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Oral history interview with Lewis W. and Erica Beckh Rubenstein, 1993 February 23

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Lewis W. Rubenstein and Erica Beckh Rubenstein on February 23, 1993. The interview took place in [], and was conducted by Stephen Polcari for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

STEPHEN POLCARI: —speak into this.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Where would you like us to sit?

STEPHEN POLCARI: Right here. Right here is fine. This is right between you, and I'm right you, and I'm right here. I'm right here.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: You want to move that around, or—

STEPHEN POLCARI: I'll move this up. This is February.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Let me see if the kettle is boiling before we start.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Okay. This is February 23, 1993. Stephen Polcari for the Archives of American Art speaking to Lewis and Erica Rubenstein.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: A little more comfortable in here?

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, this is fine. This is fine. All right, and this just goes. Try to make it unobtrusive. But you two met in the '30s during the—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well, we met—we were both teaching at Vassar College. I first came here in, I guess it was 1939. She was teaching art history, and I was teaching studio art in the art department. That's where we met.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Uh-huh [affirmative]. So this was after your travels in Italy, which were at the beginning of the decade.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yes, I was in Italy in the early '30s.

STEPHEN POLCARI: That was possible. So you made the grand tour. You just went to Italy and studied the Italian at—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well, I traveled. After I graduated from Harvard, went to Europe with a classmate, and I traveled around Germany, Italy, France.

STEPHEN POLCARI: You went with uh, Rico Labrun?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: No, no, I met him later. In 1932 I was uh—no, I guess I'd gotten a Harvard fellowship to study for a couple of years. [00:02:02]

STEPHEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. To study art?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: The art in Europe.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, you had decided to be an artist at that time?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well yeah, I decided when I was in college.

STEPHEN POLCARI: In college. Uh-huh [affirmative].

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Actually a long time before.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Do you want milk and sugar or black?

STEPHEN POLCARI: Well, usually black. It depends on how strong the coffee is.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: When I was in Rome, 1931 it was, I was looking around for a fresco teacher, and I met Rico Lebrun at a party for a cousin of mine Nessa Cohen who was a sculptor. And uh, we were both sitting off in the corner not very much interested in the party. We were both dragged—then we started talking to each other and found we were both looking for a fresco teacher, one to study. So we got together, and we found a painter named Guy Berti.

STEPHEN POLCARI: That's right.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And we studied with him in his studio.

STEPHEN POLCARI: He was just an independent painter?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Beg your pardon?

STEPHEN POLCARI: He was just an independent painter that you—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: He had done mural work. He was essentially a technician. He didn't make any great reputation, but what we wanted was to learn the fresco technique.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Technique, and you went over—you had this in mind partially because of the Mexican mural movement already, or—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Oh no, the Mexican—

STEPHEN POLCARI: —you were just generally interested? Thank you very much.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Would you like a little tea?

STEPHEN POLCARI: No, no, I'm perfectly fine. Oh, well.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Actually, the time I got interested in the Mexican mural movement was after I returned from Europe in the mid-'30s, and all American painters—mural painters were interested in the Mexican movement. [00:04:00]

STEPHEN POLCARI: That's right. There were probably two sources of movement, Paris and Mexico. Yeah, they've sort of been equated. That's somewhat been forgotten.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: But I like Mexico. Mexico had the most influence on the American mural painters.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Oh absolutely, yes. That's right. So you studied for how long in Italy?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Oh, at that time I was maybe off and on, I'd been there a year or two. Of course I saw great murals and—

STEPHEN POLCARI: You traveled all over and saw everything?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —traveled all over to see them before I started doing it.

STEPHEN POLCARI: You had been doing studio art at Harvard already?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yes.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So you had some skills and had developed. At that time you must have been 21 or 22 when you went over.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, just about then. I'd done drawing and painting all my life, really.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So you travel around, and you got an education. You got this technique. It was buon fresco, the old technique?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yes, yes, true fresco.

STEPHEN POLCARI: That must have stood you in good stead when you came back to the United States because of course there was a revived interest in that here because of the mural movement.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well, when I came back it was a time of great interest in mural art, and a great many of

the painters were interested, and I knew a number of them.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes, well that was the big outpouring of it. But you must have had a step up on most people because you had this special training?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well, we—actually Rico and I were among the very few who knew true fresco. [00:06:07]

STEPHEN POLCARI: That's right. And others had to teach themselves, and what they really did was do canvas and attach it to the wall.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And I did fresco teaching at the Boston Museum School.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Uh-huh, uh-huh [affirmative], during the '30s, at that time?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: During the '30s because I finished my—I did frescoes in the Harvard museums in 1935 to '37.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Which museums? You know, I know this. I'm going to Massachusetts on Saturday, and I want to look them up.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well the first one was in the Fogg Museum, and the—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Which part of the Fogg?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Downstairs at the end of the corridor there.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: They are in a closet now. They're thick. Well no, they're there unless they've changed. But the last time I saw them they had put a closet, an art picture storage space in front of the murals and you couldn't see them. Now whether they've changed that—

STEPHEN POLCARI: That's directly down the stairs—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: That's down—it's down in the lower floor. Yeah, because I looked for it.

STEPHEN POLCARI: —I've been down there dozens of times.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Actually, it was right next to the men's room there. I painted that mural [laughs] to the sound of flushing waters.

STEPHEN POLCARI: I know that place. I've been to that men's room many a time.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Well, that—

STEPHEN POLCARI: It was a Caravagesque or something. Very Italian stuff. I remember.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: You probably have seen it.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes, oh yes. That's right. How ironic.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: There was construction, the scene of a—wasn't it the artist sitting on scaffold?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, something.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: I don't know if they're uncovered now. [00:08:01] They've uncovered—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I think on that one I was influenced by Rivera, because as I remember he had a mural where he was painting on the—

STEPHEN POLCARI: On a scaffold. It's in San Francisco with, now the San Francisco Art Institute. Well how did this come about? You were commissioned by Harvard to do this while you were teaching at the Museum School?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: No, I didn't start teaching until after I finished my frescoes in the Germanic Museum, and that I spent a couple of years on. I did that after the—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: You didn't mention the mural upstairs in the Fogg, in the conservation department.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well, actually I did that first.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: That one you can see.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: When I came back from Europe I found that not only other painters were interested in doing murals, but they all—and I've said—we all want to do murals on what we thought were urgent social scenes.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh absolutely.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: We thought of the mural not as decoration but as a form for expressing ideas about what was going on.

STEPHEN POLCARI: That's right, a form about history and society, and past, and present, and future.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: So I guess fairly soon after I came back from that, with that in mind, I went down to Washington on one of these Washington marches. I think it was called a hunger [march]—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Hunger in those days, yes. I remember.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: It was a left wing project. And I went down primarily just to see what was going on. I went in one of the trucks down to Washington. It was a very rough time. We slept out on the floor of churches. [00:10:01] When we got to Washington we slept out on—they wouldn't let us into Washington. We slept out on a hill in the cold winter.

STEPHEN POLCARI: That's right. They blocked—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: They blocked the entrance. But when I came back I made a number of paintings out of that, and really mural designs, and Rico came back from Europe. He stayed on, and so we took a studio together in New York.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Where?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: On 14th Street near 7th Avenue.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh yeah, sure. It's still a very lively area.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And models—we made mural designs, and for models we had endless sorts of models, all these unemployed fellas around Union Square.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh yes.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: So we made a lot of drawings in the studio there. And then Harvard agreed to let me paint these murals up in the fourth floor of the Fogg, what is now the conservation department—well, I guess it was then. When I first came back I did a large section of a Signorelli fresco—[inaudible]. And then—

STEPHEN POLCARI: How did this commission come about though? Here you are. You're working in New York.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well I was on the Harvard fellowship, you see.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh that's right. That's the connection.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, who commissioned you? Was it Forbes?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yes.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: It was Forbes.

STEPHEN POLCARI: It was Forbes for the Harvard?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Edward Forbes, yeah. And he objected to that particular figure because it had a red, white, and blue codpiece in it. [00:12:00]

STEPHEN POLCARI: That was his objection, too patriotic?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah [laughs].

STEPHEN POLCARI: [Laughs.] He thought you were setting—putting in a subtle message over here?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: I see.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: But the spring after that—[Rico]—had been working for three months on these mural designs and large figures. I asked Harvard to let us paint the mural up on that—in the Fogg on the fourth floor there, and they let us do it. And we painted that mural together. And we—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Tell him the subject.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: The subject was this Washington march.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes, go ahead. It was the Wash—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And we would paint on it. The way we painted it, we used the drawings that both of us had made. Basically I think they were my designs because I knew—the material was mine, but the designs we made together, and the cartoons and—we did together. And the way we did it was one day I would set up, do the plastering, and he would paint, and the next day he would do the plastering, and I would paint. We'd alternate—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh terrific.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —sections that way on it.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Now we're talking about the Harvard thing?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Over here?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: The fourth—it exists now on the fourth floor of the Fogg Museum, and it's in very good shape.

STEPHEN POLCARI: I have to see those. I'll visit the men's room and take a look right there again, hey. [00:14:01]

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: There's no men's room up there, but you can see—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: No, he means downstairs.

STEPHEN POLCARI: I'll do the downstairs too.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I heard somewhere the one downstairs had been uncovered, but I don't know.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: I'm curious to know.

STEPHEN POLCARI: I remember.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: I'd be interested to know.

STEPHEN POLCARI: I mean, I remember seeing—because I grew up in Belmont, so I've been in and out for many, many years.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Did you go to Harvard, or?

STEPHEN POLCARI: No, I went to Columbia.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Oh.

STEPHEN POLCARI: But I worked there. I've always done the museums and things like that. So I've seen—I've been in and out of there since the '60s, the early '60s. So the fate of things probably has altered over the years, but there may have been times when it was more accessible because, as I said, I remember. I remember these things there. So you did those. That took how long?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: That took, oh, maybe, not too long, maybe a couple of months.

STEPHEN POLCARI: And the theme, how did you choose the theme?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Because I'd been on this Washington march, and I wanted very much to do something that was—our idea was to use the—we were steeped in the Renaissance concept of mural painting and fresco paint, but we wanted to use it for contemporary themes, and I found this theme in the march and wanted to use it.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So that became your subject, so it was drawn from the social upheavals of the '30s and the —

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, that's right.

STEPHEN POLCARI: —upheavals of the '30s. Well yes, which you felt, is the entire generation of it.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: That of course was during the Depression.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Uh-uh [affirmative]. Very sympathetic.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Mixed with the Depression.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, and so this was, what, what's the date on this, '33-'34?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Nineteen thirty-four, '35, and then right after that in '35 I did the mural in the Fogg museum. And then, after that I did the, I was commissioned to the murals in the Germanic Museum. [00:16:03]

STEPHEN POLCARI: By that you mean the Busch-Reisinger it's called?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Then it was—

STEPHEN POLCARI: It was. They just changed it.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: It was originally the Germanic. Then it was changed to the Busch-Reisinger, and now it's called—well I'm paraphrasing—it's called Busch Hall.

STEPHEN POLCARI: And where are they now? I've been in that building, I used to eat lunch there.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: It's the same place, what was the Busch-Reisinger Museum in the entrance hall.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Are they still there?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: They're still there. In fact, just a couple years ago they were restored to permanent view.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh terrific, terrific, wonderful.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And there was a long controversy to get them. They were covered for a while and—maybe in the '60s.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, surely.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And they were covered for some time, and then they were uncovered in the—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Must have been the '70s.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: When they—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: No, two years ago, wasn't it?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: They were uncovered and then covered again, and then finally uncovered and put on permanent view.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: We went up a couple of years ago.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: A couple of years ago. And I have all the correspondence about that—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh, terrific.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —which I've given the Archives [of American Art], correspondence—largely with president Bok of Harvard, but a lot of other people got into it. I'm giving all that original correspondence to the Archives.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Well tell them too about the controversy while you were doing it.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: There was a great controversy. I painted it in 1935, '36. The subject was ostensibly the *Ring of the Nibelheim* and the Norse legend, but it was actually an anti-fascist, an anti-war painting, and those, of course, were the [inaudible] at the time. [00:18:08] It was the time of the rise of Hitler.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Rise of Adolf, yeah.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And the first mural, supposedly, the Nibelheim with Alberich, the dwarf—

STEPHEN POLCARI: And you gave him certain features. [Laughs.]

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: But I really intended Alberich to be Hitler and the—what he was doing in Germany.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So you were using this Germanic myth to make subtle allusions to contemporary—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —wanted to make statements about what was going on in—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: You weren't so subtle either. [Laughs.]

STEPHEN POLCARI: So they were picked up, that became the controversy?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well yes, and I would no sooner finish that than all the Boston papers got—it was the headlines, the front pages of all the Boston papers. I have the original clippings, which I'm giving to the Archives.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Terrific.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And there was a great controversy. In fact, the German embassy was very—

STEPHEN POLCARI: I was going to say.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —[inaudible]—about it, and they made a strong protest. They sent, in fact, they sent a —Peter Johnson, of course, his original name was Horace Johnson, a German, to study the art at Harvard. And they sent him over to make a report on it. He was favorably disposed to the mural, so he made the report that, I think in the report, that they needn't worry about them. [00:20:03] And the—

STEPHEN POLCARI: How did he rationalize it? How did he say it? I mean, he must have recognized the anti-Nazi —

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Actually, the line that Dr. Charles Kuhn, the director of the museum, made was that they were what they purported to be the *Ring of the Nibelheim—Ring of the Nibelungen* and anything else that people saw in them were—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Were projections.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —what they read into them. And really the Harvard Museum and particularly the Germanic Museum really stonewalled on that. They told me just to disappear for a couple of weeks—all the reporters in town and the country were trying to—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Get a story out of you, I'm sure.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —get a story on it. And Dr. Kuhn just told me to hide out for a couple—

STEPHEN POLCARI: That's right, it'll blow over.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —till this blew over, which is what I did. But there was still a lot of publicity on it. Anyway.

STEPHEN POLCARI: That sounds terrific. Well—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: You know, do you want to tell him what—the reason we think that they were covered later, it's all—you'll get it all in the material.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Because—well I'm not sure it comes out in the correspondence. The reason it's covered, I was told—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: In the '60s.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —in the, yes. I'm not sure the exact date, but the Germanic Museum and the Harvard Museum were seeking—very much in need of funds, and the source that they got, the source of funding, in fact, there are bronze plaques in the entrance to the museum still there—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: You can see them.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —stating the big donors, Germanic donors, western German donors, and I think they were people like Mercedes Benz and—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: IG Farben [ph]—maybe. [00:22:04]

STEPHEN POLCARI: Well—IG Farben—oh good.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well I'm not sure of the names, but they're there in bronze—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Krups.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —and in the entrance. I would never have found any evidence at all, but the—I was told that the there was an agreement that—on these big donors that the frescoes would be kept covered. But all the time they were covered and I was trying to get them uncovered the museum, Harvard Museums, took the point of view—and I have all the correspondence, that anybody wanted to see them could see them at any time. They were—

STEPHEN POLCARI: They could uncover them?

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: What did they have over to cover them?

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: They had panels, didn't they?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: They were covering the—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Masonite panels or something.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: The original covering were not so light. They had, they were very heavy wallboard coverings. But then when they were re-covered, I think it was in 1980—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: I don't know.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —they were recovered, it was my 50th reunion.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Oh.

STEPHEN POLCARI: You go in there, and there's a gothic arch entranceway.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: They're before the—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: They're in the lobby.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: They're before. They're right in the entrance foyer in the entranceway.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Behind they used to have the plaster casts—[inaudible].

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes, that's right.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Stuff like that.

STEPHEN POLCARI: They don't have those?

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: No, that's—

STEPHEN POLCARI: I haven't been in there in several years. They took them down?

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: That's gone now.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: But when they're—there was a battle to get them uncovered, and Arthur Beal, who was

the director of conservation at the Harvard Museums, had a fight with the then director of the museum. [00:24:06]

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh, there were several.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: That's all in the correspondence, I guess, but it's—and they refused to do it. And he put up such a battle that he went out. He got them uncovered and restored, and then I worked on them at that time. I think it was in June 1980. And then they were supposed to be uncovered, remain uncovered, but within the next year or so they were covered again by the director, direction of the Harvard Museum.

STEPHEN POLCARI: This is a battle royal.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: There was a real battle about it. And there was a great deal of controversy particularly in the *Harvard Crimson*, which I kept, about that. The editor at one time—and then the [inaudible] was none other than Caspar Weinberger who defended the mural as being what they were, as Germanic Norse legends.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh, that's what he said they were, the Norse legends. I mean, I have to look at these—because they're obvious as heck that they're Hitler—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, oh yeah, they're fascist.

STEPHEN POLCARI: —and then everybody's sort of seemingly talking around them and saying, “Oh no, Norse legends,” as not to offend.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And all those clippings I'm giving to Archives too.

STEPHEN POLCARI: I think that's terrific. That's terrific.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And I have a folder just on that Germanic controversy.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: You know, at one point our daughter was in Cambridge for some—she's a lawyer—for some meeting or something, and they said that if you notified in advance they would remove the cover, and you know, and our daughter wrote in advance, and she was not allowed to see the murals. [00:26:15] They would not uncover them for her.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Well, maybe that was [cross talk.]

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: These are all things that I wrote to president Bok too.

STEPHEN POLCARI: About Derek, yes, what did he have to say, Mr. Bok?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well—

STEPHEN POLCARI: They were eventually uncovered under his reign.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well, at first he tended to back up the museum directors.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh well, yeah, that's typical.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: But kept on at it, and finally he—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Well, a cousin of his, a friend of yours who was a cousin of president Bok phoned him.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: I think she got after him.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: And then I think he moved.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Then he moved on it.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: That was Polly, yeah.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And I may have some of the correspondence on that too.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Well, that's an auspicious beginning, I must say, right there in the middle of it all. This time they couldn't accuse you of communism or leftism, which is what they usually, a lot of those murals have a problem with.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I was never really leftist and certainly never communist, but I—

STEPHEN POLCARI: You assume everyone who's decent is sympathetic.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —I was very much interested in what was going on, and at that time in the mid-'30s the major struggle was against fascism and war.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes, that's right, certainly was. It was growing.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And it was imminent.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes, it was certainly imminent to anybody who could see by 1936 that it was—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Well that was the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, 1936.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And I felt that a mural painter working in those times could not ignore what was going on.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Absolutely, absolutely, and they didn't. [00:28:02] Actually, no one did because, I know I get off on this topic now, but as you did in study, everybody started doing war art after the '30s. They started doing a lot of war art, even those people who didn't do combat art did subjects related to the war very much. It was—[inaudible]. It was too dominant. It was the big theme. But I don't want to get off on that at this moment. So you did that for a couple of years. That must have—those are three commissions. That's terrific. So that took care of the mid-30s for you.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: That's right.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And then after I finished those Germanic murals, I took a year off, traveled around the country.

STEPHEN POLCARI: All right, let me finish a thought. Did we go—also work in Germanic things that you dropped out by then?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: No, no, I did those all myself. I had two or three assistants.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: You did sort of train several—I mean, people who worked with you. They really were trained.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yes, I had a real guild of fresco—we were called the guild of the pineapple, only because I like pineapples I guess, but I had several who worked with me on those Harvard frescoes.

STEPHEN POLCARI: And they're straight buon fresco?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well I did really—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Yes, that's true fresco.

STEPHEN POLCARI: True fresco, yeah.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: They're all true fresco. Chief of them was Gridley Barrows who's now an architect in Maine. He came to work with me while I was working on the Fogg frescoes. He was in—studying architecture at Harvard, and he left architecture school to work with me on that.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Elizabeth.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Elizabeth Tracy Montminy never actually worked with me, but she was doing fresco at the time Rico and I were doing—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Oh, I thought she worked with you. [00:30:02]

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —when Rico and I were painting those Washington march frescoes, Elizabeth, do you know her name? Elizabeth Tracy Montminy.

STEPHEN POLCARI: I remember the name Tracy.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: I remember the name Tracy [inaudible].

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, she was one of the Italianates.

STEPHEN POLCARI: That's right. That's right. I remember. Yes, yes.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And she was doing frescoes actually at the same time Rico and I were painting on the fourth floor. She was doing some fresco trials, things of her own. And another one who worked with me was Channing Peake, who did—the west coast artist who did, I think he did some mural work out on the west coast.

STEPHEN POLCARI: But you remained very interested in the Italian approach.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yes, yes.

STEPHEN POLCARI: And these figures did too, Tracy and Channing also.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: In fact, in Erica's thesis she refers to us as the Italianates, I think.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh yes, absolutely.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: And Elizabeth Tracy did somewhere a mural looks like the Borgo San Sepolcro, I think it is, only she translated it into Indians, I think, Indians fighting [laughs], Indian battle, but it's pure Renaissance, you know. It's pure Italian.

STEPHEN POLCARI: How did you feel about that? What was the thinking on your part in, you weren't interested in modern—art. The Modernists seem to be a failed episode by that time.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well actually I had, before I went to Italy to study I had studied in Paris for a year, and I worked with two of the foremost—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Ozenfant.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Ozenfant and Léger in their time when they—

STEPHEN POLCARI: That's right, before you went to Italy.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Before I went to Italy—and actually I had been exposed to the modern museum movement and went back to the Renaissance point of view as much more meaningful for me. [00:32:12]

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: At that time.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And when Rico and I met we both shared that idea. Rico was—really turned his back on the modern movement.

STEPHEN POLCARI: How did you feel? Why did you do that?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Why?

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, I mean, what was your—I mean, it's perfectly fine. What was your understanding? Why wasn't that adequate? I mean, I—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: All of my thinking at the time is in my journals, which I'm giving—plan to give to the—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Terrific.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —to the Archives. But I think it just—I guess my basic feeling is that art should have both form and content. And I guess I felt that the—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Modern lacked content.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —the modern was mostly forms.

STEPHEN POLCARI: That's right. Yes, yes.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And even though I've always tremendously admired Cézanne's watercolors and his painting and been very much influenced by him, somehow or another— whatever—even when I was in Paris I think that what I was most influenced by was Seurat because I felt in him a traditional base.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes, very much so.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: That he went back to people like Piero della Francesca.

STEPHEN POLCARI: That's right, classical quotations in his work, Egyptian quotations, very much so. [00:34:03]

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: But much admired—

STEPHEN POLCARI: So I think at the late '20s, etcetera, I mean, after the First World War, the modern movement lost its steam, and it didn't seem to capture what people wanted. People wanted more serious subjects.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Certainly in America in the mid-'30s.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: The modern movement was far less interested in painters than the movement to express contemporary ideas and political ideas and social ideals.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Absolutely. That came to dominate, and then therefore the language of modern seemed inadequate, you're saying, and the language of the Italians lent itself to narrative and comment and dramatic form and drama itself.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I remember the time I was studying at the Academy Modern in Paris with Léger and Ozenfant. Another American was there at the same time, George L.K. Morris. And we were very friendly, but we used to argue about modern art. He of course became—was primarily interested in abstract art, and he got into that. One of the few Americans who was into it. I think it was called, the group was called American abstract painters or something.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, it eventually became the—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: But you know his name, George?

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh yes.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: But we used to argue about that, and we visited Léger and Ozenfant—particularly Ozenfant's studio together. [00:36:02] And we used to kind of make fun together of Ozenfant's map of the world where he had red pins stuck in everywhere there was an Ozenfant.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh really, Ozenfant's view of the world?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Excellent, excellent, I didn't know that. Yes, he eventually came to the states, didn't he, by the end of the '30s?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yes.

STEPHEN POLCARI: He fled and Léger, too, they fled the Nazis.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: I guess they fled the occupation.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: They came during the occupation time.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Get out while they could. But so the form and power of the Italian, it attracted you very much, and that became your style for—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Listen, while you're talking I'm going to put some lunch on the table, okay? You'd like to have lunch with us, wouldn't you?

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, surely, okay.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: We had very early breakfast.

STEPHEN POLCARI: [They laugh.] You're probably still getting up earlier than I. I'm a seven o'clock a person.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Will my noise disturb this?

STEPHEN POLCARI: No, no, this is fine.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Because I could close the door.

STEPHEN POLCARI: This is fine here. I'm watching it, and it's working well.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: As you're talking with him—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: My voice doesn't carry too well.

STEPHEN POLCARI: No, but it's fine. It's there. So after these years, after these frescoes it must have been terrific. This, you were a few years out of college. You're already—you had major commissions at the major university. You met Erica. Or, you met Erica later when you taught at Vassar.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: After.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So in between Harvard, but when were you finished with Harvard, '36? And Vassar what happened then?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well when I finished '37—I felt very much the need to get out around the country—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh, that's right. You traveled.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And just see what was going on, and I was primarily interested in worker subjects and industry, and labor. I worked in steel mills. [00:38:00] I worked in copper mines. I worked on the—in Arizona, and on the water front in San Francisco. I just wanted to get after—away from all this and really see what was going on in the country. And I traveled all over, through the south first and then west.

STEPHEN POLCARI: You hit the rails? You really did the whole—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: No, I—

STEPHEN POLCARI: You do it by car?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I got a secondhand car and went by car.

STEPHEN POLCARI: There was a feeling that then to represent these subjects you had to have the experience?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I had to see it, and I really in this mural world was kind of an unreal world that I created in my mind. And you asked about Rico's—if Rico had worked with me on my Germanic. He didn't, but occasionally he would come up to visit me, and I would talk with him about my designs and ideas, and he had some input on that, particularly on the second wall of the *Battle of the Gods and Giants*—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Well, he was a—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —talked with him about it, but I traveled all over that year, made a lot of drawings and watercolors. And I spent, what, a month in the Arizona copper mines, in Jerome, Arizona. I lived in the dormitory with the miners and used to go down into the mines with them every day. And I made a lot of sketches.

STEPHEN POLCARI: You were drawing. You weren't—you were slinging copper at the same—[00:40:02]

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I wasn't—[laughs]—I wasn't mining copper. I was drawing.

STEPHEN POLCARI: But you were drawing. So they let you do this no problem?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, they let me do it. I lived with one of the—one of the heads of the mines was in the dormitory there, and I got to know him, and he arranged for me to do all these things.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well this is—well, it must have been terribly fascinating. I know Benton did some of this too, but it wasn't around—was it rare or not?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well Benton went around the country—all the American artists were interested in what was—it was called the American scene, I guess—at the time. We were all interested in that.

STEPHEN POLCARI: In really recording the real fabric of—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, just to see what was happening in America, but I was mostly interested in the workers on the industrial side of the mines and some waterfronts. I spent some time in the Fore River shipyard not too far from where you grew up. I lived down there and used to go out in the yards every day.

STEPHEN POLCARI: The Boston—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: In Fore River.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh, Fore River, yeah.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Fore, F-O-R-E, it was near Quincy.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh yes, yes.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And I used to—I lived down there and used to go out in the yards every day. I still have a sketchbook I made of everyday worker men which I have in the studio if you're interested in seeing it.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So this was—you did this for a year or two. This was a great contrast.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: For a year, and then when I came back I had a job teaching fresco at the Boston Museum School, and I came back for that. [00:42:10] I would have loved to have stayed on in San Francisco, I was crazy about that, but I had to come back for this job. So every year for two or three years I gave a course in fresco for the advanced students at the Boston Museum School. And I had a number of good artists who worked with me on that. And that was an intensive course in fresco.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So they were teaching fresco courses in—the Boston Museum School hadn't converted to modernism yet at that time.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: No.

STEPHEN POLCARI: They had a very traditional curriculum.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Very traditional.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Drawing and sculpture, maybe drawing from plaster.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I think when I first came, Jacob Leff [ph] was there, and then I'm trying to think who were the directors. Irving was there at one time and—chief, kind of the head of it, was a brother to a famous writer, James, yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: One of the William [ph] James brother It must have been small then at that time.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: The Museum School?

STEPHEN POLCARI: I'm not sure of the history of it. It was attached to the Boston Fine Arts—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, it was across the street from—on the Fenway across from—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Across the street, yeah. It's still there. It's still there.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And we had a big, actually a beautiful big well-lit area for that, for the fresco, of course we worked right on walls. I was also doing something with a fresco project under the WPA at that time. [00:44:05] And I knew George Morrison, who was director there. And he wanted me to come and teach them—I did occasionally give demonstrations.

STEPHEN POLCARI: You must have had a lot of opportunity during the government projects to do that since there as this great interest, and of course they had technical schools.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well I had a lot of opportunity, and I guess I was very much in demand because I knew the fresco technique. And I used to give demonstrations in all the—at Harvard and many universities for the—country—I gave them at the Art Students League.

STEPHEN POLCARI: What was that like? They didn't have it, as I remember.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: They didn't. No, they—actually, Rico was teaching a course there in fresco at the time.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Uh-huh [affirmative]. That was the later periods.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And I think we—I gave a demonstration at the Metropolitan Museum.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Must have been museum, yeah.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And Rico assisted me in that. Gridley Barrows assisted me, but I gave it to a number of places. Andover, Exeter, Yale, Princeton, a lot of places.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So these were all on demands at some these and the art schools.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —were in demand and I used to actually paint fresco and then—

STEPHEN POLCARI: I remember reading the artist unions used to have demonstrations of technique too. [00:46:00]

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: In fact, one time there was a place down in New York, the John Reed Club, which was a left wing place, but they had a place for fresco, and Rico and I used to go down and do fresco there just as a wall to paint on.

STEPHEN POLCARI: That's right. They were very active and lively and had a big exhibition schedule. A lot of people did things with them, very much so. Well that must have been terrific, very full, and [inaudible].

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I mean, they were very ac—

[END OF TRACK rubens93_1of2_cass_SideA_r.]

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, maybe.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, that's the way it works on this.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, let's try this. So okay.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: I'm trying to think where you control—oh great.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes, it's recording. You see it's moving over here, which means that the voice is bouncing up and down. Okay I guess stop is—

[Audio Break.]

STEPHEN POLCARI: Okay, this is it. We're in business again.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I hope that's working all right.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes. Now we were talking before. We were in the '30s. You had just finished doing those drawings and your trips across the country, and you had had that experience, and then you came back because you had to teach at the Museum School in Boston, teach fresco. And then you were doing these tours with teaching fresco all over the place.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, well I was giving demonstrations, actually.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Demonstrations, yeah. Which was an interesting technique, learning technique, and then you got a job offer form Vassar. Is that it? That's the way it was?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Uh, yeah. I spent about a year in New York, and then I got a job offer from Vassar.

STEPHEN POLCARI: That was a year after the museum, Boston Museum School?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, that was in—I guess I got that—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: That was '39 to '40.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Thirty-nine I had that offer. And I was offered a job at Smith College at the same time, but took the one at Vassar and came here to teach in—I guess it was the fall of '39. And Erica came to teach here at the same time. And I was here for—a year—I was on a one year replacement appointment for someone else. [00:02:00] And at the end of that year the chairman of the department—Agnes Clafin—it was through her.

The Museum of Modern Art was having a big, I think, Mexican exhibit, and they—

STEPHEN POLCARI: That's right, with the Met, 19—well, both of them.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: The Met—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Both of them, and the Museum of Modern Art.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —engaged Orozco to paint this portable fresco.

STEPHEN POLCARI: That's right.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Nineteen forty.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —through Agnes Claflin they got me to work with Orozco. So I—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Dive bomber intent.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, so I assisted him on that and got to know him pretty well.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, yeah.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I would—

STEPHEN POLCARI: He would demonstrate. He'd do that in the lobby, right? You were working in the lobby?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Right out in public view, yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Right in public view.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: You know there are six quote portable unquote—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Murals or panels, yeah.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —frames, but they were tremendously heavy. Each one was a steel construction and [inaudible].

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes, yes, I was up recently, and—[inaudible].

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Did they put it up again?

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, they put it up on something. I forget the show.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And—

STEPHEN POLCARI: So you worked—how long did that take, that Orozco drawing?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Not very long, maybe two, three weeks.

STEPHEN POLCARI: I got it. That was obviously inspired by the Second World War.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, at that time.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: But I got to know him pretty well. I'd get in there. Early in the morning I'd put up plaster. He would sit on the sand piles and read the *New York Times*. And the headline—that was just the time that the Nazis were entering Paris. So he would read these headlines to me, and I would get furious [laughs]. [00:04:02] And he would laugh and say, “Oh, they're going to win. They're going to. I'm all for the Nazi's. They're going to —"

STEPHEN POLCARI: He was obviously being satirical.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well, I think he just did it to say the opposite of—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Of what he thought, yeah.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well, what—I don't know. I never—but he would always do that about everything. I would—I admired his lithographs and drawings of revolutionary subjects and—[inaudible].

STEPHEN POLCARI: He was different from Rivera and Siqueiros.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Very different.

STEPHEN POLCARI: He was, I mean, in his political views he was much more critical of the revolution than—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, well he said—I never saw any of that stuff. I just made the paint. I never—I never knew if that was so or not, but he would always say just the opposite of anything you'd expect him to say. And I think he was just contrary-wise [laughs].

STEPHEN POLCARI: Well, that was a very good thing in that—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: It was a good experience to work with him.

STEPHEN POLCARI: I think Jackson Pollock must have been watching you in the lobby because he very much liked the [inaudible].

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: A lot of artist were watching.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Do you remember any of them?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Oh yeah, a number I knew well, Phil Guston and—[inaudible].

STEPHEN POLCARI: [Inaudible.]

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I knew all of—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Coswell Augustin was a friend of Pollock—[inaudible].

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I'd known Phil Guston before when I was in New York.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. At that time a lot of artists were watching. So Orozco was still a powerful influence in 1940.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Oh yes. Oh yes.

STEPHEN POLCARI: That's before the surrealists showed up here.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Oh yes.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So it was still a continuation of the '30s.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And he was a very powerful influence.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, very highly regarded. So it must have been great for you. [00:06:00]

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well it was. I was brought up in the spiritual Italian fresco—technique—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh yeah, he didn't do that at all.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —and he would absolutely lawless with it. He [laughs] would do things that we just make me—make my hair stand on end. We were trying to grind up the lime white—when it had dried—to make a —you know, San Giovanni, which was the white that you used in painting. He would take a trowel full of a pure lime white just as it comes out of a plaster trough and just smear it on the painting, but it would stay on there, you know, and it would give a great force to him.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So he did this, would dive balm. He would just smear it on after it had set?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, and he would really—he never really had his designs worked out—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Beforehand—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —beforehand. He would kind of come in with pencil sketches and often while I was setting up the plaster he would work things out, and we would work together transferring—cartoons—but they were all pretty rough and ready.

STEPHEN POLCARI: That's right, so he would only have a rough idea of what he was going to do.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: It wasn't transferring the cartoons.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, and he just had—I remember I can still see him. He had one stump of an arm, and with that stump he'd stick it in the color jar, stir up the colors, and—we used, like, jelly jars. And I never asked him what happened to his arm, but a *New Yorker* reporter, I think it was Jeffery Hellman, came in with—was interviewing. [00:08:09] He said, "All right, Orozco, what happened to your arm?" Well he said, Orozco said, "Well, we children were playing." He said, "What were you playing with?" He said, "Dynamite."

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, yeah he used to have these stories, or it was a grenade or something like that.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah. And then when I went to Mexico on a subsequent leave from Vassar I saw all the frescos that—murals that—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Guadalajara.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Guadalajara, everywhere in Mexico.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So you saw him? You must have seen him too.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I saw him.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, he went back.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And there again I'd seen all these poor people sleeping on the sidewalks in Mexico City, and so I said to him that I was shocked of that. And he said—he shrugged his shoulders and he said, "They have the sun."

STEPHEN POLCARI: [Laughs.] The sympathy for the poor, yes, I understand. You must have seen everything that he did here, the New School and Dartmouth.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, I saw them all, yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, and Dartmouth too.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Dartmouth, I went up. Actually while they were still working on the—at Harvard on the Harvard murals Agnes Mongan—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh, I know her. I've met her, yes.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —drove Gridley Barrows and me up to Dartmouth to see the Orozco frescoes.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh that's right, he finished them in, what was it, '34?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Thirty-four, that's right. When you went to Mexico, when was that?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I think it was in 1950. I was teaching at Vassar then. I had a half-year leave sabbatical, and I went to Mexico.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Right around then he died, really close, something.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Close to then, but he was still—I did see him then. [00:09:58]

STEPHEN POLCARI: In the early '40s even the things he did in Mexico were well-known in New York, weren't they? There was a gallery that showed his stuff, Adelphi Gallery.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, and there was one woman, what was, Reed—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Alma Reed.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Alma Reed was very much interested in him.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So you did that about 1940. How did you end up getting picked to be his assistant? Did you

volunteer, or?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well, no. I had a good reputation as a fresco painter. Probably I was probably the leading one at that time and Agnes Clafin was chairman of the art department here who recommended me to the Modern Museum. She was a friend of Alfred Bard.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So it worked out that way. That was nice. That was nice. That was important then, but you were teaching at Vassar at that time?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, just for a year, and then after that I went to—first in military camouflage up in Boston.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh yeah, the camouflage unit.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, with Morrison and the—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Morrison?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Richard Morrison was head of that project. He was a Harvard fine arts graduate, and I knew him then. And then through—then Edwin Land asked me to work at Polaroid, and I worked there on a submarine project. Land was a college friend of mine. We've always been good friends. I worked on that for a while.

STEPHEN POLCARI: What is that? What was involved with that?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well, Polaroid was doing some research in under water vision. [00:12:08] We picked their project and had glasses to see under the water and—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Were they doing photography under the water too?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Some but mostly direct viewing, and I worked there for a time, and then I went into the navy in ship camouflage.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Which by that time was curvilinear as I remember, it was sort of roundish.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well, I worked with Charles Benninger [ph] who had been it in the First World War, and there were—

STEPHEN POLCARI: There had been a dazzle technique.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: That was one kind, and the other kind was just low visibility, and I did both. I was in that camouflage unit during the war. There were a number of artists in that too. Charles Benninger who was an artist and his half-brother was a member of the National Academy—his half-brother was John Maron [ph]. He once invited me to lunch once with Maron. And Edward Warner, who was a painter, was the other half of that. Elliot O'Hara was in the group, Bennett Buck, a number of artists.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, I remember—[inaudible]—Ellsworth Kelly was in the camouflage unit.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: He wasn't in that one.

STEPHEN POLCARI: No, he wasn't in that one.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Maybe he was in the army.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: May have been army camouflage.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, army camouflage, that's right. Rourkie [ph] taught camouflage—[inaudible]—Rourkie taught camouflage in New York City.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: [Laughs.] He made the best use of it, I think.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes, he did. Well, that's true, that he used it in his style. [00:14:00] He used it in his style.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: After the war I went back to teaching at Vassar again, and I stayed here ever since until I retired in '74. We went back in '46.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So you taught studio?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I taught studio art. I was head of the studio art department.

STEPHEN POLCARI: At that time however much of the fresco movement had come to an end, and the WPA had ended. The government projects had ended in '43. There was just this episode of the war, so you were on your end as an individual artist.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, and I did one government mural in—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Which one was that?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —in Wareham, Massachusetts.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh, Wareham, Massachusetts. My family has some property in Wareham, Massachusetts.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Sorry, I didn't know that then.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: But you had a commission—

STEPHEN POLCARI: At the post office? [Inaudible.]

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, in the post office—it's still there.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: You had a commission that they held over for you.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: In Riverton, New Jersey.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, but then didn't you want to redesign, and they wouldn't let you.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I did a very realistic design before the war, which they approved of, and then when I got out I wanted to do something very different, but they did not approve.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: So you didn't finish it.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

STEPHEN POLCARI: Why the change?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Why the change? My ideas on paintings changed then. At some point I—during those years in Washington—I got interested in, influenced by Kepes [ph] and his ideas. And I was no longer interested in straight realism.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Well you really ground out that design.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: You were terribly busy working seven days a week and really wasn't a distinguished design.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: No. [00:16:00]

STEPHEN POLCARI: So that was it. That was your last bout of public painting, in the post office and—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, I did one. No, I did a mural for the Buffalo Jewish Center in Buffalo, New York.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Uh-huh [affirmative]. When was that?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: In 1949, and that was the first mural in which I had women. There were a number of—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: And that also you painted on canvas.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, that was not fresco.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: That was not true fresco. And then you did something for a temple in Chicago.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Chicago, that wasn't very good.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: No, that was canvas too.

STEPHEN POLCARI: By that time you were—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: So I really wasn't doing murals any more. What I did do, what I have done, which maybe is a continuation of that kind of painting, I—about that time, in the late '40s, I originated something I called time painting, which is a continuous scroll that you see moving through a window of a special viewing frame as a changing composition in the frame. That was really—the idea for that really came from studying the great Chinese and Japanese scrolls in the Lawson Museum of Fine Arts.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Scroll evolution.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And the professor had—What?

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, scroll evolution, but those things don't necessarily emphasize time.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: No, but I made it so it's something that you see moving through a frame.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, why though?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well, I liked the idea of continuity. It's always bothered me in doing frame paintings just having the things stop right at the edge of the frame. I wanted to go on either way, and I also—I was motivated by the idea of doing something like music where you can develop a visual theme in time as well as in space, and I did a number of those time paintings. [00:18:16]

STEPHEN POLCARI: Uh-huh [affirmative], time as well as space.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And I've made films and videotapes of them.

STEPHEN POLCARI: And this all developed in the late '40s—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: —this is a new idea for you.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, and I was doing it for a number of years after that. It was a new idea.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Well, the video, the movies and the videotapes are really the best use of them because he combines it with music and narration so that you really have an entire, complete production. And um, he did a beautiful one in Chinese ink of a walk across the Cape Cod dunes from P-town [Provincetown] Bay over to the ocean, and he got—he used a poem by an American artist and music so that, you know, it's an entire production for about 18 minutes. And those have been very successful.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Uh-huh [affirmative]. When did you do those?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I did those in—

STEPHEN POLCARI: The '50s.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —'40s, '50s, '60s.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Well, the filming was later. It was in the—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: The film, the video, the films I did later. [Inaudible] made a film of one *Winter Walk*, which is one of the first I did, which Dr. Land bought. I did another one of Main Street Poughkeepsie, walk up and down Main Street that's in a local collection here.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: That made a nice tape because he used it with Copeland music, you know.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: The year we spent in Japan I did one of Ginza, our neighborhood Ginza in Tokyo, and we—I did that time painting in Japan, but—[00:20:16]

STEPHEN POLCARI: So with these things you were very much interested in this continuity of time and shape and—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: That was one of the things I got the Fulbright for was to study the makimono, which are the Japanese horizontal scrolls, you know, just to see that. I studied that idea of continuity and developmental idea.

STEPHEN POLCARI: That's right, and a continuous unfolding.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: And you've done a couple of the Hudson, along this area of the Hudson.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I've done one of the Hudson River. I did one of the 104 Psalm, with a reading of the Psalm—and music.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, I saw that. Why? That's new.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: You saw a Psalm?

STEPHEN POLCARI: No, no, I saw it in your bibliography—biography.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Oh, yes.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Why? That's new, that religious—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Oh no, I've always been interested in religious things. I've done a number of time paintings on religious subjects. I did one on the story of Joseph.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Moses.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Moses.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Actually it started because the first one I think you did was for the children for Passover, you know, the story of Moses.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And I did a humorous one on the story of the queen Esther. And I've done a series called *A Creation Series* which I—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Those are paintings.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —paintings, it was kind of the only nonobjective paintings I've done really which are on biblical scenes. [00:22:02]

STEPHEN POLCARI: But the norms are there. They're abstract, the indication's the idea of creation.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, well I would take a line from Genesis or from the 104th Psalm and develop a visual.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Well, that's hard to do.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well yeah, I spent a lot of time on designing them and then just let go in the painting.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: That was really extemporaneous, wasn't it? Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So, you were doing these things. These were your projects, your personal projects while you were teaching at Vassar.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah. I was fortunate in my job, my teaching was at one point of the week, and I had the rest of the week for my own painting.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, yeah, sure.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Well, I think for an artist, you know, unless he's very successful, an academic teaching job is about the best means of economic support. It's better than really than an art school because at a college he gets the fringe benefits, you know, which you don't—

STEPHEN POLCARI: That's a decent life. Pretty hard to get a decent life as an artist.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: That would work both ways that I—when I wasn't teaching I wanted to put my time on painting, but also [laughs] I've never been very good at promoting my art. I just don't do it well, and I guess I rationalize it by saying that I made my living from teaching and supporting the family. [00:24:04] I didn't have to spend time promoting it like many artists did.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: But we spent a number of summers in Provincetown, and there we saw—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Fifties and '60s?

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: —there we saw the pros at promotion, and they spent the summer selling, and that

was their big selling period and promoting, and Lewis spent the summer painting, you know.

STEPHEN POLCARI: That's right, the association, Provincetown Art Association. Blanche Lazzell, remember her? Blanche Lazzell, she was a person at some point there. I forget the woman. She was a cubist.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: There were a lot of characters.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Hoffman was there. [Inaudible] was there.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: One summer I worked with Hans Hofman on the GI Bill of Rights.

STEPHEN POLCARI: That's right, what was that, '48? Was that '48?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Forty-eight, yeah. That was our first summer in Provincetown. And that was a great experience. I—

STEPHEN POLCARI: One moment. Let me go over here. We'll pick that up in a second.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Oh.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Okay, excuse me.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Shall I turn off the tape? Well I better leave it, I guess. Better not touch it. Something might go wrong. It's all right. Or should we turn it off?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I don't know. Better let it go. It might just not go, start going again.

[Audio Break.]

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: I don't know if you want to tell him about the book.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I think so, yes. [00:26:03] [Inaudible.] No, I won't tell. I think he'd be interested. If I were sure that it would start again I'd turn it off.

[Audio Break.]

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Oh, I think it would. Wait a minute.

[Audio Break.]

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yup, there we are. So you did this time with Hofman in '48 in Provincetown?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah. Uh—he was teaching in a school in the far end of Provincetown. I found that a very interesting experience. At the time he was riding high as the artist. A number of good artists worked with him that summer also on the GI Bill. But I got a really good understanding of what abstract expressionism was all about and did some experiments in it myself and, I was interested in knowing for teaching because all of my students wanted to learn that, and I had to be able to help them. I never really worked that way myself, but I understood it, and I think it got into my work, it affected my work. [00:28:00]

STEPHEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah, well he taught a number of people. And that was a very lively school. That was a very lovely thing. I'm in contact with Provincetown now, and they still have a terrific community.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Every Friday afternoon he would get everybody together in class and look over their work and criticize it, and that was the big event of the week.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: All of us were out in front. Hans Hofman was there in his kimono and sandals, a very regal figure, and then a couple of students would move these paintings in front of him, one by one—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Sounds like an auction at Sotheby's.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: [Laughs.] Yes.

STEPHEN POLCARI: It's right here.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —waiting for his words of wisdom to come out, and then he'd look at something, and

he'd say, “Oh, so this is not bad. *Nicht wahr*.” And another one would go in. “So, this is not bad. Nicht wahr.”

STEPHEN POLCARI: That was it?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And the next one come up. “This is a great, brilliant amount of spontaniosity.”

STEPHEN POLCARI: Spontaniosity, excellent, whatever that is, but go on, yes.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: He'd make a comment each one always ending up with nicht wahr. So I thought that was some profound insight into modern art that was contained in that word, some mystic term. So when I got home I told Erica about that, and she knew what—of course Hofman was German, [00:30:06] if she knew the German word it was. So, “Oh,” she said—nicht wahr—isn't that so.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Which he interspersed between every sentence. So we've always referred to water that kind of art as—"nicker"—art.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: That's not how we say it, in praise of an abstract expressionist art I say it has lots of nicker.

STEPHEN POLCARI: [Laughs.] Yes, yes, well he became very popular. He did a whole number, but that must have been interesting. Didn't change anything for you though, did it?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Not really.

STEPHEN POLCARI: It informed you of some of this stuff.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well I must say I started working—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: I think it loosened your work up.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —yeah, it did, and I started—at that time I started working on the dunes. And I must say Hans Hofman encouraged me in that. He liked the things I was doing there. And that was a different kind of expression. Indian ink printing, which I pursued later intensively when I went to Japan. And for a number of years I did do ink paintings on the dunes, and I did this time painting in Chinese ink of the dunes, which I think is one of the best of them.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: No, I think that Lewis basically managed to assimilate eastern and western, and his —

STEPHEN POLCARI: By this time, by the '50s?

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, and after—well, and particularly later in the '60s after Japan, and he did, you know, sumi-e ink painting, but it was not Oriental. It was very much his own style. Well that's for instance one of them, and that no one would think that that was by an Asian artist. [00:32:05] You know, it's a combination.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I've been fortunate in that I've had a very good training in traditional Western art and in traditional Far Eastern art. And I guess my struggle in my work is to get some kind of person fusion of these two. And I—I think over a number of years I was able to achieve some fusion, particularly in watercolors and—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Watercolor and ink.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And ink, yeah.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: No, in Japan he had—they assigned him to a couple of Japanese, older Japanese artists, as sensei or mentor. And um, he would go every few weeks and take work, I think the two of them, Kegutsu [ph] particularly was the grand old master—the last great traditional painter in Japan. And he was very encouraging to you, he liked your work.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, we liked him very much. We—Erica and I, used to go to his studio, and art instruction in Japan, at least traditionally, was a very different thing than it is here.

STEPHEN POLCARI: In what way?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: The teacher would not teach you how to do things. What we did, he would look at all my work I'd been doing, say for a week or two and show him. He wouldn't say a word, but he would get down on the floor on the tatami, and paint himself, and in the paintings he would do he would reprimand and instruct me [laughs] on all the things I was trying to do.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Yes, that's different. [Laughs.] That's decidedly different. [00:34:00]

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: It must have been a lovely year though.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: It was, it was a very—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, just very nice, and at that time the dollar went somewhere.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Oh, well we were millionaires in yen.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes, I was going to say.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Millionaires for the only time in our lives. And we really, Lewis and I, we got all over Japan. And unlike many of the other Fulbrighters, we lived in a Japanese area and really got into the country to remote rural areas and so on.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: No, we lived in a Japanese home on the Japanese economy.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: And these wonderful Japanese inns. It was a good year.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, yes, I heard that's the way to travel even now.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: That Fulbright was a wonderful—one of the best things that the senator did was set those up.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I did some lithographs in Japan too. I worked with Anayason [ph], who was an expert photographer.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Uh-huh [affirmative]. So you had started prints, you said, in 1938, so this was then rethinking of those prints?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: No, I continues doing lithographs all through the years. I usually would get out at least one addition a year. I guess I only did about—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: You were printed in New York by Miller. Yeah.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Miller printed them in New York.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: And there was a man who did them for you in Mexico.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yes.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: A one-armed man.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Jose—I forget his last name.

STEPHEN POLCARI: They have a lot one-armed artists over there in Mexico as well as one-armed bandits. Well, you've traveled nicely, Italy, Mexico, Japan.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well, we're fortunate. We've done a good deal of traveling.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Then Lewis went with the State Department to South America for a summer for a cultural exchange.

STEPHEN POLCARI: When was that?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I think in '60, '61, something. It was only for a couple of months to South America. [00:36:02]

STEPHEN POLCARI: Just to teach there or just to travel around?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: No, it was a very good assignment. I was to meet all of the leading artists in each country and make recommendations for getting their work to be shown in America. And uh—at the same time I had a good deal of time for my own painting.

STEPHEN POLCARI: So this was wonderful.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: It was.

STEPHEN POLCARI: That's the duty? That's all?

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: That's all. He went alone on that.

STEPHEN POLCARI: I don't know this program. How long was this program?

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Well I don't know if it was a program of—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: It was a cultural exchange program.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: I don't know if other—was it a program? I don't know, or just something—

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I don't know. It was arranged by Glen Barrows, who's Gridley's sister, who was then editor of *Foreign Service Journal*, and she got me to do a number of covers for the *Foreign Service Journal* on my various travels. In fact, I enclosed some of those covers with the material for the Archives.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh terrific. Terrific.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: And I guess that she introduced you to somebody, and I don't know. It was set up for the summer. Rather short notice, as I remember. It was good.

STEPHEN POLCARI: It's turned out rather nicely. You hit the high points of the last number of decades, and it's been very varied.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, well I've been fortunate to have been able to continue my painting.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: And see in the academic world you get sabbaticals.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes, yes.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I had a couple of sabbaticals I spent in Italy.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Revisiting?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Revisiting and we traveled, Erica and I traveled together in Europe, went to various countries, to France and Vienna.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Spent a summer in Spain.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Spain. [00:38:01] Greece.

STEPHEN POLCARI: As you look back, have you liked the way the direction of art has gone from the '30s onward? Do you prefer it to have the main, I mean, the more realist approach of the '30s?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I can't say that. I don't see any one direction. I think it's gone in many directions at the same time. And I find very few artists whose work is sympathetic. There are artists I've admired. I think among Americans I think Ben Shahn made about the best balance of form and content, which is always something seemed very important to me. I've admired a fellow Buffalonian artist Charles Burchfield.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Ultimately then you think your tastes were really set in the '30s, your interests?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I can't even say that. I think my taste is changing too. At the time I was in Europe there was only one art that existed, it was the Italian Renaissance art. Now I don't look at it at all. If I had to pick the artist I find most meaningful now it would be Bruegel and his relation of human beings to nature, as seems to me.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: And Cézanne.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And Cézanne I've always admired. [00:40:01]

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: And some of those wonderful Chinese Zen painters.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well, I like the Chinese, the Tianshou [ph] thing, particularly someone like Ying Yu Chen [ph]. I always liked Shen Zou [ph] landscapes, and I think he—the influence will be very much in my landscape scrolls—Shen Zou's long landscape scroll.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: You liked Harry Levine's work, didn't you?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Who?

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Levine.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Which one?

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: I forget his first name.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Is it Jack?

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, Jack.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: In fact, I first saw and first met him when I was working with the art project, and I saw at that time his *Feast of Pure Reason*, which I still think is his best work.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes, he's still acerbic. He's still acerbic. He hasn't change much, yes.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: I guess I don't think so much in terms of styles of trends or movements but rather in individual artist's work.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You got what you like.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: You got what you like. But it's fab—it's been fabulous. It's been fabulous. And teaching at Vassar must have been enormously rewarding?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well it was. And one of the things that I like best about that was the visiting artist program, which I directed, and I really could get any artist to come up here. They'd come up here for a couple of days. They'd come over to the studio to give a crit to our students. [00:42:03]

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, the visiting artist gig.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: They'd come to my studio, and really just about all of the leading artists at that time, yeah. Max Beckmann came up. Ben Shahn.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Jack Levine.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Jack Levine, Kuniyoshi.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Did you have Guston as a visiting—?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Phil Guston came a couple of times.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: I think you had Mitchell Jamieson.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Mitchell Jamieson.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh Mitchell, yeah, when did he die?

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Gosh, I don't know, time goes. It was a long time ago. I was shocked. We met someone in P-town who knew him told us that he had shot himself. I think he must have been relatively young, in his forties, maybe fifties.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Edwin Dickinson came, Fairfield Porter, just a number of wonderful—to get to know them.

STEPHEN POLCARI: That's really terrific. Really terrific.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And incidentally all these things I noted in my journals, what they say, their views on art, and—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Terrific. The archives—it's going to be great material for the archives. Your material I'm going to draw out from the files, the World War II stuff, which I didn't realize was there. So what you did was do a WPA study, and then you followed it up with a study of the war material.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: No, no, no—I mean, I wouldn't say I made so much of a study of the war material, but I just, I think I may even have collected—

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ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: No, I did equally, I thought, you know, equally a study of the project and the—I mean, arts and the section fine arts. And I think that the war material I collected, you know, during—while we were in Washington during the war. I continued to be interested.

STEPHEN POLCARI: And that's photographs of things?

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Well that is, no, that is—I'd forgotten it. Oh, it looks like pages from *Life* magazine, and it looks like it's publications that were brought out by the companies that hired these artists, and it's a collection of material. And you know, I don't know if you've got it in your warehouse or not, but—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh, I've got it. I must have.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: But it might be, you know, before it disintegrates, it might be worth keeping.

STEPHEN POLCARI: I'm going to go look.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: No I went up again just to look through, and I must say, in flipping through the photographs of the murals, you know, after all this time, 50 years, um, I didn't find many of any real significance.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh, you mean the works?

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: The works themselves.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Well, yes and no. It was a distinctive style.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: It was a style.

STEPHEN POLCARI: The thirties were distinctive. It was a new type of history painting. It was different, as you point out, from the academic and the—[inaudible]—type of thing, and this was much more concerned with 20th century ideas and themes. In a very much more obvious way it was a democratic kind of painting relating very much the previous painting was about kings and queens and royalty, and aristocrats. [00:02:04] This wasn't. That alone was a great significant change. And so it was rather interesting and very distinctive.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: But I mean, in terms of aesthetic quality, partly because they—none of the artists were—or very few of them, had any background, had any training in murals. They were easel painters.

STEPHEN POLCARI: That's right, and they [cross talk].

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: And so they just blew up easel paintings, buy you know, I you know, if you think of the Mexican, if you think of Orozco's paintings and the National Preparatory School in Mexico City or his Dartmouth murals, you know, that tremendous intensity and social comment, the American murals are extremely bland and noncontroversial.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, well that's true. Well, almost everybody is compared to Orozco. [Laughs.] He was a—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Although I once fell upon, I don't remember—it's somewhere, an article about French mural paintings that were done after our programs. And I have a feeling they must have imitated the programs, and they were also in public buildings. And it was very interesting. [Laughs.] They were just about the same quality as the American ones. I mean, there's nothing inspiring about a post office.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes, I'm not very inspired in a post office most of the time.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: You know by the sight or the settings, and the—

STEPHEN POLCARI: And by the waiting.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: And so, you know, and then there was great pressure, particularly from the section, to avoid controversy. And so you did safe, you know, bland, safe subjects, the mail man plodding through the snow, or, you know, the pony express and farming or whatever it would be. [00:04:13] But with the exception of, you know, looking through them, I think to my feeling maybe the best of the bunch was Ben Shahn's in the social security building in Washington. I have a feeling coming back to those. He did them in the Bronx. Have you seen the ones in the Bronx post office?

STEPHEN POLCARI: I probably have seen them in reproduction. I don't think I've seen them in person.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Ah, well there's one of someone in front weaving the factory, textile factory and so on. They're good, but the scale is all out. The figures, I think, are too big, and they don't fit in, badly resolved in the social security building. The other one that I think would have been a powerful mural was the one that Rico Lebrun started at, was then a 34th Street post office annex. I don't know if the building even exists any more.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, I don't know.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: But they—he only did one wall. It was the Jamestown flood, and it was powerful, of figures on a raft, and then there was to be another wall. But he fuddled around with that. He took so long. And I spoke to the postmaster, who was still in a rage years later, over Rico's having the whole lobby full of scaffolds and never getting through, and being so temperamental so that they wouldn't—and then he also, I guess touching up or over-painting, and that began to peel. So when I was there the postmaster wanted just to paint them over with white paint. I reported that to Forbes, Sue Hudson, and Ed Roland [ph] in the section in Washington and warned them. [00:06:00] And I don't know what they did, whether they had them covered or whether they were destroyed, but that would have been a strong mural, I think.

And um—but there were a lot of disappointing, you know, they were competent but not really, I think, really first—looking back at them, you know, really great art. But I think the important thing was that it kept all these artists alive and working.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And developing.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: And developing, you know, and it was what it led to that was really important, I think.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Well, creatively it created a breadth—it created a breadth of painting without any problems.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: And it also created, I mean, it sort of unified American artists in public, to a degree unknown before. And it developed regional artists and local, I mean, artists all over the country.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, it created a community, a lot of good things for art, and I think since we all know American art had a hard time in this country, and it created a cohesiveness which in the '40s led to a stronger art role in—now of course it's—big business. It's too big.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Well, I mean the abstract expressionists, for the first time Europe was looking at America.

STEPHEN POLCARI: And resenting every second of it.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, but—the art project was probably, I think was the more exciting projects.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Because it was more varied as you had the—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: More experimental.

STEPHEN POLCARI: —regional committees, more open, and, as I said, less—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Less pressure from the office in Washington. [00:08:03]

STEPHEN POLCARI: Well Washington probably thought section [ph] was best for—[inaudible]—artists doing it.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: They had a higher degree of competence. I mean, some of the WPA artists were really not experienced artists, but when they were good they were better, I think. They were more exciting, more experimental, more independent. I think actually looking back at it the other thing I realized is, that the easel painting would probably produce the better work because most of the—I mean, you know, they were a number of good easel paintings like Jack Levine, for instance, and Phil Guston and so on who, when they were doing easel paintings they were on their home turf. And they were doing—so that that was, I think, probably if I had focused on the easel paintings I would have found that the quality was higher.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Well yeah, but they had the opportunity to continue working, and all of those things shifted into the war. I remember Levine did some war paintings.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Yes, he, yeah.

STEPHEN POLCARI: He was in the service since everybody was in the service—[inaudible].

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Well it all ground to a halt. You know, congress killed the theater project first. Because Hallie Flanagan, you know, was at Vassar before she went into the theater project, and then she went to Smith afterwards, and then when she was ill with Parkinson's she came back to live around the corner in Poughkeepsie. And she was a very dynamic person. She really did, you know, this living newspaper, and very socially conscious things, and of course congress, that was the first one they whacked.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: You know Biddle went into war art.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, sure. [00:10:00] He's one of the people involved in organizing things from the very beginning.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Well, you know, that's another thing. I have a—Biddle is always given credit, this famous letter that he wrote FDR.

STEPHEN POLCARI: In '34, '34.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: This famous letter that what they're doing in Mexico, because he'd been working down in Mexico with Orozco, we should do it here. But that really was his contribution, and in my opinion it was Ned Bruce who really did the work.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Well, that's probably true.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: He was the one who organized, you know.

STEPHEN POLCARI: I don't think it was Biddle who did that. It was—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: No, and the Biddle really dropped—and then he got one of the original—the first section jobs were in buildings in Washington, the Justice Department, Post Office Department, and Biddle, I'd forgotten, in one of those buildings he got a job and did several panels, and they were kind of niggardly painting, kind of tight painting, and that was it because those first jobs were given—were awarded to people, and Ned Bruce in particular, he favored the more traditional well-known artists. Then when it went into open competitions, anonymous competitions, then young artists came out of the woodwork all over the country. And then these older traditional, established academy artists tended to drop out, and Biddle was one of them. And then later Biddle—uh, became a war artist, and he almost scuttled the program, you know, because a couple of congressmen were in North Africa, and they found George Biddle in a tent painting a dead horse. And they questioned him about the relevance of this. [00:12:00] And he gave them some answer that an artist could paint, you know, anything he wanted, and they went back to Washington mad as hell and felt that it was a waste of money. And I remember that hit the office when Forbes Watson and Ed Roland were there, and the really had to do some rapid work to cover up the battle damage there.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, well they, congress didn't support that program very much. They pulled the rug out very quickly. I mean, '43, '44—I mean they—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: It was the end of it.

STEPHEN POLCARI: It was the end of it, and the companies had to step in, otherwise they were in trouble. Well, he wrote a book, Biddle, all about his experiences—[inaudible]. Maybe he discusses this.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: I don't know. [They laugh.]

STEPHEN POLCARI: Maybe he doesn't.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: We met George Biddle once at a party—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Was it George Biddle or the other Biddle, Frances?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: No, George, and I got into a violent argument with him. I thought we'd probably get on great because we both were interested in frescoes and murals. Then we got talking about Mexican murals. And he had worked with Rivera and had done a job in the National Preparatory School, and I had worked with Orozco. Well I didn't think much of—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Rivera?

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: —Rivera, and he didn't think much of Orozco.

STEPHEN POLCARI: I see, this continues on.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And to add to that I didn't think much of the mural, that the fresco that Biddle had pained in the National Preparatory School. Even though we were friendly with Biddle's son Michael, he and I didn't hit it off at all

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: You with the father.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: The father.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, Michael Biddle is a painter, or he was a painter. He was living in, you know, Croton, yeah. [00:14:01] We're going up to the Cape in the summer.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Well, it all sounds fascinating. It's fascinating and different and—[inaudible].

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Holger Cahill was—I never, unfortunately, I never met Ned Bruce because he had had a stroke and was in Florida, but we got to know his widow, Peggy Bruce very well. In fact we're close friends until she died. And she had, you know, she told me a great deal about Ned and the early days, and she was a—and then his niece Maria Eland [ph], well she was in the office section of fine arts, and some would recall Ed Roland and Forbes Watson was in the office there.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Olin Dows was also in the fine art. We knew him. He lived near here.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Rhinebeck.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Rhinebeck. And we knew him very well.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: He was a war artist, and he—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, he was very much involved.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: And he was one of the best. He was a real hero in the war. The stories are he single-handed captured a couple of dozen Germans.

STEPHEN POLCARI: What did he use?

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: I don't know what it—I don't know.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Was it oil? Was it watercolor?

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: He did murals in the Rhinebeck post office there.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Uh-huh [affirmative]. That's right. That's right. That's right. I think some of his stuff may be in the army art center galleries.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: He probably is.

STEPHEN POLCARI: I remember they have books—of photos of all the things that they owned.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Holger Cahill was a more colorful character. He was a real Irish politician.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well Forbes Watson was a pretty salty character too.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Well he was, yes.

STEPHEN POLCARI: How nice that people were salty. It's not like people were divided in the world, liberal and conservative like they are now. [00:16:01]

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Erica was fortunate in that she did her work right with all these people in the office there. So everything was available to her.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: And when I went around the country, you know, there were still the art project offices in Chicago and so on and New York. St Louis. Still going now—but where are all those—now I remember that there were file after file of all the material from all the different 48 state art projects. They were in some building in Washington. Now, what happened? I think national archives.

STEPHEN POLCARI: They were national archives.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Is that where they still are?

STEPHEN POLCARI: Probably, yeah, all WPA stuff was—[inaudible]—federal, federal project.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: You don't have it?

STEPHEN POLCARI: No, no. It's a separate office.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Cahill was very resourceful for the art project, you know, that index of American design was a terrific idea.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, put all these guys to work.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: And it gave out work to people who weren't that great, who wouldn't have done great easel painting but could be trained to do that meticulous rendering, and it's a terrific record of American folk art, much of which would have been lost.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Another great thing about the period was the unity in it all. All of us kind of stayed together. Now everybody goes down direction and all separate ways.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yeah, you wonder why, was it just that there was a manageable number of you that it could be done, or there just was a sort of a, maybe from the Depression on was this sort of need for other people.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Depression may have had something to do with it. I think of the Depression as a time of very positive values. There was a clear right and a clear wrong in black and white terms. [00:18:01]

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: I guess FDR was an inspirational character. You know, I think that he had a real impact.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well you interviewed—[inaudible].

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: I think I did. I seem to remember that, but that was long after. And no, he just—well I think artists in a way are always hungry to be integrated with their community, and that's very rarely that they are, and I think that particularly with the art project that they gave them this feeling of being a part of the community, part of society, of having a contribution.

STEPHEN POLCARI: It gave them a place. Otherwise they were sort of alienated art—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Otherwise they're producing luxury items.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Or they're [inaudible] making money.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Or prefers to be very independent and individualistic and not caring about trends or doing—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Please, that's all they care about. Well—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: It was an exciting period, and it's never been repeated. I was interested that—I know that in one of my recommendations, what I felt should be continued, one was number one were the community art centers of the project. That whole idea was a marvelous idea, those community—you know, that idea, setting up these community art projects using local artists for classes, exhibitions, and so on.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Well, that's the only time America ever paid any attention. [00:20:00] Now in the '60s they did do some government sponsorship of things—[inaudible]—and basically we still are rather indifferent to art—the reason it attracts attention now because it costs so much money—[inaudible]—fascinating.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Well I think we've gone back to the idea of giving commissions, you know, rather than—I mean, the section's contribution, I think, for these open, anonymous competitions. And I think we've gone back to the spoils system again, the government has to a large degree. That's—

STEPHEN POLCARI: In more ways than one.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Well I figured that the average mural was maybe $8 to $1,200, of course it's had inflation, but you get a commission now for a government job, you know, you're talking $100,000 or something, and it may not be any better. And then of course the other idea of giving grants, which is another thing I recommended was grants to artists. That of course has been—

STEPHEN POLCARI: Oh yeah, that's the NEA.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, that does exist now.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Well as you can see it runs into trouble on occasion [laughs].

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Yeah, there was one idea in Canada that I ran across some years ago. It struck me as a very good one. They had what they call art banks. And we were up in British Columbia, and I was doing some lecturing at the museum there in Victoria and met a very nice government representative, and he was up in British Columbia. And his commissioned job was to buy for the government work by local artists. [00:22:03] And then the government would lend these works of art to various public buildings, and I thought that was a very nice idea.

STEPHEN POLCARI: It is a nice idea except it's not too successful. Such ideas are taking place, for instance in Holland where the government will buy a production of artists and then lend them and borrow them, but there's also been, they have hundreds of thousands of paintings they don't know what to do with at this time. And they finally have stopped doing it simply because they don't know what to do with it. They've got so many. They've got a lot of artists over there, and I think it functions better than a small art world—[inaudible]. I mean, think of it now. There are so many people, the B.F.A.s, the M.F.A.s. In the old days people didn't go to university. You were rare. Instead they want art students to [inaudible] training out there, and now we must turn out 10,000 artists a year.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: I'm afraid so.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Over production.

STEPHEN POLCARI: It's like over production. There's a lot of good artists, but I know good isn't great, so we have a total suffusion of an industry, an art industry of talented people who have something to say but are not the fabulous geniuses. Is that good or bad? I don't know.

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: And for which there really isn't a big enough market.

STEPHEN POLCARI: No, there's never a market big enough to handle all of that. And there's not a market if everybody in the country bought a painting or something. There still wouldn't be enough to take care of the—[inaudible]. And there's no system to make a judgment that really works. Artists are tougher on other artists—there. You know, you like what you like. You don't like what you don't like. Jury systems are never fair. I mean, commercial system's corrupt, so I don't know what system is [inaudible] they're all sort of bad. [00:24:07] Anyway, it gets done. Somehow it gets done. In whatever bad way it is. It's a tough life, though yours have turned out rather nicely a lot of them are a real—they can't keep a job, some artists. And you wouldn't want to keep them on some jobs too, also, and so it's rather, I don't know, comme ci comme ça—[inaudible]. Well I think I should finish for now and let you go. We've been talking now for almost three hours.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Well, we're available for as much as you want.

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes, yeah. You have some papers?

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: Oh, to give you.

LEWIS W. RUBENSTEIN: Yes, I—

ERICA BECKH RUBENSTEIN: You want to turn that off?

STEPHEN POLCARI: Yes.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]