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Oral history interview with Maurice Sievan, 1965 April 22

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Maurice Sievan on April 22, 1965. The interview took place in New York, NY, and was conducted by Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

TAPE #1

DOROTHY SECKLER: Maurice, I wondered if you'd like just to get started, would you like to start by talking about your - let's talk a bit about your painting that I saw in the Museum last week, the one that was recently acquired by the Museum of Modern Art. I thought you might like to say something about that particular work and how it developed and what it meant to you, what you have been doing - obviously a continuation of many things that have been in progress for several years.

MAURICE SIEVAN: Well, this particular painting is part of a series of paintings that I've done over the past seven years and the subject and the treatment of the painting is related in context with the rest of the paintings, so I don't think I can talk about one single painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, no, we're going to talk about the series then.

MAURICE SIEVAN: Well, as you know, I started off by painting more or less in the academic tradition for some time and after that I turned to the Impressionists and made a series of paintings in a more or less Impressionist style. I did this not because I was particularly interested in doing landscapes, I wanted to observe nature. I know that if you want to make a statement of any kind at all you have to know your language and the best way to learn your pictorial language is to observe. So I did a series of landscapes - I think I did them for about ten years. I started with one purpose and wound up with something else and I got to like what I was doing. I got a great thrill. I forgot about theories and anything else and simply devoted myself to doing landscapes. At first I did cityscapes right here in Manhattan and since I was born on a farm in the old country that was in my blood, you see, so that....

DOROTHY SECKLER: Where were you born, Maurice?

MAURICE SIEVAN: I was born in Ukrainian, Russia.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How old were you when you came here?

MAURICE SIEVAN: When I came here I was about 9 years old, 8 or 9 years old. We moved to Brooklyn. Strangely enough, the part of Brooklyn that I lived in was very much like the type of thing that Utrillo saw in Paris, you know, the suburbs of Paris. But I was interested in drawing at that time. When I was a youngster I was interested mostly in the classics so my eye wasn't attuned to what I was looking at. Actually when I came back about twenty years later I was surprised to find a tremendous amount of material that I could have used. I think all this was that I was absorbing it without using it. And I loved that neighborhood without knowing why. Actually most of the boys I played with saw nothing at all. But I must have seen a lot of things then that were stored in my mind and when I began to do those landscapes after some years it all came back to me. So I was beginning to do these things so well that quite a few of them got into museums; even the Brooklyn Museum has one of them.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How old were you when you were doing these landscapes? Let's take it a little more in sequence. First of all, when did you become interested in becoming an artist, or how soon did you know that you would be and so on?

MAURICE SIEVAN: This is quite a little story. I think we have a little time so I can tell it to you.

DOROTHY SECKLER: By all means.

MAURICE SIEVAN: I don't think anybody else has had a similar experience. I was born practically in the woods, it wasn't a town, it wasn't anything at all, it was just living in the woods. I remember we used to see bears shaking trees, you know, and occasionally we saw a person. We lived on a farm and we didn't have to go out to get any provisions anywhere else because we consumed only that which we derived from the earth. So that I hardly saw any people except a peasant now and then.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you have a large family?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Yes, we had a large family; I was one of twelve. Somehow or other I found I was observing the faces of people and the environment there. And I started to draw those things the names I couldn't even remember when I began.

DOROTHY SECKLER: While you were in the Ukraine?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Yes. We didn't have any pencils, you see. We had nothing at all except my father used to write letters occasionally so we had a quill pen. I started drawing with those quills, I started drawing with them. I found some letter paper and I began to draw those things. We didn't even have nails or thumb tacks or anything at all so I would stick them in between the planks, you know - between the logs of wood. The cabin was one of those like the kind Lincoln lived in. I had them all around the place and nobody paid any attention to them, they thought I was just playing a game, you see. Then at the same time we got some tutor there. We had the Old Testament in Hebrew and he came to teach us, you see. So I learned how to read, I learned how to write Hebrew and my mind was filled with Adam and Eve, you know, the great prophets and so on. There were only two pictures in that book. One was the symbol of two lions. Even to this day I don't know exactly what it symbolizes; two lions, two heads together you know, their bodies apart standing on something, something very much like the English symbols of some kind.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Blake, you mean?

MAURICE SIEVAN: No, no, the English national symbol, you know, the British lion.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, I see what you mean, yes.

MAURICE SIEVAN: I began to copy those things and I began to copy the lettering and I became a first rate letterer. I was probably about four years old at that time and I began to draw those lions and then I began to illustrate the myths of the Bible.

DOROTHY SECKLER: All this was when you were less that nine years old?

MAURICE SIEVAN: I must have been about four, you see. This I'm sure of because I spoke to my parents and they told me when this all began. Then I suddenly began to notice things in light and shade. Now mind you I had never seen a painting or a picture or anything of the kind. I started to make portraits of my family. Then I began to make portraits of peasants, some peasant people who worked for us. But I couldn't get tonal effects you see, with ink; I could just make outlines and so on but I was hankering to make a tonal effect. So I began to cross hatch, I figured it out for myself, I was making lines one way and then another way and I got my tonal effects this way. But there's the funny part of the story. They were all around the place, sometimes they'd throw them away and I'd pick them up and hide them somewhere and put others up. One time our landlord came. He was an aristocrat, you see, he owned the land. We were sort of like tenant farmers. They came over and stopped for a coffee or something - at that time it was tea, they stopped for tea, and they came into the room, two of them, and they saw these little drawings lying around. One of them looked at them and he said to my father - he realized by father couldn't have done it because he was a hardworking man and so forth, he wouldn't bother with things like that - and he said, "Where is the padornky?" My father didn't know what he was talking about - nobody did. All of us just looked at each other. After they got through and were leaving they said, "Where is the padornyk?"

DOROTHY SECKLER: What does that mean?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Well now, I'll tell you. We'll come to it in a moment. So my father said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Who made those drawings? What man made those drawings?" So my father said, "A man! No, my little boy here did those." They both looked at me and when they walked out they said to my father "This boy is a real padornyk." Nobody knew what it was. When we came to this country I asked by father to find out what a padornyk is because he had a lot of crones who spoke Russian very well. He said a padornyk is an artist. So I didn't even know I was an artist and they didn't know I was an artist. Then when I came here I went to grammar school and one of my teachers in one of the lower grades took me over to Pratt Institute and paid for me to be in the children's classes, I was about 11 or 12 at the time. That was the beginning of actual training. My drawing was supposed to be so good, I understand that they took me out of the children's classes and put me in with the adults where they had models because I was bored. You know, drawing was so easy I used to waste my time. So I was drawing from a nude when I was eleven, twelve years old.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Good heavens.

MAURICE SIEVAN: And that's what started it, you see. But I must tell you another thing. The very first oil painting that I'd seen was in my neighborhood, there was a picture store on Flushing Avenue and I went by there and I was struck by a picture. You know that's a traumatic experience. I saw a portrait of George Washington by Gilbert Stuart but I didn't know it was Gilbert Stuart, the name wasn't on it. Obviously it was a man who probably

wanted to be an artist, couldn't make it, and he was enlarging photographs, you see. He copied the picture and put it in the window to show his craft. Well, I just can't explain to you what that picture meant to me. It was just like seeing God for the first time. I kept going back there and back there and back there - it was drawing me backwards and forwards. Finally I got a watercolor set and I started using watercolor but you can't get those tones in watercolor, you see; and I was frustrated again. I didn't know what was making it, you see. With water you couldn't copy an oil, you couldn't get the effects. And that was the beginning of the whole thing.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And at Pratt, what medium were you drawing models in?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Charcoal. In those days I don't think they gave children any color or anything at all. I remember the first lesson was to put a cup there, you know, and they cast light from the window - one part was light, one part was in shadow and they pointed out the division of the thing between light and dark and so on and the shadow, wherever the light is on the shadow - the light comes - the shadow on the inside will come where the light is, you see, and so on. Those are the things that were very boring, you see. The children were very distraught from this kind of thing. I got so I could do this in my sleep. So then when I saw these models in poses and so on I became a very good draftsman.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you leave school early to go on with art?

MAURICE SIEVAN: It wasn't a question of leaving school. I was forced to leave school. I went until I was 13 and after you're 13 you're entitled to leave school - well, at least legally. Until that time you have to stay in school. But my family didn't have space at the time and anybody that was old enough to help out was obliged to - although they didn't want me to, they wanted me to go on, but I realized that it would be a tremendous sacrifice so I left school and went to work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What kind of work did you get at that time?

MAURICE SIEVAN: I did all odds and ends. I delivered telegrams and worked where they had suitcases, you know, a place in Wall Street, and I got myself a job as an office boy. And finally I learned to do silk screen process. I always wanted to get into art, you see. So I got into the silk screen process before anybody else in this country. As a matter of fact it was so new here that in Germany - the Germans used it first. Actually it came from the Japanese or Chinese. Chinese stencils and so on. But the Germans, as soon as they copied it, applied for the patent, you see. They had a patent on it and there was some problem with it. And what we did in those days were banners like "Yale," "Harvard," and so on - very simple stuff. You made these on silk screen, they were varnished and so on and then we used to print it. I printed those things myself, too. Later on we began to make posters with them and later they began to call it serigraph, you know. but I was an expert at this, you see, and the reason I never was attracted doing it in terms of fine art was because I had done it commercially, you see, and it kind of had a bad taste for me. Anything that was commercial was disturbing to me. Occasionally I would make one for Christmas cards or something. But I had no desire to do it. Then I went to the National Academy after that. I studied with Olinsky in the life classes and then finally I started with Hawthorne and went all the way through. You know they don't give you a diploma like they do in other schools and I think wisely so because when you get a diploma you think you know it all, you see. If you're a doctor you get a diploma and you think you're a doctor; actually you're not a doctor at all. You're familiar with those things and you're not allowed to operate, if you're a doctor you should be able to operate - right?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Mmhmm. I guess so.

MAURICE SIEVAN: Well, to know how to operate you have to spend some time in a hospital, you see, until you kill a couple of people, you know, poor people especially. Right?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Lee!

LEE SIEVAN (Mrs. Sievan): Yes.

[END OF SIDE 1]

DOROTHY SECKLER: I think we were talking before about the period after you left the National Academy - let's take up at that period, let's say, just before you went to Europe, Maurice. You were just telling me a minute ago that you had felt, in a way, that the artists who were considered very important in this country at that time, men like Brackman and Leon Kroll, somehow or other surely couldn't be really the profound artists, and you wanted to go to Europe to get the feel of something beyond that. When actually did you go and what happened to you? Where did you go in Europe and how did it affect your way of thinking?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Of course I'd seen Cezanne, I'd seen some exhibitions here by famous French modern masters, but I could only understand them intellectually, I could never really dig into it, you see. I knew that I had to go. It's very similar to how Walt Whitman describes how he had studied Homer in school, or read it

indoors and while he enjoyed it very much it never really touched him. While he was working on a farm one time as a helping hand he took this book and he read it during rest periods or something. He discovered that it was necessary for the wind to blow and to hear the trees moving and to see the clouds moving and so on to understand Homer; only then did he understand Homer because everything in Homer happens on the outside, nothing happens inside - the ships, the gods, the fighting, all kinds of things. You have to be in that particular atmosphere, you see, so that this happens out in the wind. The wind was blowing on him and for the first time he understood what Homer was talking about. I found it out later on when I studied literature, I didn't know about it then. What I found out was that - in the first place for example, I went around to some of the places that Monet painted. I didn't go to places where Cezanne painted, I went there later on and when I went there later on I saw Cezanne all over the place. And I thought to myself, why is it? It's strange why didn't people see what Cezanne saw in that neighborhood? It took a Cezanne to see it. Nobody noticed it; it was Cezanne that saw those things. We saw Cezannes wherever we went. And I saw, for instance, I saw a woods some place and I said to a friend, "There's a Corot," and he said, "Why yes, it's a Corot." He didn't invent it, you know, he saw it. Probably put a couple little figures in it but he saw it. I began to realize that over there the cloud formations are a little different, you have water on both sides, that's right, water on both sides and then the clouds form over and they have a kind of silvery feel all over everything and I've seen it and I said, "He's not making it up at all, all you have to have is eyes to see, you have to have eyes. I thought to myself I could have done that too if I was here. Couldn't see it in Brooklyn. And so I began to get the cultural feel of the atmosphere, I began to understand the essence of it. Then I came back.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you study with Andre L'Hote for a while?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Yes, I studied with Andre L'Hote for about six months.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And did you take to his brand of systematic Cubism?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Well, at that time everybody was anxious to study with Andre L'Hote. They came there from all over. Very many Americans for the simple reason that he was the Hans Hofmann of our time, at that time. And Andre L'Hote had a method of teaching because he was a very disciplined man and sort of subistic. I learned a lot of things from him.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you cubist when you came back from Europe?

MAURICE SIEVAN: I was never really a cubist, not technically a cubist, not semantically a cubist. I was interested in what they were doing but I knew that cubism was a means to an end. I admired what Braque and Picasso were doing - it was a very interesting period, but I never cared for their pictures. I knew it was a means to an end because if it wasn't they couldn't be doing cubism at that time. Picasso gave it up, you know, and branched off. And Braque branched off. You can see and feel the discipline but as a method of painting it was a means to an end. It might be said, I think, to be the beginning of modern art.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When you returned from France with this new means at your disposal, but not yet a cubist, was that the period when you began to do cityscapes or landscapes?

MAURICE SIEVAN: That's right, mostly landscapes and experimenting at the same time with some of the things that were in the air - abstraction and cubism - without the idea of exhibiting, merely to see whether it worked so I could use it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: If you didn't exhibit, were you making a living in some other way? Were you teaching? Or what were you doing?

MAURICE SIEVAN: At that time - I think later on - the Depression came on so I got on the Project.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, you did? Well, that's very important.

MAURICE SIEVAN: I was on the Project, I was doing paintings for them, I had to turn in a painting a month.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When did you go on the WPA? Do you have a rough idea?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Well, I think around '32 or '33, wasn't it?

LEE SIEVAN About '37.

MAURICE SIEVAN: Was it '37!?

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were in Europe in '33 I think.

LEE SIEVAN He got on about '37 or '36.

MAURICE SIEVAN: Well, at that time I made a living with the silk screen process. I was doing posters for the Chase National Bank and things like that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When you got on the Project did you do easel paintings or did you continue with silk screen for them?

MAURICE SIEVAN: No, no, I did easel paintings for them.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How did WPA affect you? What was its general effect on you as an artist?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Well, I gave them my worst work and I'll tell you why. I knew this was a fraud. The object was not to promote art, the object was just to make it comfortable for us so we could make a living, so we could survive as artists. There was an Artists Union at that time and they had an idea this thing was going to last for a long time and they did their best work because they had an idea that their work was going to be placed in museums and libraries, the post offices and so on and they were going to make murals in some important places and so on. They had the idea they were going to be fairly permanent and certainly it was going to last 15 or 20 years, you see. I had an idea that it was really temporary relief and I also knew that just as soon as the Depression was over they would take our work and throw it in the ashcan - the best of it; it didn't make any difference. Nobody was interested; they took these things merely because they were asked to take them, they didn't want them to clutter up their walls. And the proof of it is that over at Queens College I found a painting by a fairly good man in the basement all torn up and banged up. It wasn't hanging at all - it was just destroyed. Later on these paintings were sold by the pound. People bought the canvas by the pound. So my prediction - what I suspected would be - did really come about. And it was a very short affair. I knew that if I were to do some good work I knew where it was going to land. Perchance it may happen by accident somebody may take care of it in some place. So I knew this was a temporary thing, they wanted us to survive and I was going to survive and take it easy and get as much paint from them as possible, and brushes. I still have some brushes and paint from that time.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you working in the same vein for the WPA as in your other work?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Yes, I was doing some landscapes but I didn't go out to do any landscapes, I made them from memory.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Why did you do that? I'm interested in why - how you arrived at that idea?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Because I know something about politics and I understand motivation. I know that this country is a country that's devoted to the free enterprise system. The most you can have here would be some reforms. That's what I knew. They were not interested in supporting bums. And we were glorified bums.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Why do you say that, Maurice?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Because they didn't care anything about us. When we went to get our paychecks you should have seen us standing there and the truck men would pass by and say, "You're a slacker! Why don't you get a job?" You know - things like that, you see. I saw many prominent artists standing there. You had to go there with an old outfit. If you came in a nice suit they used to immediately investigate you. You had to look like a bum. And once in a while they'd come to your place to look at your icebox and see how much food you'd got and so on.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Really? Who did that sort of thing, Maurice?

MAURICE SIEVAN: They were from the WPA, I don't know who they were.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But they came to your own home?

MAURICE SIEVAN: They came to see how you were getting on.

DOROTHY SECKLER: In your home or in your studio?

MAURICE SIEVAN: They came to your studio, you see; that was the home.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It was where you lived, too. I see. And they really were interested in seeing what kind of thing you were....

MAURICE SIEVAN: They were interested because there was a lot of faking going on, a lot of faking. Many people got on the project just to make an easy buck, there was a lot of it going on. There were a lot of people who really shouldn't have been on it as artists at all. But since they could draw a little bit they got on it, you see. By the way, those who were chosen as easel painters were those who already had exhibited some and they knew about

them. The other people were given other kinds of jobs.

DOROTHY SECKLER: If they found a steak in your icebox what happened?

MAURICE SIEVAN: The idea was that maybe your father could help you out, you see. Maybe you had brothers who could give you something - who were working, you see. Maybe you had some people who you could bank on. The idea was to have people on the roll who were really destitute otherwise. That was the point you see.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was there any pressure on you to paint one way or another as far as style?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Not at all, no. You could paint abstract; for instance, what's his name? The famous abstract artist who died not long ago?

LEE SIEVAN Stuart Davis.

MAURICE SIEVAN: Stuart Davis was on the project. He did work for them on the project.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Who were you closely associated with at that time? Or who were your friends?

MAURICE SIEVAN: I knew - what's his name, this fellow who's head of Yale - what's his name?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Albers?

LEE SIEVAN Tworkov?

MAURICE SIEVAN: I knew Tworkov. I knew them all.

DOROTHY SECKLER: de Kooning?

MAURICE SIEVAN: I knew de Kooning but de Kooning I don't think was on the Project. de Kooning at that time I think was doing house painting or something. I knew Avery.

LEE SIEVAN Rothko.

MAURICE SIEVAN: Rothko. I think I met Rothko, I saw him but I didn't meet him there. I met Rothko in the Federation of Painters and Sculptors when we had meetings, the first time. Who were some of the people?

LEE SIEVAN The Soyers.

MAURICE SIEVAN: Oh, yes, I knew the Soyers. I knew them all.

LEE SIEVAN Joe Solomon.

MAURICE SIEVAN: Solomon, yes, very well.

LEE SIEVAN Bombeck.

MAURICE SIEVAN: Yes, Bombeck was on there.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you get involved with the activities, the extra-curricular things, like the Artists' Congress and its picketing and all that sort of thing? The Artists Union?

MAURICE SIEVAN: I think I was a member of the Artists union, wasn't I?

LEE SIEVAN Yes.

MAURICE SIEVAN: I was a member of the Artists Union. I used to go to their meetings.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did it seem - you mentioned that you had at one point in your earlier life been a scholar of Marxist theory.

MAURICE SIEVAN: That's right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: At this point were you different in the way you thought of the Projects because of that? Or did it seem just completely unrelated?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Yes. Do you want me to tell you a secret? Many were interested at that time. It was in the air. Many were interested.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, I know. Yes. It was absolutely so but you had a much deeper insight into the causes....

MAURICE SIEVAN: Well, the point is - I'll tell you how - do you know Lozowick?

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, I don't know him personally.

MAURICE SIEVAN: Well, Lozowick is a writer, you know, he was one of the original modern artists, you know, the Russians and so on: Kandinsky and so on. He knew all those men. Lozowick was doing some remarkable work for a while but during the Depression Lozowick had become a very strong Marxist. He was convinced of what Marxist painting was supposed to be and that was "social experience" and he began to do the most horrible, horrible paintings. You see, he was an aesthetician. He was practically a poet. But his belief was so strong that he failed the artist completely. He started to make paintings of people picketing, policemen hitting with clubs and the blood flowing and so on. He almost destroyed himself as a painter. I could never do this kind of thing. He kept asking me to exhibit with him and I refused. I said this is not art and I would have nothing to do with it. I said for politics you can go to Marx but for art you have to go to Cezanne.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's very interesting.

MAURICE SIEVAN: But one time I made a painting in Paris of a depressed young man and I got something of the flavor of the Depression through this man. They asked me did I have any paintings - they were going to have an exhibition, you see, the Artists Union. I said I have no paintings. "You have nothing at all? Do you have anything depressing?" they said. This is interesting. I thought a moment and I said, "Yes! I have something depressing." I brought this picture over and do you know that ....

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2

TAPE 2, SIDE 1

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing Maurice Sievan in New York on April 22, 1965. We are continuing an interview in which in the last part of the preceding tape we had spoken briefly of your experience on the WPA and I think we might finish that up by adding one or two other thoughts that we just discussed.

MAURICE SIEVAN: In talking about the investigators on the Project it is not true - I must have given the wrong impression in the way I put it. The investigations were not done by the WPA themselves. It was done by the home relief investigators, you see. They were constantly on guard and they'd come periodically to see about things. I realized it was a necessary thing but certainly an unpleasant experience.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. They were the ones who came and looked in the icebox?

MAURICE SIEVAN: More or less, yes. Now also I also want to comment on my mentioning before that I didn't give them my best pictures. I don't mean that I gave them bad paintings. I meant that under the circumstances I wasn't inspired. I am always accustomed to working on my own and not making pictures for others, you see. In this instance it was an obligatory act and as an artist I lacked the spirit to do the best that was in me. What I gave them really was, while they were not masterpieces, but nevertheless the best under the circumstances. Now another thing I want to make - I don't want to misapprehend when I was talking about Marxism. You see, I am not a communist. I am only interested as a philosopher, I am interested in world events and I want to know what things are and when anything happens I want to see what it's all about, so I did make studies merely for my own enlightenment.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Your studies began, I assume, before the 30's?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Much before?

DOROTHY SECKLER: It was an intellectual thing.

MAURICE SIEVAN: That's right. That's right, because in my studies of philosophy frequently they spoke of Marx not only as an economist, they spoke of him as a philosopher and I wanted to know what is Marx's point of view - what contribution he made to philosophy, you see. So it was necessary to go through the several volumes of his work, which is very, very difficult reading.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It is indeed.

MAURICE SIEVAN: Very difficult reading. And I'm not altogether sure that I really understood it; let's put it that way. They claim that everybody quotes Marx but nobody read him.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It interested me, too, that when you actually did get to the point in the '30s when all the other artists were becoming involved with Marxism in a superficial way, that instead of painting social realist

paintings, you were just continuing with your own aesthetic concerns, and when they asked you that time for a painting to put in an exhibition of - was that for the Artists Union or .... ?

MAURICE SIEVAN: It was an exhibition that was organized at the Artists Union.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you didn't have a single thing to show that was typical of social realist painting then.

MAURICE SIEVAN: I was in fact opposed to this type of painting. I was opposed to this type of painting not because of social realism, I was opposed to the painting because it was bad painting, most of it. There were some few exceptions. To give you an example they asked me to submit for this exhibition. I would have been glad to but I felt I had nothing to submit because I was going along in my way of painting regardless of the time, regardless of the Depression, regardless of the WPA. I felt an artist must do what he must do without external coercion. When they asked me if I had a painting first I said no, and then it occurred to me that I had a painting that I had made in Paris of a victim of depression. He was an American who went there, a journalist, and was cut off, had no funds; and I painted him. I painted him as a symbol of the depression, what depression does to a personality. I thought of this painting and told them that I had something. They may not like it, I said, because it doesn't fit in; they might not want to keep it, but on the other hand they may - it may fit because it does follow the Depression, there's no getting away from it. So I brought this picture over and they hung it reluctantly because it was just a portrait. But it turned out that they had a sort of contest and they had a box and asked people which picture impressed them most. They had an idea that my picture would probably be ignored. But it so happened that my picture became the most popular picture because it told more about the Depression than all of the other paintings put together.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Having just seen the painting I must say that it's anything but a typical, or any kind of social realist painting; it is a portrait but it certainly has the quality of the person who is sort of alienated by depression and being without and cut off.

MAURICE SIEVAN: You might say this was an age of alienation. Talk about alienation today. You know alienation today, as compared to those days, is not alienation at all. That was a period of alienation.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That is a fascinating portrait. Well, I'm glad we cleared that up. Then, of course, there is an earlier period that we also want to go back to, if you'd like to take a minute or so - that was the period when you were in the Merchant Marine. Or would you like to go on into the '30s and come back to that later?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Well, I'd rather go into the 30s.

DOROTHY SECKLER: All right. Let's do that.

MAURICE SIEVAN: The Merchant Marine lasted only about six months. And that had something to do with the war.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Well now, when did you go off WPA and under what circumstances, Maurice?

MAURICE SIEVAN: When they broke up. The WPA was no longer. I stayed on to the end. Incidentally, I came on WPA pretty late.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you were always on the Easel Project?

MAURICE SIEVAN: I think so. I don't remember doing anything else.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Then when you left what did you do?

MAURICE SIEVAN: When I left, I think something happened and the ....

LEE SIEVAN That job at ....

MAURICE SIEVAN: Oh, yes, yes, yes. I got a job teaching art in New Jersey and I taught there for ten years.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Teaching painting, drawing?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Yes, painting and drawing and so on.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you living in New Jersey in those years?

MAURICE SIEVAN: No, I wasn't. I was living in Manhattan.

LEE SIEVAN Flushing.

MAURICE SIEVAN: I was living in Flushing at the time? Yes, that's right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you were married by this time?

LEE SIEVAN Oh, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And when - roughly was ... ?

LEE SIEVAN 1933.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you have a family at all?

MAURICE SIEVAN: No. By "family" you mean children? No. No children.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So then you were teaching and painting I assume, you were still continuing with landscapes, were you, during these years?

MAURICE SIEVAN: I still did my landscapes, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And were you showing work in galleries at this time?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Yes, I was at Contemporary Arts.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you remember roughly the dates of the shows? Or perhaps we can get that with catalogues later.

LEE SIEVAN 1939 AND 1941.

MAURICE SIEVAN: 1939 and 1941; I had two shows; that's right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: During the war years you went on teaching, I assume?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Yes, after this I started teaching at Queens College. I'm still teaching there, the adult education classes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, that's interesting.

MAURICE SIEVAN: The reason I'm teaching adult education classes is because I want the daytime to myself. I can teach three nights a week, two or three nights a week and I can paint in the daytime.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Marvelous.

MAURICE SIEVAN: And I moved to Flushing, by the way, as a result of that. I moved so I could be near the school and it would be suitable for my landscapes, as well. I was planning this new series at that time, making many studies and sketches on how to best express the ideas in my terms, you see.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you maintained all this time, I'm sure, your many sided interest in philosophy and history and psychology and so on.

MAURICE SIEVAN: Never left me. In fact, I talk now even more about those things than I do about art.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you form friends in other fields as you moved on or were you mainly surrounded by artists in these years?

MAURICE SIEVAN: When I moved to Flushing I became a hermit.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The Hermit of Flushing.

MAURICE SIEVAN: I became a hermit, not easy to get to, but I needed that detachment to reflect upon the experiences that I had in order to paint. My main objective was how I was going to retain those that I thought were worth painting - how I could find a way of doing them not in verbal terms, to paint in verbal terms but rather through metaphor, so that when you look at them you see one thing and it implies another.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Now we haven't spoken about that before. I believe you mentioned earlier the stimulus for this came to some extent from the war itself and from your despair about the situation of man and think about it. It diverted you somewhat from the landscapes into a kind of painting in which there was a, would you say a kind of symbolism or metaphor perhaps is a better word?

MAURICE SIEVAN: That's right. Metaphor.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And well, as an example, there was one I saw a little while ago in which there was a sense of the orb of the earth and a human face and arms that circled it; there was an intense feeling of loneliness and isolation.

MAURICE SIEVAN: That was from the philosophic period. It's called, Whither, O Lord? That's the title.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Now these - were they exhibited at that time?

MAURICE SIEVAN: In the first place I couldn't get a show with those pictures, you see, because they considered them - I was either in advance of my time or behind my time, one or the other, I'm not sure. But that was the time when abstract art was beginning to flourish and proliferated with rapid speed, so that I knew that I couldn't have a show. But I always managed to find somebody who didn't know anything about art, a dealer who didn't know anything about art and then I could work it all right. So I found a man who didn't know anything about art and he thought they were wonderful. He gave me a show because he sort of understood those paintings and they were a little bit of a spirit, you know. He was also a reflective kind of guy. He didn't know about art but the ideas I was putting forth had some reaction with this man. I'm not going to mention his name. He wanted those pictures and I had a show and the critics came and I was at the opening of the show and I was there a good deal of the time. In fact Hunter, what's his name?

LEE SIEVAN Sam Hunter.

MAURICE SIEVAN: Sam Hunter was just beginning to operate in the field, you see, as a critic and later on, of course he was a ....

DOROTHY SECKLER: What year would this have been, Maurice?

LEE SIEVAN '48.

MAURICE SIEVAN: '48 and he asked me what I meant by those paintings. I had to take him around and give him a lecture about it. In that review of the show he wrote what I had told him because he didn't know what else to write. Emily Genauer came and she couldn't figure out what I was doing at all. In fact, I had a satirical painting there called ...

LEE SIEVAN Variation...

MAURICE SIEVAN: Variation On a Theme. I painted the Mona Lisa and I made the head very small with a very narrow body, standing just like the Mona Lisa does with her hands folded, and I gave her a tremendous backside; I called it Variation on a Theme. In other words, what I was doing I was giving her an interpretation, you see. This shocked Emily Genauer and she, by the way, was an admirer of my work. I'll have to show you some of my reviews where she compared me to the best of the Impressionists and she said that not only that, on top of it I had a personality of my own. That wasn't bad.

DOROTHY SECKLER: She had written about you previously?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Yes. In fact she backed me on a Guggenheim, you know, so she must have thought something of me. But she saw that painting and she thought that it was pornography in a sense. It wasn't at all. She thought it was sacrilegious. As a matter of fact I have that same picture that I exhibited with Wildenstein. Wildenstein became furious, you know, and the whole organization warned me. Paul Mamot said to me, "Maurice, I know you're going to exhibit that picture," and he said, "please don't. Please don't exhibit that picture." Then he looked up - I didn't say a word and he looked up and he said, "There's no sense talking to you, you're going to do it anyway, I know."

DOROTHY SECKLER: Sounds like Paul.

MAURICE SIEVAN: So I exhibited that picture, you know, and Mr. Gug....

LEE SIEVAN Wildenstein.

MAURICE SIEVAN: Mr. Wildenstein walked around that exhibit like a crazy man.

END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 2

SIDE 2, TAPE 2

DOROTHY SECKLER: Maurice, in the period following the war period when you had been doing the metaphoric

paintings we were just discussing, you also, I understand, returned to doing some landscapes. In other words, one side of you was still involved with the realistic image - or an impressionistically realistic image, and the other was still concerned with this more symbolic, metaphoric expression. But gradually you made a kind of synthesis of the two. How did that come about?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Well, as I said before, I wasn't satisfied with these symbolic paintings that I had done before and I knew I had to find another way.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It was too literary for you, as you mentioned.

MAURICE SIEVAN: It was too literary, that's right; it was too literary. I wanted to do something in metaphorical terms. And so I did both; I still kept on with the older works and I was experimenting with this new method.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This brings us up to the late 40s at this time we're discussing?

MAURICE SIEVAN: That's right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you involved with the artists who became the important abstract expressionists? Were you a member of The Club? Did you go to their discussions and that sort of thing?

MAURICE SIEVAN: No, not at all. I was asked many times and they wanted me to become a member but somehow or other I wanted to remain by myself. Actually I have always been sort of a lone wolf.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I gathered so.

MAURICE SIEVAN: If I had it would be very helpful to me today, very helpful. I would have gotten to know Hesse, you know, and those people who promote some of the people they like, you see. So I have no personal touch and I tacked that on my own independence.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So how did you get away from the literary and into a more painterly ... ?

MAURICE SIEVAN: I made a series of paintings that links these two. I don't think I've ever exhibited them but they gradually led to this, you see. By doing something else you come to what you want.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How did you get to the figure again?

MAURICE SIEVAN: I was always interested in the figure and I think one can express through the figure anything that one wants to say. Man's preoccupation is with man. We know nothing of anything except through our neighbors. We converse with them. Nature doesn't talk to us except winds and the clouds, but man talks my language, and I know something about man. Knowing myself I know something about man. Chips off the old block. So I think that you can say anything you want to say; in fact man is a metaphor in painting and so you can express it, as I said before, in a wider range.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you work from the model directly or do you work from memory?

MAURICE SIEVAN: No. All of these paintings are done from memory. Because if you work from a model you are constricted to begin with you see; you cannot use man as a metaphor if you work from a model although he's metaphorical, you see, but a limited metaphor.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You certainly have a number of portraits. We haven't talked too much about your portraits, including the one that we mentioned before of the depressed fellow that you entered in the show. They're very sensitive, marvelously faithful and yet not literal, somehow, in the quality of the person.

MAURICE SIEVAN: I think that an artist should be first and foremost a humanist. If he's not a humanist then he's a mathematician. Even mathematicians are humanists.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Or an escapist.

MAURICE SIEVAN: Or an escapist. But I must say this, I mean, I know the problem will come up in our discussion as to what I actually mean by these paintings.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

MAURICE SIEVAN: Well, I can only tell you a little story. I saw a film on television where Robert Frost was addressing a group of children, ranging from about nine to about thirteen, and he read some poetry to them, his poetry, you see, and when he got through with the poem he asked for questions. One little girl got up and said, "Mr. Frost, would you please explain to us what you mean by the last poem you read, in fact," she said, "both

your poems. What do you mean by those poems?" He said, "Would you like me to tell it to you in a worse way?" Now that is the point about these pictures, the same as the poems. Talking about a picture is degrading it, I think. If the painting doesn't talk to you and doesn't tell you what's innermost in the heart of a man, no amount of words will convey his meaning. That's why you paint. If I wasn't a painter perhaps I'd be a poet. Even Dylan Thomas said it terrified him when people asked him to describe or explain his poetry. So that's all I can say about these paintings, you see.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, perhaps we might characterize them a little bit. We will, of course, have photographs and that will help us, but to include in the record a sense of the fact that the figures in your recent painting are very shadowy presences I would think.

MAURICE SIEVAN: Right!

DOROTHY SECKLER: And they seem to appear as if they were conjured out of nothingness or out of vapor in some way. They have a sense of gesture but nothing violent or dynamic. It's very quiet generally speaking, very muted movement and the presence is indicated by a sense of the total expression rather than the expression on the face alone.

MAURICE SIEVAN: Right!

DOROTHY SECKLER: We might describe, perhaps, the one you showed me when we were talking about Kierdegarde, when I first came in.

MAURICE SIEVAN: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Now that was one that would give us a sense of how much you eliminated just a head. It was almost a head which could have been either a man's or a woman's.

MAURICE SIEVAN: Right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It doesn't have a very assertive sense of sex. The effect is as if the thought were introverted, I would say, rather than looking out...

MAURICE SIEVAN: That's right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: ...you don't feel anyone looking out at something. Then just a long severe torso with the two arms.

MAURICE SIEVAN: That's right. But this was a specific problem. This was in a sense a spiritual portrait. It's a subjective portrait. I didn't see the man and I didn't want to see any drawings of the man. There must be some. People told me they could see what he looked like and I didn't want to see it. I wasn't painting the outward manifestations of this man, I was painting the spirit of the man, you see. So in a sense it's a portrait, you might say it's a contemporary portrait. But these paintings, these other ones, have nothing to do with this, you see. It's another thing altogether.

DOROTHY SECKLER: They're very different.

MAURICE SIEVAN: In the first place I regard man as a tiny product of nature. He is a grain of sand in the vastness of things. I don't see the distinction for instance, between man, or, in a sense, an ant. We're all children of God, let's put it this way, if you speak in theological terms - I see him as the mind of things, that's why I'm interested in man. I understand him better than I do the insect. I see him as a fraction of the sum total of things and I paint him vaguely because I want to encompass him in evolution. I want to encompass him in the idea of the biological life. A blade of grass - all is part of the same thing. I concentrate on man because all paintings are in a sense self portraits. So when I am painting those people I'm really painting myself, you see; if it's a woman or whatever it is I'm painting myself. It is my problem, it is my concern more than anybody else's. It's in that sense that this is a self portrait. These are my thoughts that I'm involved with, you see. I see myself that way. I look in the mirror in a good strong light and I see myself sharply. But am I this way? If I were to look at a man, let us say, from an airplane looking down, I don't see him at all. So you've got to put man in the context of history, evolution and astronomy and the galaxy. This is art. When I see sharp delineation of man and so on, then I know that the artist doesn't look from a deep, deep space, he's right on top of this man - it's a closeup like one sees on television or in the movies. I don't see life that way. Then it is not a metaphor. It ceases to be a metaphor. It becomes a documentary, almost, with the personal responses of the artist to the object that's before him. It's like looking at a still-life. It's pretty much the same thing. I want to see him from far away, far away and as high as you can, like from a mountain looking down at the rain, you see people moving about like ants and so on. Really what I want is a reflection of things rather than the object I'm dealing with.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Just not to give a wrong impression there in spite of the fact that you feel you are actually looking philosophically at man from such a distance the image on the canvas is not many small things but it's a looming, rather large, thing but with a space...

MAURICE SIEVAN: That's true, but I'm painting that fragment, you see. I'm isolating man from every other creature. I'm not putting him in his environment, you see, the environment is implicit.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

MAURICE SIEVAN: It's the closeness of man to me whom I know best, that's why I enlarge him, for that reason only. But then I present also the gesture because the gesture is really the inner expression of man. What a man says may mean very little; gesture is more powerful. It is for that reason that the dance is a great art. Charlie Chaplin with his pantomime is a tremendous man for this reason. Because the gesture came before the voice, away before the voice. You'll also find gesture, let us say, in monkeys and you'll find gesture in dogs and so on. Gesture is the original language.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's very interesting. Maurice, in recent years what painters of the past have you felt most close to? I know, of course, some of the early experiences you had in Paris but were there other painters who have become more important to you in recent years?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Well, I might say I'm a product of Western thought and therefore I go to the Greeks and to the Renaissance. I go to Ingres, I go to Delacroix, and I go to Corot and so on - all the way through to the present time. At the same time I have also a great interest in Eastern thought because actually we were civilized by the Easterners.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, I think one feels that in your paintings.

MAURICE SIEVAN: I look a little Mongolian myself.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I suspect there was an old mandarin there somewhere.

MAURICE SIEVAN: Well, you know, Genghis Khan overran Russia. Did you notice that the man who was the head of the German government before this one - what was his name?

LEE SIEVAN Adenauer.

MAURICE SIEVAN: When I saw Adenauer for the first time both in photographs and on television I said, "Lee, this man is an oriental." He has a real oriental look - his eyes are slanted and so on. Then I once heard Adenauer talk about himself and he said that he was an oriental.

DOROTHY SECKLER: He did?!

MAURICE SIEVAN: He said that his forefathers way back were oriental and they invaded that part of the country and they stayed there.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's interesting. Well, I think we still have just a very few minutes on the tape and there was one other thing. You had mentioned that you were active in the American Federation of Painters and Sculptors over a period of years I assume?

MAURICE SIEVAN: That's right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you ever an officer of it?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Yes, I was. In fact I was almost elected president one time. I lost by one vote.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When was that - what year?

MAURICE SIEVAN: That's hard to remember. In the '50s I think. I was Secretary. It was my job, for instance, to choose or inspect other artists who wanted admission - men like Lipchitz and so on. In fact I made some trouble for myself because some of the biggest men that I picked they turned down. And my name was on the imprint on the post card. I asked them if they would bring things down and then for some reason or other it was decided not to take them as members at all. Where did that put me, you see? Later on a lot of people got out. Rothko got out. Gottlieb got out. I think the Federation served it's purpose for them and they went on to happier hunting grounds. They didn't need them any more. But I'm still a member of the Federation.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I don't think we have enough room for our story about the Merchant Marine. We'll start the other tape.

[END OF TAPE 2]

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler continuing an interview with Maurice Sievan on April 22, 1965 in New York. On our previous tape we noticed that there was an area of your work back in the 20s that we had skipped over which probably was pretty important in your development as a painter, that was your work as a muralist.

MAURICE SIEVAN: That is correct. Once I went on a vacation to a place in New York State called Rouse's Point, it's right near Canada. I was doing some work there and a man passed by and saw what I was doing. I was really painting some of the people that were from around there. He saw what I was doing and said he liked my work very much and asked me if I'd ever done murals. I said I hadn't done murals but I knew I could do them if I wanted to because in the academy we were trained to do murals, we had to make, say, samples of murals and bring them in and get them okayed by a mural specialist; so I had training there. I told this man that I thought I can do them on a small scale, not on a large scale. He said to come over to his place there. He said he was in charge of a whole group of people, he did murals for local churches and maybe I could help them out. So I said I'd love to try. So I went over on the following day and I saw what he was doing and I saw that he had very good ideas but he didn't know how to paint well. He also worked very hard and very clumsily. His name was Professor Angelo Mattello. He had come from Italy to do this work and he was an expert. Then he asked me to do a mural on canvas and I said I'd rather work directly on the wall if the wall was properly prepared - and with oil especially if the wall was smooth and so on. And he said no, let's do a few in the studio here. I'll give you the dimensions and I'll give you the subject and I'll even give you some reproductions of the Renaissance painters on the same subject. So I made my drawing in charcoal and I did a very large mural in a matter of two days.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And how was this done? On the canvas or on the wall?

MAURICE SIEVAN: It was done on the canvas, done on the canvas directly. He liked very much what I did and they put it on a wall and it looked very good. He liked it very much. It was more professional. So he got me a few assistants to stretch canvases and so on and I became his chief mural painter. Of course, I knew the New Testament almost by heart, you see, because I've always studied the Bible, the whole New Testament I knew by heart. I knew what was to be done and I had always studied the Renaissance men with the murals. I was very much interested, and so I made this mural for him. I made them, incidentally, not by the hour but by the piece - it was piecework. Later on I suggested to him that I do them on the wall because I wanted the fascination of working directly on the wall like the old masters did.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But not in fresco?

MAURICE SIEVAN: But not in fresco, because that particular church was already half done by him, you see, so you couldn't change styles - they had to be with oil. So I made the drawings roughly. I had just charcoal on a very long stick and I made those drawings. I had a pedestal to stand on and I made them from a distance, you know, very fast. Then I got closer and started to paint and I did them with great ease. The only thing he suggested to me was the type of subject matter that went here or there, over the altar, and so on. He didn't do any painting at all, you see.

LEE SIEVAN Brushes. He made his own brushes.

MAURICE SIEVAN: I made my own brushes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you have very large ones? Very long handles or....?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Oh, yes, very long handles; and I devised a brush for each painting. For example, for Christ's beard I had a brush that's like the beard and I used to just put it on and swish it off like this, you know, to get the beard, Christ's beard, in only one shot.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Good heavens!

MAURICE SIEVAN: You know the beard...pointed.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I can imagine doing your beard that way.

MAURICE SIEVAN: Incidentally I became - during the painting I also became a writer. A local newspaper came around and wanted a biography of me and of the maestro. This is really funny because I asked the maestro all kinds of questions and he was very shy about it. But he told me a good many things and I wrote it up. He was really a sad little man, and I made it very dramatic. But he couldn't write so he asked one of his people to read what I wrote in the newspaper. They all sat down while the man was reading and the whole group started to weep. He was a tragic little man to me, a tragic little man. Also I like to write and I wanted to describe things and I wanted to be forceful as a writer. I used him, actually, as an excuse to try my prowess as a writer.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did he object?

MAURICE SIEVAN: No, he didn't object. He said put more, more, more in it. It was the first time anybody had written about him that way.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's interesting. This was way back in the 1920s?

MAURICE SIEVAN: That was in 1926.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When did you finish that?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Well, we had a whole troupe of people, we had plasterers and we had painters and decorators and we had chauffeurs and it was just like a circus.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were never tempted to return to it in later years?

MAURICE SIEVAN: No, not at all because it was very unsatisfying because you have a deadline. This had to be done in this and this time. I was able to do these things successfully because I was able to work very fast. For example, I painted in such a way that when you're close you think it's an unfinished thing, but when you stay down below and look at it you think there's tremendous detail in it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And there really isn't?

MAURICE SIEVAN: There really wasn't, you see. But his case was the opposite. He worked very hard for everything - all the eyelashes and everything else until he'd drop dead, and you didn't see anything. This is a fact.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That story is interesting. What was the color like in these murals, Maurice?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Very much like the Renaissance colors. People want something that they are familiar with, you see and they were all familiar with reproductions of Michelangelo, Raphael, and all those men and this is the tradition to work in. And it wasn't that I didn't enjoy doing it, I enjoyed doing it because I was a tremendous admirer of those men, you see, just give me an opportunity and I'd begin to feel that I was Raphael for a moment.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That beautiful selfportrait that you did which I said had a kind of, Michelangelesque look, was that done around the same time?

MAURICE SIEVAN: No, that was done later, that was when I started to do something and I said the deuce with that work it doesn't carry the spirit of the time. In those days it was probably done in the spirit of the time, you know. Now it's a different thing altogether. Now it's really a matter of decorating the church and pleasing the ladies, the spirit wasn't there. But I love the craft of it and the skill of it. Since then I made one painting of all Jerusalem.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Good heavens!

MAURICE SIEVAN: All of Jerusalem from a post card.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you have photographs of these? I would love to have them.

MAURICE SIEVAN: No, I haven't a photograph. I mean, I have a photograph I worked from.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh! I mean of your painting.

MAURICE SIEVAN: No. No.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Maurice, I was interested in what you recorded before; what Rothko said about the relationship between the figures you have done in the last few years and the landscapes that you had done previous to that, he saw a very close relationship.

MAURICE SIEVAN: Yes. Well, I had a talk with him one time - he comes to all my shows; in fact he came over to both shows at the Landry and tried very hard to explain to Landry the meaning of my paintings.

DOROTHY SECKLER: We haven't even gotten Landry into the record and here are two important shows that you had.

MAURICE SIEVAN: That's right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What were the dates of those shows?

LEE SIEVAN 1961 and 1963.

MAURICE SIEVAN: 1961 and 1963, that's right. He explained to Landry that he was familiar with my landscapes and some of my other work and he said there wasn't very much difference between those things and the things that I was doing latterly - he thought that it was the other side of the coin. Of course I differ with him. I really differ with him because the very motivation is different, you see. While the mood is in the landscapes similarly to that of these paintings, I think that the purpose of it is not the same.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It was very interesting for me to see the photographs of some of the scenes that you had painted from Flushing and various other places that were very unpicturesque, very simple street corners, a garage corner, nothing at all that would seem to make it a proper motif for a landscape painter, and yet I was astonished at how, while keeping the realism of the painting, you still transformed it with that beautiful light of yours.

MAURICE SIEVAN: Well, I'm awfully sorry for the camera. The camera has no soul, I'm awfully sorry for the camera. Actually I did not invent a thing. What I'm really trying to say is that this is exactly as I saw it. There is a way of looking at a thing as an artist, there's a way of looking at a thing as a layman. What I'm looking for are relationships, you see - the camera doesn't look for relationships. The camera is merely the way the light strikes the negative, that's all, it's a different thing altogether. The camera really doesn't have a heart, although there are perhaps cameramen who can give the camera a heart. But I don't think they can do much with the landscape without looking at it. I brought to the landscape, I imagine, a certain richness of my own and to me it was a documentary, you might say, compared to what I'm doing now.

DOROTHY SECKLER: From your point of view Rothko is only partly right and there is a difference in the interpretative quality of the figures as being much more philosophically....?

MAURICE SIEVAN: There's a difference in approach and it's a better concept.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How would you begin in one of your figure paintings? Can you recall any specific image that started you going on one? Do you sometimes make a kind of, oh, simple drawing of some kind, or is it something that you imagine in your mind fully complete? Or do you start on some little fragment of it and build it?

MAURICE SIEVAN: No, not either of them. Painting is feeling. Feeling comes from thought. And there are various kinds of feeling, you see. The feeling that comes from an intellectual life, let us say, is a different kind of feeling; it's feeling nevertheless. The feeling is the all-important thing in a work of art I think. The rest is craft and knowhow. But that is second nature. You don't stop to think of the words that you're using when you're talking to me. And so it's taken for granted that you can handle what you want to do. It's the motivation behind it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How does the motivation arise?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Well, let us say that I sit here and I reflect on man and man's place in the universe. I reflect upon the beauty of what you're looking at and what's behind it - whether it is beauty, whether it isn't purely subjective, you see, and I try to coalesce these two things. You must assume there must be some beauty otherwise a man wouldn't handle color, because color in itself is a beautiful thing, properly put together. It's the feeling of the many things that come into my mind. I prefer not to make drawings of those things that come from the subconscious. I prefer to put the canvas on the wall and look at that white canvas, and suddenly images begin to appear in my mind. I know these images are not images, I know they are all metaphors of my thought, you see.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So you have a blank canvas and you begin to work directly in oil paint?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Directly in oil paint. I allow my intuition to do my work for me because my intuition is wiser than I am.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I would assume you certainly must work all over the complete canvas with layers, fine, rather thin layers of paint?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Yes, I do. It says to me, here put this on there. The canvas starts to talk to me, you understand, just like nature speaks to who makes landscapes, the canvas begins to talk to me: brother, I want you to do something here, I want you to do something here, this must be done there, this must be done here, now tie together, tie, tie together into a meaning of some kind.

[END OF SIDE 1]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Is there a figure at every stage of the game or might there be a stage in the beginning

where you're not quite sure it will be a figure but it might be something else?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Well, as I said before, being a man I'm concerned with man. Man for me is the symbol of life, the symbol of all, the symbol of everything because we are composed of elements that make up the rest of the universe. The same elements and there is no point if focussing on something beyond man for I think he is, no matter what he says, no matter how evil he may be or how noble he may be, still the quintessence, as far as I am concerned, of what we think about the universe. And so man comes to me naturally, and the position of the man, the gesture of the man, the manner in which you juxtapose all these elements, is the sum total of what you're trying to say. There is a limitation of course, but all art is limited. If you want to expand you horizon in those areas you have to become a composer, you have to become a poet, you have to become a dancer.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you discover the image in the act of painting to some extent?

MAURICE SIEVAN: That's right. Not that I discover. I am fatally aware that this is what I'm heading for, I'm still a man I want to talk, that I know, you see, but how.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But I mean the way the figure will gesture, let's say, and the general shape of the mass and so on, this is not predetermined in any way? It grows under the brush to some extent?

MAURICE SIEVAN: It's very hard to say, you'd have to know yourself much better. This may be found out in the future. It's very hard to say what these insights are. The insights are the sum total of the being in your experiences, you see. What you're applying there is a wisdom that is wiser than you are, you might say. Today it is a misnomer, they call it, roughly speaking, the subconscious.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But it really isn't?

MAURICE SIEVAN: No, it is in a sense the subconscious, but it's the wrong word for it, some day they'll find a better word for it. What they really mean is coming from the depths, you see, not coming from civilization. Civilization has taken consideration; coming from the depths is going way far back to the amoeba. You see, human emotions are hard to define. You are the sum total of your evolution, and you are the project of probably billions of years of evolution. Everything that happened in the universe, that happened to living creatures, you are a part of. So that when we talk about the veneer of civilization is metaphysics and philosophy and so on, we are talking surface talk really, it's really the surface. Musicians don't have that problem. When Chopin composed I'm certain he didn't say to himself what notes should I put here? The feeling dominated the work. When a man has beauty in him it comes out; if he's vulgar it'll come out. You cannot verbalize about this, you see. I read in the life of Chopin that he wrote something very fast - not at all thinking. The melody struck him like a bolt, he didn't know where it came from. He wrote it and came back and tried to refine it. George Sand, knowing about all these things, said that he worked on it and worked on it and worked on it. Then he threw it all away and used it as it was originally, in its pure state.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Intuitive thing as he had first used it, yes.

MAURICE SIEVAN: That's right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I wish we could find some way of defining that term. I don't find it possible to dispense with the word "intuition" and it seems to be so very, very hard to define and to me it also does not mean the unconscious; it's part of the unconscious but not, it's a particular part and not just the whole thing in the same way that we use the unconscious in psychoanalysis.

MAURICE SIEVAN: Well, I'm afraid that most people don't understand what Freud meant by the unconscious. He was groping for a word and he used a word that is known to all. But Freud, for my way of thinking, when he talks about the subconscious implies much more than the word suggests, more. Subconscious really means that we are drawing upon the experiences of all of life, not of your prenatal life, postnatal life, but it goes way, way back and that is subconscious and still a great mystery. What it really means is you're talking with the sum total of all your feelings, including your sense impressions, of your feelings in general. That is the reason why there's never peace on earth, because man doesn't know who he is, his capacities, he doesn't know. They're all working very hard now trying to find out who man really is. I've heard many of the Ecumenical Council people talking; the one who spoke really with great intelligence was Tillich. Immense man. Immense man.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What was it about Tillich that impressed you?

MAURICE SIEVAN: He's a man who not only thinks but he feels deeply. People talk very glibly. Tillich does not talk glibly. Tillich talks with great introspection. He speaks like a man who has the wisdom of the ages, he speaks for all men. He feels for -knowing his feeling - people don't seem to understand that knowing is feeling. If you don't feel a thing you really don't know it. There are a lot of people, for instance, will say this is beautiful, that is beautiful. Now there's a difference when a man like Cezanne says this is beautiful and when one of my

students says "beautiful" - they mean different things by it. So that word "subconscious" is really a very bad word unless it is well defined.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, I think we're safer to stick to "intuition". But again it's just as hard to define. It seems to be a little more, somehow, specific for the artist.

MAURICE SIEVAN: I think "intuition" is really a human approach to things, not a dog's approach, not an ape's approach; it's a human approach. It has something to do with the development of your mind. There's a very special element that's grafted upon man because originally man only had a brain. Man evolved a layer on the brain only about 40,000, 50,000 years ago, something new. This is part that handles the abstract man. Prior to that, man was very close to the animal world. It was a brain that adjusted itself to its environment, you see. Man originally had a brain just like an ape has a brain, but when man through evolution became social he needed to know more, he needed to converse and to have a dialogue and he was forced into thinking abstractly, you see. Before this a man may have said "this is one, two and three" he couldn't say "three", you see, and he couldn't say one, two, or three; it had to be one, two or three apples. He never could conceive of saying just one, two, three, it didn't mean anything and so never occurred to him. Then came this part of the brain that I'm talking about. Any biologist will tell you that. And man began to evolve an abstract, he had an abstract machine and this is what distinguishes now man from the animal kingdom.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But wouldn't you think that intuition was not the most reasoning and cerebral part of our thought processes: It's like the thought plus emotion THING?

MAURICE SIEVAN: Intuition doesn't apply to everyday life. They talk about woman's intuition. I'm not speaking about that kind of intuition.

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, I know we're not.

MAURICE SIEVAN: We're not talking about that kind of intuition but, for example, Einstein said himself that he didn't figure out those things, he had a preconceived notion of something and he wanted to see through mathematics whether this preconceived notion was a workable notion. That is science. Most great scientists are really tremendously creative men. They equal the artists in every sense of the word except they have different objectives. Intuition means, really, to examine the things that have been done and said, and to evaluate the substance of it and to find something wanting in this - as in the case of the man who discovered gravitation, for instance, Newton. Einstein had an intuition; something didn't work just right, you see. There's a greater horizon in the sciences that we have to cope with. Einstein for instance, had an intuition that there's some kind of order in nature. He doesn't see it like most of the artists, he doesn't talk about anxiety and thing like that. There was some order in nature. Newton didn't explain that order sufficiently. Newton merely introduced one single thing like, let's say, gravitation and so on. And Einstein was looking for, being really a religious man, he was looking for order, harmony in nature and so on, and he found that to broaden this horizon he'd evolved this theory. That came from intuition. The working of it to make it viable and feasible - that he had to work out from mathematics, and his knowledge of physics, of course. Remember, these words have different meanings on different levels, so that when you talk of intuition it's a tremendous word. I'm very certain that man is the only creature on earth who has this quality. An animal has a foreboding, for instance but not intuition. When an animal sees a predator, you see, it knows enough to run away. That's a form of intuition, it hasn't happened yet but there's something menacing and it knows to survive it must run. But we're not talking about that kind of intuition. Our intuition isn't involved with our concern for personal safety. In fact the scientist doesn't talk or think about safety at all. Most scientists work on the theory that we are hunting for the truth no matter where it leads us - even if it's dangerous for us, you see. It's a functional matter, you see, but it's rather an intellectual and abstract notion.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That was very beautifully put, Maurice.

MAURICE SIEVAN: I don't think so. I don't think so.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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