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Oral history interview with Louis Kaufman, 1985 Feb. 15

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Louis Kaufman on February 15, 1985. The interview was conducted by Ruth Cloudman for the Archives of American Art's Mark Rothko and His Times oral history project, with funding 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

RUTH CLOUDMAN: How did you know Mark Rothko?

LOUIS KAUFMAN: Well, as a matter of fact, it goes back to our early kiddie days. I was born in Portland, Oregon, and I went to public school there with Mark. From a very early time, I used to come across him in here and there. At grade school...I think at the Shattuck School in Portland, Oregon. Then, many years later when I was sent to study seriously the violin-after my thirteenth birthday-I went to New York where I began to study with Franz Kniesel, who was one of the great musicians of our country. I don't know if you're aware of his career. He had the first great string quartet. He was an intimate friend of Brahms. We certainly had a good background with him. Anyhow, he accepted me into his class. A few years after I started to study...and the school was taken over by the Juilliard, I came across Marcus somehow. He was painting around. At the time he was a pupil of Max Weber, as I remember.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Would this have been at the Art Students League?

MR. KAUFMAN: Very possibly.

MS. CLOUDMAN: About what time was that?

MR. KAUFMAN: This goes back very early, because this goes back even before I met Annette. I went to New York in the early 1930's. I got to know Mark in the early Thirties or late Twenties in New York. At that time I had been introduced to Milton Avery by a very nice fellow-Aaron Berkman-who came from Hartford, Connecticut. He got to know Milton very well. I became really interested in painting. When I was very young, I already was a member of a string quartet. We used to rehearse in New Hartford. There was a little local show there. They had a mixed bag of work. I remember one picture that I thought was very fascinating. It was a little oil painting of the Brooklyn Bridge with the wonderful curve.

MS. CLOUDMAN: This would have been done by Milton Avery?

MR. KAUFMAN: No, no, unfortunately not. This artist, by the name of Mary Kumpt. This was the first time I ever thought of buying a picture. But this fascinated me. I went over and found out what the price was. It was all of twenty-five dollars with a rather nice frame. So, I bought it on the spot, that is, on the condition that I take it after the show was over, which I did. We were rehearsing for most of the summer for concerts in New York and wherever we went. Well, I took it with me to my apartment proudly. It was a little after that that I met my friend Aaron Berkman. Anyhow, he's still active and I think he is still teaching there. He's a very nice fellow. I asked him to come up to my little one room apartment to look at my painting. He wasn't so taken with it. He rather pooh-poohed it. He said if you want to see really good painting, interesting stuff, I'll take you to Milton Avery's studio. We all think a lot of him and all the young fellows go there. Well, at that time Milton and Sally were living in a tiny little place on Herald Square, long before it became the grandiose music center of today, Lincoln Center.

MS. CLOUDMAN: About what year was this?

MR. KAUFMAN: Oh, this was very early. This was still in the late Twenties, '26, '27, something like that, if not earlier. I went there and I found them both fascinating. Sally was a bubbling as ever and Milton was most likeable. He was always very amiable. He was never very talkative. But I was fascinated by the work I saw there.

MS. CLOUDMAN: What did it look like?

MR. KAUFMAN: Well, it was, most of it, was rather dark but very rich. He had still lifes and paintings that were very remarkable. In fact, the first picture I ever bought from him was a still life-a collection of fruit and one thing or another-which was remarkably rich in surface. It was wonderful. I would say it was influenced by Lawson at that time. It had an impasto, a beautiful surface, with, you might say, a backward look at Cezanne. It was very fine. Then there was another one that I have I'll show you some of the slides which relate to that period.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Good.

MR. KAUFMAN: I timidly asked if I might buy it. They were delighted because no one was buying the work; no one was looking at it. Milton at that time was painting ferociously. He couldn't wait to get up and paint. It was Sally, as you probably know, that really kept him going. She was very successful as a sort of superior commercial artist. She used to do little cartoons for the *New York Times* magazine section which were very bright and snappy and really had their own quality long before the *New Yorker* began to go into that type of material. As I said, I liked the idea of buying this painting. The painting appealed to me enormously. It suited my taste. Although it was avant garde in comparison with all the current prize winners with their more slick style and their award style, you might say….

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you remember how much you paid for it?

MR. KAUFMAN: Yes, I remember very clearly. It was all of twenty-five dollars. It wasn't framed; I had to buy a frame, which I probably did for five dollars in raw wood. It was an interesting thing that they were so poor that they couldn't afford to get regular canvas. Sally used to take cardboards and stretch dish toweling over them. It made a very decent surface, to tell the truth, and it was much, much cheaper than anything else. It wasn't long before I would take all of my friends that I could bring over. It got to be a weekly thing. We would try to visit Milton at least once or twice a week. It was a pleasure to be able to help them out a little bit. I would bring all my friends, who must have liked me in a personal way because they dutifully came along. Not one of them would think of buying anything. I always ended up by buying pictures by myself. Now to go back to Rothko-I must have met Marcus through some mutual friends. This was before he knew Milton or even knew his existence….

MS. CLOUDMAN: Well, you said you went to school with him….

MR. KAUFMAN: That was in Portland, Oregon. But we renewed our acquaintanceship in New York. I was introduced to him. I don't think he called me. I didn't call him because I didn't even know he was in town. When we got together, as we met, I mentioned to him…he said he was studying with Max Weber. Of course I knew Max Weber and his work. I said, well, I think an awful lot of Avery and all of my colleagues that know something about painting. We all like to go there regularly-not only for the life class that they used to share. They used to have a model and pay her and share the cost and do drawing. That was regularly. Sally might…And correct me if I'm wrong-but it probably was once or twice a week. I was never, of course, invited to any of those classes. I would have been an outsider because I didn't know anything about sketching and I have no talent, I'm afraid, for anything outside of enjoying art. I took Marcus to Milton and then he became a real fanatic on the work of Milton. It had an immediate effect on his work. If you have the big book on Rothko, you'll see that some of the early Rothkos could be mistaken, of the same period, for Milton's work, practically the same compositions and so forth. He soon got out of that. It was a sort of natural homage to a man he admired. One thing it did do, I think very definitely, it cleared up Marcus' sense of color remarkably.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you? How did it change?

MR. KAUFMAN: It became much lighter; more radiant. For me, the most interesting period that I personally enjoyed the most of Marcus' work is his middle period.

MS. CLOUDMAN: And by that you mean…?

MR. KAUFMAN: I mean the period of a rather light, more opalescent color. He'd already arrived at that formula of sort of minimal art-a few stripes-and did whatever he had to say within that context. But for that period, I thought it was very rich.

MS. CLOUDMAN: When you first got reacquainted with Rothko in New York, what did his work look like then?

MR. KAUFMAN: He was at that time floundering around. He was doing all kinds of things. He was doing, oh, sort of a W.P.A. style that was fashionable….

MS. CLOUDMAN: What kind of subjects?

MR. KAUFMAN: Lugubrious interiors of the subway scene-which were fairly good on composition, but the color wasn't anything to get too enthusiastic about. Occasionally, he would go back to visit his friends and relatives in Portland. I remember one or two things that he did that were remarkably good. He did a very beautiful screen based on the triptych idea with views of Columbia River Highway-which is along Portland, which is very spectacular. It was half-abstract, half-realistic, but also quite rich. But this was all after he had met Milton.

MS. CLOUDMAN: About what period would the screen have been from?

MR. KAUFMAN: That would probably be in the 1930's. This was a little after his very early period. Regretfully, it's either been lost track of…but I don't believe there's been a reproduction of that. It would have been very nice to have included that in a book.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did he own it or did he give it to the family…?

MR. KAUFMAN: No, it was a commission. I think he got probably two hundred dollars for it, you know, which was pretty good for that time.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you think he sold it in Portland?

MR. KAUFMAN: He probably did, yes. But for some reason, I remember getting a glimpse of it in New York. Now, I don't know why. Maybe it was to somebody in New York, maybe someone he might have met through Max Weber or somebody else. But it was the first sort of break out of that style. He did other things, which you can check with the book that was done by the Museum of Modern Art. I think it gives you a very good idea of the distance that he traveled from that early time. But Milton was very definitely an influence. He was an influence on everybody that came to his studio in a curious way.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did he talk much about art?

MR. KAUFMAN: No, not at all. He was the most unassertive, the least bombastic person that you can think of. He never said a word about it. He'd make a few remarks and….

MS. CLOUDMAN: Would these younger artists show Milton Avery their work?

MR. KAUFMAN: Oh, yes.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Would he comment on their work?

MR. KAUFMAN: Oh, yes. He was always very kind. I don't think Milton would willingly hurt anybody's feelings. That just wouldn't occur to him. He'd either say something that he thought might be helpful, or he'd probably say nothing at all.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did he talk about art?

MR. KAUFMAN: Very little, very little. But somehow, through osmosis or one manner or another, I began to realize that I was looking at the wrong values, at the wrong things-even including the current prize winners. I began to haunt the galleries in 57th Street. At that time, they were showing treasures. I mean early Picasso, Matisse; they had some of his very richest; the young Miro; and everything that was coming out of France at that very creative period. Then, of course, I began to haunt the museums, particularly the Metropolitan and the Museum of Modern Art.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did you ever go to museums or galleries with Milton?

MR. KAUFMAN: Yes, occasionally.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you remember anything, any artists or exhibits, that he particularly admired or was struck by?

MR. KAUFMAN: He showed very good, advanced taste. He admired above all, I would think, Matisse, Bonnard, Picasso, Braque, that whole school. He had a taste that you might say was almost prophetic in the things that he obviously admired. I think that historically he makes a very interesting transition from a very vital period of French art to what was developing on the New York scene later on. He is the true transmission, the true transition, rather, of that whole period then. All the young artists seemed to recognize that.

MS. CLOUDMAN: He's getting a lot of attention.

MR. KAUFMAN: Gottlieb I would come across occasionally. I don't remember ever visiting him at his studio, which I regret to say. But the Averys were very charitable about trying to induce me to visit some of their other young friends whom they liked at that time. I remember Ben Benn, who has been lost in the shuffle to a certain extent. Lately, he's beginning to be appreciated more and more. There was that Greek-George Constant-and quite a few others that he introduced us to that I ended up by buying occasional small pictures from. Also, David Burliuk…oh, as a matter of fact, it was the other way around. I met Burliuk just on my own. He was showing at one of the German advanced galleries, J.B. Neumann's, a man that exhibited Klee and the whole German school. He was very much interested in Burliuk's work because he was a member of the avant garde in Russia. And also for a time when he as in Berlin, he was actually on the fringes of Der Blaue Reiter, that whole big German development. And Burliuk was a rather fantastic character but completely likeable and a thorough master at

what he was doing at the time. When he got into the art picture, he was already quite rebellious and, you might say, a great force for freedom in Russian art at that time. He was very advanced. He gradually saw that the Revolution went nowhere and he was one of the lucky ones to get out with his wife. Incidentally, we have a very nice bronze of his wife done by Noguchi (an early Noguchi).

MS. CLOUDMAN: Oh, I'd love to see that. I just recently saw the Buliuk that you gave to Reed College, too.

MR. KAUFMAN: Yes, I hope they put it on the walls occasionally. That's good.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Let me ask you a little more about Rothko. Did he ever paint your musical art quartet?

MR. KAUFMAN: No, never. Not that I am aware of, no. He might have painted quartets or something like that-just made studies of it. But I am not aware of anything that I ever saw.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did he ever discuss music with you at all?

MR. KAUFMAN: Occasionally, not very much. I was fascinated to try and discuss art with him because Marcus could have been sort of an American Kenneth Clark if he wanted to continue. He knew everything. He was an encyclopedia. I wasn't taken aback when, during the first season that I met him, I said, "Marcus, what do you want to do?" "Oh," he says, "I'm busy working on an encyclopedia of art." (Incidentally, he had a show at Neumann's Gallery and Neumann told him to change his name from Rothkowitz to Rothko-as his own name was too long to be signed on a canvas!)

MS. CLOUDMAN: Oh, you're kidding!

MR. KAUFMAN: He could have done it, believe it or not.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was he serious?

MR. KAUFMAN: He was absolutely serious.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did he have a good knowledge of the history of art?

MR. KAUFMAN: Very decent. Very curious.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did he talk art theory with you? Do you remember some of the things that he was particularly interested in when he was talking about art?

MR. KAUFMAN: Not specifically, but his ideas historically I thought were rather good and they were not quite the usual bowing down to the gods of former years-that is, the classic Greek or so forth.... He would take contrary views and very often they also were sort of prophetic.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Who did he admire that you recall?

MR. KAUFMAN: I think he admired advanced French and all of those....

MS. CLOUDMAN: Such as Picasso, or...?

MR. KAUFMAN: Yes, but everybody universally was led by the nose by this pied piper [Picasso]. Everybody got into that shadow. You couldn't avoid it, whether you liked it or not. It was so all-pervading. I don't know that it was particularly a good thing, but you just couldn't escape it. All the avant garde, everybody bowed down very low to Picasso.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did he like Matisse at all? Was he interested in Matisse?

MR. KAUFMAN: Oh, yes. He was enormously impressed by Matisse. Not only the very beautiful color at that time, but the wonderful type of free drawing-which obviously was a great influence on Milton, too, more than I think the drawing of Picasso. I think the drawing of Matisse profoundly influenced him.

MS. CLOUDMAN: What about Cezanne?

MR. KAUFMAN: Oh, yes. He bowed down very worshipfully to Cezanne, as everybody did. Although at that time it was still pretty avant garde.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was Rothko at all interested in any of the German painters?

MR. KAUFMAN: Not that I am particularly aware of. I don't believe so. That is, the group that was to become so important on....

MS. CLOUDMAN: The Expressionists?

MR. KAUFMAN: The Expressionists. I don't believe so. He got into that group with Gottlieb and the other people who at that time were creating a movement of their own, a sort of Greek mythology as a basis. For a time Marcus went into that quite well I thought. They were all delving into that. I know they tried to get Milton into that circle, but Milton in his own quiet way was also very stubborn. He would paint exactly what he wanted in his own style. There was nothing that could influence him. It didn't matter whether it was sellable or not. It didn't seem to make the slightest difference. Of course, he had Sally to egg him on because she would draw out of the back curtains there all of the latest things. It used to be fascinating to go there to just see what he was doing. Day by day unfolded a whole panorama of wonderful, vital art. I think at that time Milton was interested…as he got to be more and more…I think the thing he was looking for, outside of the obvious qualities of color and composition, and sometimes paradoxical, was a freshness.

MS. CLOUDMAN: This was throughout his career?

MR. KAUFMAN: Throughout his career. It started in very early. He wanted to get a freshness of idea and get it down in purest form. In fact, regretfully, he used to paint over without hesitation in an almost cruel way the things that he didn't like or the things that he would struggle on for a few times that didn't get that purity, that freshness of idea. It was a point at which Matisse arrived also around the same time. As you remember, Matisse went through a marvelous apprenticeship of knowledge and a profound study of older masters and all art, and finally arrived at a distillation of the greatest purity. I think that this was a thing that obsessed Milton as far as I can see now in retrospect. This wonderful purity of vision. He would say himself, that if he had to struggle and work with things, they generally didn't come out. Occasionally, he would work over things and they would come out well. But usually he would do things the first chance. We are lucky to have in our collection no less than three paintings he did of Annette, two paintings that exist that he did of me, and quite a few of the artists around there.

MS. CLOUDMAN: I'm looking forward to seeing them.

MR. KAUFMAN: There was Spagna, and he did, as you see, that little one of…

MS. CLOUDMAN: Marsden Hartley?

MR. KAUFMAN: …Marsden Hartley and many, many more-Nagai, Chaim, Gross, Elshemius. I was absolutely fascinated by the portraits because I thought that he got things in a marvelous way. He got character without even trying for it.

MS. CLOUDMAN: I agree with you.

MR. KAUFMAN: And, at the same time, they were really great pictures on their own.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Let me return to Rothko for a moment. Did Rothko play any musical instruments that you know of?

MR. KAUFMAN: No. He might have but, at the time, I'm not aware that he was an exception. In Portland, Oregon, a lot of us youngsters took to the violin for no good reason that I know of. But I don't think he did.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Because there are drawings of him playing with a mandolin.

MR. KAUFMAN: Very possible.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did he ever discuss with you his belief that paintings should produce emotions like music?

MR. KAUFMAN: To a certain extent, but I don't remember anything very clearly. I remember some of the things of Milton, but those rather abstract discussions, I don't remember very much, really.

MS. CLOUDMAN: What about Rothko, though?

MR. KAUFMAN: I am going to say about Marcus, by the time he came to this sort of mysticism that he arrived at in his later, bigger compositions, I don't think we ever discussed the matter. In fact, very frankly, I did not like the very later work of Marcus very much. I didn't like the blackish color and I couldn't see the point. Obviously, I was very wrong because everybody else has seen the point in a very grandiose way. Also, he got to be rather combative and, oh, how should I say…he was very strong in his opinions about things. Very often I could not agree with him. And, as I say, rather combative in his attitude.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did you know him all the way until his death? Did you keep in touch?

MR. KAUFMAN: No, no. With my own activities and with one thing and another between the two of us, we practically lost sight of him. I remember his coming to visit us sometime in our house here. We had a rather interesting visit. I have some letters that I loaned to the Archives in San Francisco here. It was a rather touching letter. He wanted to know if we could help find some dealers around for him here. He was having a pretty hard time. We did our best but, of course, no one would look at the work he was doing at that time.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you have any other letters from Rothko or Avery that are not in the Archives?

MR. KAUFMAN: We have quite a few. My wife might be able to help you more in that direction than I. It is very possible that we have some more. We've saved most of the material.

MS. CLOUDMAN: You remained friendly with Milton Avery up until his death?

MR. KAUFMAN: Oh, yes.

MS. CLOUDMAN: And of course still are friends with Sally.

MR. KAUFMAN: We keep in touch all the time. We are getting recently very startling news about Milton. There's going to be-if I'm not letting any cats out of the bag-about six important exhibitions in Scotland and England and so forth next season. And big ones coming up here all the time in America.

MS. CLOUDMAN: He's getting marvelous attention.

MR. KAUFMAN: He's getting a belated recognition. It is so sad that he didn't get some of this while he was still alive. He would have appreciated it. But artistically it didn't seem to make the slightest difference. He went right on his own way. Nothing could swerve from his type of individual freedom and expressing, as I say, this very important factor of art of the wonderful purity and freshness which he achieved in his best work. There's no doubt about it. With a kind of personal shorthand that is seen to be very much to our liking today, without being actually abstract. I remember discussing with Marcus when he was here... I said to him, "You know, you have developed a very beautiful sense of color. Wouldn't it be interesting to try to apply this to the things of life around you that you see? Not necessarily buckeye pictures and compositions and pleasant scenes and all the rest of it, but in your own way." And he was rather evasive. He didn't think that was too good [an] idea. He said, "No, I have other ideas." I don't remember any exact conversations but probably related to the idea of having a sort of mystic communication with the people that would look at his work. It seemed far-fetched to me at that time. I couldn't quite connect on that.

MS. CLOUDMAN: How many times do you remember him going back to visit Portland?

MR. KAUFMAN: I think it was fairly frequently, as I remember. I don't know too much about it.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you remember some of the works that he painted when he was visiting Portland?

MR. KAUFMAN: No, outside of this one screen, I really don't remember. That stuck out, I remember. It was remarkably good because it impressed itself on my memory. It was a big three-part screen, like a sort of Japanese screen. It had very, pretty color.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Now, were you living in New York during the Twenties and Thirties?

MR. KAUFMAN: I came to New York shortly after my thirteenth birthday. My father took me there and I was boarding out with some relatives in the Bronx. I spent an awful lot o time traveling on the subway to study at the Institute of Music and Art, which is on 116th Street on Riverside Drive. That's been taken over now, I believe, by the Mannes School-after the Institute of Music and Art became absorbed by the Julliard, later on. I remember very vividly the old Herald Square little studio the Averys had was a tiny little room. Our kitchen would be bigger than all of it.

MS. CLOUDMAN: The Averys?

MR. KAUFMAN: Yes, the Averys.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you remember any of the books that Rothko was reading when you knew him? Did he discuss what he was reading at all?

MR. KAUFMAN: Not too clearly, I regret to say. I believe that he probably went his own intellectual way. He must have gone towards the philosophers of the time, the German philosophers and so forth. He was much more advanced intellectually than I was at that time, I must confess. But who knows, the writers Hegel and Nitzsche and probably some of those philosophers. I am just guessing, you know. This is not factual. With Milton, I can tell you that his tastes were very simple. He used to like to buy little paperback detective books. That's what he

seemed to enjoy, that seemed to be a kind of welcome change to him. He did very little theoretical reading, as far as I could see. He absorbed all his theories and he absorbed everything that he wanted to do in art through his eyes and not through theories. This had something to do with Milton's insistence on his own personal fresh view of everything. And he didn't have to go far afield for composition, as you know. He took the most prosaic objects and he would transform them.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Well, early on....

MR. KAUFMAN: ...around the house. He used to love to do portraits of everybody that used to come to the studio. Really it was fascinating. And by the way, he used to do those in the most incredible way. In those early days, he would start simultaneously drawing and painting at the same time. He would practically never make preparatory sketches or anything like that. That was all [done] simultaneously. Some of his finest, most striking, portraits were done in that way. Later on, he got to the process of making small little sketches, which were very rudimentary, actually. But the painting he did of myself and the early one and the later one were all done directly without preliminary sketching.

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MS. CLOUDMAN: You were talking about the clowns and the circus that Avery was doing.

MR. KAUFMAN: Yes. It was a summation of practically everything he'd been working on in many other studies. I'm not even sure that that's in the resume of the book issued by the Museum of Modern Art. But it's an all-important picture. Sally has it, I think, in the warehouse. I don't think she has it in their apartment, but she certainly has reproductions of it.

MS. CLOUDMAN: I understand that the Averys used to go to vaudeville and the circus and so forth. Did mark Rothko go to circus performances and to vaudeville and theatre?

MR. KAUFMAN: I'm not sure. He might have gone with them, because I think they got to be very friendly. I think Marcus liked the Averys like everybody else did. I think they also were very much interested in him at that time.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did they ever go to wrestling matches and boxing matches that you recall?

MR. KAUFMAN: This I couldn't say. I don't think that Milton was interested in that type of thing per se.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you remember any of Mark Rothko's leisure activities, what he did for relaxation or fun or entertainment?

MR. KAUFMAN: I really don't know. That part of him I really don't know because when I would come across Marcus, it was either mostly at Milton's studio.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you remember Rothko's first wife, Edith, at all?

MR. KAUFMAN: Oh, yes. I remember her very well.

MS. CLOUDMAN: What was she like?

MR. KAUFMAN: Well, she was very nice. I had the impression of her being a rather buxom, healthy young lady. He liked her very much, obviously. There was a real attraction, perhaps in more ways than one.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you know how they met initially?

MR. KAUFMAN: Honestly, I don't. But I believe it was in New York.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you have any idea why they separated?

MR. KAUFMAN: Oh, I think it was a matter of personalities. They probably grated on one another. As I say, he was argumentative and sometimes could be pretty abrasive with all his qualities as an interpreter of art and color in his own way.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was he much affected by the divorce?

MR. KAUFMAN: Yes, I think it affected him very profoundly. I don't think he was a bit happy about it.

MS. CLOUDMAN: You talked a little bit before about how Rothko changed over the years. You were saying that he got more argumentative as time went on.

MR. KAUFMAN: As a personality, yes. Perhaps the reason for that is because he probably felt more sure of

himself because, once he got taken on by Peggy Guggenheim and some of the avant garde leaders, he began to be much more sure. Even later on when I met him, he said, "You know, I've got to be very careful--I can't afford to sell any more pictures this year because it will put me in too high a bracket. I don't dare."

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did he talk with you much about his success? What were his feelings about his success?

MR. KAUFMAN: Not too much. I think he was very much of.... I don't think he was a person to rub it in that he was obviously doing very well, much better than most. Milton never began to touch the success at that time that Mark was able to hitch onto with that group of dealers and enthusiasts. It was very funny. I never could quite understand it. Milton came so late into public appreciation and artistic appreciation, but he more than made up for it. There seem to be curious paradoxes artistically that sometime the later these artists wait for recognition, the stronger it is. Of course, it's obvious and notorious in the cases of geniuses like Van Gogh and Gauguin, even Picasso didn't have an easy time of it at first. He was delighted to sell work for practically nothing.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you think Avery's later work was at all influenced by Rothko? It got simpler and simpler.

MR. KAUFMAN: He got simpler and simpler. I don't know that it was an influence by Rothko or not, but I think he little by little tended to go in that direction. I think it was a natural tendency. It might have been sort of unconscious osmosis, you might say. But I don't believe it was a direct thing. I think it was as if you have two ships that sometimes go on the same path and begin to coincide practically, or something like that. It was something in the air-more abstraction and more severity of concept and form, perhaps.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did Rothko and Avery hit it off immediately after you introduced them?

MR. KAUFMAN: Oh, yes. Of course, it wasn't difficult to hit it off with Milton. Milton was friendly to everybody.

MS .CLOUDMAN: Did Rothko ever talk to you about how he felt abut Avery and Avery's work? Particularly in those early years?

MR. KAUFMAN: Yes. I remember taking.... Wait a minute. I must get Annette into this conversation. Who was that artist who is beginning to be very prominent now? That Russian that was a Count and whose work has been...?

MS. CLOUDMAN: You don't mean John Graham, do you?

MR. KAUFMAN: John Graham. I got to know John Graham very well. I must relate another story that relates to Milton. I got to know John Graham through a young brother of Zborowski, who was the first important dealer of Utrillo and Modigliani in Paris. Somehow, his younger brother I met here in Los Angeles and we got to know each other also in New York. Through young Zborowski I met John Graham, who was also friendly with him. He used to go to Paris periodically. I remember on one of my first trips to Europe on a boat I was lucky enough to be there with John Graham. At that time, he didn't know anything about Milton. The artist that he thought at that time was the foremost American artist was that abstract one that we like very much now. Stuart Davis.

MS. CLOUDMAN: About what time was this now, what year?

MR. KAUFMAN: This was also before I met Annette. It must have been also in the very early Thirties, around 1930 or so. 1929, 1930, probably around the early Thirties. I asked John Graham-who used to pooh-pooh everybody, practically. At that time, he knew Gorky very well and he knew de Kooning. I was stupid enough not to try to insist on visiting de Kooning at that time. But I did visit Gorky with him and visited his studio. Those were very powerful influences, as you know, on John Graham's own work. And he said the greatest American painter was Stuart Davis. He used to do those sort of semi-abstract things and get simple forms based on American subjects. John was saying that, "No, the greatest painter was this fellow here, this American painter." I said, "Well, do you know the work of Milton Avery?" "No," he said, "I've never seen the work." So I took him to his studio and this seemed to be an absolute revelation to John Graham. He says, "I thought that my friend was the greatest American painter, but I was wrong. This man is the greatest American painter." Right at that time, long before he had public recognition. I remember the very first time I took Burliuk up to see Milton Avery. He said something that always stuck to me. I thought it was very apt. He said, "You know, your friend Milton Avery is an aristocrat of color the way Modigliani was of line."

MS. CLOUDMAN: What a nice quote. Yes.

MR. KAUFMAN: Which was true. He saw it because he was a wise old bird, Burliuk. Perhaps he was too wise for his own good. He painted in every style. We have a lot of his work. I love the old man's work for what it is.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you think Avery's subjects influenced Rothko early on?

MR. KAUFMAN: Oh, yes. This simplification of forms, whether with portraits or whether with landscapes or still

lifes. I think they were a profound influence on Rothko in his formative time-before he came to his finalized formula.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you remember Rothko and Avery and possibly Gottlieb painting on graph paper? Cheap, you know, craft paper?

MR. KAUFMAN: Not particularly, but I know on the matter of necessity they would paint on anything cheap that was available. They all did it.

MS. CLOUDMAN: How long did the friendship between Rothko and Avery last? How long were they close? Did they see each other frequently and so forth?

MR. KAUFMAN: I really can't say exactly. I think Sally might be able to fill you in on that better than I would, unfortunately.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you have any idea of why they grew apart?

MR. KAUFMAN: I think it had to do with the personality of Rothko more than anything else. More than perhaps their different viewpoints in art, which began also to be more and more separate. I think it was the personality of Rothko, which was not always the most amiable.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you remember the summers that they would spend together?

MR. KAUFMAN: Not too well. I know they did occasionally, because those were the summers in which Milton did some very fine portraits, including some of Marcus.

MS. CLOUDMAN: How much time did they spend together when they were in New York?

MR. KAUFMAN: Like many of the younger fellows-I shouldn't say younger because they were all practically the same ages as Milton and Sally at that time. It was a sort of congregating, meeting place for a lot of people that would habitually go to the Avery's studio there.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Who all would go? Who were some of the people?

MR. KAUFMAN: Sometimes he would have a lot of people there. Not only all sketch class, but just like that. Although they had practically nothing, they were very hospitable. They were always having people over for crackers and coffee or whatever.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was Louis Harris one of the people who..?

MR. KAUFMAN: Yes.

MS. CLOUDMAN: And Vincent Spagna?

MR. KAUFMAN: Vincent Spagna. Louis Harris. And there was one fellow who did some very nice painting. He's not particularly well known.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Joe Solomon?

MR. KAUFMAN: Joe Solomon was another one. The relative of George Gershwin. Henry [Botkin] who was quite a good painter at that time. But there was a whole circle that used to congregate there and used to stay there. It was a combination of the personalities of Milton and Sally, and also the work he was doing-I think he outdistanced everybody that I know of-and the amount of work he was doing was colossal. Close to what you might say Picasso was doing, although on a different scale, because it was mostly, besides innumerable sketches and watercolors, mostly in oil.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you remember Adolph Gottlieb being there at the studio too?

MR. KAUFMAN: Vaguely, not too clearly. But I know they all used to haunt the place-George Constant and Wallace Putnam.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you remember what some of the discussion were like when they got to talking?

MR. KAUFMAN: There was very little that was theoretical. It was usually on a personal basis-things of ordinary personal life and art exhibits, happenings and so forth. They'd sometimes get together and mull over the latest exhibits and things that they thought were interesting. I should mention as you mentioned your interest in Eilshemius, it was Milton Avery that first took us over to Eilshemius' studio. That's how I got to know the old man.

And we found him fascinating. They were great friends. They thought very highly of each other. Milton admired Eilshemius very much for his poetic quality. Milton was one of the few people that Eilshemius really liked. I don't think it was personal. I think he must have known some of his work.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Sally Avery told me something very interesting last month. She said that one summer when the Averys were in Gloucester and the Gottliebs and the Rothkos were there at the same time.... This was about, she thought, 1935 or 1936. She said that that summer that Milton refused for the whole summer to show his daily work to Rothko and to Gottlieb because he thought they were too dependent on him. That it would be better for them to lean on their own resources. And it wasn't until the end of the summer that he showed them everything.

MR. KAUFMAN: This is very possible. It has a lot to do with the inner philosophy of Milton. Because it was very funny, without being in any way pressing or grandiose in his attitude, Milton was a tremendous influence on everybody he met. I can say very openly in my own career in life as a violinist--I think I've had my share of experience in concert life and recording and so forth. I think I was as much influenced in my viewpoint towards music by what I learned through Milton.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Really?

MR. KAUFMAN: Opening my eyes to composition and color, and I began to find parallel values in music that related to the art that you might consider interesting painting. That's why I began to realize the parallel of the French Impressionists to the music that was going on of Debussy and his other great contemporaries. They sort of worked together.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did Milton talk about music himself?

MR. KAUFMAN: No, not very much. But I know Milton and Sally both liked music. I think, due to them, frankly, that from the time I started to give yearly concerts in New York, solo concerts, I had by far the biggest audience of artists and painters that anybody every had-because it was not so easy to fill a hall, you know. So I would give out the passes in a grandiose way to Sally. She would manage to see that most of them were used. The painters used to like very much to come to my concerts. I tried to avoid the usual buck-eye type of concerts ending with the usual trifles. I would make part of the program more or less traditional, but then I would try to go away from there and try to show as much as possible what was going on in the avant garde, especially with reference to some of the American music that I felt was very good and interesting, very vital at that time.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Was there a sense at that time of American music and American painting, a sense of something new and fresh happening in America?

MR. KAUFMAN: Well, it was very obvious. I found out even later on through my acquaintanceship with Darius Milhaud, the French composer who was at that time...I got to meet him when he was teaching at Mills College. I got to know later on that American jazz was a profound influence on the French at that time. Some of Milhaud's early work was really fascinating. What he does with American Jazz, to say nothing of his great friend Poulenc, who I got to know very well also, and that whole group-Ravel amongst others, was profoundly influenced by American Jazz. He was very much influenced by and enthusiastic about the work of our own George Gershwin.

MS. CLOUDMAN: What about American painters? Did they have a sense of moving American painting forward? Was that important to them at all?

MR. KAUFMAN: No.

MS. CLOUDMAN: They thought of themselves more internationally?

MR. KAUFMAN: No. They were very national in their tastes. They had a notion that, as far as American painting at the time, contemporary-it was sort of a new arrival on the scene and still had to be tested for value. I remember on one of my first trips to France when I was a member of the string quartet, taking a few smaller oil paintings of Milton's, just to show some of these people, including the elder Zborowski and a few others with the idea of seeing if they would be interested. They couldn't see it at all. They considered it perhaps too direct, perhaps even brutal to them after the great refinement of their own contemporary school, working along with completely different minds. I remember the older Zborowski shortly before the poor fellow died, and through the younger Zborowski we took some of these sketches to the hospital where he looked at them very carefully. The only comments I remember are the old Zborowski growling, "Why does he make his signature so large? He's a fine master of line."

MS. CLOUDMAN: [Laughs] Did Avery ever talk about the art of the Twenties and Thirties to you very much? We kind of got into this before, but...?

MR. KAUFMAN: Not too much. There was not very much that Milton would venture on theoretically. I remember

taking them both to the Frick Museum, which they hadn't visited before, because, actually, I think that they were both much more enthusiastic about what was going on at the time. The Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum and the shows that used to be at the wonderful type of art circuits on 57th Street, with all those wonderful galleries, one after the other-the French dealers and the American dealers, Valentine Dudensing and the other avant garde. But I remember taking them one afternoon to the Frick Museum, where of course they have a magnificent collection of the highest quality of old masters-Flemish, and French, and Italian-some of he greatest masterpieces there. Milton dutifully looked at everything but it didn't seem to be too impressive. The only comment he made in a quizzical way was, "Well, they certainly must have used buckets of varnish on these pictures." [Laughs] It was a different viewpoint; they were working for something else. In my own development in art appreciation, both myself and Annette, we've gone backwards all the time. We started in the modern contemporary scene, went back toward the French Impressionists, from that we dot directly to the Renaissance, the Italian Renaissance and later on the French, the Mannerist School. Little by little, we found ourselves in the Romanesque period, going still backwards and before you knew it, we're both fascinated by the early caveman-Lascaux and so forth, by their directness and freshness of approach. Before you leave, perhaps, I'll tell you we're interested also with some of the fine primitives, particularly contemporary primitives, because they have that freshness without knowing what it's all about. Sometimes [they] knock off marvelous works.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you like folk art, too?

MR. KAUFMAN: Oh, yes. You can see we have a grab bag in our own house. Lloyd Wright was the son of Frank Lloyd Wright, you know. He built our house and he was very much upset. He says, we have an international junk shop in here. He was right, of course. But we got to have a feeling of the universality of the art. I feel sorry for those people with little, snobbish tastes who still admire only the latest thing that they' re looking at or a Rembrandt or a Picasso or a Van Eyck at the expense of everything else. We all bow down to Rembrandt and the whole development of everything. But I think that everything that is conceived by human hands and brains and feeling is worthy of some attention if it's sincere. If it's not a copy, and if it's done in a sincere way, it's worthy of looking at very carefully. Naturally, there are grades of art, and naturally one period that's obviously supreme in comparison with others-but they are all interesting. I think it should be enjoyed. As a musician, I don't like to think of myself as a specialist, although I have done my share of early music-I have recorded over 36 Vivaldi concertos alone, and the men who influenced both Vivaldi and Handel, Torelli.... I've recorded his work-but on the other hand, I've recorded work of my contemporaries. I've recorded a Sonata of Copeland with Copeland on piano; I've recorded the Second Milhaud Concerto with the composer conducting, I've recorded the American Concerto written for me by Rupert Russell Bennett, who was a charming man-who by the way I also brought over to Milton's studio and Sally can drag out sometime one or two portraits they did of our friend, Russell Bennett. They were marvelous, they looked like El Greco. They were marvelous stylistically.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Not too long before Milton died, he was getting some success. He was selling his works.

MR. KAUFMAN: Oh, yes.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Did he ever talk with you about that, about his success, about selling paintings for a change?

MR. KAUFMAN: Not at all. We would always talk about other things and start discussing his work and work he was trying to do. Always I would be so regretful. I would see a painting that I would think was stunning. He would work on it and after a while he would paint over it. It used to upset me very much. I'd say, "That's beautiful." "No," he'd say, "I don't like it; I didn't get what I wanted to."

MS. CLOUDMAN: Can you think of anyone else I would talk with who might have reminiscences about these three artists in the Twenties and Thirties, particularly?

MR. KAUFMAN: Let me think. Unfortunately, the best sources are all gone. They don't exist any more. But, let me see, who could give you help. Oh, I know who could help you. Ask Sally about it. They had an old friend who's still painting very well, Wallace Putnam. He would give you very good ideas. His name escapes me, but I'll refer to Annette and you can make notes upon that. It escapes me. He'll be able to give you some very good ideas. He used to hang around and was also profoundly influenced by Milton. And, of course, March, Milton's daughter, could give you a lot of inside material and George Constant-Rafael Soyer.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Well, she was a little young during that period.

MR. KAUFMAN: She was younger, but after all, she might have a very interesting approach also as far as Daddy was concerned.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Do you know other collectors who might have some early works by Rothko, Avery, and Gottlieb? I'm talking about works form the Twenties and the Thirties, particularly.

MR. KAUFMAN: There was that collector Roy Newberger [who] had quite a few. You can find his name in the

book if we have the Milton book around; I can identify him from his collection. He got some of the great big compositions, that famous composition of March playing the cello; that belonged to Maurice Geller. And quite a few others. He might be able to tell you some interesting things about them. But there was this artist, who was actually quite gifted, and who still shows around -Wallace Putnam. Richard Diebenkorn visited the Averys many years ago.

MS. CLOUDMAN: We'll ask Annette.

MR. KAUFMAN: Ask Annette, and if she doesn't remember off-hand, why Sally certainly will.

MS. CLOUDMAN: I know that Avery painted both you and Annette.

MR. KAUFMAN: He did about four or five portraits of me. There's one that I never got. It looked like it was painted by Soutine at a particularly drunk moment. I should have bought it because it was a formal one. He had me painted with a tuxedo and a black tie and so forth. I should have gotten that. But I do have two that I had gotten from him.

MR. CLOUDMAN: Did Rothko ever paint you?

MR. KAUFMAN: No, no. I wasn't as close to him as I sometimes think I might have been. I don't know that he was doing.... He got away from painting portraits altogether very soon. His portrait period didn't last very long. It would have been interesting to have had his slant.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Tell me about your first trip to see Eilshemius.

MR. KAUFMAN: We had been talking together....

MS. CLOUDMAN: Who is "we" now?

MR. KAUFMAN: Sally and Milton and ourselves, at that time, there were both of us. Incidentally, it is interesting. Annette was one of the first ones, already at a very early stage-when I met her she was a young girl-to be fascinated by the work of Milton. She had come from Bismarck, North Dakota, where she studied piano. I met her as a music student and we started playing sonatas together. Of course, on my first date I took her over to Milton's studio. And, contrary to the rather cool reception of my friends, she was absolutely entranced by his work. She had, first of all, fresh eyes and fresh vision. She thought the work was beautiful.

ANNETTE: You know, I may be... (Mila called.) Maybe I should have asked her over, but I thought at the last minute it would be too impolite.

MR. KAUFMAN: We can't get them all. This will give you an idea of my normal activities. This is-I've made a lot of records and so forth. This gives you an idea.

MS. CLOUDMAN: Tell me about your first trip to Eilshemius'.

MR. KAUFMAN: Oh, we were there together and Milton suggested we visit Eilshemius. He used to visit the old man very often at that time.

ANNETTE: You know, really it's too bad they can't see some of those big Eilshemius' in that room upstairs. We have some marvelous Eilshemius' up there. Wait a minute, I'll bring one down.

MR. KAUFMAN: No, please don't bring down those great big things. They weigh a ton, Annette.

ANNETTE: I can bring one down, at least.

MR. KAUFMAN: Anyhow, he suggested that we go see him. At that time, it was very nice because poor Eilshemius had already had his accident, was in a chair like this, and refused to get up. I think he could have walked if he wanted to, but he didn't. Anyhow, he was there in his chair and he loved to have visitors. We got along very well. When Milton said, "You know, Louie is a violinist and his wife is a pianist," then Eilshemius suggested, well, he said, "I have some musician friends that come up here. You know, George Gershwin and his nephew-(there was this painter also, I remember) he likes my work, too." Actually George collected quite a few of his pictures. Ira Gershwin also bought pictures directly from him. He said, "But George Gershwin only talks about himself. He says, "You know, I also have written some music, and besides writing poetry... (Actually, he wrote a lot of poetry)." So I asked him if he wanted to see some of this poetry. He says, "Sure," so he showed me some of his books on poetry. I said, "Well, this is marvelous, where might I get some?" They were all out of print. Eilshemius was very peculiar. He says, "Yes, well, I'll sell you some." And we bought some of those. Then I started looking around and I saw some marvelous compositions that they had all stuck in the studio. I asked the old man if I might go back there and look at some of the things. He says, "Oh, sure, go ahead." So we picked out

a few pictures and asked if I might buy them. Evidently, he got a....

[END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE]

[TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE]

MS. CLOUDMAN: You were finishing your story on Eilshemius...

MR. KAUFMAN: He let me go in the back room there and I held out one or two things full of dust-he used to leave things around-and I looked at them and they were very beautiful. One was very nice. It was like a Greek frieze.

ANNETTE: They were a series of about ten or eleven nudes sitting in a row. He had painted the nudes in a very interesting way. It was just the board showing through. He didn't make any color for the bodies. It was just the board. And Milton was just wild about it. He thought it was one of the finest ones. He said, "By all means, Lou, you ought to get that one."

MR. KAUFMAN: "See if you can buy that one." This connects with what I'm saying about music. Old man Eilshemius said, "Well, look, Mr. Kaufman, would you mind looking at some of my music?" And I saw some of it. Actually, some of it was very charming. He had a little folk song that he had arranged for voice and piano. He said, "Would you mind playing that sometime?" I'd been doing concerts in New York-that's the main reason I used to come habitually, outside visiting our friends. So next time we visited him, I brought my violin along. He had an old piano that was broken down and was all over the place and way out of tune and way low in pitch. So he said, "Would you mind playing that?" So, Annette sat down at the piano and we read through the music. It was a simple little thing. It had a very pretty melody. And he had tears in his eyes.

ANNETTE: The piano was way out of tune. I had to play very softly.

MR. KAUFMAN: I had to calculate and play in a different key so it would match the tune of the piano. It was about a tone off. He said, "Would you mind playing that again?" I did, and he seemed to like that very much. From then on, we were on good terms. Says, "You know, when George Gershwin comes here, he never plays any of my music. [Laughs] All he thinks about is his own." So we made a thing of it, I'm happy to say. Every time we visited Eilshemius, we would look around and try to buy something.

ANNETTE: He wouldn't take a check. He wanted to be paid in cash. The first time we were there it was a little embarassing because we didn't have cash. I think Louis had to run down to a bank. It was fortunately early enough in the day; Lou cashed a check or something. So after that, whenever we came, we came with cash. If it wasn't cash, he thought you weren't serious. He must have been given a bad check by somebody at some time.

MR. KAUFMAN: Anyhow, it depended on his mood. He could just as well ask you for a ridiculous sum-ten thousand, twenty thousand dollars for a little sketch. Or, if he liked you, just something, you know, a few hundred dollars or whatever.

MS. CLOUDMAN: When did you first meet Eilshemius?

ANNETTE: It must have been, let me see, 1937, '38...?

MR. KAUFMAN: '37, '38, that's right. After we started going to New York regularly for our concerts. That's right. Around '38 or so.

ANNETTE: Milton and Sally only went with us once. After that, we went on our own.

MS. CLOUDMAN: We were trying to remember the name of.... I asked Mr. Kaufman who I should talk to about the early days of Avery, Rothko and Gottlieb in the Twenties and Thirties. We were trying to think....

MR. KAUFMAN: Who was that fellow that still hangs around them? He's a very good painter, paints in Milton's style. He's an old friend; I think he's also a photographer.

ANNETTE: An old man or a young one?

MR. KAUFMAN: At that time, he was young, but now he's older like all of us.

ANNETTE: We have a portrait of him. You mean Wallace Putnam.

MR. KAUFMAN: He was a very intimate friend.

ANNETTE: Yes. Well, Sally's the best person. Sally remembers better than anybody.

[END OF RECORDING]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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