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Oral history interview with Dorothy C. Miller,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Dorothy Miller on May 14, 1981. The interview was conducted by Avis Berman for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of 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

MS. AVIS BERMAN: You didn't receive a catalogue from the Guggenheim [Museum, New York, NY]?

MS. DOROTHY MILLER: You see, I didn't own a [Mark] Rothko so I didn't lend a Rothko to the show. Of course, I saw the show.

MS. BERMAN: Well, I'm sure - I'll talk to Bonnie and have her send one to you. That's the least they could do.

MS. MILLER: Well, my reminiscences are very early.

MS. BERMAN: That's good.

MS. MILLER: And they don't carry over into his late period because he didn't see us any more, by us I mean my husband Holger Cahill. Of course, I was working for the Museum at the time. And I think it was 1951 probably that we met him.

MS. BERMAN: Well, I think that that's late. I'll tell you -

MS. MILLER: He was living near the museum. The first time I ever remember seeing him was - I mean going to his studio, I went with Alfred Barr, and it was on West 51st I guess.

MS. BERMAN: Well, let me see. First he had one - now from '45 to '46 he had his studio at 22 West 52nd. Then he had one at 1288 Sixth Avenue, and he had that between '46 and '54. And then he had - that's where he lived too. Then in '52 he had one at 156 West 53rd. So he was all around the area.

MS. MILLER: It was 53rd and not 54th?

MS. BERMAN: Now we have 102 West 54th.

MS. MILLER: 54th, yes.

MS. BERMAN: Now that was '53 according to the Guggenheim catalogue.

MS. MILLER: Before the one you mentioned just before.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, excuse me. 106 West 53rd. There's that one. That he had in '52 - he had in 1952. And between 1946 and 1954, he lived at 1288 Sixth Avenue which would also be right around there.

MS. MILLER: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: You may have gone to his studio then.

MS. MILLER: We went to a studio. Alfred Barr and I went to his studio having seen his earlier shows at Betty Parsons [Gallery, New York, NY 1946-1983]. That is his surrealist shows. And it seems to me we went once - I only vividly remember going to his studio on 51st Street.

MS. BERMAN: Well, could this 1288 Sixth Avenue be Sixth Avenue and 51st?

MS. MILLER: We went somewhere. It was on a cross street, but it was quite near Fifth Avenue.

MS. BERMAN: Well, why don't you tell me about it and maybe later I can figure out-

MS. MILLER: I think we had barely met him but had seen perhaps a first show he had at Betty's. I don't know when he had the first show, the '50s, late '40s.

MS. BERMAN: '47 was the first Betty Parsons show, but before that he had been in "Art of This Century". So maybe you had seen him at Peggy Guggenheim's show.

MS. MILLER: That's right, "Art of This Century". In the first place, my first recollection was that group show which was an annual and it had at least 50 members and they were all New Yorkers.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, that's the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors?

MS. MILLER: Right.

MS. BERMAN: The first one was in 1941 and that was at the Riverside Museum [New York, NY].

MS. MILLER: We saw those. We used to go to the Riverside Museum. Was he in the first show?

MS. BERMAN: Yes, he was. He had done, I guess, the last of the subway scenes.

MS. MILLER: That's right, the subway scenes. And Alfred Barr also saw these shows. We saw them together usually on Saturday afternoon. And in a big group show like that, we would say, well, let's go through it separately and write down the people we like the best and then compare. And there were two or three times when we both separately wrote down Rothko's name. Usually we had two or three names only for a list. And that's the first I remember focusing on his work. Then came a show at Betty Parsons that we saw. That was an early show, perhaps it was in '47.

MS. BERMAN: And in between also, do you think you saw the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors after they moved from the Riverside in '42 or '43. Then they were at Wildenstein, too. Would you have seen that?

MS. MILLER: Yes, we would have seen those. And we always had his name on our lists we made, you know. At least a number of times we did. And how did we get to really know him? Oh, yes. We went - we called and asked if we could go to his studio. We found out from Betty that he had a studio on 51st. So we went to see him. I'm trying to think exactly which work it was he showed us. It must have been surrealist work more or less. And we asked him if we could see those early figure paintings that we remembered from those group shows. And he said, "Oh, no, no. I don't have them any more." But we could practically see one of them sticking out of the racks in his small room, and we sensed that he had them but he didn't want to show them to us because he had probably gone beyond them. But he had not yet gone into anything approaching his latest style. Then we always ate in a small Italian restaurant on West 52nd Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenue. Somehow the name of that place has now escaped me.

MS. BERMAN: Is it Valmor?

MS. MILLER: Yes, it is the Valmor, because the two owners are Valentino and Morande, or something like that. That's it exactly. And we always ate there and he began to eat there because he was right across the street, and he would often join us, or join us after lunch and he would sit and talk for a while. So that was how we got to know him personally. And then - let's see - the transition from that early work to the late style, I just can't - you probably have a great deal of information on that, haven't you?

MS. BERMAN: Which aspect?

MS. MILLER: How, when, let's say, he made that transition.

MS. BERMAN: Well, the first breakthrough -

MS. MILLER: The first break.

MS. BERMAN: - came in '49 or so, '49 to '50.

MS. MILLER: That's right, because the shows at Betty's, we saw all the shows. And in fact, we used to spend every Saturday afternoon looking at shows. And group shows that were open on Sunday, like Riverside Museum, we'd see them on Sunday because we were so pressed for time it was just terrible. But I do feel confident we saw every one of his shows because he was somebody we were very much interested in, among others. I think we sort of rejoiced with him, probably at the Valmor, when Betty Parsons took him on, you see, which was quite late. And then I remember the first Parsons show as being surrealistic. Is that right?

MS. BERMAN: Yes, that's '47.

MS. MILLER: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: Biomorphs, more likely.

MS. MILLER: Yes, yes.

MS. BERMAN: Maybe something under water.

MS. MILLER: Yes. But it was very interesting. Oh dear, I never had the brains or really talent except late at night to write down, you know, to keep sort of a shorthand diary of what had gone on that day. It would be very useful now because my memory is not the best in the world to recall these things but perhaps you can recall some of them.

MS. BERMAN: Well, I thought what I'd do is go back over the things you said and ask you some detail. In the beginning when you say you saw some of those figure paintings, in first '41.

MS. MILLER: In the group shows.

MS. BERMAN: Right. You said that both of you were attracted to Rothko and you put his name down.

MS. MILLER: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: Can you remember what qualities or what it was that made him stand out?

MS. MILLER: Well, in those shows there was an awful lot of straight realist work. It was the hangover of the very big realist period with American art in the '30s and early '40s. And we were all sort of bored with it. And these stood out. Although they had a subject matter, it was treated in a rather abstract way and the color interested us. I think that would be it.

MS. BERMAN: Now you mentioned of course you would see him in the restaurant and you visited him at the studio. Do you remember which may have come first? I mean were you eating with him and talking with him first or -

MS. MILLER: I think so. I think so. I'm not sure because we visited him - it seems to me the first place we saw him was the 51st Street studio. And that might have been before we knew of the restaurant.

MS. BERMAN: Were you visiting him in his studio purposely to buy something or just look?

MS. MILLER: Well, in that era Alfred Barr wasn't quite so terribly - he was insanely busy because part of the time he was still director of the museum, which was one of the world's most hellish jobs. And then we went around a great deal after he was no longer director of the museum. That ended in '43. And then he had a little more leisure to go around and look at things. We almost always did it on Saturdays because we both had so many appointments and meetings and so on, on weekdays that almost all our gallery going was Saturdays. Now exactly what did you ask me now?

MS. BERMAN: Well, I was wondering when you went to the studio, were you there just to view his work in general or did you want to purchase something at the time?

MS. MILLER: No. We would go to studios not to purchase. We went almost invariably just to get acquainted with what the person was doing and purchasing usually came later, you see. Or it might have been one of the things we had seen in a studio and had been very much attracted by them. We have a committee and I think all big museums have to have committees. If they don't have them, they should have them. I mean the running of the big museum and all its complications should not be just one man's job without committee work. So we had this museum committee for Modern Museum collections and that committee included all the collections. By then we had five departments, you see -- painting and sculpture, drawings and prints, architecture and design, industrial arts, and so on. But later that big committee grew too ponderous in the meetings. It would take three days instead of three hours. So it was broken into separate committees for each department with its own choice of people who would be on those committees and, of course, some duplication of people that were on both - all of them. Sometimes a whole committee would go to visit something because Alfred Barr and I would be so interested and we'd say, "We've got to buy something with the committee or some members of the committee could go with us." And we would also bring in often as many as six works to the committee meeting to get a better idea of an artist's work. We tried to bring in several so they could get a real idea of what the person was like. So I don't know whether I've answered your question. I lost track of what the question was.

MS. BERMAN: Let me ask you, when you were in, say, the restaurant socializing with Mark Rothko, did he - you know, what did you talk about?

MS. MILLER: He was very interesting. He talked a great deal about not art. He talked about his early life when he had first come over here and lived out in Oregon was it?

MS. BERMAN: Portland.

MS. MILLER: Portland, yes. And about what he did then and involvement in religion and God knows what. I think he liked to reminisce, and he had very ready listeners. So we didn't talk just about - we rarely talked about art. We were mostly talking about other things, other people maybe somebody else's art. But he didn't seem ready to open up very much about his own art and was in too much of a transition at the time from the early to the late style which didn't develop until a year or two later.

MS. BERMAN: Well, do you think he was also being very scrupulous, given your position, not to press himself?

MS. MILLER: Yes. I think that came into it too.

MS. BERMAN: When you say religion, was he raised in a strict Jewish home or was he still religious at all did you feel?

MS. MILLER: I didn't feel that, no. I felt he was raised by a religious Jewish family. I think he laughed at himself that he remembered. It made a very deep impression on him.

MS. BERMAN: Was he hostile about that?

MS. MILLER: No, no. I don't remember his being hostile about it. I'm sorry I can't remember more.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, no. That's okay. I'll just keep asking.

MS. MILLER: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: Did he ever, for example, talk about Russia in his time, now, or anything like that?

MS. MILLER: I don't think so.

MS. BERMAN: You mentioned that you thought he probably talked about other artists' work. Would you remember who he talked about then?

MS. MILLER: I think he talked about - I don't think he knew terribly many artists well enough to talk about it. But he talked about Barnett Newman and Motherwell. And they all were very close friends at that time and: then they all split apart. And I always figured that the split [perhaps I'm wrong], but I figured the split came through Clyfford Still who was a fascinating man and a wonderful talker. He could just talk about anything and he loved to talk about baseball. And my husband was a baseball fan and so was Clyff and they would sit there and talk for hours about baseball -- they'd talk about anything. And he was close to Rothko then, just for a brief time really, like two years maybe. He was close to Barnett Newman. And there was one time when Newman - Newman was a very funny man. God, he used to make some of the best wisecracks I've ever heard, that I didn't write down. I'm trying to think of one. Tom Hess wrote a book then in that early time called -

MS. BERMAN: It was just called *Abstract Painting* I think.

MS. MILLER: No. There was another one before that which is called *From de Hooch to de Kooning* or something like that. Did you ever see that?

MS. BERMAN: I'm not familiar with that one.

MS. MILLER: [Indistinguishable] And I remember Barney saying, "de Hooch to de Kooning by de Hess". [Laughter] He loved to do things like that. That was the time when Barney Newman got a studio on Wall Street. It actually was on Wall Street where Wall Street comes down and goes into the East River. It actually runs into the East River, and his was right there. And it tickled him pink to think that he had a studio on Wall Street. He couldn't get over it. We all went down there and visited him on a Sunday there.

MS. BERMAN: And you said that you felt they split apart through Still.

MS. MILLER: Through Still, yes. Still was a sort of force for disintegrating friendships of people. It was a very sad thing but it was just the way he - it probably had to do with his upbringing and all that. He was a loner. He became very good friends with Newman and Rothko and so on. The first break was with Rothko. After they were the best of friends, they just hated each other like poison and it was very dramatic and traumatic. And we continued to be friends with Still. He rejected all those other friends, all the artists; but he did continue to be friendly with us because we had nothing in particular to fight about. And we continued to be friendly with all those other artists. But Still was a very peculiar man, a very difficult man to get along with. Before he finally married Pat -- and they had been together for a long time -- but he had [Indistinguishable]. We would ask him to dinner and he'd come alone. There was never any mention of Pat being part of his life. And there was a period for over a year, I'd say almost two years, that he used to come here all the time. He lived down - oh, what's that street that runs past Cooper Union from Eighth Street down?

MS. BERMAN: I know. You mean Astor Place?

MS. MILLER: Yes. It must be Astor Place. He lived there near Cooper Union for quite a while and that's where I first visited his studio. Every-thing was rolled up. He didn't have anything showing. Finally I asked him if he would be in this show of mine, and I was sure he would say no. And he said, "Well, who else is going to be in it?" He had to know that. So I said, "Newman and Rothko," and then I said, "There would be a group of - I have to make these shows varied. There would be a group of realistic, more realistic painters." And he said, "Well, I'll think it over and tell you tomorrow morning." And so the next morning he came around. I was painting this room.

MS. BERMAN: Excuse me.

MS. MILLER: I was painting this room. I mean we were all of us broke. And I just went on painting. So I was up on a ladder and I had emptied the room and stashed things away in the tiny bedroom, kitchen, and so forth. And I was just up on a ladder painting. And Clyff came in and sat down and just watched me. He doesn't ask me if he could help. Nothing. I mean he's painted a dozen rooms, whole houses, but now he just watched me and then he left. But anyway, I don't know why that came up.

MS. BERMAN: It's all interrelated. We were talking about Still. Do you know why exactly Rothko and Still split apart, the reason for that?

MS. MILLER: I used to. Let me see. Probably rivalry entered into it. Peggy Guggenheim had decided to show them both. Now someone was advising Peggy and advised both of them and some of the others that Betty was showing. And I can't remember who that was.

MS. BERMAN: Was that Putzel, Howard Putzel?

MS. MILLER: Yes, right. So Still was always very reluctant to show. It was as if he felt someone was going to take something away from him just by looking at the pictures, I mean even if they weren't painters and weren't going to copy anything. It diminished. He had to keep them to himself. But he did show them to me, many of those rolls, because I had asked him - have we come to the end?

MS. BERMAN: In a minute. Go ahead.

MS. MILLER: I asked -

[End of Side 1]

MS. BERMAN: - how to work the tape recorder, as our president knew.

MS. MILLER: Well -

MS. BERMAN: You were talking about how Still agreed to show.

MS. MILLER: Yes, and I asked him very trembling because I didn't want to be refused. And I had planned a very stunning one of the abstract group, you see, starting off with a Baziotés piece and then working up to a crescendo of Still and Rothko, Rothko and Still as the final one and going into abstract sculpture from there. And I wanted him very much in that show, and I asked him here in this room expecting him to say no, but he said, "Who else is going to be in it?" I told him. I didn't mention all the realists. I said, "I will have a realist section because these shows are supposed to be varied." And he said, "Well, let me think it over overnight. I'll tell you tomorrow." And that's when he came in and I was painting this room, and he sat down and watched me paint. And I kept thinking, gee, if he'd only ask to help me, it would take just half the time; but no. And he said, "Yes, I'll be in the show." But I had told him he could write anything for the catalogue, apart from anything obscene, because I said, "I have to send this catalogue through the mail and the government doesn't allow obscene material to be mailed." Well, he said, "I don't need to be obscene." So he did write, and I expected a blast. It's very tame what he wrote, and I printed it just as he had written it. Then he was in the show. We had a Rothko gallery followed by the Still gallery. And I had chosen the pictures that I had wanted in his studio [Rothko] on West 54th. When he sent them, he sent a few of those I had chosen but a lot that I hadn't that he had chosen. Well, I accepted them. It had been hard to choose anyway because there was so much marvelous stuff there that I didn't mind if he rustled in a few others that I had hesitated over -- very big things. I was looking for medium sized things so that I could get more in, but he wanted some of the very big ones. He was then making things about six or eight feet square, you know, and he wanted one of those in. Almost all the artists I would ask, "Do you want to come up and make suggestions when I arrange the show? I'm perfectly willing." And they all said, no, you do it, including Pollock. He said, "Oh, no, Dorothy, I wouldn't dream of that. You do it." Rothko said he would like to be there to see how I arranged it and whether he approved of it and Still said, "Why don't we do it when there's nobody around in the evening." So I said all right, I could get in. The watchman let us in and we

arranged the show together.

MS. BERMAN: That's the three of you arranged the -

MS. MILLER: No. Just Still and I.

MS. BERMAN: You arranged the room for Still and -

MS. MILLER: Just for Still.

MS. BERMAN: Okay.

MS. MILLER: And Rothko came before Still, and I had a transition - a big group of plants in the entrance from Rothko's into Still's to make a break, and I had a black painting. He painted a black painting for that show, specifically for that show. The only one that I know of that he did for that show. He called me and said, "Oh, boy. I have painted a big black monster." I said, "Really? Well, we have room for it." He said, "It will take the whole wall. It's 13 feet wide and 6 feet high." He was terribly pleased with it, and it was a very interesting painting. The black had texture. Then there was one tiny, tiny line of red part way down, almost over but not to the very edge. A very fascinating painting. And I think it was bought by the Art Institute for Chicago, Katharyn Kuh. I sold a lot from that show and I'm not sure. I think that's where that painting went. Let's see. Most of the other artists said, no, I won't come; you arrange it. You know how and I like the way you do it. Except Rothko and Still. And Rothko, he made suggestions. I think I did a first arrangement and asked him whether he liked it. I think he made one or two suggestions, and that's it.

MS. BERMAN: But Rothko and Still were still friendly then?

MS. MILLER: They were still friendly.

MS. BERMAN: Had Rothko - I was wondering if you knew how he got into the habit of, shall we say, being very firm in how he wanted his paintings exhibited.

MS. MILLER: It was later than that. I don't know when that was. Have you any clues on that?

MS. BERMAN: It seems to me what started first were him not wanting his paintings exhibited at a place that's close to - you know, that seemed to be started first, and then more directions.

MS. MILLER: He certainly didn't want to be in any more group shows. He wanted only solo shows.

MS. BERMAN: Well, did you think that was unreasonable at the time? How did you feel about that?

MS. MILLER: With him and Still too, I think they both wanted only solo shows. In their galleries, it of course made perfect sense. I couldn't do it. I mean to my surprise I thought Still would be something that none of the public would understand, and it's true they really didn't. I used to go down in the galleries and listen sort of anonymously or walk among the crowds, and they were quite hostile when they came to Rothko and Still. They just didn't get it. And they'd say, "Outrageous." But I think they - I can't remember afterwards either of them submitting to being in any big group show.

MS. BERMAN: Well, I do know that after your show, "15 Americans," at the Museum of Modern Art there was an International Council show in '55, "Modern Art in the U.S.A." which was a group show and they were in it. And in 1958 Rothko was in "The New American Painting." That was a group show. And in 1961 - of course in '61 he had his own retrospective, but also in '61 he was in the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Ben Heller, so he was in group shows at the Museum of Modern Art [New York, NY].

MS. MILLER: Well, "The New American Painting" wasn't shown in the museum. That was a traveling show. But Europe was so eager to see this new art in America, so the person in charge of our international council and exhibitions asked me if I would do a show for Europe of these people like Still and Rothko, so I did. And it went to eight European cities. But they didn't have any control over that. They felt they had some control through me of what went in the Museum of Modern Art. It was awfully hard by then to borrow Stills, and there weren't too many people who had bought them. I had bought a Still and I made the mistake - I wanted to pay for it on time, at least in two payments. It was hanging over there. It was a beautiful painting. He suddenly turned against me, as I had seen him do with other people so it wasn't unexpected, for no reason that I could fathom. But he just suddenly said, "Here's the amount [of what I had paid him]." He sent me a check in his letter and he said, "Roll up my painting and send it back." I was very angry because I felt that my husband and I had given him for a matter of several years very, very sincere friendship without any - you know, only seeking friendship, seeking nothing for ourselves out of it. Not even to buy a painting. So I was terribly angry. And if I hadn't been angry, I would have - or if I had paid for the whole thing, I would have said, "No, I will not send it back." But I had only paid half of it. And that plus my anger made me feel, if that's the way he acts, then I don't want his painting

here. So I did what he said. I cashed the check and I rolled up the painting and had it delivered to his studio.

MS. BERMAN: When did that happen roughly?

MS. MILLER: I could look the letters up in my file. It was after the show, obviously. I remember he took me to his warehouse where he had things rolled up in a ball. And he unrolled many rolls for me to choose something. And I chose a picture I had never seen before that I liked very much. And he said - I pulled it out of the roll and he said, "Let's go down right away and hang it up in your apartment." And we came down. I remember he tacked it or nailed it into the molding up there -- that picture molding six inches below the ceiling. He tacked it into that and it came down below the table. It was quite big. I said, "My husband will faint when he comes in here and sees it." He was out. And we had it there for about a year I guess -- six months, seven months, eight months. And then he inexplicably made this break with me in which he said in the letter that he wrote me, "Take my canvas down and roll it up. I won't have it hanging in a house where my values are not appreciated." Of course, nothing had happened like that. We figured it was the work of another person that he knew, that someone had poisoned him against us. So I took it down and I rolled it up and I had it sent by Berkeley Express to his studio on West 25th Street I think it was. And we never saw him again.

MS. BERMAN: Well, when -

MS. MILLER: I heard from him once again, a sort of conciliatory letter. And I didn't answer it. I was too angry. I also saw him in person once at one of those dinners. Oh, dear, I can't think of the name of the organization. Oh, the Skowhegan School [of Painting and Sculpture, New York, NY]. And I was sitting at the head table. I don't know why, or I had done something about him. And he was giving a speech on the platform. He was a featured artist in the show, which was against his principles you know.

MS. BERMAN: He was probably getting an award too.

MS. MILLER: Yes. He got some sort of an award.

MS. BERMAN: Probably the Painting Award.

MS. MILLER: Yes. And it was absolutely against his stated principles ever to do anything like that, but he did. And afterwards he came down to the table that I was at and shook hands with me. And I didn't want to shake hands, but I had to. And I didn't - and that's the last time I ever saw him. I mean my anger was permanent, and I didn't want to make up with him ever again. I felt he was a bad friend. I didn't understand and didn't want to understand anyone who would do things like that, because the way he took that painting away from me, sent back my check, was shocking, and there was no reason for it. Up until then we had been very friendly.

MS. BERMAN: Well, also he didn't inquire into your side of the story, if there was a story.

MS. MILLER: If there was. I don't know what it was. And he just said, "I won't have my work hanging in a place where my values are not respected." Eddie and I - Eddie was furious. He just said, "Wouldn't have it in the house," and I felt that way too. And it was the absolute end.

MS. BERMAN: You also, I guess, eventually had a split with Rothko too?

MS. MILLER: Well, that was not very important. I can't think of what - it was not a split like with Still, and I don't remember any words or what - do you know anything about that?

MS. BERMAN: No. I was wondering when you stopped maybe being intimate. I imagine - he seemed to have become withdrawn more than anything else. But I was wondering -

MS. MILLER: Well, Rothko did become very different psychologically. The last time I remember seeing him was before he moved uptown from 52nd Street. When he used to come to the restaurant, I think he was very friendly. Then he went uptown and we never went up there to visit him. He didn't ask us, and we never saw him after that. There was a very nice woman, terribly nice woman, Italian, who was connected with Marlborough. She ran Marlborough in Rome. Her name was Carla Panicali. And she was great friends with Rothko. In fact, she invited Rothko and his wife and child to spend the summer with her in her apartment, she had a big apartment, in Rome, and they did. And I was great friends with Carla, and she was my only contact with him. That's the only way I heard of what was happening with Rothko. I remember her telling me one day at the Museum, "Oh, he's in a terrible depression. He's not himself in any way and I'm so depressed. I've just come from seeing him. I say, 'What's the matter?' and he won't tell me." It was the beginning of the end. I don't know if anybody knows what caused all that, or if it had no cause outside of his own self, which is what I think. I mean everybody treated him well and he was - It must have come from within.

MS. BERMAN: You don't think it was all those pills that he was taking?



MS. MILLER: Well, I don't know about those pills. What was that?

MS. BERMAN: Well, he was going to doctors who were prescribing a lot of different medications which were just keeping him depressed or low.

MS. MILLER: Oh.

MS. BERMAN: You know, I guess some of it was probably from physical conditions.

MS. MILLER: Yes, probably it was.

MS. BERMAN: His drinking too, altogether -

MS. MILLER: Well, I don't know. It must have been that because the whole personality totally changed.

MS. BERMAN: Well, his former personality, would you call it either sunny or how would you characterize it?

MS. MILLER: Well, it wasn't exactly sunny. It was friendly and open. He loved to talk with people. As I said, he'd come over to the restaurant and he'd sit down. After he finished his lunch, he'd sit down while we had our lunch and talk with Alfred about philosophical matters. And Alfred would ask him things about his past, when he came to this country where he lived, what he did, and all sorts of things. And he was always very responsive. But that all went away and he didn't want to see us or any of his former friends.

MS. BERMAN: Well, I want to stay - I think I'll stay in that sort of warmer, friendlier period for a while. I was wondering if he ever mentioned the books that he was reading.

MS. MILLER: Oh, I'm sure he did. But you see, my trouble is not having jotted things down in not a real diary but just notes. That would be so useful now.

MS. BERMAN: Well, you're doing tremendously. That's why I'm asking very detailed questions. No one would expect you to remember them all, but I'm just trying shots in the dark.

MS. MILLER: But I do know he talked a great deal with Alfred Barr about books and reading and things that would influence them.

MS. BERMAN: Did he ever mention his politics at all?

MS. MILLER: I don't remember.

MS. BERMAN: I was wondering if you ever had the feeling that he was liberal or radical or anything like that.

MS. MILLER: No, I don't remember. I would say now that he was a very unpolitical person. I don't know if he really was, but looking back that's what it seems to me, that he was not interested in politics and much of anything that was happening in the world, just very centered on his own problems.

MS. BERMAN: Did Mel ever have lunch? Did his wife ever join you, Mel?

MS. MILLER: I think she probably did. We knew her quite well. We knew her long before they were married. No, that was somebody else's marriage that was celebrated at Rothko's house. That was Stanley Kunitz's. He and his wife had lived together for many, many years and finally married. I remember a big party at Rothko's. Or maybe it was somebody else's and Rothko was there. It doesn't seem very likely. It must have been at someone else's house and Rothko was there.

MS. BERMAN: They were not entertainers?

MS. MILLER: Themselves?

MS. BERMAN: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MS. MILLER: Yes, they were. But somehow - oh, I know. I think it was that dear little man, very short, lovely sweet face, almond face. What was his name? If I just had a sidekick around here who remembered him. Lived up on East 91st Street or something. He was a good artist, very tender. Barney was up there when Stanley and Elise got married. God, it's so boring to start losing your memory this way. It's really terribly boring.

MS. BERMAN: Did the Rothkos come here, for example?

MS. MILLER: They came here a number of times early on. And we had stopped having - we didn't have much entertaining at all after a certain point because my husband was ill, a long, long illness. But I do remember

Rothko sitting - that chair used to be over there by that light. And I can see him sitting there the whole evening talking.

MS. BERMAN: I should ask you anyway a little bit about Holger Cahill because he was so versed in American art. And of course, he had been running the WPA [Works Progress Administration]. And in general how he fit in with these artists and also if he and Rothko ever reminisced and talked about being on the WPA, one from the artist point of view and one from the administrator point of view.

MS. MILLER: I'm sure they did. Cahill was a very interesting man. I feel he was quite equally split between creative writing and administrative work in connection with the arts. And he was very talented in both. And when they asked him to run the WPA artists project, they called him to Washington for a meeting between Harry Hopkins and Edward Bruce who had been running the previous - less than a year art project, which was a selected group of artists picked by an artists committee which Edward Bruce used to top. It was a small number of artists. It was under 100 I know from all over the country that were already quite well known, at least in their localities. People like Peter Blume were on it. And that preceded the WPA and it was an elitist sort of thing, whereas the WPA was for all the artists. In the first year, right away, there were over 5,000 artists on the WPA art project. That didn't count the musicians project and the writers project and what was the fourth? Acting. The theater project. The arts project was just one of four under WPA. Hopkins had set up -

[End of Side 2]

MS. BERMAN: Okay. We're ready again.

MS. MILLER: Where shall I start?

MS. BERMAN: You could talk if you knew if Rothko and Cahill had talked about that. And also if they had agreements or disagreements because Holger Cahill had such an enormous background in American art from the beginnings. And perhaps Rothko and his friends were, of course, rejecting so much of that tradition, and what he thought about it.

MS. MILLER: Well, no. I don't remember any arguments or anything like that because all of those artists were so damn glad there was something to help them out where they'd get a very good salary every three weeks that they all gratefully accepted being on it, as far as I know. They may have had philosophical arguments about whether it was a good thing or not, but it certainly worked as a good thing and they knew it. On the arts project alone, as I say, there were over 5,000, and right away the first year, who were destitute artists who were among the most well known artists we have, like Mark Tobey. They were mostly older artists like Mark Tobey, and then all the best young artists in each locality were put on too even though they were more or less untried. They had been on local relief projects. And my husband traveled all around to all of those centers and looked over previous work of the previous small relief programs and okayed the ones to put right on the WPA. Then there were a great many more added of course later. WPA did major work in the discovery of new artists. There were hundreds who were very young and would have had to fight their way to get known even if there hadn't been a depression. And it was a great stimulus to an awful lot. And I started to say, it also made a huge coverage of American art that didn't exist before. I mean there was a limited, very limited number of people that would go to museum exhibitions in, say, Louisville, Kentucky. Yes, there was a museum, but it was quite static. And maybe it would have every year a small exhibition of local artists' work. But that terrifically increased that local artists' exhibition because the project found everybody that had any possibility of turning out well. And it was amazing what it did. It just not only saved hundreds and hundreds of artists all over the country but it made also a new public because the public got excited about WPA and they came to see it. And WPA had to have half its support from local places, and that meant going through each town or small city and rousing up enough local interest among the existing not just art things, but you'd start with the mayor's office and you'd say, "Who is in charge of libraries here?" or whatever. And then you'd get that person excited about helping to support this gift from the government. And it was an amazing thing. I hope someday there will be a really perfect book on it which my husband should have written. He never had time.

MS. BERMAN: Francis O'Connor has done a number of things.

MS. MILLER: Yes. Francis knows more about the projects now than anybody because he really researched them very hard for years in Washington in the archives. And while he wasn't part of them - I wasn't part either. It's just that I was married to the man that was running the one section of it. Francis O'Connor went in, and quite true, I would say that Francis O'Connor has answers to questions about how this then happened. I was working full time. I was working the eight day week as we called it at the Museum of Modern Art at the time and I didn't, couldn't follow everything the WPA was doing, but I followed some of it. But for any details, I always refer to Francis O'Connor.

MS. BERMAN: I want to ask you more; I want to go back to Rothko. Perhaps he talked about artists he was influenced by, especially the ones who were older during World War II. And I was wondering if he had mentioned

or talked about, since he was associated with Peggy Guggenheim, say, Max Ernst, if he mentioned him or if he was interested in someone like Duchamp.

MS. MILLER: I'd certainly say he was terrifically interested in those people and must have talked about them. But there again, I don't know what he said because I didn't write it down. But Peggy Guggenheim was very important in the few years she was here.

MS. BERMAN: Would you know if he ever visited Mondrian for example while he was in New York?

MS. MILLER: I don't know. He must have. I just don't know. Mondrian, of course, Glarner was always visiting Mondrian. That's natural because their work was so related. I just don't know.

MS. BERMAN: That's quite all right. I'm just going to keep peppering you if you don't mind.

MS. MILLER: Yes, do.

MS. BERMAN: The other question is, you know, for a time that Gottlieb and Newman and Rothko went off with the bird imagery of the northwest coast, Indian ideas. Was Rothko familiar with some of that from living in Portland or in coming from the Pacific Northwest, via Russia of course?

MS. MILLER: Well, I think he may - not when he was there, but he knew it after-ward, after he was here I would say as part of that movement that came from here rather than starting out there. And that movement too came in great part from the WPA because in each region the WPA tried to use whatever there was of great interest in that locality. In some places there wasn't anything. But there, of course, there was and the people that were put in charge of state projects out there knew all about what was there already and how to put on exhibitions out there and use it.

MS. BERMAN: Now I guess this is about 1942, maybe earlier. Rothko got interested in surrealism. I think before that he was practicing automatic writing and all. Do you ever remember any sorts of discussions about when you were at the studio looking at some of this? I guess you must have seen the surrealist work when you went there.

MS. MILLER: Yes. Well, there again, I'm sure he discussed those things in the studio and here in this apartment and, you know, various other places. I remember my husband and Motherwell and somebody else got together and said, "Let's get Rothko to give a lecture." It was on a Sunday afternoon, and I think it was right here. We got together about 15 people here and got Rothko to give us a talk about his ideas. This I hadn't tape recorded. We didn't have those things very much.

MS. MILLER: I mean it wasn't usual to pop a tape recorder out of your desk drawer.

MS. BERMAN: It might have been inhibiting too at the time.

MS. MILLER: But I do remember that Sunday afternoon when he stood up and we all sat on the floor around here and he talked to us about his ideas. But what he said, I don't know.

MS. BERMAN: Do you remember what he said were his favorite artists at the time, people he -

MS. MILLER: I guess contemporaries.

MS. BERMAN: Well, it could be anyone really. I mean, it could be anyone from Giotto on down, you know, whoever you remember -- contemporaries, too, I guess.

MS. MILLER: Oh, dear. It's terrible that I can't remember. As far as contemporaries went, of course, he liked - I think he liked Still the best as a friend and as a person to talk to, as a mind he respected. Probably Motherwell. Motherwell was very vocal in those days before he sort of retired unto himself. Who was that person in Provincetown?

MS. BERMAN: Gottlieb had a summer place there.

MS. MILLER: No, this was someone who I think lived there all year round that had quite an influence.

MS. BERMAN: You're not thinking of either Dickinson or Myron Stout, are you?

MS. MILLER: I think it was Myron Stout. Dickinson I think was more or less a loner, as far as contact with other artists went. He struck me that way. I knew him quite well. I went to see him in Wellfleet. He was a marvelous artist, wonderful. I'm trying to remember. I don't think he had anything to do with this other group that Rothko was part of. I think he felt it was all very valid. He was a very generous person. He always paid attention to anything that he knew was serious.

MS. BERMAN: Was de Kooning friendly with Rothko at the time? Do you remember?

MS. MILLER: I was there just at a time in the beginning when they were all friendly and then became all unfriendly. I remember them all being here together. De Kooning -- that's when de Kooning -- Rothko made that remark about - Hess had published a book. I told you this before.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Oh, right, that Barnett Newman had made.

MS. MILLER: Yes. "*From de Hooch to de Kooning* by de Hess." But, yes, we were very friendly with de Kooning for a while, and he used to come around here a lot.

MS. BERMAN: When you visited Rothko at his studio -- I assume that happened more than once.

MS. MILLER: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: Did you ever - were you ever able to watch him paint?

MS. MILLER: No.

MS. BERMAN: Was he secretive about that?

MS. MILLER: Perhaps. But if anybody came in, he just automatically stopped painting. I think probably all artists like to paint when they're alone.

MS. BERMAN: Do you ever remember any particular painting, seeing it being worked on, that you would remember, you know, recognized?

MS. MILLER: No, I don't believe so. I did see him with things in progress especially when he was on 51st Street. I mean, he didn't have a phone there. I told you this. And I'd just walk in there. I mean, we were that friendly that he didn't mind that. Later on he would have killed anybody that walked in on him. And I took people there. I took Henry Moore there.

MS. BERMAN: What did -

MS. MILLER: Because Rothko was rather a special sight in America for a year or two. He was so different from other artists in what he was doing. Nobody else was doing the sort of painting that he was for a while there, and then he began to get imitated and so on.

MS. BERMAN: What did Moore think of this?

MS. MILLER: I think he was fascinated. I wish he were here now to tell us.

MS. BERMAN: That would be - Who else did you bring or send there?

MS. MILLER: There were a lot of people. They were mostly visitors like Henry Moore.

MS. BERMAN: How did Rothko take this sort of emulation or pilgrimages?

MS. MILLER: He liked it. You see, it was before he had that complete change of personality and became so remote that nobody ever dared to go and see him. After he moved uptown - I don't know what year that was. From there he moved up to a - it was at that time that he became remote.

MS. BERMAN: Well, he moved to East 91st Street in 1961.

MS. MILLER: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: That would be about the time of the big retrospective at the museum, the one that Peter Selz -

MS. MILLER: And Bill Seitz.

MS. BERMAN: Oh.

MS. MILLER: Wasn't it done by both of them together?

MS. BERMAN: Probably you're right. Did he ever discuss any techniques - this is for the conservator that I'm asking these questions - about priming canvases or grinding pigment or using a binding medium? Did he ever discuss anything like that that you would remember? The technical -

MS. MILLER: I don't remember. He may have.

MS. BERMAN: Did he ever advocate the use of a particular brand of art materials? Do you remember any kind of brands or what kind of stuff was there in that studio?

MS. MILLER: I don't know.

MS. BERMAN: Did he ever discuss acrylics at all? Probably it was too early when you knew him, but they're trying to figure out how early he began to use acrylics.

MS. MILLER: I don't know when he did, but I'm sure it wasn't when he was down-town. I think it must have been after he got uptown there. I wish Carla Panicali were here to tell us some answers.

MS. BERMAN: Now does she live in Rome still? They'll just have to send me to Rome to interview her.

MS. MILLER: Well, she knows a lot about him because he visited her. She invited him to spend the summer in her - she had a huge apartment in Rome. And he did with Mel. I believe they had a child at that time too.

MS. BERMAN: Did he ever talk to you about his plans for the Foundation that he was -

MS. MILLER: No. I'm on the board of that but he never talked to me about it. One thing I'm sure is that he did not plan to help elderly artists, which was a notion that went around a lot in the beginning. I really honestly think he did not want to do that. Or if he did, it was a very minor sidelight of his. I think the foundation is primarily to promote him and his work all over the world by exhibitions, donations of works of art, loans of works of art to museums or other things like museums all over. I think that was the motive. It was a self-aggrandizing motive.

MS. BERMAN: Well, then you would also see it primarily as a tax dodge too at the time?

MS. MILLER: Well, I suppose so. I think that's more or less the feeling of the whole Rothko Committee, of which I'm a member, that that was the prime motive, not one as was advertised early on as a means of helping other, particularly elderly, artists. I don't think he had that in his mind at the time.

MS. BERMAN: Well, whose idea was that, or why was that given currency?

MS. MILLER: I don't know. Bernard Reis was in on that business. Have you talked to Mrs. Reis? Bernard Reis is dead.

MS. BERMAN: I know that. Well, I'm not sure. I guess I'd have to talk to Bonnie Clearwater at the Rothko Foundation.

MS. MILLER: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: I'm not sure if those people would be hostile or not to this.

MS. MILLER: I wouldn't take her word for it. She would be so biased about it, the very adoration for her husband, that she would give you a different kind of report from what I think is right.

MS. BERMAN: But you don't think your friend at the - Carla Panicali who's at Marlborough, Rome, would be biased?

MS. MILLER: No. I don't think she'd be as biased. I think she could answer a lot of these questions that I don't know the answers to. She might be biased in favor of Rothko but she might not. She's a very discerning person.

MS. BERMAN: Well, I didn't mean so much biased in favor of Rothko but in favor of Marlborough, you see.

MS. MILLER: Well, I suppose she'd have to be. But maybe she's no longer connected with them. I don't know. I haven't heard from her for a long time. I don't remember when I heard from her last.

MS. BERMAN: I should also ask you, besides the people that you mentioned, who else did you know at the time who also knew Rothko besides the other artists and the people at the Museum of Modern Art?

MS. MILLER: Outside of the art world you mean?

MS. BERMAN: Yes. Or even other artists that we haven't mentioned who knew him who we might not think of just because they were older or were, say, realists or someone out of the ordinary, unusual friendships he may have had.

MS. MILLER: I don't think I know of any such thing. In general, I think he was surrounded by people in his own

way of thinking or with their own ideas about painting which he respected. He was definitely a part of the Betty Parsons Gallery. You know, he would have regular shows there and he would support and go to the other artists' shows whether he liked their work or not because he was part of the gallery. Have you talked to Betty Parsons?

MS. BERMAN: She's on the list. There are several interviewers. I don't think I'm going to be the one to be interviewing her. I'd like to, but I think someone else is going to. She's on the list.

MS. MILLER: I can't remember what you told me this is for.

MS. BERMAN: It's for the Archives of American Art and the Rothko Foundation.

MS. MILLER: And it's going in the files rather than being published?

MS. BERMAN: Absolutely. Well, I imagine that the same rules of restriction apply. You have to give permission to -

MS. MILLER: To look at it?

MS. BERMAN: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MS. MILLER: She'd know a lot more than I do, I'm sure [Betty Parsons]. I think she would. Although she might not know the things that happened in relation to the Museum.

MS. BERMAN: Did Rothko ever talk to you - before you mentioned when you were doing the 15 Americans Show, that he changed the emphasis of the scale by sending the big ones instead of the small ones.

MS. MILLER: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: Did he ever talk to you about, say, difficulties he may have been having with the transition in beginning to paint larger because of the difference in that time of going to these larger canvases?

MS. MILLER: No. I think he wanted to do it and he just did it. I don't think he had any block against it or any difficulty in doing it. He just stretched a big canvas and went to work on it. It was something that probably he felt a need of, that the smaller canvases were not enough for him and he showed how he felt. I put one of those big ones in the show -- two big ones on the big wall, two big ones over here on the big wall; one of the very big ones alone; and probably two smaller ones on the shorter wall.

MS. BERMAN: Since he was so ornery about that after all wanting to paint differently, were you friendly with him afterwards, or could you understand what he wanted, or was there a temporary break at the time after that show? Also, neither Still nor Rothko would lend their paintings for traveling for that show.

MS. MILLER: He wouldn't lend to that.

MS. BERMAN: But you didn't try to force him to do that?

MS. MILLER: No, because I borrowed them from people -

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MS. MILLER: - to my putting other artists that they were not sympathetic with. This is 15 Americans that Rothko and Still were in, and that was '52. And it doesn't bear with the other artists that were in there besides them.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, Dickinson was in there.

MS. MILLER: I had just whom I wanted and no matter what, whether he was abstract or realist or whatever. And they never made any objection to that.

MS. BERMAN: Well, historically, could they? When you had done these previous shows, even if other artists had objected, you wouldn't have thrown the other ones out. You would have let them decline.

MS. MILLER: No. I was doing the show and I put in it whomever I wanted. And I didn't - that was one good thing at the Museum, one of the many, that they put one person in charge of every show. They never had too many shows after the first year when Alfred Barr was only 26 years old and they thought he was too young to put on shows by himself. So the first one or two shows, they had a committee of trustees who felt they knew so much more than he did, which they didn't, that he had a couple of committee shows. And after that they let him do it himself, and he always believed that every show should be one persons' choice and no one else's. So I never had any interference with those American shows. I just put whoever I wanted in it. I could ask as much advice as I

wanted, but I wasn't troubled with "no, you can't put that person in," or, "put this one in."

MS. BERMAN: Well, when that show was going to travel, when you went to Rothko and he all of a sudden changed his mind or decided he didn't want the paintings to travel, what did you say to try to persuade him and what were his arguments?

MS. MILLER: Oh, yes. Well, I did try to persuade him and he said - and yet, I didn't travel the show at all. It was not right.

MS. BERMAN: Well, you said before that maybe you had borrowed things from other people.

MS. MILLER: Yes, yes. I can't remember. Oh, yes, I do now. No, I didn't travel that show because Still refused and Rothko refused and I don't remember if there was anyone else that refused. But with them out, it just ruined the show. And there was another show that I put them in without their - without asking them. And that was the show that traveled to the eight European cities. And I borrowed those from collectors, and they had nothing to say about it. The New American thing was shown in eight European countries, 1958-59. Oh, then I came back. That was it. I sent it to eight European countries and then I showed it in the Museum of Modern Art with a separate catalogue. I called it "That as Shown in Eight European Countries." So I got back at them that way, you see, by borrowing.

MS. MILLER: Well, they were on that kick. I had one marvelous Rothko from the Museum of Modern Art that we owned, and then I borrowed Mr. Duncan's, Frank Stanton's and the Grossman picture and I don't know how many others. But that was that. I made that catalogue up about the relations of the artists in about two weeks. I remember that I had horrible work in doing that show.

MS. BERMAN: Do you think that some of also Rothko's, after being friendly, the difficulty that you had with him hating this show, was there some animosity or jealousy because Still had the biggest room and you were going to end up with Still? Was that -?

MS. MILLER: Well, I didn't actually end up with Still, but it was the climax of the show. After Still came two or three other artists who were tapering off, letting you out alive, as you might say, after the smack in the face by these - But I'm sorry. I lost track of your question.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, I was wondering, as you say, Still was the climax of the show. I was wondering if Rothko was ornery or resented the fact that Still was going to be the climax as opposed to Rothko.

MS. MILLER: I think so, yes. Well, yes, but in a way they were both the climax. They came together. And I remember Rothko saying, "I don't like having Still's pictures show through the door." Leading into the Still gallery, there was a wide door, about six feet wide. So when you were in the Rothko room looking at pictures on the south wall, you could see into the other gallery where the Stills were and he objected to that. And I said, "Well, I can't help it. The door has to be six feet wide because we get crowds in the museum and that's our rule. I could put a couple of plants in there between your pictures, you see -- plants in the entrance, I mean in the opening between the two galleries -- which will make a break." And Rothko accepted that. He said, "Well, okay."

MS. BERMAN: Did he have any other objections?

MS. MILLER: Well, I didn't want to separate them. I wanted them both to be toward the end of the show. You said, did he have any other objections? I can't remember.

MS. BERMAN: Well, you did say that he seemed to want bright lights on his work.

MS. MILLER: Oh, that's right.

MS. BERMAN: Why was that?

MS. MILLER: He wanted his gallery to be an absolute blaze of light in order to outshine Still's gallery which would be normal light. And, yes, that's quite right. He wanted twice as many lights in all the light pans that we have around the ceiling which threw the light on the walls. Plus he wanted central lights put in. And I said, "I'm sorry. That's impossible. We've never done that. Everybody is in the same light." Light men had used spotlights or the work, but there is a general light in the gallery too. And it's absolutely impossible. You cannot do that. We do not ever do that and haven't ever done it and might not do it now. So he accepted that.

MS. BERMAN: It also seems to me that that kind of light would have been absolutely inimical to the quality of his work.

MS. MILLER: It would have wrecked his work and it would have also wrecked the exhibition, which was all lit. Each one had the same fair chance for you to see their work. And if you suddenly had in the middle of that this

over lit gallery - Well, he accepted that. He may have not accepted the entire installation but he had to accept this against all his inferences.

MS. BERMAN: Well, would he eventually see that aesthetically it would have been a mistake?

MS. MILLER: I don't know.

MS. BERMAN: Also, he wanted to hang the pictures touching each other. Is that true?

MS. MILLER: Yes. He wanted them all the way around like that. I wanted, you know, the way I wanted it. But he tried very hard in order to get more in, he wanted where I on a wall, say, that wide, I would have two paintings and he wanted to have five paintings there, you see, have all of them touching, over each other. And I said no, I think it would look terrible and I'm in charge of installing this show. I just pulled rank on him and said, "I'm to install this show." I don't know whether, as I said to you, I don't know whether I said, "If you don't want to be in this show, why, you don't have to be in this show. You're already in the catalogue because that was printed months ago." But anyway, he backed down on those things.

MS. BERMAN: Did he eventually, was he able to admit to you and say, "Oh, you were right," or apologize or anything? Did he say that to you? Did you say no?

MS. MILLER: No, he didn't.

MS. BERMAN: Only because when you nod your head, it doesn't record on the tape.

MS. MILLER: I'm sorry.

MS. BERMAN: It's okay.

MS. MILLER: No, he never did say that that I remember. He acted as if he was pleased. I don't know whether he was or not. But when the show was finished and lit and so on, he acted satisfied at least, shall we say. Still -- I don't know how Still felt about it. You know, we did his room together and he liked it as we did it in a sensible arrangement. But I was afraid he wouldn't come to the opening. I knew all the others would.

MS. BERMAN: When you say - which he, Still or Rothko?

MS. MILLER: Still. And I was right -- he wouldn't. So I asked him to come over here and go up with us.

MS. BERMAN: You were talking about how Still wouldn't come to the opening, so you were asking him to do something else.

MS. MILLER: Oh, yes. So I got him over here and there was a dinner for the artists at the Museum. And I got him up there and I got him up as far as the sixth floor where the dinner was. My husband was with us and we were determined that he was going to show there. And he - I felt really quite - there was a receiving line. I remember Nelson Rockefeller on the receiving line with all our trustees in it --some of them. And it does seem to me that Still went through that receiving line. They were in the hall near the elevator. And then he absolutely evaporated. I looked around and he wasn't there and he had gone. He had gone right down again in the elevator and disappeared. He would not face all those people. I don't know what it was with him. It wasn't like shyness. It was just - I don't know. But so he wasn't at the opening much to my regret because people - it was a good opening. And I remember Margaret Barr coming up to me and saying, "It's great. Your show's a great success," because I was very worried about that show.

MS. BERMAN: That was very daring.

MS. MILLER: It was considered then far out. When you look at the list, you can't believe it now. But she came up to me and said, "It's a big success. Don't worry any more." And I said, "How can you tell?" She said, "Oh, the air is electric." And it was - it did interest people an awful lot because it was new then and it worked. But Still wasn't there. All of the other artists were.

MS. BERMAN: Speaking of trustees, before you had this show of the 15 Americans, you tried or Alfred Barr tried perhaps to buy a Rothko for the Museum. Was that successful?

MS. MILLER: Yes. That had been done. That was done several years before. We bought through the Betty Parsons Gallery, picked it out there, and he had no objection to that at that time.

MS. BERMAN: That's Rothko himself?

MS. MILLER: Mark, yes. He professed to be very glad we have it, glad to have the money, and needed it and so



on. It was before he had any success, you see, or fame.

MS. BERMAN: But even in this show, the 15 Americans, he was becoming well known, he wasn't so famous that he could afford to pull all the paintings out. Maybe there was more fame to be had by doing that than not.

MS. MILLER: Well, somehow I prevented that.

MS. BERMAN: Well, he had this feeling, I guess there was a point when he felt that museums were trying to use him. Did he ever say things like that to you?

MS. MILLER: Yes, he did. That was part of when he got very neurotic about everything. I think that was because - I don't think he felt that way in the beginning when I first knew him. He got that notion into his head from somebody, from something.

MS. BERMAN: Did he ever talk with you - I guess in the '50s he would not have a painting sold to the Whitney.

MS. MILLER: Oh, yes.

MS. BERMAN: Did you know anything about that at all?

MS. MILLER: I did at the time. I'm not sure about this, but it seems to me he got a fixation that he wouldn't let anybody buy one painting. If they were going to buy any, they had to buy a big group. A museum, for instance, had to buy eight or ten paintings, that one painting alone didn't mean anything and didn't commit to his work and ideas.

MS. BERMAN: Now would he have gotten this idea from someone like Still, or would he have gotten this from someone else?

MS. MILLER: I don't know where he got that idea, and we didn't see much of him after that show so I don't really know too much about him after that.

MS. BERMAN: Was that rule for all the museums? I mean, would he have said that to the Museum of Modern Art too?

MS. MILLER: I think so, yes.

MS. BERMAN: They seemed to have the feeling that their art would be contaminated by being near anyone else's.

MS. MILLER: Yes. There was definitely a feeling of contamination about showing with certain other artists or in certain museums.

MS. BERMAN: Were you involved at all in the 1961 retrospective of Rothko's work at the Modern?

MS. MILLER: Well, it was done by somebody else. It was done - I guess it was done by Peter Selz, and I wasn't involved in it at all.

MS. BERMAN: But nothing filtered down or around?

MS. MILLER: No. I went to the opening, said hello to him and all; but by then we had drifted very far apart.

MS. BERMAN: Did he ever talk with you about works on paper at all or did you ever see water colors or blotches when you visited him?

MS. MILLER: Yes, we did see those. And it was after my show. I saw them at Marlborough. They showed me a whole group of them. I don't know what happened to those, do you?

MS. BERMAN: No. Well, I was wondering even in the '40s about those that he was doing because he seemed to be very fond of his works on paper. I was wondering if he ever talked about them.

MS. MILLER: I don't remember. In fact, I don't remember seeing them until Marlborough and that was after.

MS. BERMAN: Another thing. Did he ever advise you which other artists to be on the lookout for, for different shows or saying you should go to their studios?

MS. MILLER: He did just once when I asked him to be in the show. We were sitting in my office in the Museum. He was living right in that neighborhood. And an elaborate comedy of giving him a pass made out in the name of his baby -- artist's pass to allow the baby to come in, in a baby carriage because he and his wife both had a pass

--so he could wheel the baby around in the Museum garden because it was much closer to him than Central Park and more private. Now what was I trying to answer?

MS. BERMAN: I was asking you if he had advised you to -

MS. MILLER: Yes, he did advise. When I asked him to be in the show, we were in my office. He said, "May I suggest another artist that I think would be wonderful for you to put in the show, and that's Clyfford Still." I said, "Well, I've got his name on my list. I'm going to."

MS. BERMAN: Was there anyone beyond this very tight circle that he had noticed or ever mentioned?

MS. MILLER: I don't think so. I don't remember any. There may have been but - I don't know.

MS. BERMAN: Did he ever talk about - well, I noticed, say, that you don't have Gottlieb in here. Was he mentioning - or was he no longer friendly with Gottlieb at the time?

MS. MILLER: He probably was friendly. I don't know. But I didn't care for Gottlieb's work particularly and that's why I didn't have it.

MS. BERMAN: Did Rothko ever mention Avery to you at all, talk about Avery?

MS. MILLER: Did Rothko ever talk to me about Avery?

MS. BERMAN: Yes.

MS. MILLER: I don't remember whether he ever talked to me, but I knew that he thought a lot about Avery. Was Avery a teacher of his?

MS. BERMAN: No, not a teacher; but they really went back. He'd known him since the early 1930s.

MS. MILLER: Yes. I know there was a great bond there.

MS. BERMAN: I guess you would say Avery wasn't a formal teacher but he did show him a lot, you know, influenced him.

MS. MILLER: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: His teacher was Max Weber, at the Art Institute [Art Student's League - BC].

MS. MILLER: Yes. I remember going to a party of Mark's. When did he live on the east side?

MS. BERMAN: Well, he was all over the place. There was a lower east side. He was on 31st. Or do you mean on East 95th?

MS. MILLER: No. It was not way up there. It was much earlier than that. It was in the teens of the east side.

MS. BERMAN: Right.

MS. MILLER: Fourteenth Street or 19th Street or something like that.

MS. BERMAN: Yes. He was on 31st for a while too. He moved a lot.

MS. MILLER: And we went to a party there and Avery was there and they were very friendly.

MS. BERMAN: This was very charming what you were saying before, that Rothko used to come to the Museum frequently. Was it to visit you or -

MS. MILLER: It was just to look at things in the Museum. And we gave him a pass, an artist's pass. All artists that were in the collection got an artist's pass, a free entry at all times in the museum because by that time we were having to charge an entrance fee in order to try to reduce our deficit. But any artist in the collection got a free pass, and artists in general whether they were in the collection or not got a cheaper pass. Think of all the artists folks which was something like \$5 a year, and the public paid more. So Rothko had a pass, a free pass, and we gave Mel a free pass. And then we gave the baby a free pass. And he used to bring the baby over. It was very funny to see Rothko pushing a baby carriage. When he lived on Sixth Avenue he came very often to the Modern Museum of Art.

MS. BERMAN: That's a nice story. Did you know him and were you involved at all, because it was so close by, with this school that Rothko and Still -

MS. MILLER: Oh, yes.

MS. BERMAN: Subjects of the Artists.

MS. MILLER: On East Eighth Street.

MS. BERMAN: Right. 35 East Eighth.

MS. MILLER: Yes. We used to go to the meetings that preceded that called The Club. And anybody could go to those meetings at The Club, and we always went because it was right on this street and we were very interested. I don't know exactly how they ran that club but anybody if they wanted could just get up and speak. So one heard a great many artists' comments about everything at the club. I think The Club simply developed out of the fact that all the artists went to that bar. I don't remember -

MS. BERMAN: The Cedar.

MS. MILLER: The Cedar, the Cedar Bar. And they needed more space and they got this space on East Eighth Street. It was quite a big space. I think it was the beginning of the school that was going to be run by Motherwell and I think five artists were involved in the school, but it never really got off the ground as far as I know. But it had the space and it had like an auditorium with seats in it. It may have been somebody else's school before.

MS. BERMAN: Do you remember Rothko's participation in this, or level of participation?

MS. MILLER: I think he did participate. I seem to see a row of artists sitting up on the platform and they were all going to speak. I seem to have some dim memory of Rothko and Still and Newman -

[End of Side 4]

MS. BERMAN: Was Rothko that much of a participator, as much as the other ones?

MS. MILLER: Yes, he did participate. It was before he just took that strange - although I'm sure he had a very real psychological reason in his personality why he sort of withdrew from everything, withdrew from the world.

MS. BERMAN: But do you know any more about that school, the Subjects of the Artists?

MS. MILLER: Well, it started out being called the Subjects of the Artists. And I don't think the school ever really started. Or it may have started and just -

MS. BERMAN: But did they enlist you or anyone else to help out?

MS. MILLER: No, no. It was all the artists -- Rothko, Still - Have you got other names?

MS. BERMAN: Yeah, like Newman and Motherwell. You're right.

MS. MILLER: Newman, yes, and Motherwell, yes. I don't remember whether Baziotis was a part of it or not.

MS. BERMAN: Did Rothko ever talk about his teaching jobs, because he had gone to California and he was going to go to Brooklyn and anything at all about his appointments?

MS. MILLER: I don't think he talked about it. Everybody knew he had them and that was fine. But I don't remember his saying anything in particular about them. He may have to other people.

MS. BERMAN: Also during this period both Gorky and Pollock died. Do you remember him speaking about it in particular or organizing any sort of gesture or ceremony or anything like that?

MS. MILLER: There was a big thing organized about Pollock which took place out on the island at Pollock's home, but I do not know who organized that aside from Lee. I do not know who - it may have been only Lee Pollock's idea. We were up in the country and we drove down for it and drove Grace Hartigan's son with her. We drove to the island to Pollock's place. I don't know who organized that, Newman?

MS. BERMAN: I don't know either. I'm just organizing and checking because I don't know how friendly, say, Rothko and Pollock were or how they felt.

MS. MILLER: Well, they certainly were friendly in the beginning. Let me think now. There was a man from California. Did we ever remember his name?

MS. BERMAN: No.

MS. MILLER: Who was close to Peggy Guggenheim.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, that was Howard Putzel.

MS. MILLER: That's right. I think he was around at that time.

MS. BERMAN: Did you ever go to Rothko's studio in the Bowery? He took that about 1958.

MS. MILLER: After the one near the Museum.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Well, he took this one to work on the Four Seasons murals.

MS. MILLER: Oh, yes. I remember being in three of Rothko's studios. The one near the Museum many times, the 54th Street one. The one where he did the murals was uptown as I remember. Maybe it wasn't. You think it was on the Bowery?

MS. BERMAN: Well, that's what's in the book there. That's what they said because he needed a big space to do those murals.

MS. MILLER: Yes. It's funny, I see them in another space.

MS. BERMAN: It's possible.

MS. MILLER: But he may have done them downtown, but I remember the downtown studio as it was very big. I went there with Eliza Parkinson to see him, and he showed us the studio. He showed us whatever paintings he had. And it seems then she decided that she would buy a painting. She had enough money to, so she bought one.

MS. BERMAN: And she bought it straight from the studio there?

MS. MILLER: I think she did.

MS. BERMAN: He had no objection to her purchasing that?

MS. MILLER: He was with Janis then?

MS. BERMAN: Yes, probably. Well, '58 - it depends when we're talking about.

MS. MILLER: No, he had no objections. She got it and she has it now.

MS. BERMAN: Did you ever buy anything by Rothko?

MS. MILLER: No. I was such a damn fool. I never bought anything from Pollock. I never bought anything from Rothko. And there was a Pollock that I had in my show and I always considered, that's my Pollock. That's the one I'm going to get. I have so little room in this two room apartment. This was a long thin painting -- a frieze-like painting--about 12 feet long and two feet wide. It was a beauty, and it was in my show and a museum wanted it so I just let it go. But it's an awkward situation not to have any room. I've had several large pictures on that wall and given them to museums. When I wanted another thing, I'd have to give the other one away.

MS. BERMAN: Did you always give it to the Modern?

MS. MILLER: No. I gave it to other museums. I gave it to Smith College Museum [Northampton, MA] or some other museum.

MS. BERMAN: Did he talk about the murals for the Four Seasons with you?

MS. MILLER: Oh. Oh, yes. I think I only went to see them once in his studio. They were almost finished. I sort of forgot what happened, why they weren't kept there. They weren't hung.

MS. BERMAN: Well, he didn't want them in there. Maybe you can remember this or clarify this. He said that he didn't want them in there, all these capitalist pigs or whatever eating in front of his paintings or demeaning his paintings, he said.

MS. MILLER: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: Now he said that originally he thought this was going to be an employees' cafeteria at Seagrams, whereas Philip Johnson said, no, he knew it was going to be the Four Seasons. Did he ever talk to you? Did Rothko actually ever say, "Oh, these are going to be for the cafeteria," or restaurant or anything like that?

MS. MILLER: I've forgotten about the fact that it was a different location. I thought they were always planned for that room.

MS. BERMAN: Well, they were to Johnson's mind. See, Rothko evidently maintained that he decided to do this because he thought this room was going to be a cafeteria for employees instead of the restaurant that it was.

MS. MILLER: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: So I was wondering which - but he said that later, but no one knows really if he thought it or not.

MS. MILLER: Yes. I don't know.

MS. BERMAN: Was he satisfied with those murals? Did he -

MS. MILLER: I think so. They later went to -

MS. BERMAN: To the Tate.

MS. MILLER: Oh, to the Tate. He did a set for the Fogg. In some big room of the Fogg they had Rothko murals. Do you remember?

MS. BERMAN: I'll take your word for it. I'm not sure.

MS. MILLER: So I get those mixed up with the others.

MS. BERMAN: Now I'll ask you because we're summing up - we're to the point now where after this, I guess you just didn't see Rothko any more.

MS. MILLER: No, we didn't. We didn't see each other at all.

MS. BERMAN: I was just wondering if -

MS. MILLER: I did go once to his studio with - I guess it was Lee Eastman, the lawyer, wanted to go to Rothko's studio. And he happened to be in the Museum talking with me and he said, "Come on with us. Come on, let's go." And I went because I was curious to see this uptown studio and to see what was in it and so on. So I did go, but not at Rothko's invitation.

MS. BERMAN: What was there at the time? What was he doing?

MS. MILLER: It seems to me it must have been some of those uptown murals. He did one of those sets, either Four Seasons or the other.

MS. BERMAN: You know, reading about Rothko and all, it seems that I don't know if he had no feel for it or had no friends that were, but there seemed to be very, very little mention of interests or, say, any-thing having to do with sculpture. And I was wondering if he ever talked about any sort of relationship of sculpture and painting, any sort, even when talking about myths or totems or anything like that at all.

MS. MILLER: I don't know. I think he may have simply not have had any interest in sculpture.

MS. BERMAN: I guess the other thing is any sort of last thoughts or reminiscences or feelings about Rothko, episodes that we haven't covered.

MS. MILLER: Oh, dear. Well, it's a big city and if someone decides they're not going to see you any more, it's very easy not to because it is a big city.

MS. BERMAN: Oh, absolutely.

MS. MILLER: I suppose I had seen Rothko at various times at exhibitions, particularly big exhibitions like museum ones. And it seems to me we've always at least acknowledged each other's existence by saying hello or something like that. But other than that, I just don't know what to say. There was no communication, that's all.

MS. BERMAN: But you never had - but you don't seem to have had the animosity that you say that you had for Still. I mean you seem to regard him peaceably shall we say.

MS. MILLER: Yes, yes, more or less so. And in both cases I always made special care to see their exhibitions, all their exhibitions that were within reach. I didn't see the Still shows that were out on the west coast because I wasn't going to the west coast at that particular time. But I saw catalogues and so on. But if they were around here, I'd see them. It is a very strange feeling to have to look back upon the struggles we went through at the

Museum, the struggle it was to get those artists in the show and have it so accepted by the trustees and so on. And all that and then to have a complete break in friendly relations. It was so hard.

MS. BERMAN: And even before that, after the work and all, having the artists mess things up a little by being ornery.

MS. MILLER: Yes.

MS. BERMAN: Did you ever explain something like that to the artists, you know, "We've had to go through all this. Can't you just accept this?"

MS. MILLER: Yes. I suppose I did with Rothko when he wanted to change the whole show. That's one thing Still was very, very nice about.

MS. BERMAN: People are unpredictable.

MS. MILLER: In fact, Still continued to be nice all through the show. But it was because of Still and Rothko that I did not try to have a traveling show you see. Everybody wanted the show to travel, but I said those two major artists in the show will not travel with it. And there were other things that were too fragile to travel with. Lippold was in that show. You couldn't travel with Lippolds. So altogether, it wasn't in the cards for that show to go anywhere else.

MS. BERMAN: Did the trustees chastise you for their conduct? Did you take heat for that, for their pulling out of the show?

MS. MILLER: No, no. No, the trustees were very supportive always of the staff, of their efforts. It was a very good team of people working together --trustees and staff. I don't know how it is now. I have no idea. But during my era, it was a bunch of people all pulling together. And whether the trustees liked the stuff or not, they said, "Dorothy had a right to put it in the show. It is her show." And sometimes they didn't like things and then they would get to like them. I guess that's about it.

MS. BERMAN: Right. Okay, thank you very much. I appreciate it. Thank you for taking all your time.

MS. MILLER: Unless you can think of other questions.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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