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Oral history interview with Alexander Stoller,
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Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Alexander Stoller on December 10, 1976. The interview took place in West Stockbridge, MA, and was conducted by Robert F. Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Uh, the easiest thing at that time—

[Audio break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: December 10, 1976. [Audio break.] This is December 10, 1976, an interview in West Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Right?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: With Alexander Stoller. And to begin, you've been talking a bit about what it was like as a child, at the time you grew up. You were born in New York City in—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: —New York City.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [1902].

ALEXANDER STOLLER: In 1902. As a child, my first visual experience, which I still remember, was that, not far from us was a tombstone-maker, who carved granite, marble, and, oh, at five or six years of age, I was absolutely enchanted with the sound of the chisel and stone. My second experience, which I remember, was watching my first moving electric sign. Uh, it seemed that one light was chasing another around a sign, forever and ever. Um, my schooling was haphazard, in that we moved from one apartment to another. Uh, my teachers were dedicated.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were your parents strong influences on you?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: My father was a designer. Designed costumes. And my first experience in drawing was watching him draw. Uh, what he did was purely commercial. Uh, it never occurred to me that I could do anything in the art world, until I was about 10 or 11 years of age. And at that time, in the public schools, they taught drawing, but drawing was not especially an important part of the curriculum, or curricula. And I can't remember when I became interested in line drawings.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Your father, did he ever discuss it with you, or you—he was simply doing a job? [Cross talk.]

ALEXANDER STOLLER: He was simply doing a job, and I watched him doing his drawings. It never was an important part of my experience until about—as I say, about 12 years of age, at a public school in New York, I did a drawing of Santa Claus coming out of a chimney—or leaning out of a chimney. And it was so well-liked by a Doctor Thiebault [ph], who was the principal of our school at that time, and I believe he is the man who afterwards became head of the public education system in New York. Um, liked this drawing so much that I was asked to go around and do a similar drawing in all the classrooms in the school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was this very encouraging to you?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: It was very encouraging to me. My father, also about that—when I was about 13—took me to the National Academy of—what is it?—at that time, was the 109th Street and Amsterdam Avenue—to try and enroll me, and brought some of my drawings up to show them. And they were not especially well received, and I was much too young to go to any school of that kind. So, um—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did that discourage you, or—?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Not really, because you—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Not really, because it was one of the few things that I was interested in. Of course, at that time, also, one of the things that I always remember of my childhood was running away, playing hooky, going out as far west as I could towards Riverside Drive, to look over at a sunset across the Jersey side. At that time, New Jersey was not as built up as it is today. And always thinking that if I looked long enough, I would see an Indian. I don't know, it always seemed to me like the far west out there. Uh, there were things of that kind, but when I talk about the facility with which someone like myself could do almost anything he set himself out to do—which is the part of the American dream anyway—was that, in those days, there were so many areas in which a draftsman or a painter or a sculptor could work. Uh, if you wanted to work in plaster, there were all—there were many plaster men at that time. Plaster was much more a part of construction as, today, concrete is. Almost every building had plaster embellishments, which were later gold-leafed or painted. Or, if you were interested in graphics, you could go to any number of lithographic plants, and work in lithography. Or you could, if you were interested in painting scenery, there were any number of stage designers who were interested in encouraging that kind of work.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In other words, there was a great deal of the crafts—the art crafts, associated crafts.

ALEXANDER STOLLER: That's right. And which today are kind of limited. Not to say that they are completely gone. There were people who were in the dyeing business—that is, D-Y-E, dyeing—uh, business, who were interested also in artists, or commercial artists, who would hire you to make designs. There were also magazines that were interested in illustration, and fine illustration.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You worked for one. Is this related to that, the one in 1917, the *Dry Goods Economist*?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Well, I worked in the art department of the *Dry Goods Economist*. Of course, at that day, at that time, I was only 15, and my job then was to do outlines of—in India ink, on, um—oh, I've forgotten the name of that special kind of print, but you washed it off in mercury. Uh, it was a photograph on this paper. You washed it off in mercury, and what came out was—what stayed was your waterproof line drawing, you see. Uh, and that perhaps is the—encouraged my interest in line drawing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Even though that was a very mechanical—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: It was almost a mechanical thing—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —process.

ALEXANDER STOLLER: —but yet you could take certain liberties, too, you see.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You could choose what in the photograph you wished to emphasize?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Yes, and if Mr. Conit [ph], who, at that time, was the art editor, didn't like what you did, you'd take another one out and go over it again. You could do any number of the same drawing, as long as you had the photograph on this special paper.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you still in school at this time?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: No, I left school—I never graduated. Uh, I just simply—I was very unhappy with school, because the things I was looking for, or searching for, I could never find. Uh, it wasn't that the teaching was poor. The teaching was excellent. But it was just that my interests were so profoundly in one direction.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What were they, then? [Cross talk.]

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Well, anything visual. I didn't understand what I was looking for. I think it's very hard for a boy or a girl, at that age, to know exactly. Of course, my background was, wasn't like a Sandy Calder, whose father and grandfather were sculptors. Uh, with me, sculpture was very, very far removed, except my earlier—that earliest experience watching someone carve stone. Uh, perhaps I don't know whether it was because of the rhythmic sound of the carving, or whether it was the actual physical work, because the man seemed a giant to me when I watched him, or what it must have been, but there was something there that I remember. And even today, I can almost see him in my mind's eye, almost the way he looked with these heavy pieces of stone on large wooden blocks. It wasn't—well, of course, my working—I worked in the art department of—

ROBERT F. BROWN: It was Metro—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: —Metro Pictures. Well—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Which is what, an early—?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: That was 1917, I believe, when I was 15. All that period, you know, I worked in one place.

I don't know. Even today, I suppose these people still owe me. I would just walk out of the place and try to find something else, and never even ask for the pay that belonged to me for two or three days extra.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You'd stay at home? You were still at home?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: I was still at home, but I, uh, well, I started breaking away from my house, from home, until I was—at about 17 or 18. But today, these things are understood, and in those days, they were not very well received by families, because there was a kind of, well, you were considered a rebel. There was something wrong with you if you didn't quite follow the pattern that was laid out, pattern of behavior. It was—don't forget, we'd just come out of the Edwardian period, Victorian Edwardian period. But I'm jumping around a little. But what I would like to point out was that I had worked for, first, for the *Dry Goods Economist*, then briefly for the Jay Francis [ph] Press, which I think is still in business. Then I worked for Metro Pictures, in the art department, with Ferdinand Earle—I think.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he a quite a well known, uh—?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: He was then. I think he was the first man to decorate the titles of silent pictures. Uh, then I went to work for J. Walter Thompson, and there—at these places, the work that I had to do was mostly running around and delivering layouts, having—getting okays from artists for the work that they had been doing. Uh, among the experiences I had was delivering a drawing to John Barrymore, who was—had been an artist, but—well, the reason for that is not very clear in my mind, except the fact that I went down to his studio, which was down in the village. And I think he was working at that time in—for—I think he was doing *Hamlet* at that time. I'm not sure.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But this sort of—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: This is 1917, '18.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Seeing a celebrity at that age was quite an important thing, something that—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Meanwhile, you weren't going to night classes or anything like that?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Oh, yes, I went to a night class at the—run by a man whose name was Hunt, who was an illustrator. Uh, I can't remember his first name. But it was over at the high school, which was on 59th Street and I think Columbus Avenue. Uh, I've forgotten the name of it. I don't know whether it was Townsend Harris or some—one of those high schools. And these were night classes, and this was, this was the first time I went to a life class. Of course, being a public school, we didn't have any nude models. They wore bathing suits. And, um—but it was interesting, and I received a good deal of encouragement from Mr. Hunt.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was his method of teaching? Do you recall that at all?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Well, the method was very much the method that we ran into in almost all art schools, and that was to permit you to make your drawing and then criticize. Which is the only way. I mean, the only time I had—I was annoyed was in the Bridgman class, life class, at the Art Students League, where he would erase my drawing, and then put his own drawing on top, and that annoyed me, because I wanted him to tell me what he thought of my drawing. I would—I was always much more interested, and didn't realize until much later that my interest in line drawing was precisely the kind of drawing that must sculptors do.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why do you think they do that? Why is that?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Well, because we're interested mostly in space and contour. Um, the—well, if you look at a Rodin drawing, you'll see what I mean. The contour, the interest in contour, the interest in spatial arrangements. Painters look for color. We look for spatial arrangements. Uh, and, of course, in order to achieve spatial arrangement, you must be interested in contour. It—I don't know why it should be so, but I guess it's part of the—how shall I say? Uh, it's part of your—the means of expression that you develop in your attitude or experience.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But rather than shaded drawings—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Well, chiaroscuro, sometimes you can go into that, but that becomes, then, a secondary part of the drawing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: At this point, did you sense you wanted sculpture as your preference?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Well, no. I—all I knew at that time was painting and drawing. It wasn't until I went to an

exhibition that was given at the Bourgeois Gallery by Maurice Sterne, an exhibition of sculpture. Uh, of course, I, like every other kid in New York who was interested in these things—in art, directly or remotely—I did go to the Metropolitan Museum. I went to—it was the only museum at that time in New York anyway. Um, and I looked at sculptures, but didn't interest me as much as seeing the solid, really solid, plastic quality of work such as Maurice Sterne had at that time. And, of course, you know, Maurice Sterne did a—had studied rock formations, and done drawings of them. He was a superb draftsman. And there, I began to see—of course, I can't remember now—I guess it was 1925 or somewhere around that—uh, there was also a wonderful teacher at the Art Students League, whose name was Nicolaides. Nicolaides was a wonderful draftsman, and a very superior draftsman. And his teaching was line drawing. In fact, what he tried to do was to teach you to not look at your drawing, just simply look at the thing you were drawing, whatever it was, a figure, or if it was any object. Uh, but simply coordinating the—it was a class in—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —coordinating your vision with your—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Yes, but it called for manual dexterity of a kind that followed your eye, more or less. It was interesting. Uh, I never could achieve any—unless I was given an enormous piece of paper, because, with me, I always wanted to do something very, very large, monumental if possible. The larger, the better. And so if I were go—if I were going to do something like that lamp over there, I would have to do it about twice its size in order to make my hand follow my eye. But it was a very interesting thing. I also—

ROBERT F. BROWN: A useful discipline, was it?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: It was an excellent—

ROBERT F. BROWN: And not only visually.

ALEXANDER STOLLER: An excellent discipline. Uh, of course, sometimes you would find yourself so completely off drawing that it would just—it was very discouraging. But it gave you a sense of security when you were doing a line drawing, because, then, if you were—if you decided to really do something without looking at the object, you found yourself doing it so securely, your drawing so securely, that it came out excellent. It was excellent. I haven't done much drawing in recent years, but I used to be a fine—I think—a fine line draftsman.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you also doing some sculpt—these were—this was the early '20s. Were you also doing some [inaudible]?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: No. It wasn't until—let's see, 19—I went over in 19—I went to Italy in 1927—the winter of '26, '27.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Until then, you really hadn't done any sculpture?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You had that—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: I studied painting. I studied drawing and painting at the Art Students League.

ROBERT F. BROWN: By and large—well, you mentioned Bridgman had his shortcomings. He—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Well, Bridgman—I'd never had—I never went to the—I didn't—I never started. I went—the system was that first you went to the antique class, and that is where you did drawings of busts and statues and plaster statues. And then you went into the life class, which was Bridgman. His wasn't the only life class, because other classes had—like Nicolaides—had live models. But the life class was simply the study of the human anatomy. And this was what Bridgman taught. But the thing about Bridgman was that he insisted on everyone doing his kind of drawing, which was not what I was looking for. And although I was there quite a long time, I never did cotton to his kind of drawing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was it possible to stand up to him and say, "No, I don't want you"—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: I did.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —"fiddling with my drawing"?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: I did, and from that time on, uh—no, I, I asked him not to erase my drawing, but tell me what he thought of the drawing, and he just got up, walked away, and he never came to my easel again. But it didn't bother me too much. I just went on doing my drawing. Then I studied painting. Let's see. Painting. I worked with Boardman Robinson for a very short time. Uh, you see, you could move, in those days, from one class to another, and I suppose even today. Um, but the—I studied painting with Thomas Benton. I studied

painting with John Carroll.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were they both pretty good teachers?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: I didn't think John Carroll was—he was all right. I mean, they were all right, because, you see, all you could say about teachers like that was that you got out of them as much as you wanted, and then you moved on to something else—or as much as you thought you needed. Uh, there were some people who stayed in those classes forever and ever and ever, but I never felt any need for that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were friends, contemporaries, an influence on you at this time? I mean, were some—would you discuss artwork—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Oh, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —or what you were doing?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Of course, we always did that in the, um—we would have our lunch break, or our four o'clock break, and discuss various things in classes. Uh, there weren't—there were some people there who, afterwards, did very fine work, like John Locke [ph], people of that kind. But I never—we discussed the work, but there was some rebelliousness at that time, yes. Uh, I mean rebelliousness in—only in the nicest possible way, not political rebelliousness, but people who rebelled because of certain attitudes. Probably the best teacher at that time was Weber, who—I guess his name is Max Weber. Very, very fine painter. Uh, but his kind of painting called—we had a lot of people there. We had the Miller class, which was mostly murals. There were—in the sculpture department—that was the second—after my return from Italy. I didn't—see, what I tried to do after I saw the Sterne show was to try and get to Italy. And I went over to Italy in—I guess it was January of '27—and tried to get to Anticoli Corrado, where I found out he had—he was working. Uh, and I made the trip from Rome to Anticoli at a time when Mussolini was supposed to have made all the trains run on time. I found that it didn't—that that was [laughs] not as advertised. But I did get to Anticoli, and at that time, Anticoli Corrado was a hill town in the Apennines, and it looked like a set for *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. But really, it looked like an early Cubist design. And when I got up there, I found—I wandered around, because—well, you see, the train landed in the valley down below, and I had to climb up, all the way up to the top of the hill. And when I got to the top, I found that, by asking around, that Mr. Sterne was in America, putting up, I think, the Worcester Memorial to the pilgrims. Uh, and the very nice English woman, who took me in—I was rather cold and missed lunch, and she took me in, gave me some tea, and I think a slice of bread and butter. And I wandered back into—down the hill, took the train back to Rome, and through friends, joined the only school of sculpture that I could find in Rome, that I could enter. The Academy, the American Academy at Rome, under Mr. Fairbanks at that time wouldn't even consider me because I didn't come through the chain of command, see. Which, in those days, you had to go up to Yale, and then Yale would suggest you—[inaudible]—or somebody like that—[inaudible]—to go on. So through friends, I enrolled in the British Academy, which was sort of not—was rather free, and under a man—for the first time, in sculpture, worked as a sculptor in the sculpture class, under a man called Shortino [ph], who was a Maltese sculptor, whose only claim to fame, so far as I know, was that he was the father of the idea of a Monument to the Unknown Soldier.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you thrive there? Did you like that?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Oh, I enjoyed working there. I only stayed about six months. Uh, six or eight months. Uh, and cast some things. I have only one example of one of the things I did, which now belongs to a Mrs. Springer in La Jolla. But I did some small things at that time that were interesting to me. And for the first time, I had a sense of real fulfillment, which painting never gave me, although I'm still interested in painting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What do you think it was in sculpture that made you feel that way?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Well, first, I suppose, the tactile sense of sculpture. Um, and I suppose it—like everything else that you do, whether it's painting, sculpture, or suddenly deciding that a certain note in music is just what you were looking for. It's a very difficult thing to say, because it's a thing that you get every time you do a piece of work that seems to go along right for you, and yet it's—I think it's indescribable.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you did feel you were on—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Undescribable, I mean.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were on the right track, you felt, at that time. You said in, um—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —in New York, even before you had gone, you lived in West 55th. You had a studio by then,

and in Greenwich Village—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Uh, no, that was later. That was when I came back—let's see. I came back in 1927. And then I enrolled in Lentelli's class at the Art Students League, which was down in the cellar. It's interesting, you know. In those days, sculptors were never considered very much, because—even at the Art Students League, they put you down in the cellar or something. But it was a very good thing, because it was a large studio. It had pretty good light in it. And I never saw Lentelli. All I did was to do some work down there, and I never—oh, incidentally—I must backtrack a little. Before my departure from Rome, I was in the American Express one day looking for my mail, and there was Maurice Sterne. And Maurice Sterne also lived in—although he worked and lived, in the summers, in Anticoli Corrado, in the winter he had a place—he had a studio near the Piazza del Popolo—del Popolo. And so I walked up to him. You know, at that age, you're pretty unabashed. You just walk up and say what [laughs], what you were interested in saying. And I told him that I wanted to come and work with him, and I—he invited me to come out to his studio, which I did, the following day, at about four o'clock in the afternoon, and brought some drawings and some photographs of things that I had done. And he said, "Well, why do you want to work with anybody? Why don't you go out and do your own work?" And that was as simple as that. Um—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did this astound you?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Well, it—uh, no. Uh, it didn't astound me so much as it fortified me in my belief in myself, but I don't know whether it was a good thing or not. I think it might have been better for my discipline if he'd said this. But you know, he was, at that time, changing from being a sculptor to being—becoming a painter, which he did. Finally, he ended up as a painter. And maybe, now that I look at it, maybe he didn't want to become involved. I don't know. He was married at that time to Mabel Dodge, I think, or just—I don't know whether—uh. But this, of course, was fine. I was leaving shortly after that. Came back to America, and, as I say, went into—and worked in the Lentelli class.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you have to work at other jobs, meanwhile, to keep going, too?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: No. By that time, George Ball [ph] was backing—George Henry Ball, who later became president of the Saratoga Racing Association.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And he backed you?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: He backed me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did he back other artists as well?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: No, he just backed me, because he was interested in what I was doing. That was something that came on through the Hunt period, you know, when I was studying with Hunt. Uh, which I'll tell you about. [Audio break.] Uh, at—when I was studying with Hunt, there was a man by the name of Rupert Joseph, who was—Rupert Joseph was a stockbroker who was interested in art and was trying to learn drawing. He wasn't very good and very few people paid any attention to him. And so he started talking to me, and I was polite enough to him, though I was—he was interested, or said something very polite about my drawing. And then, through Rupert Joseph, I met Mr. Ball, George Ball, and from that time until his death, we were very, very close friends. And in fact, my daughter called him Uncle George. He was always Uncle George. Uh, a bachelor whose family—about the time when we met, his sister had been sent to an institution for the mentally disabled and he felt very much alone and decided to become interested in it. So this was the reason why I was able to travel from one place to another and study. So as I—when I came back to America in the fall of '27 and worked with—

ROBERT F. BROWN: In the Lentelli—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: —with Lentelli. Of course, I met my wife in Rome for the first time, the woman who afterwards became my wife—the girl who became my wife.

ROBERT F. BROWN: She was an art student, too?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: No, she—her brother was a painter—was interested in painting. No, it was just a simple business of the only son in a family of four being accompanied by his sister in order to keep him from going astray, I guess, or something. And so we met in Rome and—for the first time. Uh, then, the follow—they went up—my wife and her brother—my wife later, and her brother, went up to Paris, and I was interested in going to Paris, too. So when I came back to America, having worked with Lentelli, I went back to Paris in the winter of '27 and ['2]8—I think Christmastime—just before Christmas. And my future brother-in-law and I shared a studio on the—[inaudible]—a painter's studio unfortunately. And it was there that I started doing small things and trying to break myself up into something more important—more in the area of statues and of things that had more of an

architectural quality.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Really? Those were considered very important in those days. [Cross talk.]

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. This is why that photograph that Man Ray took, it's really the kind of thing that, in the old days, they would have put on top of a column or set into a piece of architecture in some way. It was the only thing I knew. Much of the things—sculpture theory didn't exist as it does today. Did things—you did life—things that represented life. You didn't work in shapes so much. You didn't work in—of course, texture was unheard of, because the only texture was bronze, or stone, or—

ROBERT F. BROWN: The texture of a medium.

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Well, yes, the texture of the medium. You didn't invent textures, and you didn't cast things. Today, people do work in textures that would have been considered in the realm of tailoring, not, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: The textures you worked with were just part of making something life-like, or—?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: No, textures—I'm talking about material textures. The conditions—by conditions, I mean what condition you, in your attitudes in your—in art—were the things that people at that time always considered art to be. Representational. Which is a little absurd that you'd take some abstract thing like justice, and it had to be a woman with a scale. Uh, or whatever it was. But it always had to be—relate to the human figure. Today, we do entirely different things, which is interesting. And I'm sorry I wasn't a boy just starting out in—oh, let's say 10 years or 12 years later. Uh, but anyway, in another sense, this was a good thing, too, because we learned the groundwork of what sculpture was all about. Today, people go right into welding without any idea of the architectural quality of sculpture. Uh, so—

ROBERT F. BROWN: How would you describe that quality, the architectural quality?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Well, if you have a sense, let us say, of the structure, what proper structural support should be—I'm now talking visually. Not the way an engineer calculates things. I'm talking about the visual things. You wouldn't attempt to do some of the things that people are doing today. And that's why we find such a strange mixture, where painters are doing sculpture, and sculptors are doing paintings, and nobody knows what is what. Uh, I think it's always interesting to see what Dubuffet does in sculpture. But when you see a thing like that carried to a height of 20 or 30 feet, it becomes a little absurd, because, architecturally, it doesn't—it isn't sound. Now, if a—just in the same way, if you go to the [inaudible] Champs-Elysees, you'll see those beautiful Maillol murals inside. And they're painted just exactly the way you'd expect a sculptor to paint, with two or three simple colors, you know, using earth colors, or whatever they are—I can't remember them now. I haven't seen them for years. Uh, not since the late '20s or '30s, whenever it was they were put up. Uh, but they are a sculptor's paintings. And it's interesting. Just as, to painters, sculpture is always interesting. But when you look at a piece of sculpture by a Degas, for instance, those are painter's sculptures. Uh, can you imagine a sculptor putting a tutu on a little dancer? Only a painter would do that. Um, but painters are always looking for color, and a sculptor is—a sculptor almost never looks for color. He looks for shape. Entire different thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you have colleagues or fellow sculptors you were close to in New York and in Paris at this time? You mentioned—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: No, the only one is—the only one at that time, 1928, 1927, '28—uh, that I ran into was Reuben Nakian, who's very—I also met, through Nakian, met—who just finished—oh, I also met—though I knew him only briefly—was Gaston Lachaise. Uh, but Reuben Nakian and I have been friends ever since, and I saw him only two weeks ago, down in Stanford. Um, he's losing the sight of one eye. It's rather sad, but—

ROBERT F. BROWN: At this time, did you share a lot of discussion with him, or how did your—what was your friendship like?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Well, It wasn't so much discussion as just as we would help each other out. Um, if I needed—if I had done something and needed a patina on it, we'd both come—he'd come over and I'd work with—he'd work—we'd both work with him. And I remember also, at that time, he was doing some carving, and we both worked on tempering tools. He had a little gas oven that you used to be able to put a chisel in, get the proper color in it, and then he had a little anvil, and we used to temper the steel, and dip it into the water twice, and get nice temper to work. He was doing marble carving then. But we did that kind of thing together, and—well, we did discuss work. We discussed—it's very hard to say, you know. It's been so many years ago, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: A long time ago. Was someone like Lachaise very talkative?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Well, not, not that I know. He was much more interested in survival, I think.

ROBERT F. BROWN: At that time, he and others were working for Paulanship, weren't they?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Yes. Well, this is it, you see, and that's when I met Paulanship, too.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did you think of his work?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Oh, I never liked Paulanship. I think Paulanship was America's first banker artist. Well, no, I shouldn't say that, because I met him later on. I was asked to become a member of the—well, somebody suggested my becoming a member of the National Sculpture Society, to which, alas, I still belong, but I don't know why. I should have resigned years ago, but I don't know. But anyway, he was president of it when I became a member, and I met him several times. But towards the end, you see, he was a very much-disappointed man in that I think he felt that what he had been doing no longer had any interest for people. Of course, he did the *Prometheus* and a few things like that in the '30s, but a limited kind of thing. He never grew. When he started his—I remember the first time I ever saw anything of his, which was, I think, a wood carving, which is still at the Metropolitan, as far as I know. I was impressed with it. It had a kind of a sharp and interesting quality. But from that time on, it was a—what he did was—seemed to be done in a formula that later—that as it—as he proceeded working with this formula, the work became more and more arid. It lost that special bounce that he had. And this is rather sad, because he could very well have—if he hadn't—if he'd kept himself artistically loose, it might have horrified the American Academy in Rome. It might have disgusted the Yale Art School, but he—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Which were conservative—[inaudible]—at the time.

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Yeah. But it would have done him a great deal of good. All around him were people who were trying to break away from that, and he was one of the first, almost, to try to break away from it, with that thing at the Metropolitan, but he never gave it enough of a chance. From that time on, it was just that formula. Of course, the—if you were to go—I think it's called *Diana* or something like that. It's a figure with—I think you'll see it in almost any book onanship. Don't forget, too, that at that time, we were—one of our fine—one of probably the greatest sculptors that we produced at that time in America, in that genre, was Epstein. And I think that what he produced was really great. There was probably the—I'd say this. That if Jo Davidson had less gall and more talent in the line that Epstein had, he would have been the greatest portraitist of all time. I think Epstein was a great portraitist. Very few people realize what a really great portraitist he was.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And Davidson had less talent, but he was—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Oh, he was a great raconteur, and it might very well be that he may go down in art history as the grand—as the father-in-law of Sandy Calder's daughter.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.] In Paris, did you meet any of these Americans when you were there, or what did you spend—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Well, these sculptors—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who did you spend your time with, mainly?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Well, mostly with people like, of course, Sam Chamberlain.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The etcher.

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Uh, the etcher. And who was one of my witnesses at my wedding, marriage. And I was still questioning my area of work. It didn't—I wasn't quite sure whether sculpture was the answer, and now that I look back at it, I think that I didn't like what I was doing. I was very unhappy. And so I went to the—instead of working on my own, I went to life classes at the Grand Chemier [ph]. Uh, Chemier [ph]?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Chemier. And the Academie Colarossi, too?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: And Colarossi. And I also became a good friend of Charles Despiau. And it was Despiau who suggested my showing at the—now, this was 1928, I guess—my showing at the Salon Panton [ph]. Uh, I can't—no, that was later. That was the Salon Versailles. I showed at the Salon—[inaudible]—and the Salon Panton, and the Salon Versailles. And I also had a couple group shows. I had a small thing shown at the, uh—God, what was the name of it? It was on the Rue Seine [ph].

ROBERT F. BROWN: But there were many places to exhibit then, and—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Oh, yes. As a matter of fact, it was much easier in Paris to show than it was in America. There were a lot of little places. Madame Zak at the Galerie Zak would put a piece of mine on a pedestal, and there you are, you know. Uh, if you weren't careful, you might have a hard time getting it back, but you just

brought a piece in, put it on a pedestal, and she'd say, "Yes, leave—put—leave it over there." It was like that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was Despiau—what was he like? What was he—what was your friendship like, and what was he like?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Well, he was a—at that time, he was doing—he had a studio on the Rue Bréa Sabivon [ph]. And, well, his wife was a very handsome woman, French woman, very simple. Both of them were very simple people. Uh, but he would take me around and show me his work and tell me what he was doing. Uh, he was, like all sculptors, built sort of stocky, with eyes like a ferret. Quick, darting eyes. And his—[inaudible]—which I can't remember now, he spoke very rapidly, and it didn't make any difference whether I understood what he was saying or not, but he was just glad to see me, and we both would sit around and have a cigarette. Of course, the thing that you must remember in those days, if you went to see somebody like that, you brought in a couple of flowers for *madame*. That always opened the doors, you know. But I was introduced to, to Despiau by Madame Zak, and—uh, let's see. And from that time on, we just became very good friends. I saw him only once, briefly, during the war, when he was in very bad odor. Hid in France, because it seemed that he and Derain went into Germany, and were considered collaborators. Which was very sad, because I think that he was one of the few people who, in France, would never have become a collaborationist, because he was much too French. But he thought that he was doing a good thing—[inaudible]—uh, I never met the—well, though, at the Academie—[inaudible]—where I went for a while to do drawings, Despiau was the instructor there, and this was after we met. And supposedly, that German sculptor, whose name I can't remember now, who did all those great big monumental horrors—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Thorak? Josef Thorak?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: I can't—was that his name?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why don't I—

[END OF TRACK.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is side two.

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Well, with people of Wheeler Williams's sculpture, people who did that kind of sculpture—I don't know whether I can say it the same way, but I think that these people made it more difficult—not directly, but indirectly—made it more difficult for people who were questioning their work. And I think it's healthy for an artist to question his work. I think it's right for an artist to be so detached from his work that his judgment is right. Because if if he thinks that everything that he does is perfect, and doesn't question it, it will show, eventually, in his work. And this is the kind of thing that Wheeler Williams did, and it made it, as I said, very difficult for an artist to question his work, his own work.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, this man was so well received, and yet you said—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —his work was very—[inaudible].

ALEXANDER STOLLER: His work had a quality of—even when he did a figure of a woman, it wasn't a woman. It had none of the qualities that you would want or feel that you should have in a woman, or even in a man. Uh, and yet his work was so well received that you yourself began questioning your own things.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And this is one reason you started going to these drawing classes and—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Yes. Yes. Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And your friendship with Charles Despiau was so important at this time.

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Oh, well, Charles Despiau, if he were doing—whatever figure he was doing, a man or a woman, it had the quality that I felt was right. Um, so did Maillol, except that, in Maillol, you find that his juxtaposition of various shapes in the human anatomy were so beautiful—the proportion, for instance, of the breasts, the shoulders, the ribcage, the thighs. All these things seemed to be almost like the building of blocks of stone, each in different shapes and sizes. Uh, and it lent a certain excitement, which I think anybody could find if they look at a good Maillol piece. Not all of his pieces did I love. Uh, *Liberte Enchainee* was one of the pieces that I always admired in photographs, but never so much as I did when I saw the—near Puget-Theniers, or maybe in Puget-Theniers, in the Alpes-Maritimes, is the statue that was put up to some French politician, who probably will be famous forever, not because of what he did, but the statue that was put up for him. Um, the—you come up onto it in a little side street, off the little side street, I guess, off the main drag, and there it stands on a pedestal that must be eight feet high. And on top of that is this magnificent, striding figure. Beautiful shape,

beautiful space, everything right. And when the exhibition of Maillol's sculpture was put up in the gardens of the Louvre, they placed this statue in the middle of the exhibition, almost, but not quite, on the ground. And that was rather sad. It should have been back up on a pedestal, because it—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Designed to be—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: It was designed that way, I think. And it lost—it made it, instead of something striding, forever, somewhere, it made it look a little bit like somebody walking along [laughs]—in the nude, walking along the garden. So that was rather sad. But you have to look at that—it's one of the great, great pieces of 20th-century sculpture. Uh, Despiau never quite came up to that standard. I suppose. Did he do—who did the *Monument to Cezanne*? I think he did, Despiau, and that, of course, is a great piece of sculpture, too, but it's entirely different—it's what the French would call, *figure allongée*. But it's a very fine piece of sculpture. Well, of course, this is the area in which I was interested in, and of course my work was shown in various exhibitions, group shows, such as the Whitney, the College Art Association, and so on.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Even while you were in France, this was happening?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Well, the College Art Association was while I was in France. The Whitney, only once, when I was away, and that was 1938, I guess—1938, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you were—did you have certain patrons in Paris? You had a number of friends in the art world. You knew, also, the sculptor Asan [ph] and Bourdelle, didn't you?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Oh, yes. Well, that—he—yes. The—Bourdelle and I went into the studio on the Impasse du Maine, but I never stayed very long. And of course, Bourdelle was putting up, I think, the statue to Mickiewicz at that time, the Polish poet/writer. Uh, but—and Asan, I think, was doing ceramics work at that time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But he—were these friends as well?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: No, not especially friends. Acquaintances more than that. No, I would say that Despiau was a friend, but I wouldn't say that—I just knew them, just the way I met even Picasso, just—but I never knew him. Uh, I would say I knew him, but I never—I don't think Picasso permitted that anyway. He was a pretty difficult guy. I would have liked to have met Brach. I would have liked to have met some of the other people. But the opportunities were there, but the—you would have had to make a big effort to have found them, and I wasn't about to do that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But in general—you've said earlier, Paris in the '20s and '30s was a place where there was great rapport among artists?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Among artists.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And the public and artists, too.

ALEXANDER STOLLER: The public and artists. Of course, there was also the business of every—that every man who had a little shop on the Rue Seine, every—there were lots of little art galleries, stores, and there were any number of them who would be glad to buy your services under contract, and promised to launch you in the art world. Of course, there was all that. There was also—there, around the Dome and the Coupole and those little cafes on the Carrefour, or down at the Cafe Flore on the Avenue Saint-Germain, you know, the Saint Germain, there were any number of little places where you can be and see somebody who had been working with you. Or one of the big giants of the art world at that time, like Picasso, you could see them. Of course, you could go up and nod, or they would nod to you, and if you knew them, sit down and have a drink and talk to them. But in general, they were all a little older than I was, and of course, the, I don't know. You know, with someone like Lipchitz, I never—although I had a studio in Boulogne-sur-Seine, about 1929 only a few doors away from him, I never talked with him, although we met. We'd nod to each other, but that's it. Uh, I didn't talk to him until many years later, when I was in the gallery business, directing a gallery on 57th Street. I had a piece of his on exhibition at that time, an early Cubist thing of his, of *The Matador*, and he came in, and then we started talking and reminiscing about Boulogne-sur-Seine. But I would never have thought of doing that as an artist, unless there was a direct invitation to do that kind of thing, you know. Whereas, when I was in the gallery business, I had no hesitation about doing that, talking.

ROBERT F. BROWN: At your time, if you felt people—each person had their work to do—and I mean, their time was their own.

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Yes. Of course, if you met—I met Despiau several times at the Rotonde or the Coupole, and we'd sit down and have a drink in the late afternoon, and sit down and talk. I remember once being very discouraged with my work and not doing anything at all, and saying something to him, and he said, "Well, of

course, you know, you never stop working. Even when you're not working, you're still working. Your mind is going." Little things of that kind.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Those were pretty important things at that time.

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Oh, yes, because the things that you questioned, it's nice to get an answer.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sure. You were—at this time, you were working in a number of media, weren't you? You were doing direct carving—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Oh, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were casting, you were doing plaster.

ALEXANDER STOLLER: I was working in clay and plaster, and also doing—carving pieces. I was working in granite and marble, and learning my way, you know. I never—people say, "Well, did you learn to—where'd you learn to carve?" I never learned to carve. I just bought chisels and sharpened them up and went to work, and when I found out my chisels were too sharp, I started working with chisels that weren't quite that sharp. You can't take a piece of marble and sharpen it up like a kitchen knife, and use it more than once or twice, and then, bingo, you—it's no—the edge is no longer there. You have to work a different way. So I had to learn all of that by trial and error. But it also—when you do that, if you, um—let's say, if you have perfectly sharpened chisels, and never having carved anything, you don't—and start to work on a piece of marble and your chisel is perfectly sharp and just right, you'll never really know what that stone is like. But if you start working with just a little bit wrong—the chisel's just sharpened a little bit wrong—you'll suddenly realize that this stone has a quality of its own and you can't play around with it. You've got to do it right. Uh, this—these are the things that you learn. And I think you only learn it by actually doing it, and that's the way I did. I'm not the best carver in the world by a long shot, but I'll tell you this. I never would want to be the kind of a stone carver that you'll find down in Genoa, these guys who can take a piece of marble and make it look like a piece of silk. Uh, that kind of carving would bore the hell out of me. I don't want to do that kind of carving. And the only way you do that kind of carving is when you're so facile in the medium that it no longer has any quality. You know? But I don't know what more to tell you about, except that—

ROBERT F. BROWN: In the '30s, you, you went back again. You went back to New York, and then did you go back again to France just before the Second World War?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Oh, yes. Uh, I had an exhibition at a place called the Delphic Studios in 1937, I guess. And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You sold pieces out of that show.

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Yes. It was—at that time, there were only two sculptors that were showing at that time, that winter. It was a bitter winter, you know. Imagine an exhibition around November or December, I guess—I can't remember now. Imagine an exhibition season in which there were, so far as I know, only three sculptors shown. In New York City. And that was de Creeft and John Flanagan—were the only, were the only two. And I think that—I've forgotten whose exhibition it was in, but it was a gallery run by a French woman, I think, that showed John Flanagan's work. He was a very fine—I knew John Flanagan in New York. Way back in 1928. I'd met him. And he was a very strange fellow. But very nice, I mean. And one of—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he reclusive, or was he—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Well, he was an alcoholic, and at that time—gee, as I remember it, he got into a fight with a policeman, and he was sent to—ended up in that hospital on 11th—12th Street and 7th Avenue. But he came over to Europe. Of course, you know, Nakian came over in '31 on a Guggenheim. And I saw him. But—and then, of course, I met Picabia and Madame. Later on, he divorced his wife, and met her, and saw a good deal of her in the south of France. But when I lived in the south of France, that was in the '30s, and that was when I did my big standing nude, and finished off my granite torso.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were these done on commission, any of these things, or—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: No. In those days—these were Depression years. Uh, I entered competitions. Never got anywhere. You know, this—I don't say this with any degree of modesty. I don't think I have much to tell you about my work, because, you know, these were Depression years. Um, I never wanted to go into anything like the DPW—not DPW, the—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —WPA.

ALEXANDER STOLLER: WPA. I had—my first piece was shown, which was the big standing nude, at the Whitney.

Uh, that was, I think, in '34. Thirty-four. Well.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was the response to that?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Oh, I got good notices, but nobody—it was a big bronze. The only response that I remember was that a photograph was taken of it, and they wanted to show it at the—I was told this—it was going to be shown in the—put in the—[inaudible]—section of the *Times*, and then they decided that they couldn't put a nude in the—[inaudible]—section. Imagine.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So the '30s were—in terms of your own work, or by and large, it was, um—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: —representational.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Representational.

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I mean, was there a progress as, as you look back on it? Because you, you weren't standing still, were you?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Oh, no.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In terms of exhibiting and all, it was exciting, because it was Depression and—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: No, I had—until '43, I was showing things. Uh, the only place that you could have things was at—were the Whitney—and imagine the Whitney in those days used to pay you a rental fee if you showed anything at the Whitney. They paid—they not only picked up and delivered your stuff through Budworth [ph], but they also paid you eight dollars or \$10 for showing. Nowadays, it's the other way around, you know. The artist is the last person to get anything. You know that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The—was your work—what directions was it taking then, would you say, as you go through the '30s?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: The direction my work was taking was simply a refinement of certain personal attitudes in representational work, which was about the only thing that may set my work apart from other representational work that was being done. But there was great questioning in my mind as to whether what I was doing was satisfying to me. Uh, sure, my training, in this one direction—and I say one direction, which is representational work—portraits, figures, standing figures, reclining figures, seated figures, anything. Uh, the great question in my mind was, did this have any really valid reason for existing in the 20th century? It seemed to me a little bit wrong. It was almost a dying 18th, 19th century area for artistic expression. And I had a feeling that, if the war hadn't broken when it did, that I would have done entirely different work in the '40s. And when my last crouching figure was done—and that was the time that Curt Valentin came up to the studio to look at it, and I was supposed to have an exhibition to send this—no, this seated figure was supposed to be in the center of his gallery, in an exhibition of the painter, Belgian painter, Ensor. And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: It was about 1948 or so?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Forty-three. No, '43. But the thing was that, I felt instinctively that this was the last piece of that kind that I would ever do. And so I went back to—I didn't know at that time—having put in for service during the war, I didn't know when I was going to be sent overseas. I was told that I would be sent overseas momentarily. Of course, this lasted for months. Um, I told Curt that if he wanted the figure, he would have to either take it then or I would put it in storage. And we talked about it, and I decided that I would much rather have the sculpture shown when I was in America, when I was there, and I didn't know whether I would be told to go overseas. Which didn't happen until '44, a few months later. Anyway, uh, we moved from New York, and moved up to the Berkshires, and I took the piece with me, and that's why it was never shown. But when I came back after the war, I couldn't bring myself to do the kind of work that I was—I had done then, before. Of course, I didn't have a studio. I didn't have a place to work. Everything was, so far as my work was concerned, was in a bad state of—well, or at least topsy-turvy. There was no—I was used to working in a studio. I was used to having light, proper light. And I tried to do a couple of small things. It didn't work.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did the war—the war had an effect on this as well?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Well, I don't—the war didn't have that much of an effect on me. It was something that I myself was questioning. Whether it was in the air, I don't know. Whether it was part of my generation, I don't know. You know, these things do work that way.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do—were there contemporaries who were having the same doubts at this time?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Oh, I think a great many of them, unless they were like Wheeler Williams, you know, sure—or—I can't remember his name, but Paul Manship. They knew exactly what they wanted to do, and they never questioned anything. The world is changing all around them, but they didn't seem to feel it. Uh, and I think it is something that you feel. Anyway, so I drifted into traveling, which, of course, my experience during the war was in psychological warfare, which had to do a great deal with, aside from prisoner interrogation, things of that nature, it also had to do with talking to French civil and military authorities, and getting them to do what the army wanted them to do. And so a friend called me one day and asked me if I would be interested in going out on the road for Sam Goldwyn. As an advance man. And since I had nothing else to do, and I thought all experience is grist anyway—so I went out on the road pushing a picture called *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Good picture. And I was on the road for several months doing that. And then, I was asked to do the same thing for Selznick, and with a terrible movie called *Duel in the Sun*. Was a terrible movie. And I did that for a couple of months, and then, coming back to New York, I was asked to run the Kleemann Galleries—Henry Kleemann—which I did for two years.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What kind of things did you—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Well, I put on things like the first Bernard Buffet show. I hung all the exhibitions, and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was Buffet someone whose work you'd known before the war, or—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: No, he was a—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Came along.

ALEXANDER STOLLER: No, he just came along. And, well, we had hung a lot of contemporary Americans in the Stable. Men like Mahler [ph], Urban, a few people like that. It was a very, very—it was an interesting and rather sad moment in American art, because I think what happened at that time was that the great American—it was almost like the—I don't know whether it would be proper to put it in—it was just like a great sleeping giant, who was having his last dream before awakening. And that's what I mean by sadness, just like the sadness of when you're awakened from a very profound sleep, because, all of a sudden, the work of men like Hans Hofmann, or Americans—Milton Avery, Davis, people of that kind—were catching on. They were—they had learned a lot from European artists, and all of a sudden, imposed their own view on art. Not the foreigners, but the Americans, all of a sudden, were doing that. And this was the beginning of it, but it was that little period in the last of the '40s, '47, '48. And then all of a sudden, bingo, the whole thing blew, and the sleeping giant found that there was beautiful sunlight out there, you know. So that—and of course, this was almost what I was feeling, and not knowing exactly where. Perhaps if I had talked with some of the others, I might have—I did, with some of the painters. But sculpture didn't come along—of course, David Smith started at that time. I showed a big thing of David Smith's at the Kleemann. Uh, Henry Moore, but that was European—English. Gee, there were, there were a lot of pieces of work here that were brought over—people who had fled and brought over, and they were being shown for the first time, like some of the works of Barlach, Kolbe—but all of these people were brought over and shown for the first time, I think, by only one man. Probably the finest man ever to work in the art gallery business, and that was Curt Valentin, of Buchholz.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you know him pretty well?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Oh, yes. Oh, I knew Curt very well.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was he like?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: He was a little pixie. Uh, he had a—he was short, fat, fattish, slightly bald, a little wall-eyed. Uh, had a funny thing. There was another man at that time who, just the same, was—oh, the man who started the ACA—uh, ACA? Oh, I forgot—there's no point in my talking about him, because I can't remember his name. He was German. Well, so was Curt Valentin, but Curt Valentin had almost no accent when he spoke, and this other man I'm trying to think of did. But I think he—the man I'm trying to remember is the first man to show Chagall here. I can't remember his name. It's funny. But, you know, these things slip your mind. You can't remember them all.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But it was getting to be extremely lively, was it?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Oh, yes. Oh, my. The, the excitement on 57th Street was—when I was in the gallery business, as I say, there were only about 30 galleries around. Now, of course, there's 10 times that much. But, um—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What happened, then, to the older generation of American painters and all? Were they beginning to slip back a bit at that time?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Well.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You've mentioned a couple of the younger ones, and you've mentioned the Europeans being brought over—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Yeah, well, of course men like Stuart Davis, Milton Avery, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Some were—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: These, these men were not slipping back. They were doing very fine work.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you working at all at this time, or were you—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: No, I—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —pouring yourself into this? You told me before that this was very hard work, wasn't it? Mounting one show, and then another.

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Oh, listen, I used to close a show on Saturday, come in on Sunday—of course, the shows lasted three weeks. Close on Saturday, take them down on Saturday, come in on Sunday, hang the show—or place the show, depending upon what material it was—and be ready for an opening on Monday. Or, rather, the vernissage, or the opening of the show. Uh, now, of course, a lot of the galleries are closed. And what we tried to do at that time—or at least I did, anyway—was to stay open one evening to give businessmen a chance to come and see things. This was suggested to me by a man very high up in the Time Inc. company, that—saying that he never could get in to see a show, because they were all always closed when he got off work. So I said, okay, I'll do it, and you know, he never came. [They laugh.] I won't tell you who it is, because he was very, very high up, very famous man in the Luce organization, and that always killed me. Where art is concerned, the lip service—the only—

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Inaudible.]

ALEXANDER STOLLER: —the only thing you can guess, the only thing you can depend upon is the volume of lip service.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.] Were these times—did you pretty much enjoy doing this work, do you think?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Oh, I enjoyed it, because it was—the only thing I didn't enjoy—I enjoyed it—let's put it this way. I enjoyed it because it was in the nature of my interest. Um, but what I didn't enjoy were the things which I hope are finished now, and I have every reason to believe is finished now, and that is that the artist would have all of his friends, and the gallery director or owner would have all of his friends in for the opening, and then you'd sit around for three weeks and almost no one came in. And then the artist would cry on your shoulders, and that finally got to me. Uh, I must say one thing. Uh, there were two or three art magazines at that time around, that were trying very, very hard, and they did a very good job. They would come in, and they would write up the show, and maybe on a Saturday, a couple of people would come in. And that whole thing changed in—within a year of my leaving the art gallery business, that whole attitude changed, to where, all of a sudden, it became almost as important as a movie to have a gallery and have a good show. People would come in, and for—and even today, you can go in almost any time to an exhibition, and there's almost always somebody—there's almost always somebody looking at it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative]. What do you think did that? What do you think made that change?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: I think, I think all of a sudden, it—people—Americans became conscious of American art. I think a good deal that had to do with it was that the social climate had changed, from maybe newly arrived people who didn't have great examples of work constantly around them, trying to perhaps—I know this is—this may sound cynical, but trying, perhaps, to advance their social status by acquiring works. Uh, also, the papers, when we had four or five in New York—which we still had in those days—would write up exhibitions, and people would go to them, and then, in the social columns, you'd see people who, 20 years before, could never have made the social columns all of a sudden being shown in new surroundings, with new works on the walls. I think that had a lot to do with it. Uh, not all of it. I think a good deal of it had to do with the social consciousness. Uh, that you weren't really of that generation unless the work that you had around you, or the things you had around you, were representative of that generation.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sort of a now generation suddenly.

ALEXANDER STOLLER: That's right, that's right. The expression "being with it," do you remember?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALEXANDER STOLLER: The now generation, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, in the years after you left the gallery business, you've had other jobs and—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Oh, yes, I—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —now in recent years, you've been able to devote yourself, the last ten or so, to—more steadily, to your work.

ALEXANDER STOLLER: That's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: When did you begin getting back into sculpture, and why do you think you did?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Oh, well, this—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was the moment? What made it possible?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: There wasn't any moment. First, what made it possible was being able to fix over the garage—what used to be the garage in this house, where we now live. Uh, which, incidentally, I bought when I was in the gallery business, you see. Uh, bought it in 1946. So almost 30 years ago. But the reason for it was fixing over the garage, and making a studio of it. And you know, you can't walk around an empty studio. You have to do something, you know. Another thing is that my work, my older work had been stored in a—in someone's barn. And so I brought these things back and had them in the studio for a while. They're out now. I haven't got them here. But for a long time, they were in there. And in a way, this was good for me, because I could look at those things and realize why I no longer wanted to do that kind of work. Uh, and so my first things were—although they were still a little bit representative—that is to say that the human figure is involved—I still didn't feel that it was right—and I don't feel that it's right for any generation to move too far away from the human feeling. I don't care whether the work can be as abstract, can be abstract to the very, very extremist—completely extreme degree. But I think that somewhere, like the sound of a bird, it's got to be understood by human beings. And I agree absolutely with Nakian when he says, "These things are interesting, but where's the poetry in it?" And by poetry, he also means something that is understood by the human psyche. Uh, you can't make sculpture for animals, unless you're going to show—put it down in that great big plane in Africa and forget about it. And maybe the animals would wander up to it, but they won't know what it's all about. If you're going to make sculpture, you have to make it for people, and it has to respond to people. Uh, I don't think that you have to go back to Michelangelo or Donatello. The great schism between the—Michelangelo and Donatello is one that has plagued sculpture for years. Does it have to be robust, muscular, sculpture of the Michelangelo-esque kind? Or can it be something poetic, romantic, and warm, like a Donatello? Why not? Why not have a combination of both? Why not have beautiful, abstract, David Smiths? But not everybody can—is a David Smith. You have a thing that I was discussing the other day with Nakian when I was down there. These people who are doing metal collage, taking a sheet of steel and welding it onto another piece of steel, and half the time don't understand the space. And if you get to it and look for something responsive on the side elevation, it's—you find that it's only two-dimensional. There's nothing—no depth to it at all. Uh, this is sad. This is where, if you were—if you carved something in stone, or even wood, you wouldn't—you couldn't leave the side without having it express or continue on the design, or even show that wonderful thing, which we sometimes, in sculpture, don't even look for, and that is surprise. You go up to a Sandy Calder, stabile, and you know exactly what's on the other side. This isn't right. Though—or, I mean, I'm not criticizing Sandy, because his work is, I think, is fascinating.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you think—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: How much weight it has in the end is another thing again.

ROBERT F. BROWN: A good deal of it's just tableau, sort of.

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Well, it's a statement. But you know, you go back to Michelangelo's *David*, and there, too, it's a statement. But it's more than a statement, see. You have to—it's like a—it's just like a scientific paper. You make a statement. You have to have a premise. You have to have a conclusion. You have to show every side of it. And why not a piece of sculpture? Why—like a Beethoven symphony. Look at the expositions you have of it. Sure, it's one theme, a statement, but it goes on and on and on. I never have had a piece of—produced a piece of sculpture that didn't have a little surprise to it, that it didn't go exactly where you want it to go. If you looked at it, you didn't have to walk around the back. You knew what it was. This is the sad thing about most of the welded stuff that's being done.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What about the so-called minimal sculpture of a few years ago, like cubes?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Oh.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you—can that at least have monumentality and—

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Well, you know, the cube and the pyramid and the cone were designed thousands of years ago. Uh, if you can't do more with a cube than to put a little surface design on it, and put it up on end, like a dice, a single dice, and put it up on—and if you can't do anything more with it but have it move, I don't know what you can do. Of course, there are two, you see. Uh, you have the same thing. Here, now, you see, when I talk about having more to say than your original premise, if you stand in front of something and have it move back and forth, up and down, or around, so that you don't even have to move around it to see what it's all about, I think you've defeated half of the purpose of a piece of sculpture. Piece of sculpture, there's a set out in an open space. Must have something to compare it with. Uh, maybe it's a hillside way off in the distance, or a tree or something. But as you move around it, that changes. And so the whole thing must conform. But if you stand in one place and that whole thing moves, you never—you've got the same thing in a—somehow or other, I feel cheated when I—when that happens. I feel I would like to see, well, how does this shape up there? I don't want to see it shaping up somewhere else. Or if I move around to that place and that thing is still turning, it's disturbing. So I don't know whether I've given you enough of—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. [Audio break.] Whether you—are you concerned with whether, you know, a piece you make is successful or not?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Oh, no. Uh, when I do a piece of—whatever I do, whether I carve it or put it in color, or let the color evolve in the space I create, whether I'm successful or not doesn't concern me. It's something that I have to do. If it doesn't come off the way—if other people don't—aren't interested in it, it doesn't concern me. It shouldn't. I feel it's a shame that you—that, nowadays, the success of everything you do has to be evident. Uh, some of the greatest pieces of sculpture, some of the masterpieces, have little faults and little—even if it isn't a fault in the artist's work, it's a fault in the material. There's always something a little bit wrong. There's no such thing as a hundred percent successful piece of sculpture. Even the pyramids are not that successful as sculpture. Although that may very well be in the realm of architecture.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Is the—to contrast, say, with the '20s, when you, at least in Paris, saw this great rapport between artists and the public, today do you think the public demands success, too? They—in fact, you've indicated that, beginning in the '50s, in New York, they want to see success, and certain exhibitions and certain collectors of prestige, and then that is the main criterion?

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Well, it is, you see. It's a little bit, it's a little bit like [inaudible] in the Gilbert and Sullivan thing, saying that what is good enough for that particularly—whatever it was. I can't—I have to paraphrase it. What is particularly good for that poetic young man is good enough for me. I don't know whether I've explained it correctly. But anyway, if someone has bought a piece, who is supposed to be knowledgeable or—in contemporary work, let's say, not—I hate the expression "modern work" or "modernistic work" or any label, except work by contemporary artists. If you have somebody like that buying a piece of work, you find that, all of a sudden, someone else will come along and want to buy something because it has already been bought by so-and-so, who's very knowledgeable about these things. Museums are exactly the same way. Uh, I think some of the most irresponsible, and I think some of the most Neanderthal types we have in the art world are in the museum business. I don't think they know anything. In fact, I know that among dealers, if they—when I was in the gallery business, there was one man who was director of one of our great museums, national museums, not in New York, was considered a complete artistic ass. But he knew names and dates, and he was an art historian, and so on. Uh, but the thing is that nothing can take the place of an awareness by the public of what an artist has to say. Or what his particular field is. And wouldn't it be nice if we left the boob tube and went to an exhibition now and then of work by contemporary people? Uh, or even go to an exhibition of a group of Old Masters, but that is only done by—you know, in our country, we're only a generation removed from people who thought that anybody who worked in the art field was either a pansy or an idiot. You know, because didn't everybody know that artists starved in galleries? And now, all of a sudden, people are beginning to think that maybe art has something, because the Rothko estate is worth 12 million, 14 million, or 20 million dollars, something like that. Or God knows how much Picasso's work is worth. Now, all of a sudden, *whew*.

ROBERT F. BROWN: At least they can equate it financially.

ALEXANDER STOLLER: Yes. Oh, sure. [They laugh.] It, it's a very, very funny thing, you know. I remember, years ago, somebody saying—I don't know, I think it was to a relative of mine—saying, "Why, why is he doing sculpt—why doesn't he go out and get a job, like any man?" You know. And I said, "Well, if you sit around and swing a 2.5-pound mallet all day, you'll find out that it's a man's work." But it's the only way you can explain doing things like that. Why do you have to explain anything like that. That's the thing that's so sad. But then, too, you see, we're a materialistic people, and the things that made for such wonderful things in the '20s and early '30s, anyway in France, was that there was a spiritual quality. As the French call it, quality of *esprit*, of the mind, you

see. You used to go to exhibitions in Paris, and very seldom were the women there. There were mostly men. And here, at the same time, you never saw a man in a gallery. It was always women. It's very—it's an indication of things.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]