but I mean I didn't care about that especially. I just wanted a place to work. And he couldn't speak English. L'Hote wasn't there. Friesz was there, so Friesz would come around you know, for criticism. I couldn't speak French or understand French because, I don't know, I just didn't

take the time. I'm not good at languages anyway. So a young French girl who spoke perfect English would interpret things for me and we became rather good friends. She had been raised in England during the war, I guess, so she had an English accent. She didn't have any French accent at all although she was French. But anyway I went there for a while. Well, it was a good experience, you know. I saw what was happening at the schools. But I was over there and I wanted to become steeped in the French tradition. At that time there wasn't an American tradition especially, you since know, the early days --

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. The Hudson River School.

CLAY SPOHN: The Hudson River School and so on. Or Albert P. Ryder who I think is one of the greats at least from my personal point of view.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What appealed to you about Ryder's work?

CLAY SPOHN: The romantic, the poetry, a great deal of poetry in it for me. I liked the impression, the strange whimsical way of thinking and the great of it mystery of it; mystery for me is something of an element; there has to be mystery of some kind.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes, if it's all explained then there's no problem.

CLAY SPOHN: But – I don't know, it's a bigness. Later during the revival of' the 1913 armory Show I saw that. I stayed a long time. I looked at everything. Of course, all the paintings weren't there. But I stayed to see what would wear well. Matisse went down. Everybody else went down except Van Gogh. I saw some Van Gogh there that were out of this world. I had never seen those reproduced. And Ryder. Those two men really stood up for me. I mean they had everything, a kind of totality.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's a fascinating combination.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Well, it has nothing to do with technique, it has nothing to do with my technique, it's not that, it has nothing to do with superficial qualities. There's some kind of depth that they both have. So naturally whatever they said, whatever element was there was so natural and so intense, I saw a lot of intensity in both Ryder and Van Gogh. The others I felt were working from the top of their head, they were working from theories and premises, things based fall on premises that fall through. They didn't have feelings from the gut, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Anyway, could we go back to Paris a little bit here.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, oh, sure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You spent - what - about two years there?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, just short of two years

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you do besides go to the Academie Moderne? Did you travel around France? Or Spain?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. I had some wonderful experiences. But I painted. I finally got a studio and I painted.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you get to know any of the Americans who were living there?

CLAY SPOHN: Oh, yes, I had many friends. One was an Englishman. And Arthur O'Neil who was a tragic person. He was a photographer who worked on the Conde Nast magazines. And then Calder came over; that was before he became known or really was fully developed. It was a very interesting thing, I was going to write a long thing about this – well, I have some place; I've written about it sort of humorously. I guess it was the first summer I was there, 1926. The terrace of the Dome in Paris was just jammed with American tourists, you know. You see, I arrived, I think, on the tenth of January. So the people... Well, shall I go back there and then build up? or shall I just—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, just say what you think.

CLAY SPOHN: When I arrived people were all coming back. Hemingway's book *The Sun Also Rises* hadn't been published yet.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. You've mentioned that.

CLAY SPOHN: They were coming back and so I mean things were - and the desolation winter [decoration windows?] were very wonderful in the spring because there was a loneliness, you know, and the tourists hadn't arrived yet. Well, anyway, when the tourists arrived the terrace was wonderful on sunny days, it was just jam

packed. I was sitting way in the back with someone and, let's see, I don't know how many seats, tables and people were in front of me. But then here was this guy with big mustaches—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Handlebar mustaches.

CLAY SPOHN: Handlebar mustaches, a straw hat and a suit with stripes not far apart, an orange suit with bright yellow stripes - well, it was brown but it looked orange , and a cane and little beady blue eyes, you know, with a sort of grin on his face coming walking up. And I ducked under the table to hide. But it was Calder. As I remembered him at the League he was a clown, you know, nice guy and all that, a lot of fun but I mean sort of clownish. So I tried to hide. Well, before he came up he was out on a ---there was a bench where the street-cars or trams or whatever they're called went by. There were two benches back to back. So he was sitting on the top —

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see, on the back.

CLAY SPOHN: On the back brace - he was sitting on that with his feet on the seat and he held a sketch pad and he was sketching someone in this crowd. He was facing them and they were facing him. And it was an old pose, you know, I got a feeling. But he was without shame. That was the wonderful thing about him. I think that's one reason he got where he did. He was shameless; nothing serious; and he had this strange kind of courage.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Do anything.

CLAY SPOHN: Do anything and never be ashamed of it. He could make an ass of himself. And that's wonderful to be able to do that. I mean I understand that's the first thing they teach you in the theatre when you're learning to act – is to be able to make a fool of yourself and not be ashamed of it. He had that quality. It was sort of frightening. But I admired him for it. So he was sitting there drawing and then this crowd you could see the people posing, you know, and he was sketching. But who in the world would have the nerve in front of all those people. Well, there was nothing wrong with it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He's always liked an audience though.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Well, there were some wonderful things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What were you painting in those days? What was it like? How would you describe the work you were doing in Paris?

CLAY SPOHN: Well, I allowed myself to be influenced by the French School of Painting except that I didn't imitate them. Well, maybe in a few little things I did become like the French School. I wanted to go in so many different directions, I thought, well, I'm here now, why not let myself be influenced and then I'll develop my own technique later. And I'm sorry I didn't go on with an idea that I had in New York when I was at the League.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was that?

CLAY SPOHN: Well, I was working in - I was doing figurative painting but I wasn't satisfied with it and I was going to get some pieces of broken bottles, assorted glass and look at the figures through that and then paint it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

CLAY SPOHN: That was before I ever heard of Soutine or saw his work. But was going to develop that because I felt that in order to create you had to break things down and then rebuild them and I felt that would be a good method of doing it. And I had been working around with a few abstractions just for the fun of it, you know, more like doodles than anything else. But anyhow I'm sorry I didn't go on with that I should have. So when I got to France I thought I'll just let myself go and be influenced while I'm here and then afterward forget it and go on and do my own thing afterward.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who did you know among the Americans who were in Paris then? Were there any particular friends who became special friends? Or --

CLAY SPOHN: Americans?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Or were they just general people?

CLAY SPOHN: Well, more or less general people. A lot of people. One was Mark Goodrich who was writing – I think he was a music critic - for one of the American papers. He wont to Hollywood later and be came a script writer. He knew everybody in Paris. He was supposed to go on that trip with Hemingway, you know, but he turned it down. He told me all about it. He said what happened. And I used to take notes; the notes I was jotting down were notes to myself and he thought I was a writer. He said if you ever want a publisher I'll introduce you

to my publisher in New York. Anyway, he went out to Hollywood and he eventually married Olivia de Haviland I heard; I didn't see him after I was in Paris. I ran into him in New York.

And then, let's see, there was a whole bunch of people. I used to know a fellow by the name of Teel Messer who was from the League. He gave up painting and became a schoolteacher later on out in San Francisco; I ran into him out there. But he knew everyone. He was the strangest fellow. He lived in place in the Village here. He knew Buckminster Fuller. He lived in the same - Buckminster Fuller lived in the same building as he did; you know, he was across the hall. And Stuart Chase was another one who was living there. They all knew each other. Now how this fellow – he didn't have much talent as a painter but he was a great talker. He had a lot of nerve and he'd just go around meeting people. He had all these contacts.

Before I went to Paris I was extremely fond of reading James Stephens, not *The Crock of Gold*, I couldn't read that. But some of his other writings were great. *Demigods* was very good. The short stories *The Angry Heart*. I liked that strange Irish wit that he had, very good, very wonderful, very descriptive. And I still prefer descriptive writing to
thematic or whatever you want to call it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Do you still read a great deal?

CLAY SPOHN: I don't - I'm a slow reader because I like the way the words are arranged if they're arranged nicely in an interesting manner. Stephen Crane's *The Open Boat* affected me tremendously, such wonderful description, pure description. It has no plot. That was wonderful; I liked that. And then twenty years ago very few Sullivan very few people know about it. It's around in some of the libraries. The very first line is poetry. It was translated from the medieval Gaelic. He was from the Baskin Islands. He just wrote it for the people of the village where he lived about what he felt, just what he felt about things. There was no plot, it was just pure description but it was poetry all the way through. And it gave me ideas for painting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way? I mean how --

CLAY SPOHN: Well, I still have – that was way back, that was in the twenties or something like that. At that time I was still thinking a little bit in terms of representational painting, I was thinking of the poetry of situations. Well, I still worked with abstract materials based on nature, not the appearance but what nature is doing, the function of nature. I'm still working on things like that, the rhythm, the patterns that occur but in an abstract way. So it had that suggestion, it suggested that kind of quality. So the go-ahead drawing is like music, you know, like notes, wonderful rhythm and counterpoint and all. So any way James Stephens was in Paris, which I didn't find out until years later when I used to see Teel Messer in Paris and he told me that he used to visit the Cafe de Lilas with James Stephens. The cafe is a block or so away from the Dome. I was furious with him that he didn't tell me at that time because I would like to have met him. He died a few years after that, I think. Now Teel Messer didn't have any influence, none of these people had any influence on my work but they were friends and acquaintances and so on. Oh, Todd Robbins was one - do you know who Todd Robbins is?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Not off hand no.

CLAY SPOHN: He wasn't a very good writer but he wrote *The Unholy Three* which was a film. He was a very short man, I don't think he was five feet, but he was very strong, he had shoulders this wide, he had won many cups in pole vaulting. He was all shoulders. He used to come around to the tables, you know, and introduce himself no matter who you were. He'd say with a big grin, "I'm Todd Robbins. I wrote *The Unholy Three*. And who are you?" He used to go out to Giverny. That was where Monet lived, you know. There was quite a group, a few English men used to go out there. I used to go out there with them. I met Jim Butler who was Monet's nephew. I had met him in Paris. Oh! Yes! I'll tell you who I knew. You couldn't help but meet these people, they were all around all the time. That was Hilaire Hiler.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes, right.

CLAY SPOHN: He was a wonderful person.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He was a character.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. He was wonderful. Years later I ran into him in Santa Fe and different places. Of course he was older and wasn't up at the exciting pitch that he was. He was a wonderful raconteur.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Didn't he play piano in a bar or something?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Well, he had his own; he started the Jockey Club.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's right.

CLAY SPOHN: I think he had given it up by the time I got there but I knew about it. He was around a lot at the Deux Magot Bar around the corner from the Dome. Once a year his father put on a big party for all the artists in the Quarter.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

CLAY SPOHN: French, American, anything. Hilaire was a good linguist, he spoke fluent French. He knew all the French artists.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why did his father the party? What was the—

CLAY SPOHN: His father was interested in the arts, too. He was a theatrical man, I mean he owned theaters in Philadelphia or some place.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I didn't know that.

CLAY SPOHN: He was very well off. So he just liked to give a big party. He would have a band, have a nice layout of food and drinks, it was in a big dance hall, it was great. I met Jim Butler there and saw him again at Giverny. He told me that Monet wouldn't let him into the place, into his grounds because his father was an American. At that time the Americans were in bad favor, as you know, for many reasons: trying to collect the war debt, the difference in the franc, the franc was down, the Americans were throwing their money around like idiots. It was offensive.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, did you come back to the United States because of the shift in the Depression, or the onset of the Depression?

CLAY SPOHN: My family was trying to get me to get a job. They were afraid that I might drift, just stay in the arts and not support myself. So they forced me to come back by cutting down my allowance. But I want to cover some of these other people. Oh! Yes! Hiler at that time was painting as a primitive. And he should have stayed with it but he became—

PAUL CUMMINGS: He had all his color theories and everything.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. He intellectualized the whole thing which spoiled everything for him. But he had great wit. He was a great raconteur. A friend of his was Arthur O'Neil he was from New York. His father was a newspaper man, owned a whole string of newspapers some place in the States. Arthur had been a photographer for Conde Nast, you know, Vanity Fair, *Haper's Bazaar* and so on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh yes, right.

CLAY SPOHN: I guess he was head man, an awfully good photographer. But he was an alcoholic and not very responsible. When I ran into him he had all his... Do you want to hear about this?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I'm more interested in what you were doing than all these other people.

CLAY SPOHN: Well, you asked me about the people, the Americans that I knew. There were so many things that happened. Well, let's see, so I one of my best friend there was Roger Ferris, an Englishman, he was a friend of Arthur's. Arthur and Ferris and myself used to go out on parties, you know. We ran into Hayter. Hayter recalled a party that we went on one night. But I worked a lot. I worked sometimes in the hotel room.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did your painting change a great deal during the time you were there?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Yes, it did. I made about 300 drawings I guess that I liked very much. The San Francisco Museum has fifty-five.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, let me move on a little bit here. What did you do when you came back? That was – what – in 1928?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes—

PAUL CUMMINGS: 1927 – 1928.

CLAY SPOHN: I came back. I was able to get as far as New York. I landed with twenty dollars. My parents sent me enough money for my fare back home. I saw a book with a facsimile of Gauguin's *Noa Noa*. It was done in collotype and there were only a hundred copies printed. So I got a copy of it. That was 1500 francs which was the equivalent of about fifty-five dollars. But that—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Took the money.

CLAY SPOHN: Set me back. But I couldn't miss the chance of getting it. I gave it to the San Francisco Museum. They have it now. They put it on exhibition. So I had to wait to get more money. Then I was just able to get to New York. That's what they wanted me to do, they wanted me to get to New York and get a job. They knew I could—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, You'd been here before.

CLAY SPOHN: But I was run-down and weak and I wasn't eating properly and I couldn't pay my rent. I was paying fifteen dollars a week rent for my room. I didn't have enough money to... In the first place, I was too run-down to get a job. But I got mixed up with a chance for a mural decoration competition in Florida. I forget what it was. So I was working on that. Well, that was a foolish thing to do because what was the chance of winning a national competition. I should have at least gotten a job some place.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you went back to San Francisco?

CLAY SPOHN: I had to, I finally had to tell them that I was ill and couldn't work and I wanted to come home. They sent me the fare. So I went home. Then I was painting there. One of the best the paintings I've ever made was an abstraction, a semi-abstraction of the city hall. Let's see, no, I had done that before that's right, I had taken it to Paris and people there wanted to buy it. I wouldn't sell it. I don't have it. It was lost but I have a reproduction of it. Let's see, what did I do. In the period when I went out from the League and when I went out there from Paris I get those two periods mixed up. Oh, yes, that's right, I—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, the Depression was on when you came back after Paris – right?

CLAY SPOHN: 1929.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You came back before the Depression hit?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. I got myself a studio on Montgomery Street in San Francisco where I could paint. My rent for the studio was paid and I had Just enough money to eat on. So I'd go down there every day and work. I had a lot of paintings; I don't know whatever happened to those things. But anyway it was behind Ralph Stackpole's stone yard and I used to go over and cut stone in his yard once in a while.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. He was very nice. He invited me to come in.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was that sculpture that you were making? Or just trying things?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, I was just playing around. It was fun. He'd give me a piece of marble and I could make anything he could put in his garden out in the country where he lived. You know who he is? He's a sculptor?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, sure.

CLAY SPOHN: He's in France now I guess if he's still alive. His son went with *Time* magazine as a photographer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's—

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, Peter Stackpole is his son. He married a little girl with a Dutch name, a painter, a darn good little artist. I think her name is Heidi.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Okay, let's turn this over.

[END OF SIDE 1 – TAPE 2]

[SIDE 2 – TAPE 2]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Let me say it's Side 4 [Side 2 of tape 2 = Side 4]. What did you do – I mean you now had the studio on Montgomery Street?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Well, I used to go down there... I didn't have any money. I ran into, or I saw John Howard. We spoke of him before.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

CLAY SPOHN: The thing is that before I got that studio I had a studio with three other artists. It was a big loft,

you know, an old deserted loft that we shared. We put up big pieces of paper to divide it off into sections so that each person could have some privacy. John Howard was working there. And, oh, yes, Jack Schnair who is a sculptor, he's at the University of California now in the art department. I've forgotten who the other person was. We used to paint there. I used to talk to John a lot. He was interested in many varied things. I remember making constructions out of wood and sandpaper and different things as feelers for tactile sensations to run your hands across. John was saying how tough it was being broke. He didn't have much money either. We both came to the conclusion – we both agreed there was something wonderful about being broke because then you have no responsibilities.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You just do what you want to do.

CLAY SPOHN: Just do what you want to do, work with your own ideas, you don't have to be bothered where all these material things are concerned.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was San Francisco like during the l930s? What was the art life like?

CLAY SPOHN: That was very difficult. I showed my paintings to a number of differentpeople. They said "well, but it looks like it was done in France, it looks like its French painting." And so it wasn't accepted by everybody; only a few persons; I took it to the de Young Museum and lately, a number of years later when Heil was there as Director. Most people said, "well, why don't you find yourself instead of allowing other influences to come in?" When I had the studio on Montgomery Street I was so discouraged with the work I had done in Paris... Although I still have some of the paintings left I eventually destroyed a lot of the paintings, not all, but some. I just stopped cold doing those canvases. So in order to make some money I thought well, maybe I'll paint some portraits. A friend of mine who I went to college with asked me if I'd paint his portrait on commission. So he used to come down once in a while on his lunch hour. He was cleaning up on the stock market at that time. I remember he came down – then he'd take me to lunch. But, you know I wasn't doing my own thing. I didn't want to paint portraits anyway.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who was that? Does that painting still exist, do you know?

CLAY SPOHN: No, I probably painted over it. I used a lot of those old canvases to paint over. When I say I destroyed them I mean I used them to paint over and I painted over so many old canvases and, looking back, I'm terribly sorry that I did.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The Federal Art Project was out there in the thirties?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, that came on later. Well, anyway, this fellow Hal Otto was with the glass department of Fuller Glass Company. His wife owned one-third of the business, I think that's the way it was. But he was sitting for his portrait the day of the Crash. He said: "I'm losing $80,000 an hour" or something like that. And he was laughing. Apparently he didn't care. He was the only person I knew it didn't affect. He said it wasn't his money anyway. He said he had other money saved up so he was just playing around with it. But he lost 2 million dollars—or $180,000 was what he lost. He was trying to build it up to two million and then he was going to quit.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see, yes.

CLAY SPOHN: But anyway he was a nice sort of fun guy. He belonged to the Hibbee Club. He wanted me to join the Hibbee Club. I didn't want to join, I didn't want any part of it. He used to have me there for lunch. It was too much of a distraction. My father was ill. Oh I had a show of some of my drawings at a gallery on Montgomery Street, San Francisco Art Museum.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was the life like for you? I mean did you go the studio every day and work?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were there many other artists around? Or was it just you and --?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. Tim Wolfe had a studio next door. He and Stackpole owned the building I was in. There were two buildings there. He was a painter but he didn't do much work. But he was a brilliant man, a well-educated person to talk to. So let's see. San Francisco was a dull place. The people just didn't have an interest in the visual arts. It's a great music town.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, music.

CLAY SPOHN: They were fine for music.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why is that, do you think?

CLAY SPOHN: Well, San Francisco never did believe in local talent anyway. Everybody had to leave to make a name for themselves. David Warfield was from there. I think he came to New York and made a name for himself in the theater. But commercial artists every body had to leave. Bud Fisher was from there and he had to come East. And Rube Goldberg had to come East. The reason for that came from the early days, the pioneer days, the Gold Rush days when there wasn't any talent, they had to import talent. So they always had the notion—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see, it was better from some place else.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, it was always better from some place else. So had I been from New York or from Europe I probably would have received some recognition.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Made a whole difference.

CLAY SPOHN: But if you're local... So they kept leaving.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When the Federal Art Project came along was it a help?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. The thing is my father died and my brother took over the business so I had to go down to work for him. But he was going into bankruptcy anyway. I worked there for about three years, two or three. So finally I hold him, "gee, Jack, I have a chance to get on the Art Project; I'd like to stay here and help out but I just can't do it; I think this is a great opportunity." He said, "Well, all right go ahead; it might help your future." So I got on the - it was the PWA first.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

CLAY SPOHN: I got on that. Then later I was on the SPA. It was an interesting experience. But it took an awful lot out of me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way?

CLAY SPOHN: I worked too hard. I wasn't eating right. I was full of a lot theories about diet. I didn't eat right. So I was always tired out. But I did quite a bit of work on it. I did a few murals. I did one mural for Los Gatos High School, an Indian legend, it was thirty-seven feet long and about eight feet high, in egg tempera. It took me two or three years to complete it. I used all small brushes. But I was prouder of the cartoon that I made for it on paper than I was of the actual work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you say that?

CLAY SPOHN: Well, I often thought afterwards I'll never make a cartoon, the life goes out of it, it becomes static, it didn't have the spontaneity, it didn't have the bugs in it that the original sketch would have. It didn't have the same vitality. It was working toward perfection.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was there a lot of politics in the Art Project out there?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. I thought there was. I don't know just how. I resented it in many ways. I would rather have been on the easel project but they needed—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mural people.

CLAY SPOHN: Murals to support, to get support of the PWA Project

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

CLAY SPOHN: But I learned a lot. I made a lithograph which I liked. I worked for two years on that—stone. But it turned out very well. It was the Greek legend, the myth of Ariadne and the Minatour and Theseus. The whole story was in one drawing and I liked that idea, you know, to incorporate...The beast in Crete and each step of the story was all incorporated in one picture. It was a sort of symbolic thing. I have reproductions of all those things some place. That's why I want to get rid of this so I can get all that stuff together.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was the life like once the Project started? You had to – what – report once a week or something?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes – I forget whether it was—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Every other week?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, but then when I was doing the mural I was at the Project anyway. They asked me if I wouldn't

be a supervisor. Kadish did a very strong mural. Did you ever see a reproduction of that mural?

PAUL CUMMINGS: I might have, yes.

CLAY SPOHN: It was at Teachers College I think. It's very strong. He and Meisner was the supervisor at that time. But I thought it was an opportunity to get some experience in mural painting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think it was a good experience for you the fact that--?

CLAY SPOHN: I guess it was a good experience because I know now what not to do. That was the important part—what not to do and something I'll never do again. I think it was a good thing. I think the Project was fine for the artists. It was good for me in a certain sense but it took a lot out of me. I wasted a lot of – well, I didn't waste time, it wasn't time wasted but I would rather have been painting my own things. So I got quite a bit out of it. I could go into detail and tell you all the work I did and all the different things but there was a lot of pressure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think that doing the mural project affected your studio painting?

CLAY SPOHN: Doing the mural? no.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean the style or anything like that?

CLAY SPOHN: No, absolutely not. Absolutely not.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They were quite separate in a way?

CLAY SPOHN: Oh, absolutely. To me they were like doing illustrations. At one time I had thought of doing illustrations to make money, I mean as a livelihood. But it would have been a compromise. No, my painting is entirely separate from that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, did your paintings change after you had been in San Francisco for a few years?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, it was always changing gradually. Or let me see—

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean there was no big shift within a short space of time?

CLAY SPOHN: No, gradually a little bit one way and then back again and so on. I did experiment a lot. I didn't – it kept me – it prevented me – I think the Project prevented me from developing the thing that I was working on in the twenties. I could explain that exactly by showing the work. But I wasn't terribly happy with the things I was doing in easel painting until the forties.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What happened then to make the difference?

CLAY SPOHN: I don't know – I was working with – I thought that eventually I'm going to get down arid paint and forget about all those other little trick things like working with satire, I was doing satirical things. The Museum that I had in 1949 that was a satirical thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did that all start?

CLAY SPOHN: I want to explain first you see during the Art Project days the San Francisco Museum would have artists go up there and work on decorations for various social events and things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

CLAY SPOHN: I used to go up there an awful lot and work arid make decorations and things. And Charlie Howard – did I speak of Charlie Howard before?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you mentioned him but not elaborately.

CLAY SPOHN: He came out there just before the war and he was on the Project for a while. His interest to some extent was in what I guess you might call symbolic abstraction. I liked what he was doing. But I liked the idea of working with what you might call visual metaphors, idea associations things. So just before the war I was having those dreams of fantastic effects, you know, in a war, in a battle of some king. I was thinking of all those fantastic kind of machines, a great display like fireworks. It wasn't destructive, it was just a great display. And I kept talking about it to Charlie Howard. And he said, "Why don't you have a show, draw those and get it out of your system." I thought that's not a bad idea. So he talked to Douglas McAgy about it. McAgy was working for the Museum as assistant to Dr. Morley.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes, right.

CLAY SPOHN: And so they arranged for an exhibition and this was before Pearl Harbor. I was planning all these things but I didn't get down to work. There was a deadline and for reason I couldn't get working on them. I had all these ideas and I kept making plans. Then when Pearl Harbor came along...The exhibition was arranged for February 1942. I didn't start working until about two weeks before the show. I just worked like mad day and night. They called the exhibition "Fantastic War Machines". But that was satire, too.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why were you interested in satire? What attracted you to that mode?

CLAY SPOHN: Well, I guess it as the Surrealists and Dada. I saw some of it in Paris, you know. When I was in grammar school and high school I was always interested in satire. Oh! when I was a student at the University of California I was art editor of the college magazine The Republican and I was working with cartoons and satire there. That's where it all came from. And, I don't know, it was just that the people that I knew, the people that I ran around with, everybody... So all this was the result of that. So I was interested in this. Actually I wasn't getting any real painting done; although I had in the twenties but I mean I had dropped it for a while.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what was the reaction to the show in 1942? I mean the war just appeared and here you were already with fantasy machines. What kind of reaction did you get?

CLAY SPOHN: Strangely enough same of the machines worked, too. There were a lot of… These pieces were sort of jokes, fun, wild. I got some good write ups. Yes, the reaction was all right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did your museum develop?

CLAY SPOHN: That was l949. McAgy - let's see - I was one of the instructors at the California School of Fine Arts. Oh, yes the school always needed to raise money and they tried to put on a ball. First of all, they put on a costume ball for which they charged a fee and raised money in that way. They didn't know what to call this. I suggested to McAgy that they call it "The Unknown," "the Ball of the Unknown." I thought that was a wonderful opportunity for the imagination for the ideas for costumes. People used to call up wanting to know what do you mean by "The Unknown."

PAUL CUMMINGS: You had them all talking about it.

CLAY SPOHN: So there were all these concessions. As part of the arrangements there were all these concessions assigned to different people all over the building. I don't know how this came about except that I started collecting a lot of scrap metals and stuff which I had always admired. I liked it just for the visual effects of it. I don't know whether McAgy suggested that I make a museum. As a matter of fact, I don't remember if I got this stuff before – I think maybe I had collected it before and I had filled a room full of it; I had collected an awful lot. So McAgy said, "Why don't you use some of that at the museum." So that's what I started doing. But in some of the recent write ups of that some people have said that these were "found" objects. Well, that isn't true. I went out and searched for the objects and got them the same as you would go out and look for paint or any kind of material for sculpture.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you mean you "looked for," I mean, as an example, what would you go and "look for"?

CLAY SPOHN: Well, interesting material, material that had some kind of aesthetic feeling to it, or something I felt I could use to make a construction. For these were constructions.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, some of them were put together?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, all of them were constructions, all except maybe one. They were all wired together. I would pick up little pieces of cast off parts of machinery and then get some wire and a piece of metal and put it all together, wire them together and make an little object of it. One had a little watch attached to it that I found; it was called "starter for a rat race", another one was a hat tree for a neighborly garden. It was a construction. They were interesting shapes and forms.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, would you get ideas for those things before you found the pieces? Or would it develop from odd pieces of material that you found?

CLAY SPOHN: They developed from — I'd find something and I say, gee, I could use that. For instance, in my kitchen cabinet way in the back I found a bottle of rice. The rice hadn't been cooked and it had all turned green and I thought, gee, that looks like little mouse droppings. So I put them in a bottle and called them mousies. Another thing: I gathered up a lot of stuff from the brush of the vacuum cleaner, stuff from the carpet, and called it "bedroom fluff". Just to stimulate thinking and give people ideas or something, no matter how vague. And then those old embryos, you know, Halloween mask, a retort about this big and a Halloween mask was an old man. I don't know – I got a kick out of those. I thought they were sort of fun.

PAUL CUMMINGS: A lot of people were very interested in that and in some ways I think it affected many of the art students who saw it.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, the students liked it. A lot of people liked it. I got a lot of fun out of it. I don't know – it was just a fun thing to do. But in a certain sense it was almost poetic for me, I mean.

PAUL CUMMINGS: hat happened to all those objects?

CLAY SPOHN: Well, I gave a lot of them away, and some were taken. After the whole thing was over it remained for several weeks in this one room. I wanted the students to use them for still lifes or suggested material or something. The best thing were the forks.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, right, yes.

CLAY SPOHN: I have reproductions over

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, I've seen photographs. Were there a lot of those? or a few?

CLAY SPOHN: Altogether there were a few, I've forgotten – let's see, maybe eight altogether. But then for the San Francisco Retrospective I made sixteen more. I had a lot of new ones made. Some were stolen so I only had three left, maybe five. So I made new ones.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you come to use forks like that?

CLAY SPOHN: I don't know - I found a lot of them in the city dump. Something suggested hands, like frustrated hands or frustrated forks. I don't know – they seemed so expressive I could make them expressive. Those were the most important. I think I got more out of those than any of the other things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Now how did that affect the other work you were doing? Or was that just a separate—?

CLAY SPOHN: It was part of the whole thing. I had them in a plastic box on a piece of velvet and they looked great. You know, they were old, they had been burned and were all rusted, some were corroded. On this piece of velvet I mean—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Contrast.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, contrast and taking something that was forgotten and discarded and making something precious out of it, or treating it in a precious manner. Well, to me here was this stuff that had been taken from nature by man and manufactured into something else and now was being turned back to nature. I liked that idea. That idea appealed to me. That's what these people hadn't – I'm trying to give an explanation because it's still the same material, it has just taken another form and what was accepted as wonderful at one point, was changed, and then rejected at another point. It was turned back to nature but it's still the same material. There's something to think about there, a spark of philosophic thought.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I want to ask you about Douglas McAgy who was very active in the forties there. How did you come to know him? Through the Museum? Or —

CLAY SPOHN: Yes, through the San Francisco Museum. We clicked; everybody clicked with him and also with his wife Gerry. They were enthusiastic, they were far out, they were all for progressive ideas or avant garde ideas. We could work with him. We had a lot of fun. McCrary was a friend of his. They had gone to school together at the Barnes Foundation. McCrary, you know, is at the University of California now. We had a lot of fun working together. They were good friends of Charlie Howard so we all became good friends. They had a wonderful sense of fun and that was good. Leah Hamilton who is a painter, a well-recognized painter in San Francisco, was on the board of trustees of the art association which controlled the dealings, the workings of the school. She was instrumental in getting Doug to be director of the school of the San Francisco Art Museum. He had a good strong background. He was from the Cleveland Museum I think it was. He was getting people to teach. Some woman said to me, "Well, are you going to teach?" I said, "I don't know, I haven't been asked." She said, "Well, you're a friend of Doug's, aren't you?" I said, "Yes. That's why I can't ask him." I didn't want to put pressure on him. So she told him. So then he asked me anyway. I was very pleased to get the job. At the time, Gerry, that is McAgy's wife, was the acting director of the California Palace of the Legion of Honor while Tommy Howe was in Europe going through the works of art in the salt mines.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, right, the art repatriation.

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. She was acting director so she got me a job at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor during the summer of l945. And that came off very well. I worked with them, they were wonderful kids, they were all great.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like teaching?

CLAY SPOHN: We1l, it was very difficult for me to express my feelings, you know. I had to put it down in writing. I feel I'm not a verbal person. I can write better than I can talk; at least I think I can. Anyhow, I had some ideas. I enjoyed it in a way; in another way it was very difficult.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you mean enjoyable and difficult?

CLAY SPOHN: I knew I a lot to say but to be able to express it and give it to others so they'd know what I was talking about, I found that to be very difficult. But a number of the students seemed to think that I did very well. John Hultberg was one of my students. And Frank Lobdell was a student; he's on the staff now. The two of them were there and they were two of my best students. They seemed to get a kick out of the way I stated things. John used to prick his ears, never did get it. But then one night I got an idea of how to explain this whole thing. I wrote out the whole thing and made, oh, maybe thirty drawings. The next morning I put them all up on the wall. And everybody wanted me to have a book made of it. They didn't want a copy of it; there were on mimeographs in 1928. Doug wanted me to take a trip back East with him – he was going back for about a week or two weeks. So I flew here with him. He said there's a chance to get your book published. I took them to Simon & Schuster. And they wanted it. They said: "could you have it finished in three months." I presented it to them as though it were an outline; actually it should have remained no more than that. I should have told them that that but I didn't. When they asked, "could you have it finished in three months?" I said "yes". I didn't do anything more about it. I should have told them that that was it. I still have it somewhere. But anyway, they all liked it. But the idea faded out.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did your own painting change during the forties?

CLAY SPOHN: I was searching for things. I was working with non-representational material fishing around for meanings. Clyfford Still arid Mark Rothko had an influence on me. I began to doubt all this French influence. They were very much against that. And I realized why should I be dependent upon ideas from Europe. They talked a lot.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you get to know either of those two very well?

CLAY SPOHN: Oh, yes. They came to the school. Rothko came out several times. Rothko used to say he wanted to go around to meet the younger artists. Well, I took him all over. Gee, he was tickled. He loved to talk. He liked to meet young people. He had a wonderful time. So we became great friends. Later on, in later years after I was here I didn't get up there because everybody was going to his place. I didn't like the idea of going to a big salon.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about Still?

CLAY SPOHN: I used to see a lot of Still. I haven't seen him in the last few years. The last time I saw him was about 1928 I guess. In 1927 I went down to visit him in Westminster, Maryland for a couple of days. He took me around he had all his paintings there, a big collection.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was he supposedly as difficult in the forties as he became later? Was he very difficult in the forties in San Francisco? or not?

CLAY SPOHN: Well, let's see, the thing is that I saw Still before I had ever met him. He was working in the Navy Yard and I was, too. I saw this fellow there. We talked about it afterward. He came to the school in 1946. One day Doug McAgy asked me to come up. He said, "I want to show you - the thing is that a man came from either Sacramento or some place up there. He left two paintings. I want to show them to you. He talked with authority and the two paintings have the sign of authority. He's coming back and I want you to meet him." So I met him and we became good friends.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was the Navy Yard about?

CLAY SPOHN: That was during the war. I did technical drawings and drafting, designing engine placements for the room, making different drawings.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was Still working in that same area?

CLAY SPOHN: He was expediter in another department. He was right next door and I used to see him every day. He looked like a college professor, a very efficient guy, you know. Have you talked to him?

PAUL CUMMINGS: No.

CLAY SPOHN: Well, he was difficult with some people sometimes. But I always got along with him because I never quarreled with him. I never had an argument with him or anything. Other people used to challenge him. I

accept people for what they are so we got along all right. The same thing with Rothko. I never had an argument with those people. They had certain ideas that I didn't have at the time and I was interested in finding out. I did go along with their point of view. Both Still and Rothko were all for creating an American School and to wipe out all the – even the word terms. They didn't want the word "abstract" because it came from France. Motherwell – I had dinner with him one time in New York, I think it was in l948 or 1950 when I came here – 1950 – there was: Motherwell, Ad Reinhardt, Barney Newman, Still, Rothko and myself. They were arguing about whether it was valid to use the term "abstract" or "non-representational" or "non-objective", or something of that kind. Motherwell wanted to use the term "abstract." Same of the others were opposed to it. There was Still, Rothko and Newman or one side and I think Motherwell, Ad Reinhardt and I've forgotten, it seems to me there was somebody else, were or the other side. So there was this bit of friction but still they working together because they were at the Parsons Gallery and were working together but still had their little differences within that group. For a long time I was undecided about whether I should seek something completely my own or should I let the French influence still remain, a certain amount of it. So I allowed a certain amount of it to remain but then I began to get away from it. It was through my contact with Still and Rothko that this change came about. So I was in New York. I had a place on 19th Street and –

PAUL CUMMINGS: What brought you to New York then?

CLAY SPOHN: Let me see. Oh! Wait! While we were still in San Francisco toward the end of the school year Still kept talking about: we'll get to New York, we'll all go to New York, that's where it's going to happen, that's where we've got to go, that's where the bunch is, our friends are in New York, there's nothing out here. Which was true, you know. You couldn't get anywhere out there. So I thought yes, gee, fine. Well, in the meantime my brother died. I had to sell some houses that we owned so I received some money from that. I had a bit of cash. I felt now is the chance to get back to New York. I always wanted to get back to New York anyhow because I always had fond memories of when I was at the League and there was something rather nice about the thoughts I had regarding New York. And this was where things were happening anyway.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

CLAY SPOHN: Then with Still saying "gee, we must go to New York" and all that... I came to New York. As a matter of fact, I quit the School and left before Still did. I came to New York and Still quit a few months later. I quit in January 1950 and I think still quit the following semester. In New York we used to go to the whole... Barney Newman was in very good favor with anybody there. Barney was supposed to be the spokesman. Still kept saying, "You know, Barney is going to be the spokesman for the group." They were at Betty Parsons Gallery but they wouldn't go into Janis's Gallery. Rothko in a joking way said, "Let's make a spy out of Clay and have him go to Janis's Gallery and come hack and tell us what's going on there."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, marvelous.

CLAY SPOHN: Then a few years later they were all with Janis. I was 1iving in this place where I couldn't paint. There were cracks in the wall that wide and the cold was coming in. The only means of heat was a kerosene heater and a fireplace. I think there were twelve fireplaces in this house where I was renting. It was on 19th Street and Seventh Avenue. I could never work. It was just too cold. In the summer I went up to Maine. I came back in the fall. I was trying to get to painting but I just couldn't. But I was seeing a lot of these people. Newman and Still were: getting along fine. Before I got to New York Still used to tell me, "I want you to meet Barney Newman. He'll like you. You'll like him. I've already told him about you." And later they became great enemies. You knew about that, did you?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: Still told me all about it. I didn't read the contents of that writing contest they had where they wrote about each other in – was it *Art International*?

PAUL CUMMINGS: I think so.

CLAY SPOHN: In the summer of 1967. Anyway, that was too bad.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In the fifties you were in New York - right?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you get involved with The Club or the Cedar Street Bar group of people?

CLAY SPOHN: Rothko took me down to the Cedar Bar. I went there a couple of times. But I didn't go to The Club. They spoke about it but I never did get there. I don't know whether —

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you go to the Tenth Street Gallery ever in the fifties arid early sixties when it was so interesting?

CLAY SPOHN: Oh, yes, that gallery on Fifth Avenue - whose gallery was that way down

PAUL CUMMINGS: On Fifth—?

CLAY SPOHN: Fifth Avenue. Could that have been...There was a new ga1lery because McAgy, was saying, “This is a gallery you should get with.” It was rather new but it was showing avant garde work. It was on Fifth Avenue or just around the corner.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I can’t think who that was.

CLAY SPOHN: Could that be - what was that woman’s name, it begins with—she used to be on 56th Street or 55 Street. She’s way uptown now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, Poindexter?

CLAY SPOHN: Poindexter? Was she down there?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Not on Fifth Avenue.

CLAY SPOHN: That wasn’t Peg Guggenheim’s Gallery, was it?

PAUL CUMMINGS: No. I can’t think who that was.

CLAY SPOHN: Where was Peg Guggenheim’s Gallery?

PAUL CUMMINGS: On 57th Street.

CLAY SPOHN: Was it on 57th Street?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

CLAY SPOHN: In 1950 was it still operating? I don’t remember ever seeing it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No.

CLAY SPOHN: It wasn’t in existence?

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, she went back in 1945 or so when the war was over.

CLAY SPOHN: Anyway, when I was in San Francisco I was familiar with the work that was being done here. Jeanne Reynal took my studio on Montgomery Street. She was buying Pollock I guess maybe to help him out because she liked him. You know, sometimes she’d buy things just to help people out. Well, anyway, they said, “You’ve got to meet the people here.” Which I did. I went along a little bit. I was involved with a girl and it wasn’t working out well so I guess that’s one reason I couldn’t paint – I don’t know. In the spring I got a letter from Corbett... Oh, you see I had been to Taos, New Mexico in the summer of 1945 with the McAgy’s. I was there for about a month. So I knew Taos. It was wonderful in 1945. It was still very primitive. Well, anyway, Corbett was in Taos. I received a note from him, a card, saying, “Why don’t you come out?” We had been good friends and he was a friend of Still and Rothko. They liked each other very much. I began to talk to Still about it. He said, “Gee, why not?” He was going to drive out to the West Coast, he’d drive me out, he’d go that way; instead of going straight across he’d go down through New Mexico. So I did. I packed boxes and boxes of stuff, they’re still here, haven’t been opened. So I shipped them... Well, no, I went out there first and decided to stay a while. I had all my equipment shipped out. So I painted in Taos, New Mexico from the spring of 1951 until the end of 1957. The reason I came back to New York was Corbett was teaching at Mount Holyoke and he had an invitation to do six months at Tulane University. So he called me on the telephone and. asked me if I would take his job for the time he was away. I said okay. I said, “How much time do I have to decide. He said, “Twenty—four hours.” I said I might as well say take it now. As a matter of fact, all my money was gone; everything. I borrowed $200 from a woman who ran an art gallery in Taos. I was going to become an itinerant painter, you know, just anything to make a living. So I bought a secondhand station wagon for $2OO. I had been invited to go to Tempe, Arizona, an artist friend of mine was out there teaching at Tempe. Just a few days before I was to leave, Corbett called me and changed my plans. I went to Tempe anyway. So I left the car there. I took the train up to Mount Holyoke, took the job, and I was there for... But I was ill all the time. I had pains in my gall bladder, I didn’t know how bad it was. I kept changing my diet. I thought it had to do with the kind of food I was eating so I tried to live off salads. Well, you can’t do that. I was run down all the time. But that was all right. They were very nice up there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But then after that you came to New York again?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. I thought: gosh, this is my opportunity to get to New York. I always wanted to come back again. Even when I was in Taos I wanted -to come back. I was fed up with New Mexico.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why was that?

CLAY SPOHN: It was too isolated; too much alone. I like to be where there are lots of people. Even when I went down to a hick town like Albuquerque – and you know there isn't much going on there – but there are a lot of people – I felt much better. But still there wasn't enough there. I like New York because there's a conglomeration of everything. This is the hub of the world. When I got down here I took a taxi and I was telling the driver what a wonderful place it was; he was talking it down and I was talking it up. Oh! That very I night when I arrived back in New York was the reopening of The Museum of Modern Art after the fire of 1958.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One thing I want to ask you about because we're running out of tape here. You taught at the School of Visual Arts for a few years?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like that? That was a very active place in those days. How was it as a place to teach? Did you like that?

CLAY SPOHN: The school itself was fine. When I first got there I had some good students and things were going very well and I got some good results. Several years later I had students come to me telling me how much they got out of my teaching, a lot more than from anybody else. A couple of people told me that and I felt good about it. But then I don't know what happened. They made a shift. They started giving me commercial art students and they had already been brainwashed. That ruined me; that wore me out. I should have complained but I didn't. I couldn't deal with those people. I got so I couldn't talk; there wasn't anything to talk about. After five years I received notice that my contract was up. Well, it was because I wasn't really teaching. But I couldn't.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think that you can teach very much to a young art student?

CLAY SPOHN: I'll have to think about that. I don't know. Some, yes; if they're intelligent I could. If they've already been brainwashed, no. Like the commercial artists – I couldn't teach them, I wouldn't even try, I wouldn't attempt it. But even so there were a few of those commercial art students that I reached. Usually those were the ones that weren't looking for shortcuts or the ones that didn't have very much talent. I put talent into them really. I swear I saw this fellow develop; he had nothing but he was able to free himself—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Something happened.

CLAY SPOHN: And it was a wonderful thing to see; It was a wonderful experience to see that happen. There were times when I did get good results especially when I picked somebody out of class and I was fresh and I could talk and I was enthusiastic and then I could give a new attitude, a new approach that they didn't have before. But, no, some of the things I was working on while I was in New Mexico I'm going to develop now. Certain things happened that were out of this world. I mean—

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way?

CLAY SPOHN: Well, there are things that you feel in nature that you don't see. They are abstract qualities. You don't see them. And those are the things I want to paints the things that I experience not with my eyes but with my whole being. I saw that; I felt that there are things that you feel rather than things you see visually. And I know how to do it now. And it goes back to my childhood. It's exactly the way I painted as a child. I don't mean it's simple; well, it is simple but it's not that childlike simplicity. I mean it's involved but it has to do with the – your feeling and movements, things happening, occurrences. And then I want to paint them visually, make them visual occurrences. These things I experienced as a child I saw again in New Mexico, and the wonderful have cloud effects. So I have no urge to paint it literally but to paint it as I felt it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Now last time I was here you were writing in a notebook. Do you do that frequently? Is that a regular practice?

CLAY SPOHN: Yes. I finished one book for January and I'm starting one for February now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So about every month you fill one up, is that it?

CLAY SPOHN: I have filled up two in one month. All these - see all these.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see; oh, yes, dozens of them.

CLAY SPOHN: I've got others put away in boxes some place. Some of them might be rather repetitious and some might be sort of naive or—I don't know. But I'd better go through it again. But once in a while something comes out, it takes a sort of poetic rhythm really, it gets a rhythm and I can't get out of it because it takes off by itself. So I'm doing that just until I get this place cleaned up. But I'd rather – I wish I could stop. If I could stop I could get this place cleaned up and then I could get to painting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You get so involved with the writing that it's—

CLAY SPOHN: It's a trap, you know. In other words, the reason I'm doing this is I'd like to give it to somebody, I'd like to share it. I mean the whole process of painting is a process of sharing. I know of artists who say that art is not communication. Well, if somebody gets something from it, to me it's communicated as much as music is.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Well, I think we'll have to go.

[END OF SIDE 2 – TAPE 2]

END OF INTERVIEW

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