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Oral history interview with Irving Marantz, 1968 August 31

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Irving Marantz on August 31, 1968. The interview took place in Provincetown, and was conducted by Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The sound quality for this interview is poor throughout, leading to an abnormally high number of inaudible sections. The Archives of American Art has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Inaudible.] Well, Dorothy Seckler interviewing Irving Marantz?

IRVING MARANTZ: Marantz, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In Provincetown on August 31, 1968. And I have had the [inaudible] which is here in your home, and I was interested in what you were telling me about the fact that although these are rather recent they are not necessarily typical because these changes in your work are [inaudible]. Would you like to expand on that a little bit?

IRVING MARANTZ: Yes, [inaudible] that particular painting you saw in my living room is a painting that was started four or five years ago, and at the time it was even starting [inaudible] had a throwback in style to a previous period [inaudible] before 1960, which [inaudible] sometime because the way I work is sometimes in reverence—totally different from the [inaudible] form. I kind of use a free associative thing. It's what—the thing [inaudible] that's bound to pull me back into a previous style. Um, I notice that happens also in many of the paintings of Picasso. There's a certain—something happened and he does a kind of a painting of a period within another period. However, I—that's not not an explanation why I do it. That's just, you know, it occurs. So that thing is not really typical of the kind of thing that I generally do. Now, I do say generally do because—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Is it typical of your color or—I—

IRVING MARANTZ: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Inaudible] a very conspicuous attitude toward color in most of your paintings.

IRVING MARANTZ: Yes, yes, [inaudible] color. The, subject matter is somewhat flattened more in the more recent paintings.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It's more flattened than this painting here.

IRVING MARANTZ: Yeah, yeah. And, uh, the color is a kind of a vibration of color. [00:02:01] The vibration of the painting is coming out of the vibration of color. Though the subject matter is a still figure, I mean, it's not a totally abstract painting. It has a more abstract element than does that particular painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you work from the figure, or are your paintings sort of more abstract work [ph]?

IRVING MARANTZ: No, I don't work from the figure at all. And I don't have models pose for the paintings or anything of that sort [ph]. I work with a figure when I draw but not when I paint. So that's—

DOROTHY SECKLER: How would you likely start a painting?

IRVING MARANTZ: Well, in the recent years the way that I start a painting is by—through the associating a large matter of colors and associating content with—without the association of color of movement and development that [inaudible]. In other words, the tendency is to grow organically rather than my having a prearranged concept before I start.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So you may not know when you begin whether it will be a landscape or a figure, or is it mostly figures though?

IRVING MARANTZ: Definitely it's mostly figures. [Inaudible] possibly containing landscape, but it's—my associations with—have only been with figures. My whole background came out of a kind of humanistic approach to painting so that the figure still remains. I have found it very difficult to [inaudible] figure painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Does it have a rather symbolic connotation for you?

IRVING MARANTZ: I really can't answer that question. It, uh, naturally has a symbolic connotation.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But not necessarily one that can be expressed in words?

IRVING MARANTZ: No, no, it's—as a matter of fact, there's a great attempt to organize the paintings in a manner that they cannot be spoken about specifically. They can only be seen—understood when they're seen, not talked about.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, I gathered that from the quality of the composition and the [inaudible] abstraction and color. [00:04:03] Uh, this is—you spoke of your painting having come out of the [inaudible] background. I see that you were getting started as a painter in the '30s, and this is a period when artists often thought of their work, you know, in that, uh, context in terms of, well, it was a time of great preoccupation with social events and things, and so on [ph]. Where were you at that time?

IRVING MARANTZ: Well, in the '30s I was in New York City.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you on the project?

IRVING MARANTZ: I was on the project, yes. I joined the project—Federal Art Project around '34, 1934. And actually, as you had said, when you came out of the art school—I was a young, young man. When I came out of the art school the prevalence was of involvement with social affairs and the social needs that people [inaudible] profession. And like many of the young artists who come out of school that were caught up in the current wave of art movements, I was caught up too. And so I readjusted my thinking and become aware of—more aware of what I wanted and should do, and as I matured I changed somewhat. But I was, well, you might say a social realist painter in the '30 caught up with Orozco and Rivera, the whole social scene of painting, and that's how I actually started.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And had you gone to an art school before the projects?

IRVING MARANTZ: Yes, I graduated an art school in New Jersey. I lived—I'm born in Elizabeth, New Jersey, and I graduated Newark School of Fine Industrial Arts, 1932 or '33. And I got into some kind of a scholarship with the art school degree. And I went to the Arts Students League, and actually [inaudible] study with George Grosz [inaudible] orientation at the time. [00:06:06] And so I studied with George Grosz at the Louvre and studied graphics with Harold Sternberg.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, I remember there was [inaudible] were you mainly a graphic artist in those years?

IRVING MARANTZ: No, no, I really intended to be a painter. The graphic arts was kind of rounding out the part of art school training that I didn't get, you see. And that's why I went into the graphics. But I was basically a painter.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you were on the Eva [ph] project then?

IRVING MARANTZ: No, I was not. I was not. I got a job on the art teaching project.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Everyone's in good company there too.

IRVING MARANTZ: Yeah, and—

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Inaudible] must tell them I'm not [inaudible]. [Laughs.]

IRVING MARANTZ: Matter of fact, uh, there are many good painters I spoke to who were teachers in those days that I do quite well on the art student [ph] project, and eventually I became a supervisor, and then I became a director of the Art Teacher's Training Institute that they set up in the project.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, that's interesting. I'm surprised that we didn't get to you when we were doing our special study on WPA.

IRVING MARANTZ: Well, Paul O'Connor has, incidentally, he—you know, he came down [inaudible].

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Inaudible] the archives?

IRVING MARANTZ: Not to the archives, no, for this present study he's making for Washington for, now what's his name. [Inaudible]. Grant was doing a complete study on the federal arts project.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, we did our own complete study about—

IRVING MARANTZ: Really?

DOROTHY SECKLER: —couple of years ago. Yes, I think that, uh, there's a book to be produced. But in any case I want to go to that now. I'm [inaudible]. I'm surprised that we should have known about you then. So you were teaching—this is—what is the exact title of this project, this special study group?

IRVING MARANTZ: Oh, well, the exact title of the school that I was a director of, it was the last year that I was on the society, but I left the project in 1930—'38. [00:08:09] I was director of the Art Teacher's Training Institute, and that was—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Art Teacher's Training Institute.

IRVING MARANTZ: We set up an art school for the art teachers so that they could continue their studies while they were teaching on the project. And I was the first director of that school.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was this in New York too?

IRVING MARANTZ: It's in New York, yes. As a matter of fact, we were situated at the Harlem Arts Center on 125th and Lexington.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What did that training consist of?

IRVING MARANTZ: Graphic arts, sculpture, painting, in other words, we had teachers who were training other teachers in the arts. So they maintained their creative attitude, you see, in their work. And that was the intention, not the training necessarily as teachers but the training to continue their training as artists while they're on this project.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And it was assumed that they would not have otherwise? They were not an art—involved enough as artists to have been doing that without some incentive of some type?

IRVING MARANTZ: Well, a lot of the people who came on the art teacher's training, like myself, were people who came right out of art school.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

IRVING MARANTZ: They were young artists, and the great holocaust of the Depression was to sell it as a great boon. So it became—it gave us employment while we were developing as artists, you see. And so that it was a boon to some of these people, and some of the people, for example, are people on the project who had never studied graphic art and who were art teachers, and they had an opportunity to study lithography and photography, and so forth.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How do you evaluate that? Was it a good idea?

IRVING MARANTZ: I think it was a good idea. It was a splendid idea, actually. It was well-attended, and it fulfilled a function. Unfortunately I left after a short while. Because I'd gotten a job to go to China as a buyer of Chinese antiquities, through a relative of mine and I spent the next four years after '38 in China. [00:10:08]

DOROTHY SECKLER: That must have been fascinating.

IRVING MARANTZ: It was a great—ripped up this and began studying Oriental art, you see, which was very weird [ph].

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. So tell us more about China then. [They laugh.] I must say I'm fascinated.

IRVING MARANTZ: Well, that—

DOROTHY SECKLER: That must have been an enormous change.

IRVING MARANTZ: It was enormous change, and it was enormous opportunity, and it's, um—and I think it had enormous impact on me from philosophically as an artist. That's where my reorientation in thinking took place, you see. I was taken out of this hectic scene in New York, you see, with all the things that were taking place and put into a different setting. I had difficulty painting in that setting because the things would come out like *National Geographic* magazine illustrations. And it [ph] reoriented my thoughts. So I didn't do too much painting though I did some painting while I was there. I had—I did a great deal of studying of Oriental art, which affected my own point of view.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was this by yourself? I mean, in museums or temples or—

IRVING MARANTZ: No, in museums and temples and also dealing with the Chinese dealers themselves who were—had a great insight and a great knowledge about Chinese art. They don't have scholars the way we have scholars. Their scholars are the actual dealers, the ones who handle these—they're scholars of that, what they collected or sold of Chinese antiquity.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, is there a market in China? Was there a market in China for antiquity?

IRVING MARANTZ: Oh yes, the Chinese were the greatest collectors in the world, see. As a matter of fact, as far back as the Sung dynasty, as far back as 8[00] or 900 years they were making copies for the use of collectors of the period that existed 200 or 300 years before. So they had forgeries of earlier periods. So we have forgeries that are 900 years old [laughs], you see, that are good works of art. [00:12:06] I mean, they've lived through that period, but they're actually imitations of a precious period of art. And bronze and [inaudible] and so forth.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would you take your paintings in to show them to these dealers and get their reactions?

IRVING MARANTZ: My paintings?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah.

IRVING MARANTZ: No, no, no, no, they're worlds apart and not involved in western art in anyway whatsoever. No, I've—and I know I learned a great deal by the handling. I learned [ph] handle literally thousands of objects of art. [Inaudible] and then I [inaudible] and ship to America.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What period and what kind of work interested you the most?

IRVING MARANTZ: From China?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah.

IRVING MARANTZ: I would say I had a great love for the Zhou period, the bronze or the early bronzes, and I have—I love the Tang and the Sung period, which were the most vital periods, I think.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I guess you have a pretty good taste then.

IRVING MARANTZ: Yeah, yeah.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You can't [inaudible].

IRVING MARANTZ: But it was a very deep [inaudible] in the [inaudible]. So that was my—

DOROTHY SECKLER: I think so. Did that might—

IRVING MARANTZ: I like Han too. You know, with these kind of primitive qualities in the Han, the archaic qualities of the Han dynasty.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, you can go as far as Shang.

IRVING MARANTZ: Yeah, right, oh even further. I had a funny experience with, uh, I don't know if you remember a Dr. Salmoni [ph].

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, I do—

IRVING MARANTZ: At NYU?

DOROTHY SECKLER: —know that name, yes.

IRVING MARANTZ: When I came back—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Course I studied at NYU.

IRVING MARANTZ: Did you really?

DOROTHY SECKLER: I took a course in Chinese drawing and learned all about [inaudible] and notches [ph] and [inaudible].

IRVING MARANTZ: Very good, all right. Well you see, I had never studied scholastic Chinese art, so when I came

back to America in 1941 I thought, well, might be an interesting thing to go study with Salmoni? Well, I went up to see Salmoni in his study, and we talked over about what course I could take and so forth, and in the process of talking we had a very interesting experience, which, it was tragic for him, I think. [00:14:06] He started telling me that he's working on a paper on a very rare object that nobody has ever seen in America and that it's one of the earliest wood pieces ever found in China. It dates back to early Zhou, so as he's describing it, suddenly I said, "Do you have a photograph of it or anything?" And he says, "Well, all I have is this little snapshot." He brings out a little tiny snapshot of the piece, and I was very much amused because I was the agent for that piece in America, and I had large 8 X 10 photographs of it and all the history of it with [ph] the Chinese and then the Chinese sources, which he didn't have. And he was very much upset by it, you know.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well what—does your history contradict what he thought it was?

IRVING MARANTZ: Not at all. I didn't care whether it did or not. That wasn't important. Important was that I had all this documentation of a thing that he was supposed to be the sole source of and no one else knew about.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh.

IRVING MARANTZ: And I said, "Look, uh, Dr. Salmoni, I'm not a scholar, and I'm not really interested in scholastic [inaudible]. I'll give you the photographs and the documentation and you do whatever you want with it," and I did, but I know he was very—he was somewhat displeased by this. I guess scholars generally are because they—he felt that he had something, and he probably did write a book on this piece. I still have the photographs of it—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you study with him after that?

IRVING MARANTZ: No. [They laugh.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: It would have been rather uncomfortable.

IRVING MARANTZ: No, I did not. So that was—

DOROTHY SECKLER: So you were there four years.

IRVING MARANTZ: —that was [inaudible].

DOROTHY SECKLER: And, uh, [inaudible] certain things, and you did get to know the dealers pretty well.

IRVING MARANTZ: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, I knew the man who owned this piece. He was [inaudible] of high pace [inaudible] that I used to come in contact with them [inaudible]. [00:16:10] But that's how I really learned.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah, I suppose [inaudible] on painting and sculpture must have also imparted painting, outlooking sources in philosophy or what [ph] art and aesthetics really are about.

IRVING MARANTZ: Definitely, that was the main consideration—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah, the main thing, yeah.

IRVING MARANTZ: —was a previous concept, and it made me reorient my thinking, and the word "orient" comes from [inaudible].

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would you like to enlarge on that a little? I know how difficult it is.

IRVING MARANTZ: It is difficult. It's—and I think it was because my—taking painting out of the realm of dealing with a total awareness and moving closer to a mystical, even a mystical approach, uh, that had a greater pragmatism [ph] about the thing. And if you look into the paintings in my living room you'll find that it has no specific time, place, or area. It's just seems to exist, you see, in a kind of timelessness. And, uh, this is what occurs. And in my work and from that experience. And it was difficult to digest all this and take it in and then give it out. It took many years before that took place, actually. But I'm not one that's easy to doff my hat. I think my hat [inaudible]. So it was a gradual kind of thing that occurred.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So you come back four years later, and what year would that have been when you returned?

IRVING MARANTZ: I came back in '41.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Just in time to be involved in the war?

IRVING MARANTZ: Just in time to be involved in the war, and also just in time for my son to be born.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So you'd been married?

IRVING MARANTZ: My wife was [inaudible]. [00:18:00] And then I was caught up in the arms of the war. And I had a—for a period of time I had a Chinese art gallery up in Boston. [Inaudible] that. There [inaudible] that I [inaudible] to myself [inaudible]. And I raised just enough money to spend a year or so in Connecticut painting. And then I was caught up in the war. I ended up in the war, end up in the war plan as a proletariat person [laughs]. But I—my romantic concepts [inaudible] and being a proletariat was quickly erased. That was fun, particularly if you weren't one before. And then I ended up as a USO director out in the Middle West [inaudible] up at Camp Harring [ph] near the proving grounds. I wanted to go back to China, and I made a number of efforts to join the, oh, what's the name of that group that [inaudible]? In psychological warfare? I'll think of it in a minute or two. But it never seemed to resolve itself, so I spent the year to the war in America because my child was born and I went into the draft [inaudible].

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you ever get back to China?

IRVING MARANTZ: No, never got back to China.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And of course so much had happened during your [inaudible] and then it's a whole—

IRVING MARANTZ: Yeah, so there's no—with Chinese antiquity, there's no point in going back to China, so after the war, uh, no antiquity was permitted to leave China. [00:20:08] And it's just for the fact that America, due to the fact of China spreading communism, America wasn't willing to [ph] permit work—Chinese works of art over 100 years of age to come into American because it all originated in China, [inaudible].

DOROTHY SECKLER: So then after the war years you—were you still a dealer in any sense, or?

IRVING MARANTZ: No, no, no, no, no, it was—I worked, tried to earn a living as best I can in many ways, just painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative], you weren't teaching then at that point?

IRVING MARANTZ: No, I started teaching again around 1955 when I had the school up here in Provincetown called the Provincetown School of Painting. I had that for almost 10 or 11 years every summer I would teach up here at the school. Well, 1960-uh—until 1962 I had the school, Provincetown school. In 1962 I went to Europe [inaudible].

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did they have much enrollment up here?

IRVING MARANTZ: Oh yeah.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How large a school was it?

IRVING MARANTZ: Oh yeah, oh yeah. It was, oh, I average a class was about 20 students, maybe more [ph].

DOROTHY SECKLER: What kinds of courses did you have? I can imagine—

IRVING MARANTZ: Just painting and drawing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —[inaudible].

IRVING MARANTZ: Painting and drawing. And I taught up here, and I taught for [inaudible], and I also taught at the University of Iowa and the University of Georgia, you know, NYU, that sort of thing [ph].

DOROTHY SECKLER: What was your painting like, uh, during these years? That state between '46 or so and '52, how would your painting have looked and what kinds of—

IRVING MARANTZ: Well, uh—

DOROTHY SECKLER: —there's still a figure, I assume.

IRVING MARANTZ: They were still very figurative and still had some social content. They would be generally starting to change. [00:22:00] Around 1940—'48, I got a Pensacola Award, and they gave me a one-man show. It was my first one-man show, 1948. And they got—

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Inaudible.]

IRVING MARANTZ: —on 57th Street, Pensacola had opened a gallery, and they showed May to August. They gave the one-man show in an area of new talent. And I was one of those eight that year. That was my first one-

man show.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was that, uh, really a milestone for you? Was it important in [inaudible] your life?

IRVING MARANTZ: Yes, it was a milestone because it was a kind of a—even though I'd already been included in numerous national exhibitions, um, this was a kind of a first step of recognition which was—that was given to me at the time.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And what year was that in?

IRVING MARANTZ: 1948.

DOROTHY SECKLER: '48, well, that was a pretty crucial year in American painting. I mean, if you're daring to be this, you know, the whole—

IRVING MARANTZ: Abstract expression.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, it's abstract expression and more, of course, focus in general on American painting and more opportunities for American artists.

IRVING MARANTZ: That's right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How'd that affect you? I know it might have worked both ways at the same time.

IRVING MARANTZ: How does what affect me? [They laugh.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, the, first of all, of course, the general tendency for people to pay more attention to American artists. It seemed to be one [inaudible] good for almost anybody to some extent, and yet at the same time it wasn't—it did have a—you might have a focus on one style that was, I guess [inaudible].

IRVING MARANTZ: Well, I wasn't swept into the abstract expressionist movement even though many of the people who were leaders in the abstract expressionist movement I knew from the '30s, I mean I knew them personally, but I wasn't swept into it. I sort of, as I said before, I'm not quick with change. [00:24:00] And I did not become—I did not join that movement. I continued my own trend and changes [inaudible] in a kind of figurative style. So I wasn't swept up by that, if that's what you meant.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, I was just wondering in what way it would have affected you. And you weren't, in any case a member of—

IRVING MARANTZ: I would not say that I didn't learn from it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

IRVING MARANTZ: But I didn't swing into the movement.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah, well, there were certain elements, of course, in that movement that implied an awareness of Zen and so on. I was sort of curious also to whether your Oriental background would have put—

IRVING MARANTZ: Well, I think that was applied—

DOROTHY SECKLER: —[inaudible].

IRVING MARANTZ: —I think this is—that was applied to the painting after the painting was done rather than being the birth of a source of the painting. I think that was a kind of a search to reorient that type of painting and to fit it into place. And I don't think that was really because this whole zen philosophy had been absorbed and therefore that kind of painting took place. I think the painting took place before that concept, and tried to fit it in with it, and they started trying to fit it in with this Monet style too, Monet's late style of painting. But I think that's after. That's the analytical part of it, not the synthetic part of it, you see, that occurred. Now, when you have to talk about it, now we have to attach it to something. And that's why I talk to you about painting as sometimes very difficult and not necessarily people, done by—presented by the artist themself or any contemporary artist in relation to his work. I don't think he really, uh, can—so if he can paint it it's very difficult to talk it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

IRVING MARANTZ: The analytical part is really very [laughs] [inaudible].

DOROTHY SECKLER: Had you gone to a [inaudible] at all impressionistic at any state? It doesn't sound as if you

had any. I don't—didn't gather that you had a—

IRVING MARANTZ: Yeah, that's why there was some—there were influences of post impressionism in my work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When it was—was it more highly colored at [inaudible] symbolically colored, or, um—[00:26:05]

IRVING MARANTZ: No, I think it was amalgamated, through my work in relationship to my developing of my con—my philosophical concept. With painting and philosophical concept the colors started coming—becoming more important as a kind of an element of the painting that once was a little element. And it—kept getting more and more important as time went by.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Now, I imagine it may have happened also with surface texture, I mean that you—

IRVING MARANTZ: Surface texture too, yes, and as a matter of fact the, uh, just the use of acrylics, because I was one of the early users of acrylics, staining the canvas so you maintain the surface of the canvas was a kind of a way of keeping the surface of the canvas as [inaudible], kind of a textured surface from which I had fallen into as a result of coming across acrylic paint and using it on unprimed grind or gravel.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you wash it on in some way?

IRVING MARANTZ: Yes, I didn't prime the ground. I used the linen and just washed the paint on, so it remained and remained fresh, you see. And it kept the same texture as a tiny painting with watercolor on silk, especially on silk.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah, did you also have a very open feeling to some of those paintings?

IRVING MARANTZ: No, they weren't as open as some of the Oriental paintings are. Actually, paintings I had done in Rome, which was a great year for me because it gave me a completely free—just to do nothing but paint.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What year was that now?

IRVING MARANTZ: That was '62, '63.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

IRVING MARANTZ: I—the paintings—I used color as a sense of movement within the painting. The figure suddenly took on no movement, and the colors created the movement. [00:28:01] And it was a kind of a greater divorce, and divorce from the contents of the painting, the [inaudible]. It was going more and more into color. And—

DOROTHY SECKLER: What kind of color was this? Could you give me an idea? Was it similar to the color you now—you use in your paintings here?

IRVING MARANTZ: Um, no, I think they were—I wouldn't call them bright colors. They were kind of a restrained kind of a color.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Rich [inaudible]?

IRVING MARANTZ: It was a rich [inaudible] time.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is a good many dark colorings with some [inaudible] brown then off-black and black with blue [inaudible]. Were you using those at that time too?

IRVING MARANTZ: No, no, they were—the colors were brighter than that at that time. I suppose the best thing to do is for you to see some of those paintings, but, uh—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, well, I intend to, yeah.

IRVING MARANTZ: Uh, it might be a better—you get a better idea of what they're like.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What was it that happened in Rome that affected you? Was it the light or the place itself or something that you saw?

IRVING MARANTZ: I think many factors, the light, the fact that I had a year that I spent with no other interference but painting, no teaching, no other job, no—during the whole period I decided to burn a candle at both ends by raising a family and keeping them well-fed and being a painter. Which is a difficult kind of a process. But just this year gave me a wonderful sense of freedom. I was not involved in anything to do but

painting. Very often I think that I'm a painter that's maybe 10 years younger than myself because of all the time I had lost doing other things and supporting my family and raising a family, so it was, um—I always think of myself 10 years younger than I am. [00:30:01] [They laugh.] It helps.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You had your family with you in Rome too, I believe.

IRVING MARANTZ: Yes, they were with me in Rome, my daughter went to school there. Everyone was there [h]. But we all had our own path. We left each other alone so we had a lot [inaudible] I accomplished a great deal. And then Rome too, I—I started before going to Rome. I started doing some sculpture. Nobody can be in Rome very long without being involved in sculptures in some way. But I started to do some sculpture and castings in sculpture, and it ended up with [inaudible] just this past year I received permission to do a 10-foot monument out in New Jersey, the model of which you see is [inaudible] over my fireplace there, yeah.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Inaudible.]

IRVING MARANTZ: And that was, uh, 10 feet high, around 10 feet wide. I mean, it was [inaudible] large to make [inaudible].

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, that was quite a [inaudible] from turning all those years into sculpture. How did you—what foundations were you drawing on?

IRVING MARANTZ: Well, I had studied sculpture when I went to art school, things like that. The foundation was just kind of a gradual development, you see. And I started a few years before I went to Rome just playing with it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Using what materials?

IRVING MARANTZ: Working in, um, plaster [ph] and casting and drawing, and then, uh, when I went to Rome I worked I worked wax [ph]. I mean, it started to develop, and over the period of time I kept doing more and more sculpture. So it, uh, [inaudible].

[Audio Break.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Just, uh, to make sure we have the name of the place and the [inaudible] building.

IRVING MARANTZ: It's the sculpture installed with the—it's against the front wall of the Bayonne Jewish Community Center in Bayonne, New Jersey. [00:32:00]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you said it was quite—how many feet high?

IRVING MARANTZ: Well, uh, with the base it's around 13 feet high.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

IRVING MARANTZ: The sculpture itself is approximately 10 feet by seven feet by four feet.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How did the idea for that sculpture develop? Did you trace it first a little bit?

IRVING MARANTZ: You mean the, uh, the concept of the sculpture?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, the concept of what it meant and how it [inaudible].

IRVING MARANTZ: Well, uh, naturally a community center would want something that deals with the type of thing they dealt with, and also the fact that it was a Jewish community center was then another problem to present itself.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, were you allowed to have an image?

IRVING MARANTZ: Yes, I was allowed to have any image I liked, I preferred. I submitted, uh, five drawings, and they selected the one drawing I liked best, the one sketch I liked best for a piece of sculpture. I like giving them a little leeway in selection. The concept of the sculpture, actually, again, I think is close to my painting in the sense that it held on to a timelessness, and though it's figurative and represents a family it's—it informs function, and it has a vibration within the movement of them forms themselves. It created a concept of solidity and unity, you see, but I attempted, again, the building up the wall, and if you look at the sculpture carefully you'll even find a symbol or symbols that indicate a book or a scroll. And all of that culminates in the kind of a figure of three, three or five figures of a family in the piece. So it kind of combined all the elements rather than, again, being a descriptive thing. It took on a mystical, symbolic quality and also had kind of an archaic recall, you see. [00:34:03]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, I noticed that it's very stern.

IRVING MARANTZ: It goes back, you see. It's contemporary and it goes back. Again, the aspect of timelessness was very important to me in developing the concept of the thing, you see.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I think that's very clear in the model that you have here. Well, that was an interesting change, and certainly it must have been quite a challenge. Do you feel you'll go on with the sculpture now about —

IRVING MARANTZ: Only sculpture?

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, I mean along with painting.

IRVING MARANTZ: I think so, yes. I think so. It's a kind of broadening of my self takes place in doing the sculpture, the addition of painting. And as we observe in recent years, many of the painters have been doing sculpture. As a matter of fact, in some areas of sculpture and the painting becomes one again.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah, you may end up with a shaped canvas [ph] yeah.

IRVING MARANTZ: Who knows? I mean, who knows?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, the blurring—the dividing line between the forms is certainly blurred a great deal today.

IRVING MARANTZ: Yeah.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And, uh, you know, we may find this happening in your work too.

IRVING MARANTZ: I know. I'm a growing boy. And I'm not—

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Laughs.] And you've got those 10 years to back up.

IRVING MARANTZ: Yes, okay. And I'm not one to sit back on one thing. I mean, I get bored easily with one concept, one thing that—but I have to grow or else I feel as though I will die if I don't grow. I don't mean physically die, but emotionally die. So I'm very much tied up with the aspect of growth, the aspect of search. And as I say, I'm a growing boy. [Laughs.] I really mean that. And I feel very young.

DOROTHY SECKLER: We talked a little bit about your reaction to abstract expressionism, and then of course more recently we've had a whole series of rather rapidly exploding isms and, you know, pop up and color field and so on, but you've apparently been sort of plowing your own furrow without paying too much attention, but I suppose everyone is affected somewhat by the climate of the whole art scene. [00:36:15] How do you feel about —

IRVING MARANTZ: We're affected by everything. We're affected by everything. I am—I told you I don't move quickly into movements, never, since I was a young man when I moved quickly into social realism. And, um, well, I try to learn a great deal by these movements. I'm not swept into it. And at the same time, I don't rest on my laurels and maintain a kind of one direction. I'm a bit of a maverick, I think. I don't belong to any—aesthetically any group and move with a group so that it's actually—it's less opportunist in a way because when you attach yourself to a group you move much more rapidly in getting publicity or attention and so forth. And maybe it's less wise from a personal opportunist point of view, but I just don't fit into that kind of concept. I have to really integrate what occurs before I can accept it, you see [ph]. So I move more slowly. Now that doesn't mean I reject them, but it doesn't—it also doesn't mean I totally accept them, you see.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, I gather from looking at your paintings that your paintings still have this timeless quality. There's no sort of reference to a specific environment as one would find, for instance, in Pop. At the same time there's certainly no losing of the figure in a broad abstract field of any kind. So I imagine that this represents your own resistance to a certain extent.

IRVING MARANTZ: Yes, I suppose. [Inaudible]. Go my way to a great extent, yes, but I don't—but at the same time I think everything effects one, you see, the climate affects one. [00:38:07] And I try to learn from all of them rather than accept one of them anyway or being trapped into accepting one. So many of these artists do get involved in a kind of a wave, and then they're caught in that wave, you see. And it's hard to extricate themselves into a—then they have to make a break and reorient the painting, and stuff [ph]. And it's very hard to execute it myself. So my little kind of a gradual plane of development, I move along in my own way as best as I can to try to think out my own thoughts as best as I can. And, um, I think my best philosophy is be rigidly opposed to rigidity, [they laugh] and move along, and I think in that kind of thinking, you see.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How would you say your general outlook has changed since you returned from the Orient? Is there any broad addition to the way you think about art in general, in your own work in particular?

IRVING MARANTZ: Well, that's a broad question.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It is.

IRVING MARANTZ: That's a very broad—

DOROTHY SECKLER: I throw out a big net here.

IRVING MARANTZ: You can fall into a terrific, uh, situation with that question. Um, no, I think it's—I think I more or less explained that the attitude I have is one of personal resolution of things rather than feeling that this is it or that is it. And if you might throw that concept to a move existentialist kind of point of view where the man has to resolve his own problems [inaudible]—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yeah, yes, I thought there might be an element of that.

IRVING MARANTZ: —and live within himself in order to meet the situation. And so that this is what I try to do. So there's a constant inner search rather than trying to take outward. [00:40:00] That whatever happens with the outside, then search from within and move my own way, you see. That's about all I got. It's not a—and I think a number of painters have done that. I think Matisse is a very good example of a man who constantly moved his own way, moved through everything but kept moving his own way, how he was resolving it himself. And that for getting [ph] freest and greatest in his last years. So I hope I live that long. That's the only thing [inaudible].

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, we—when we were talking about your painting and, well, I guess it was before the Rome, you were talking about using acrylics and washes and leaving the canvas unprimed and so on. You worked away from that somewhat recently, I gather.

IRVING MARANTZ: No, I haven't. I—

DOROTHY SECKLER: You're still doing it?

IRVING MARANTZ: I'm still somewhat working the same manner of painting, yes. And I still use acrylics. Matter of fact, that painting you see in the living room that you commented on, talked about was an acrylic.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, you're using it in a very painterly way.

IRVING MARANTZ: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And it wouldn't immediately register as acrylic to me.

IRVING MARANTZ: No, it's—though I—one of the reasons I moved to acrylics, one of the original intentions of moving to acrylics is attempt to move away from this kind of romantic, buttery kind of painting that oil painting lends itself so readily and also to the many habits of painting that I was taught as a way of unlearning and readjusting, you see, so that when I moved into acrylics it was flatter in flatter areas. I had to deal with a new technical process to make it meet my needs rather than learning the old habits that I was taught by my teachers. And that was also a kind of a break in a new direction. [00:42:02] And it's—I found—I found it helped me resolve my personal approach much more than oil painting, and that's why I never went back to oil painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When you begin painting nowadays, how would you likely actually get started? Do you work on a white canvas, or do you [inaudible]—

IRVING MARANTZ: I usually work on unprimed ground. And I might start with two or three large areas of color that I put a rather—at random on the canvas, and though those three areas may not appear or end up in those—is exactly that way, they are the source of beginnings. And then it builds up from that, the whole set of associations will take place. In other words, the composition, the concept, the color, all organically develop simultaneously—

DOROTHY SECKLER: So you're not imposing a drawing early on that, but you're sort of finding your image in it?

IRVING MARANTZ: That's right. At the same time I do a lot of drawing on my own, you see.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, I saw that quite, uh, vital self-portrait drawing that you did this summer.

IRVING MARANTZ: I do a lot of drawing, but that—that I kind of dissociate from my painting. In other words, I paint with my brush.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

IRVING MARANTZ: And I don't paint with a line. The brush creates the line.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

IRVING MARANTZ: So there's a different kind of an approach in the painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

IRVING MARANTZ: But at the same time I sort of draw in a way that a musician practices the chords of the piano, you know, so that I keep in tune. There's a set of relationships that are always there, you see.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I notice you have a tendency to affirm certain vertical, horizontal elements, usually in a painting. They turn up a good bit. [00:44:00]

IRVING MARANTZ: There's very—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Parallel to the surface.

IRVING MARANTZ: [Inaudible] the last—that—I would say that occurs since around 19—oh, since about 1958, 1960, that that kind of compositional structure—which is not a—again, not a conscious concept. I might do vertical, horizontal structures, but it seems to work out that that's what the structures come out that way. And it even comes out in much of my sculpture too, that it has this kind of horizontal, vertical interrelated movement. But this came—

DOROTHY SECKLER: What would that have reflected, coming—uh, appearing in your work at that time? Uh, I don't suppose that you were particular attracted to Mondrian, but I—would this—I suppose if it is this general thing in the air of a flat—of keep it close to the surface of the canvas, not letting a space go too deeply into this.

IRVING MARANTZ: Exactly, yes, yes, yes, this is part of the—my own development brought that on. My greater concept for order and logic within painting, which as a young social realist I didn't—I really didn't have. I didn't integrate that. And I suffered like many of the young painters do, who suffer today who were taught a manner of painting or move into a current mainstream that exists without really understanding, why are they there, you see. That exists in that—they want to be in the swing of things. Well, that's a kind of a youthful enthusiasm that maybe maturity, uh, reorganizes for one. Some of us get it earlier. Some of us get it later. That's what occurs. And I imagine it happened to all the painters. I mean, it occurs. And it's a different time element that takes place there, in that regard. There was a greater attempt to flatten the surface of the canvas, to move away from the physical, naturalistic depth that exists in painting, and to find other sources of inspiration within the canvas itself rather than the naturalism or of optical appearance or something. [00:46:10] But that occurred, and I think that it—that, um, the whole influence, I think, of European painting as a result of World War II when so many of the European painters like Mondrian and Léger and the others came to America. I think it affected me as well as all the other painters just to a great degree, and they brought something to America. I remember giving a lecture at the University of Georgia in which I pointed out that certain holocausts culminated to—social holocausts created changes in American painting, see, such as the American being involved in becoming ex-patriots after World War I and being involved with the European scene, and after World War II or the beginning of World War II the European artists coming to America, you see. And even made me think of a fact that the abstract expressionist movement culminated to the explosion of the atom bomb, though it's very difficult to indicate how one thing, the explosion of subject matter in a painting occurred almost simultaneously to the explosion of the first atom bomb being exploded. Now it's a kind of a thesis that I've haven't gone into in great depth, but it's an interesting observation.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It is.

IRVING MARANTZ: And I try to break down different periods, and I call them the holocausts, like the explosion of the atom bomb was a holocaust to me that created effects on part of painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I wonder if we're going to have a Chicago period now. [They laugh.] Since we're doing this tape immediately following the brutalities of Chicago convention of the Democratic Party. [00:48:05]

IRVING MARANTZ: Sure.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Which has been looked at—our summer's almost a—

IRVING MARANTZ: Oh, maybe it'll effect the younger artists and—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, I know.

IRVING MARANTZ: —create something of—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Something.

IRVING MARANTZ: —some form of direction, yeah.

DOROTHY SECKLER: [Inaudible] comes out of it. [Inaudible] some form, some level, but that's an interesting parallel, and probably quickly going through here I don't suppose anyone would know exactly how to pull it out of the—they call it the zeitgeist or something [laughs], you know.

IRVING MARANTZ: That's right. You'd have to go into great depth—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, that's the question.

IRVING MARANTZ: —on the thing in order to find out the—to make a specifically scientific concept. It's not a scientific one.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, you're next sabbatical you can—

IRVING MARANTZ: But it's just an observation.

DOROTHY SECKLER: —attack that one. [They laugh.]

IRVING MARANTZ: I'm really not interested in becoming a scholar. I just want to be a painter.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, uh, that's an interesting thought though. I, uh—who—while you were in Europe did you find any particular European artists with whom you felt—

IRVING MARANTZ: Yes, now—

DOROTHY SECKLER: —with whom you felt drawn to?

IRVING MARANTZ: Yes, I did. See, this is—even my kind of—even though I was involved with the Oriental concepts I sort of eclectically put things together. Piero della Francesca, for example, was an artist of great importance to me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

IRVING MARANTZ: As a matter of fact, I made an excursion to every Piero della Francesca that exists in Italy, I think—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh.

IRVING MARANTZ: —and looked everyone up including his birthplace because in his paintings he too has this kind of—even though he deals with specific subjects, there's a kind of a timelessness about both the structure, the intent, and then the con—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Now I know where you got those verticals and horizontals.

IRVING MARANTZ: Yes, he—yes, that's true.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Because he has that so.

IRVING MARANTZ: He has that too. Maybe that's why I was attracted to it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

IRVING MARANTZ: But he's been a real—this is my association to Oriental art in the Western world is Piero della Francesca, you see. And so then I was closely attached and influenced by that, I think more than anything else. [00:50:01]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you couldn't have done better.

IRVING MARANTZ: Of course Uccello is also a very interesting source and Giotto was a great memory in point of scene in too. But this is one of the purposes—my purposes of going to Europe, actually to see them, you see. And I think that had some effect.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I'm sure it did, looking at the paintings. I mean, it seems to me that's a very, uh,

enlightening influence [ph] to learn.

IRVING MARANTZ: We had to dig that out. [They laugh.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, I'm glad we did, in any case.

IRVING MARANTZ: Yeah, yeah, it's a certain concept.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, I'll probably get a chance to see all this spelled out in much greater detail and sort of flesh put on the bones when I see a work in your studio in New York this fall.

IRVING MARANTZ: I'll be pleased, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And we can go back and then trace the—

IRVING MARANTZ: Perhaps we could meet at the gallery, because see, most of the paintings are there.

DOROTHY SECKLER: We haven't talked about where you were showing all these years. I think we do want to put that in the record too.

IRVING MARANTZ: Well, around 1949, Carmine Dalesio, of the Babcock Gallery, saw one of my paintings up here in Provincetown and approached me, and I've been showing at the Babcock Gallery ever since. He has passed away, but I still show there. So I show sculpture and the painting there now.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, that's nice. Well, you're on the rare artists that's kept one affiliation over a long time then.

IRVING MARANTZ: Well, I think it's almost the same attitude I have of I don't move quickly. I don't make violent changes, and I kind of—the gallery grew, and I grew too. So that even the point of view of the gallery has changed over the period of the years, and I grew with it where some of the more conventional painters have dropped out, and I'm sort of still there, you see.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I haven't put in the record yet. You're teaching, and I know that's at NYU. Would you want to make that more exact? [00:52:02]

IRVING MARANTZ: Well, my present teaching is at NYU at the School of Continuing Education. The year before I was the University of Georgia as the artist-in-residence, and the year before that I was at University of Iowa as the artist-in-residence. Those are my major teaching areas.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Have you any particular approaches as a teacher that you'd like to put on the record?

IRVING MARANTZ: Without thinking [inaudible] a lot of answers.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That is kind of sticking you.

IRVING MARANTZ: It's a sharp one.

DOROTHY SECKLER: We could continue that after you've had more time to think about it, as a matter of fact.

IRVING MARANTZ: Well, it's—I have been more—without any effort on my part I have been a somewhat—recognized as somewhat successful teacher, and I function fairly well in those areas. I think primarily because I am rigidly opposed to rigidities, and I don't believe in necessarily in teaching techniques but developing the conceptual, developing the student in conjunction to his own technical development, so. And the technical development [inaudible] makes more or less on his own while growing, you see, and I relate to his growth rather than superimpose my concepts on his growth. The only thing I superimpose is the concept of art, I think, is really, in a nutshell, what I believe in, and I found students respond to that kind of thinking, you see. It gives them a chance to move out, and nobody has a particular point of view to superimpose upon someone else. Sometimes that can be looked upon as too lose approach, but I found it very successful, particularly with the more developed student. At the universities I dealt with the graduate student, and they responded very well to that kind of approach. [00:54:05] There was a relationship that grew out of that, you see. And many of these students still correspond with me, which is a very gratifying thing. I remember when I went down to University of Georgia at the first lecture I gave there the—at the question period, you know, you come down as a painter of some recognition, and the first question during the question and answer period that came up was the student who said to me, "Well, why do you teach?" I knew that was a sticky question. You see, if you're such a big painter what are you doing down here? You know. So I had to give him an honest answer. I said, "I teach in order to earn a living." I said, "I also teach to gratify my own ego." But I also teach in a way that I feel that I give something to the student and that they're obligated to meet with the rest of their lives in some way or other,

you see, which also gratifies my ego. And that was the only way I could answer the question, but it was a sticky question that he had me there for a moment. [They laugh.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, I think that's a very nice point perhaps that we could stop for today.

IRVING MARANTZ: Oh, that's fine. Thank you.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Or until we could take it up in the fall.

IRVING MARANTZ: Fine.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]