Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Hedda Sterne, 1981 December 17

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

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Hedda Sterne on December 17, 1981. The interview was conducted by Phyllis Tuchman 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. PHYLLIS TUCHMAN: How did you meet Mark Rothko?

MS. HEDDA STERNE: I met him in '42 or '43 at the Art of the Century [Gallery, New York, NY], the gallery of Peggy Guggenheim, and we both were exhibiting in her gallery.

MS. TUCHMAN: Had he had his exhibit yet when you met him?

MS. STERNE: You mean at the Museum of Modern Art [New York, NY]?

MS. TUCHMAN: At Peggy Guggenheim?

MS. STERNE: I think so, or immediately after. Anyway, I remember that's how I met him.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you remember being impressed by his physical appearance or his paintings or what he said to you?

MS. STERNE: His physical appearance? He wasn't the only one. There was a whole group of people who didn't look at all like what my Byronic idea of an artist was. He was kind of a heavy, stout man. And until he - at that period he hadn't married yet his second wife who took beautiful care of him, so he was kind of ill taken care of. But not in the conventional bohemian way, just plain, you know-

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you know him in the '40s out in the Hamptons?

MS. STERNE: No, I never went there in the '40s.

MS. TUCHMAN: Would you see him at parties or...

MS. STERNE: Oh, yes, yes. And as soon as he got married - I don't remember when he got married-there would be parties at his house and they'd come to my house.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did he seem comfortable in a crowd?

MS. STERNE: Yes. I didn't know yet, but he already was drinking heavily. But I didn't know. I only found out very late that he was a very heavy drinker because he carried his liquor perfectly. You couldn't tell.

MS. TUCHMAN: I'm just curious. Do you remember what kind of food, say, they - the Rothko's served? Would it be simple, gourmet?

MS. STERNE: Simple, I think. Simple. Jewish simple, you know.

MS. TUCHMAN: I make that into brisket.

MS. STERNE: Well, you know, Mark for instance always liked the idea that he wasn't a sensual artist. He claimed that he didn't look at things. He only had to use inner vision. He always liked to say, "I'm not visual." He never noticed. I think the only reason he made himself a beautiful house was because of his wife. He really didn't care. He didn't look; he didn't see. I don't think he even looked on the street.

MS. TUCHMAN: No kidding?

MS. STERNE: I'm telling you what he said. He was not visual at all.

MS. TUCHMAN: So you don't remember having any conversations with him about old master paintings or things like that.

MS. STERNE: Not so much painting. He rather would talk about literature. He liked [William] Shakespeare, [Leo] Tolstoy. He compared himself with Tolstoy. How, I don't know - but he did.

MS. TUCHMAN: Tolstoy!

MS. STERNE: He loved beautiful, good music. He had excellent records of Mozart. And that he liked very, very much.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you think he liked Tolstoy because Tolstoy was Russian and he felt something with his background?

MS. STERNE: No. I think that he had a sense of - he probably had an image of the greatest. Consequently he compared himself to the greatest - something like that.

MS. TUCHMAN: Someone had compared Rothko to Dostoevsky, so now to hear an interest in Tolstoy seems -

MS. STERNE: Well, yes. From the way he lived and the fact that he finally killed himself, it would be rather Dostoevsky. But he was a very unhappy man. For instance, he told me - I don't know - this is kind of a cruel story. It's just too cruel. I'd better not. When our human relationship - something very cruel his wife said. And also, his brothers came to town and immediately they took it for granted that if the Museum of Modern Art showed him the Museum of Modern Art wasn't much. That's how they took it. Do you see what I mean?

MS. TUCHMAN: Oh, that's really sad.

MS. STERNE: And they so much tried to put everything down that they didn't go to the Statue of Liberty. This is a funny story. Mark said, "Why didn't you go to see the Statue of Liberty?" And the brother said, "I don't like sculpture." [Laughs.] And it was just one more way of putting him down, you see?

MS. TUCHMAN: Oh, how sad.

MS. STERNE: But he had lots of stories like that. They're too cruel to tell.

MS. TUCHMAN: Would he ever talk about what it was like to come to America from somewhere else?

MS. STERNE: He was six when he came from Dvinska or Minsk or Pinsk, one of those many consonant towns -- Dvinska I think. But he was so small. He went straight to Colorado and became totally American by the time he grew up.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you ever have a sense of him - well, would you have gotten a sense of that he was a person who'd gone to study at Yale [University, New Haven, CT]?

MS. STERNE: To me he was totally - a very funny thing, to me he was totally a ghetto Jew - all his nature, everything.

MS. TUCHMAN: Would you say he wasn't really an intellectual?

MS. STERNE: No. He was much more of an artist. I think his culture was very spotty, you know. Maybe he knew a lot on one subject but nothing on some other. It wasn't a well rounded or renaissance type of information and education. I may be wrong, you know. Maybe this was a way of him presenting himself. I mean it's very difficult to find out what - all the time, because I had a different kind of education than many people here, many times I had both surprises of what seemed to me abysmal ignorance and in other situations very beautiful information because it was just another kind of education. What I took for granted in Europe was not necessarily taken for granted in schools here.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you mean in terms of what one read?

MS. STERNE: Well, I'll tell you something. I remember we went to-I won't tell you the name, but we went to Venice once, with an artist, a very good artist. And we went to the hotel and he disappeared for a while and he came back with starry eyes. He said that he discovered this little church just like a jewel in this beautiful piazza. Well, he discovered St. Marks. He never knew. Whereas in Europe everybody goes on a honeymoon to Venice and there isn't a child by the time of four that doesn't know exactly Venice and St. Marks. Do you know what I mean? That kind of thing - the difference of types of education. So it's very difficult for me to judge for this reason.

MS. TUCHMAN: Several people have said that Mark Rothko seemed to have a kind of public persona as opposed to what he might be like in private or on a one-to-one basis. Did you ever notice that?

MS. STERNE: I don't know. He was at all times totally self-absorbed and unhappy.

MS. TUCHMAN: Happy or unhappy?

MS. STERNE: Profoundly unhappy. And I think that he didn't seem to hide it even from casual people.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you run into him a lot in art galleries? You mentioned meeting at Peggy Guggenheim's.

MS. STERNE: Yes. When he was young, he would go to all the shows.

MS. TUCHMAN: But would he comment on the art that he was seeing or he would just be there?

MS. STERNE: I remember once I met him at the show of Noguchi, which was a very beautiful show. And he said, "Too many images." You see, typical. The strength of the totally obsessed in one sentence. That's a great strength to be that biased.

MS. TUCHMAN: Would you see him at The Club or at the-

MS. STERNE: I didn't go to The Club much. I was married and I didn't like very much to go. The people at The Club would go into very vicious fights, and I saw one or two and I didn't like it.

MS. TUCHMAN: During the '40s especially with Peggy Guggenheim's gallery or later Betty Parsons', did you ever talk about how you felt about surrealism with one another?

MS. STERNE: Oh, yes. He came to Betty Parsons' as soon as Betty opened her gallery in 1950. And even before that, she had a gallery. She was working with somebody else, and he was with the gallery. So then more than ever I saw him.

MS. TUCHMAN: But would you talk about surrealism? Do you remember which surrealist artists he liked?

MS. STERNE: Well, he was. He started out more or less as a surrealist. I don't know if you know his early work.

MS. TUCHMAN: Yes.

MS. STERNE: He started out that way. Then I didn't see him for a while. One year he didn't paint at all and he wrote some kind of a manifesto. You should somehow get to see that.

MS. TUCHMAN: It's a missing book.

MS. STERNE: It is?

MS. TUCHMAN: Yes.

MS. STERNE: I know about it because I know from Harold Rosenberg that's what he did. For a whole year he wrote that thing and showed it to friends. And then about a year or so later, he started "The Walls of Light," more or less. Not exactly the Walls, but he was well on that path, you know.

MS. TUCHMAN: I'm just intrigued that you characterized the more signature style pictures as Walls of Light because-

MS. STERNE: You know which I'm talking about.

MS. TUCHMAN: Yes, yes.

MS. STERNE: I think they were called like that or he called them that. I remember how beautiful they were.

MS. TUCHMAN: Well, Elaine de Kooning called them walls in the mid '50s.

MS. STERNE: Yes. I want to tell you something. You asked me about what he talked about. The one artist he absolutely worshiped was Clyfford Still who didn't return his feelings at all. But he really worshiped-that was the one great influence in his life. And he was very generous about that. He was also very generous about-I don't know what his name is. It will come to me- who was his master and whose house he always sent to?

MS. TUCHMAN: Oh, Milton Avery.

MS. STERNE: Yes. And he was also very generous about giving credit for what Milton Avery meant to him. He loved to be able to be generous. You know, he didn't like many things but when he did like them, he enjoyed being generous and giving credit.

MS. TUCHMAN: What do you think he would have liked about Clyfford Still, the person, the art?

MS. STERNE: Clyfford Still's vision liberated him.

MS. TUCHMAN: No kidding?

MS. STERNE: Yes.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you have any recollection of a fight that they had?

MS. STERNE: I know they had and I know that even after his death Clyfford Still talked with great disrespect and dislike for him.

MS. TUCHMAN: About Mark Rothko?

MS. STERNE: Yes. Clyfford Still was very difficult. He disliked most people. But he was an incredible, interesting man, marvelous man.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you remember the days in April, 1950 when there was a big round-table discussion that was printed?

MS. STERNE: Sure. Did you see the whole thing?

MS. TUCHMAN: Yes, in the book. Do you have any special memories of that day, of people being argumentative or-

MS. STERNE: Yes. Well, as a matter of fact, I submitted the first subject of discussion. I remember that very well. No, it was very peaceful, very interesting, everybody was treated very well. Everybody treated everybody very well. And after the end of three days-as you remember, it got in all the papers. This happened because Ad Reinhardt and Barney Newman went to all the papers and showed the letter of protest that we sent to the Metropolitan [Museum of Art, New York, NY].

MS. TUCHMAN: Oh, this came out of that 1950 roundtable?

MS. STERNE: Oh, yes. It happened there. And we all signed everything at the end of those three days of the roundtable.

MS. TUCHMAN: Well, I don't understand. I have the photograph with me. I mean why weren't there any sculptors? There were sculptors at that roundtable?

MS. STERNE: Because these are the people who signed.

MS. TUCHMAN: Oh.

MS. STERNE: These are the people who signed the letter of protest. And I always sign everything. But there were many other people in the meeting who refused to sign the letter of protest against the Metropolitan. That was all.

MS. TUCHMAN: Oh, I see.

MS. STERNE: And then I forgot what journalist who called this group the "Irascibles." And you know how the press loves a word or a name. We became the Irascibles, and the *Life* magazine made the story and it got all inflated exactly as Barney and Reinhardt knew that it would. They had a fantastic sense of social, you know? Both of them. You know, Barney wanted to be mayor at one point. And Reinhardt made political cartoons. They were very involved in politics and society and social matters. They were very aware.

MS. TUCHMAN: Now I'm sort of curious in your saying that because do you remember how this photograph was posed because you sort of have a line right down the center?

MS. STERNE: Well, the girl at *Life* magazine had prepared the chairs completely, just like at the table where you have the-I remember I came in rather late and she told me, "stand there," that's all. She had prepared the layout.

MS. TUCHMAN: Oh, for who was going to be where?

MS. STERNE: For *Life* magazine.

MS. TUCHMAN: No, no. That this for instance would be the chair that Stamos was sitting in?

MS. STERNE: Yes, yes. Everything was all prepared and designed and grouped. And then she fixed us and we sat.

MS. TUCHMAN: That was true at the roundtable discussion too, that people knew the chairs they would sit in?

MS. STERNE: That I don't remember. But this just derived from the roundtable. So this was a group of those people at the roundtable who signed the letter. That's all.

MS. TUCHMAN: You're probably asked this all the time, but when you see this photograph, what do you think about?

MS. STERNE: In terms of career, it's probably the worst thing that happened to me.

MS. TUCHMAN: Because you were the only woman in the picture?

MS. STERNE: Just for a variety of reasons, it was very bad.

MS. TUCHMAN: But do you remember, say-

MS. STERNE: They all were very furious that I was in it because they all were sufficiently macho to think that the presence of a woman took away from the seriousness of it all. Do you understand?

MS. TUCHMAN: Yes.

MS. STERNE: They were truly furious.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you think all those men sort of got on with one another or that this was just a well set up-

MS. STERNE: In the '50s they had- Barney and all this group were very close but very soon they became total archenemies. Barney Newman sued Drifer [sp] for some statement or other. Rothko in the '60s, he was so lonely, so alone. He would have loved to have seen them, but not one of them- no, not one of them went to see him. They all split totally. Each one, they split apart.

MS. TUCHMAN: Would you see Rothko in the neighborhood? Have you always lived here?

MS. STERNE: Yes. The last years of his life he lived two streets away, so I saw him all the time. When he did the chapel, that's when I saw him all the time.

MS. TUCHMAN: And had he aged a lot?

MS. STERNE: He was very ill and very-in the last year, he wasn't himself at all. He really died when he had that seizure. In the last year you cannot count him as a man who was alive at all. You know, after he got ill and until he committed suicide, he wasn't himself any more.

MS. TUCHMAN: When he was living in his studio, would he ever talk to you about missing, not seeing his children?

MS. STERNE: Yes. Well, yes. You see, he was sort of sad about not seeing his family but he talked on the phone once or twice a day with his wife and children who lived a few blocks up. So actually he really never left them, you know. I mean he said he did but he never did. I mean when you abandon somebody, you don't talk once or twice a day with them for maybe half an hour or so, which he did.

MS. TUCHMAN: During this period, did you ever discuss why the pictures for the chapel were black?

MS. STERNE: He was a very, very profoundly unhappy man and he wanted to - he always talked about despair. And another word he used a lot was poignant. I mean he was after communicating intense emotion. That's why he kept saying that he's not visual. He was painting about emotion. And you know how large those paintings are?

MS. TUCHMAN: Yes.

MS. STERNE: Well, he'd decide, let's say, an inch or two inches all around smaller would be better. And he'd shrink them and he'd call me up to come and see. And then he would again make them maybe five inches larger, and again he would call me - come and see.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you ever talk about how the pictures were painted?

MS. STERNE: You mean technically?

MS. TUCHMAN: Yes.

MS. STERNE: Well, I could see. I could see how they were painted.

MS. TUCHMAN: Well, someone had said that he was very secretive about his painting technique so that today they're having restoration problems.

MS. STERNE: Well, there is a young boy who knows-a young man who knows, in Texas.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you ever see the paintings installed in Texas?

MS. STERNE: No, I never went there.

MS. TUCHMAN: I'd be curious how you'd feel about them.

MS. STERNE: But he had them here.

MS. TUCHMAN: Had you been in Rothko's other studios?

MS. STERNE: Yes.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you think that they changed as his paintings changed or as he became more successful, the environment changed?

MS. STERNE: They had to be larger because his paintings were larger. But also, I can say this - this has been my experience - it's surprising how much the space you work in influences your painting. Very much so. Now this last place he lived in, in a way was very luxurious. You know, it was a stable of a very elegant house. But it was one of the saddest places you can think of because it really wasn't built for anybody to live in or even work in. It was meant for carriages. So it was a terribly sad place to be ill and alone - terrible place to be ill and alone. You see, the distance and the size of the whole thing was just a terrifying place to be in.

MS. TUCHMAN: And you never felt that about, say, other studios he had?

MS. STERNE: No. But when he had the other studios, he'd go home to a very comfortable bourgeois life and house. Here it's only at the end. I don't remember exactly how long it was when he left home and started spending the nights in the studio.

MS. TUCHMAN: When you see a painting by Mark Rothko today - you know, you're in a museum or an art gallery or something - what do you think about? Do you think about the man or a particular -

MS. STERNE: Well, what I think about is that he should never be shown a painting among others. He should always have a room like at the chapel. And that goes for lots of painters who are not supposed to be seen as one sample among other samples. I remember even when I saw Clyfford Still, I really appreciated Clyfford Still when I was in Buffalo where he had a whole room with only his work. And there are painters like that, and he's one of them. So it was very good. You know, he wanted a chapel desperately, and he was right. I think he has a room like that at the Tate also. And that's what I always think of. I am sorry to see them under other circumstances.

MS. TUCHMAN: Is it because there's a particular emotion that's played like a sonata or there's a religious quality like an Italian renaissance chapel?

MS. STERNE: There's a mood quality. It just doesn't work when you see just one painting in the samples. As a matter of fact, it's hardly good for anybody in modern times. Maybe it was good when people had the... the paintings were isolated by frames. They look pretty scary, not because of him, because of you, because he makes a kind of noise that would scare you.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you think there's anything else about Rothko that I should have asked you?

MS. STERNE: That you didn't ask other people you mean?

MS. TUCHMAN: Well, yes. Did you find that he was a flirt?

MS. STERNE: Flirt? I never saw that at all. But I was told that he was very much of a lady chaser. I never was aware of it. He was very affectionate with me but as friends.

MS. TUCHMAN: The other thing I'm just struck by is that, you know, if you were going to have dinner together, would he talk? Would his wife be the talker of the two?

MS. STERNE: You know, there are very few couples who are good being - you know, there was this woman, very

elegant woman, who always invited couples separately because couples seem to interfere with each other's style. I don't know if you see that. They interrupt each other or they say, "Don't say that." I mean they do all kinds of things which are of no importance, but is a kind of indication of boredom that carries in company. Both he and his wife drank very heavily.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you have any memory of him being interested in current affairs?

MS. STERNE: I don't remember that.

[End of Side 1]

MS. TUCHMAN: Can we go back now to your childhood?

MS. STERNE: To my childhood?

MS. TUCHMAN: Yes.

MS. STERNE: What would you like to know about my childhood?

MS. TUCHMAN: I read somewhere that you mentioned that you liked to draw as a child.

MS. STERNE: Yes.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you-

MS. STERNE: You know, children are given a little slate board. And I drew on that when I was supposed to do my little sticks. And a friend, a little girl who was older than me - I was tutored at home the first years - and just an hour before the teacher came, she would make the little sticks for me. But I drew all day. I drew on the outline of newspapers, you know, the white section. I drew in books. You know, the first white page in books. And I never thought that it's possible to have a real page, a big page of paper all for yourself. And then finally my mother wanted me to play the piano. And I did play the piano but I hated it. And the day that I stopped - I hated also music, and I became a tremendous music lover the moment I didn't have to play the piano any more. But I was apparently a rather articulate child because I explained to my mother, "If you want me to study an art, why don't you let me study something I want to do and you make me study something I don't want to do." And she saw the light and one day my father came home with an easel and paper and told me I can study art. Well, this is to this day, was and is to this day, the happiest moment of my life. I was deliriously happy. And I was sent to a German who was a sculptor who taught me to organize a page. And I drew from - how do you call it -plaster, plaster casts. And I became very soon very, very proficient.

MS. TUCHMAN: From classical casts?

MS. STERNE: Yes. And his wife did painting, still lifes. And it seemed like the most idiotic thing in the world to paint the pots. And I wasn't aware of color at all. Then at 17, suddenly the big turn - I became aware of color. But I did sculpture too.

MS. TUCHMAN: When you studied with this German sculptor, was that in Rumania?

MS. STERNE: Yes. And then later I went to Austria. I studied there and in Paris too.

MS. TUCHMAN: What did you father do?

MS. STERNE: My father? He was a teacher.

MS. TUCHMAN: What did he teach?

MS. STERNE: Languages.

MS. TUCHMAN: You must know all the romance languages.

MS. STERNE: I beg your pardon.

MS. TUCHMAN: Rumanian is a romance language.

MS. STERNE: With Rumanian, you couldn't go anywhere in the world. So all Rumanian children, like Russian children, like Turkish children, I suppose Bulgarian also, you immediately- when I learned to read and write, I learned to read simultaneously German, French, and Rumanian and later on English. So by the time I was 11 I could take endless dictation without any fault in all of these languages. So I think it's a very good thing. You know, it's a good education for thinking, you know, the subtleties in languages. To this day I am interested in

language and grammar.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you have a feeling as child that you were in a particularly graced family because your father was a teacher?

MS. STERNE: No. You know, as a child you take everything for granted.

MS. TUCHMAN: And I understand your brother grew up to be a conductor.

MS. STERNE: Yes. And he was a musician. I loved to listen to him. There was lots of music in the house because later on an aunt of mine lived with us. And he played trios with all the children and all the time there was Haydn and Mozart and Beethoven trios played and she sang lieder. So music was very, very much a part of my life.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you have any other brothers or sisters?

MS. STERNE: No, just one brother.

MS. TUCHMAN: So you really slanted towards the art and he covers music.

MS. STERNE: The funny thing is that my mother wrote poems. Never published or anything, but she wrote poems all the time. But except for that, there was nobody, no art. And I never knew that there was such a thing as painting, as art. I just did it, you know. And then, of course, I was given books. I also was very precocious. I read for pleasure at six. So because I drew all the time - and nobody taught me how to read - I taught myself. I asked questions. I so wanted to read that I just kind of taught myself. Of course, when they saw that I drew all the time, I was given art books.

MS. TUCHMAN: Oh, how great.

MS. STERNE: And again, without anybody telling me, I copied. I copied from-I remember, I had *History of Art*, and *Holbein and Titian*. What else did I have? *Modern* magazine. I remember a violin teacher of my brother would bring *Modern*.

MS. TUCHMAN: From France?

MS. STERNE: From Germany, from France. And I remember the painful puzzlement when I would look at abstract art and I couldn't understand it. But later on I began to accept it, that some people do this and some people do that. But I never was aware of chronology. I didn't realize that this was a simplification or a complication that came with time at all. I thought that some people did this and I accepted it. And I'm told that children are like that now when they go to museums. They see the whole thing together and they don't know that one thing comes after another or that there is a connection. Much later did I become aware of history of sequence, of the linear element.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you have a recollection of seeing German expressionism?

MS. STERNE: Yes, very clear. I liked very much Corinth drawings. And I liked him very much. And Kokoschka - the drawings of Kokoschka. To this day I like the drawings, not his painting at all. But his drawings are fabulous. Did you ever see drawings of Kokoschka?

MS. TUCHMAN: Yes. I just saw some in L.A.

MS. STERNE: Fantastic drawing.

MS. TUCHMAN: I'm just curious. There seemed to be a very large German expressionist sculpture show.

MS. STERNE: But otherwise, I hate German expressionism. It's completely against my temperament, completely in painting, except as I say drawing. I also liked-I remember later I went to Vienna and I liked very much Egon Schiele, but again with drawings. In all the cases it was the drawings that I liked very much, and that I always did like. I always did like all those drawings and Kokoschka's drawings and Egon Schiele's drawings.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you have memories - you grew up post-World War I.

MS. STERNE: What?

MS. TUCHMAN: You grew up after World War I.

MS. STERNE: Yes.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you have memories of what the landscape was like? Was there a sense of this god-awful war

is over and we won't have another one?

MS. STERNE: No, I was too small for that. But later on I was a hiker, a backpacker. Every weekend in the teen years I went to the mountains backpacking and skiing. I was very aware of landscape in that sense, yes.

MS. TUCHMAN: Was that like a gymnasium?

MS. STERNE: No, it was a lycée, like the French. It was four years of grammar school, and eight years of lycée. And the girls- the boys had divided classic, real, and modern and each one had a specialty. Real was mostly science. Modern was mostly modern languages. And Classic was mostly Greek, Latin, I mean the accent on. And the girls had everything. Very difficult.

MS. TUCHMAN: How did you get from that situation to going to Vienna to study drawing and sculpture?

MS. STERNE: I spent vacations in Vienna. And then when I graduated from high school at 17 because I started very early. That's when I was sent to Paris.

MS. TUCHMAN: Before we get to Paris, where would you live when you went to Vienna for the summer?

MS. STERNE: Oh, I had an aunt, and stayed at her house.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you have more freedom when you stayed with your aunt than, say, at home with your parents?

MS. STERNE: I was like a real good little Jewish girl. I could be as free as possible, but I behaved all the time exactly as if my mother and my father, my aunt, all my relatives were right around there watching me.

MS. TUCHMAN: You went to Paris before you then went to stay with-

MS. STERNE: No, no. First Vienna and then Paris.

MS. TUCHMAN: Where did Bucharest come in, when you studied philosophy in Bucharest?

MS. STERNE: Well, I told you I went only during summer vacation. So between 17 and 19 I took two years of history of art and philosophy. But I never graduated. I only did two years.

MS. TUCHMAN: What aspect of philosophy did you like?

MS. STERNE: I had a fabulous teacher who taught us and gave out the names of all the people who later created existentialism. I read Husserl, Rosenov. Not to talk about Hegel etc., etc. I read all the great Germans, Heidegger. Maritain. And for some reason or other, Maritain was the greatest. And Berdyaev. These two mystic philosophers were the most powerful influence. I also had a friend who died later in Russia who was a Christian poet. I mean not because he was born a Christian. His poetry was Christian mystic poetry. And he also gave me lots of books. I remember so well, later on I felt so privileged having read all these people.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you have a sense of studying philosophy at a time when psychology.

MS. STERNE: Well, I read psychology too.

MS. TUCHMAN: I mean I would think being in the middle of Europe, that would be a very -

MS. STERNE: But there was no Freud mentioned, not in my classes.

MS. TUCHMAN: Well, does that mean no Jung or Adler?

MS. STERNE: No, not yet. It was not in class.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you know about them?

MS. STERNE: Later on I found out about them.

MS. TUCHMAN: And then you went on to Paris and studied with Leger.

MS. STERNE: His class. I never saw him once.

MS. TUCHMAN: You saw him once?

MS. STERNE: I never saw him once. I met him later here in the United States. He was never there. It was just a

class. He had people coming, but not him.

MS. TUCHMAN: Was it in his atelier?

MS. STERNE: In his atelier and a man called Gisha who always came. Apparently he was very well known.

MS. TUCHMAN: And what would get taught, the principles of abstraction or-

MS. STERNE: I also went once or twice to Lhote and I showed my work and I was very proud because he was explaining the classic composition and I had a slight idea what I was doing. And he showed the class what I did and told them that this is what they were supposed to do.

MS. TUCHMAN: And who is this?

MS. STERNE: Andre Lhote. But I just went as a guest and I looked, "Oh, that's what I did?" I hadn't the vaguest idea I did what he said I did. Do you see what I mean? Once, at this visit, but it gave me lots of encouragement. You know, when you're young you need confirmation.

MS. TUCHMAN: What would be taught at Leger's school?

MS. STERNE: Well, the same like as anywhere else.

MS. TUCHMAN: So you didn't have a sense that one went there to study how to make miniature Legers?

MS. STERNE: No, no, not at all.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did he paint in this atelier or he just used it as a school?

MS. STERNE: Just a class. I never saw him once.

MS. TUCHMAN: I just wondered what the physical surroundings looked like.

MS. STERNE: I don't even remember very well. Just a class with other people, easels, because in Rumania I had had a lot of that too. I went to Lycée in the morning and in the afternoon I went home, I changed, and I went to art school.

MS. TUCHMAN: And where did you live when you were in Paris? And what years are we talking about?

MS. STERNE: In this hotel by myself. And again I continued to behave exactly as if my mother were around all the time. In a little hotel, a student hotel.

MS. TUCHMAN: Was this in the '30s?

MS. STERNE: Yes.

MS. TUCHMAN: And do you remember the world's fair of 1937 when Picasso showed the-

MS. STERNE: No, it was later, 1938. It was '38 I think.

MS. TUCHMAN: Oh, so you don't remember the world's fair?

MS. STERNE: No. It must have been after '38.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you ever read *J'Humanite*, the Communist newspaper, when you were in France?

MS. STERNE: No, never.

MS. TUCHMAN: Were you aware of Picasso and his-

MS. STERNE: All my friends were Communists. And I was supposed to be this bourgeoisie because I had never been really poor. I couldn't accept communism at all.

MS. TUCHMAN: Were you aware of Picasso as a presence in Paris?

MS. STERNE: No. Well, yes. I remember I went to a club. It was the year '38 because he had done the *Weeping Women*.

MS. TUCHMAN: Yes, that was-

MS. STERNE: I remember I saw a show of the *Weeping Women* in '38.

MS. TUCHMAN: Had you heard about *Guernica*?

MS. STERNE: No.

MS. TUCHMAN: It's sort of amazing that you missed it by a year.

MS. STERNE: When one is young, one is not so aware of the history going on while it's going on when you're very young.

MS. TUCHMAN: And how did you get from Paris to showing at Peggy Guggenheim's London gallery?

MS. STERNE: Well, in Paris in 1938-39 there was a Salon. And I was doing at the time - I would tear paper and throw it and then look at it the way you look at the clouds and then accent with a pencil what I had seen. And I showed a few at the Salon in '39 because I went every year there. And Hans Arp saw them and he wanted them for a show of collages at Peggy Guggenheim's gallery that fall. So when I came here, I also had known - Victor Brauner was a Rumanian and I had known him and his family since I was that small. So when I came here, I came because I had had a thing in her gallery and also as a friend of Victor Brauner's. So I immediately was introduced in her work.

MS. TUCHMAN: Well, I have a few questions. When you described the technique for making those collages, of course I thought about Arp because that's how I start Arp. Were you aware of his work when you did those?

MS. STERNE: I can't remember if I was or not. I had seen Minotaur all the time when I was young. The greatest influence in my life when I was young was surrealism, without a doubt. So this was surrealism. I still have some. I'm going to have a show soon, and I'm going to have selected works '41 to '81. And I'm going to show one of those collages which I still did in '41.

MS. TUCHMAN: Bronar [sp] of course was a surrealist. Do you think surrealism was sort of like minimalism, that it was what people did if you lived at that time?

MS. STERNE: No, I think it goes much deeper than that. It wasn't just a fad of the moment because you can think of it, think in the past the romantics were very similar to surrealism. The romantic movement is very similar.

MS. TUCHMAN: Delacroix.

MS. STERNE: Well, I'm not talking classic. I'm talking the folk, poetry, etc., etc. I never separate the arts, by the way. I never think of myself just as a painter. I think of myself as an artist. Whenever I read on art, I realize that I never think of it - I'm never concerned just to - I'm sure that you read Collingwood's *Principles of Art*.

MS. TUCHMAN: No.

MS. STERNE: That's a fabulous book by an English metaphysician called *Principles of Art*. It was written first in I think '35 and republished, republished, reprinted, many, many times. And I read it. It's a marvelous book. And he has this approach too. And when I read him, to me it doesn't make any difference. What applies to music I think applies to painting, poetry, to literature -- the principle. So I think of myself in those terms. And when I think of art too, I think in those terms. And I think surrealism is a vein of art that always has been there. After all, think of Bosch and Brueghel and think of the poets.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you go to London for the exhibition?

MS. STERNE: No, no.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did it get reviewed? Did you know anything about it?

MS. STERNE: I haven't the vaguest idea, and I don't even know what happened to those things. I remember I left some in Paris too. I don't even know. I have only two large ones, but I made them much smaller. I remember I left them with some friend. I left them with a little gallery. I don't even remember where they are. But I don't have this attachment to the past, you know. In spite of being so old, I still look ahead. I still think tomorrow I'll do my real painting, you know. Absolutely. I still feel that one day I'm going to be a good painter. I'm still hoping.

MS. TUCHMAN: How did you get from Paris to New York?

MS. STERNE: Well, I had been married.

MS. TUCHMAN: To Mr. Sterne?

MS. STERNE: Yes, Mr. Sterne. And he was here.

MS. TUCHMAN: And what did he do?

MS. STERNE: He just-

MS. TUCHMAN: No, I mean as a profession.

MS. STERNE: Oh, he was in business, you know, finance business. And he went to Washington every day with slides of my work although we were separated. Finally, there came a telegram of Cordell Hull who was then the minister. That's how I came.

MS. TUCHMAN: Was the war still on?

MS. STERNE: It was '41. I came in October and Pearl Harbor was December 7.

MS. TUCHMAN: And was the boat filled with people like yourself who were coming to live?

MS. STERNE: Yes. It was one of the - what do they call it - export lines, a one class ship. And one of them, I just escaped; the one that preceded it - I was in Portugal waiting for it - and the one that preceded me sank. There was *Excalibur* and *Excandia*. *Excalibur* had sunk and I came on *Excandia*. I found out later that the one that preceded me sank.

MS. TUCHMAN: Was it frightening being in Paris during the German occupation?

MS. STERNE: I was in Bucharest during the German occupation. It was frightening. I barely escaped with - escaped alive. They came to get me one night. Fortunately I had a friend, a non-Jewish friend, who was a very strong young man who literally fought them off.

MS. TUCHMAN: And that's when you went to Paris?

MS. STERNE: No, no. I had been to Paris and then I returned there.

MS. TUCHMAN: Oh, I see.

MS. STERNE: I had been in France in 1939, September of '39. So I returned to Bucharest. I was in Bucharest in '41.

MS. TUCHMAN: Wasn't it very frightening going back to Bucharest?

MS. STERNE: Very, very.

MS. TUCHMAN: I'm just curious why you went back there. Why did you go back to Bucharest?

MS. STERNE: To settle things. I don't know. My family was there, my brother was, my mother was there. I couldn't think of anything else to do.

MS. TUCHMAN: When you came to America, what happened to your parents and your brother?

MS. STERNE: They were there, but they left a few years later. The miracle was that the Jews were less killed in Romania than anywhere else because they were the only people to run things. The whole middle class business - banking, doctors, lawyers - were Jews. And everything would have stopped if they had killed all the Jews, or practically. So they were strangely enough killed less. We thought it would be the end of everything there. And it would have been the natural thing, but they were forced to do it. And then after a few years, they escaped too and went to France.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you read *Sophie's Choice* two years ago?

MS. STERNE: No, I didn't. I can't read any more of those kinds of books. It kills me.

MS. TUCHMAN: It's about -

MS. STERNE: I know what it's all about and I don't read books like that if I can help it. They just take too much out of me. Can you read this kind of book? Doesn't it take a lot out of you too?

MS. TUCHMAN: No. I thought it was one of the best books I ever read, just astonishing.

MS. STERNE: Well, maybe I will read it then.

MS. TUCHMAN: Oh, it's beautiful.

MS. STERNE: Did you read *The White Hotel*?

MS. TUCHMAN: No. You came to America in 1941. Did you go to Washington or come to New York?

MS. STERNE: No, just to New York.

MS. TUCHMAN: And who met you at the boat?

MS. STERNE: My husband from whom I was separated and his family. They met me at the boat.

MS. TUCHMAN: And did they help you find an apartment?

MS. STERNE: Oh sure.

MS. TUCHMAN: When you came here, did you know what you would do?

MS. STERNE: Yes. I knew I would paint. I thought that maybe for a living I would do windows or something like that. But very soon, as I say, I met Peggy Guggenheim and I started showing in groups for her gallery, and then with a group for a surrealist show and I had a few things in that place. And then in 1943 I started showing with Betty Parsons.

MS. TUCHMAN: At the Winfield Gallery?

MS. STERNE: Yes. So it was actually two years.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you like the physical appearance of Art of this Century, the Kiesler?

MS. STERNE: Yes, it was interesting.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did it do anything to the art? I mean did it sort of take control saying this room is better than the art?

MS. STERNE: A little bit. He was something I call old-fashioned modern. As a matter of fact, there's a beautiful story. I made this portrait which I should show you once of Kiesler. He later on built another gallery - I do not remember - The World?

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

MS. STERNE: And we went there at the opening and we complimented him. He said, "Ah, you should have seen it without paintings."

[They laugh.]

MS. STERNE: You know, architects quite often dislike art. They think painting interferes.

MS. TUCHMAN: Right.

MS. STERNE: Of course, it does very often. It certainly does.

MS. TUCHMAN: I like it when a famous architect designs a room with all windows. You know what they feel.

MS. STERNE: As a matter of fact, in 1967 I had a show of paintings from the ceiling because there was no more walls left. Also, because I liked them to be seen from - you know, they had no up and down. So I told them they were meant to be looked at on the -

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you meet Jackson Pollock and Motherwell and all those people at Peggy Guggenheim's?

MS. STERNE: Sure. Yes, and at Betty's. They all came to Betty Parsons when Peggy Guggenheim left. She closed her gallery, divorced Max Ernst and closed her gallery; and all of the artists came to Betty Parsons. That's how it happened.

MS. TUCHMAN: Why was, say, someone like David Smith seem to be apart from - when one speaks about names at the Betty Parsons Gallery, do you know why David Smith seemed to be apart from everyone?

MS. STERNE: Did you see his other sculpture?

MS. TUCHMAN: Yes.

MS. STERNE: Beautiful surrealist. He was an abstract surrealist. He was marvelous.

MS. TUCHMAN: But he just didn't fit in with the Betty-

MS. STERNE: Oh, yes.

[End of Side 2]

MS. STERNE: It was a very good center of art. You know, they were on the same floor. And both of them had very good shows.

MS. TUCHMAN: Oh, Marion Willard and Kurt Valentin.

MS. STERNE: Were friends.

MS. TUCHMAN: Oh, I didn't know they were on the same floor.

MS. STERNE: They were on the same floor there and both of them had excellent shows.

MS. TUCHMAN: You had a show of water colors in the spring of '45 at Mortimer Brandt?

MS. STERNE: That was Betty Parsons.

MS. TUCHMAN: Yes. Were water colors more - I mean it seems to me lots of people made water colors in the '40s.

MS. STERNE: I don't even remember. It was so long ago.

MS. TUCHMAN: I was thinking that Rothko was making so many water colors.

MS. STERNE: I really don't recollect. I think they were egg tempera not water colors.

MS. TUCHMAN: At that point you were married to Mr. Steinberg.

MS. STERNE: Yes.

MS. TUCHMAN: Was it hard making art and taking care of the house?

MS. STERNE: It was very interesting and very tiring. I worked very, very much. But I painted as much as I worked. When I was young, I think I had about five times as much energy as now because I also cooked big dinners for 14.

MS. TUCHMAN: For 14?

MS. STERNE: Yes, I mean big dinners; and I painted all day. But it was a stimulating, interesting life.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you spend a lot of time with writers?

MS. STERNE: Everything.

MS. TUCHMAN: Were you concerned about politics? Do you remember thinking about Franklin Delano Roosevelt, or Truman?

MS. STERNE: Of course. I mean how could you not? But it didn't influence one's everyday life. But of course we were very much so. As a matter of fact, I had such strong feelings about Roosevelt because Roosevelt looked a little like my father and I lost my father when I was very small. And when Roosevelt died, I became orphaned once more. I was really very, very unhappy.

MS. TUCHMAN: When Kennedy died, my father always said there were certain moments in the life of people in this century that they remembered. And one was the day that Franklin Delano Roosevelt died.

MS. STERNE: When Kennedy died, I was in Venice. I had a Fulbright grant and I stayed there a year and a half. And I felt so exiled that I had the *Voice of America* on 24 hours a day, the radio. And as it happened, I heard it. It was kind of a famous voice, "Ah, the President-" I heard it happening. I wouldn't believe it. And then for days all my Italian acquaintances came to visit and condole. And I considered it absolutely correct because I really felt like that. I felt it.

MS. STERNE: I became infinitely more American than I am when here.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you feel that way when the war was over?

MS. STERNE: I beg your pardon?

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you feel that way when the war was over?

MS. STERNE: No. It took me some time to become American. It took me I think about ten years to be able to tolerate any criticism of the United States. Having come from Rumania and how horrible it was, I couldn't tolerate any criticism.

MS. TUCHMAN: When you say it took you ten years to really feel American-

MS. STERNE: In the sense to be able to be at all in any way critical of something in United States. Do you see what I mean?

MS. TUCHMAN: Yes.

MS. STERNE: And the moment I was able to make a little criticism, I thought, now I became American because I changed a point of view. I didn't have any more of this intense gratitude and enchantment. As a matter of fact, I think that lots of refugees are likely to become practical reactionaries because of this. Somebody like Hayakawa. Yes. You see, because you continuously compare and so you appreciate everything so much that you're not ready to criticize. Everything is much too marvelous by comparison to be able to criticize. Just talk to a Russian who comes now from Russia and you'll see. Or talk to anybody coming from that part of the world - the Iron Curtain - and try to criticize the United States and see what happens.

MS. TUCHMAN: When did you become a citizen?

MS. STERNE: Very soon because Saul went to war so I became- in 1944 I became a citizen. Betty was my witness, Betty Parsons.

MS. TUCHMAN: Oh, great. So you started voting almost immediately.

MS. STERNE: Yes.

MS. TUCHMAN: And do you still feel an obligation to vote?

MS. STERNE: Occasionally I neglect because it seems a bit hopeless.

MS. TUCHMAN: How would you characterize your work from the '40s following the collages that you were making?

MS. STERNE: Maybe I'm saying something which is a truism, but I feel that my work all along was like a diary. When I came here, I was making these collages; and when I came here, I became totally enthralled visually with the United States so I became like a premature pop artist. I started painting my kitchen, the kitchen stove, the bathroom appliances, everything where I lived. Then I went out and I painted Ford cars and the elevated. And then I went to the country and I started painting industrial machines, and then I painted the roads. I became visual when I came here. And then it gradually became again more and more and more abstract. I mean the subject matter, I would start from something else, but I think it was very abstract. I would start from agriculture machinery but it was very abstracted. I would start from the structure of the bridges in New York and they were very, very abstracted.

MS. TUCHMAN: And would you paint with oils?

MS. STERNE: First I did egg tempera then I did oils, then I did spray.

MS. TUCHMAN: No kidding.

MS. STERNE: Yes, for a long time.

MS. TUCHMAN: With images or the abstract?

MS. STERNE: I was pretty abstracted by then. And I did spray. And in 1952 I did moving, I did revolving.

MS. TUCHMAN: I saw those.

MS. STERNE: You saw that show?

MS. TUCHMAN: No, no. I saw an article on it.

MS. STERNE: I was going to say you were a child then. I did them - I put them on like a lazy Susan because I realized that when I paint, I turn my painting all the time. And then I thought it would be more comfortable if they were round, so I did them round. And then I thought, why shouldn't somebody participate in this process of the way I work. So everybody could stop it if they wanted to where they wanted to.

MS. TUCHMAN: You've jumped a little bit ahead of me. I was wondering how maybe looking back on it now or perhaps you can remember how you felt when Clement Greenberg reviewed an exhibition of yours at Betty Parsons in November,'47.

MS. STERNE: What did he say?

MS. TUCHMAN: He liked it very much. He liked your work, and he was reviewing Adolf Gottlieb at the same time. It was about the future of abstract art.

MS. STERNE: Really? And you have that piece somewhere?

MS. TUCHMAN: No, no. I saw it at the Archives.

MS. STERNE: Really? What a beautiful thing that there is such a thing as the Archives. I don't remember anything. I always had fights with Greenberg when I met him.

MS. TUCHMAN: That's not hard to do. [They laugh.]

MS. TUCHMAN: What would you fight about?

MS. STERNE: Whatever.

MS. TUCHMAN: Yeah, one of those.

MS. STERNE: I remember one. I talked with him about something...and you know, in Europe one is a bit more formal, a little more mannered-and he said "Don't give me that." I just turned my back to him. So it wasn't just the subject matter, it was the mannerisms.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you by any chance read a piece that Lionel Abel wrote about the surrealists in New York in the '40s? Do you think the Betty Parsons group of artists was very close-knit?

MS. STERNE: You know, artists are never close-knit. They are only close-knit for a while if it's necessary and helpful. But this is a very strange thing. I think also in the history of art, except for the short moment of the cubists - what a beautiful result that was - that was the one moment when artists were for a moment a united school.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you start going out to East Hampton in the '40s?

MS. STERNE: Late, '59-60. I first went with Saul when we used to go there, and then we separated. I didn't go for a few years. And then in '66 I got myself a house too.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you have any special memories of your shows at Betty Parsons?

MS. STERNE: Well, I remember this one. Oh, another one was a show that I liked. Recently, in 1970 I had a show of-I did some serial things of heads and the installation was quite beautiful because that whole gallery was absolutely lined and then also hangings - the paintings were not stretched canvas. I wish I had a film of that show. I'm very sorry I don't. I did do posters and things like that.

MS. TUCHMAN: I saw some of the -

MS. STERNE: Did you ever see the poster of that show?

MS. TUCHMAN: Yes. I saw that the other day.

MS. STERNE: The poster that was still in here, but in the gallery it was much better. It was just completely lined with hangings and the light was dim and it was absolutely eerie, beautiful. What I am saying is generally the show looks about as good as the work. But in that case the presentation enhanced very much the work.

MS. TUCHMAN: Did you go see all the shows at Betty Parsons?

MS. STERNE: I'm very negligent about going to shows.

MS. TUCHMAN: What about in the late '40s and early '50s?

MS. STERNE: In the beginning when I was young, I went to all the shows all over the place. I learned, you know. Now I'm negligent about going to shows.

MS. TUCHMAN: In 1950 when the Janis Gallery included you in a show in which they matched up American artists with French artists, did you feel that was contrived or necessary? I mean didn't you have a sense that art was happening here in America and the French weren't the ones?

MS. STERNE: No. I don't see so much this - art is art, you know. Of course, you as a historian or something, you can see. But that's not my point of view, you know. I don't see it that way. When people organize shows, they have to find the connecting thing. I remember once Janis - I think did it or was going to do it - he was going to do man and wife. And I was scandalized. I said next we can do also redheaded artists or flatfooted artists. I mean what point is it? You know, you have to connect art not because of extraneous things but because it connects in a different way. But this is what group shows are, you know. They do it all the time.

MS. TUCHMAN: Now going into the '50s, I think you said your art was becoming more abstract?

MS. STERNE: Yes.

MS. TUCHMAN: Was it becoming larger as well?

MS. STERNE: Much larger and much more abstract. You know where you can see, by the way, do you know that blue cupola at the Rockefeller Institute? There is one you can see. Mostly for a while I rolled them and I have them in storage. I wish I could show them to you. And they became more and more. And then in '64-all along, even when I was doing abstract, I was doing portraits. And in '64 I showed a show of portraits which everybody considered a tremendous inconsequence or something, a betrayal, I think it was. I don't know. Or if they had good will, an act of courage. But it was none of this because I had done portraits all along. Suddenly I get the need to do portraits and I do them because that's what I did when I was a child way before I knew that there is such a thing as art. I did people, and I continued to do people all my life.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you think they changed as a result of your making abstract art?

MS. STERNE: Yes, Did you ever see portraits of mine?

MS. TUCHMAN: Yes. I liked the Barney Newman one very much.

MS. STERNE: Yes, but did you ever see others? Let me show you.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you make portraits today?

MS. STERNE: Occasionally, yes. I mean not large, but I draw people. But as I say, it's not planned. I just suddenly get the urge.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you still make abstract art?

MS. STERNE: Oh, yes. You'll have to come one day later and I'll show you what I make. Can you see here?

MS. TUCHMAN: Yes, I can.

MS. STERNE: This is the period just before the present period. Now I'm in another period. But when you come later, I'll show you.

MS. TUCHMAN: But I'm just wondering when the tape recorder's on how you might describe them, not how I would describe them but how you would describe them.

MS. STERNE: My paintings? That's ridiculous. I can't describe them.

MS. TUCHMAN: Why, because it's asking for something verbal?

MS. STERNE: First of all, when you talk about painting, it can so easily sound pompous. Because what you feel, it's okay. But when you talk about it, it becomes pretty pompous, or what you intended to do.

MS. TUCHMAN: Who were the people in the art world who you stayed friends with through all the years?

MS. STERNE: Betty - I mean I don't visit with them a lot but I'm friends with everybody. I mean I go to their openings -

MS. TUCHMAN: Someone has explained to me that as you get older, you spend more time working. Do you think that's true?

MS. STERNE: Every time I get an invitation, when the time comes, I have such a temptation to cancel. It's so much nicer to stay home with a good book. And this is what happens. And talking. When I'm in East Hampton, I see quite a bit of the Lassaevs and who do I see? Elaine de Kooning. And of course, Bill too. Who else do I see there? Everybody. In the summer I see all the artists.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you feel that there's a certain moment in an artist's career that you have to be aware of the style of what's being done at that moment, and then as you grow it becomes your style?

MS. STERNE: Well, you have to be aware of what's going on. Otherwise, you'll get - but when you become yourself, it becomes uninteresting.

MS. TUCHMAN: Uninteresting?

MS. STERNE: Yes. As you become older and yourself, you have a kind of total independence, I mean just the way you have an independence in your opinions and in your thinking. When you are younger, you have respect and you think, "Oh, maybe they know better." And for years and years and years you keep thinking that and take into consideration everything that other people say or do. And then comes the moment you lose interest in that and do just what you have to do.

MS. TUCHMAN: You just mentioned a show you're going to have of 40 years of work. Do you have particular favorites from different years or just different groups of works that you like more than others?

MS. STERNE: Yes. There are periods that I think of that I can even dismiss. But when I see them again, I think, um, as if somebody else did it. You see, one goes - for instance, now I have a feeling that my painting is about thinking. See how pompous you can sound? And also I have the feeling that I was always visual. Sometimes I have the feeling know, like in the movies the camera zooms and you see from very, very near and details. And then you go a middle distance and then extremely distant. So I think all my life I was involved in explaining the things to myself. You explain to yourself and do them. Someone says, why did you do a painting? You do a painting to see how it is. You have something, and it has to be materialized. It's a materialization of an idea. But it's funny because this sounds like such a cliché, but it isn't to the doer, you know. You discover again and again that this is what you do as if for the first time.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you think that there are certain times, let's, say, when you're not making art and there are bad things happening in your life that your art can be really good, or that when there are good things in your life-

MS. STERNE: I have periodic periods of dryness. And as a matter of fact, these are the periods when I do portraits. I just went through one of a year and a half and I did lots of drawings because I wanted to work. And now I'm out of it and I work like a race horse.

MS. TUCHMAN: You're so lucky that you know to do that.

MS. STERNE: And each time I'm in one of those periods, I think that I will never get out of it. I had several in my life and they are difficult. But they come. I refuse to work in a routine. The whole idea is I work because I can't help it and I have to do something that wants to be done and I am just the instrument of that thing that wants to be done. That's how I have to feel. If I don't feel like that, I don't feel I have to work. I don't want to work.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you work all day? Do you start painting in the morning?

MS. STERNE: Well, you know, I'm trying to be disciplined so I start early morning with my exercising first. And then I clean up and go to the studio.

MS. TUCHMAN: And do you paint the whole time you're in the studio, or do you have little things you can procrastinate and feel that you're doing something?

MS. STERNE: Well, you know, painting is 90 percent looking and 10 percent doing, or maybe 80 percent.

MS. TUCHMAN: Do you use natural light, artificial light?

MS. STERNE: Natural light. But it's an enormous effort when things work well. The effort of concentration is incredible. You know, I never know if I've been in the studio three hours or five minutes.

MS. TUCHMAN: Terrific.

MS. STERNE: And that's when I function right. And when I don't function like that I feel half dead.

MS. TUCHMAN: How do you feel when you send your paintings out to be exhibited?

MS. STERNE: It's very funny. I feel like a mother cuckoo. I'm terribly involved in things while I do them, but I don't have that same - you know, people collecting work and be proud and related. I continue to look ahead and try to do better. I'm not very concerned with the past. Now and then I see something from the past, and I'm very happy that I still like it but I'm not very concerned with it.

MS. TUCHMAN: Will you go and look at the old masters now?

MS. STERNE: Very much. Oh, very much. I love it.

MS. TUCHMAN: And do you find yourself changing in your response to -

MS. STERNE: Not changing but very stimulated. All my life a good painting stimulated me enormously. And when I see a bad thing, I want to stop painting altogether. It isn't a matter of comparing myself or anything like that.

MS. TUCHMAN: Who's your favorite painter or painters?

MS. STERNE: Well, but I like so many, so many.

MS. TUCHMAN: Well, in the back of your mind would you pick somebody from your life in America? Do you think there's been anyone -

MS. STERNE: Any one contemporary painter?

MS. TUCHMAN: Any contemporary painters who could hang, say, in the Louvre?

MS. STERNE: With me?

MS. TUCHMAN: No, no. Anyone you have known in your life.

MS. STERNE: I would like to own, you mean?

MS. TUCHMAN: No, that you could picture hanging in the Louvre, someone you've known.

MS. STERNE: You mean their work hanging in my apartment?

MS. TUCHMAN: No, in a museum. Anyone you think could be in the Louvre with Titian?

MS. STERNE: No, because art has become something totally different. It's like - who says that, comparing apples and oranges?

MS. TUCHMAN: Yes.

MS. STERNE: It has become like that. It's totally different. Because in his time art was-well, I don't have to tell you how different it is. Still there are things that I enjoy a lot but they're just totally different. But I enjoy them. Or I can go to a gallery and see somebody who puts a few things on the wall, and I think it's very nice, very graceful and I like it. Its something else, and I consider it art. But it's something else.

MS. TUCHMAN: Are there any particular group shows that you were in that you have a fond memory of?

MS. STERNE: Which I have been in?

MS. TUCHMAN: Yes.

MS. STERNE: I don't like the idea of group shows at all, ever. It's like Woolworths, a sampling, you know. But I don't remember having - I don't remember, no.

MS. TUCHMAN: I mean like the Stable show of '55 was a kind of famous exhibition.

MS. STERNE: Which one?

MS. TUCHMAN: At the Stable Gallery.

MS. STERNE: Was I in it?

MS. TUCHMAN: Yes.

MS. STERNE: I don't remember.

MS. TUCHMAN: So in some way do you feel your philosophy is always that the next picture is going to be the best one?

MS. STERNE: Yes, I hope so. Like starting the next day, you know.

MS. TUCHMAN: Really. That's marvelous.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated...August 31, 2007