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Oral history interview with Paul H. Nitze, 1996 Apr. 30

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Paul H. Nitze on April 30, 1996. The interview took place in Baltimore, Maryland, and was conducted by Liza Kirwin and Richard Wattenmaker 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 bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

LIZA KIRWIN: —begin by saying that, uh, this is Liza Kirwin and Richard Wattenmaker, and it's April 30th, and we're speaking with Ambassador Paul Nitze for the Archives of American Art. And we wanted to ask you to reminisce a bit about your encounters with Sandy Calderand Noguchi. Maybe you can begin with, uh, Calder.

PAUL H. NITZE: I went to Paris in the—I guess the 1920s? Spring of 1928, my recollection. And I had—in Paris, I ran into a number of my American friends that I hadn't realized were there, and—told somebody that I was going to go to Berlin. And ride my bicycle.

LIZA KIRWIN: All the way from Paris to Berlin?

PAUL H. NITZE: Yes, well I took the train part way—I guess got off some place and did the rest of it by bicycle. And they said, "Well, if you're going to Berlin, there's a friend of ours who's having a vernissage at the Kempinski Hotel in Berlin." [00:02:00] So I arrived on my bicycle. I was staying at Pension Norman, on some kind of a place that doesn't exist anymore, and bicycled over to the Kempinski Hotel—and lo and behold—there was Sandy Calder, whom I had never met before. But he was quite clearly Sandy; he was [laughs] a very distinctive looking man. And I went in to talk to him; we immediately got into a very friendly conversation. Something clicked between us, right off the bat. And so I proposed to Sandy that the Kempinski Hotel was an awfully expensive place, and this pension I was at was much cheaper and friendlier, and he ought to leave the Kempinski and come and move in with me at the Frau Norman's establishment—or Frau Norman, I guess she was. And so he did that. So right away on the very first day we became pals—

LIZA KIRWIN: Roommates. [Laughs.]

PAUL H. NITZE: —and this pension was a very attractive setup. There were students from—of all nationalities—there were about 20 of us I guess who lived there at this pension. And they all took to Sandy, and Sandy took to them. And then it was agreed that we would all go to Russia together. [00:04:06] And we would bicycle down to Rotterdam and catch a plane in Rotterdam going to Moscow. Either a plane or a train. But in any case, we got to Rotterdam, and we had a bike—glorious bicycle trip—I guess we had taken the train down to Bremen and then started to bicycle from there—and arrived in Rotterdam and all went to the consulate—the US Consulate—to pick up our visas there. And they were all given visas; they'd applied for visas as artists. And I had applied as an economist. And they were granted visas, and my visa was denied. [They laugh.] So they tooled off without me, leaving me and my bicycle to my own devices. But then later, I—well, I came back to New York—I told Sandy that if he'd ever—came to the United States, he ought to send me a message, and I would meet him at the boat. Back then when they came over it was a boat in those days—and he could live with me. So he sent me a message saying he was arriving on a given date. So I went to the boat and met Sandy and took him home. [00:06:05] But this apartment that I was living in was on the market to me, it was the Depression period. And the owner of it was the father of a friend of mine, and I was living in kind of a—one back room. It was quite a big apartment. But there was another little room in the back there, too. I'd bought $20 worth of furniture from a bankrupt white Russian—[laughs] moved it in. When I picked up Sandy, he didn't have any furniture either, so he bought another $20 of furniture and moved into this cubicle in the back. The rest of the apartment was totally empty, but then there was—we—he needed sustenance; so did I. So he began to—he had friends in New York and he got in touch with them, and together we all agreed that we would perform a circus—his circus—by laying out some green beige cloth upon the floor. And we got into trouble with the owner because we nailed that green beige [laughs] upon his floor. And then these friends that he'd—got to come appeared and he performed his circus. [00:08:05] And I think that was the first performance of the circus in America. And he obviously charmed everybody right off the bat. And it was a huge success—a beautiful performance, he was witty, and everybody loved him.

LIZA KIRWIN: Who was there in that audience? Do you recall? Of his friends that he invited to see the circus.

PAUL H. NITZE: Of what?

LIZA KIRWIN: Of the friends that he's invited to see the circus, do you remember—

PAUL H. NITZE: I've just forgotten their names. They're people that I'd heard of but didn't really know very well. I'm just—my memory is not good enough to recall who those friends were.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: When you were living in Paris, did you have any other contact with the art world at all? Either American or French?

PAUL H. NITZE: Well, at that time, I thought I'd like to become an art dealer. And so I got myself ready to set myself up as an art dealer, and let myself introduce to a lot of the artists who were then producing works of art. But I also talked to some of the other art dealers in Paris, and they told me tales about the experiences they'd had as dealers, and it seemed to me the whole profession was a bunch of crooks.

LIZA KIRWIN: [Laughs.]

PAUL H. NITZE: [00:10:02] And my French wasn't quite good enough. I could understand French perfectly well, but my vocabulary was limited, and—

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: Who did you meet? Did you meet Paul Guillaume or Bernheim-Jeune, or Durand-Ruel or any of those?

PAUL H. NITZE: Well, I guess my closest two friends were two—one of them was called Pat Borgen and the other was named Cromwell. And Whitney Cromwell was the brilliant and intelligent one, and he was a friend of James Joyce and almost everybody you could think of—while Pat was a very nice but incompetent painter chap. It was a very good combination because nobody could possibly be scared of Pat, who clearly was an innocent and not frightening in any way, while Whitney was a—truly an intellectual. And the avant-garde of Paris valued Whitney Cromwell. And Pat was the one who, the regulars had the associations, and nobody was scared of him. He was a—

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: Where did you live when you were in Paris? Do you recall?

PAUL H. NITZE: I lived on the quay—hm—across the—on the left bank but right on the quay. [00:12:03] Quay d'Orsay?

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: Quay d'Orsay, yeah.

PAUL H. NITZE: Quay d'Orsay. I lived with an American, who was studying to enter the Foreign Service and was learning his French—or perfecting his French—that—that apartment in which he lived had belonged to a well-known American homosexual—I forget his name now—whom everybody knew. But he was—there was some law about subletting apartments; you needed per—needed some special permission from the city authorities in order to sublet an apartment. And—so my friend went to the authorities, the city authorities, to ask for some license to sublet for his—subletting his apartment. And they asked, "And who are you subletting it from?" And he mentioned the name of this well-known American homosexual, and they said, "C'est la mort." [They laugh.] Approved it—they gave him permission right off the bat. [They laugh.]

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: [00:14:00] Beautiful. What kinds of French painters did you meet? Do you recall who? I mean, among the younger people—or even older people.

PAUL H. NITZE: No. I can see their paintings, but I forget the names.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you ever meet up with Calder again in Paris?

PAUL H. NITZE: Did what—?

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you meet up with Calder in Paris?

PAUL H. NITZE: Um, I don't think I did. I think he came over to the United States and came and shared this unfurnished apartment with me.

LIZA KIRWIN: What kind of a roommate was he?

PAUL H. NITZE: Oh, he was delightful.

LIZA KIRWIN: [Laughs.]

PAUL H. NITZE: It was great fun. I was devoted to him. Then he—one day—he told me that he was passionately in love to a girl by the name of Louisa James, and that she—she was a painter, and she had an apartment someplace—I forget exactly where. And I finessed him with—he really—he said he was too shy to talk to her. And I said, "Well, would you mind if I went and told her that you had this deep admiration for her?" And he said,

"Well, I don't see that that could do much harm. She might throw you out of the apartment." [00:16:00] And so I went and talked to Louisa, and within 10 days they were married. [They laugh.]

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: Your first negotiation.

PAUL H. NITZE: I didn't do any negotiation. [They laugh.] I didn't say a word.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: That was your métier, obviously. [They laugh.] Great. Was he a heavy drinker then?

PAUL H. NITZE: I don't recollect that he was. Perhaps I was, but I think he was not.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: Okay. Because in later years he had a reputation for it.

PAUL H. NITZE: Well, I think at that time I was more addicted to the bottle. It was a more joyous participant in that sort of life, then. Later, I got infectious jaundice, and the doctors didn't know anything about it, and I damn near died. Cirrhosis of the liver. So my joy in drinking thereafter was not the same.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: How did you come to think about being an art dealer? You must have studied at Harvard, or—

PAUL H. NITZE: No.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: —thought about it or gone to galleries, or—

PAUL H. NITZE: Uh, my mother was interested in art. My mother and father came—well we had family that lived in Chicago. My father was a—there—a professor of French literature, but his field was the 11th century and the Grail Romances and all that sort of thing. And he really was the world's greatest expert on that part of French history. And he was absolutely engrossed in his subjects and loved it—loved France. [00:18:04] So we spent—I spent most of my youth—when I say youth—up to seven years old—in Europe more than I did in the United States.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: That was prior to the first World War.

PAUL H. NITZE: Up to—yeah. When the First World War broke out we—father thought we ought to get out of Europe; it was dangerous.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: He was right.

PAUL H. NITZE: So we got a Dutch boat out back to the United States. Well, I found myself rather out of touch with the—my age group in Chicago. But they were all—none of them were interested in Europe at all. [William Hale Thompson] was our mayor, and made his reputation by saying that he would punch—whoever the King of England in the eye if he ever met the King of England. He got elected on that—

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: There were a lot of Irish voters in Chicago, huh? [They laugh.]

PAUL H. NITZE: Strange campaign, but it worked in Chicago. [They laugh.]

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: Did your father go back and work in France after the first World War to look around and see what effect it had had?

PAUL H. NITZE: He spent—yes, he had a sabbatical which he spent in Europe. But I think during that period, my mother took us first to England and then to Berlin, and so we lived in Berlin during most of that year—or I guess a year and a half, two years.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: [00:20:14] There was a lot to see in Berlin. There was a big center for modern art in those days.

PAUL H. NITZE: That's right. And I went to and—art exhibit in—I guess in Vienna. And there were—there was a painting there that I very much admired, painted by an Austrian by the name of Hans Grüss. G-R-U-Umlaut-S-S. In fact, two paintings—both of which I liked. And I bought both of those paintings at age 15; those are my first acquisitions in the field of art. Not here, and not in our house in Washington, either, because the big one was too big, and it didn't fit it any residence that I lived in for some years, and so my son had a house in New York, an apartment with a big hallway in it where this would fit in, where it still rests. I go up there from time to time, stay with him, and there's my painting—both of them, in fact.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: Did you stay in touch with Calder? Did he send you invitations to all of his openings and all the exhibitions that he had in New York and wherever?

PAUL H. NITZE: Yes, he did. [00:22:01] Well, he came and—as I said—lived with me, in New York, in this barren apartment. I forget—well, then he married Louisa.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: And moved out.

PAUL H. NITZE: And moved out on me. Much to my disappointment. No, I was fond of both of them.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: So you watched the development of his career, as he—

PAUL H. NITZE: Yeah.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: —showed at the Whitney or the Museum of Modern Art.

PAUL H. NITZE: Oh yeah. And he—the lady that I very much admired in those days, was—ran the Museum of Modern Art. Jenny Carpenter. But I don't think she was particularly interested in Sandy's work, so [laughs] as I recall, that was different than what she was—she was, uh, more in favor of the Impressionists, and so advanced to the point of thinking that Sandy was—well, frankly, I didn't think he was an artist; I thought he was a tinkerer with wire. [They laugh.] I couldn't imagine that anyone was going to pay money for this. Then he got his—made his reputation on that.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you ever buy any of his work?

PAUL H. NITZE: Yes, I di—well, he gave me some. I don't think he ever bought any. I don't remember if I ever did.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: Did you visit him in France in later years? He had the place near Azay-le-Rideau.

PAUL H. NITZE: [00:24:00] I don't believe I ever did, no.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: And then he lived in Connecticut, I think.

PAUL H. NITZE: That place in Connecticut, I did indeed visit. Yeah. But he was such a joyous person; he radiated joy, you know. He was—he was having fun. He wasn't serious. He was naughty, and, uh, just a glorious person to be with.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: He was from Philadelphia, and his father and grandfather were both sculptors, so—

PAUL H. NITZE: Yes, I remember that. Yeah.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: —I guess he was a rebel from the beginning—

PAUL H. NITZE: That's right.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: —he didn't want to do academic sculpture the way they did.

PAUL H. NITZE: That's right.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: One of them did the William Penn that's on top of city hall. That's Calder's grandfather.

PAUL H. NITZE: Then we did discuss that famous wire figure that really made his reputation—that put a quarter in the slot that produced—it was the Virgin Mary that produced the Christ child. [They laugh.] But that was considered so sacrilegious that—I'd never heard of—

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: [They laugh.] It was.

PAUL H. NITZE: —as naughty or as sacrilegious as that figure was.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: Does anyone own it now?

PAUL H. NITZE: I don't know whatever happened to it. I just don't know the answer. [They laugh.] It should be a very valuable piece of machinery. [They laugh.]

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: And you came to know Noguchi also at one stage.

PAUL H. NITZE: [00:26:02] I did indeed. I'm trying to remember how I came to know Noguchi. I had a friend by the name of Sydney Shepherd Spivak, and uh, I was kind of in locus parentis to him—he'd run away from home when his mother died and his father had married a woman that he—Spiv—considered to be a Polish prostitute.

Then he'd become a mascot for a, um, army regiment training in Boston—in Boston Common. And he was also making speeches on Boston Common, selling liberty bonds. And a man by the name of Dreyfus, who owned Jordan's Department Store [Jordan Marsh & Company] in Boston, watched this little kid selling liberty bonds and making these impassioned speeches, and he approached him and asked him whether he'd like to be taken home. And so Spiv was more or less abducted by—[they laugh]—this man, and he had then tried to send him to various schools. And Spiv was not the material for school—[laughs]—didn't take well to discipline of any kind. [00:28:02] So he got—he went to about five or six different schools and got fired from them all. And after having been fired from the sixth school, he decided that he didn't like this life of people trying to educate him and subject him to discipline, so he got himself a boat—a job on some boat going to Europe. Ended up in Paris. And got himself a job at a department store that—Le Bon Marché—and learned the French of that class of Parisian girls. And then I guess [inaudible]—his fellow salesgirls at Le Bon Marché. It was thereafter no one could compete with him in his ability to talk to the common folk of Paris—and having more or less, well, mastered this part of the French language, began to read French literature. And he was a very bright kid, and so he got interested in French literature, and so his—his—he never went to school that I can think of, and after having been fired from these various schools. And—but knew quite a lot about French literature—at least, he was very glib in talking about it; he could make you think that he knew and understood all kinds of obscure pieces of literature.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: [00:30:02] Did you expose him to your father?

LIZA KIRWIN: [Laughs.]

PAUL H. NITZE: No. [They laugh.] Father would have been horrified. Well, no I think I did introduce him once, but, uh, I didn't let him talk to father [they laugh] about any serious subject.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: And Noguchi came—was a friend of his? Or did he—he had met Noguchi?

PAUL H. NITZE: Well, Spivak—he had kind of a—a guilt complex about the fact that I was more or less supporting him. And he ran into Noguchi, and Noguchi was in even worse shape financially than Spiv was. And so Spiv undertook trying to help Noguchi survive and peeled offpart of the assets I was giving Spiv to Noguchi. [They laugh.]

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: This was in Paris or New York?

PAUL H. NITZE: This was in New York.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: New York.

PAUL H. NITZE: And then, uh, Noguchi felt a little bit guilty about living off of Spivak off of me [laughs] and decided he wanted to repay me. And so he said he would do a head of me, and it's—that's how I got him to do that head. But he—he started doing the head in plaster, and I thought it didn't look that badly—I thought he was doing a pretty good job. [00:32:11] And he said, "It doesn't have any character." And he grabbed the head and threw it in the corner, where it hit with a loud bang. And he picked it up, and it was all askew. And he said, "That's better." [They laugh.] And so having this—this strange, out-of-shape piece, he then went ahead and finished it, and it turned out to be a very interesting head.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: That was in the early '30s?

PAUL H. NITZE: I think so. I don't really remember when the—

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: He had had training from an Italian sculptor who was a realistic sculptor. And he worked in that style before his later, more abstract things.

PAUL H. NITZE: Yes.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: He'd done a classical training.

PAUL H. NITZE: But he also had an instinct for making things acceptable to the modern art world, to the then–modern art world. You couldn't just do a classical thing and have it accepted—

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: No.

PAUL H. NITZE: —to his contemporaries.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: But they accepted people like Noguchi and they accepted people like Lachaise.

PAUL H. NITZE: Yes.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: Did you stay in touch with him over the years, and—

PAUL H. NITZE: I did. I—well, I tried to keep in—I didn't keep as closely in touch with him as I did with Sandy Calder. [00:34:03] Noguchi was—Sandy was such a glorious person, and Noguchi was more Japanese. And he didn't glow with warmth and friendship the way Sandy did. Noguchi was more—

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: —reserved. Did he have a difficult time during the war—or did anything happen during the war, to him?

PAUL H. NITZE: I don't believe so. I think his mother was a Nisei—and therefore an American citizen, even though Japanese. I don't remember about Noguchi's father. I have no recollection of him.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: And in later years did you maintain contact?

PAUL H. NITZE: With Noguchi? Some, but not as close contact as I did with Sandy.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: And the head is still your possession?

PAUL H. NITZE: Yes. And from time to time, they have exhibits of Noguchi's work, and they ask me to borrow the head, and it's one of about eight or nine heads that Noguchi did at one time. They're quite varied in nature. And so the—I forget; the Smithsonian or somebody else—from time to time, do that.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: [00:36:06] Right. Hirshhorn.

PAUL H. NITZE: Yeah.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: Have you visited the museum that he established on Long Island City?

PAUL H. NITZE: I don't think I have. At least I don't recall it.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: He had a studio, but a number of those pieces were—are still exhibited there.

LIZA KIRWIN: Did you know of his connection with Calder, that he had uh—he had participated in one of the performances of the circus by playing a Victrola? I guess that was in—

PAUL H. NITZE: I think that was probably in—

LIZA KIRWIN: —Paris.

PAUL H. NITZE: —my apartment.

LIZA KIRWIN: Really? Hm.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: So they were friendly? They associated?

PAUL H. NITZE: I think so. But that was a—I look back with real pleasure to those days on that apartment on—I guess was 39th Street.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: The—they were both artists who had a very international outlook—very cosmopolitan outlook. I mean that in a positive sense, that—very different from the WPA people.

PAUL H. NITZE: That's true.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: Did you have any association with the other artists? Or was your life sort of so remote from that—that stage?

PAUL H. NITZE: Well, I got pretty well wrapped up in whatever I was doing, and so I ceased being interested in being an art dealer. [00:38:15] I continued to collect things, though, so—I have made a first class collection.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: What type of, uh—

PAUL H. NITZE: Well, I guess the best thing I have is a Degas that—it's the only thing I ever paid real money for. [They laugh.] But I thought I'd made some money—turned out I'd really hadn't, but I still kept the Degas. [They laugh.] And I'd also thought I'd made some money, and I bought a Van Gogh.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: Wow.

PAUL H. NITZE: But there, I couldn't keep it and I couldn't continue payments. Brought it to Marie Harriman, and

she found somebody else to buy it right off the bat. Then I made some money and I may have tried to buy it back, but it was too late.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: Which one was it?

PAUL H. NITZE: It was one of the Merewether's [ph]—this little girl in the forest. Not one of the important ones, but it was an attractive one.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: That's too bad.

PAUL H. NITZE: It was too bad. You can't win them all.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: No, no. And the Degas's a pastel? Or a drawing? Or a sculpture?

PAUL H. NITZE: Pastel.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: Pastel.

PAUL H. NITZE: That's a beauty. That's one of his best. It's one of lady in a box. Called *La Loge.*

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: Oh yes. [00:40:00] Straight pastel or over a print—over a monotype?

PAUL H. NITZE: I think it's a straight pastel.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: Wonderful. And then any other Americans—any people like Avery or others—that were of that period?

PAUL H. NITZE: No, I didn't—didn't buy any of those. I bought a Monet, which is a beauty, which didn't look any good at the time I bought it—it was covered with a brown varnish. And I went to a Sotheby's auction for the possessions of a lady by the name of Lizzie Bliss, whom I—had been a friend of mine.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: The founder of the Museum of Modern Art.

PAUL H. NITZE: Yeah.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: She was a friend of yours?

PAUL H. NITZE: Yeah. And most of those—most of those Monets were bought by a competitor of mine in the investment banking world. Bonbright and Company. He bought seven Monets—of good ones—and the last one that he didn't want went for $500. Well, I bid $500. Then I bid $600. And my wife Phyllis was sitting there, "Paul, you're bidding against yourself. Stop." [They laugh.] So I stopped, and bought both—I think it helped me because I was so avidly bidding, it scared other people; they thought that I was going to go much higher and I didn't.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: And you had it cleaned?

PAUL H. NITZE: So then I took it to the restorer, the—at the National Gallery, whom I knew, and he had the professionals clean it and restored it and it turned out to be beautiful. [00:42:13] Absolutely first class.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: Great. What was Mrs. Bliss like?

PAUL H. NITZE: Well, she was a very attractive and charming person. She was—and nice to the young. So—all of us my age who were interested in art, she was kind of our heroine.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: She had a beautiful collection.

PAUL H. NITZE: Yes, she did. She had good taste. Very good taste.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: She had Cezannes, and she had a lot of paintings by Maurice Prendergast—

PAUL H. NITZE: Yeah.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: —and she was a great patron. She was somebody.

PAUL H. NITZE: She had a friend as I remember by the name of [Anson] Conger Goodyear. He was a very nice man.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: His collection's in Buffalo.

PAUL H. NITZE: Yes.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: Wonderful collection.

PAUL H. NITZE: Well, what else can I try to re—

LIZA KIRWIN: Well, I think that's—thank you very much.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: We appreciate it very much.

PAUL H. NITZE: It was fun to think back to those days. [They laugh.]

LIZA KIRWIN: Anything else you'd like to add?

PAUL H. NITZE: No, I can't. Nothing comes to my mind at the moment.

LIZA KIRWIN: Okay.

RICHARD WATTENMAKER: We appreciate it very much. Very nice of you.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]