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Oral history interview with Grace Borgenicht Brandt, 1963 January 10

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Grace Borgenicht Brandt, on January 10, 1963. The interview was conducted by Dorothy Gees Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The original transcript was edited. In 2023 the Archives retranscribed the original audio and attempted to create a verbatim transcript. 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. Additional information from the original transcript has been added in brackets and given an –Ed. attribution.

Interview

[00:00:03.69]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [In progress]—on January 10, 1963, and we were just talking a few minutes ago about the Borgenicht Gallery on Madison Avenue in New York, and I wanted to ask you, Grace, about how you came to become an art dealer in New York, and who were some of the artists that you first started out with.

[00:00:32.82]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: I had a quite long background in art, I guess you would say. I majored in art in college, took my master's at Columbia University, and studied painting in Paris, and, also studied with Stanley Hayter in this country, because I decided I should know something about engraving. I studied a little with William Zorach, because I thought I should know a little bit about sculpture, and, uh, studied watercolor at the "Y," and with the former student of George Grosz, Chris Ritter, who had started the Laurel Gallery.

[00:01:23.98]

And in 1947, I had my first one-man exhibition at that gallery, the Laurel Gallery. I was surprised at that time to find myself in a company of professional artists. I had never taken my work too seriously up to then, but I enjoyed tremendously the stimulation of meeting artists. At that time, I met Jimmy Ernst, Milton Avery, George Constant, Gabor Peterdi, and a great many of the critics and writers of the time.

[00:02:08.50]

It was a whole new world of stimulation for me, and I thought that perhaps at some future date when my children were grown, I might enter into the gallery business. But when one has an idea of that type, it doesn't take long. The children were still quite young when I decided that perhaps I really [laughs] could do something, and I started to help Chris Ritter in the Laurel Gallery in about 1948, I believe. For some time, a few years, I was not too active a partner, but I became interested in gallery work, and went to work. When my youngest daughter, Lois, was born—she's 13 now—what year would that be? It's 1963—[Laughs.]

[00:03:14.68]

DOROTHY SECKLER: It must've been '50.

[00:03:15.34]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: —1950. I decided that perhaps I should stay home, which I did for about six months, which was all [laughs] I could take of domestic life again as a full-time chore. Jimmy Ernst at that time was scheduled to have an exhibition with another gallery. During the time that I retired, the Laurel Gallery had gone out of business, and Jimmy said to me, "You've got to come back and open a gallery." And at that time, I thought I didn't know enough. I hadn't had wide enough experience to have my own gallery, and I looked around to see what gallery I might work with to gain further experience. But there were very few galleries at that time who were interested in American art, which was what

interested me. I believe there was Kraushaar, and Edith Halpert, and, uh, very few others. There were practically no galleries at that time who sponsored just American art because it was not popular. It didn't pay for itself financially. It was unheard of in Europe, and the only thing that sold in America was either French or Italian art.

[00:04:46.68]

DOROTHY SECKLER: So collectors were not yet aware of American Art as a really top quality at that time?

[00:04:55.31]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: No, not at all. But I decided that this was what interested me, and that if we in America didn't promote American art, we certainly couldn't expect the French to do it or the English, or the Italians, and it was up to us to support our own artists. And so with Jimmy and Peterdi's encouragement, I found a space and opened an exhibition of Jimmy Ernst in May of 1951.

[00:05:27.47]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And that was on 57th Street.

[00:05:29.21]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: —on 57th Street.

[00:05:30.60]

DOROTHY SECKLER: What address? Would you recall?

[00:05:32.15]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: I think it was 61 or 63. It was above Kleemann's at that time. Kleemann was in business. And one day, walking on 57th Street, I saw a place. The owner had—it was a Japanese lamp or something. He had just died. The place was available, and I believe in three weeks I signed a lease, had it painted, we had announcements printed, and we opened with an exhibition. [Laughs.]

[00:05:59.95]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Of Jimmy Ernst?

[00:06:01.25]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: Of Jimmy Ernst. [They laugh.]

He had the exhibition painted, fortunately, but everything else happened in three weeks. [They laugh.]

And that was how I started my gallery. I had a group of artists, some of whom were from the Laurel Gallery. Calvin Albert was with me then, and Gertrude Greene, Balcomb Greene's wife, who has died. It was an interesting group.

[00:06:33.55]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Wasn't Milton Avery in that first group, or was he—

[00:06:36.88]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: Not the first. I can't really remember whether he was there the first year, or he came in the second year, but possibly the first year. I'll have to look up the records and see.

[00:06:48.56]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I think I remember at *ARTnews*, Tom Hess said to me one day, "I want you to go around—a nice girl I know has just opened a gallery on 57th Street." And when I went, it was the first—what I did see there was Milton Avery, so that's what—

[00:07:03.43]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: Oh, then it must've been. I guess you're right. [Laughs.]

[00:07:05.68]

DOROTHY SECKLER: But I think it may have been that he was still new—

[00:07:08.01]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: No, no, I—

[00:07:08.37]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Inaudible]

[00:07:09.34]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: No, it's quite possible that we did have him at that time. Milton Avery at that time was not a very popular artist, especially among museums. I remember trying to get him into a Whitney Annual, and they said, oh, no, they wouldn't even consider him. And then since, of course, he had his big retrospective, which opened at the Whitney, and they own his work.

[00:07:38.49]

And it's quite wonderful to me to see what's happened in 10 years to Avery, someone who was not accepted at all, people felt that he painted too many pictures; they were too pretty; they were too soft; they were too sentimental; they didn't understand them; they were empty. And today his great influence on other painters who've been accepted is recognized, and now he's accepted for a great artist.

[00:08:08.69]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And even at that time he was honored and recognized, of course, by artists who have since become so famous, like Rothko—

[00:08:15.83]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: That's right.

[00:08:16.70]

DOROTHY SECKLER: —who acknowledged his great debt to Avery, and he was just beginning. Rothko was—

[00:08:22.01]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: Rothko, yes.

[00:08:22.07]

DOROTHY SECKLER: —of course, at that time, just beginning to come into any acclaim, but I had almost forgotten, too, how little there was recognition for Avery.

[00:08:32.42]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: That's right. He had had quite a few exhibitions. I think he had three exhibitions at one time at Knoedler and Rosenberg, and—

[00:08:41.84]

DOROTHY SECKLER: He had three galleries at one time, yes.

[00:08:43.02]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: Three galleries who were all showing him.

[00:08:45.44]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah. What—and then after that, there was a kind of decline.

[00:08:48.11]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: Then there was a real decline. It was as if he'd almost out-painted himself, or he'd done too much or, uh—and people thought, oh, yes, an Avery might be nice for the children's room. I heard that comment many times, but people did not take him seriously as an artist the way they do today. And of course, there's been this phenomenal rise in prices. Averys at that time that I couldn't sell for $6[00], $700, today bring $6,000. Now it is, in fact, longer time, 10 years, that this is happening.

[00:09:26.85]

DOROTHY SECKLER: So you were not at all frightened by this public—this lack of response on the part of the public, eh?

[00:09:33.42]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: I found it a great challenge. I guess I like a good argument [laughs], and, uh, I felt really, that I didn't open a gallery to make money. That was not my objective. I, fortunately, didn't need to earn a living from the gallery, and my objective was to do something for the American artist, whom I felt had been neglected and was being neglected by the world, actually.

[00:10:08:06]

And this was a great dream of mine, to make American art respected and to allow the artist to make a living. When de Rivera first came with me, that was in '52, I believe, or '50—I'm not quite sure, but very shortly after I opened the gallery, he came to me. And I thought he was a marvelous artist, but I could not sell his work. Um—and this—

[00:10:41.02]

DOROTHY SECKLER: We have to note, of course, this is the sculptor, de Rivera. [Laughs.]

[00:10:44.63]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: Yes, who works in stainless steel and—

[00:10:47.12]

DOROTHY SECKLER: We don't want to mix him up with Diego. [Laughs.]

[00:10:49.22]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: No, [laughs] not anymore. People did for many years, but now when they see—I sometimes wear a pin the way I'm wearing one now of de Rivera's. And they say, Oh, de Rivera. People—I think that [laughs] was when he arrived, when people no longer confuse him with Diego. [Laughs.] Now it's Rivera, not Diego.

[00:11:11.33]

But he for many years literally and actually starved. He, uh, he used to tell me that at the time when he used to eat corn flakes with water because he couldn't afford corn flakes with milk, but he never, never would give in. He would never compromise. He would never do anything that he thought wasn't absolutely perfect and absolutely right, and what he wanted to do.

[00:11:46.42]

Mr. Root, Elihu Root—I mean, Edward Root, was one of the first people to recognize de Rivera. He bought one for himself, and he bought one for Munson Williams Proctor Institute, which is now the Utica Museum. But he was one of the very few collectors, and at that time,

de Rivera's prices were very low.

[00:12:12.76]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was he doing the same kind of shape that we now associate with de Rivera, the curvilinear—

[00:12:20.86]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: Well, he did the—yes.

[00:12:22.06]

DOROTHY SECKLER: —sustaining, rhythmically repeating shape?

[00:12:24.82]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: He did the painted aluminum forms, of which the—there's one in the— The Whitney Museum owns the blue and black—

[00:12:35.62]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Yes.

[00:12:35.83]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: —of that sweeping form. And then this piece of sculpture right here was the first stainless steel piece he did, which was related to the aluminum, and then he started working in stainless steel and hammered bronze.

[00:12:55.47]

DOROTHY SECKLER: He was the first American sculptor to do very much with stainless steel —

[00:12:59.82]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: That's right.

[00:13:00.60]

DOROTHY SECKLER: —in the sense of the machine tool surface that was very characteristic of his work.

[00:13:08.04]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: Except that it's hand tools.

[00:13:09.45]

DOROTHY SECKLER: It is.

[00:13:10.18]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: [Laughs.]

[00:13:10.22]

DOROTHY SECKLER: It sort of had that quality—

[00:13:11.11]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: Yes.

[00:13:11.88]

DOROTHY SECKLER: —of not being a romantic surface. It looks controlled. It's interesting, though. I never knew exactly how he did produce—you say it's all hand—

[00:13:19.21]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: All hand-hammered.

[00:13:19.96]

DOROTHY SECKLER: —hand-hammered.

[00:13:20.86]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: Yeah, he forges hammers. If you go to his workshop, which is unbelievable—it's a tiny room over a candy store on East 34th Street, and there's a little workbench with some hammers. And this is just about the studio. [Laughs.] There's practically nothing mechanical in it.

[00:13:42.26]

He has finally now, in his later years, when he can't do quite so much—he's gotten a few machines to polish—help him do the final polishing, but his fingertips are just about worn away from polishing by hand, because he hammers all this work, and then polishes out the finished product with emery padding. It's incredible. Stainless steel people have come to me and said, you know, This can't be done. [Laughs.] It isn't possible.

[00:14:16.75]

A great story—

[00:14:17.67]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Inaudible]

[00:14:17.88]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: One of the greatest stories I [laughs] can tell you about de Rivera happened very early in my career as a dealer. I one day got a phone call from Eero Saarinen in Detroit, and he said, "We're considering two sculptors for a project at the General Motors Research Center. It's a $50,000 commission. One of the two sculptors is de Rivera. Would you and Mr. de Rivera come out here?" A $50,000 commission? I was just about a year in business. That seemed like about a $1 million commission today. And de Rivera, who had hardly been making any money up to that time, and whose wife actually had been supporting him by working—it was quite an amazing—

[00:15:16:03]

[Audio feedback.]

[00:23:37:47]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Grace, just before our machine went out on us, we had been talking about the time when de Rivera was offered a commission by Eero Saarinen. Would you like to complete that story? I thought it was a very interesting—

[00:23:56.31]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: Well, I'll try to reconstruct it again. De Rivera and I flew out to Detroit. We went to see the General Motors Research Center, which is an amazing almost city in itself. I could even—[background speaker interrupts.] I could even say it was a walled city. There were so many guards around that one had to pass through. They keep their cars very secret.

[00:24:30.36]

The buildings were very beautiful. Saarinen had designed them, the furniture. There were floating staircases, executive dining rooms. Incidentally, Jimmy Ernst later did a mural for one of the dining rooms. We went to see the center, and then later went to Saarinen's home. Aline was there. They had a young son. She was very hospitable. [Background speaker interrupts.]

[00:25:00:03]

We then discussed the—Could you excuse me a minute? Shall I tell them?

[00:25:09.14]

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

[00:25:10.85]

DOROTHY SECKLER: —No, we haven't. All right. Yes, you were out then at Aline Saarinen's and discussing this commission with de Rivera.

[00:25:19.62]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: Then we went back to the office, and Saarinen showed us the plans, and told us that General Motors had agreed to a large sculpture, which would be a sundial. And Saarinen explained that he would take care of the mechanics of the sundial, that they would have that all done on the ground, but what he wanted de Rivera to do was to do one of his beautiful constructions, which would cast a shadow, actually just be a big form and space to cast a shadow.

[00:25:59.94]

And de Rivera looked at Saarinen, and looked at me and said, "But I don't do sundials." And at that point, that sort of ended the discussion. He flatly refused to do anything which he felt was a compromise. He said he had worked all his to develop certain forms. He was interested in sculpture. He was interested in developing what he wanted to do. He didn't want anyone to set a problem for him.

[00:26:33.44]

And so we took the next plane back to New York, and that was the end of the commission. It was—I could only feel respect for him, however, because I felt that this tremendous integrity, this following his pattern, what he wanted to do, was what made him a great man and a great sculptor. And if he didn't have this, he really wouldn't have anything, that if—once he compromised, he might compromise in his work, and then he wouldn't be the great sculptor that I think he really is. It was a tremendous experience for me.

[00:27:16.18]

DOROTHY SECKLER: It's a wonderful story.

[00:27:17.11]

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

[00:27:27.77]

DOROTHY SECKLER: [In progress]—before about the various artists that make up your gallery, Grace, and what it was about each one that attracted you to them. We're talking about Jimmy Ernst, for instance, a very different personality, certainly from either de Rivera or Milton Avery, and the way his career had developed.

[00:27:47.96]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: His career just seemed to take off from the first exhibition. It was successful. And I could say that every exhibition he's had since has been successful. Doesn't mean that we necessarily sold out the exhibition at the time, but I remember one exhibition that we had quite late in the season—it was in June; I don't know why we did it then, but somehow it worked out.

[00:28:16.43]

And by the following, say, January, or possibly the following June, every single one of those paintings had been sold, hadn't been sold during the show, but somehow during the year, and to very fine collections. I'm very proud of the fact that Jimmy is in the Metropolitan, the

Guggenheim, the Whitney, the Wadsworth Athenaeum, Chicago, Houston, most of the big museums in the country. And I guess—I guess I've sold them all it seems to me [laughs] there, and he's been with me for 10 years.

[00:28:53.75]

DOROTHY SECKLER: A pretty remarkable thing, having a very famous father, to have been able to hew out his own independent career.

[00:29:02.51]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: Yes, it's always been quite a thing with Jimmy. I think he struggled against it for many years, and it's only all in Max's great maturity [laughs] and Jimmy's maturity at this time that they can accept each other. Max thinks Jimmy is a fine artist, and I don't believe he's afraid of him anymore. He's a little proud of him. And Jimmy is not so fearful of his father, but it was a struggle for many years. It's interesting; Jimmy will have a show this spring in Cologne, where he was born, and they're stressing the fact that it was three generations of artists. Jimmy's grandfather was a painter, and his—

[00:29:51.80]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was he?

[00:29:52.39]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: Yes, he was a church painter at the time, and his father, and Jimmy— In fact, *LIFE Magazine* may do a story on three generations of Ernsts as painters. We don't know what the younger Ernst will do. There's a—Jimmy has a young son who is right now quite a fireball, but I don't know if he's going to turn into a painter [Laughs.]. He's a terror.

[00:30:19:17]

DOROTHY SECKLER: How old is he now?

[00:30:20.13]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: He's about five. [They laugh.]

[00:30:24.21]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Then, of course, you have a few others in your gallery, and still a very different temperament, for instance, Wolf Kahn, a very young artist still.

[00:30:33.90]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: Yes, Wolf is an artist whom I respect very much and have great affection for. He—when I first took him on, his first exhibition was a complete sellout. He painted, oh, all almost in the manner of Bona, very poetic colors, very beautiful, some of them high in color, did figure paintings. But notwithstanding the fact that he, at that time, married, and later had a young child, he just decided that perhaps he wouldn't be a popular painter, but he was going to paint what he wanted to do. He went to Venice, and came back with a series of almost all-white paintings. The color had just about disappeared. And he said, "Grace, I don't know. I may be a problem to you, but this is what I want to do." And I said, "Well, as long as you paint what you feel, and I think it's fine. Perhaps I can't sell it. This will be a problem. But if you're willing to go along with that, I certainly am." And we didn't sell the white paintings at first. It took about a year and a half, actually, for the public to begin to appreciate his white paintings, the subtlety and the beautiful paint quality.

[00:32:10.66]

DOROTHY SECKLER: They were, to me, the most beautiful, out of everything.

[00:32:13.72]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: Yes, I really loved that period. And by the time the public had gotten accustomed to that, Wolf was on to something else. The color kept coming back

again. But to me, this is amazing, an artist who, at that time, lived in a cold water flat, had a wife and child, but still felt that his painting was more important than anything else, certainly more important than selling, and having a public.

[00:32:44.62]

He wanted to develop as an artist, and it takes—I don't know what it takes as a dealer to put up with this [laughs], but you have—if you believe in an artist, you have to let him do what he wants to do, whether you sell it, or whether you don't sell it. It's always a challenge to you, because by the time the public has become accustomed to something, the artist is ahead to something else.

[00:33:10.36]

But this—I think a dealer, in fact, has to learn a certain amount of humility, because you don't know. The artist is always ahead. It took me two or three years to appreciate Corbett's white paintings. The first time he sent some of his all-white paintings to the gallery, I almost took it as a joke. I couldn't understand it. I opened this package, which was wrapped in white oilcloth, and there were two stark-white paintings. And I couldn't quite believe it. His other things had been quite colorful, very, very beautiful, always very poetic, but here were these paintings which he called "Paintings for Puritans," and they were all white.

[00:33:35.42]

And two years later, when I decided I wanted to buy a painting—I don't know. I think I might have sold—I don't know what happened, but there was an empty wall for some reason in my home. And the painting I wanted most in the gallery was one of these white paintings. To me, it was the most satisfying, most beautiful work. But two years previous, I just hadn't been able to appreciate it. And this I just think back on, because so many times I just have to learn to keep my mouth shut when the artist brings in something—

[00:34:36.97]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

[00:34:37.81]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: Because I may not be up to it.

[00:34:39.78]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did Baskin's work ever present such a problem to you?

[00:34:43.03]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: Well, it presented another problem. The first time I saw his work, I was completely bowled over, and I said, "This is strong. And it's—I think it's terrific, but I can't imagine anybody wanting it." I said, "I'd be very happy to give you a show. I think it's great. But please don't expect me to sell it."

[00:35:02:05]

Well, of course, the joke was on me, because we can never keep enough Baskins on hand. The demand is so great. And the more horrifying, the more terrible his images, the more he does death, and blind people, crippled people, disfigured people, dead people—we're even selling his dead people. There's just an ever-increasing demand. He can't seem to shock people enough. This, of course, I never expected to happen. I think he's developed beautifully as an artist.

[00:35:40.88]

DOROTHY SECKLER: When he first came into your gallery, was he concentrating on drawing and painting, or on sculpture?

[00:35:48.35]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: He never did painting. What he first—what we first showed

were the woodcuts and the drawings. He had been a sculptor, and had worked—but he wasn't ready to show it. In fact, I didn't even see his sculpture until I'd handled his work for a few years, and then I saw it, and of course, gave him a show. And it was very successful.

[00:36:13.29]

DOROTHY SECKLER: So astonishingly, all of a piece, all of the same concept—

[00:36:17.03]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: Yes.

[00:36:17.51]

DOROTHY SECKLER: —the drawing and the sculpture?

[00:36:18.77]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: Yes. Well, he has his ideas on which are—come across cross in his work.

[00:36:27.02]

Weinberg is an example of an artist whom I really had to chase. I saw one small piece of his, a figure—I believe it was a religious figure—in a New Talent exhibition. And I wrote to him. He never answered my letter. And I wrote again. And finally, I called him, and he said, "But I haven't any work. I don't need a dealer. I just don't have anything."

[00:36:54.55]

And I finally went up to New Haven to see him, and he said, "I have some waxes in my studio. I don't have enough money to cast them in bronze. I'd like to do a wood carving. I don't have any money to buy the wood." And I said, "Well, maybe I can help you." And someone advanced me the money for the wood, and he did a wood carving, which I later sold to Joe Hirshhorn for about $3,000—it's now in his collection at the Guggenheim Museum. It's about a $3,000.

[00:37:28.66]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, it's a beautiful piece.

[00:37:30.73]

GRACE BORGENICHT BRANDT: And then he was able to cast some things in bronze, and we sold them. And it's always been a very fine relationship I've had with him—

[At this point, there was further trouble with the tape recorder, and the interview was not resumed. –Ed.]

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]