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Oral history interview with James S. Ackerman, 1991 January 2

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with James S. Ackerman on January 2, 1991. The interview took place in Cambridge, Massachusetts at the Fogg Art Museum and was conducted by Robert F. Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ROBERT F. BROWN: —we're at the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University. And maybe we could start out with something about your growing up, your family that—

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: I—I grew up in San Francisco of a family—uh, my mother's forbears had arrived there and —my great-grandfather arrived in 1848 or '49 and—in California that gave people a great priority, and socially, as you can imagine, distinction. My grandmother was very, very strong on this point. It was a Jewish family, and there was the whole aristocracy of German Jews there. I say aristocracy because they were people who got to California early on and made a lot of money, and put on airs, and built themselves grand mansions. My aunt grew up in an imitation of the [inaudible]. And they—so this Jewish society developed alongside of the big Gentile families and were, in some ways, better assimilated than Jews who immigrated elsewhere. [00:02:11] And I think that had an important impact on me. For example it was part of my family's scheme of things that people should be given cultural opportunities, and I was taken to Europe several times by my parents and my grandmother. And my grandmother had quite a bit of wealth. She drove around in San Francisco in a limousine that had purple wheels, and the purple wheels, I've always presumed, were intimations of royalty. [They laugh.] But they were—the first time we went abroad, I was 12 years old. My father took the whole family to celebrate my brother's graduation from college, and characteristically saw to it that my sister stayed on to study a year at the Sorbonne and my brother a year at Oxford because he felt that was the high-grade [ph] thing to do. He took us around to the museums all over Europe. [00:04:04] He knew nothing about art, but felt it his responsibility to introduce us to art. I can't remember what he said about things, but—of course he's been well-informed, but nonetheless, uh, I had an early exposure. And my mother was particularly interested in the visual arts, and in middle age became a ceramist and did very interesting work in ceramics. Her major genre was that she'd glaze tiles and then break them up and make mosaics out of them, and they were very special things. She did tables and such things with mosaic tops and very high quality work.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did these for herself mainly or the family, or did she exhibit as—

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Yeah. No, she never sought to exhibit. I think she was of a generation where ladies—who did the arts stayed out of a professional realm. She also started to work for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art early in its history when it was the San Francisco Museum of Art and focused on the library and worked regularly in the library and afterwards gave money to the library. [00:06:20] It's now—it carries her name and so —

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was she particularly well read in books in art—

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: In the art? Well, no.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —or in general over this?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Not really very well read. I mean it was also characteristic that she was not sent to the—to higher education. She went to a kind of finishing school, and people didn’t send proper, young ladies to college in those days. Well, she got married at 18 or 19. And my father, on the other hand, had an Orthodox education at Stanford and went to the Yale Law School, and that was one of the reasons why he was eager that I should go to Yale. And related to my mother's interest in the San Francisco Museum, in a couple of years, I think, when I was 15 and 16 when I came home for the summer, I worked in the San Francisco Museum to, uh—just doing handiwork in—I mean not handiwork but go-for work, I would say, and—[00:08:03]

ROBERT F. BROWN: What do you recall of the museum at that time? Because you were all ready to get in to collect colored prints of works of art.

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Yeah, right. That came from the [inaudible].

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Inaudible.]

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Well, the museum—let's see—we're talking about the mid-'30s. That was before they had much of a distinguished collection. It was a small collection and members of the Stein family had given a few good works, Matisse and the like. And then I recall that a wealthy family connected with Levi Strauss by the name of Haas also gave a number of works, some of which had come to them or they had bought from the Stein family or from the estate, I can't remember. At any rate, the collection built up much more strongly later on. It was an odd thing for a city outside of New York to have a museum of modern art in the '30s, and there wasn't much community support for that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It wasn't part of the Museum of Modern Art network of—

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: It wasn't connected.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —now or even in the—

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: But—and, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Nothing like the one in Boston or in Washington or Philadelphia? Those were—

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Those were kind of institutes that didn't yet undertake to collect, and so the San Francisco museum is more comparable to the MoMA than to the others. [00:10:12] It got a further boost at the time when the San Francisco Art Institute brought Rothko and Still and became kind of avant-garde, and there are a lot of works of Still there. It's one of the strongest representation of any contemporary art is this Clyfford Still. Well, they did things with photography. I think it's quite remarkable thinking back to the mid-'30s how in pressing they were. It was the time of Depression, I don't think that they were getting a lot of support. I think they got help from the city at least in terms of housing. They were and still are until the completion of their new museum in the Veterans Building, which is a public building. But anyway, I had this first introduction to working with works of art at the museum. As you mentioned before, I'd been collecting—I don't know whether it was from my first European trip or the second—when I went in the museums, I would buy small, color prints that are works of art. Now color printing had only become available a very, very short time. [00:12:02] Before there were no colored postcards or I think—so. But they'd make a particular kind of color print, which is about five by seven in dimensions and not too bad in quality. And sell them in small quantities, small enough so that it could be interesting to collect them, and you'd have this collection. It wouldn't be an endless sea of images the way anything would be today. So, I shifted from Matchbox covers to reproductions of works of art. And in the process of leafing through the collection, I began to realize that you could tell from looking at a painting that it was done by a certain person, so I got a concept of style well before I realized that that's what occupied art historians so heavily. That wouldn't happen again today because style has become boring to contemporary, to younger artists, right? Nonetheless, that was the very core of art history then. And so, I had that kind of a start. In prep school also, there was a German teacher who knew a little bit about art, and he [inaudible] on the basis of the prints or the history of art that were provided by the Carnegie Corporation. [00:14:00] They had a project of sending out to schools collections of perhaps 500 photographs representing the history of art, and they sat mostly in school libraries not being used very much. But in this case this teacher, perhaps in response to interest expressed by me and the other fellow who did, would spend an occasional evening looking over these things and talking about them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he an art historian himself, this teacher?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: No. He was a German teacher. Literature was his thing and, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was the school you went to a progressive sort or was a very traditional kind of preparatory school?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Very, very English type, traditional. I mean really modeled on Kent School in Connecticut in the sense that they, uh, emphasized that kind of toughness and self-discipline that you were—rose at dawn and took a cold shower—well not—first, you took care of your horse. I mean this is a California school, and everybody had a horse.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: It had a big stable, and the horse was the means by which we would get around. So you'd go down the stable and then clean out the droppings and curry the horse and then you'd come back and take this cold shower. [00:16:00] And then you could go around school in jeans during the day, but you had to dress up with a stiff collar at night, a starched collar separate from the shirt. You put it on with collar buttons and all that, and a proper suit. So all these dirty little boys [they laugh] had to look clean by 6 pm or whatever it was.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was the name of that school?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Cate, Cate School, and it still exists. It's changed very drastically in character. It's now coeducational, and it's long since got rid of horses. It's not as—well, it's a funny kind of a mixture because the headmaster was running kind of an Episcopal operation in a traditional, ascetic prep-school style. At the same time, this outdoor life—the rooms had three walls, one wall, which is open to the outdoors. And the, uh—so that there was this kind of roughness and that was combined with the dressing properly and having good manners in the evening. It also—it was very confusing to me culturally because it was an Episcopal school, and I was the only Jew in it. And I wouldn't have been there if it hadn't been the Depression and they needed money, so they [laughs]—they probably—prior to that, they had consciously excluded Jews. [00:18:04] But actually also being Jewish at that time was a lot more—well, there was more prejudice connected with the Jews then than there is now. And at Yale for example—I went direct from prep school, they put the Jewish applicants together as roommates. And I found out only in recent years that Yale didn't tenure any Jewish professor until 1946, long after I'd left—not long, five years after I left them. And when I read about this, I started thinking whether I ever had anybody, any junior faculty member who was Jewish, and I didn't. There was no member of the art department and so on. I mean, it was a time when you were likely to be isolated on that account.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was that true also in the San Francisco area to a degree or was it more—

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Well, as I was telling you—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —school then?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: —the business of being of a pioneer family in California offset part of the bias. In school, I never felt it. They were very accepting, and the headmaster and his—the headmaster's wife came from Boston. [00:20:00] She was very Bostonian, Unitarian, and she said, "Oh, you and I really believe the same—it's only one God," and so on, which would scandalize her husband then.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Anyway, they were very—they really lacked bias I felt, and I ever experienced or recall an experience. And my father, on the subject of that, was extremely sensitive and almost anti-Semitic himself. He was so afraid of being the object of bias, and so instead of defending himself by believing in Judaism, he defended himself by more or less trying to forget it, and that meant I never had any proper education. I didn't get any religious instruction other than Episcopal. So that it was very confusing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Your father was a fairly formidable figure?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Oh, a very tough character, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You've described going to Europe, and he would talk and then he'd lecture in the museums?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Yeah, yeah, yeah. He was an old-style father. Actually, he was very much like the headmaster at the school. They were exactly the same age and very deaf—I mean the headmaster had, I think, a better ethic than my father. My father was very biased about all kinds of things. [00:22:00] And he was—well, on the other hand, he didn't rein me in. I was free to do what I want unless called to account for where I was the night before and why I had stayed out after 12 or whatever. Well anyway—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What—was the school curriculum quite a traditional one? Was it pretty rigorous?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Fairly. It wasn't imaginative, that is to say history mostly consisted of preparing to do well on the college board examination rather than open investigation. I did learn Latin, which is a great blessing. And I had art courses, and I painted quite a lot in school. Again, as I say, they had arranged for me to have sort of this art history, so. When I went to college from there, I got advance placement in art history so that I started at Yale with the upper division courses, and so by the time I was a junior, I could take graduate courses. That's how I got involved with Focillon.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You said earlier you were sort of preordained by your father to go to Yale? [00:24:01]

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Yeah. I only applied to one college. In the mid-'30s given the economy, I guess it was easier to get into college, but still it seems to me even then it was probably hutzpah to make only one application. [They laugh.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Had you seen the place? Had you been east—

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —to any degree?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: And I didn't investigate whether I could do more with art there. I just went, and as it turned out, the—a major in the history of art was created the year before I arrived, and I was the third—well, there were two my year and one the year before I think. I don't even know who it was the year before, but anyway, that meant that that number of majors in art history. And the faculty were all exactly the same age. They had gotten their degree in the—in the period just prior to that. Before I talk about that, I wanted to say that before going to college, uh, there was one book that I read that had a great impact on me, which was Roger Fry's book of essays, called *Vision and Design*. And so Roger Fry was a kind of a lead for me into looking at works of art. [00:26:04] I also had at the same time, a book by somebody by the name of Cheney called *New World Architecture,* and I was interested in architecture. This book was a kind of Appalachia [ph]—the moderne style. It—this was prior to the time when people were talking about international style, and I guess—well very much the—uh, just in the middle of the time when Hitchcock and Johnson published the book called *The International Style,* but I didn't know about that then.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you came out of prep school pretty interested in doing something in—

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: I wanted to be—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —with the art?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: —an architect. My parents encouraged that idea. If I had said at the time that I wanted to be an art historian, they would have said, "What's that or do—can you earn any money at it?" My father tended to evaluate things in terms of how much you got for doing them. He was a corporation lawyer, and he did very well out of his profession and his investments. And—oh—the whole family had been businessmen. My mother's side of the family made their fortune in the shipping line that went from California to Alaska, which they founded with the money that came out of selling equipment to the gold miners. The, uh—and there's also an interesting story that the great ancestor who went out to California direct from Germany by horseback—that Collis Huntington came to him and said that they had an idea of a railroad that would go across the country and was he interested. [00:28:26] He said that that was a stupid scheme and that it would just ruin them all, and no thanks. So, as a result of that I was spared the fortune of becoming one of the degenerate rich. [They laugh.] Anyway, the—or back to Roger Fry and his—one of the books on architecture. I still have, actually, a teenage drawing, an elevation of an elementary school or a high school, which I did in Art Deco style. So the architectural interest was there incipiently. And my intention at Yale was to be an architect, and in my first year I took physics and math in preparation for that, and I flunked one and got a D in the other.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You did?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: But, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: This began to affect your attitude? [They laugh.]

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: I may have been worried. At that time, most architects can't add or calculate a stress. But in any case, it really wasn't my performance in those courses that decided me not to be an architect, but I encountered Focillon. [00:30:12] The members of the department who were there at the time were very young. I think they were not more than 10, 12 years older than me. They must have gotten their PhDs around 1930 for the most part and been around 28 years old or 30—George Hamilton, George Kubler, and Carroll Meeks, and Sumner Crosby. That was really the backbone of this—of the group. Charles Seymour was there at one moment but then went off to be curator of sculpture at the National Gallery of Art. And those people had all been students of Marcel Aubert who came over regularly as Focillon did. Marcel Aubert represented in France the—what they called *archéologie médiéval*. The approach was exceedingly positivist and then they treated medieval architecture—as a trustful [ph] archeologist would treat an excavation, except that the documents played a much more significant part. And in doing—in following Aubert's steps, one had a completely fixed pattern in which to move. [00:32:12] I mean, certain kinds of documents first and then you did a description of the site. You started at the lowest level and you went to the next level, and so on. It was like an article in *Bulletin Monumental*, which is essentially an archeological—

ROBERT F. BROWN: In which Aubert was an editor of or something for many years, right?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Yes. And he was a person with very little imagination except that perhaps he had the imagination to make this template in which everybody was supposed to fit. And he had a lot of students who did the same thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you—did you become a student of his?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Only peripherally. I think I might have taken one course with Aubert, but it was Focillon that I remember. And Kubler, I think, had learned a lot from Focillon and Crosby, but I imagine that they started out their work with Aubert because they all did their dissertations in this style—the French monogram. It's a

funny thing exists. The same thing was going on in Princeton with manuscripts that whatever anybody was interested in, they had to do medieval manuscript for dissertation. At Yale, whatever their interest, they did a Gothic cathedral then spread out later on. In fact, Crosby was the only one who stuck with the Middle Ages. [00:34:02] Of course Focillon wasn't limited chronologically. He dealt with everything. He did a wonderful text of 19th-century French painting for example, which never was highly approved of by those more Orthodox people. But he was a miraculous teacher and absolutely spellbinding. And he was almost blind at the time, and he could see out of one side of one eye. He could only take in a work of art by moving around it with his whole body, which was actually in very bad shape. He was all bent over with—and his—didn't carry his head upright and walked with a cane. He was I don't think chronologically very old, but he was—oh, he may have been in his late 70s, but he was physically very deteriorated. And he lectured in the most incredible language. It was virtually poetry in French. And so for those of us who were undergraduates who were admitted into these seminars, there was a language problem at the start too. [00:36:08] I, for example, had studied French for years and years, but as everybody knows studying French in America doesn't give you any capacity to talk it or even to hear it when it's spoken—well, and so it took me a while to catch up. It was just—even with partial comprehension—extraordinary. One gave papers in the context—I don't remember whether the papers were in French or English. And at a—at a certain point, I guess, when I graduated or the last semester that he was there, he gave me a copy of his book called *L'Art des sculpteurs romans*, and he inscribed it saying, "*Rester fidèle à nos études a qui vous etes c'est bien preparer*" or something like that. I was so excited by this that I decided to be an art historian. [They laugh.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: I mean there were other factors of course, but this really capped it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was there in his teaching? Maybe you can describe what made him so friendly, so charismatic in your day, so influential?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Yeah. Well, I think what it really was, was his capacity to draw you into the work of art by the evocation of its quality. And then he—uh, this would sound like a further—direction from Fry. [00:38:18] But in addition to Fry's literary ability, which was like Focillon's ability to evoke the work of art. Focillon also saw it in the context of a cultural history and—well, perhaps a history of the psyche. He had a sense of the mind of the medieval body of people, and he could bring their perceptual faculties to the fore of them. For example, he gave a seminar called *L'An mil*, and that dealt with the feelings of apocalyptic vision that they had that the year 1000 would be the end of the world, and the impact that this had on the depiction of the monstrous in medieval art. So this—the combination of the evocation, the incredible language, the sensitivity, and perception into the work, and the kind of psyche of the time is what made that so special. [00:40:19] And this is all in a context of '30s art history in which in America, there was almost nothing there except just documenting. And the—well, the generation with whom—the younger people with whom I was studying with—the first people to move from out of that to some extent are particularly cooler, who developed a real philosophy of his own. And Schapiro with whom I didn't work until later—who must be more or less in age—Schapiro's a little older. But there wasn't really much going in America before that time. It was very lacking in richness.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What would you say of the Harvard staff because it was the largest, I guess, at that time, or certainly—

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Well, I think Kingsley Porter probably had a lot to offer. I don't think that Post and Chase were very interesting nor—who—Edgell? And then there was Sachs who was really just a connoisseur and not a historian at all. [00:42:08] Who else would there have been?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, in Princeton, Morey was—

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Yeah, Morey—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —the big gun. That was—

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Morey? Yeah. I don't think that Morey could have taught in a way that the elevated people. Morey was somebody who first got the scheme and then looked around to see what fit into it, and it was very arbitrary. And then there was the whole direction of German art history, which is similarly very positivist that—at this time. The influence on Germany was more on that positivist line than it was from the more theoretical thrust of Wölfflin. But it wasn't a very thrilling field at the time. And there's this strange tendency in American art history that existed all the way through of being suspicious of the French contribution.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Americans have never read French art history. It was very strange, and it's particularly considering the impact of French thought on literary studies in the past 20 years. So, you want to change this?

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ROBERT F. BROWN: Your having Focillon at Yale was an exceptional circumstance compared with, uh, what was available in America for most students of art history at that time.

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: At least I think so. Sometime around there, uh, there would be some German visitors here. Panofsky was at Harvard one year in the '30s. And that would have been very exciting. And then Wolfgang Köhler came, and I think Köhler was a big figure. Unfortunately for the field in the general, Köhler developed a passion for teaching undergraduates, which and—developed very few graduate students in the field of manuscripts. Well anyway, it was Focillon that decided me. Oh, I didn't say that the other undergraduate who was in these seminars was Vince Scully, so Focillon was also responsible for converting another person and then we both became architectural historians.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was Focillon brought in as—was he a visiting professor, or what was his status there when he was—

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Yeah. He came one term a year for I don't know how many years as did Aubert. [00:02:04] They—maybe they alternated years. I can't recall that. And, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who was the—you're sort of as an undergraduate and not aware, but who was the—administratively the person responsible for beefing up art history and bringing in these two notable French teachers? Was there a—

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: I can't say really because—well, that's a question they could put to George Kubler because that whole metamorphosis into a department of art history occurred just before I got there, and what brought it about and who did it, I can't say. The president at the time I went was the kind of Herbert Hoover of a character by the name of Seymour who never would have had an interesting idea like starting art history. [They laugh.] So I don't really know where it came from.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you get—did you have any—much experience at all with the architecture school while you were there? Having gone there thinking of becoming an architect, did you—

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Yeah, that didn't—there wasn't much of a change there. Except that we—the basic survey course in the art history department was given by one of the art people whose name was Rathbone. [00:04:02] And I just—I don't remember that either school having much impact. The Yale Art School at that time was extremely conservative and would not have been interesting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You weren't—you've done some painting, but you weren't inclined to pursue it?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: You know once I got—

ROBERT F. BROWN: At Yale.

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: —interested in art history, I was really—I was paralyzed when I tried to paint. I'd have too many ready-made [ph] images, and I think anybody who wants to paint effectively has to have an idea first and then can use history. I don't know if that fits the Gombrich scheme of making and matching. But in any case, I always—or my only relationship with painting and drawing was simply to make a picture of what I saw in front of me without any ideas about it. And knowing that what I did was bad also was what stopped me too. But the—I don't—I think it just gradually emerged out of the idea of being an architect into art history. And then I also came to see architecture as an occupation where there are only a few minutes, maybe hours of invention. [00:06:07] And the rest of it consist of drawing [inaudible] systems and then making painstaking drafting and that didn't suit my temperament at all. So I just shifted over, and I think the parents were pretty disappointed because they've never heard of anybody doing art history for a living. At that time, teachers didn't get enough to live on. And even 15 years later by the time I've been through the army and then graduate school, my starting salary was $5,200 or something like that. So I decided that I'd try this thing and then—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were the others teachers—were these younger men also your teachers to a degree or deemed as influential as was Focillon? You've mentioned the three—

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: No, Kubler maybe. Kubler because he presented a kind of scheme of how you look at things. Kubler, with him I studied pre-Columbian. I mean, it wasn't advanced work it was just a kind of introduction. And I thought the others were interesting, but they hadn't developed their own thing yet particularly either. [00:08:08] The most exciting course that I had at Yale apart from Focillon was a course in poetry by a new critic who was also very young, the same age as the younger artist [inaudible], and unknown, hadn't yet written anything himself, but he was well-versed in criticism. I took this course. Two of my classmates were really very accomplished poets. And one is a prize poet, widely known today by the name of Reed

Whittemore, and the other whose name is James Angleton did very nice work. He was an associate of Pound's, I mean a protégé. And then ended up in the CIA. I don't know how that happened. But anyway, with those very exceptional artists in the class and with an extremely gifted teacher that was a very exciting experience. And I actually published my first article, which I don't put on my bibliography, is on E. E. Cummings. And that I—well, I mean besides getting involved in critical theory that way, I also got involved in contemporary poetic expression, which was very—had big impact. [00:10:17] Oh, I should say about Yale that the honors program—in the honors program, you don't—you write a thesis in order to get an honors, right? My thesis was not accepted. And so I didn't graduate with honors, and I never understood why. I did never get a proper criticism. They just said that they didn't accept it. It was very—I thought it was a very interesting undertaking. It was an effort to define the nature of abstraction in Paleolithic art. And it may be that they, in their inexperience, didn't want to cope with something, which was amateur theory. Which they probably—having all been through the Aubert thing [laughs] wanted something that they could just put finger on. But I can't believe in retrospect that—it was rather interesting thesis and—[00:12:07]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was that a bit of a blow to you at the time?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Yeah, I was terribly disappointed but—and also because being any son of a father like mine who spends his entire life trying to prove to the old man that they're okay. And maybe that was the primary reason that I was disappointed. But then as with applying to Yale for graduate school, I applied to NYU, only one place. Which anybody who knew the scene was the only place to go because they had just recently started to catch the German refugees who came from Nazi persecution.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is 1941 or so?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: That—I would have applied in 1940. And some of them had been there for two or three years by then, Walter Friedläender and Karl Lehmann as examples. And so it seemed clearly the place you went if you wanted to pursue this field.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you were determined at that—by then to pursue—

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —the field?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: I started studying German in my senior year in order to make it possible to cope with the languages. [00:14:04] I got started on it. I went there in the fall of 1941, and there was a—well, the institute was in a small house of the Warburg family on 82nd Street. I mean, small for great palaces—in comparison to the present housing. There was quite a—the enrollment was quite small—of regular, steady PhD candidates and then they have a vast number of New Yorkers who'd come in and go to special lectures, or follow one course or another. So there were a lot of people working. They would take one course at a time, and there were a lot of society women who would come from Iselin, and a rather small cadre of students. A large percentage of which of my time have remained in the field. It was a very demanding curriculum and very stimulating and uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you feel you were quite well prepared by your training at Yale? [00:16:00]

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: As well as other people, but the impact of coming into contact with all these Europeans at once was to feel inferior. To feel that no matter what you did, it was already too late to have the enormous capacities of learning that they had. For example, they had all become easy with Latin, Greek and—or whatever languages one could possibly use, they have had some experience with. And plus read wildly in philosophy and had the old, German gymnasium education gave a person tremendous preparation for the future. I just felt relatively uneducated in comparison.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yale was also much more cloistered, wasn't it, much more structured? You have with the colleges now at NYU and graduate school, you're—

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Yeah there were entirely—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —on your own. Yeah.

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: It was—I found it a real burden because you never knew what the limits were. You never knew when you could stop working on something and go on to something else and so—and I felt that I was living in constant tension then. And—but I really appreciated the—what I was getting. [00:18:08] And I was—I particularly valued the fact that putting Focillon together with this group of people. The range of experience was so wide. Well, one of the people that I had studied with early on was Offner whose fort [ph] was the most intricate observation of works of art. He never stepped far beyond that one-to-one relationship between him and the object. And he would announce courses in Italian 13th-century painting, which you would end up at the

beginning of the 13th century. I mean, he never would be able to cover the ground because he would devote an entire hour to one painting. And he was the one professor there that expected us to go and actually look at works of art. The others preferred photographs and slides. In the days before color slides, there was the—the images, I think, had more in them in some sense because these large slides reproduced every detail in a very impressive way. [00:20:00] And, of course, being black and white, they didn't distort the color.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why do you suppose they did not encourage you, with the exception of Offner, to go look at works of art?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Well, it had to do with the way they were using them really, yeah. It's not that there wasn't appreciation for what was in them but—well, if you take—the approach at that period was intensively a style approach. Now, my theory about what it means to focus on style is that style is the common denominator among a class of objects. And that—when that becomes the subject of investigation, the individuality of the object is downplayed. For example, the great notion—there was new in the late '30s, it was mannerism. And mannerism became a kind of object in itself. And if you were—spent some time looking at one painting for a long time, you wouldn't see mannerism, you'd see a painting that had certain characteristics that were unique to it. So, the whole idea of mannerism had to downplay the intrinsic character of any work. And it's quite interesting the way that it vanished completely, and that nobody would speak of mannerism anymore because style isn't central to art history now, but then it certainly was. [00:22:15] And well, in the case of Panofsky for example, his focus was on iconography. Iconography also related to the comparison of classes of objects and so—well, I mean at the level that he spoke of it, that is an iconology as a kind of a science, a philosophy. That would not be extracted from close observation of the works but would be ideally pursued in a good photographic collection where you put things one beside the other and see what kind of evolutions happened. But in the technical sense, the study of iconography and the study of style were equivalent. They had—they were the end product of the theory of evolution, you might then say, and sort of it gave the element of—then, of course, I did a lot of architecture and European architecture.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mentioned Richard Krautheimer—

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: You couldn't—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —lecture.

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Krautheimer was teaching at Vassar, and he came to New York to give a course every other semester, I guess. [00:24:03] So I started—well, I had a course with him in Renaissance and Baroque architecture in my first year. And then after the war when I came back, I had decided that I wanted to do more with that. I started working closer with Krautheimer.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you do your MA thesis before you were drafted?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No? Was that—

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: No, I just did that first year of graduate school. And then in my second year in New York, I may have taken—and I guess I didn't do any courses because I entered into a program that was promoted by the army in language training, and the courses were done at Columbia. We had an intensive language course, and I signed up to study Turkish because I was working with Lehmann, and I thought, perhaps, I would do ancient art history as distinct from archeology. I didn't really want to get into archeology. And so, I thought Turkish would be great because you had all these sites and an HRD [ph], and so I enrolled in Turkish and then I got a postcard that was asking me please to pick something else because I was the only person who'd chosen Turkish, and they didn't want to have to give a course for one person. So I met Ken Donahue on the street. [00:26:01] And he was one of my fellow students who was the ex-Saratoga director to whom I had given the drawing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, yeah.

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: And I—and Ken said, "Oh, I'm going to take this Russian course, why don't you do this with me?" So I said, "Oh, okay, then. That's all right." [They laugh.] So Ken and I did the intensive Russian, which was wonderfully taught so that we were reading Tolstoy after four months, and we were conversing with some facility. And then after five months, I had to leave because I've been called up, and I lost it after five months. I mean it came intensively, and it went intensively. Today, I can barely read the alphabet and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you—they didn't call you up to go into some language service?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Yes, they did but it—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, they did.

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: —wasn't Russian. With typical army efficiency, they wanted to know after a while whether I would rather do German or Japanese. And uh—so that took care of the three years.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What were you in—what—intelligence work or?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Yeah, it was called Signal Intelligence. We were intercepting communications. I never did a bit of good in the whole time I was there. I never received anything, an operative message that there wasn't—in a code that we couldn't break, and we just wasted the funds of the American army entirely but—[00:28:06]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you in Europe most of this time?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Yeah. Well, we were sent first to England, then to Africa, then to Italy. In the campaign in the Apennines, we set up on mountaintops and listened to people, but to no effect. Originally, we trained in England to do air traffic interception, and the British had a system where they could tell where the voice was coming from by triangulation. They'd have stations all along the coast, and they'd catch a particular message from the air. And they could beam the signals so that from one side, they'd go pointing towards the source on the other side and then they could see where—tell where the plane was and shoot it down. It was a great system and then—but it didn't apply to other fronts particularly when we're sent to Africa and then the German army collapsed in Africa. Then we're sent to Italy and spent our times in the Apennines but—to no avail. And, uh, except to get more familiar with Italy, and at the end of the war, I was waiting around—waiting for reassignment, and I took a job with Monuments and Fine Arts. [00:30:03] And I mean, I was a sergeant so that I could dictate my own fate. But I told the head of our company that I was getting bored sitting and did he mind if I went off to Milan and then spend some time with the Monuments and Fine Arts. So they assigned me to pick up documents that had been stored at the Certosa di Pavia for safety during the war. So I went out there with my army truck every day and stood around while they loaded the truck and looked at the Certosa di Pavia. So I did my master's thesis about it, and this meant to returning to the study of Renaissance art.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were just for a very short time in—with the Monuments and Fine Arts?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Oh, yeah, weeks, just weeks. Before that time—I have to inject the story of liberating Mantua. I—this company of ours, this radio company had tended to—the entire company was on trucks because we had to move around to get the best reception. And so the offices of—I mean one truck would hold the radio equipment, and another truck would be kind of an office where we tried to do decoding and deciphering, and the other things we did. [00:32:02] And the third one would have a kitchen, and so we'd pick up and move when we had to. And when the German line broke in the spring of 1945, we all got in our trucks and headed north. And at the start we were in the mountains overlooking Bologna. And the first day we got to Bologna, which was still being somewhat contested—and halted in a field somewhere. The second day, we caught up with the infantry, and the third day, we were the advance guard of the 5th Army because all of us were on wheels, and everybody else was on foot, and this was ridiculous. I mean everywhere we went, we were the conquering heroes, and all we've been doing is working in these little offices like drones. And so we were the first unit to cross the Po, and actually I have no idea how we got across because—well, there must have been an engineering unit that laid down a bridge somewhere but anyway. Then we camped on a field on the far side of the Po and waited a couple of days to be told what to do. And so, my tent mate and I asked the captain if we could go with the courier and see the nearby town, sightsee some. He said all right, so we hopped into this jeep, and the nearby town turned out to be Mantua. And the jeep drove into the main square of Mantua and dropped us and took off, and said he'd be back in the evening. [00:34:04] The place was deserted and then gradually, people started appearing from behind arcades. And they didn't know what breed of being we were, and when they heard that we were Americans from the 5th Army, the whole town broke loose. This was their liberation, and here we were the two of us who thought we might look into the Romano buildings or something [they laugh] suddenly becoming military heroes, and really we weren't even armed. [They laugh.] We were just dirty soldiers looking for some works of art. And so we were thrust to the head of a victory column, marched through the streets, and it was ridiculous. Anyway, I did pick up an interest in the Certosa di Pavia, which served to produce the master's thesis and then my connection with Krautheimer. But I had started a—I had started a thing with a thesis with Lehmann on Greek grave stele because I was very much taken with Lehmann. He had an extremely rigorous method, and he was very demanding on the students. [00:36:04] And I felt that I was really being beaten into shape by him with respect to the precision and approach, and the questioning, and so on. He was a really great teacher and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Quite different from Focillon, was he?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Vastly different. Focillon was all fireworks, and Lehmann was by—no slouch in terms of imagination, but he insisted we'd be based rigorously on [inaudible]. He did brilliant work, and I was profoundly impressed by him. He was a real Prussian. I think he was—uh, well, Lehmann must have been Jewish like the rest of them, but he was much more like a Prussian army officer [laughs]. But he had a real kindly side too, and I was

—I liked him, and I admired him. While Krautheimer was much more folksy and familial, and easygoing, and if you want to do it that way, okay. And Krautheimer also, himself, had always had an extraordinary method, which is that he would always come up with an answer first and then looked to see how he could justify it or refute it and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Quite unusual in that time?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Yeah. And then he was very open. It was typical of a Krautheimer lecture that he'd put a slide on a screen and suddenly be in deep silence, and say, "I am so unhappy for [ph]—"and then started often in a different direction having just made a discovery that he wasn't prepared to make, but very humane. [00:38:33]

ROBERT F. BROWN: A very important to learn—to have learned as well, wasn't it, for Krautheimer?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Yes, to be always open to the unexpected.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But before you went into the army, you were moving toward doing an MA thesis with Lehmann on—

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: That's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —the Greek grave stele?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And when you came back—

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: It was strange that he sent me on to the particular problem because it was a stupid problem. It was a Greek grave stele with a sitting and a standing figure and, uh—but that had really wasn't an autonomous character. I mean, there was no sense to doing that rather than sitting and two standing, or two sittings and one standing. So I have a certain amount of suspicion about it, but it didn't go far enough so that I ran into real trouble. I gathered a file of cards, photographs and then I couldn't of course, pursue it in Italy. [00:40:05]

ROBERT F. BROWN: When were you mustered out then, at the summer of '45—

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Well, let's see. I was extremely fortunate because I was the only person in my group who got out immediately. Because what happened was that after the episode with the Monuments and Fine Arts, my company, they've decided that they would retool our company for Japan. After we've been useless in Europe. [They laugh.] And with no consideration to the fact that it would take them five years to train us to handle Japanese. It's just one of those wacky army ideas. So, while everybody else was being slowly shipped back, we'd kind of rush order and we had to be brought back into—among the first boats to return. We got back to this country and we're given a home leave for two weeks, during which time the atomic bombs were dropped, and the Japanese surrendered. And I got back to Fort Dix, and they'd decided that they didn't know what to do with us, so they sent us away. And they demobbed us immediately in a day or two. And this was sometime in early September. [00:42:02] And I went up to New York with only two uniforms to my possession and enrolled in the fall semester in the institute. So I lost an amount of time through the terrific break. Some other people were a year or two—

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ROBERT F. BROWN: —were you enrolled right way

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —the same cast of teachers were there still, did you go back to Lehmann and—?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Yeah, I can't remember the time that I did Panofsky. Before—I think after I had returned, Panofsky became extremely influential then. In a course I took with him in Gothic art, which he had devised a fascinating scheme of stages about the guard that went through particular stages of space. And he would go through each of these in, uh, looking at a mask of illumination, sculpture, or architecture, or whatever. And even the smallest detail of architecture for example, and even particular spatial characteristics to the plan or the pier or the light. I remember one category out that would be net space where the disposition of elements would be like a netting, a grid kind of organization. You could find this in a particular kind of manuscripts where the backgrounds would be made up of little squares, and it would have a determining effect on order in the

composition. [00:02:03] And in the course of one of two courses I did with Panofsky, I had spoken to him about doing a term paper, and he said that he had a good idea of something that he'd worked on recently with Frankl, which had been published in *The Art Bulletin* about their work on Gothic proportions. And there was an article called "The Secret of the Medieval Masons" I think by Frankl with a postscript of Panofsky's. They had used the documents on the building in the cathedral in Milan, which had all been published in the 19th century. And he said, "Why don't you look at the documents and see whether you can draw anything out of them of any use in terms of the way in which the Gothic architect thought about his work?" So I got this set out into Columbia, and it turned out there were a lot of interesting things in it. And out of that article—I mean out of that paper, I did an article published in 1948 on—called the, "Ars Sine Scientia Nihil Est," and that was published in *The Art Bulletin*. [00:04:00] That was my first article. Well, there was also one on the Certosa di Pavia in the NYU student publication *Marsyas*.

ROBERT F. BROWN: *Marsyas.*

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: And that piece, which is not very well written, but which is not bad in terms of its concept, is far and away the best known thing that I've ever done, the first thing. It has—of course, it had been cited five times as often as anything else that I've ever done and still people refer to it, and that's interesting. In my—in the book of essays I'm bringing out where I'm republishing earlier things and write postscripts to each. I say something about I wonder what this has to say about the value of a PhD when the article that most people know me by was written before I ever got a degree [laughs]. I also—that was also my years from my first public presentation at a College Art Association meeting of 1948.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You gave a presentation on this Milanese theory.

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was part of the impact, do you suppose, that until then most people had not thought there was any well thought-out theory behind Gothic architecture or sound documentation? [00:06:02]

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: There was a certain literature in German for the most part and then this thing with Frankl and Panofsky had to do with theory. But the Milan text demonstrated the—that Gothic ideas of engineering were fundamentally geometry, that they used geometry to affirm the structural strength of the building, and that was new. Well, I didn't think that was new—it was the extent to which this was the kind of foundation of their thought. The big issue at the time of a discussion in this issue where Kubler had contributed considerably to—was on Gothic rationalism. That is to say on those who argued that the—in conformity with Viollet-le-Duc that Gothic architecture is a completely logical structure and that the system is all built out on the concentration of thrusts, and through the ribs and supports. [00:08:00] And this was something that was discussed by everyone—by Aubert and Focillon, too, and there were the pros and cons about whether Gothic approach to building was fundamentally rational if not—or fundamentally expressive. But that was somewhat different. The concreteness of these discussions took—made the whole thing less speculative because here these people are actually saying that you have to build this within a Pythagorean triangle because of this and that. And so, this then turned out to be a classic article. It is kind of interesting that one would do this as a student without the experience of having written a dissertation. And the—well, I think it also had a very significant impact on my career because this and the Certosa article and then—followed after I started my dissertation with an article in the Warburg journal on *The Cortile del Belvedere* in the Vatican. [00:10:09] That made it very easy for me to get a job and to be well launched [ph] so that I got employment easily as I got into graduate school and [laughs] the undergraduate school—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You think—

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: It's a very interesting thing, too, that this kind of record is—seems to be virtually unachievable today. I think that the most talented students today very rarely bring out important things in their student days. I think maybe it's just the difference in society, and it's hard to tell. But the people of my generation who became better known just did these things that made a mark at very early time. And their productivity was, I think, substantially higher than the productivity of equally talented people today. My guess is that the whole nature of family life has changed. A typical scholar of my generation had a wife who was home taking full-time care of those house and the kids and typing manuscripts for people. [00:12:09] And that's one factor, although in my case, it didn't work for very long because my wife got polio and was paralyzed and then—but having been all tuned up prior to that, perhaps I just continued on dead reckoning—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mentioned that you gave the Gothic theory piece you had also given as a talk at the College Art Association?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was that among your first encounters with that professional organization or was it—?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Well, I attended a meeting prior to that—I don't know. In any case, it was a different picture in those days—

ROBERT F. BROWN: It's really much smaller, wasn't it?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: What's that?

ROBERT F. BROWN: It was much smaller, right?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: It's very small. The papers were given for the most part by the big shots, and it was occasionally that a student would be admitted to that forum to speak. And so one really felt amongst one's elders. And, uh, well, the association was just a completely different thing. [00:14:04]

ROBERT F. BROWN: It would seem to me if the big shots, as you had said, predominantly gave the talks that these were—the meetings were sometimes occasions when great strides were made or new ideas were brought right out by eminent figures. They were rather important occasions I suppose or they could be?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Yeah, I guess there was that possibility. But it—for somebody attending the sessions that you had better insurance that you'd hear something that was well done and then later but—I mean on the other hand, you can't claim that art history was in such good condition then. Apart from these people we've been talking about, a few others all through the country, art history was re-taught in a fairly pedestrian way. There really wasn't any philosophical underpinning there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But what need, do you think, that rather pedestrian way of teaching satisfied? Why did people take those courses? Because you've mentioned this several times and in your writings, too, that—there was no theory or philosophy behind—?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Well, I think they took it for reasons different. Well first of all, you had very naïve students that didn’t think theoretically in other way in history or in literature either. [00:16:06] And so that I mean I'm saying this exciting literary—literature course that I had in Yale was exceptional because it dealt with ideas. I think people took art history courses because—the same way that my father thought I had to go a museum. Well, that's still true today in some sense. I mean I think that when John Shearman gave a course on Michelangelo two years ago and 600 people tried to get in here and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.] All of them undergraduates, huh?

JAMES S. ACKERMAN: Yeah. Well, it's part of the core curriculum. I mean that was one of a very large array of courses that would fulfill that requirement, but that isn't the only reason. If it hadn't been in the core, it would have been 200 or 250. But at any rate, that's a large course for Harvard. And I think the reason is that there's just this kind of American myth that you have to have a taste of culture with capital C and then Michelangelo was more culture than something else. And they're very really insubstantial reasons, and it's not a part of it in the mind of a student that they should learn to think in new ways. What is—what they are expecting to get is how you look at a work of art, which isn't really art history either [laughs]. [00:18:02] It's art appreciation. But I think they think essentially that after taking one of these courses that then they will be able to take their children to museums in Europe and say, "I learned at Harvard that this represents that." And so, this is a whole new thing, and now this has radically changed today, and there's a great deal more self-consciousness—about it all. Although not all that much more good art history because, well, sometime or other even after this tremendous explosion of critical theory, the number of outstanding contributions to thought remains quite small. And we've been—I mean, the literary people have been just kind of imitators of the best French thinking. I don’t think we've produced anybody like a Sartre or a Barrett or a Lacan, or you name it. These are the people that are talked about all the time and never emulated, never equaled. In art history, I think that's the case too. [00:20:00] Well, I guess we could just start again and—

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]