



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Isabel Bishop,
1987 November 12-December 11

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

Contact Information

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Isabel Bishop on November 12, 1987. The interview took place in Riverdale, NY, and was conducted by Cynthia Nadelman for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Isabel, can you say when you were born and where? Your actual birthdate.

ISABEL BISHOP: I was born in Cincinnati, Ohio in March, 1902.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: What day?

ISABEL BISHOP: March third.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Also say your middle name also. Do you have a middle name?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. Just Isabel Bishop.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Okay. You lived in Cincinnati not very long I guess.

ISABEL BISHOP: About a year.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And then you moved . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: To Detroit, Michigan.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you have brothers and sisters?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, I didn't have brothers and sisters . . . I didn't mean to say that. I meant to say it was like a separate world because they were two pairs of twins. One was fifteen years older than I and the other I guess twelve.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Twelve years also older?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And they were both twins?

ISABEL BISHOP: A boy and a girl in each.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Wow! That's amazing!

ISABEL BISHOP: More amazing to my mother. [laughs]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Right. And then you came along?

ISABEL BISHOP: All that time later I got there.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Right. And you were the baby?

ISABEL BISHOP: I was the only one born after that.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That's interesting. So one pair of twins was fifteen years older and another pair was twelve years older than you -- a girl and boy each. What were their names: Is that asking too much?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. The older pair were Mildred and Newbold. The other one was Remson and the other was Anstice.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And Remson was your father's name also, I guess.

ISABEL BISHOP: His name was John Remson.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: John Remson Bishop. And your mother's maiden name?

ISABEL BISHOP: Newbold.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And her first name?

ISABEL BISHOP: Anna.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Anna Newbold Bishop. Right. Can you describe the circumstances that had the family moved from Cincinnati to Detroit?

ISABEL BISHOP: Before I was born my father had founded a prep school in Princeton. Both of my parents' families are from New Jersey -- associated with Rutgers.

[MACHINE TURNED OFF BRIEFLY]

Then my mother produced this first pair of twins. As she said later, "I don't really like babies. [laughs] I like children, but not babies." In two years she had another pair of twins and you could tell that was too much. My father needed more money. He was offered a little better salary.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Well, it makes sense. He was offered a better salary, I guess. With a school in Cincinnati?

ISABEL BISHOP: He sold the preparatory school which I understand still exists under another name.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Really? And what was its name then? Do you know?

ISABEL BISHOP: Princeton Preparatory School, I think.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That was the name of it under your father?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. That was really long ago.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: It was for boys?

ISABEL BISHOP: Boys only.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And he was the head of that school?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, the principal. But then I guess he didn't make enough money so he sold the school and bought a school . . . he thought in the Midwest would be a more likely place for it. He went out the middle west to see what the prospects would be. He almost bought a school . . . it doesn't matter. He went out to examine a school. It was next to a pickle factory or something. [laughs]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Really? Perfect for little boys. [both chuckle]

ISABEL BISHOP: He bought this school in Detroit, Michigan, but he didn't buy it immediately. Got himself employed there.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: He had been at a school in Cincinnati where you were born as well?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Well, Cincinnati sounds like it was a transitional point. And you don't have memories of it I'm sure. You don't remember it?

ISABEL BISHOP: I was born there. It was many years.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You were just a baby at that point. Did he have a specialty as a teacher?

ISABEL BISHOP: I didn't know what his specialty was.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: But was he basically a principal?

ISABEL BISHOP: He got his Ph.D. somewhere out there in the West. It was in history. He was also very strong in languages.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And classics and things like that also?

ISABEL BISHOP: Classics very much. So my family lived there when the other twins arrived. We lived there for a good number of years.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: In Cincinnati?

ISABEL BISHOP: No.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: It's Detroit where you lived for a number of years.

ISABEL BISHOP: Fourteen.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And they continued to live there even after you left. right?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you remember your father as a headmaster-type person or a principal? Was he very scholarly?

ISABEL BISHOP: He was considered to be scholarly. I wouldn't know.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I can believe it. I know you're very well read.

ISABEL BISHOP: I know how good he is in those languages. He was especially fond of Latin and Greek

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: The old classic languages.

ISABEL BISHOP: He taught that as a living language.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That's great. Did you learn things at home as well as in school?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. [both laugh]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Were you a good student?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. Moderate.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You would say that anyway, I'm sure. So your only memories as a child are of growing up in Detroit. So that was your home. Can you describe yourself as a little girl? Do you have an idea of what you were like? Were you spoiled by your older brothers and sister?

ISABEL BISHOP: My sisters and brothers were always going off -- were going to boarding school or were going to college. It seemed they were hardly ever there. One of them would come back temporarily -- usually he would make me over. I became a different person. A sibling.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You were like a doll [or] a plaything or something? Is that what you mean?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So they were rather strong characters in their own right?

ISABEL BISHOP: Very different from each other. Each one wanted to make a different creature out of me. [laughs]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Your mother was a strong personality?

ISABEL BISHOP: It's a funny thing. My mother and father didn't like each other.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did that become clearer as the years went on?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did that create tension or unhappiness at home?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did it seem like a happy household?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. It wasn't a happy household.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: In what sense? You say your mother was a strong personality or character.

ISABEL BISHOP: It was hard on my father that she was strong. For one thing, in Detroit, Michigan, women were

not supposed to be strong. She simply liked what she liked and that was it. One time she was asked to go down to the court and testify in some case. She went down, but she wouldn't swear to be telling the truth. She was asked by the court why she wouldn't and she said, "I don't believe in God." It was in the Detroit papers. "SCHOOL PRINCIPAL'S WIFE DOESN'T BELIEVE IN GOD" was the headline. [laughs] I really felt for my father. I mean, a school principal! His life was pretty impossible after that.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And she wouldn't make any concessions?

ISABEL BISHOP: She wouldn't apologize to the press. She didn't believe in God. She didn't believe in any supernatural being. Unlike my father.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Were you closer to your mother or your father?

ISABEL BISHOP: My mother.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: She was probably sort of a free spirit or something?

ISABEL BISHOP: That was it. He was a very conventional man. But years and years later, I was asked by the museum to come out and be a one-man jury on this show out there.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: In Detroit?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. I didn't want to do it because I didn't have good memories of Detroit. But they persuaded me. I went out on the sleeper, which I thought was very romantic. I still do. When I woke up in the morning, the train was going through an industrial part. It was pretty awful-looking and it smelled of chimney smoke.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And that was Detroit?

ISABEL BISHOP: The train was going through the outskirts of Detroit. To my absolute surprise, I found myself in a state of euphoria. I belonged here. I was amused by the feeling. I never imagined I'd feel nostalgic. But I did.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And you had not been back for quite a while before that?

ISABEL BISHOP: Years.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Well, something that's familiar like that comes back to you.

[BREAK]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: When you were in grade school?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. There were Saturday drawing classes. There was a forward-looking old man who ran the art school. He didn't do anything about having women in men's life classes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You mean he didn't mind their being there?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, he didn't. I was twelve years old when I was admitted to his class.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: To a men's life drawing class?

ISABEL BISHOP: It turned out to be that.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN; With a male model?

ISABEL BISHOP: With a male model, which was fine.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Right.

ISABEL BISHOP: He was a very forward-looking man.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Was that in a public school or a private school?

ISABEL BISHOP: Public school. By this time my father had given up having a school.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Oh really? And what did he do at that point?

ISABEL BISHOP: He was principal of a big high school.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Were you ever in the school that he was a principal of?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you remember the name of it?

ISABEL BISHOP: Eastern.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And that's the school where the art teacher was who was forward-looking?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you take classes with him for like a year or more than one year?

ISABEL BISHOP: It must have been the years I was a student there.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: While you were in school?

ISABEL BISHOP: In high school.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Was that teacher in the school? He taught at the school. He wasn't outside the school?

ISABEL BISHOP: I'm not sure about that.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So that was sort of your first introduction? Do you remember . . . even as a little girl were you always interested in art and drawing?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And were you encouraged at home by your parents to be interested in art?

ISABEL BISHOP: They weren't especially interested, but they took moderate interest.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: They didn't discourage you?

ISABEL BISHOP: No.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you have any first memories of any art projects or something like that? The first time when you actually thought, "This is what I want to do?" Any particular thing like that?

ISABEL BISHOP: He asked each of us in high school to make a mural, I think.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That's a pretty big project.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Were you an outgoing little girl? Do you remember? Or Did you spend time by yourself?

ISABEL BISHOP: I'm afraid I wasn't very outgoing.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you remember yourself as being a reader?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you actually go to some kind of an art school in Detroit? You did, I think, for a while. Right?

ISABEL BISHOP: Mr. Wicker. I remember his name all these years. The Wicker School. After I left high school, I must have studied privately that year.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I see. That's the one.

ISABEL BISHOP: I think I felt his influence over the years.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That's interesting. You mean he instilled you with certain skills or something like that? Your mother being a strong -- I'm sure you'll have more to say about this maybe later -- but did she help give you a sense that there wasn't anything you couldn't do as a woman or as a girl?

ISABEL BISHOP: She did say that women could and should do more than they did.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: What were her interests?

ISABEL BISHOP: Writing. She wrote, and wrote, and wrote and didn't publish.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: What kind of writing?

ISABEL BISHOP: She was a suffragette. Quite radical in her politics. In her 80's she was still subscribing to the New Masses. You remember that paper?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I know of it. Yes. That's really something. That would have been in the Forties or something?

ISABEL BISHOP: In the Forties.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you find yourself in agreement with her?

ISABEL BISHOP: I was probably a traitor.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So there were political discussions in your family -- to put it nicely? Right?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Just before we get off the subject, you said your brothers and sisters were all very different. Each have different interests and things like that. I was wondering what kinds of things they ended up being involved in.

ISABEL BISHOP: My older sister was what she thought would be a social success.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Being popular?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. The other sister lived at Bryn Mawr. She graduated from there . . . [unclear] down there where they let the German language even before the war. My father got some commission or something. He didn't have enough money to take her to Germany so he went to finish his [unclear] in German. Then she changed her direction and decided she must be a nurse. We had a relative who had something to do with St. Luke's. So she went there to study nursing.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: In New York? St. Luke's?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So your sister had come to New York before you?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. I never lived with her though. [pauses] I wish I wasn't boring you.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You're not boring me. [laughs] I find this interesting. You probably felt somewhat like an only child considering that your brothers and sisters were so much older and out of the house.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And your bothers? What about their interests and pursuits? Did they have much influence on you?

ISABEL BISHOP: They were very different people. [pause]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did they take after your father somewhat more?

ISABEL BISHOP: My brother Remson was an electrical engineer so that set him into a certain direction. Newbold became a high school teacher. It didn't matter.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: No? Did they mostly stay out? I mean the one sister came to New York. Did the rest of them stay out in the Midwest or did everyone spread out all over?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. Newbold became a high school teacher in the city. Remson became an electrical engineer.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: In Detroit?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And then did your parents continue to live in Detroit?

ISABEL BISHOP: They did.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And you left -- I'm amazed at this -- when you were sixteen? Right?

ISABEL BISHOP: Must be that or fifteen.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Wow! You left Detroit and came to New York by yourself?

ISABEL BISHOP: My mother was sympathetic with us.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you have long discussions about whether or not you would do this or could do it?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That's what you wanted to do?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So by that time you knew you were interested in doing something in art? Maybe you weren't sure what exactly?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: The school that you came to -- what was it?

ISABEL BISHOP: New York School of Applied Design for Women.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So you knew about that. You were already enrolled there before you left Detroit and that's why you came to New York, I guess. Right? To go there?

ISABEL BISHOP: I think I came to New York before I knew what I was going to do.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Really? Has that school become one of the big art schools in New York? Because sometimes they change names. You switched to the Art Students League. Was that part of the Art Students League?

ISABEL BISHOP: No.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Because I hadn't heard of that school. Maybe it doesn't exist anymore at all.

ISABEL BISHOP: It doesn't.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So you came and then somehow you ended up in that school. Can you describe it? Do you remember liking it, or what went on there, or any other thing that occurs to you about your move?

ISABEL BISHOP: [pause]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you think at that point that perhaps you would become a designer or something like that?

ISABEL BISHOP: I thought this school I came to was about art[?]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: What kinds of things did they . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: It was a commercial school. I'd draw what they described.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: What sorts of things, for instance?

ISABEL BISHOP: At the school I would design textiles. I may not have paid attention to the man who described something, but just do it.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: More personal?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. Then I began to read. I read about the French experimental artists and I was electrified. I never dreamed that would be so profound.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You were reading the periodicals, you mean? Or also books?

ISABEL BISHOP: It was one special book. I can't remember its name anymore.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: It wouldn't have been about Post-Impressionism or something like that?

ISABEL BISHOP: Something like that.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And that was while you were still in the other school?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: What was the situation? Where did you live when you first came to New York?

ISABEL BISHOP: That had been arranged. It was a so-called student home.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: For girls or for women?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh, yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you remember your feelings when you first got to New York?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. I remember thinking, "This is a great city." [both laugh] I said it just needed me.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you think of yourself as being fairly headstrong or proud of yourself to have come to New York?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. I just felt that it was where I wanted to be.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And you thought at that point it was the place to learn more about what you wanted to do?

ISABEL BISHOP: You have to agree it was a very special experience.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Right. You found out about the Art Students League once you came to New York, I guess?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you just sort of decide to go there instead?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That was after just a year or two at the other school?

ISABEL BISHOP: Two years.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You spent two years at the New York School for Women? And then you enrolled in the Art Students League.

ISABEL BISHOP: By then I'd read about modernists, all French.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Which ones in particular appealed to you at that point?

ISABEL BISHOP: Braque.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So when you got to the Art Students League, the first course you took was with Max Weber? Maybe it wasn't the first.

ISABEL BISHOP: It was the first.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And you finally felt as if you were where you wanted to be, I guess. Right? Maybe not specifically in that class, but at the school?

ISABEL BISHOP: The atmosphere in the League was lovely from my point of view. There was a kind of

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: They had a lot of excitement and stimuli there, I guess.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. The teachers were at odds with each other.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Were there different schools of thought?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh, yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Max Weber would have been more influenced by the Europeans, I guess.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. And he was in his Cubist period.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Were the people he was allied with?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh yes. He was a little man. He would be surrounded by his big, tall students. We anticipated every wish.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did all the teachers have that following?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. Some did, and some didn't.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: What did you think of his classes? Being thrown into that Cubist kind of thing must have been . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: Every Saturday he'd have students who thought they were going to [unclear] and he'd criticize them publicly, so he picked out a work of mine. He said, "The reason I go to this first is the reason the fireman goes to the worst place in the fire." That was it. He wouldn't even talk to me. I thought, "I'd better start somewhere else." You didn't have to sign up for anything at the League except for by the month. That's all.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Nothing was required? That sort of put an end to that, I can imagine. And you hadn't really been exposed to anything like Cubism at that point probably. Right? So it would have been hard to form them. Well, anyway, that one course was over with and then you became happier.

ISABEL BISHOP: Then there were various people.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I guess once you're there you figure out who the other people are and who you'd like to study with and that sort of thing.

ISABEL BISHOP: Try one thing and another.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: By the way. Where there very many other women in these classes?

ISABEL BISHOP: Lots of them. Girls are very much more likely to get some money out of their fathers.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: To study art. So then was the next course you took . . . ? After the Max Weber class, what happened? Do you remember?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't remember. From then on, I tried one thing or another.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: But at some point, I guess, you started taking courses with Kenneth Hayes Miller?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. That started it all.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You already probably had a fairly good background in life drawing and that sort of thing?

ISABEL BISHOP: I always did do that a little bit.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: From Detroit. So were you friendly with other students? Or did they not seem serious enough?

ISABEL BISHOP: I would like to have been closer to a few students than I was.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Has the Art Students League always been on Fifty-Seventh Street?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So then you stayed there for two or three years studying. Right?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And did you take courses with Kenneth Hayes Miller and with . . . ? Did Reginald Marsh teach there, or was that not how you got to know him? And Guy Pene du Bois?

ISABEL BISHOP: Pene du Bois taught there.

[END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Were there assignments? Did Kenneth Hayes Miller do things like assign people to go out

onto the street?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. We did everything in museums.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Yes. That's something I wanted to ask you, I guess. Whether you also started learning about art history at the League or on your own or what? How did you do that?

ISABEL BISHOP: I never did study art history.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I guess not on paper. I didn't see it anywhere on your resume, but I know you pick things up. Has that just been through looking, basically?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: When you say he encouraged you to go to a museum, you probably mean especially the Metropolitan. I guess that was a pretty good sort of school.

ISABEL BISHOP: It really stimulated your curiosity. There was a certain amount of certain periods [?].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: In particular?

ISABEL BISHOP: Florentine.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Of course, in those days they didn't have slides.

ISABEL BISHOP: They did.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Were there things like slide lectures and showing the work of Old Masters, et cetera?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And you were probably beginning to feel less and less like a student and more like an artist on your own at that point. Did you feel that you had role models among some of the teachers there or is it just that you filled things in, but pretty much wanted to become your own person? How should I put that? I guess probably one of the things that you learned the most from teachers is how to develop work habits and things like that. Did you have a studio of your own at that point? Did you live on Fourteenth Street yet or at what point did you move to that neighborhood?

ISABEL BISHOP: Fourteenth Street was my first New York studio of my own in which I lived.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you move to that after the home for women?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: What I was wondering was, what was Fourteenth Street like in those days? What was its relationship to Fifty-Seventh -- for instance -- where you were going to school? Would it have seemed more as if Fourteenth was midtown in those days and Fifty-seventh was uptown?

ISABEL BISHOP: There was a certain amount of that.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I have the feeling that Fourteenth was a much more central part of the scheme of things in New York in those days than it is maybe today.

ISABEL BISHOP: Not as much as you think.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Yes, that's true if you lived there and had a studio. Did many people live around Fourteenth Street?

ISABEL BISHOP: It was a small business neighborhood.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So you were sort of the equivalent of like people moving into lofts nowadays?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Right. Did other artists do the same thing?

ISABEL BISHOP: There wasn't the concentration that is there now.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So if you had your own studio, it means you spent the time you weren't in school doing your work at the studio, I guess. Right?

ISABEL BISHOP: It really sounded like a great deal. It was quite a different thing to be absolutely on your own in a work sense. I nearly gave up in despair. when I had given up, I thought, "Now what do I do?" [chuckles] So what I then had to do was go back to school at the League working among other people that were working. That in itself was very important.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Kind of generate some energy?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You were probably at that point all of nineteen or twenty?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. About that.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You really were fairly young. Did you feel you were getting to know the teachers? Were you able to sense what kind of people they were other than just being a professor at the head of a class? Do you have a sense of a type of personality that Kenneth Hayes Miller, for instance, seemed like?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. Probably very fascinating. No two people could be as unlike as Miller and Pene du Bois. They hated each other. [chuckles]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: In what ways?

ISABEL BISHOP: Mostly in . . . [pauses]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I would imagine Kenneth Hayes Miller as being much more earnest and sort of serious. Is that part of it?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. Du Bois was brought up in France. Had been there. He thought Miller was cold and strict in his [unclear].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And in terms of their art, I would have thought du Bois was more of a colorist and things like that.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: In fact he must have been of French background. And you took courses with both of them? I would also imagine that du Bois was more amusing as a person perhaps?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. He was somebody who was interested in me [?].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: In what way?

ISABEL BISHOP: He had studios.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Right. [chuckles] Was he as good a teacher, though as Miller?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, I don't think so. I don't think he was as good a teacher.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You say they were very different and they hated each other. I guess that would mean temperamentally, but also as being quite different in the work they did. Yet would they have both been allied against Max Weber, for instance? Were there all these different schools of thought there?

ISABEL BISHOP: It was very confusing.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And then did students inevitably begin to take sides also?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: But you could see advantages to both sides?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh yes. And art students accosted me about it.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So we're sort of getting to the early Twenties. By 1924 you were through studying with the League?

ISABEL BISHOP: I left it.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Right. You left. And that's when you just decided to plunge in and spend all your time doing your art. But at that point you thought you had overcome that sense of the difficulty of working on your own?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes]. I went abroad a couple of times.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That's what I wanted to ask about. One of the trips was with those two professors, right?

ISABEL BISHOP: With Miller.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And du Bois?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, I never did.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you go to all kinds of museums and see lots of art in Europe?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you remember which cities you went to? Was it Paris and Rome and I guess Florence because you mentioned Florentine?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you go to Paris also?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: At that point what was the main thing you were concerned with in your art to try to do? Did you travel everywhere with a sketchbook? I don't have the feeling you were going places to get picturesque scenes somewhere or anything like that.

ISABEL BISHOP: No. Thoughts and ideas. [chuckles]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Full of thoughts. Right. Was Reginald Marsh on when you went with Kenneth Hayes Miller?

ISABEL BISHOP: One time I went with them.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And while you were in Europe did you sketch or draw?

ISABEL BISHOP: Not when anyone was around. I drew a little in the museum if I was by myself.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Which things in particular do you remember impressing you?

ISABEL BISHOP: Rubens' sketches.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So then you came back. I'm just trying to get a sense of the atmosphere in the early Twenties. I guess it was mixed. Was there a sense of fun on some level? I'm sure you were thinking about the work you were doing, but were there parties and socializing also among artists?

ISABEL BISHOP: Some.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You weren't too into that?

ISABEL BISHOP: I went to a few artists' balls. I don't seem to have had any young men.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Was that because you were more concerned with your work?

ISABEL BISHOP: I hope that was the reason. [both chuckle]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I imagine it was. so you were not the party type? You were in Woodstock one summer or more than one summer? Something like that.

ISABEL BISHOP: One summer. It was a summer school of the Art Students League and the teacher I suppose was Dasburg.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Andrew Dasburg?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So that would have been more an outdoor atmosphere?

ISABEL BISHOP: It was in a studio.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: It's just that you lived more in the woods? Also, I was wondering, did you have any connection to the Whitney Studio Club at that point?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, I enjoyed that.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: As a place to see art or to see the work?

ISABEL BISHOP: to see the work and to see the young people.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did social and artistic occasions happen there?

ISABEL BISHOP: There's a Peggy Bacon etching of the Club.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Of one of those scenes? That's great. Sounds like fun. [chuckles] Did you know her?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: She must have been fun.

ISABEL BISHOP: She was. She died up in Maine.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Not too long ago. Last year, I think. Let's see. And you knew each other all along. Or did you get to know her better in later years?

ISABEL BISHOP: Later.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: What other artists do you remember getting to know at that point? I'm trying to think who would have been at the Whitney Studio Club. A lot of them would have been older than the ones I can think of. There were these little auctions and things like that where people sold works for five dollars or something. Didn't that happen at the Whitney Studio Club?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't remember that. Sounds like a good idea.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Right. And did you show at the Whitney at any point that early?

ISABEL BISHOP: I think I did.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: In the Twenties?

ISABEL BISHOP: I had a picture in their first exhibition.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That's right because the Whitney didn't become a museum until 1929. At some point you turned your attention to the task at hand which was to paint? You tell me. I was wondering what was on your mind in terms of what you wanted to get when you went to your own studio after you finished school and you started doing things on Fourteenth Street. Consciously were you thinking that you wanted to combine the techniques and the manners of old masters or something along with contemporary and capture a contemporary sense that way?

LB: Oh yes. It was a major mission.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And actually the very technique of combining oils and tempera that you have is a very I don't think that many people were using it the same way that you were. Maybe Reginald Marsh who used tempera also.

ISABEL BISHOP: I wasn't doing it yet. I was looking in that direction.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I was thinking of the order. First I guess you would get many sketches of something that you wanted to turn into a painting. And then to get that look of which some of your early paintings, but all the way through I think where there's the kind of black lines show underneath the tempera. Is that from doing pencil under the painting? I'm sort of babbling here because I'm sure you know exactly the order in which a painting takes place.

ISABEL BISHOP: The pencil is on a panel.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That was on a wood panel?

ISABEL BISHOP: A wood panel covered with gesso. It would be above building up some . . .

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You didn't pick up the idea of doing a wood panel from anyone? Kenneth Hayes Miller didn't do that, I don't think. Did he?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So that was something that was done. Right?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: In a way I'm thinking maybe we should get into the actual technique and the actual painting at another time so we can start fresh talking about paintings, but maybe talk about the situation and the atmosphere right now. We can also stop off pretty soon. You might be getting kind of tired. One other thing I was wondering about is the influence of photography at that point. Were you interested in photography?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. Photography was a technical skill, but no direct relation to art.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And to use it even as an aid to memory. Of course there weren't such things as snap shots. That didn't happen in those days. The photograph was a very elaborate thing to get, I guess. It didn't seem as if it was something that could become useful as an aid to memory or something like that?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, it did.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: But only as that, in other words? Yes, that's actually what I meant. Photography's role in painting as a way of looking at the world. Is there a sense of that you had at that point?

ISABEL BISHOP: What would be an example?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I was thinking of very early things like motion studies.

ISABEL BISHOP: Those were wonderful.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Muybridge or even Eakins. Did you find that was interesting?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes]. I had a tape of Eakins.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: A videotape?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: It's interesting how on TV more and more art shows and programs, et cetera, are being shown on the air.

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh, yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: It's interesting how it captures that. In the news last night they had a photograph of the Van Gogh Irises. The colors are not like Van Gogh's, but they're very bright. It's sort of interesting.

ISABEL BISHOP: Photography is a very fascinating thing.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Right. Speaking of Eakins or photography or whatever, but is he someone whose work as far as American artists . . . is he one of your favorites?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. Most vehemently, yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I take it you know his work quite well? You studied it quite a bit I guess. Who else in terms of earlier artists?

ISABEL BISHOP: Homer, Ryder.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: In fact, do you feel closer to an American art tradition than a European one at this point?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And did you feel that way even back in the Twenties do you think, or was the European influence still kind of strong?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, I think the feeling of pulling together in American art is an important togetherness.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Band together.

ISABEL BISHOP: [I] never got over being angry at the Whitney for selling American work. They got rid of Eakins, Ryder, Homer. They sold them. I understand they regretted it very [much]. They couldn't afford to buy them back.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you travel to Philadelphia or anything to see more Eakins'?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. And Boston to see [Manet]?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: When you were in Europe, where did you see the Rubens sketches that you especially liked? In the Louvre, [I] guess?

ISABEL BISHOP: In Spain.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That's interesting. Do you speak any foreign languages?

ISABEL BISHOP: No.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: How about reading? At that point were you mostly reading about art or had you always read other things? I know you read poetry and other literature and so on. It must have been largely on your own. I assume it was because you had been in art schools much of the time in terms of schooling.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. I never had any real school for academic.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you have favorite fields that you like to delve into in terms of reading?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't think I have any special field.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You read novels and poetry?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you remember any particular events like -- for instance -- the parties at the Whitney Studio Club or the get-togethers or anything? Were there any special situations that you remember or some funny stories come to mind?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, but I guess there were.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Also, the summer that you were in Woodstock. How did you like studying with Andrew Dasburg? Was that interesting?

ISABEL BISHOP: Moderately.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: He wasn't very interested in painting people, I guess. Was he?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, but I don't think I was either. I was beginning to work in a non-representational way.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: At that point you were. Did you have early abstract paintings?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, I haven't any.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: But you were working in that mode for a while, I guess. And then what? You just felt that it wasn't what you wanted to continue with?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. Nobody would buy them. And myself.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: What were they based on? Would they have been Cubist types of things?

ISABEL BISHOP: Based on some screwy ideas about Cezanne. [laughs]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Would they have been taking off still-lives, or landscapes, or just completely non-representational?

ISABEL BISHOP: I've never taken off from landscape.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So you did some of those when you were up at Woodstock? Maybe you weren't outdoors, but you were thinking about the outdoors. Right? Where did people stay up there?

ISABEL BISHOP: They just stayed in a farm house and some in the inn.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Different artists lived in different farm houses with the farm people from around?

ISABEL BISHOP: They would take somebody into the house. I got into trouble.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: How?

ISABEL BISHOP: I can't remember it now, but it was very serious at the time. [laughs]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Right. It always is.

ISABEL BISHOP: The woman put me out of here house.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Think of why that was.

ISABEL BISHOP: She thought I was no good. I think that's the time my father had to get me by.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did they put you in a different house or something?

ISABEL BISHOP: I can't remember how I left Woodstock.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: What was it like traveling when you traveled with either Kenneth Hayes Miller or Reginald Marsh? Were there other people?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, but I didn't get in trouble. [laughs]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did gossip fly?

ISABEL BISHOP: Probably did.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: When you took trips to Europe, about how long would they usually [last]? Were they substantial?

ISABEL BISHOP: Very short.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Other than Woodstock, you've never been somebody particularly to go to the country?

ISABEL BISHOP: No.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Of course you're in semi-country here, I guess. But you really like cities? Or do you?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You like the coming and going?

[END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO]

TAPE-RECORDED INTERVIEW WITH ISABEL BISHOP
NOVEMBER 14, 1987
INTERVIEWER: CYNTHIA NADELMAN

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I wanted to ask a few more things about Fourteenth Street when you were first hanging out there in the Twenties. Your studio was number nine or something like that?

ISABEL BISHOP: Nine West Fourteenth.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And you lived there as well. Can you describe the studio?

ISABEL BISHOP: The studio was great. It was kind of a big loft. [It] went from the front to the back of the building.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Just one great big room?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes]. It wasn't so enormous. As a matter of fact I don't know how, but at some point I was able

to rent the second room. It didn't go from front to back. I'm wrong about that. The two rooms in the front were my

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Right. And you were able with even one of the rooms -- the first of them -- to divide it off so you could live there or at least sleep there as well?

ISABEL BISHOP: I had two rooms, you see. Worked in one and slept in the other.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Then you rented the second room out?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, I didn't. Just me.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I assume the studio part was the bigger room?

ISABEL BISHOP: Sure. The second room had a little fireplace.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did it have water and a stove and a kitchen sink?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I assume it had good light.

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, the front room had north light from the south side of the street.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you actually look out the window of that studio to get inspiration?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. Very much so.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And could you see Union Square from there?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. I couldn't see it very well, the details.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: At that point and certainly from the beginning when you were at fourteenth Street you would go down into Union Square and sit for period of time?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes]. I hadn't seen the show that they had

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I just heard about that. Right. I haven't seen it either. What would you do? Kind of sit down on a bench and just move around?

ISABEL BISHOP: Sometimes I would sketch.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: On the whole, you found people continued about their business and let you do that?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Were there days when you would pretty much spend the whole day out there outdoors and then spend another day in the studio or something like that?

ISABEL BISHOP: I didn't eat any food out there.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: [laughs] So you had to come in.

ISABEL BISHOP: I had to come in to eat something.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Were there some other artists who had studios at that point on Fourteenth Street whom you knew?

ISABEL BISHOP: Gorky was there.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you actually know Gorky?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. Not to speak to.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: He wouldn't have been well known around the Twenties, yet were you?

ISABEL BISHOP: [laughs] No.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And he was painting subjects also at that point. He wasn't abstracted yet?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. I never did work in an abstract mode.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Right, but he wouldn't have been working in the abstract either at that time, probably.

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't remember; he might have.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did Reginald Marsh or Miller?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. I guess I knew Marsh at that time. He wasn't on Fourteenth Street.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And was Kenneth Hayes Miller on Fourteenth Street?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. Right on Fourteenth.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So you know of Gorky at least back in the late Twenties?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did he have something of a reputation already?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you get to know the Soyers around that early?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't know at what point. Not at first. I've always loved Raphael. Rebecca, too.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you know the other brothers also?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. I know the other brothers, but not well. One of them had a wife who was a dancer.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did he ever have a studio on Fourteenth or Union Square area? Do you remember?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't think so.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I wanted to talk a little bit about printmaking also, but did you have an etching press as early as the first studio, or was that not until your next studio? Do you remember?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, my first studio, I didn't. I hadn't begun to try etching, I don't think.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You hadn't? We'll get to that later, when you did.

ISABEL BISHOP: Reg was doing etching.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Was that partly what was an inspiration to you?

ISABEL BISHOP: He always was.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: This is Reginald Marsh?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: At what point do you remember meeting him? Was it students at the Art Students League?

ISABEL BISHOP: When did I meet him? It must have been at the Art Students League.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: He had been an illustrator and he was kind of relearning fine art at the Art Students League?

ISABEL BISHOP: Graduated from Yale and then he began to do something with Life magazine, I think. Series of topical sketches. He had to do one of these a day. He enjoyed it.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: But at some point I guess he felt he wanted to move into doing painting instead?

ISABEL BISHOP: Not instead -- also.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Also. Right. So he was quite a bit older than you were? Or maybe older than many of the students? Is that accurate? Maybe not quite a bit, but a few years?

ISABEL BISHOP: Not more than about four years.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And you began to be friendly or to see eye-to-eye at a fairly early point as students?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't know whether that was after I went to the Art Students League.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Probably?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't know.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And did you kind of share inspiration with one another?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Of course he did the technique. He did go out among people and sketch all the time.

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Were you ever inclined to go to Coney Island?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. I went with Reginald some times.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I don't remember seeing any results.

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't have any.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you remember specifically thinking that this was a generation wanted to do something different from what -- let's say -- Everett Shinn and that earlier group of artists had done?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't think any of us knew Everett Shinn.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Or the Eight or the Ashcan School -- some of them?

ISABEL BISHOP: They were a little bit older.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Right. I'm wondering whether there was an attempt to go beyond what they had done or to do something a little different. Did you have a different sense of overthrowing something they had done and trying something else? I know over the years, that wouldn't become an issue anymore.

ISABEL BISHOP: No. I don't remember it as being an issue ever.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Okay.

ISABEL BISHOP: I didn't know Sloan, but everybody I knew knew him.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And you knew his work?

ISABEL BISHOP: In those days everybody [did].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And he had taught at the Art Students League?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So he was sort of an important figure?

ISABEL BISHOP: He was a teacher.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you study his work? Were you familiar with it?

ISABEL BISHOP: I wasn't a student of his.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: But of his painting? You would have seen it in museums or something like that at some point? What kinds of occasions were there to show in the late Twenties? Were there many group shows?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, there were.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Would they generally have something like a theme? I guess there were often competitions or something like that? Is that something you remember entering?

ISABEL BISHOP: There were artists' societies that were of help for me.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Right. And they would have shows of the members' work or something?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you remember any particular thrill about a first time you had a work in a group show or anything like that?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. The first big thrill I had was being taken by a dealer.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That must have been a really big thrill.

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, rather. A dealer named [Valentine] Dudensing. He left New York. At that time he was in New York. He had a gallery on 57th Street. The big thrill came when I bought every art magazine you could possibly imagine. [laughs] One came out. The advertisements in it of the dealers listed the people they had on their roster. So I knew Dudensing had put my name on the thing. That was the point at which I thought of myself as a professional.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You saw your name in print. So they had picked you up for . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: A group show.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You went in there just off the street?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. I just went in there with a small painting under my arm.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you remember what the subject was?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. I think it was a man sitting in Union Square with a stone wall around him.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And did they take very many more paintings of yours to show?

ISABEL BISHOP: They took them for a while, but I was always such a slow worker there weren't that many. He went to Chicago or somewhere else.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Was that the reason you stopped . . . ? You mentioned that it was a small painting of yours, but most of your paintings were small, weren't they?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Would it have been on wood at that point?

ISABEL BISHOP: [No].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Was there a particular reason even early on why you kept them small?

ISABEL BISHOP: I thought I was working in a Renaissance method, but Soyer was definitely not.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: At any point?

ISABEL BISHOP: [unclear]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Right. Would you have arguments about it?

ISABEL BISHOP: [laughs] No.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you know his work before you knew him?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Was his work already starting to be shown also in the Twenties?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You mentioned working in the Renaissance mode. That kind of goes right into I was going to ask you what inspired the painting "Virgil and Dante in Union Square?" That was a 1932 painting. That was probably your main attempt at doing an allegorical kind of painting in contemporary dress, right?

ISABEL BISHOP: The only one I ever did try.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: How did the idea come to you? Do you remember?

ISABEL BISHOP: My mother, curiously enough. She taught us Italian before we were reading.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Dante?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes]. But what I got from that was that she had a passionate wish that Dante would be accessible instead of only to scholars. She made it so she could learn it and be close to it; she taught herself to read it. I felt inspired by her wish to make it contemporary. My inspiration was my mother.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: She felt she would get closer to it by reading it in the original than in translation?

ISABEL BISHOP: What she was interested in was it should be a piece of literature, but it had mostly thought about as religious in content. She gave me the idea of trying somehow to connect it with modern life. At Fourteenth Street Union Square was what was there.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Sort of teeming with life in fact?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Obviously you had discussions then with your mother about the content of what she was reading?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't remember at what point she died. She died early on.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You don't remember at what point in your life she died?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, but it must have been I had been working on this Dante thing.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That was in the early Thirties. So she lived much longer than that. I was going to ask you about that. Did she move to New York at any point, so that you were having some kind of conversation with her about things like literature?

ISABEL BISHOP: She lived next door.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: But she couldn't have lived next door to you yet?

ISABEL BISHOP: She died there.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I see. So you moved out here [Riverdale, N.Y.] in about 1934 I guess after you got married, which we will discuss. Is that when she moved to New York? Sometime around then?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And she lived nearby in Riverdale?

ISABEL BISHOP: Next door.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That's nice.

ISABEL BISHOP: In that direction. [points]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So that's east, I think. I'm not sure. Did she live alone in a house there?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. My sister lived in it and her husband lived there.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: This is which sister?

ISABEL BISHOP: The younger sister who was thirteen years older than I.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That was Anstice, right?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: She is the one who went to Bryn Mawr and became a nurse?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. She didn't go to Bryn Mawr, but she did become a nurse.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Oh, I've got them confused. She went to Germany and then became a nurse?

ISABEL BISHOP: No.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You mentioned that one of your sisters had a strong interest in Germany and went there to study at some point and then she changed and became interested in nursing. Is that Anstice?

ISABEL BISHOP: That's Anstice.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And that's the one who lived right next door?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did she remain a nurse?

ISABEL BISHOP: She had a very sad time of it. As a nurse she joined the Navy. My brother Remson -- her twin -- had become an engineer. He joined the Navy and was shot down and killed. She was in France at the time as a nurse so it was very, very hard for her.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That was during the first world war?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So he died quite young. I didn't realize that. Anyway, she became a New Yorker pretty much like you did, in other words? I don't know whether you consider yourself a New Yorker now. You must be.

ISABEL BISHOP: I came in 1934.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You came out here?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And did your sister and her husband already live here or did they come afterwards.

ISABEL BISHOP: I think they came afterwards.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Then at some point your mother also joined them?

ISABEL BISHOP: I came here when I married Harold Wolff, who was then at New York Hospital, and he worked with them.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: At which hospital?

ISABEL BISHOP: New York Hospital.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I was going to ask you all about that too.

ISABEL BISHOP: I may have been already living at the loft on Fourteenth.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you remember when you met him or the circumstances?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. A fellow art student introduced me.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And he was a friend of the fellow art student's?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And did you have a long courtship or anything like that?

ISABEL BISHOP: We didn't marry for ten years.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So you knew him back early in the Twenties?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I see. And during all that period did you see very much of him?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. He went on a slow boat to China. He went around the world in little hops.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So it was a long trip. Did you correspond?

ISABEL BISHOP: An occasional postcard. When he finally came back, I was a little older -- ten years. [laughs]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: He took a trip that lasted that long?

ISABEL BISHOP: IT lasted a couple of years. When he came back, I had been struggling with a studio life for a while by that time. I decide to lay siege to Harold. [both chuckle] I never intended to marry. I decided against it.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Against your original resolve, you mean? By that time you probably found out that it's kind of lonely working on your own.

ISABEL BISHOP: I sure did. But anyhow I laid siege and finally won it. [laughs]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: How did you do that? What ploys did you use? I'm sure you didn't have to use many ploys.

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh, yes, I did. My family had come in the meantime to live in Peekskill, New York, where the school was that my father taught.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: The Peekskill Academy or something?

ISABEL BISHOP: The Peekskill Military Academy. So anyhow they said to invite this young doctor for the weekend, which I did and he came.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did they get along? Was he well received by the family?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh yes. Very well received. [laughs] It turned out Peekskill Military Academy was his own [unclear]. Boys marched around the campus. It as a school that made a point of taking children whose parents were divorced or something.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And kind of straighten them out?

ISABEL BISHOP: My family lived right on the campus. You would see little boys about this high. Enormous heads because they were so young in these caps -- marching. It was very humorous. My father hated it because the point of the school was to make them mind. my father had a scholarly turn of mind and was offended by this, but he had no choice.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Was he the principal there?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. He was called Dean of the Faculty. The principal owns the school. It went on existing for a long time after that.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I think so. Yes. I've heard of it in my own time. It may still be there. So you would occasionally visit them now that they were in the East?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That's great. And on this particular occasion you invited this young doctor and that was kind of the beginning of a romance?

ISABEL BISHOP: It was.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Was he about your age?

ISABEL BISHOP: Four years older.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Was he interested in art?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. I was going to say he was.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So he must have found you very unusual, I would think. Even in the beginning, was he on a fairly regular schedule as a doctor?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: He wasn't sleeping over in the hospital and things like that? I know young doctors are always impossible to see because they have these odd hours. But I guess by then he was probably already advanced. He had finished his education?

ISABEL BISHOP: By that time he was specializing.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And his specialty was what?

ISABEL BISHOP: He became a neurologist. Then in relation of mind and body.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Was that sort of a new study at that point?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. Innovative. I have many books somewhere on those shelves written by him.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And were you able to understand the things that he was doing?

ISABEL BISHOP: I thought I did. He may not have thought so.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Well, he was able to communicate those complicated, scientific things?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. I thought it was great.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did he teach?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So big things happened in the early Thirties? You got the gallery and you got married. Those are sort of milestone things. I don't want to cut you short in this story. For how long did you wait?

ISABEL BISHOP: I am short. [laughs]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: [laughs] Right. I was wondering for how long did you lay siege to Dr. Harold Wolff?

ISABEL BISHOP: I can't remember.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: But you were doing things together, and going out, and all the usual things?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you both look for a house or something like that?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And that's when you found this house?

ISABEL BISHOP: [unclear] I think maybe my sister and her husband came at first. I don't remember.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And were you congenial with your sister and husband?

ISABEL BISHOP: Not with her husband. He died after not very long. She was in the house next door until she died.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Which was quite a while?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That must have been nice.

ISABEL BISHOP: Probably about ten years, I guess.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And did your mother survive . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: She didn't survive that long.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: But for a while it would have been just your sister and your mother living there?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Then had your father . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: He died way back.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: After the Peekskill period?

ISABEL BISHOP: He retired from school life. Then he had time to leave it. He was going to write a translation of

Catullus. He had a heavenly retirement planned out. Then he had a stroke and was gone.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So he never had a chance to begin on the translation?

ISABEL BISHOP: No.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So it was during the time that Dr. Wolff was on this trip that you began to show and you were showing at the Dudensing Gallery. Then you shifted in 1932 I guess to Midtown Gallery. Or you signed a contract with them and went with them. How did all of that . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: I never had a contract.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: With Midtown?

ISABEL BISHOP: With anybody.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Okay. It's good to have that on the record because it's written in some places. How did your connection with Midtown come about?

ISABEL BISHOP: See, by this time it was the low point of the Depression.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Had you met Alan Gruskin somewhere? Did you know him?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, but it's beginning to come. Edward Laning was teaching at the Art Students League. Gruskin had just graduated from Harvard and didn't know anything about paintings. He went around New York for artists to form a gallery. He was aiming to do it in an unusual way for those time -- a jury or various juries. He gradually collected a stable. He asked the Art Students League teachers to suggest. I got to know Edward Laning, and I was one of the people he suggested to Gruskin. Somehow or other it stuck.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And he asked you?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. He didn't really ask. He had juried shows and in the natural course of things

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: At the Midtown?

ISABEL BISHOP: At the Midtown. Alan Gruskin was the only person who was setting out to be a dealer on that basis -- depending on the jury.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That's interesting. Would Laning have been a juror or would he have been somebody who suggested that you be in a juried show?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. As a teacher in the League, he was asked.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: For recommendations?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I'm just trying to get this straight. So on that basis he would have asked you to be in a show and then the show would be juried?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. The show wasn't juried.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So the jury decided on what would be in the show?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Was Gruskin an artist as well?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. The reason I mentioned Harvard was he graduated from Harvard as an artist. So on that basis this was a definite diversion. He couldn't afford to start a gallery, really. He had no money. Artists like myself were included once in a while in exhibitions. You would be invited to try showing for a month or something. You see, it was a natural way to try. There was no capital.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And I don't imagine there was much selling of art at that time? I would think you had a hard time selling things at that point during the Depression.

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So how did he even manage?

ISABEL BISHOP: I do not know. I know he slept in the gallery.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: [laughs] So he was very dedicated to doing that? He really did want to show art?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. Very dedicated.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: After you had been in some group shows, I guess then he did ask you to join the gallery?

ISABEL BISHOP: I can't remember.

[END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So there was nothing so formal as an agreement to start showing, but you did have a solo show at . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: Not for years. Someone who was a member of the gallery said what you ought to do is show in the monthly shows. They really got reviewed.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And who were some of the other people showing at that time?

ISABEL BISHOP: I really can't remember, but there were quite a few women. He was always good to women.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: There were quite a few people passed through there. Not all the ones who are presently in the stable?

ISABEL BISHOP: Have we any women?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I think there are.

ISABEL BISHOP: Ethel Magafan.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Ben Shahn's widow. What's her name?

ISABEL BISHOP: Bernarda Shahn,

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Right. But there were people showing earlier on who are not being shown now, in other words?

ISABEL BISHOP: That's right.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So you did start to get reviews and that must have been nice.

ISABEL BISHOP: Not really nice. They weren't favorable.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I guess that's part of being a forward-looking artist.

ISABEL BISHOP: The first gallery was on Fifth Avenue.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That was a pretty good address.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. You'd think so, but it isn't. A very old building and it wasn't quite near anywhere.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I see. It wasn't around other galleries or anything?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. It wasn't. I'm sure it sat there. Nevertheless the place was filthy. Very dirty. He had no wife at that time.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So he [Gruskin] was not big on the aesthetics of gallery ambiance?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. [laughs]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And I suppose one had no idea whether the gallery would exist next year or next month.

ISABEL BISHOP: No. Or next day.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Actually, it's amazing that of all the galleries that it's become one of the longest lived. So you didn't have a solo show in 1933 though or that early as far as you recall?

ISABEL BISHOP: It was when I did.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Yes. That's what it says in the resume. That must have felt like a pretty big accomplishment.

ISABEL BISHOP: And the gallery was on the sixth or seventh floor. [laughs]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And you had to walk up?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you manage to get people to come?

ISABEL BISHOP: A few.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And if your work was rather small you must have had by then quite a few paintings to show.

ISABEL BISHOP: They accumulated.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: On that same subject by 1936 you had sold a painting to the Metropolitan, which is a pretty big

ISABEL BISHOP: Isn't that queer?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Queer? I don't think so. [laughs] I think that painting is one of the highlights of the new Twentieth-century wing. I'm sure I'm not the first person to have told you that. It looks wonderful there. Have you been to see it?

ISABEL BISHOP: [No].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You painted that with two girls which you painted in 1935 and it was bought in 1936.

ISABEL BISHOP: Two waitresses at Child's. I still didn't have anybody to have breakfast with. [both laugh]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You were eating alone at Child's in the Thirties?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Had you developed a rapport with the one waitress or with both of them?

ISABEL BISHOP: They've written to me ever since. Not they. One dropped away.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: One of them is the one you knew better, and the other was her friend or something? And they came to your studio?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you also sketch them at the restaurant?

ISABEL BISHOP: No.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: It was really her face that interested you? It was why you wanted to get her into the studio?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Was Robert Beverly Hale the curator at the Metropolitan at that point?

ISABEL BISHOP: Probably.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Was that painting bought from a show at the Midtown?

ISABEL BISHOP: I think it was.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did they show it very soon? I guess not. They buy a lot of things before they show them. Or do you remember it being shown?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't remember.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: But it must have felt like a thrill at any rate to have the Metropolitan buying your painting. Was that exciting?

ISABEL BISHOP: It was great. No. Bryson Burroughs was the curator.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And he's the person who probably came and saw it?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't know.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Also, I was wondering whether if, after 1929 and the Crash, was there a discernible change in Union Square? Were there more unemployed men or bums hanging around there?

ISABEL BISHOP: Not dramatically increased, but an increase.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And did many of the people seem to be like men who had had jobs and who had fallen on hard times? Was there a difference in types of bums?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. Something I want to say about that. It's about the bums. I had been looking at them for a while and at which point I went abroad. When I came back, I wanted to draw the bums and had drawn them in a place called the Green Park in Belgium. I felt, to my surprise, when I came back and stood around Union Square, they were quite different from the European bums. They looked different. A different type of rags on. I was fascinated by that. I still don't know how to convey it though.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: In the work?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes]. I hope it did.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You meant they were different from the European ones? Maybe they were also different from the ways bums appeared to you before you left?

ISABEL BISHOP: I meant the first.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: In other words, American bums are different? Can you characterize that a little bit ore?

ISABEL BISHOP: I wish I could, but I don't think I can. It's something about the way they sat.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That's interesting. I think I read that you said somewhere that bums were America's only leisure class. There's a certain sense to that, I guess. [laughs] After you moved to Riverdale in 1934 and after you got married Oh. I meant to ask you, did you have a small wedding or a big one?

ISABEL BISHOP: Justice of the Peace.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Then you changed studios. It moved from Fourteenth Street to . . . ? I've read the address, but I forget now what [it was]. Do you remember the address of the next one? It was west of Union Square, right?

ISABEL BISHOP: 857 Broadway. It was bigger.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Was that the reason for moving?

ISABEL BISHOP: It must have been.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So in some ways it gave you a different view of Union Square, didn't it? From a different side?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. And in the other one, I really couldn't see the Square.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And now you could?

ISABEL BISHOP: By sticking my head out the window I could see the Square, but at 857 Broadway I had a perfect view of it.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So for things like architectural details, you could just get some of that from looking out the window? Like the fountain?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: It must have been at some point then early in the Thirties when you did take up etching.

Do you remember first beginning that or what happened?

ISABEL BISHOP: I think it was Reg that first . . . there was an American artist who lives in France called William Hayter. Hayter had come to New York one winter and Reg suggested to me that I go to the class. It was very important to me as it turned out.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I think that was during the Forties when he

ISABEL BISHOP: It could have been.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So you had been doing etching?

ISABEL BISHOP: I'd been doing them, but I forget with whom. I can't seem to remember that.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I imagine what you learned from Hayter was just more. Maybe that helped you make the move into backgrounds and atmospheric affects.

ISABEL BISHOP: Aesthetic concepts.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: But you had been turning your sketches into etchings for quite a while also, I think. Hadn't they been sort of a stage in making your painting? Or at least many of them seem to correspond to paintings and specific scenes -- et cetera. Did you actually do all the printing yourself in your scenes?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes]. Reg found that press for me. He put it up and put it together.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: It must have been great to be able to just do those in your own place. He did prints too, I guess? Right? There's no question about that.

ISABEL BISHOP: Soyer was probably doing them, too.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: But you felt Hayter opened up a whole new feeling about doing prints?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: But it wasn't until much later that you started doing aquatints, was it?

ISABEL BISHOP: Much later.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Once you were married and then you had to commute into the city from here, did you find that your time was more regimented? You did your work in your studio [and] you did your living at home or whatever? Was there a change in your life?

ISABEL BISHOP: Especially when I had a baby.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: When Remson came. Right. That would have been in . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: 1940.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I can imagine. [both chuckle] Did you take any time off for that?

ISABEL BISHOP: Just the minimum. Three weeks, I think.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You still kept in touch with your artist friends and so on after you were married?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Had you always been pretty much someone who worked on the studio on a nine-to-five situation anyway?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: At that point, did you also have some kind of studio at home also?

ISABEL BISHOP: [No].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: In the beginning, how did you usually get into the city? Did you and your husband both take a train?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So you would take that to Grand Central and then the subway the rest of the way?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Also, I did want to ask you, in 1938 is when you did that mural in Lexington, Ohio. That was for a post office? do you know if it's still up?

ISABEL BISHOP: I know it is, because one of these people called them up and asked them about it and they said yes it was still there.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: What was the subject?

ISABEL BISHOP: The subject was meant to represent the notable people in the history of that town.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So you had to do research to find out who was notable in Lexington.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. I went out there and was told that the president of the historical society was a lawyer in town, so I called up the lawyer from here and managed to come and see him in Lexington. I asked him who were the notable people. He said of course everyone knew the writer Aloysius Januarious Magan.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: [chuckles] Did you have to find out who that was?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. I said, "Never heard of him". He was shocked. Really shocked. Januarious Magan was a very colorful person, it turned out. He was a reporter on The New York Times, I guess, back fifty years before then. I believe the Times sent him over there to some war. I don't know what war it was. I can find the book.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You have a book about him? Did you read something about him, you mean?

ISABEL BISHOP: I must have five books.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Were there other figures as well?

ISABEL BISHOP: You haven't seen the photograph of this mural?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I don't think I have, because it's not in the big Abrams book about you.

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't know why it isn't. I guess it isn't.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I'd like to see it at some point if you have a picture.

ISABEL BISHOP: I'd like to see the gallery of these characters.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Yes, it would remind you of who's in it. That's true. Maybe I can do that, and next time we'll deal with that a little bit. Did you like working on a large scale?

ISABEL BISHOP: It took me a whole year. It wasn't a very large scale. The mural was only eleven by four feet.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Well, that's pretty large.

ISABEL BISHOP: I thought it was enormous. I painted it in New York.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And they were able to somehow attach it? YO must have felt right at home in the Florentine tradition working on a wall

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't think you can see much of the Florentine tradition.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You felt more American. You didn't feel you were painting in the footsteps of . . . I don't know of the Florentines . . . Masaccio or something, did you? Anyway you did sort of enjoy it. Or did you find it a little bit tedious in the long run?

ISABEL BISHOP: I enjoyed the whole experience of it. I went out twice, I think, to Ohio.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Yes. I would like to see a picture of that.

ISABEL BISHOP: I'll ask Mary Gruskin.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: For a photograph? Okay. Or I can ask her too. Also, you taught at the Art Students League itself for one year at least in 1936/37?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you like that? Do you like teaching?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, because it does take an awful lot if you're really trying to paint. It's not a good idea.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So it must have been quite something having a baby at home. Once that happened, that must have made a difference in your workday, I suppose. Did you find your days were made shorter for a while and that sort of thing?

ISABEL BISHOP: Certainly.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Were you also collecting -- or maybe your husband was collecting -- some work by either contemporaries or earlier artists at that point? Because at some point I noticed a reference in an earlier interview to how your house was just full of . . . This was probably later, actually. It was probably . . . it was in the late Fifties I was saying this -- but how the house was full of paintings of your peers.

ISABEL BISHOP: [We] exchanged work a lot.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So you would give something and then they would give something back?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: At some point I guess the Midtown became established?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And when did Mrs. Gruskin come along?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't know when she came in.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So for a long time it was just Alan Gruskin doing all that work?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

[BREAK IN TAPE]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: When did you come to New York?

ISABEL BISHOP: Just to be in New York was a matter of great excitement. I lived in this student home, so-called where, all the girls were from other places because they were in this student home. They lived somewhere while they studied. [When] the world war ended -- the second one -- of course the city went wild. It was very exciting to be a part of.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Yes. It must have been. Do you remember being out?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. I wasn't on Fifth Avenue, but you could see it [the parade].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Was there a parade or something?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh yes. What year was that? 1945?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Well, 1945 was the end of the second world war, but you mean 1918, I think.

ISABEL BISHOP: I'm talking about the first one.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Yes, that was 1918. You must have just gotten to New York. That was your first year here, I think, and that's when that took place. Where was the home for women?

ISABEL BISHOP: East Sixty-Fourth Street.

[END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE TWO]

INTERVIEW III WITH ISABEL BISHOP AT HER HOME
NOVEMBER 19, 1987
BY CYNTHIA NADELMAN

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Let's talk a little bit about the Forties and Fifties and how it felt when abstraction first

became such a big issue on the scene. I guess there were probably different stages of it. I know that you have always been open to things going on, but it must have felt at certain points like all you ever heard about was abstraction and Abstract Expressionism especially. Do you remember your first awareness of that whole situation?

ISABEL BISHOP: My first real awareness of it was at the beginning meeting with other painters. We discussed some way to bring about critical attention. Every focus became entirely on Abstract Expressionism. Nothing else was even discussed. This was very infuriating.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Was Raphael Soyer perhaps one?

ISABEL BISHOP: He was one.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: How about Jack Levine?

ISABEL BISHOP: Jack Levine was very much one.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Yes. I would have thought so.

ISABEL BISHOP: And everyone decided to get out a little paper that they called "Reality," which I thought was a very poor title.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That sounds like sort of a good title in a way because you can think about the different meanings of reality. So what was that?

ISABEL BISHOP: We used to meet in Raphael's studio. I don't think we ever met in mine. I don't know why. Mary [Gruskin] tried to get answers from some of the people.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: From some of the critics, you mean?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you actually write letters individually to them or mostly just write "send this issue around?"

ISABEL BISHOP: Right.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did it have photographs in it or illustrations or just text?

ISABEL BISHOP: Just text. We were very desirous of getting the Museum of Modern Art to engage in it.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I was going to ask you about that. [Do you remember] whether they ever sent any curators to placate you or anything like that?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, they didn't care about placating.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: [laughs] Of course the Museum of Modern art was under siege at that point by American abstract artists as well because they thought they were being ignored too, I guess.

ISABEL BISHOP: True.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Everyone was unhappy. Well, it must have been a good feeling finally to at least have some other people to band together or to think about these issues with. I'm sure at first everyone felt as if they were alone in this wilderness.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you remember how long that went on?

ISABEL BISHOP: The Reality paper? I'm trying to remember how many issues of those.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I guess I can find that out. And you had your own mailing system and the mailing list and that sort of thing?

ISABEL BISHOP: I wish my memory was better.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That can be researched. Did you write some of the essays for that?

ISABEL BISHOP: I wrote one. I was kind of proud of it. [laughs]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I haven't seen that, but I would like to see that. Do you kind of remember that gist of it? I've seen quotes from it, I think.

ISABEL BISHOP: It was stressing that the artists were getting locked into this mode. Talking about everybody who couldn't get noticed unless you identified with it. That annoyed artists very much. It should have been an open question of which of anybody's work would be taken. Instead it wasn't.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You mean there would have been more freedom . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: If there had been a variety.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I guess there could have been two results for the painting that you were doing -- and Raphael Soyer, and Jack Levine and someone like that -- one could have been that with the attention elsewhere you would have had time to really quietly be going about doing your work and making great strides. I guess the other side would be that one could become so bitter that it would keep you from working. I know that, for instance, everyone is saying that sculpture is having a revival right now because, until just very recently, everyone was paying too much attention to painting and sculpture was meanwhile quietly being done. Then all of a sudden it emerged on the scene, so maybe it was good for everyone's paintings in that same way.

ISABEL BISHOP: It could have been.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you feel one way or the other about that? Everyone needs to have some critical appraisal, I think, at some point for yourself.

ISABEL BISHOP: I think [unclear]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Were there letters sent back to the magazine or anything like that? Do you remember kind of angry exchanges?

ISABEL BISHOP: There were a few from abroad. Somebody has written about this.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: About the whole period, you mean?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Of course in the meantime probably through serving on the National Institute of Arts and Letters you probably have gotten to know some of those artists -- Motherwell, for instance, maybe.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. He was one of them.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you have any feelings about these different artists in retrospect? Which ones you found more interesting and which you did not and so on?

ISABEL BISHOP: Certainly Motherwell was one of the artists I found of interest.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Hans Hofman? Did you have a feeling about him? He would have been the earliest and more a teacher in some ways.

ISABEL BISHOP: I think he was already a teacher.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: How about Jack Levine? Did you know him?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. Jack was very active.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Yes. He's quite a strong personality. Of course as artists yourselves you didn't really fit a school either. Among yourselves there were different . . .

ISABEL BISHOP: No. I already said that. Artists resent being put into a school.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I can understand that.

ISABEL BISHOP: I certainly don't agree with it.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You mentioned that you wrote the one essay and you were quite proud of that Reality magazine. You've done quite a bit of writing. Maybe not quite a bit of writing, but you've also written lectures that you have given and that sort of thing?

ISABEL BISHOP: I wouldn't say much.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I guess not to a large extent, but maybe each one is powerful enough that you remember them.

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh God! [laughs]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you sort of enjoy putting into words . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: No.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You would rather just do your work?

ISABEL BISHOP: I remember working on that paragraph.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: One particular paragraph?

ISABEL BISHOP: On a ship. I don't remember what ship.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You were on it? You were traveling?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I hope it didn't ruin your trip. Would that have been the paragraph for Reality or possibly for a different one?

ISABEL BISHOP: It was for Reality.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Speaking of being on a ship, you did travel probably quite a bit over the years? I know you did earlier and then with your husband. Did you travel quite a bit?

ISABEL BISHOP: He had chores at his lectures.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I see. Conferences and things?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes]. That sort of thing which took us abroad.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And then you could go to the art museums or something?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And did you travel in this country also very much?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. I remember that I got around the country a bit because [of] serving on juries.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Have you ever been to California?

ISABEL BISHOP: I have been. I can't remember which jury, though.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you feel like a New Yorker at this point?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh yes. [chuckles]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You've got the Midwest out of your system?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Sort of like F. Scott Fitzgerald or something?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes]. [both chuckle]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You mentioned at those meetings -- of Reality at least-- were probably mostly in Raphael Soyer's place. His studio or his house. At that point would the other Soyer brothers have also been involved?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So you were friendly with them by the Forties or Fifties?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Reginald Marsh continued to be a friend also -- right? Who do you think among artists -- in terms of who you would sort of chat with, or complain, or talk, or whatever -- who was just sort of your best artist-buddy if you had such a thing?

ISABEL BISHOP: The list of artists involved with Reality.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: They are pretty much the ones who you were close to?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: How about outside of artists? Do you have enjoyed having friends who were not artists sometimes just so you could get away from the whole scene? Has there been a best friend or was your husband pretty much your best friend all these years?

ISABEL BISHOP: I didn't have many connections.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: What about being a woman artist? It doesn't seem to have been anything that tripped you up too much. Do you have stories or were there occasions when you felt that you weren't getting as much recognition as you might have if you were a man?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, I didn't. I'm always being asked [that question]. I really didn't feel held back by being a woman. I really might have been fortunate being a woman because I got support. I think anyone would have, at any stage, would have paid for the education of an artist, including male artists. It is easier for anyone to continue endowing a woman.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Before you were married, did you have some slight family support or something like that? I'm sure you lived frugally.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. But it was slight.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You do sell work and have been selling work, but you do work slowly also, I guess.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. I never could have eaten.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Is it true that you would do about -- somewhere I read -- an average of two paintings a year?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I understand the process of your making a painting, which we can discuss later, as a long one. So your husband pretty much all along was supportive and did not have problems with your going in every day and doing all of that?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And on some of these travels, which I guess were partly work and partly recreation, did you tend to take your son with you?

ISABEL BISHOP: No.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did he live at home or did he go away to school at a certain point?

ISABEL BISHOP: He went to the Riverdale school and then he went to Exeter.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And he became a photographer later?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did it worry you that a son would be going into the artistic . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: No.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I was wondering about your family. We talked about your sisters and your brothers and your parents. Did you have anyone else, uncles or aunts or anybody like that in the family, who would have been role models at some point or anyone else who had ever been an artist or anything like that? Do you remember?

ISABEL BISHOP: My father had a sister who was known in the family as an artist. She wasn't a professional.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you have an awareness of her work?

ISABEL BISHOP: No.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So she doesn't really count for you?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. She was not very nice looking, but "artistic" -- quote/unquote. That's all that was. She might have been a certain amount of spiritual support.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And where did she live?

ISABEL BISHOP: She lived in New York.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I'd like to talk a little bit about your association with the National Institute of Arts and Letters over these years because you were made a member, I guess, quite early in the Forties. You got fairly involved. You were vice-president for a while, right? What do you feel about that association? What are you proud of being able to do there?

ISABEL BISHOP: I'm proud to be associated with it, if not especially as a painter -- proud to know the writers. It's a great privilege to know them. I valued it.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That does seem that one of its better uses is bringing people of different arts together. Are there any writers in particular there who you have known or admired?

ISABEL BISHOP: Many.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: The association with writers in some ways meant more to you?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Has it led to friendships and so on outside of the Institute?

ISABEL BISHOP: They weren't very close friendships. [They were different books of different colors. Some are green, gray, or red. The paper. Referring to Institute publications.]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: What would happen at the Institute? I guess there are dinners and things like that? Is it also a form for helping younger artists and doing that sort of thing, or is that not so much [part of it]?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, that was really not an important part of it. It wasn't a place that you spent time at. There would be various occasions, but . . .

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That they would organize and you would go to? It's a little bit out of the way as a place to visit.

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh, yes. [laughs] A little bit.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: It's a wonderful complex, though. I finally went there for the first time this winter to see a show of paintings. Going there is quite exciting.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. I thought that was pure gravy.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: One of the perks? At least artists get some perks. Right? [laughs]

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: As I was over there looking at your books, I did notice an entire shelf of papers written by your husband. Scientific papers, I guess. It's quite impressive. You've read some of those?

ISABEL BISHOP: I've read them all.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Just to backtrack a little bit, during the second world war, do you remember any special measures that artists had to take? Was there a shortage of materials? Did one feel a need to emphasize a certain kind of subject matter or was it simply that maybe there were not as many men around to paint? Things like that?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Was there an atmosphere in particular that you remember?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't know if I can answer that. I don't remember anything back to the war.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: During this period we're talking about, when abstraction became prominent, your own work was undergoing a change also. It doesn't seem as if overnight you went from genre scenes to doing the walking people. There was sort of a gradual change, I gather. How do you feel about that?

ISABEL BISHOP: I never thought of it as a change. It was a different direction.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: But certainly your means did change a bit.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, I hope so.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: As a way of approaching that, I wanted to show you some reproductions from one of those books.

ISABEL BISHOP: Don't tell me you carried that in here.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: [laughs] Strong arms. The idea of portraits. I wanted to show that there are some portraits here. They are not specifically portraits. I'll show you what I mean. I was wondering with heads such as these One is called Young Woman's Head and it's 1937. The other one is Head Number Two and it's 1938. They are obviously specific models, but they also seem to be generalized. In doing heads like that, what was the primary thing you think you were aiming for? Character? mobility?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. The concept of searching for sequences of form. Nothing to do with personality. I wanted to get gestures that I could feel was reality rather than verisimilitude; you may have looked at others after realizing I wasn't.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: The word has been used a lot about your work -- mobility -- as if you're ready for the next stage. That one is ready for their face to change is already incorporated into the painting. To do that you had to use specific faces because you did want to use the details of facial structure, et cetera.

ISABEL BISHOP: I didn't realize until this minute how much I depended on hats.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Well, you do use quite a few hats.

ISABEL BISHOP: I felt somehow or other there was a sequence of forms which entered the work.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And that was a topknot thing?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes]. It felt and that was velveteen or something.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: It was velveteen in Young Woman's Head and also in Head Number Two. And those were their own hats?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh yes. It was important for it to be their own hat because it was part of their sense though I didn't think it was important.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: But it was a part of them?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you think maybe you spotted the hat first and the person [after]?

ISABEL BISHOP: Could be.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So it was not just mobility. What you're describing is also -- as you put it -- a sequence of forms. so a kind of balance and that sort of thing or how the forms of clothes echo that of body shapes?

ISABEL BISHOP: I wanted the thing to be finally perceived by the onlooker in unity.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And even this early in the late Thirties -- and I'm sure you started sooner -- the background texture is a striping. Can you tell how that came about? How you started using that and why? That sort of wonderful background that continued until your much later paintings.

ISABEL BISHOP: I was trying to paint the air.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Air being something kind of tangible?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. I wanted air to be as much of it as substance. As much of a form [?]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: As the head or natural objects?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And that's interesting to see that in a case like this where there is no background. In other situations air is something that exists between two people or in some kind of a relationship or something. And that's when you started nudes, which I wanted us to discuss also. Did you have a favorite model for nudes? There's a certain shape which is sort of voluptuous. A certain person who is a really wonderful model. I was wondering if there was one in particular that you had you enjoyed using.

ISABEL BISHOP: No, I don't think so.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: With the nudes, the same thing would be the case, right? Where you wanted to background to be equally brought into the . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And you've written before about your reasons for painting a nude at all and it being a somewhat anachronistic thing to do in the Twentieth Century. Can you talk about that a little bit more?

ISABEL BISHOP: I've forgotten what I tried to say about it.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Well, it's the idea of how incongruous it is to have somebody come in and take off their clothes and then be painted. But I was wondering why you think the nude still persists as a subject for art -- the big one -- the quest?

ISABEL BISHOP: Did I say that?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Yes.

ISABEL BISHOP: Something about it in that little piece?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: There was some quote. This may have been from a lecture you gave at Skowhegan or it may have been something you wrote. I'm not sure. It is interesting because you didn't seem to paint them as series, but every now and then you would paint a nude. It's sort of the opposite of what you said about a hat, for instance, being an extension of a person. In the case of a nude, they have gotten rid of all the trappings of that.

ISABEL BISHOP: The subject of nudes which can be resolved if it's done by the introduction or even the potential for movement. They weren't moving, but I am portraying their potential for doing so. To them I was resolved.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: By having them on their way to or reaching for something?

ISABEL BISHOP: The unreality, because it's saying that painting a nude today

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Well, there's something intimate about the situation of a nude, too. They are doing a kind of movement that isn't a public kind of movement. They're not striving towards something. They're moving around a bedroom or something like that. That usually seems to be conveyed in your paintings although that's not really what you're after.

[END OF TAPE THREE, SIDE ONE]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: To leave the subject of nudes for a second and go back to portrait-type things, the most recent things you've been painting were self-portraits. That must be quite a difficult thing in a way because you're probably trying to capture the same thing that you were earlier in things that were not portraits, such as form, movement, mobility. And yet there you are seeing yourself in a mirror and the face that you know pretty well. What were your feelings about that?

ISABEL BISHOP: Probably the aim is to use myself as a model in the most objective manner. Seeing that I didn't finish in much of my time to paint a work now working on abstract ideas. Painting what one saw would be a great relief. That's the way I felt about abstractionism. I thought it was great to be able to just ask that question of myself instead of just reproducing something right before my eyes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That's interesting, because you would have been partly doing that before. You were also reproducing something that was there, but you were also putting your ideas about it onto the canvas as well. So in the end it was nice to take a break from I'm sure that as a reflex reaction I'm sure those ideas came out

anyway and are probably evident in the work.

ISABEL BISHOP: I hope it did. I questioned everything from the choices of the subject and certainly every aspect of its development. So this seems like a very simplistic point of view [unclear] to impose on the time. That's without questioning the value of pursuing what you had in front of you.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: If you take someone like Rembrandt as a precursor as someone who would do portraits that existed on various levels -- not just as reproductions centuries ago -- do you think he was tortured by those same ideas? Every time he started a painting, do you imagine he was thinking the same things or was this sort of Twentieth Century phenomenon?

ISABEL BISHOP: I think it's Twentieth Century.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So in earlier periods -- such as in Rembrandt -- the concern would have been more to represent what you were seeing? Reality?

ISABEL BISHOP: Do you mean trying for that?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Right. Is that what you think is probably the case until the Twentieth Century more or less? Maybe that line of reasoning is not I won't continue that exactly. While we're talking about portraits, there is a portrait of you by Alice Neel that's

ISABEL BISHOP: I love that painting.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I like that a lot too. Did you know her?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: She was quite a character. How long did you sit for that?

ISABEL BISHOP: I told her I'd sit . . . she had to come and do this. I said I'd pose for three days and that would be it. So she did it in three days.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Was that fast for her?

ISABEL BISHOP: It sounded fast for me. Sh was very funny.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you converse while you [were sitting]?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. All the time. [both chuckle]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: She lived and worked together in a studio on upper Broadway or something, didn't she? So was she a little bit miffed at you for giving her that three-day limit or that you would only pose for three days or did she find that a challenge?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't know.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: But she did it. Was it three days in a row, close together, or far apart?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't remember. It must be at least twenty years ago.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Oh really? I didn't realize it was that long. Of course she would have had a very different approach to doing portraits.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you discuss that? Did you find yourself wanting to talk about that while you were sitting or standing?

ISABEL BISHOP: No.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You just wanted to leave her alone and let her do her work?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you remember the first time that you started painting the subjects walking?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. I can't name the year, but I remember when.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Right. And you remember the circumstances? How did that happen?

ISABEL BISHOP: I had a young man phoning [posing?] for me. I decided that he was a student. He wasn't a student; but he was young enough. I was drawing him. You know, cute little drawings as he held his pose. I showed them to somebody -- I don't remember who -- who must have said he looks very small. [unclear] I don't remember who said it. I thought it was a wonderful idea. The young man walked for me for a long time.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Individually at first?

ISABEL BISHOP: In the beginning.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So you got interested really in the idea of one person walking first?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And what was it? The sense of being in between steps or something like that? Was there a particular pose that you found interesting?

ISABEL BISHOP: I think so.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And what would make one model such as him more interesting to you than another one? It probably wasn't his face that you were concerned about. Some people simply conveyed movement better or something like that?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. I think so.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And then you progressed to groups moving. Do you remember whether that was first an idea that came to you watching people really move in the world like in the subway or in a park or something? Or was it an idea that was hatched in the studio?

ISABEL BISHOP: I thought it would be hard to remember about that. First I had him carrying a bag of books. I worked for a while on the walking person carrying something.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And they weren't always students either. You did become more interested in students later, I guess. You went up to Columbia which actually to see people striding across campus.

ISABEL BISHOP: I got more and more into completing the idea of one piece of it on canvas. You have an excellent view of students walking in a front view.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Would that be on top of those stairs that go up to the library perhaps?

ISABEL BISHOP: Going up and coming down the stairs.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Stairs are important in themselves.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. The situation seemed real to me. I had a fascination with it.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: They were really on their way to a destination?

ISABEL BISHOP: I think it made the idea of movement more interesting.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you prefer watching people move from the same level that they were on or did you like to sometimes go up like on top of the stairs and get an aerial view of people going this way and that way?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't remember that specifically but it's interesting.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Because I would have thought that Columbia in the Sixties nobody was much going to classes. [laughs]

ISABEL BISHOP: No. That's true.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So you did like the idea of watching that group of people who were as you say in a situation that seemed real. Also -- I don't know which happened first -- but also in the subways there's a lot of coming and going. You seemed interested in that.

ISABEL BISHOP: I felt interest must be in the going. I think people belong, but I couldn't draw any inferences. And then it came to me that if I could show them getting out of this particular place -- the subway station rather - - than standing around in it -- though they actually were standing around -- it became real to me.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: In other words, there was something more real about their leaving the station?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. Standing there the implication might be that they were in prison. It made an interior in prison. I remember my idea of the subway.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Right. You wanted to convey more was the moving and getting places and that sort of thing?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you focus on things like rush hour or something when it was particularly crazy?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, because it wasn't that aspect that I was interested in.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: It wasn't a journalistic aspect you were looking for?

ISABEL BISHOP: [No].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you find yourself spending much more time at other places watching people rather than in your studio -- those nudes on stage? Or again you did sketches at Columbia or in the subway and then you brought the idea back home to your studio?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Would you sometimes have a number of people walking back and forth in your studio at the same time as well?

ISABEL BISHOP: Not more than two.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: This is just a question. I assumed that when you worked on wood panels, it was some form of wood. Have you also painted on masonite?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh yes. That's a form of wood.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Well, that's true. Is that something that replaced wood in later years.

ISABEL BISHOP: No.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: They always had masonite? I thought it would be new. Once you started painting the moving figures, the walking figures, you probably didn't feel much like going back to portraying other genre subjects. I gather you did not go back to the other situation. You kept moving in the direction of moving figures?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, that's true.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: When you recently did the self-portrait, did you use the same method of building up the layers of the painting beforehand with gesso and the tempera and all that?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't think so. I can't remember.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Let's talk about when you were posing for Alice Neel.

ISABEL BISHOP: When I came in in the morning, she said, "Oh, that's a nice dress" or I had a new hairstyle or something and then we'd start in. I never was asked to look at it. And then I came and she announced that she was finished and I could look at it. So I came around in front of it and here is this skewed up -- well, you know how crooked I am -- skewed-up person looking like a mosquito. I said to her, "zzzzz." [both laugh] I told her that and she thought it was funny, but she showed this picture a lot at exhibitions, and she usually told that. [laughs]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Well, of course that is the way she painted. You shouldn't take it personally.

ISABEL BISHOP: I did look like a mosquito.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I doubt it. I thought you were going to say she painted a completely different dress or something like that on. [laughs] There's a kind of humor about that portrait which was really nice.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. I think it's great.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: She told that story . . . then you mean when she would go places to show it?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: What were some of your duties as vice-president at the Institute?

ISABEL BISHOP: None.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Really? You didn't preside over meetings or something like that?

ISABEL BISHOP: No.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: To completely change the subject, but let's see. You have grandchildren, right?

ISABEL BISHOP: Two.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Are they both girls? Or women?

ISABEL BISHOP: Girls.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do they have artistic inclinations?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, they don't.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: More scientific ones, perhaps?

ISABEL BISHOP: I can't tell at this point. They're twenty and twenty-three.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Maybe we could discuss the Eighties a little bit more. I know you're still getting all these magazines -- Art in America and Artnews and everything.
-- and you do try to keep up with what's going on.

ISABEL BISHOP: A very nice man has been bringing them to me from St. John. He used to be curator somewhere near Philadelphia

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: At any rate he brings you the latest magazines?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes]. It's very nice because they are expensive.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Yes. You don't subscribe anymore? Because you used to, I think.

ISABEL BISHOP: A long time ago.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: He curated the show that was held in 1986 or so that was out in California. Do you have any thoughts about the contemporary art and what you see? Do you feel encouraged about the way things are going in what you've seen?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, I do not feel encouraged

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That's too bad. Once you came out here you left your studio in New York and you did get a few self-portraits done, didn't you? You did more than one? Two or three?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't remember.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you have any thoughts about whether the Museum of Modern Art has done its job all through the years, according to its name? Do you feel that maybe there's a whole group of artists who consider themselves modern who feel left out?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, I do.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Of course, all of that is being revised right now. People are really revising the way we think about Twentieth Century art history a lot.

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Yes, I think so. I think it's hopeful.

ISABEL BISHOP: Toward what?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Toward re-examining the meaning of modern.

ISABEL BISHOP: That could be.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Is there art writing that you've been interested in over the years? I guess there were some art historical things like Wolfli and that sort of thing, but is there any other art history that you've . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: By whom did you say this now?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Heinrich Wolfli.

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh yes, well that's

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Yes. That's early, but I was wondering if there are others. Has there been a particular dialogue in recent years or in any years that you've been reading and thinking about art that you found particularly interesting?

ISABEL BISHOP: There's a great man named Rewald.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: John Rewald. He writes about Impressionism and Post-impressionism.

ISABEL BISHOP: Who I admire. I don't know him [personally].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: He's written on Cezanne, too, I guess. Is that what you've read? Is Cezanne someone whose work you think about or was an influence? Or do you not so much . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: No.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: How about Bonnard?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: There was a Bonnard show at the Philips a few years ago which unfortunately never came to New York.

ISABEL BISHOP: Did you see it?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Yes. I thought it was wonderful.

ISABEL BISHOP: I have tapes of

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Oh, that's great. Yes. That would be wonderful on tape, I would think.

ISABEL BISHOP: I have a tape on [illegible].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Is that good?

ISABEL BISHOP: It's nice. I have Bonnard.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: If you can't get to museum shows, it's a very nice way of being able to see things. Yes. Did you watch television at all . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I mean even early when it first came into being? Did you think it was an interesting medium as early as the Fifties or Sixties?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, I didn't see it that much.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: It's just that more recently you find it [interesting]?

ISABEL BISHOP: Much more recent.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I just wanted to finish one other thing. Have you thought about sculpture very much? Has it been an influence at all or do you really feel like a painting person through and through? Did you ever even try sculpture yourself?

ISABEL BISHOP: No I wish I had.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: It seems fairly alien to your work.

ISABEL BISHOP: It is.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Have you traveled at all either to Africa or the Orient?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, I haven't. I didn't feel I could get any hold on it.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did anyone else ever paint your portrait that you remember?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. Guy Pene du Bois.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: He painted a portrait of you?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: A very long time ago, probably.

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh, yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Was it just a head?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. Sitting in a great big chair.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I'll bet that's wonderful. Do you know where that is now?

ISABEL BISHOP: It's been sold.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: To a private collector?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't know.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you like that painting?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. He made me look very French if you can imagine. [both chuckle] A little tight hat in that period.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you wear a hat?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: A kind of cloche hat?

ISABEL BISHOP: I think it was.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Yes. I think of his paintings as I can't imagine you painted in his style because you're so thin. Did he fill you out quite a bit? I think of his figures as often being very rounded.

ISABEL BISHOP: He rounded me up a bit. [He was an] interesting man.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: He must be. Did you stay in touch with him to the end of his life?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And was he married?

ISABEL BISHOP: He has a daughter.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: There's a William Pene du Bois.

ISABEL BISHOP: That's his son.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: He paints the frontispieces of The Paris Review. It's not a painting, but it 's a drawing.

ISABEL BISHOP: Is it nice?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Yes, it is nice. I know something else I wanted to ask you. Speaking of paintings that have gone places, do you find that you wish you could keep better tabs on what happens to paintings that you've done?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. I don't care at all.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: In other words, you feel once you've finished it it can go away and you don't feel possessive?

ISABEL BISHOP: [No].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you like seeing the work that you've done afterward?

ISABEL BISHOP: I'm very interested. [laughs]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I suppose you look at it with a very critical eye?

ISABEL BISHOP: Probably not too good now.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And over the years did the Metropolitan at any other point get any other work of yours? I think they do have something after that.

ISABEL BISHOP: An etching. Have you seen the new wing?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Yes, I have. And I've seen that painting you painted.

ISABEL BISHOP: Your father has a piece in thee.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Grandfather. Yes. There were two pieces, but they weren't from the collection actually. They're on loan.

[BREAK IN TAPE]

You went to Russia with Alex Katz? On what kind of a trip?

ISABEL BISHOP: Geldzahler was at the Metropolitan then. He had gone to Russia the year before. He said, "You'd be crazy about it." He got the government to send him and three other painters journeyed to Russia and be required to make some comments on their own work. Bring slides and made comments on it. It kept getting harder and harder to find any artists who could go. Finally they got down to me and Alex Katz. [laughs]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You and Alex Katz? Not too bad. And was there a third one also?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. The third one didn't go.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And did you go with Geldzahler or did he just arrange it?

ISABEL BISHOP: Geldzahler didn't come.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So the two of you went to what? Moscow?

ISABEL BISHOP: We went first to Moscow and then briefly to Leningrad. It hadn't been planned that we should go to Leningrad at all except we wouldn't have seen the Hermitage, but Alex forced the man. He put his foot down and he said, "We are going to Leningrad." They got us tickets on a train they are very proud of called the Red Arrow or something like that to Moscow on which we spent the night on the way.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: From Moscow to Leningrad?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. They didn't have enough room on the train so Alex had to share a stateroom with me which didn't please him too much.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: [laughs] How did you feel about it?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't know. I didn't care about anything. They took us in a car all around Leningrad. We had only two hours in the museum, which was nothing. Then we . . . they put us back in the car and drove us someplace out of Leningrad.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: To show you other someplace outside of Leningrad?

ISABEL BISHOP: So they said, but we were

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You felt they were taking you away from the Hermitage?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So it was a whirlwind tour of [Russia]?

ISABEL BISHOP: Five days.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Five days in Russia completely? The whole trip was five days?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And you gave a slide show describing your work?

ISABEL BISHOP: He did. I did. We were required to.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And you did sense that there was interest?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. There seemed to be some interest.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: They probably would have been more interested if the people who wanted to see the slides had been able to come. Had you met Alex Katz before that or did you know him?

ISABEL BISHOP: I'd just met him.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And you got along all right on that long trip?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So most of the other traveling you've done as an artist has been to serve on juries and that sort of thing?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you know Will Barnet? I know he's made a tour of juries too.

ISABEL BISHOP: I haven't seen him recently.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I was on a jury with him one time. That's how I met him.

ISABEL BISHOP: Painting or graphics?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I think it was paintings. It might have been a combination. It was not too serious. Have you given any guest lectures? Not in the immediate past you haven't I guess, but do you remember any ones that you've done? I assume you would see students' work also when you go to give a [lecture]?

ISABEL BISHOP:

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: In terms of other museums in this country -- other than the Metropolitan or any New York museums -- do you have favorites? I guess you mentioned the Boston museum before. Are there places you really like to go to see their collection?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

[END OF TAPE THREE, SIDE TWO]

TAPE-RECORDED INTERVIEW WITH ISABEL BISHOP
AT HER HOME
DECEMBER 11, 1987
INTERVIEWER: CYNTHIA NADELMAN

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I thought maybe there were a few more people we could discuss who you might have known early on and who may have had some input into your career. We were talking about Juliana Force last time. I think you asked me if she would have been involved as early as the Whitney Studio Club and she was, I found out. So she would have been way back in the early part. Do you remember her?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh, yes, I do. She was a very vivid personality. She as in charge of all the WPA [FWAP] work.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That would have been at some later point.

ISABEL BISHOP: I'm pretty sure.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Were you involved with WPA work?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, I wasn't. I didn't need it.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That mural that you did in Ohio had nothing to do with WPA?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, that was a direct commission.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: From the town?

ISABEL BISHOP: From Washington.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Or from New Lexington?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. They were sorry to have a choice commission given to them -- a woman and also from Ohio.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So it wasn't New Lexington's choice at all?

ISABEL BISHOP: No.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You were kind of pushed onto them?

ISABEL BISHOP: I was pushed on to them.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: How did this happen? It would have the post office. The Department of U.S. [Mail]?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So at first did you feel some resistance when you went out there?

ISABEL BISHOP: Not really. They were really quite nice.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: But they were shocked or something that it was a woman?

ISABEL BISHOP: They said afterward when they were interviewing me after the mural was done they had been disappointed. First they had been disappointed when the building was designed by a New York architect. That everything should be out of their hands. They didn't like that.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Was it a new building?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. Brand new.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That was a direct commission you say from Washington?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. I remember I was driving our Ford and opening the mail on that day when the commission came. My first impulse was to say not -- that I wasn't interested in mural commissions. But then when I thought it over and thought I should feel quite complimented that they would buy me for that particular work.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And so you had not applied or put your name in to some pool or something like that?

ISABEL BISHOP: No.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: At that point, were they assigning artists to building around the country or something?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did they give you any kind of guidelines to begin with.

ISABEL BISHOP: No, they didn't. I went out there to try to get some guidelines from them. I met a history buff of this part of Ohio. That's why I assumed that would be the best person to tell me about Ohio. They said, "Well, Mr. McKeehan [?]." I don't quite remember his name. He was a lawyer and the historian of the place. He was the head of the historical society.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: We spoke about this once before and you mentioned Januarius . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: Aloysius Januarius Magan.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Right. And I noticed the list of some of the other people in your writing in some notes of yours at the Archives in the microfilm and they were . . . although a lot of it is quite illegible [laughs] . . . there

seemed to be many military men, and generals, and things of that sort also. Also, there were some public figures. I think a senator from Wisconsin or something like that. Did they all have to be from New Lexington originally? Was that the criterion?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, they didn't. There were no restraints or restrictions on it except the matter at hand. Mr. Meenan, I think the historian's name was. He came to see me in New York.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Later or at the time?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't know when. So he did take some interest in me. I told you about the one who said his grandfather wouldn't be seen dead in a hat like that?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: [laughs] No, I didn't know that. Really? His grandfather was one of the characters in the mural?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. I had taken a lot of trouble over these characters. I was trying to get it so that they would be generally recognized.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: What kind of hat was it? Do you remember?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, but it was in a history book or something.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Well, you made them more accurate than his grandson was about that. [laughs] Did you have some kind of photographs or something of some of the people? Or was much of it from your imagination as to how they looked?

ISABEL BISHOP: I went out and took some pictures.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Of the place?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So you actually worked from pictures somewhat? That must be one of the few times that you ever did. You said you worked on that for almost a year?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, I did.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And you worked on that in your studio back in New York?

ISABEL BISHOP: All winter.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That sounds exciting.

ISABEL BISHOP: It was something I had never done in my life.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So you at no point were sitting or standing at the post office in a white smock doing your painting out there -- right? That's not what happened?

IB; No.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: [laughs] Okay. I have an image of you.

ISABEL BISHOP: Too bad. I'm sorry about that.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: [laughs] That's all right. Or lying on your back?

ISABEL BISHOP: [laughs] Yes. That's what it should have been. Lovely.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You were just mentioning Juliana Force. You mentioned that she was a strong personality. Do you mean in a kind of flamboyant kind of way or did she inspire much enthusiasm?

ISABEL BISHOP: She inspired good reactions.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Was she encouraging to you as an artist? Do you remember that?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. I have the impression that she was.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And what about Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney? Would you have been as likely to come in

contact with her?

ISABEL BISHOP: She would come to the teas.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: [Was she] sort of a grand lady?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, but very sweet. She worked on the Whitney Studio Club. I don't remember ever a club in the formal sense, but they were in that studio club and had taken the space [for artists]. And the artists involved in that organization were lucky.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: There was a space where they could work?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And did you work there sometimes?

ISABEL BISHOP: I did.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And then they just had frequent get-togethers also? You mentioned teas that Mrs. Whitney would come to, but I gather there were also less sedate kinds of goings on? Parties and things of that sort? So you probably remember The Whitney in lots of different buildings too because it had several moves over the years. I guess it was on Eighth Street at one time. Maybe that's where the Studio Club was in the beginning. I'm not sure about that?

ISABEL BISHOP: I remember it being on Eighth Street.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I guess where the (N.Y.) Studio School is now. Was Sarah Roby a collector of your work at that point?

ISABEL BISHOP: That was later.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Would she have gotten involved in the period when . . . I'm probably jumping around. It may be a little bit hard to concentrate, and if you want to bring me back to the proper dates, that's fine. She was interested in I don't know about Realists because I hesitate to call you that, but work that had some figurative elements in it. I was just wondering if you had known her or if she collected your work?

ISABEL BISHOP: I knew Sarah Roby. Oh yes. Before she was buying any work. She was studying at the Art Students League.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Not at the same time you were, was she?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. Much later.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you ever know Kuniyoshi?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh, yes. And his wife Katherine Schmidt. She was a very good painter. I think she died, and the Whitney had a memorial show.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Oh really? I didn't know about that. You were never part of the Penguin Club, were you?

ISABEL BISHOP: No. I don't remember it.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: It probably was a small group of people.

ISABEL BISHOP: Sounds interesting. Literary?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: No, it was artists. It was the Gaylors -- Wood Gaylor and his wife Adelaide. It was probably earlier actually than you.

ISABEL BISHOP: No, I knew her. And Stuart Davis I knew very well.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: He wasn't in that group, I don't think, but did you like him?

ISABEL BISHOP: I split with him over the war. There's not much I had to do with him.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Which war was that? The second war?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And you mean you had a disagreement?

ISABEL BISHOP: See, Stuart was very much preoccupied with the Artists Congress. It was really a Red organization, and he was very much part of that. I didn't want artists mixed up with politics. I thought it was wrong, so we disagreed thoroughly.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And did you remain split or did you later [resolve your differences]?

ISABEL BISHOP: After they got less preoccupied with politics and I got a little more liberal.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So you moved in a direction toward being more liberal, you feel?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Was there a sense in a certain period there that one should get involved?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh, yes. There was a good deal of pressure.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: In the late Thirties, I suppose?>

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I was wondering how that influenced the art itself. From some of the writings I read later on one had a sense that anyone who still drew the figure or was a Realist or something like that people tended to brand them conservative in their politics as well. That must have been something to get your goat -- at least I would think.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. It got my goat.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: During the whole controversy when Reality magazine came out, I was reading some of the exchanges and there were some pretty testy things. It sounded quite ugly in some ways. Did you feel that way?

ISABEL BISHOP: There were a lot of bad feelings.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I guess the only thing that made it better was to know that there were others who thought like you or like one another. I'm sure one didn't think exactly the same way.

ISABEL BISHOP: It was too bad that the artists split.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: The split was not only along aesthetic lines, but carried over into the political as well.

ISABEL BISHOP: Especially in politics.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And in your view was there a basis for that? Of the people that you knew who were also involved with Reality magazine, were their politics different from whoever was critical of them. Or did you feel that blanket statements were being made that were not fair or accurate?

ISABEL BISHOP: It was sporadic.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: It also seems in your writing about the aesthetics you always wanted to make it clear that you were no more enamored of so-called life-likeness, for instance, than Abstractionists were.

ISABEL BISHOP: I'm sure I would be the same today as a matter of fact.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You use as an example -- I think if I can get this right -- Vasari's characterization of Michelangelo as being a person who created life-like figures. Your point was that Vasari got it all wrong and that wasn't the point with Michelangelo at all. Am I paraphrasing this correctly?

ISABEL BISHOP: That's what I said?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Again, I was reading some of this from your notes which are handwritten that are a little hard to read. They're on a microfilm at the Archives. But I think you were implying that an artist like Bouguereau who might have read about a Michelangelo though Vasari got Michelangelo all wrong.

ISABEL BISHOP: I'm sure he did.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You have quite a few testy things to say about Bouguereau. [both laugh]

Bl: It's so funny to bring Bouguereau here.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You spoke about him in a few talks that you gave. At that point what I would like to get you say [is] if your life-likeness was not a goal . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: No.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: What was the goal then?

ISABEL BISHOP: My goal as a painter?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Right. I know it's a big issue. Is that something you can put into words?

ISABEL BISHOP: How did Michelangelo get into this?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I'm not saying this correctly, but in a lot of your writings I think you're trying to bring some balance to the argument and show that this is different. This is not the Michelangelo discussion, but that the Academy, which everyone had been rebelling against, had simply been replaced by basically a new academy -- namely those people who would only look at a Mondrian or something and the -- quote-unquote- -- "pure of heart" kind of people. It sounds to me like it must have been very frustrating to feel that you saw both sides of the story . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: Well, it was frustrating.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: The same thing happens now. Kind of all swept up in the current situation and not able to see that in perspective. They were eventually creating their own academy in some way. Did it feel lonely sometimes?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't seem to feel too lonely.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Not personally or emotionally, but as an artist?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh, yes. The [?] is lonely. What brought the artists like Stuart Davis together was [pause] I don't know where we are in the argument.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: What brought these artists together, like Stuart Davis, you were saying.

ISABEL BISHOP: Their complaint was that they were painting to no audience because so-called self-conceived progressive artists

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: They felt they weren't understood?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So you mean that fed their political beliefs? A certain kind of bitterness or something?

ISABEL BISHOP: There was bitterness involved in that. It was very sad because it wasn't the issue. There weren't any issues of why good art was good.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And what about the audience? How do you feel about that?

ISABEL BISHOP: It meant that the shows did not get reviewed. They just were obscured or hidden. There was no sense to it at all.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You mean an artist like Stuart Davis in the beginning would not get reviewed?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh, yes. Well, he would. He was one the reviewers would.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I see. But other ones [wouldn't]. What would account for him being paid attention to and others not, I wonder? I'm trying to figure out whether I understood what you just said. So he would have had no reason to believe that being progressive would mean not getting good attention because he was getting good attention?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Okay. But who would not have been getting good attention?

ISABEL BISHOP: Kuniyoshi always got good attention.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you think any of it had to do with -- I guess it always does -- personality?

ISABEL BISHOP: Of Kuniyoshi?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Either one of them.

ISABEL BISHOP: I think so.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You were getting reviews, certainly, all along, right?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't remember especially now whether I was or wasn't.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You seem to have had fairly good coverage throughout your career. Did you know Stuart Davis at an earlier point? You were friendly early on?

ISABEL BISHOP: I knew him earlier than the period we're speaking of.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Right. Actually probably when he was still painting in a more or less Realist way. Of course he was in Paris for a long time also.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, he was. But he came back here and he was painting in his wonderful style.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That's when you knew him? When he came back?

ISABEL BISHOP: I know of him. I knew his work.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And you did like him at that point?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, and I loved his work. I remember saying to somebody that Stuart Davis's work seemed to me -- what you saw when you saw it -- that it was to my mind the most American work that was being done. I still think they're fantastic, although heaven knows why. They don't look like anything in particular. [chuckles]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Maybe it's the bold -- the certainty.

ISABEL BISHOP: But they're awfully good, don't you think? He's one of the people who remains very good, in my opinion. But I remember going to call on James Johnson Sweeney, who was then at the Modern Museum, to complain about this. But James Johnson Sweeney swept everybody off the floor.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: He wouldn't listen, you mean?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh no.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You went to him to complain about what?

ISABEL BISHOP: the lack of coverage of contemporary work.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And he wouldn't listen?

ISABEL BISHOP: No.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did people look to you to speak up for artists' points of view?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh, I don't think so.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: It seems that way a little bit. Was it hard to go back to your work sometimes?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: When did that seem to be the most difficult to you?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't remember dates.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Can you remember occasions when you felt really eclipsed by work that was getting more publicity or something?

ISABEL BISHOP: It seems very unfair. Do you have that little magazine, Reality?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I saw some on microfilm.

ISABEL BISHOP: I have a little piece on one page.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Yes. I read that and it seems that Alfred Frankfurter at Art News, among others, was completely unsupportive of anyone else raising a different voice from what he and Art News were putting across at that time. It even sounds as though they were lumping Realists in with McCarthyites, or something like that. It sounded really kind of ugly.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, it does. It got a little ugly. But none of it had to do with what was really important.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You must be glad that the worst of that is over. I think that must have opened up quite a bit.

ISABEL BISHOP: OH, yes. I don't see any of it left.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I guess it must have also seemed that there were no critics who were sympathetic at a certain point.

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh, it did, I must say.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Were there any who you felt you could rely on for interesting commentary?

ISABEL BISHOP: I'm afraid I don't.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: He about maybe a Henry McBride? What did you feel about him?

ISABEL BISHOP: He may have been sympathetic.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I noticed you gave some talks. Mostly it was about art; not about the political side of it. But you gave some talks. I was wondering if other "Realists" -- again, I used that word in quotes -- were giving talks and did you go to them sometimes? Were there people you were particularly interested in listening to what they had to say.

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't remember any.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Raphael Soyer was probably not a very vocal . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: Not vocal at all. I felt that he was just as dogmatic on the other side. He wouldn't be drawn into any talk about that.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Whereas you were certainly seeing both sides of the story. To get back to Michelangelo, I noticed in some of your lectures you go through a lot of slides and it sounded like a knowledgeable look at our history and so on. Did you seem to try to show that the thing other than life-likeness in art of the past were such things as the structure of a painting or the meaning behind what was just going on in it? Actually I was wondering if you've read Frank Stella's Working Space -- the book that's made up of his lectures. I haven't read it myself, but to paraphrase it, I think his current favorite is Caravaggio.

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't know it.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Oh, yes. Maybe I should get you that. I think you'd like to see it. He ideally wants to apply a sense of the structure and the drama that went on in Caravaggio's paintings to an idea of abstraction that's got structure, and drama, and all those things. It echoes a bit what you were pointing out in your talks . . .

ISABEL BISHOP: I hope so.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: . . . about pulling things other than reality from paintings of the past. There's another lecture where you talk about box-like space. Do you remember that one? I think one of the things you were saying is that we didn't need Einstein to liberate us from box-like space because . . .

ISABEL BISHOP: Because [?] had done that.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Yes. You said that. And even earlier painters have done that also. That not everyone did use a box-like space I guess in the past.

ISABEL BISHOP: I think Caravaggio did that.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Right. Did it feel at a certain point that art of the past equalled something like box-like space to many people? Was there that kind of simplistic thinking?

ISABEL BISHOP: I thought the box-like space was a brilliant contribution. [laughs]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Sure. Right. What I mean is did it feel as if maybe you were looking at art of the past as having been just one thing such as box-like space or something else which they didn't feel they could apply. What did you feel that you got from the box-like space for your own work?

ISABEL BISHOP: First of all, I felt that it was usable by artists that had one goal and the possibility of not using it.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Can you explain that again?

ISABEL BISHOP: It didn't come out as a sentence.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: [laughs] That sounds like me. I often don't end a sentence.

ISABEL BISHOP: What did we get?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you feel that you did use a box-like space?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, I didn't.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: But it was something that one could get some interesting or useful information from? Can you define a box-like space? Maybe that's necessary first. That would have been something where I guess not much movement takes place where there's a lot of stasis. A kind of lack of infinity? I guess an example of somebody who used box-like space would have been Raphael, for instance?

ISABEL BISHOP: Raphael, yes. I don't think Michelangelo was interested in box-like space.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Would a box-like space tend to contribute to that sense where things aren't moving? Where there isn't the possibility for movement? For your own purposes at least I guess you are more interested in the work of the past that allows movement.

ISABEL BISHOP: That's true.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: What would be an example of a successful model from the past which does not use a box-like space? Would Rubens be a good [example]?

[END OF TAPE FOUR, SIDE ONE]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: These are Florentine?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. Florentine form was based on a box-like [space]. I think Raphael is a wonderful example. And Signorelli. I don't even remember art history.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: There would have been artists who were not particularly influenced by it then? What about the actual texture of your painting -- which would certainly contribute to that sense of infinity and movement and openness. Do [you] remember when it first came to you to use the layering and the lines and the different colors patches around the painting, or was that something gradual? Was there a particular spark?

ISABEL BISHOP: What was your question?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I was wondering whether you think of the coloring and the texture of your paintings -- in other words that kind of It's not monochromatic, but certainly . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: I think not.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Well, it approaches that, but there are so many hues and variations. Was that a deliberate effort of some kind to contribute to that sense of infinity and non-box-like space and movement?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: How did you come about doing that? It seems very innovative.

ISABEL BISHOP: All I can say is that whatever I did was done in desperation and whatever kind of form was arrived at for this effect was just there because I had to do it.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Well, it's something that distinguishes the paintings from the drawings in a way. The drawings are not so much about effect as about incidents or something like that, it seems to me. Did you draw a big distinction between drawing and painting?

ISABEL BISHOP: No.

[BREAK]

There's no question that they were preoccupied with continuous . . .

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: The Impressionists were?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That's true. Yes. Who was your favorite Impressionist?

ISABEL BISHOP: Renoir. I think he was great.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you see the show that was in Boston maybe a couple of years ago?

ISABEL BISHOP: I'm not sure whether I saw it.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you still own that Renoir? You do have a Renoir, don't you?

ISABEL BISHOP: Downstairs.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you remember the circumstances of how you found it?

ISABEL BISHOP: I didn't find it. It's incredible, but a disciple of my husband gave us this Renoir. Incredible!

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: How wonderful. A student of his?

ISABEL BISHOP: A doctor who had been a student. It's amazing! It's a delight to have that picture.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I would think so.

ISABEL BISHOP: Have you looked at it?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I did several years ago. I think I'll look at it on the way out. That's in your dining room, isn't it?

ISABEL BISHOP: In the living room. It's especially well-placed. I wanted it to be inconspicuous to any casual caller.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Right. Did you and your husband entertain very much out here?

ISABEL BISHOP: A lot more than later.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Would it have been artist friends of yours, or friends of his, or a mixture?

ISABEL BISHOP: A mixture.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I guess over the years you got to know people in the neighborhood and so on?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Was there ever any resistance to having an artist in their midst? I shouldn't be asking you this question. [laughs] Do you ever feel looked upon as a rare bird or something?

ISABEL BISHOP: In New York nobody pays attention.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You mentioned Kuniyoshi. Wasn't he put in a camp during the Second World War?

ISABEL BISHOP: No.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I am wondering if you knew him at that point.

ISABEL BISHOP: I did know him at that point.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I am just trying to think of some more people who might have been in that group. John Dos Passos. Do you remember him?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. He was definitely on the side of the enemy.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: [laughs] Right. And he remained on that side, I guess?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Are you a person who likes to write? Do you write down your thoughts in your notes? I noticed there seemed to be a couple of examples of that in your papers. You're shaking your head.

ISABEL BISHOP: No.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did the few speeches you made and you wrote help you put your thoughts together?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. That's the only part that made any sense.

[BREAK]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You never read . . . ?

ISABEL BISHOP: What was the name?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: What was it about?

ISABEL BISHOP: It's a lecture at Harvard.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you mean Frank Stella?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: That's what I was asking you. Well, that was turned into a book. It's called Working Space. Maybe I can get you a copy of that.

ISABEL BISHOP: That would be wonderful.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Okay. I've been looking to get myself one anyway.

ISABEL BISHOP: Thanks a lot.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You're welcome.

ISABEL BISHOP: I've no idea what his formulation is.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I don't either exactly. That's the Caravaggio connection. I've read some articles that he wrote based on it, but not the actual book. Do you know him, by any chance?

ISABEL BISHOP: Only just nodding.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Are there any artists of a younger generation who you have gotten to know?

ISABEL BISHOP: Not really, I'm sorry to say.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You referred several times in your writings to Occam's Razor. Can you explain what that means to you?

ISABEL BISHOP: It means what it's supposed to, I think.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I probably don't understand it. That's why I'm asking you.

ISABEL BISHOP: What it is, is the rule about expression of thought. The rule being that it's wrong to . . . there should not be more in the terms of an argument than is absolutely to the argument. There can't be other things brought in.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Keep to the essentials? You applied that to the need to question things that had been taken for granted. And especially -- this is one of your arguments -- you're implying that it was time that figurative matter was questioned in the Twentieth Century. And you said that the nude in particular is something we should question. What answer do you come up with to the nude? Why bother to paint the nude?

ISABEL BISHOP: It's such a challenge. It could so easily become something kind of silly.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So it's a challenge to keep it serious?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And do you see it as a kind of formal activity?

ISABEL BISHOP: I'd say yes if it didn't sound too pretentious.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: When you would paint the nudes and you had a model did you usually have them moving the way the moving people would move or did they strike a pose in the traditional way?

ISABEL BISHOP: I did not have them moving. I had an aim in the whole effect of arriving at a form which could include rather potentially the possibility of movement.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: So in that way time is incorporated too, right? Because the before and after are kind of in the painting.

ISABEL BISHOP: Probably.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: When painting a nude -- for instance -- would you have the model there while you were painting or did you work from a drawing?

ISABEL BISHOP: No, I had the model there.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Well, you did mention before when I mentioned the term monochromatic you said that you do sort of think of your work as monochromatic. Can you elaborate on that a little bit? Why you would do that?

ISABEL BISHOP: [pause]

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Let me put it this way. How do you feel about the role of color for you?

ISABEL BISHOP: I think color has to do with the kind of painting that I am involved in. The color with which I make monochrome includes the idea of unity and diversity.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: In other words, there is more possibility maybe if there are many colors, and yet they are all underneath one another in many cases? I think what you said -- unity and diversity -- makes sense. It seems to me that would be very different from -- for example -- Kenneth Hayes Miller's use of color, which is very much Raphael-like. Very much clumps and pieces of color defining certain items like a skirt or a door or something like that. Whereas maybe you are doing almost the opposite -- including everything rather than separating it off? You're not in your head at this point? [chuckles] Do you remember thinking anything about his use of color? Kenneth Hayes Miller?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. I thought about it a lot. I saw that I really couldn't make use of it, but many people said, "Don't struggle to say anything." They said, "She imitates Miller." I found that very annoying.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I can imagine that. I guess that was the misfortune of what happens if you study under someone. It's immediately assumed that that's the case, and then if you begin to use some of the same subject matter certainly it seems interesting in the beginning. Did you feel at any point that you were reacting to his work?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you at any point even formulate some ideas in order that people would stop feeling that you were doing work like his?

ISABEL BISHOP: Probably did. From time to time I would.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: The teacher-student relationship is often that way, I guess. In wrestling with the specter of the teacher, you develop your own. I don't know at what point he died. I was wondering if he lived to see your mature work -- if you want to call it that.

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't remember.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You don't remember getting any kind of response from him about where your work was going or what he thought of it?

ISABEL BISHOP: I had more of a feeling of disapproval than approval. He really felt it -- I think -- pretty necessary to use Florentine concepts. And any other kind of effort he gave the feeling of [being] unacceptable.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And was he fairly dogmatic when he had ideas like that?

ISABEL BISHOP: Very.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did Reginald Marsh study under him also?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. He did study under him, in a way.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You're laughing about something. He didn't really study in a normal way?

ISABEL BISHOP: Reg was on Fourteenth Street. He said, "I never paint a picture without showing it to Miller." On the other hand, He was so individualistic. Their forms were so different.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: But that's interesting that they had enough of a relationship that he did still feel that he wanted to show things to Miller.

ISABEL BISHOP: They always had a sort of enthusiastic relationship.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you show him things after you had done them? Would you show them to Miller?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, I would.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And did you have interesting give-and-take, did you feel?

ISABEL BISHOP: I thought I was too dependent on him.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you and Reginald Marsh share studio visits?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did you criticize one another's work?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And did you feel more in sync with what he was doing than with Miller?

ISABEL BISHOP: I admired Reg so much. I wasn't afraid of being influenced by him because I don't think his work was so I never felt influenced by it.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And you were friends with him socially as well, right? I think among your papers I saw a picture of him and his new wife at some point. I guess he got married. I don't know whether it was before or after you got married. But did you remain friends throughout your lives?

ISABEL BISHOP: [Yes].

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Did he always have a studio on Fourteenth Street or did it move at some point?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't recall him having a studio anywhere else. It was on the corner of Fourteenth and Union Square.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Raphael Soyer's approach to his subject was really quite different from yours?

ISABEL BISHOP: Very different. But I didn't know him at that period even though he had a studio in the same building.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Do you remember when you did get to meet him?

ISABEL BISHOP: I suppose it began with the meetings of that group which were the ones that wrote that magazine Reality. Socially he was in a different group.

NC: And you got to know him better later on, I guess. I guess James Johnson Sweeney was the main person from the Museum of Modern Art that you ever had contact with. Is that right?

ISABEL BISHOP: That I had contact.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I guess it wasn't very good contact. [laughs] Did you ever get to know anyone else from there?

ISABEL BISHOP: I don't think I ever did.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Are there any other curators who you are particularly fond of or you have gotten to know?

[BREAK]

ISABEL BISHOP: Serving on the jury out in Ohio with James Johnson Sweeney and Russell Cowles. You wouldn't remember him.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: No. Wasn't he a collector?

ISABEL BISHOP: He was a painter. He had some connection with a paper.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Right. The Cowles family, I guess had I forget what the magazine was. A whole publishing group. So there you got to know Sweeney a bit in that situation? Did you like him?

ISABEL BISHOP: Oh yes. [He was] very charming, Irish charming. We were on this jury out there and James Sweeney said -- when I met him, in Pittsburgh, I think There were three of us on the jury, and James Sweeney was the chairman. He said, "I'll only recognize a unanimous vote." Otherwise he would have had a hard time determining the whole thing.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: I see. In other words, he wanted everyone to agree and if they didn't then the decision would go with whatever he

ISABEL BISHOP: Whatever he wanted. It turned out that during the whole morning of judging we hadn't been into the exhibition hall. We hadn't all voted on one.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You mean none of them were chosen?

ISABEL BISHOP: None of them. You see, Cowles and I thought this wasn't fair, so we talked with Sweeney and Sweeney said, "Oh, well, in that case, just admit everybody." And this made the artists, the professional people, artists other than academic They didn't get any prizes, because we didn't give them. The artists at that place were perfectly furious. They carried placards and walked them down the street. It was so unfair because they had invited us to come, paid us a salary for coming, and then wouldn't accept the decision so the artists were furious. I went out there for some reason and then later I saw Sweeney in New York, and he said he'd never had this reaction to any exhibition that he'd juried. He couldn't understand it at all.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: And did you feel somewhat upset because you were stuck with his rules and you might have done something differently?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. Rather.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: It sounds very autocratic of him.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes. He wouldn't accept any modification.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: IT also sounds like a bit of New York arrogance, which is not that unusual.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Was that before or after you had been into his office at the Museum of Modern Art?

ISABEL BISHOP: I think that was after.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: You've been on lots of juries, haven't you? On the whole, do you have a feeling about the kind of work that you see around the country?

ISABEL BISHOP: Just if one part of the country would be different from another part?

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: No. Whether there is interesting work to be found in juried shows like that?

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, I did think there was. I thoguth it was a distinct loss to the whole art scene when it was given up.

CYNTHIA NADELMAN: Juried shows. Right. I guess they used to be much more a part of the way things were chosen.

ISABEL BISHOP: Yes, and in many universities. Many of the universities had them. It's a way for variety to get into the art scene.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Last updated..July 18, 2002