Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Buffie Johnson, 1982 Nov. 13

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

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Buffie Johnson on November 13, 1982. This interview was conducted by Barbara Shikler as part of the Mark Rothko and His Times Oral History Project for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Funding was provided by the Mark Rothko Foundation.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

BARBARA SHIKLER: Well, the first thing that I think we should do is to say that we're going to speak primarily about your relationship with Mark Rothko, and some of the impressions you had, and some of the memories that you have, that might shed some light on his work and him as a man. Could you tell us when you met him?

BUFFIE JOHNSON: Yes. I met him in Southern California. I was staying for the summer with Ruth Ford, the actress. Ruth Ford had a coach named Sophie Rosenstein, who asked Ruth if she could bring over her nephew, Mark Rothko.

MS. SHIKLER: Would you tell us when that was-what year?

MRS. JOHNSON: I would think that was 1942-possibly '43. Mark Rothko was completely unknown at that time. He'd had some exhibition in the Village, in some rather obscure gallery, and he'd never had an Uptown show. This was not mentioned by Sophie Rosenstein; I knew nothing whatsoever about him. Everywhere I went, people not in the arts were eager to introduce me to their nephews who painted. I naturally thought this was another case of somebody's nephew or grandson, someone who painted, and all the family thought it was so nice-and what could I do for him? Usually it was a hopeless case. So in order to avoid that, I said to Ruth, "I'm not going to stay and meet the nephew of Sophie. I'm going to the hairdresser." [Laughter] So I went to the hairdresser, and it took a couple of hours. This was in the Hollywood Hills, and I walked back up the hill; and I could see as I approached that they were sitting on the terrace, and there was no way into the house except past the terrace.

MS. SHIKLER: Oh dear.

MRS. JOHNSON: It was right on the edge of a drop of seventy-five feet or so. I had, for politeness sake, to stop and sit down, and say hello to Mark Rothko. Well, in a very few moments of talking with him I realized he was a very interesting man, with an excellent mind.

MS. SHIKLER: What had you talked about, do you remember?

MRS. JOHNSON: Oh, I haven't the faintest idea.

MS. SHIKLER: Small talk?

MRS. JOHNSON: Well, we were talking about the art world, painting, and so forth, in an impersonal way. After about fifteen or twenty minutes of this sort of conversation, I said, "Well, I'm really very curious.." I had lived two and a half years in Paris before the war, and shown there, so I was used to the "café talk" of artists, and you can tell quite a bit about somebody from talking with them. The strange thing is, they may talk a wonderful picture, but then you see, finally, their art, and it's very weak indeed. Usually, among artists, the question comes up, "What kind of painting do you do," and it's always a question asked with trepidation, because how can you possibly describe what you do? You can relate yourself to certain schools, and so forth. So, instead of explaining, he took out of his breast pocket a small spiral bound notebook, which had some gouaches on it, and he said, "I've been visiting up and down the coast with my relatives." I think he had been in Seattle. "I did these things on my travels." They weren't landscapes; they were all completely abstract. They were what is now called the surrealist period.

MS. SHIKLER: I'm going to show you something in the Rothko catalog from the [Solomon R] Guggenheim [Museum], number thirty-four, Terracius. You mentioned before that you thought that this was fairly typical of what he was showing you.

MRS. JOHNSON: Yes. I do. They were luminous. They were pastel. They were what I call a French color-because at that time France was still dominating the art world. I didn't think of them as surreal at all. I thought of them as perhaps related to Gorky more than anyone I knew.

MS. SHIKLER: Did he call them surreal?

MRS. JOHNSON: No, no. Not at all. I think he always disliked placing himself-naming what he was related to. I suppose that's why he took out his sketchbook. I wouldn't call these little things he took out sketches; although they were so small, they perfectly showed what he was doing at that time, and I was extremely impressed with their originality.

[Tape interrupted]

MS. SHIKLER: You were saying you were impressed with the originality of his work-those gouaches.

MRS. JOHNSON: Yes. Have I already said that I thought they were related to Gorky?

MS. SHIKLER: Yes.

MRS. JOHNSON: I did mentioned that I thought he belonged in Peggy Guggenheim's gallery, and I certainly thought he was of the stature, although I'd never seen any large pictures-just from the sketches. Well, I was very good friends with Peggy Guggenheim's advisor and gallery man, Howard Putzel, and I was good friends with Peggy, but Peggy would never have listened to me-she would listen to Howard Putzel. When I came back to New York, I was not well. I tried to lay a stair carpet at my little house on 58th Street-I was very poor at that time, but I always lived very sumptuously)..

MS. SHIKLER: A good trick.

MRS. JOHNSON: Yes. I was trying to lay a second carpet to cover up all the worn spots on my little staircase. Well, it was too heavy for me, because I had the full length of the carpet to drag up, all the time-besides not knowing how to do it-and I strained myself, and I became really quite ill for about a month and a half. Mark called quite often to inquire about my health, and then finally we got together for the second time when I was just up and still feeling a bit weak. I introduced him (and I can't remember the introduction, so probably the introduction wasn't made in my house; it could have been there, but probably I got them together through the telephone, because I don't recall that-but I know that I did it) and it took quite some time for Howard Putzel to interest Peggy.

[Interrupted by street noises]

MS. SHIKLER: You were saying it was some time before Putzel introduced him to Peggy?

MRS. JOHNSON: No. I think he may have introduced him right away, but it was some time before he got Peggy's permission to give Rothko a show. He did that, I believe, by hanging the pictures up, either in his place, or in some place where she was going to be, and they would be seen without his pressuring further. Peggy was stubborn; and Mark didn't have any background to recommend him, you see. But anyone with a good eye would certainly be able to recognize these things, and Howard Putzel did at once, and I knew he would. Then I began to see a good deal of Mark and Barney Newman and Adolph Gottlieb, who were Mark's bosom friends. Barney was not then a painter; he was the sort of philosopher for the trio. Adolph was already a better-known painter than Mark, at that time. He had shown at the Wakefield Gallery, where I showed when I first arrived from Paris. That was my first show in New York. I think that was his first Uptown show. It was a small gallery where Betty Parsons was the director; and I've known Betty Parsons since I went to school in California. I went to college in California, although I'm a New Yorker. Actually, it came through someone else entirely that I was at the Wakefield. Barney Newman was the philosopher and spokesman of the group; he was the one that philosophized about the direction of art, and so forth. Mark was very interested in philosophy, and I was very interested in philosophy at that time. I was also very interested in Jungian ideas, which they rejected, but they liked it if I presented the philosophical interests of Jung, such as acausal time, and so forth. They were very fascinated. Their wives also attended, but they were both teaching school and supporting their husbands-Esther Gottlieb and Annalee Newman. Mark wasn't married at that time. They used to sit a little aside, and chat among themselves, because they had a great common interest. And I used to go to their houses; but more often they came to my house-and we used to meet, I think, about every week for a year or two. I can't really remember the times.

MS. SHIKLER: How did the philosophical discussions, which are, by themselves, often an abstract kind of thing, relate to what he was doing? Did he relate his philosophy to his ideas about what he wanted to paint? I'm speaking of Rothko himself. Did he speak of his ideas for his own work, and how they related to your discussion?

MRS. JOHNSON: Not at all. Not at all. I don't think that Mark, who was very interested in classical music, and so forth, every felt there was any relation between painting and philosophical ideas or music. I would just say no, because years later I told him that I felt his work was of a very spiritual nature, and he denied this vehemently.

MS. SHIKLER: Did he really? When was that? What sort of work was he doing at that time?

MRS. JOHNSON: Yes. I'd say that was in the early Sixties. He was doing the work he did from then on.

MS. SHIKLER: What did he say it was, if it wasn't.?

MRS. JOHNSON: Well, he didn't say what it was. It was painting. He did not like it to be related to any other discipline or any other art.

MS. SHIKLER: Did he speak about the work at all, in those evenings, those discussions?

MRS. JOHNSON: We talked about painting, but not their personal painting. After he'd had one show with Peggy-I'd like to go forward in time, because I'm reminded of this, and I won't ever bring it back again. A few weeks before he died, I went to his studio with Tony Smith and Stamos and-what was his name? The art teacher and critic, a red-headed man who was the head of the art department at Hunter College? Gene Goossen. Gene Goossen was with us, and we all had dinner together, and then we decided to go over and see Mark. I don't know whether this was planned before we had dinner or [if] we just decided to do that after dinner. But we went over to Mark's; and Mark at that time was drinking heavily. He used to have a little closet near the couch and chairs where guests sat in his immense studio (which had been a stable), and he'd go into the closet and take surreptitious drinks-sort of half in the closet and half out. He didn't seem to be drinking so much that night, and he showed us what were his last paintings, which were no longer squares, but there was a horizon line, much like the surrealist pictures in the sense that there was nothing on them but a division, and they were all grey to black, and misty-looking, because of the way he puts on his paint (it's always very varied within a very close color range). So they were dark above and light below, or vice versa; and there was change in where the division on the canvas was. They were very impressive, I thought, but I also thought they were very mournful-that's not quite the word. Later I thought they were very prophetic. Gene Goossen spoke up and said, "Oh, Mark! You're doing landscapes," and Mark said, very firmly, "I don't see them that way." And I thought how crude of Gene to have said this. He certainly couldn't have known Mark very well.

MS. SHIKLER: Was he teasing?

MRS. JOHNSON: No, no, no. Gene Goossen isn't that type. Tony might be teasing, but I don't think Tony would ever have teased Mark. Nobody would tease Mark; Mark was much too serious. That incident impressed me deeply, as to what those pictures were not intended to be, although somebody not knowing Mark's whole oeuvre might well have taken them for landscapes. I thought that was the last thing Gene Goossen should have thought of. It was very shortly after that that Mark killed himself.

MS. SHIKLER: Did the discussion go any further that evening-about the work? Did he speak of it at all?

MRS. JOHNSON: Oh, everybody spoke in detail about the pictures, but not about their resemblance to a landscape. That was like a very cold shower for anyone sensitive to Mark. That's the thing I remember most about that evening.

MS. SHIKLER: It's something to remember, especially knowing what happened so soon after.

MRS. JOHNSON: Well, the pictures themselves were oh, so very, very startling, because he was deserting the square-unless you took the boundaries of the canvas to be the square, which is probably the way he meant them.

MS. SHIKLER: Did he say.talk bout his choices?

MRS. JOHNSON: Oh, no. He never did, to my knowledge, never. Never explained himself. No. [pauses] Well, let's go back to more chronological..

MS. SHIKLER: Yes. I was going to ask you before, just very quickly-since you brought that in.. How do you compare the two images you have of Mark?

MRS. JOHNSON: The early image and the later image?

MS. SHIKLER: Yes.

MRS. JOHNSON: I suppose the seeds of his depression were there from the beginning, but I certainly would never have suspected it. I felt Mark to be a man who knew exactly what he wanted. He was a terribly shy man in a certain sense, and a very proud man. I think for a while he was a little sweet on me, but I was very much in love with somebody who was away in the war, and I was not interested in Mark that way. Nothing was ever said, no indication was made but..

MS. SHIKLER: Interesting combination-it might have been.

MRS. JOHNSON: I don't think it would have been possible, at all; we were too different in temperament.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, let's go back, if you'd like to-if you're ready to. I don't mean to interrupt you.

MRS. JOHNSON: Well, as a matter of fact, when Mark married is when we stopped seeing each other regularly. That went, really, for all three-because, in general, Mark and I would have lunch together, and I'd go up to his studio afterwards.. I remember how quickly he worked. I was so impressed with this. I met him at his studio one day..

MS. SHIKLER: Before he was married?

MRS. JOHNSON: Yes. I got married myself shortly after Mark got married. I went to his studio, in the earlier days, to meet him for lunch. He lived on 52nd Street, right opposite Twenty-One; there were old brownstone houses there, and he had the parlor floor, or the second floor, something like that, a great big sunny room-it was very light although it was on the north side, actually and he had a piece of watercolor paper attached to a board on the easel. He said, "I've just mixed up a wash. Can you wait a moment until I put the wash on?" And with a big brush, he put the wash on, in three to four minutes, while I watched.

MS. SHIKLER: What was he using-just watercolor?

MRS. JOHNSON: Watercolor, or gouache; I can't remember. I think it was watercolor. No, it must have been gouache. We came back from lunch, and I came into the studio, because I wanted to make up my face and go in the bathroom, so I asked him if I could come into his place. I came out of the bathroom-it must have been five minutes, while I repaired my makeup-and he had finished the picture. He had finished the picture!

MS. SHIKLER: My heavens! What kind of a picture was it?

MRS. JOHNSON: It was a very nice watercolor of the surrealist period. He did them that quickly.

MS. SHIKLER: How big a watercolor was that?

MRS. JOHNSON: It was a good-size water color; it was about the size of the watercolor board.

MS. SHIKLER: Did he talk about it?

MRS. JOHNSON: No, no. We just looked at it. I never say much more about a painting than that I like it, or I like something in it-"I like that form." I remember the fist time I saw a great many of his large paintings, before I introduced him to Howard Putzel. I looked at all these pictures in silence, and I felt for the first time that I was entering a different world. I think that every painter presents a world; but this was such a strange one, and it was much more subtle than the other surrealist worlds that are open to one. I mean that metaphorically; I don't mean that I walked into his picture.

MS. SHIKLER: I understand.

MRS. JOHNSON: I just wanted to make that clear. I think if a painter's of real interest, this is always true. When you see the pictures of one after another, they open up a quite different world which is the unconscious of that particular person.

MS. SHIKLER: Yes. It's a marvelous point that you make: it isn't always something that all painters can tap in themselves; they have, of course, an unconscious, but it isn't every painter who's able to present it in such a way that it becomes a unique statement that one can respond to.

MRS. JOHNSON: Yes. Of course, creativity does come from the unconscious. It's at the-I wouldn't say "mercy" of the conscious, but it comes through from the unconscious to the conscious. If anything, it's the conscious that's at the mercy of the unconscious. But I don't think most artists would ever think about that, at all.

MS. SHIKLER: Did he speak of it? You say you were so involved in discussions of the unconscious.

MRS. JOHNSON: I'm sure he did; I'm sure this was exactly the sort of thing we were talking about. Mark would have understood this. I can't remember all our conversations, of course, but they were always very serious conversations. You see, with other people I would be very humorous or talking about many things; but with Mark I always talked very seriously.

MS. SHIKLER: Taking your cue from a very serious man, apparently.

MRS. JOHNSON: Yes. He was one of the most serious people I've ever known-and I've known some very great men.

MS. SHIKLER: He was an interesting boy, I should think. He published something at Yale called "The Saturday Evening Pest," he and a few friends. They employed humor, but it was a serious denunciation of the triviality at Yale, and the superficial kind of intellectual directions that most students were taking-so even then there was that intensity, and that insistence, you might say.

MRS. JOHNSON: Seriousness--of the life.

MS. SHIKLER: Yes. It's too bad that he didn't speak more about his own work, and what he had in mind. Did he speak about surrealism as a concept, at all?

MRS. JOHNSON: I don't recall that. My feeling, at that time, was the surrealism was on the way out, as a movement. It had been a very strong movement, and even an influence [on] my early painting life in Paris, but when I came here-as a mater of fact, I told Clem Greenberg that surrealism was finished, and he looked at me quite with wonder, I think, and said, "Yes. I guess it is." I always quite respected Clem, because he could take other people's observations seriously.

MS. SHIKLER: What discernible changes could you see in Mark, after the show he was given by Peggy Guggenheim? You'd seen him as a novice, as it were.

MRS. JOHNSON: After Peggy Guggenheim, of course, he went to Howard Putzel's. I think that he always saw himself as a very important painter. I really think that he didn't want to be anything else, you see; this was the only thing in life that mattered to him, and that's what he was going to do. I think that he didn't marry the right person; now that they're both gone, I can say so. He married a little girl from Cincinnati, who came with her girlfriend. She'd studied commercial art, I believe with the idea of marrying a famous painter. They both wanted to marry famous painters and I think they both did. I never cared for her; I thought that she was a very mundane kind of girl. She was always telling me what the butcher had said to her that morning.

MS. SHIKLER: Goodness gracious. Isn't it a wonder that he was responsive to her, though!

MRS. JOHNSON: Well, she was a very good looking woman, and very capable.

MS. SHIKLER: And, I gather, quite fun-loving. Siskind talks about double-dating with them and partying.

MRS. JOHNSON: Did the other girl marry Siskind?

MS. SHIKLER: I don't think that they married; I'm not certain that I recall.

MRS. JOHNSON: I wonder who the other girl married-because they both did what they intended to do.

MS. SHIKLER: It sounds so "groupie," doesn't it?

MRS. JOHNSON: Yes. She was a typical Midwestern girl, I suppose, somewhat naïve. I think that Mark was so shy, physically speaking, that he would never approach a woman; they had to sort of approach him-at least that's what Rita [Reinhardt] told me, after he had died. After her husband's death (and he was a very good friend of Mark's), Rita was his mistress. I've forgotten their last names by now. She came and told my husband and I all about it, and what a shock the death had been, because they had plans for the next day. Rita said that when they became lovers she had had, really, to make all the approaches. I'll never forget what she said. She said, after all, she had made two painters now-her husband had been a painter long before he married her, and Mark Rothko..

MS. SHIKLER: Isn't it interesting [that] people want to take credit for something like that.

MRS. JOHNSON: She said now she'd done enough, and she was going to do it for herself. She was going to make herself as famous a painter as she had turned them into. Well, perhaps she had helped them.

MS. SHIKLER: Still sounds like a "groupie" philosophy.

MRS. JOHNSON: Yes. But Mark was certainly a well accepted painter before Rita appeared on the scene.

MS. SHIKLER: Isn't it crazy to hear things like that?

MRS. JOHNSON: Well, I hope she gave him some solace and comfort before his death. His wife had become alcoholic.

MS. SHIKLER: He was very injured by his experience with his first wife.

MRS. JOHNSON: Yes. Never spoke of it.

MS. SHIKLER: She'd made life hell for him, apparently, because she accused him of being a failure. He was at that time teaching children, in Brooklyn.

MRS. JOHNSON: He was when I met him.

MS. SHIKLER: He was still doing that. He'd gotten her a job at that Jewish center, teaching jewelry making. She wanted him to be a salesman for her, and to sell her jewelry, because she thought nothing of his ability and his future as a painter. Ultimately she left him.

MRS. JOHNSON: That's good.

MS. SHIKLER: Yes, indeed; but it was a very brutal thing, and he was quite injured and hurt. I wonder if that didn't shape some of his later response to other women, and make him exceptionally cautious. I kind of get a kick of thinking to myself later-what she must have thought of this giant of a reputation he had achieved-and whether she questioned herself at all. At any rate, that might account for some of his shyness.

[End of Side One]

MS. SHIKLER: We sort of left your chronology somewhere back in post-Peggy, pre-Putzel.

MRS. JOHNSON: I think I mentioned that he had shown with Howard Putzel and I think that his shows were already being taken seriously. James Johnson Sweeney was a friend of mine; I had recommended Mark's paintings to him, and I think I was helpful in getting the Museum of Modern Art interested-not at that time, but later.

MS. SHIKLER: You certainly were central to his fortunes, weren't you?

MRS. JOHNSON: I don't think he even knew that.

MS. SHIKLER: You began, in a sense..

MRS. JOHNSON: I meant I don't think he knew that (because I never told him) I was getting to the ear of James Johnson Sweeney, but I did. I think that James Johnson Sweeney is a very fine man, one of the most fine men of the art world, and a man of great feeling and perception. He was so interested in Mondrian. I feel there's some relation between Mark and Mondrian. They couldn't be more different, in a way, yet at least they shared the square. I always used to do a lot of joking, and tell them that Barney chose the circle, Mark the square, and Adolph the line. Oh, it was quite different; the line was Newman. Sometimes I can say things absolutely backwards.

MS. SHIKLER: That's the dyslexic thing that so many people do do. Do you ever see words backwards, or write them backwards?

MRS. JOHNSON: No.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, at any rate, what happened with Sweeney?

MRS. JOHNSON; He, I think, got Mark into the Museum of Modern Art, which was a very important step. It was not until Mark got to Betty Parsons-that is, his third show-that Mark was really being taken very seriously.

MS. SHIKLER: Did he talk about it-what was happening to him, and how he perceived his career?

MRS JOHNSON: No.

MS SHIKLER: He accepted it?

MRS. JOHNSON: I think he thought about it; I think he thought it out. But it's not very usual for artists to talk to each other about how they think their career is going. I think that would be an embarrassing kind of thought to share.

[Interrupted by street noises]

MS. SHIKLER: When I said, "Did he talk about the way that his career was going," apparently, according to Ernest Briggs (who I interviewed a little while back-and very much enjoyed that interview) he sort of decried what was happening, after a while, at The Club, or at the [Cedar] bar. What had been interesting philosophical discussions

between painters, and excitement about the work, began to be translated, for the most part, into who was selling, and who was showing where, because, he said, the thing took off, all of a sudden. People who had expected to find themselves working against opposition, always, were feted, and had almost rapid successes, one after another. In a sense this was what was happening to Rothko. I'm interested to hear that he was relatively silent, in the face of a lot of other discussion of that sort of thing by painters.

MRS. JOHNSON: Well he was, to me. I can only say that he was not discussing these things with me. And I can't imagine him discussing how his career was going, with other painters. I do know that he was not making money. He was not independent through his painting until the early Sixties, which is a long time. This spans practically over fifteen years-since the period about which we began talking. You see, I went to live in East Hampton when my daughter was born, in 1950, through the [Jackson] Pollocks, although I didn't remain friends with the Pollocks.

[Tape interrupted]

MS. SHIKLER: So we're back to the chronology. I'll just let you go on.

MRS. JOHNSON: In the 1950's I didn't see so much of Mark; I was seeing all the painters out in East Hampton. Tony Smith a little, and Tony was seeing a great deal (I introduced Tony to Mark)-a lot of Mark, and actually getting his brother to buy one of Mark's paintings. I think he bought himself, although he never had much money. Tony was improvident [laughs]. He was teaching with Gene Goossen up in Vermont-the college; I can't remember the name. It's a very well-known experimental women's college, in Vermont near the New York border [Bennington]. It's still a lively art center. Even Clem Greenberg was there.

MS. SHIKLER: Well-nevertheless..

MRS. JOHNSON: I can't forget at the end of the Sixties I was at a party at Dorothy Norman's and Mark was there-and everybody was there, but not so much in the art world as the literary world, which I also belonged to as my husband was a writer, and I've always known a lot of literary people anyway. I sat down and talked to Mark much of the evening, and Mark made the remark to me. "Buffie, I'm terribly, terribly unhappy." I was very shocked. I didn't ask him why' I felt somehow it would be impertinent. But it's something I've never forgotten, because at this moment Mark was just beginning (it must have been '59 or '60) to come into his own. Every painter knew and respected him, but now the general public was becoming aware of him. I suppose he meant his personal life.

MS. SHIKLER: I wonder. I've heard people say that such acceptance almost took away the impetus. He as pretty much of a fighter, too. I wonder if that.?

MRS. JOHNSON: People have told you that acceptance took away the impetus for Mark's [work]?

MS. SHIKLER: They simply speculated on whether it did. I don't know that.

MRS. JOHNSON: I used to come from East Hampton and go to his studio, and we'd have lunch. I'd meet him at his studio, and we'd walk someplace. That's when he had his studio on Second Avenue, above the ten-cent store, in the Seventies. I don't remember the address any more, exactly. It was really a big studio, as big as the ten-cent store downstairs; it was just a two storey building. He was working on immense pictures at that time, and I think he worked very fast. That's why I was so puzzled when I was told after his death, by Stamos, that he only left two hundred pictures. I suppose that's something Bernie was trying to.the idea of disseminating.

MS. SHIKLER: Incredible.

MRS. JOHNSON: We never spoke again about how unhappy he was, but I was always aware of this.

MS. SHIKLER: He didn't say anything more about that?

MRS. JOHNSON: No. but I did not think that he said this out of a mood; I felt it was a very profound thing he was saying.

MS. SHIKLER: Tell us about the time he gave you the painting. What happened? How did that come about?

MRS. JOHNSON: Well, I don't remember very much about it, as a matter of fact. It came about after his show with Peggy, and I was surprised and pleased, and I sort of thought he gave it to me as a very, very nice gesture of thanks. I gave him one of mine-not at that same time, but later. I don't know what's happened to that picture. It was an awfully nice picture; it was realistic. He admired it, and so I gave it to him. I've never known his daughter's address, so I've never gotten in touch with her, to find out where it was.

MS. SHIKLER: We can get you that address; we're in touch with her.

MRS. JOHNSON: I'd be delighted.

MS. SHIKLER: No problem at all. You said you had a second one that was stolen.

MRS. JOHNSON: I had a small watercolor that was stolen.

MS. SHIKLER: From that same period?

MRS. JOHNSON: I think it was stolen at a party that I'd given. It was not framed, because he'd just given it to me, for Christmas. It never occurred to me to put it away. It wasn't exhibited; I think it was in a little folio, probably leaning against the wall or something, with other things.

MS. SHIKLER: Makes one very creepy about one's friends, to say the least. The picture that he gave you after Peggy's [show]-you said you sold it. Was that a surrealist?

MRS. JOHNSON: Yes. That was a surrealist period picture. It was a good-size picture; it as the size that all the pictures were. One would now call it a medium-size picture. The large paintings hadn't come in yet.

MS. SHIKLER: He never did discuss those transitional periods with you? You said that before; I guess I'm pushing a little bit, hoping that he might have made reference to ideas that he had for change-for instance when one period became part of his past, and he'd moved on to something else. Was there no reference made to those changes?

MRS. JOHNSON: Well, no. I would just simply say, "I've seen the new pictures," and what I felt about them. I don't remember what he would say in answer. I never speak in very specific terms. From the surrealist period he went into a very strongly colored (those were very pastel, pale) --quite strongly colored, with a lot of red and yellow. You can see how the big square pictures came out of that. But they were quite a new way of painting, and it's not one that I like as well as even the final square paintings, or the earlier paintings. They were very romantic, and fluid, and abstract-more abstract. He lost the horizon somewhere along the way; and that was a freeing sort of period.

MS. SHIKLER: Softened edges were appearing.

MRS. JOHNSON: Yes. And they were very fluid.

MS. SHIKLER: It was such an extreme..

MRS. JOHNSON: They didn't have as much to say as either the earlier period or the later period.

MS. SHIKLER: Yes. But did he not make such an extreme change, really from what he'd been doing before-and everyone must have been fairly surprised by those changes, unless he in some way indicated that his thinking was changing. With his interest in a certain philosophical approach, the painting was changing. Do you remember any of that?

MRS. JOHNSON: No, I'm afraid I don't. While Mark wasn't exactly taciturn, as Jackson was (when he didn't drink)-Jackson never opened his mouth-still, Mark didn't say much of a deeply personal nature. Where something is going, in your painting, or where it's gone, where you've arrived, people like Mark take to be self-evident; the picture should tell you, rather than what they say. It's too bad Tony Smith is gone. Did you ever tape Tony Smith?

MS. SHIKLER: I never did. I don't know whether the Foundation has done that or not.

MRS. JOHNSON: Tony Smith was a very articulate person, and loved to talk about painting. He would have talked to Mark; I don't know whether Mark would have talked back. [Laughter]

MS. SHIKLER: That surprises me, though-that he was interested in discussion, but obviously not about his own work.

MRS. JOHNSON: Oh, he was. You could see by the clipped way in which he simply denied Gene Goossen's statement that he was now painting landscapes-one sentence: "I don't see it that way."

MS. SHIKLER: It's an insensitive comment. And yet I gather that he went on at length about his interest in the unconscious and..

MRS. JOHNSON: Mark?

MS. SHIKLER: Yes.

MRS. JOHNSON: Well, his early things were very much influenced by him, before I met him. We did talk much more about painting in the early days. He talked less and less about art as time went on.

MS. SHIKLER: What did he like to talk about with you?

MRS JOHNSON: Everything. You know, as old friends talk. Not particularly about our home lives, or anything of that sort. When I came back and lived in New York, then I was living a family life, as he was-with a child and a husband. We didn't get much chance, then, to be alone together and talk. Actually, I could talk with him more when I was living in the country and would come back and have lunch with him, go to his studio and see what he was doing. When I finally moved back, in the late Sixties, to New York, then we'd go to dinner at his house, or I'd go to a Christmas party (he gave a Christmas party every year). Then I'd see him with his wife, and my husband. My husband was a great talker, and usually got the conversation going on some intellectual topic far from painting, because he wasn't interested in painting, really (he said he was, but he wasn't). He found painters, for the most part, a lost cause because they didn't want to talk. [Laughter] I was awfully shocked when Barney Newman told me that my husband really didn't like painters.

MS. SHIKLER: Did you believe him? Immediately, did you know that he was right?

MRS. JOHNSON: Immediately I didn't know that he was right. Now I see that he was absolutely right. I guess love kept me blind.

MS. SHIKLER: That's what they say. Well, I think that nobody is interested in painters as much as painters are interested in their art. There are a lot of followers, a lot of people who will be interested, and ask a lot of questions, but they never really get into that zone that is occupied only by painters, I feel-followers and writers and critics, and lots of people who make a public fuss about it.

MRS. JOHNSON: Yes. Among the abstract expressionists I didn't fare very well, because they weren't very open to women. I felt very aloof and alone in East Hampton.

MS. SHIKLER: I shouldn't really digress, I suppose, but I'm curious to know about somebody like Lee Krasner.for instance.

MRS. JOHNSON: She didn't get anywhere, until her husband died. We were good friends for a while, and then I showed one of my old realistic paintings in the East Hampton guild Hall, because they'd asked me to put something in a realistic show. She stopped on the street in front of the post office and harangued at me for doing this. I said, "Well, I don't deny my early work. If Picasso shows his realistic things and his abstract things side by side, I don't know why [I shouldn't]." She said, "We've spent years trying to get the Guild Hall to accept abstract work, and you come along and undo all our work." She's a very emphatic woman, and we soon had a great crowd around us of the painters, who were all going to the post office around the same time in the morning. I felt very injured.

MS. SHIKLER: The battle lines were drawn very sharply then. It always seemed to me an unnecessary battle; I could never understand why it was so important for one side to reject the other.

MRS. JOHNSON: Well, I was an abstract painter, but I didn't deny my early work.

MS. SHIKLER: How did Mark respond to that kind of battle that was always ongoing between realism and abstraction? Did he talk about it?

MRS. JOHNSON: Well, when I met him I was doing realistic work, and he liked my work. In fact, he wrote something about it, saying that he would ordinarily not be interested in that kind of space (since he was very interested in space), but that there was so much mystery in my painting-he couldn't understand what created the mystery, and he liked it.

MS. SHIKLER: That's a nice thing to say. Certainly his paintings always had mystery, didn't they?

MRS. JOHNSON: I felt they did. I felt they were all very interior paintings. They were all expressive of a very deep soul, a great spirit.

MS. SHIKLER: It would be nice to know what he had in his mind, when he spoke about being unhappy-whether he meant his work, or his personal life, or the direction it was all going.

MRS. JOHNSON: I didn't think he meant his work, because that was when he was doing his best work. I didn't want to inquire. Then, although we were talking for a very long time, in the middle of a very large party is not exactly the place to bare your soul, or to ask someone to bare his soul. I never asked. I just let people tell me what they want to tell me. Well, it makes me very sad.

MS. SHIKLER: I can see that. And that was a good deal before he died.

MRS. JOHNSON: Oh, yes. That was in the late Fifties or the early Sixties; I can't pinpoint that at all, but it was certainly before I came back to New York, long before I came back to New York.

[Tape interrupted]

MS. SHIKLER: I wonder if you have anything more that you feel is important-or unimportant.

MRS. JOHNSON: No. I wish I could remember more of the things we used to talk about.

MS. SHIKLER: We can always add, at another time, if you think of something that you'd like to say. Then I think we'll just finish here.

[Tape interrupted]

MS. SHIKLER: We're going to add a few bits and pieces. You were saying that Mark took you in to look at the chapel.

MRS. JOHNSON: When I had returned to New York in the late Sixties, Mark had the 69th Street studio, and he asked me if I'd like to see the studies for the de Menil Chapel. I told him of course, I'd like to. I came over and saw these very handsome paintings. Then he scrapped all those paintings, and he did it all over again. I was so surprised, because I had thought the first ones were very fine; but I thought the second were still finer. They were very impressive, very. Something or other spoke to me of Beethoven; I think that he was playing a lot of Beethoven.

MS. SHIKLER: I understand that he was one of his favorite composers.

MRS. JOHNSON: Yes. I gave him a book on Beethoven, something I can't remember. I remember my surprise at his change, because the first pictures that were made were quite a heavy load of work, and he scrapped them all and did it all over again.

MS. SHIKLER: When you say he scrapped them, did he paint over them?

MRS. JOHNSON: I don't think he threw them out. I think he liked to paint on a fresh canvas.

MS. SHIKLER: The texture would indicate that.

MRS. JOHNSON: Those probably still exist; I don't know anything about that.

MS. SHIKLER: I don't either. It would be interesting. I don't even know if they've been seen by anyone else at all. Do you?

MRS. JOHNSON: I don't know a thing about it. I only know what I saw.

MS. SHIKLER: How did they compare with the later things? Those that he finally installed?

MRS. JOHNSON: I think that they didn't have the weight that the later things had. They were quite different. I really can't say, now, in what way.

MS. SHIKLER: Tonally similar, were they?

MRS. JOHNSON: No. I think the final pictures were much heavier. I think that Mark relates much more to the Old Testament than to the New. Of course, the New is Christian. I'm not saying that properly. I think that the Old Testament was a very appropriate thing for Mark to have taken as a subject, because he had something of that quality in his spirit.

MS. SHIKLER: He had size--and I don't mean that literally, either. He had the qualities of a prophet, from what I gather, at times.

MRS. JOHNSON: Yes. I admired Barney and his work, Adolf and his work; but Mark was the person that I felt truly related to, and to his work-but not in a sentimental way, at all.

MS. SHIKLER: It's interesting that at a time when you said the abstract expressionists were not interested in women, he was quite agreeable to having a friend who was a painter, who was a woman-and your friendship was a solid one, apparently.

MRS. JOHNSON: The prejudice had not arisen at that time; maybe it was always there, but women were

accepted in the art world when I was young. It was only the abstract expressionist period when they were scorned.

MS. SHIKLER: Why is that, do you think?

MRS. JOHNSON: I wouldn't like to venture to say. I don't like to dwell on negative things. I think it was a very hard period to live through; I felt it very deeply, and I was isolated in the midst of it in East Hampton, and I just withdrew.

MS. SHIKLER: Not a happy experience, then.

MRS. JOHNSON: No. It was a terrible experience. I lost my dealer; and I retreated, more and more. I even looked worn. Everybody said that I was a very good painter, but the painters were all men, and they never talked to the women; and the only person that doesn't recognize that is Carol Fine, who had an adoring husband who kept her, and no children, no problems. She felt none of this; but she's the only one.

MS. SHIKLER: Strange period, in many ways; kind of anachronistic. Shall we sail off again?

MRS. JOHNSON: Yes.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated...April 26, 2007