Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Jack Werner Stauffacher, 1993 February 8

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 Jack Stauffacher on February 8, 1993. The interview was conducted at the artist's home in San Francisco, California by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

JS: JACK STAUFFACHER
PK: PAUL KARLSTROM

[TAPE 1, SIDE A]

PK: An interview with Jack Stauffacher on February 8, 1993. The interview is conducted by Paul Karlstrom and is being held at the interviewer’s home in San Francisco. Jack, will you start us out by telling us when you were born?

JS: I was born December 19, 1920, in San Francisco.

PK: Well, Jack, what we’re going to do this afternoon is to learn from you something about your own experiences here in the Bay Area, connections with the art community and your own activities with Greenwood Press, particularly to what degree your activities with the press, and then, your interaction with other aspects of the art community, especially the visual arts community. During a time in San Francisco, which is being more and more studied, this post-war period into the 50's and into the 60's when a number of interesting things were going on, and you were an observer. To get started, why don’t you tell me a little bit about your own biographical background.

JS: I lived most of my formative period in San Mateo, California. I went down there when I was about a year old, and I lived through the 20's, going to grammar school and then into high school in the 30's. The whole environment that I lived in was very quiet, very suburban in the 20's-style. People always took the train to commute. My father was in the plumbing business. Do you want to know some of those things?

PK: Yes. What your folks did.

JS: I had an older brother by the name of Frank. Frank was basically the person who was the, quote, “artist in the family.” He was the one who read books and studied. My mother was also very, artistic. She did ceramics and she played the piano, so we were raised in a sort of middle-class atmosphere.

PK: You were born in San Mateo, right?

JS: No, I was born in San Francisco but I came down to San Mateo when I was a year old. We lived on Baker Street, in San Francisco near the Panhandle [of Golden Gate Park].

PK: Was this because of your father’s work?

JS: Well, my mother was born here from German parents. I think, actually, divorced parents and my father came west from Wisconsin in, I would say, 1880's or ‘90's. I mean, this is not very clear. I’d have to clarify that.

PK: But your parents actually go back to the late nineteenth century here in the Bay Area?

JS: Oh yes. The atmosphere was very conducive to things artistic in terms of my brother’s early interest in painting, early interest in writing and reading. He finally got a scholarship to go to Art Center in Los Angeles.

PK: About when was that?

JS: Oh, that was in the early ‘30's, in fact, middle 30's ... ‘36, 37.

PK: Were you also interested in art? Did you look at him as a role model?

JS: Yes, he was, he was my mentor, as it were.

PK: How many years older was Frank?

JS: Six. And he did establish that rapport between wherever I was coming from and we could share together he

was kind of a romantic guy. He had his room upstairs. He was a medievalist for awhile. He had armor on the wall and he was like -- he liked The Raven, he liked Poe.

PK: He was a Gothic sensibility.

JS: Yes, he was of early Gothic interests and knights with helmets, but his influence was the central artistic interest in my work.

PK: Would you describe your household, your family, as an intellectual household or ...

JS: Well, I wouldn't say intellectual. No, I wouldn't say that. I think that came from Frank with his own deep interest in reading books. He had quite a library. My mother, I remember, I think again, this is the kind of middle-class illusions for learning are the Harvard Classics in the living room.

PK: Well, so they obviously valued this kind of thing and education

JS: Yes, there was a whole series of little red books of Shakespeare's works. Music was definitely a very strong thing with my mother. Old records I had up until recently with Caruso singing and those old, those hard old records, and the voice is very thin and kind of tinny. And she used to play Chopin. So that sort of grew as you became a little more aware of the world, you start to take on things which you didn't have before.

PK: Okay, we were talking about your early years in San Mateo and the environment in which you grew up, but particularly those aspects of your situation which might have encouraged interest in the arts and related things because both you and your brother went on in your separate ways to distinguish yourselves in these areas. And maybe you can bring us along with that progress a little bit, moving you up closer to the time then when you finally moved permanently to San Francisco and pursued your careers.

JS: Well, by the time I had become interested in printing, when I was 14, that whole interest just started spontaneously. It wasn't that my father told me to become a printer. It was just a very natural curiosity. My brother encouraged me and he would always look over my shoulder and my father was encouraging. I built a studio in the back of my house with the [name] Greenwood Press.

PK: So the Greenwood Press was actually at your home in San Mateo when you were young?

JS: Yes.

PK: Well, what introduced you to printing as an interesting activity and in what way were you interested in it?

JS: Well, on the first level, it was a total curiosity and interest. I saw a magazine ad in the Popular Mechanics. My brother and I used to take Popular Mechanics. There was a little ad, it said, "Do you want to learn to print?", and there was a face of a man pointing his finger out at you out of a page. I just was curious so I sent [the ad] off and they sent me a catalog. I purchased a complete little printing outfit for $15 or $20. Now, were talking about 1933 or '34. From that time on, I had this little teeny press and little type, put it in the washroom in the house and there's where I started to find a great love for this. I went through the process of learning more and more and then finally I had to get a bigger press. My father helped me build a studio out on the back of my house. And it was named Greenwood because of the street on the side of our house.

PK: At what point did you see it as something more than a hobby? It must've started out kind of as a hobby?

JS: Well, hobby, whatever curiosity, if you're interest is in carpentry at home, you get a little bench where you make things. You go to school and you take a little course. This is about the level it was. I used to do little business cards.

PK: So you actually did get jobs?

JS: Yes, little jobs at the high school. I would do little tickets for dances, things like that, but that started a real enthusiasm and curiosity. I looked around and looked at type differently, and put it together and thought deeply about it, as deeply as a young man can feel about these things.

PK: So at an early stage, you became interested in type itself. It wasn't just this ability using this equipment to print something.

JS: Well, that's true.

PK: I jumping ahead?

JS: Yes, you're jumping ahead, because at the first level I was enthralled with the mechanical apparatus, the

press itself, the rollers, the type, ink. The aesthetic, the more artistic part, came later. That wasn't my main focus at that time. It was just learning how to handle the tools, and that came somewhat years later.

PK: Okay, tell me how you got from this early phase -- the earliest phase of Greenwood Press to a point where you would describe yourself operating, or at least in terms of your interest, on a higher level, certainly a more sophisticated level. That's one part of the question. My other part would be, what role did your mentor play in developing an awareness of the potential of the medium?

JS: Well, I think that there were other forces operating around me in my environment that made me realize that there was a great historical part of typography and printing in books that was moving towards me. For instance, I knew some friends in Hillsborough who had their own hand press and they were sort of a dilettante and they were inspired by the group, William Morris Arts and Craft. So I would help them work the hand press.

PK: When they named their Press William Morris?

JS: Well, it wasn't named William Morris but it was Acorn Press ...

PK: But what were their names?

JS: Names were Lillianthal.

PK: Were they connected to that famous family?

JS: Must be because Ted Lillianthal and Corkus Press, that was it.

PK: Corkus?

JS: Corkus or Acorn, something like that. Anyway, he was part of that whole '30's period. Also, I was curious enough to go into San Francisco and meet the Grabhorns, meet John Henry Nash, meet Taylor and Taylor, the great printers which I had heard about but I was very brash. I went up and talked with them…

PK: … because these were the printers you admired and you had heard of and admired.

JS: I admired their books and between that there were studies, books, I bought. The History of Printing Types by Updike was a strong influence. It was two volumes that were the kind of cornerstone by which I started to understand the whole history of types over five hundred years. Of course, there's a bibliography in that book and then that spreads out into other areas of study. Even at an early age I was studying the history of printing. By 1938 or '39, I decided to invest some money in a typeface. It was an important investment, large fontings of an American-type foundries, Garamond.

PK: You chose that for some aesthetic reasons.

JS: Well, it was a typeface that was historically one of the great typefaces ever cut. Real texture for text work, for book work, and I considered the finest at that time.

PK: But you weren't printing books yet?

JS: Oh, yes. Well, no -- I -- my first book was done in 1936, which was a rather crude bit of work. It was by a Viennese singer. She wanted to give the secrets out to the world. I have it. Funny little book.

PK: Which secrets?

JS: The secrets of the Viennese voice -- soprano. She was a teacher so it was a little -- strange little book, a little one, six, eight pages. So I did that. It was my first book.

PK: But how could that project come to you?

JS: Oh, I don't know. I would go down to Burlingame and talk with my friends and there was a book store there called The Peninsula Bookstore that was run by a refugee from Germany. He really knew books.

PK: What was his name, do you remember?

JS: Meyerfeld. He's an elderly gentleman now who lives on the Peninsula. He was very encouraging about the quality of formats in books. So I wasn't going total commercial. I was sort of concerned with the craft of book-making, not advertising, but the book.

PK: But somehow you got put together with this Viennese singer.

JS: Well, yes, I did tickets. I did bill heads, invoices. I did some commercial work.

PK: Yes, but who commissioned this?

JS: Well, through my father from the plumbing business. He would tell me to go to see some people in San Francisco and I did that.

PK: And then you got work?

JS: Yes, I got work.

PK: Did you meet this Viennese singer?

JS: Sure, I met her. Could I have not met her?

PK: She had this book and she wanted you .....

JS: A funny little book.

PK: What was her name?

JS: I'll have to give you that some other time because I don't remember.

PK: Okay. But that was your first book or that's what you consider the beginning of what you've been doing ever since, right?

JS: Yes. Then the next so-called book, but not quite a book, was the book I did for the San Mateo Burlingame Polo Club. It was a horse-show program. Quite elaborate. Frank did the cover.

PK: He was out of Art Center now, already?

JS: He was either out or coming back and forth. And that was done in 1938. This little horse-show book, or program, was a very marvelous experience. Typographically, it has a sort of modernism to it and yet, not. I was being slowly influenced -- I was pushed -- pushing away from total William Morris symmetry but I didn't know William Morris that much. I did start to find the Grabhorn –- the quality of books that they were doing. I tried to copy them for awhile, and then I started to break away from it.

PK: What did you look to for your sources, then? If you turned from them, breaking ...

JS: Right, right. There comes 1938, '38. It was still during the age of innocence, which separates my work from before the War and after the War. That was a very important element. By 1940, I had now achieved my really first mature controlled book. All the other material I had done before was somewhat amateurish. It wasn't tight and ordered. This book called, The Three Choice Sketches by Washington Irving, with illustrations by my brother. You see, up until now, the collaboration with my brother with books had been the first one was the polo horse show, then in a more classical way was this Washington Irving book. It was all set by hand, printed on my press, beautifully bound, and sold for $2.50.

PK: I suppose you didn't charge the labor against it because that was your own work.

JS: Yes, that's right.

PK: You certainly couldn't or Greenwood would go under at those prices.

JS: Well, I wasn't basically in business, but that book was the beginning of a commitment to book design. Then, a year later I started to produce the little green book called Bicycle Polo, Techniques and Fundamentals. That came out in '42. Just on the eve of my departure into the Second World War. So that ends the book period until I'm out of the Army. I leave in either '43 or '44.

PK: So the Bicycle Polo book ...

JS: Also illustrated by Frank.

PK: That was what year?

JS: It came out in '42. I was in the Army by September of '42.

PK: So that makes a break and there are a couple of questions that come to mind about that. First of all, the collaboration with your brother, Frank, on those first little projects was really pretty important.

JS: Oh yes.

PK: Second thing, points you in a certain direction that would be more along the lines of the aesthetic possibilities of this craft. Do you remember how that came about? How the collaboration actually worked? Did he talk about ideas in art, what was going on? Did he have an enthusiasm and knowledge about modernism?

JS: Well, Frank was a person of his period. He was also very interested in film, at the same time. He was terribly fascinated with a certain genre of film, very romantic, mysterious films with the overtones of The Raven, that kind of material.

PK: Was he interested in Surrealism? Is this something he would talk about?

JS: Yes, but Frank seemed to have innate intuitions about things and we were able to express them very well. But it never manifests itself until after the War. But between the time he was drafted in the Army and then came out, I think for a lot of people -- a lot of creative people -- what do you call it, a watershed of change. If you can use a metaphor, it was like you were on one side of the wall and then you have got to leap over onto the other side of the wall and that was after the war. Everything before was different, the sky was different, birds sang a different tone.

PK: Really?

JS: Well, I mean, it's kind of psychologically. You were, by that time, a little older, too. You're grown up a little bit. The age of innocence, in a sense, was closed.

PK: What form did this take within the art field? Focusing on that particular activity, were you able to recreate that even in yourself, in your own activities? How do you remember that? How did the world change, specifically within your interests and within the arts, and personally?

JS: Well, for the first time I traveled a little bit when I was in the Army. I went to New York and took in the sights, Washington D.C., and I saw another environment. I don't think it influenced me not in any direct way, but it shaped certain images in my mind. I remember, I went way back when I was so young, went to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. You walked in there and you saw modern paintings and I became interested in architecture, which helped me to understand the so-called Modern movement in architecture.

[TAPE 1, SIDE B]

PK: Continuing the interview with Jack Stauffacher. This is Side B of Tape 1. Jack, you were beginning to talk about your growing awareness of something called modernism, partly through travels but, what was interesting, you used the [a] metaphor for the war times a wall and that prior to that time -- pre-war -- you're standing on one side of the wall and then you find yourself post-war -- on the other side -- and everything seemed different. And you were explaining how this came about. And I'm also interested in how to you and your brother and others, presumably, things seem different.

JS: Returning from the Army, I came back to San Mateo and tried to find out what exactly I wanted to do. I was, maybe 23 or 24, I can't remember. I still had my press and I had plans to go to a university. I left the Army before the war was over, '43 or '44. I got sick with pleurisy, and when I returned, I tried to pick up some of the thread that I had from the past but somehow the momentum or the innocence wasn't there any longer. It was a re-thinking that cataclysm of the war. It changed so many things in my world. So I started to think about the world after ... I always use, "after the bomb. " I had been reading a lot of books and commentaries about this and tried to, in my own way, re-thinking about the future, where I could fit into that world of change. I wanted to somehow commit myself to something valuable and worthy. Since I knew something about books and typography, I felt the ideas of books, the crafting of books would be an honest and worthy pursuit. So I picked up the tools and started again, but a little difference. I was very concerned about the world. Where it was going, how it was going to heal, socially, psychologically, every way. I connected myself with a very avant-garde group of people in Berkeley with a magazine called Circle. Do you remember seeing Circle magazine? That was the beginning of opening new doors for me in avant-garde literature, painters. Since the war had brought many, many important refugees to California from the Surrealist school from writers, Thomas Maldonado, music, Stravinsky. So there was an exchange of ideas. Huxley was here. And that was pretty heady stuff.

PK: How did you connect with this Berkeley avant-garde group?

JS: I don't know how I connected. It was just, maybe I was at a party or some situation.

PK: Who were some of the people?

JS: Well, it was George Leite. George was a strange man.

PK: How do you spell that last name?

JS: I think it's L-E-I-T-E. T-E. George. There was a fellow by the name of Bern Porter. I got connected with Henry Miller because he was part of that whole group.

PK: Well let's hear about that.

JS: Let's see, how did I meet Henry Miller? How did I meet him?

PK: You collaborated with him on a book.

JS: Oh yes.

PK: Later. That was a little later, right?

JS: Little later, yes. How did I get a hold of him? Was it through -- yes it was through some mutual friends. I also knew Kenneth Rexroth and I knew through Kenneth Rexroth, James Laughlin of New Directions. And they came down to my house. At that time, I lived in the house ... my father had died during the war and my mother died in 1947, so we're talking about '45, '46, '47, '48 period, which was the opening up of all these connections with these people. Frank was back and he was starting his Art and Cinema, which was the gathering of all these painters, poets, film makers and it was very exciting period. Moholy Nagy's wife, Sybil -- after he died -- came to live here, so we became very good friends. I was introduced to Henry Miller through these connections.

PK: There weren't a lot of art openings and that kind of thing at that time?

JS: Well, there was one book at a museum that he had collaborated with a painter friend of mine. They had an exhibition at the museum, but that was a little bit later even. Also Frank, with his Art and Cinema, brought a lot of these film makers up to the Art and Cinema program to talk. He brought some of the people from New York, Hans Richter, who Frank became very good friends with him. I met him and talked with him and then he became friends with people down in Los Angeles.

PK: Like Oskar Fischinger, probably.

JS: Oskar Fischinger, Man Ray, [Luis] Buñuel, these people who were sitting there in Los Angeles doing nothing or relegated to very minor positions. I think Buñuel was in the costume department at Paramount or Fox or one of those studios, but his talent was not being used.

PK: So Frank and his activities really served as a focal point.

JS: Yes, and he was capable of having enough influence to have these people come up here and put on their films and give talks. So it was really a very unusual situation. So my brother and the little brother – (that's me) -- going down into these places and talking with these people into coming up here.

PK: Did you go down to Southern California?

JS: I went down with him once.

PK: And you visited these people?

JS: Yes, and out of that came the Art and Cinema, the book that Henry Miller wrote the introduction.

PK: Now, is that one of your books?

JS: I designed it, yes.

PK: You designed it?

JS: But it was actually a book called Museum of Modern Art book.

PK: Did you print it?

JS: I didn't print it, no.

PK: But you designed it.

JS: Yes. I printed the covering. Kind of crude book but it's a nice book.

PK: Now I've seen that before, but in one of those shows of some things you've done.

JS: Yes.

PK: What is on the cover? Is there a picture or is it just ...

JS: Well, there was a picture by this friend of Henry Miller's, Lily Schaatz, I believe. I didn't like the cover so I did my own cover for a few copies. Frank and I got connected with architects -- Warren Callister, Jack Hillmer, very important people in our lives at that time.

PK: Now, you were still in your 20's, is that right?

JS: Yes.

PK: Yes.

JS: I wasn't quite married yet.

PK: What trying to proceed in an orderly manner here -- is it possible for you to transport yourself back a bit to those times? Here you are, fresh out of the Army -- you find yourself in the midst of a rather incredible group of people, who were going through changes, as well, and as you described it as post-war period and perhaps new recognitions of not only the possibilities of art but, then, maybe even the limitations. Certainly [that would be part of] this dangerous, frightening, human experience that you've been through. But at any rate, what do you recall them talking about? Did you get a sense that there was a common cause? That there were objectives that these people saw their activity as serving certain ends?

JS: No, I think it was much more random. There were people pushing for their own ideology or their own interests, like many people do. In my experience, some of them were less forthright, while some were very outward and very spirited people. The more famous people, like Man Ray, who I only met once and spent an afternoon with him. I don't, in a sense, know him, only in his studio and talking with him, but we were young enthusiasts. We just shook hands, smiled and talked about things those ordinary things, and they enjoyed meeting people who were interested and could talk a conversation they liked. Possibly, [Kenneth] Rexroth was more of more didactic. He was always claiming certain catastrophes in the world, but not Henry Miller. He liked just to have a conversation, let the conversation take it wherever it will go.

PK: Well, Rexroth, from your experience, was perhaps more socially focused? That he felt that art and this kind of an activity had, maybe, a social responsibility? That change could be brought ...

JS: Well, he had an answer for everything. He could talk politics, he had a strong opinion about things.

PK: He was opinionated?

JS: Yes, opinionated. Miller was not that way at all. He first was interested in meeting you and talking with you and discussing things and just let it flow out. He had no agenda.

PK: That's what I was going to ask. It sounds to me as if Rexroth had a certain program that he wanted to always be running [in] the exchange.

JS: Well, he had his own attitude on everything.

PK: And did he expect people to perform?

JS: No, you just sit there and listen to him. He talked. Again, meeting the lesser unknown people ... there's where the excitement was all about, not these famous people. The people of my generation would talk and argue and discuss things.

PK: Well, who in the community that you've described as the creative people, the avant-gardeist, the Bohemians, maybe, were the ones that you thought were important or special or even promising? Was there any consensus? Any sense that this person or that person really had it, represented the new tendencies best?

JS: During that period?

PK: Yes. No, not from this perspective, but at that time, besides Man Ray and those people, obviously.

JS: Let's see. Well, a little later the person that I got to know very well was Gordon Cook who I wasn't really involved too much with the painters. It was more, maybe, struggling poets. And then there was another fellow who just -- well later -- was that other Rexroth, not Rexroth ... [Kenneth] Patchen, maybe it was him. A lot of these fellows came from the East to live out here. It was a kind of migration of creative people. This is before the Beats.

PK: Right, but not a lot before.

JS: Well, the period I'm talking about -- Patchen was, say, '49, '50, '51. That was about Patchen period. The Beats came about '58?

PK: Yes, certainly my recollection is they were pretty established [by then].

JS: Some of the painters that I knew, and there are some quite famous, went up to Sonora and did beautiful landscapes. What was his name? There was that whole Monkey Block, social painters of the '30's -- Black Cat and that whole world which was totally of the '30's which kind of oozed in onto the '40's after the war. But it changed and Monkey Block was the oasis.

PK: Yes, I know about the Monkey Block.

JS: But there were a lot of these painters and the Italian restaurants with sawdust on the floor. There was still that Bohemian atmosphere.

PK: Did you feel that you were participating in this local Bohemianism? Did you seek it yourself?

JS: I don't think so, no. I didn't move up here until 1947. I opened my shop on Sansome Street, Clay and Sansome. How would I describe it? No, I did go to the California School of Fine Arts for a short period, just after I got out of the Army. I didn't like that so I spent about 3 or 4 ...

PK: Is that a GI Bill?

JS: Yes, a GI Bill. I did meet ... what was his name? Howard? A painter ... no it was a sculptor.

PK: Robert Howard.

JS: Robert Howard. And I met other artists but I can't in any way say they had any strong influence on me.

PK: So you didn't feel particularly involved in the fraternity, shall we say?

JS: No, no.

PK: Avant-gardeist types.

JS: Avant-garde -- the real avant-gardeist didn't come here -- didn't filter into this world until a little later, I think. And there was a period of study. Wittenborn published those four great books. One by [Piet] Mondrian, and Herbert Read had a great influence on my thinking.

PK: So you were aware of these?

JS: Oh yes. We had put on a marvelous film at Art and Cinema Society. Had some really avant-garde pieces like, Leger's Ballet Mécanique, which was a very, I mean, this is in the '20's.

PK: Well, did you actually assist Frank with the Arts Cinema projects?

JS: Well, I did his programs for him. I participated as a spectator and meeting his friends and the general community of film people. It was a community of film people who were trying to experiment with the new art form. So as a mixture of film, books, architecture, it all seemed to be seething in interests and there were cross disciplines and interests. If you were into architecture, you were into paint, it was not all separated, as I recall. You have to talk intelligently; you'd have to talk about architecture too much.

PK: That's what I was wondering about because some people cite that at this time there was a new coming together of the different areas of art and creative activity, that there was less distinction about this. I'd be interested in your views -- but probably in many ways the printing may have been viewed as the other separate -- even though there were fine art presses. I guess part of my question is, were you aware of these fields coming together?

JS: Well, the aesthetics of the Arts and Crafts Movement, which permeated a certain Anglo-Saxon look had a staid, safe symmetrical format. The so-called new typography, which was being shaped out of a new voice coming from a new way of looking at [things] not just the page of a book, but architecture, the Modern Movement. If you study Mondrian, you can see his play on different planes, what does he call it? Dynamic equilibrium. He wants us to meditate and think about these things and it was a new language you were learning. It filtered back into everything that you were dealing with, especially in the book. It had terrific influence. It wasn't saying, "Arts and Crafts is bad." It was just a new visual way to resolve form and content. And if Mondrian

as a painter can influence the typographer, there is obviously a new way of looking at things through these people. So those kinds of things filter into your aesthetic.

PK: And into your work as a printer or at least.

JS: Yes. Then there was people like Jan Tschichold, who had written The New Typography in the '20's. It was never translated into English or it hasn't even been translated yet. A lot of the doctrines of the modern had not been translated into English. We knew of them, and there's where I think [George] Wittenborn did a great service in having Moholy Nagy ... Louis Sullivan's Kindergarten Chats. Now that was not translated but he had this marvelous rich mix architecture, painters, Apollinaire, first-time translated or accessible to the people who could buy them, because the art book until that time -- or the Doctrines of Philosophy of Art were hard to come by. When we go into Stout's bookstore and just on architecture, I mean, you can't compare. You just could pick a few books. The Phaidon Press was one of the great historical art publishers that you could purchase some of their books, nice folios, collotype. They all came from Europe so it wasn't as accessible in terms of information. We were way off here on the West Coast. And those influences ... Cubism, that's what that ... after the war, I think, we're struggling to learn the language. Learn the symbols. Try to put it all together. I think that the 30's, there were maybe a few, the Museum of Modern Art. What were the names? She was the first ...

PK: Grace McCann Morley.

JS: Yes. It was always an uphill battle because she would have exhibitions with the modern artists. After the war there was enough information to build on, a language, a way to proceed.

[TAPE 2, SIDE A]

PK: Archives of American Arts. Smithsonian Institution, continuing an interview with Jack Stauffacher on February 8, 1993 and this is Tape 2, Side A. Jack, we were well into the subject of modernism, or the new art, and awareness of the new art in the San Francisco area in the immediate post-war period and you were talking about all these interesting people that you met and had some kind of interaction with -- partly, through your brother, Frank. I wanted to pursue this and to do so, there are a couple of questions I wanted to ask but I guess, actually, what you were discussing when you left off is somewhat encompassed in this question I have, and that is, a sense of the separation, being in the Bay Area, being in California out on the West Coast, a sense of awareness to be a little bit of a distance from these new ideas. One was the difficulty at that early period, of getting sources, getting books. We now take it for granted. So you said that seemed to be a bit of a problem and it was beginning to change. What I wanted to ask as part of that was there a sense of being special in this community, special in a positive way, but also, special in a less positive way of removed from the action. Was there a sense of San Francisco, as it's own unique art community with the pros and the cons? What was this San Francisco in terms of modern art?

JS: Well, I can only speak on the fringes of it because I was not deeply committed within that world. My world was still the print shop type books and poets would continually knock on my door -- if I would print their little poems. Sometimes I said yes, so the literary currents were in the air in the shop, more than just painting.

PK: But that's okay because literature is part of modernism, so ...

JS: Yes. So there was that influence, which was more paramount than the plastic arts. As I was saying earlier, Frank was an illustrator. He dabbled in painting, but never moved into the so-called higher artistic levels. There was a book that I think, was one of the early precursors for us. He purchased in 1938, that marvelous book that came out of Paris, Minautor, it was a large book -- it's famous.

PK: Was a Surrealist book?

JS: Well, it had everything in there. It had Picasso, it had Braque, it had all the great artists and writers.

PK: Not Minantor?

JS: Minantor, that was it. Minantor. And Frank got that in 1938 and that was part of the key. There were things going on in the world that didn't happen here. And after the war, publications of these separate artists were coming out very quietly. in most cases, from France in the original language. I think it took a man like Herbert Read to be the pioneer for English-speaking audiences -- to give an authentic voice to the modern movement, to defend it. Herbert Read no longer is read much but his books on What is Art? and What is Modernism?, I can't remember the titles but they were very important.

PK: Oh, yes. He was a very famous spokesman of that modernism.

JS: Yes, so he was a person we paid attention to. He legitimized it. And his range was not just painters, but it was

also writers, architects, and he did that book that Wittenborn printed of long essays on an essential attitude towards the modern world. I forget what the book was but it was a very intelligent, well-written book.

PK: Well, so you were coming across these books, presumably others were and you were talking about these?

JS: Yes, we were discussing them and sharing them, but all during that time I was learning my trade in a more disciplined way in which I could perfect the type and the page. And by 1949, ’50, I had made the decision to purchase a particular typeface from Germany to do a specimen book, which turned out to be the Chance of Definitive Collection. Now that was a very important in creating that book. In that book, there are quotes from different people in a very subtle and oblique way. It talks, shapes and frames a classical idea to the modern. It kind of connects those two worlds together in a typographic ... very, very subtle. It not like William Morris but it pays attention to the history with great thrust of the past in the typography with a certain element of the modern feeling. The book is totally asymmetrical. It quotes different people in there that I was concerned with....

PK: I mean, you singled them out as having an influence. What was the book called?

JS: Janson: A Definitive Collection.

PK: And what year?

JS: 1954. But that took me four or five years to do.

PK: And Jansen, for the sake of this interview, why don’t you say something about the book.

JS: Well, Anton Janson was a Dutch designer who created a face of the Baroque Period that turned out that he did not design. He was attributed to have designed it but scholars found that he had been a minor designer and the type that we were using or the history by Jansen was actually Nicholas Kis. Now, that goes into a long story, which I won’t get into, but it was ...

PK: But this was the subject of your book? Not Kis, at that point yet?

JS: Well, I did insert Kis in there but I didn’t change the title of the book. That’s a whole other typographical bibliophile scholarship.

PK: But for you, this was like a revelation, or the result of a revelation. When you saw in this project, this represents a major step.

JS: Absolutely. Well, a major step in terms where I was able to really reach a level of perfection. I know nothing is perfect but perfection and control with my type and with the paper and the print. From the very beginning to the end of the book, it has a total wholeness. I like to call it “organic”. The book reflected the skill of the maker. He put it all together, he wrote it. It’s not a large piece of writing but it’s the enthusiasm and the commitment as an object of a book -- the way it’s bound, and when the book started to leave San Francisco, off into the world. I gave some copies to my gurus, Adrian Wilson, Stanley Morison. Actually, Stanley Morison helped me with the editing. But it was an astonishing acknowledgment from these people. They said. “Hey, how could a book like this be done in San Francisco? What’s going on here? Hey, this is amazing.” I don’t say this to brag about it. So the book started to build energy for me, I actually would have got my full buzz on.

PK: You like that? So this brought tension to you and to your work?

JS: Yes. I think you can call me now “scholar printer”. Where I could talk to other scholar printers and they would allow me to be part of their fraternity.

PK: But I gather from what you say that this was viewed as surprising in some corridors that such a project and enterprise could come out of San Francisco.

JS: Yes. Stanley Morison felt that way. He said, “No way, how could this be done?”

PK: But he was assisting you with it.

JS: Well he was, but he later when the book was all finished.

PK: He was surprised.

JS: He was surprised. I had a beautiful letter from him. So it achieved a sense that I had arrived at a certain level in my craft that was very, absolutely, fulfilling. It’s an amazing achievement because I did it and I had to still raise a family and I didn’t have any grants or anything. I just did it. I just devoted a lot of time. I had to borrow money to buy the type so it was an act of love. I had been destined to do it. It was not that I knew I would fulfill it

but it took some time.

PK: Well, you mention that this project, for you, represented the crest for a kind of perfection within your activity.

JS: And we missed a whole period there.

PK: Well, we can go back.

JS: Alright.

PK: What I wonder is did you see this project, this enterprise, as somehow a modernist quest? Did you see it in terms of what you understood to be modernist goals and ideals? Or did you not think of it that way at all?

JS: I didn't think of it exactly in that, in those labels. What was permeating my psyche was how I could perfect that letter on the page and make it balance on the page and all these influences, be it modern, classicism or it might be have all helped and I knew I was to have a bit of Baroque elements, illustrations, but the way it was framed on the page, you could say it was modern but I don't want to use that term because it wasn't at all formal.

PK: It wasn't?

JS: No. It has a formalness, but it wasn't obviously trying like the Art and Cinema book, which was obviously trying to be modern. It was sans serif type and pictures here that obviously I was pulling right from the modern movement and modern typography, but the other one was not. It was a sifting out a kind of highly aesthetic control of type and the elements. It was paying homage to the great tradition, but, naturally, I was going to make it my way. It wasn't going to be a copy.

PK: So you saw yourself, in a sense, participating in the evolution, the progress of your art.

JS: Yes.

PK: And that there was, indeed, this kind of progress not an ascension, necessarily, but that there was change and was always becoming new and this was your activity.

JS: Sure.

PK: Is that a fair enough description?

JS: Yes, that sounds good. But I think I jumped too quickly from the 40's that brought me into the collision with Dynaton and then it goes back to me meeting them in the Army and meeting my friend, Adrian Wilson, in the early times and their influence on me and how you slowly find your own aesthetic after all those influences.

PK: Let's now shift back because there's a whole side of this that we have saved and this goes back to something I think is an interesting coincidence. Growing up and from a very early age, having contact with several individuals who became very important to the history of modern art, certainly in California. And then, subsequent to that, meeting others and becoming friends with rather some key people. Why not start at the beginning now with Sam Francis and Hassel Smith.

JS: Well, I think first comes Sam Francis then Hassel at San Mateo High. He was the same age as my brother, Frank. They knew each other very well. Now, I never knew Hassel as a painter in those early days nor did I know Sam was a painter. He was not a painter. He was just a kid, a real ornery kid. He was always getting himself in trouble. But those days in San Mateo, we were kids and we gravitated to all the kid things. Now, with Hassel that was a friendship through Frank and Hassel. And there were huge gaps -- decades -- before I saw Hassel because I hadn't seen him in the last 10 or 15 years. We can come back and talk about old times in San Mateo. I was not with him during his struggle as a painter and affirming his aesthetic -- his art.

PK: So you didn't know him at all at that period back then, when he was at the Art Institute.

JS: No, I was diligently trying to do my craft and it's hard enough to learn how to do that.

PK: So your paths did not cross?

JS: No. I knew him as a San Mateo fellow, Hassel Smith, but I never trafficked his group.

PK: Were you aware of the fact that he was becoming established and establishing a reputation?

JS: Yes, but there were big gaps there where his name was not even mentioned.

PK: What about Sam, though. You met him when you were in grade school.

JS: Well, yes, grammar school. In San Mateo Park Grammar School but that's the same thing. He emerges as part of that childhood period and then total blank-out period of decades and then you read about him in the paper, "Oh, Sam Francis, I used to know him in grammar school". So it was not that we were associated or called on the phone or had any friendship over those few years, not at all. It happened only recently when I met him at the airport by accident in San Francisco and we got into a conversation and an old friendship started ... it was old discussion of the San Mateo days.

PK: Well, that was before, Lapis Press.

JS: Yes, yes, just maybe '84. That was not as meaningful in terms of art as meeting Wolfgang Paalen and/or Gordon Onslow Ford or Lee Mullican.

PK: And my understanding is that both your experiences in the military helped to forge a pretty close relationship.

JS: Yes.

PK: I gather a somewhat idealistic, looking ahead to a better future when you might collaborate with art and things. How did you meet Lee?

JS: I think I met him in Paris, Texas. Fort Maxie, I think it was. That was the topographic battalion I was in. He was in the same one. We would gravitate to Paris, Texas to an Episcopal church and somehow in that menagerie of people in a camp ... thousands of people coming from all walks of life, there was a little oasis in Paris, Texas. Artists, painters, writers would gather and spend evenings together discussing things. We read books. Most people didn't read books or were not interested in books. And there I met Lee also in the battalion but we would go together to our little retreat of friends and that's when we started to spin out our little myths -- or I spun out mine, because, "Where you from Jack?". "San Francisco." "Oh, he's from Chickasha" and so we got along great. We talked and discussed and we became friends and I said to him one day, "When we get out of here -- back in California -- come out and visit me and see what happens". And when he came I was living in this big house in San Mateo and so he came and stayed there with my brother, Frank, the three of us. We'd have parties and discuss things. I'd have Henry Miller over and Rexroth and James Laughlin. He'd come skiing out here with his beautiful blonde wife or girlfriend.

PK: That was Laughlin?

JS: Yes, James Laughlin. Was a good friend of Rexroth. And at that time I used to go to the city -- I used to take a bus, Greyhound bus. I don't know why but I took a Greyhound bus. I was going to meet a friend at the Cow Palace. We were going to a horse show or a cattle show where they have animals and I got in the bus, sat down next to a young lady, who turned out to be Jacqueline Johnson. Now, this is how it all starts.

PK: This was before Lee had come out?

JS: Now, maybe Lee had come out but he didn't know them at all. I might be wrong in this and he said it differently. So I meet Jacqueline on the bus and I invite her to the show. She can't come. She gives me her name and says, "I would love to see you again. I want you to meet my husband Gordon". I said, "Fine".

PK: Did she say that he was a painter or anything like that?

JS: Painter or something, yes.

PK: So she was an artist, too, I think.

JS: Yes, so she had just come up from Stanford. She was graduated Stanford, I think. Yes, she was. Jimmy Broughton who was that teacher-poet at Stanford-- they were close friends.

PK: Ivor Winters.

JS: Yes, so she was quite a mentor, she was mentor of this man.

PK: Or he was hers.

JS: Yes.

[TAPE 2, SIDE B]

PK: This is continuing Jack Stauffacher interview, Tape 2, Side B. You were talking about the bus ride and meeting Jacqueline Johnson.

JS: Yes. She invited me to have dinner at one time so I went up there and met Gordon. They were living -- not exactly where they ended up in San Francisco on Telegraph Hill -- but Gordon talked about his work. His Surrealist background and possibly that he was the first painter, who would discuss his work and bring a lot of interesting cultural baggage on the avant-garde world. He had a beautiful library. Jacqueline was versed in the Surrealist history. We became friends and here's where I'm a little bit vague. When Lee was living with us -- and I believe when I moved into San Francisco where Lee and I and my brother moved to a little apartment up on Russian Hill. Did I introduce Lee to Gordon and Jacqueline.

PK: Lee says yes.

JS: Okay, then I did.

PK: He said you already knew them and through you he met them, those very historical poets.

JS: Yes. That's right. So as we became friends, they did move to Telegraph Hill and he had a beautiful studio there and up above that or below that was where he lived and all. Everything was beautiful and done with great sophistication, the food, the wines, everything. It wasn't painters who were suffering. There was money there. They had just come up from Mexico and were full of this Mexican mystique of the Indian and that's where, finally, Wolfgang Paalen came up for visits and then finally he came up to stay. He brought a great deal to both Gordon and Lee because Wolfgang was one of these European intellectuals, very tense, and with him was his wife Luchita, a beautiful South American woman.

PK: Obviously you first met Jacqueline and Gordon and you obviously became friends. Apparently they invited you back more times and so to a degree you became part of a circle. Which at that point, I can't imagine was too big because he was new to the area.

JS: Yes.

PK: Do you recall when you first met Paalen?

JS: Well, it must've been -- now I'd have to go back and look at some of my files, if I have them. That doesn't clearly tell you the exact time but I can tell when I did the Dynaton book and when they moved from Telegraph [Hill] to Mill Valley was a very critical moment because that was the moment when Paalen went to live with Gordon in Mill Valley in this big, old marvelous house and that was a very important period for Lee -- which I could never quite decipher correctly. Dynaton came out in 1951, the book and the exhibition.

PK: Yes. I believe that's right.

JS: Frank did take a movie of that exhibition but it's been lost, forever, I guess.

PK: Too bad you don't have it.

JS: Yes, I wish I had it. It was in color, too. Frank, by that time, was working on films and he had something with a museum program -- he was doing some things for a museum on art. But Wolfgang Paalen was very intense and we did have a lot of things to talk about. We talked and he was interested in printing because he had done it in Mexico. He published a magazine called, was it, Du, Dyn, one of those. Ever seen those magazines he did?

PK: I know a little bit about them.

JS: They're very interesting, very important because they were very precursor of a lot of that whole interest in the Northwest Indian cultures and totem poles. He had different writers and he wrote on a journey he took up in that area. So we're talking about the '40's.

PK: Did he recount these stories?

JS: Oh yes. He was always talking about the American Indians. He was very versed and very well read and very well-knowledgeable about those areas. He had done exhibitions on American Indians also in the pre-Columbian work. He collected a lot of that stuff which, turned out to be the end of his life. Another story.

PK: It turned out to be the end of his life?

JS: Well, that's ...

PK: Well, okay, that's another story. Getting back to this particular time, it's obviously of great interest, how you found them, I mean, what they were like, basically, your connection with Dynaton?

JS: Well, I had done already a book -- first book Gordon had ever done, Towards A New Subject In Painting. Ever seen that one? I was the first printer. That was done in 40-something -- '48 ...

PK: Sounds right.

JS: Yes. At that time I think Adrian and I worked together.

PK: Adrian Wilson?

JS: Adrian Wilson. What'd I say?

PK: No, I was just clarifying that Adrian is Adrian Wilson.

JS: Yes, Adrian. And so I knew Gordon on this level now -- his book. He wanted me to do the book. We worked together on it and we published it. I think he had a show at the museum, Museum of Modern Art [San Francisco Museum of Art], a show of Gordon's work. From that time on we were close friends. I would go to his house a lot. I moved, eventually, from San Francisco to Marin County. Right above -- I lived right above him.

PK: Oh yes?

JS: In Mill Valley.

PK: You lived above Gordon?

JS: Yes, up on another street.

PK: Okay. Let's be clear on this. Were you married to Josephine then?

JS: Yes. I got married in 1948 so I remember bringing my first wife, Paula to Gordon's house.

PK: That's your daughter, your oldest daughter?

JS: Yes. Isn't that funny?

PK: To show her off?

JS: To show her off. So Wolfgang Paalen comes a little bit later with Dynaton. He generates and rallies around Gordon and Lee and Jacqueline, a new manifesto -- a new way of expressing the world of paint and writing. You read those essays -- they're pretty good. Have you ever read them? Paalen had a poetic way of writing.

PK: I've looked at them but I haven't read them.

JS: They're quite good.

PK: How did you feel about these ideas? I mean, even before the project itself, doing these.

JS: Well, I was, maybe, entranced by them and their work and there were all kinds of interesting ideas flying around and different people. I was very supportive of it. I wasn't critical of it.

PK: But no doubt it was exciting? I mean, it has a certain energy about it?

JS: Sure.

PK: It must've been very persuasive because you're with these people who were intellectuals.

JS: Well, yes, very cultured, high-cultured people. Wolfgang was one of those Viennese-German who could speak four or five languages. So they were very enjoyable to be with.

PK: Did they expect you to adopt their ideas? Not that they'd give you tests on that, but was there a sense that this was a real collaboration and that it was a project together?

JS: No, I don't think so. I remember we were looking at an exhibition at the museum and it was some famous painting by Braque or I don't think it was his painting. He said, "Jack, you have to bring something to the painting. You just can't sit there. It has to be interaction. You have to bring some intelligence, some sensibility."

PK: This was Gordon that said that?

JS: No, this was Paalen. And you just can't look at it and say, "That's fine". That's not enough. You have to bring some knowledge, some understanding of where this is coming from.

PK: How are you supposed to get that understanding? Did you ask him?

JS: What he meant by that was that you have to learn how to see.

PK: Well, did you get the feeling that he felt, though, that the ...

JS: Well, yes, he had his vision, his special way of looking into a painting and what he was trying to do.

PK: Did you get the sense that to the properly educated viewer, Paalen's ideas would become manifest -- they would become clear as his own vision, his ideas ...

JS: Oh, I think so.

PK: His art would communicate.

JS: He had his own agenda. He had a way of intellectualizing it more than any of the other two. Jacqueline could intellectualize it in the kind of rhetoric of poetry and language. She tried to break that world of words and a linear structure. That was her thing. She wasn't a painter. She did a lot of writing. Not much was published.

PK: How did the Dynaton project come about? At least to the extent you could observe it?

JS: I think it was a terrific effort to make an impact of the world of modern art. They were ... just this energy ... they had hoped that it would, kind of, take off from the ground, kind of get lifted into the world of modern art as a meaningful thing like abstract expressionism. It would have that legitimacy. And actually, it never did. It lifted off to a point and then it seemed to not have caught the imagination. I think that what the problem was that the people like Clyfford Still and those people were absolutely against them, I think.

PK: They thought they were on the wrong track, perhaps?

JS: Yes, because these fellows were Europeans, basically.

PK: Oh, you think that was a factor?

JS: I think that was a factor. I intuit that. They were not from here. You have, Bischoff?

PK: Elmer Bischoff.

JS: You have Diebenkiorn, Clyfford Still and David Park, all these who were, in a sense, coming out of their own environment.

PK: In other words, there was a national sense coming out of American experience. Is that right?

JS: Yes, well, with a more regionalism, maybe, coming from here. This is how I felt it, at the time, because I didn't traffic with these other guys.
PK: Did you get some of this from the observations of your friends, of Lee and Paalen and Gordon?

JS: Well, I think at that time there was the California School of Fine Arts. There was this fellow, the director of it, he had some influence.

PK: [Douglas] MacAgy?

JS: MacAgy. He was an intellectual for intellectuals. He had somewhat of an important role to play in getting some of these California artists out in the world and I just think that Wolfgang expected that this would really take off and Gordon felt the same because he had in Dynaton, the text -- you find about the Pacific, the Orient, the Indians, the totem poles, this new mystique ... the new world of ... it's no longer surreal, it's something else, and it's coming together and their manifesto. I don't know why it didn't, but it didn't. If they had all the intellectual equipment, all the right approaches -- maybe you could say, well they weren't great painters. I don't know. The thing I see today ... what goes for a new legitimate -isms without anything to back it up but just sheer dribble. It's astonishing. I think the new school with Diebenkorn, these guys were really serious. They're language was different. Their ancestors were maybe the same, I don't know. But I believe that Wolfgang might have thrived better in New York. I don't know.

PK: Did they seem optimistic? When you were working with them, did they really have great expectations?

JS: Oh yes. They were just terrific.

PK: They were going to transform modern art. Is that it?

JS: Well, no, I don't say transform. They were going to make an important statement and they did have some followers. Dick Bowman, down there in Redwood City, you know him?

PK: I'm not sure.

JS: Why it never gained momentum and legitimacy, is what they wanted? Who can tell? If you look back, maybe you could say, "It was too late for them". They were the custodians of an end of a period. I don't know.

PK: I think that that's very well said or observed. What about in your specific involvement? What can you tell me about the process of doing the book?

JS: Oh, that was a lot of fun.

PK: I mean, how was it working with the three artists, who played which roles?

JS: Oh, we all worked together. Wolfgang was very interested in the cover and he did a lot. We had a lot of fun doing it.

PK: Where did you work on it?

JS: Well, they loved to come to Greenwood.

PK: Now, where was Greenwood?

JS: It was 519 Sansome Street, near Clay and Sansome. We used to all go have lunch at Jack's.

PK: It wasn't all too far from where you are now?

JS: No, not too far. They just loved it and worked on it. It was discussing it in the evenings and this was going to be the manifesto. This was going to put them into orbit.

PK: How much did you have to do with the ... I mean, working with artists, sometimes, can be difficult because they want to call all the shots.

JS: No, that wasn't so bad.

PK: They listened to you?

JS: Yes. I think, it was three artists working together on it. When you have one artist, they're a little more focused, but they seemed to share. They put their own egos aside.

PK: Who chose the type?

JS: Oh, I did all that.

PK: So you basically designed it and chose the type.

JS: Yes. There were three color reproductions. The plates were made in Mexico just because Paalen could get them done cheaper there. But we didn't do that, we sort of created a color feel for it, just by the way he put it together.

PK: How do you mean? I don't understand.

JS: Well, it wasn't a photograph of a painting. It's something he created. It's like he puts four colors against each other -- you'd have two separate things if you put it together. It was made for that particular piece.

PK: Were these like films you made of the super ...

JS: Well, he made some ... it wasn't done the normal way. I'd have to look at it. Do you have the book here?

PK: No, I wish I did.

JS: I could get you one.

PK: You can? Yes.

JS: A little faded one, but I'll get you one.

PK: Oh good.

JS: I should've brought it today.

PK: Well so, it was in effect a pretty straight-forward job for you?

JS: Yes. It was nice.

PK: Did they pay?

JS: Oh, sure.

PK: Did they pay well?

JS: Oh, I can't remember.

PK: And, again, this it through the museum?

JS: Yes, museum publication. I think the museum paid for it or helped pay for it.

PK: Do you remember who the curator was?

JS: I can't remember.

PK: Was it Morley herself?

JS: No, I think Freeman. He writes the introduction to it.

PK: It sounds like a great project.

JS: Yes, it was. It was one of those experiences that I would imagine that they were recreating like a Paris. It wasn't all separated. We were all kind of socially apart. We'd do the book together and there was a unity.

PK: The whole thing was a project. This must have been for you and Lee, the realization of what you had talked about.

JS: Yes. That's right.

PK: This is what you had envisioned.

JS: Actually, it was part of Europe that came and settled here and they tried to create their myths -- their dreams.

PK: Alright. Do you feel that there was a romantic component to the whole business, especially for you and for Lee?

JS: Romantic? Well, no, I don't think so. I think that each of us was steeped in our own relationship with each other and what we had hoped to accomplish. I thought I was a small participant in that experience that they were trying to develop. I thought there were authentic, mysterious creative forces going out between these painters and they were trying to do something. It was, I mean, romantic ... well, I mean, that's possible but I thought we were right in the center of the creative storm, if you want to describe it... juices.

PK: Well, by romantic, I guess, I meant just that a romantic notion that you held of what it was like. What you imagine it to be like in Paris.

JS: No, I never did that. No. I meditate on the idea that transplanting a particular kind of culture -- aesthetic culture -- to another part of the world. How it grows from that transplant. And especially, I think, the war had a lot to do with it. How it changed the whole way one asked questions about the painter and his role. What I think the Dynaton thing, maybe in hindsight, as we look back onto it, it's failure -- that it did maybe failed then but possibly as we fully find ourselves in, I call, the "chaos" of art, we'll find that there's something there that those people could not see at that time and that there is a re-evaluating of that thing we could not see. In that sense, it resonates a little bit differently later on as we get to the 21st century...

[TAPE 3, SIDE A]

JS: ...trying to draw some feelings about renewal of what was possibly they were trying to do. I have always

looked at these three painters through different points of view. I knew Lee's work way before I knew Gordon's work or Paalan's work. Lee's first early works, when he showed it to me in the Army days, were very figurative portraits, landscapes. The influence that Gordon had on him, I think, was quite amazing or his world that he was coming into. I remember when Lee started to paint in San Mateo, I used to have a printer's ink knife and one day he asked if I could give it to him. He'd start -- not with a brush -- but with this ink knife, and some of those early works, which I think were just brilliant and beautifully done. I thought Lee was the better of the painters. His early things, I'm not saying the later things, he had a sense of the Southwest. The colors and the way he could arrange the canvas, I was closer to his work. Gordon's was more difficult for me to get into. Not to say that they were not equal to Lee's but they were just different. They didn't speak to me immediately. I thought Lee had a more spontaneous approach to it. Now, Wolfgang was the real intellectual. He knew all the nuances of the European surface and surreal and so he had great facility. Not that he was an amazing painter but different than Lee or Gordon. I thought he had a little more going for him than Gordon. Gordon 's palette didn't seem as free. I think Gordon has developed over the years and at certain periods I like his work very much, and during the Dynaton period I thought it was very good, too. I didn't want to compare them but they were in a sense different.

PK: You felt more of an affinity with Lee's work? You used the word "spontaneity". It seemed more spontaneous. Do you think that in some ways that may represent Lee himself and his own experience as an American from the South or Southwest?

JS: Well, I think in the text of the Dynaton, or even in Towards the New Subject Painting, which Gordon wrote, that he sees in Lee this new hope, this new vision of the American painter fused with the European.

PK: With the rigor and discipline and culture and tradition.

JS: Yes. They were kicking him on.

PK: He was responding though, I mean. Is that right?

JS: Oh yes.

PK: Well did you talk with him? You introduced him to Gordon and then, of course, Paalen showed up, so that's how that came about. But did you talk with him -- you must have, he was living with you -- after his first meeting with Onslow Ford?

JS: Well, see, Lee was a very quiet, reserved young man. He didn't say too much. He was very quiet. So he never had dialogue with me about his paintings. He would look at it and he would be kind of amused at what he's done, and smile at me, "Jack?" He didn't go into any intellectual reasons, any cosmic forces or metaphysical mysterious things that he was trying to bring out in his paintings. The only thing he would meditate on was the Indian Southwestern motifs as inspirations, but he wouldn't get too verbal about it. Wolfgang was very verbal, but Gordon, not so much.

PK: Were they all intimidated by Wolfgang, in a sense?

JS: No, they felt very close to him because he was their prophet, their voice. And once he was out of that -- I think there's another element. Once he felt that [they were] not doing what he felt, he left. They lost a very important voice. He was the one that gave it that intellectual support. He gave it some foundation.

PK: He provided the foundation, the framework, the armature. Now when Lee first came to visit you, he actually describes it as if it wasn't just visiting, it was almost a pilgrimage in that he was really leaving behind everything else.

JS: Oh yes.

PK: He was casting his lot in his new Paris, his Paris -- San Francisco. But for a period of time then he was actually painting in your house in San Mateo.

JS: Oh yes.

PK: And he had his room and that's where he set up his ...

JS: Yes. Well, actually, we had a room down near the garage where he painted, and he slept upstairs. Up in the second floor, I believe we had an extra room up there. "Will you paint down there?"

PK: How long was this living arrangement in that house?

JS: Let's see. Oh, a year maybe. Then we all moved up to Grover Street. It was called the "Grover Street Days".

PK: Where's that?

JS: It's on Russian Hill, a little street.

PK: Did you buy a place there with the money from your folks?

JS: No, I didn't. I should have done that.

PK: Should have done that, Jack.

JS: I was stupid.

PK: Oh well. So you sold the house?

JS: No, I didn't sell the house. My uncle sold the house.

PK: Didn't you and Frank -- weren't you the ...

JS: Well, Frank and I have a brother, Bob.

JS: And he died some 25 years ago. He was my twin brother. That's a whole other story.

PK: I didn't know that.

JS: Yes. See, my twin brother was not involved in art or writing or books. He was a totally physical man. His only achievement in the world was he became, at 18, National Bicycle Champion.

PK: That's an achievement.

JS: Sure is. But anyway, that's another story.

PK: And that's what inspired Mario [Jack's son]?

JS: Maybe, I don't know.

PK: Well, he rode bikes for a while, didn't he?

JS: No, I've been riding bicycles all my life but ...

PK: So, is this where you got your bicycle interest?

JS: Well, we learned to ride bicycles when we were young.

PK: I'm not sure that anybody who listens to this tape will quite understand.

JS: Well, that's a whole other world about the bicycle. [Stauffacher produced a book on bicycle polo]

PK: Well, we know about that. Well, alright, so back to Lee. He was painting in your place, and then you moved the three of you to this other place. Did he get his own studio?

JS: For a short period, yes. I think he found a studio in North Beach. I'm not sure. But before we left The Greenwood in San Mateo, I did print a little book of his, A Gain of Aft.

PK: Oh, he mentioned that. Tell me about that.

JS: He did the illustrations and he wrote the poetry. It was totally his creation. He was struck with great fascination with Gertrude Stein and this Gain Of Aft. I will have to show it -- have you ever -- you've never seen it?

PK: I've never seen it.

JS: I thought it was a nice little book.

PK: He's very inventive.

JS: Yes. He's really handy with a pen. He could do all kinds of interesting -- and we'd call ourselves the Illuminate.

PK: You called yourselves the Illuminate?

JS: Yes. 1947 we did.

PK: That's early, but what about the dynamic with this group, this interesting group in which you participated. You certainly were an observer. You described your view of their work. How you would compare them, the differences between these three.

JS: I wouldn't go that far. Some paintings I liked -- there were quite different kinds of textures, surfaces.

PK: Yes. But they were different. But is there anything you can tell me about the dynamic among or between them. How they operated together? How things played out because, Lee, at one point, lived in the Onslow Ford's house. You referred to it earlier as very important because, of course, as we know, Lee ended up with [Luchita] the wife of Paalen. What about that sort of soap opera side?

JS: Well, that was a very deep and, at that time, I couldn't fathom what was going on in the Mill Valley house.

PK: But you probably went there to visit sometimes.

JS: Well, yes. I gather that Paalen was having some difficulties with Luchita and Lee was always, as I said, a very quiet, a polite gentleman and he wasn't a womanizer. He never really was too interested in women.

PK: Until Luchita.

JS: Until Luchita. To whom he's still married. That was the woman of his life and Wolfgang was suffering, I mean, his ego was eating him. Somehow he had this is another element that has nothing to do with Gordon or Lee but he would always -- I would talk with him, he would always say, "Jack, if I don't make it now, I'll never make it". I mean, he was just, like he wanted to be a real illuminator of the art world.

PK: A major player.

JS: Major. I mean, he wanted to be like Duchamp and those guys.

PK: He was highly ambitious.

JS: Oh. I think it destroyed him. But he was a fellow who'd had always support. Women would latch onto him, women in the back from a shadowy world --a Swiss lady who doted on him and supported him. But they were always in the back stage. He was in turmoil, I think, at this time and then when Luchita left him, he was just unable to deal with the world so he just left. That might have had something to do with the problem Dynaton's. I don't know.

PK: And this is speculation, but do you think if there hadn't been this domestic business ...

JS: I can't say. I was not as privy to that information. All I knew there was some tension, some real tension. And it surprised all us that Lee is the seducer or the one that -- or is seduced, let me put it that way, by this very powerful and attractive woman. I mean, she got real energy. And she was always very, you just always very -- she has a very good mind and she talked well and she was very supportive of Wolfgang. I don't know what happened.

PK: Well, let me put the question a different way. Obviously, you can only give your point of view but you're involvement with the project, with Dynaton and the book. Was your sense that they saw their group as a movement that would continue to achieve it's goals because, as a matter of fact, for whatever reason, it didn't continue. Were they looking to the future? Did they see themselves as a combination, a unified group here striving together to achieve goals?

JS: Well, I don't think even in the -- when you think of the abstract expressionists in New York -- the different personalities that were part of that group, I think they were separate but part of something and I think Gordon, basically, has got his own individual posture -- Lee has. I think they needed each other at that point.

PK: At that moment?

JS: That's what I think.

PK: It was not a marriage?

JS: No. I think it was where Paalen came and gave the whole thing intellectual energy and they could march along with him on that moment. And once he wasn't there, the thing didn't have the energy or -- each one went on his own.

PK: Well, what about you? Did you keep up with any of the group? Presumably Gordon, but what did that do to your involvement with Paalen and Lee and Gordon? That moment was over, then you went your own way, I suppose.

JS: Well, actually, after 1951 I'm now a little bit vague on this, Gordon moved from Mill Valley to Inverness, where he was then getting involved more and more with Zen, Japanese calligraphy and, I think, at that moment he was starting to find other ways to reinforce his ideology or his way of painting and Lee, I think, went to Southern California. I don't know exactly when. And then I went to Europe.

PK: That's right.

JS: And then I went to Europe and I was away from San Francisco for eight years.

PK: When did you go to Europe?

JS: '55.

PK: Okay. Well, that was a bit afterwards.

JS: Yes.

PK: Because Lee, maybe in 1951, '50, '51 went down to -- and ended up, of course, finally teaching a course at UCLA for many years but -- you then went to -- so, in a sense, the breakup or change with this group then brought a change for you, as well. You were -- that phase was over.

JS: Yes. It was sort of like a meteor going [swish sound] sort of died right there. And maybe when you maybe premeditate something too much it doesn't take shape. It's intellectualized hope and sometimes I believe the abstract expressionists were in the right time and that right place and the right elements to make it do... make it do -- it was a meteor but it lasted much longer -- what is, 20 years or 15 years?

PK: Well, they also had the support curatorial, theoretical, and Dynaton seemed to happen almost in a strange way, in a vacuum. It seems like an anomaly.

JS: Oh yes. Yes. There was no real hard criticism against it or for it. I mean, it was -- there might have been pleasant reviews of it but it was no one taking them -- like, possibly, like a polemic, like Wolfgang would have loved. Even if they didn't like it he would thrust back and say, "Listen, this -- you got it all wrong. You're sitting there judging and you don't even know what you're talking about".

PK: He didn't even have that opportunity.

JS: No, he never had that opportunity. Whereas the abstract expressionists –- there was a polemics, all over the place.

PK: Well, let me ask you one more question about them before turning then again to you and your later projects and enterprises with other artists and your own great poets, including classical ones. Your conversations again with these three and in connection with your observations that they were up against an ascendancy or ascending star of American art? Abstract expressionism, which, to a large degree pretended it had nothing to do with European modernism.

JS: Yes.

PK: This is nationalistic in a strange way -- almost a political kind of thing that they were authentic of America.

JS: Yes.

PK: Dynaton, not so, because as you pointed out, that clearly this was the old world coming and perching in San Francisco for a brief, very brief period of time, pulling in poor Lee Mullican to make them legitimate on the American side. They were savvy folks. They knew what was going in the art world -- what was going on. They were ambitious, especially Paalen, and for that matter, Gordon.

JS: Oh yes, Gordon. Yes, very much so.

PK: My guess would be Lee, in a sense, even less so.

JS: Less so. Yes.

PK: But did they ever comment on this? On the world in which they [were] operating, what they were competing

with? This is a long question.

JS: I don’t know. All I can say is that the influences of modern art -- be they on the abstract expressionists -- were not, in a sense, on their own. They were not isolated from the influence of Europe because Europe had made a tremendous impact coming through Mondrian, coming through Braque, Picasso. I mean, these guys had a tremendous influence on the sensibilities of the artists of this country. I don’t say that the abstract expressionists were -- I mean, they were trying to find their own authenticity. They were -- “Okay, we’ve had enough. Let’s try to deal with our abstractions, our things, our material in our way”. And so they did. But they -- I don’t know if -- that doesn’t mean that they blocked out the influences because they were obviously there. They were just taking something and extending it beyond the frontiers. They were just pushing it a little bit further, their way.

PK: Yes, I think that’s true, but did your guys -- your gang -- at that moment, did they see themselves in almost a competitive mode?

JS: I cannot recall..

PK: Them talking about ...

JS: ... them talking that obviously. They were more in tune with the climate of art at the time. But they were trying to resurrect or restore the surreal automatism. They were echoing all this, Breton, and all this -- The Dream and psychology.

PK: Well, they were out of Surrealism.

JS: Yes. And they were bringing this and they were trying, out of that, to create a new plastic art. Whereas the other people in New York were less so.

PK: So they didn’t, in your experience, talk about abstract expressionism ...

JS: No. Maybe later on after the whole thing is ...

PK: That’s interesting because one would think that they would.

JS: No. I think they were so immersed in their own climate -- their world -- and they were talking about Breton and a lot of people didn’t know who Breton was and so they were explaining who these people were. And I don’t know if the abstract expressionists were not talking about these guys. The View magazine came out, the surrealist magazine.

PK: Oh yes.

JS: So, that’s all I can say about that.

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... *December 2, 2004*