

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Nell Sinton

AN ADVENTUROUS SPIRIT: THE LIFE OF A CALIFORNIA ARTIST

With Introductions by
Margot S. Biestman
Joan S. Dodd
Ruth Braunstein
Tony DeLap
Philip E. Linhares

Interviews Conducted by
Suzanne B. Riess
in 1992

Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the Nation. Oral history is a modern research technique involving an interviewee and an informed interviewer in spontaneous conversation. The taped record is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The resulting manuscript is typed in final form, indexed, bound with photographs and illustrative materials, and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

All uses of this manuscript are covered by a legal agreement between The Regents of the University of California and Nell Sinton dated November 4, 1992. The manuscript is thereby made available for research purposes. All literary rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley. No part of the manuscript may be quoted for publication without the written permission of the Director of The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley.

Requests for permission to quote for publication should be addressed to the Regional Oral History Office, 486 Library, University of California, Berkeley 94720, and should include identification of the specific passages to be quoted, anticipated use of the passages, and identification of the user. The legal agreement with Nell Sinton requires that she be notified of the request and allowed thirty days in which to respond.

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

Nell Sinton, "An Adventurous Spirit: The Life of a California Artist," an oral history conducted in 1992 by Suzanne B. Riess, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1993.

Copy no. _____

Cataloging information

SINTON, Nell Walter (b. 1910)

Artist

An Adventurous Spirit: The Life of a California Artist, 1993, xvi, 314 pp.

Walter family background and interest in art; Nell growing up in San Francisco; school experiences, and studies, San Francisco Art Institute; art community, friends, galleries, collecting contemporary art; Grace Morley and San Francisco Museum of Art; psychotherapy in 1970s, and changes in approach to art work and life; travel, teaching, thoughts on aspects of creativity; children and grandchildren; discussion of "Social Development of an American Female" and other art works. Appended Autobiography and other writings by Sinton; critical reviews and interviews; lesson plans; catalogue of "Nell Sinton, A Thirty-Year Retrospective," 1981.

Introductions by Ruth Braunstein, Braunstein Gallery, San Francisco; Margot Sinton Biestman; Tony DeLap, artist; Joan Sinton Dodd; Philip E. Linhares, Chief Curator of Art, The Oakland Museum.

Interviewed 1992 by Suzanne B. Riess. The Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

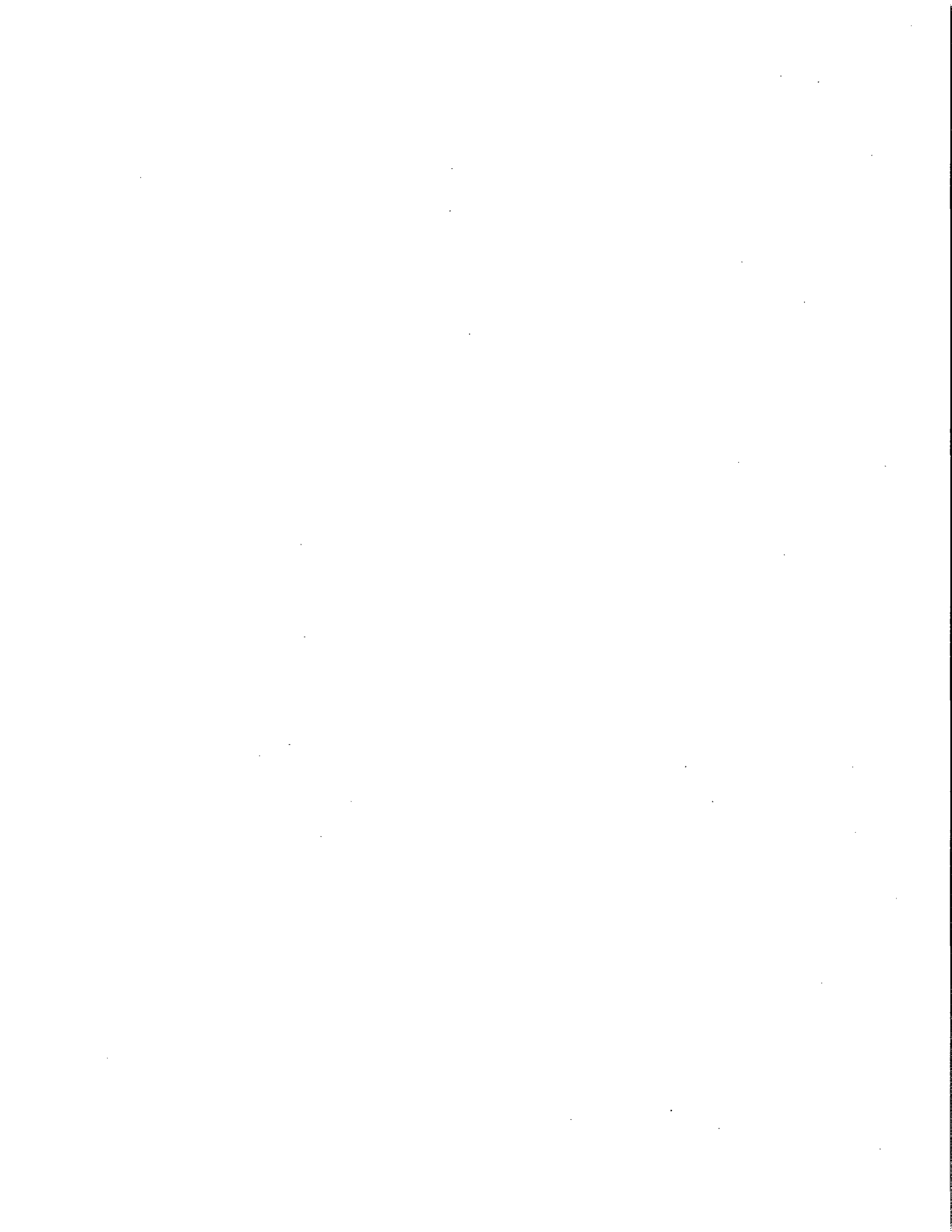


TABLE OF CONTENTS--Nell Sinton

INTRODUCTION--by Margot Sinton Biestman	i
INTRODUCTION--by Joan Sinton Dodd	iv
INTRODUCTION--by Ruth Braunstein	vii
INTRODUCTION--by Tony DeLap	ix
INTRODUCTION--by Philip E. Linhares	x
INTERVIEW HISTORY--by Suzanne B. Riess	xii
BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION	
I FAMILY BACKGROUND AND INFLUENCES	1
The Greenebaums and Walters	1
The Artistic Component	5
The Religious Component	6
Nell, The Eldest	9
The Snobbery, The Friends	10
Post World War II Liberation, A Different San Francisco	12
Mother, the Schwartz Girls	13
The Walter Brothers, John and Edgar	14
Nell Becomes the "Only Boy"	16
Generations of Summers at Rampart, Lake Tahoe	17
Early Visual Memories	20
Artistic Skills	21
Oral History Process Discussion	22
Nell's Father, and the Children's Parties	23
Teachers and Coaches	26
Bookbinding	28
The German-Jewish Ambivalence	28
Music Lessons	30
Preparation for Marriage to Stanley Sinton	31
II AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ASIDES: YOUNG NELL	34
Transactions Under the Table	34
Seeking Answers, Analysis	35
Friendships, Social Life	39
Academic Record	43
III MARRIAGE AND A HOUSE	46
IV NELL, THE ARTIST	49
Collecting, Galleries	49
1930s, Art Studies	53
Finding a Community	54
Issues of Gaining Confidence	58
Issues of Success, Money	59

	Comments on Maurice Sterne, Frida Kahlo	60
	Artists Parties, Balls	62
V	THE SAN FRANCISCO ART WORLD	64
	The Bricoleur	64
	Dropping Names	65
	A Peter Stackpole Photograph	67
	More Artist Friends, Ellen Bransten and Ruth Armer	68
	Society of Women Artists	72
	Grace McCann Morley	74
VI	THOUGHTS ON:	77
	Heated Discussions about Art	77
	Problems of a Self Portrait with Grandchild	79
	Art as Spaces and Shapes	82
	Art Festivals	84
VII	MORE SAN FRANCISCO ART WORLD	85
	Clare Falkenstein	85
	Maurice Sterne, and Federal Art Project Work	86
	More Name Dropping	88
	Ruth Braunstein's Gallery	90
	Importance of New York for Artists	93
	San Francisco Museum of Art, and Oakland Museum	95
	Art Commission, 1959-1963	97
	A List: A Few Friends and Acquaintances	98
VIII	PSYCHOTHERAPY AND ART	100
	Eugene and Juanita Sagan	100
	Credit-taking, and Inclusion	102
	Learning to Draw People, the Feeling Inside	105
	Theoretical Basis for Creative Teaching	107
IX	"UNDER THE TABLE AT THE DONNER PARTY"	110
	Introduction	110
	The Meaning of Under the Table	112
	The Events and People Under the Table	114
	More Creative Techniques	118
	About Scrolls	120
X	A FAMILY IN THERAPY	121
	Singing Lessons	123
	"Alternatives to Failure"	123
	Oral History Process Discussion	125
XI	<u>NELL SINTON. A THIRTY-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE</u>	126
XII	THOUGHTS ON:	130
	Writings	130
	Museum Docents	131
	Motivation, Confidence	133
	The Pleasure of Painting, Teaching, Making Mistakes	135
XIII	"THE LEGEND OF RECKENDORF"	138

XIV	THOUGHTS ON:	142
	The Eyes of an Artist	142
	Flowers	143
	Divorce, New Liberation	145
	Good Memories	146
	Teaching	148
XV	"SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF AN AMERICAN FEMALE"	150
	The Message	150
	Critical Reception	154
	"Reviews are...Not Why I Paint"	155
	"The Garden Party"	157
	My Family	159
	Another List: Relatives	162
XVI	COLLECTING	164
	A Start	164
	Traveling, Looking, Shopping	165
	Buying Important Contemporary Art	167
	J. DeFeo	169
	Boxes	170
	Pebble Mosaic, Projects	173
	Something From Nothing	174
	J. B. Jackson	177
	"What Do You See?"	178
	A World of Color	180
	An Afterword from Nell	181
XVII	MORE ON THE SAN FRANCISCO ART WORLD: A CORRESPONDENCE	182
	TAPE GUIDE	191
	APPENDICES	192
	A. <u>Autobiography: The Social Development of an American Female.</u> Written between 1971 and 1980.	194
	B. "After Dinner Scroll, Under the Table at the Donner Party," Oakland Museum <u>Magazine</u> , 1973.	222
	C. Under the Table at the Donner Party, A Dining Room Frieze. Edition for sale.	223
	D. Statement about Scroll II prepared as gallery handout, Oakland Museum. Introduction by Harvey Jones, 1976.	227
	E. Writings to Accompany Drawings in Scroll II, 1976.	229
	F. Scroll II, script for video.	231
	G. Ways of Looking at an Exhibition [class for docents], 1978.	242
	H. Artistic Growth and Models, and About Painting Women, 1976.	255

I. Color Direction, 1977.	266
J. The Garden Party, Statement for the Braunstein Gallery exhibition, 1980.	271
Jj. Oakland <u>Tribune</u> review by Charles Shere, February 1981.	275
K. Secret Places, 1983.	277
L. Interview with Nell Sinton, by Barry Gifford, <u>Berkeley Monthly</u> , 1983.	279
M. A Talk About My Two Scrolls, and Workshop for Scroll Talk, 1984.	282
N. The Empty Room is Full of Shadows, 1985.	287
O. Landmarks--Points of View, 1986.	288
P. Notes about my Children, and Education. Written May 8, 1992.	289
Q. "Mistakes."	291
R. "Creating a Safe Place for the Gifted Child," 1982.	293
S. Lesson Plans.	296
T. Newspaper reviews.	301
U. Chronology.	308
V. "Nell Sinton, A Thirty-Year Retrospective," Catalogue of Exhibition at Mills College, 1981.	
INDEX	311

INTRODUCTION--by Margot Sinton Biestman

Alive, lively, always challenging. I am pleased and proud to introduce my mother, Nell Sinton, an artist-painter.

Mischievous, curious, insightful, outspoken--sometimes to the point of spite--my mother is never boring. She is authentic--a woman of integrity, intelligence, and a highly developed sense of aesthetics. My mother is playful, able to laugh at herself, willing to admit mistakes--even make use of them, especially in her art work. Sometimes unforgiving, demanding, snobbish--she's even impossible--but at other times warm, giving, and caring. She is a woman determined to grow.

Above all else, I am forever grateful to my mother for being an artist--for helping me to see the world through the eyes of an artist. By her example, I opened my views about life through careful observation of nature and people. Her being an artist gave me different possibilities to explore, experiment with, invent, to be surprised by. Had it not been for her artistic spirit I might have succumbed and drowned in family, school, and social "shoulds and oughts." I am also grateful to her for her quest for greater knowledge and her desire to learn, which became part of my commitment to grow myself. She was willing to make important changes in her life, so she could fulfill her dreams as a professional artist. Then she became a mother whom I could love.

What a treat it was for me to support her authenticity and growth as an artist and to see her develop into a woman who learned to respect and care about my husband Perry, our children, and grandchildren. She is a woman who learned from us and was open with her feelings of envy and appreciation for the different way we chose for our relationships and family life.

In my early days when I came home from school and called, "M-o-o-o-m," I remember finding my mother painting in a closet, hiding her special talent. I remember her frustrations then; she was in a hurry, ill-tempered, always looking for time to be alone, painting. I remember her colors, her rich sensual palette.

When I was young it was hard to compete with her and live up to her artistic standards. It was also hard to live with her frustrations and conflicts when she wasn't painting. I felt resentful that I didn't get the attention I needed and wanted, and took it out on her by my screaming tantrums.

But I also remember my pride in my mother during her early art shows. I liked standing next to her and hearing people's comments about her work. However, one time we got in trouble together when she asked me to join her in reaching over the neighbor's wall to pick some huge rhododendrons to float in the pool at the San Francisco Art Institute for the celebration of a group show. The part that I didn't like at the time was hearing the neighbor screaming at us for stealing flowers that my mother could well afford to buy. Had anyone stolen a flower from my mother's garden she would have hollered a threat to call the police. Though I applauded her at the time, and followed in her footsteps stealing flowers for years afterward, when I was older I was embarrassed to have been her uncaring and disrespectful accomplice.

I remember my delight when she chose to join me when I needed to grow and change during the time of my parents' divorce. Different opportunities presented themselves in the sixties, and after becoming a professional metalsmith, I became a professional educator and author, and Saturday painter.

How thrilled I was to sit with my mother and sister, Joan, in Juanita Sagan's art room for the first time. How reluctant my mother had been when I suggested this meeting. "How can a school educator teach me anything about art?" She had asked, with a scoff. But when Juanita asked her what she wanted, she said how much she longed for the return of her sense of humor. Juanita asked her to draw a picture of herself with her eyes closed, using her unaccustomed hand. Joan and I were excited as we watched her authenticity develop in her self-portrait and other family drawings of family members. She later showed these works as "The Rogues Gallery," and invited everyone to come to her house and see if they could identify themselves. Her humor and mischief had returned in a more artistic way than ever before.

I thoroughly enjoyed watching her progress from her abstractions in the fifties into her beautiful figurative paintings. With my encouragement she began to take more professional pride in her work. How pleased I was to see her put her social commentaries into wonderful scrolls, digging into her own flesh and blood and developing her figures from her family and portraying them as they are with a freshness and honesty I treasure. I love the way she moved her spite from people onto her paper. I love the way her strength matured.

When she showed her scroll, "The Social Development of An American Female," at the Oakland Museum, Joan and I had a great time listening to viewers' remarks. Our favorite was when two women came to the end of the scroll, having read all of my mother's commentaries. "I do wonder how her children turned out," said one, with concern. "Oh dear," answered her friend, "I wonder." Joan and I nudged each other. "Just fine," we said, with pride. "Here we are!"

My mother not only learned to develop herself and her paintings; she also was willing to learn to teach from me and Juanita. In the beginning of her teaching at Student League in San Francisco, I remember kicking her under the table to try and stop her from making put-downs of students' work. In time she learned the art of feedback to help her students expand with her insightful and positive critiques. When she added teaching to her repertoire, she traveled around the country by herself as an art teacher.

And delightfully, she continues to be a student--this time in my course, Creative Behavior in Aging. She also keeps up her exploration of alternatives in the physical health care field--using acupuncture, herbs, Feldenkrais movement, osteopathy, and an occasional Jin Shin Jyutsu treatment. She is in excellent physical condition and leaps at the chance to be a recipient of my Middendorf Breath Work training.

I admire how my mother's paintings continue to grow in her eighties where I find her absorbed, focused, and happiest. We take the most pleasure in her when she leaves behind the "shouldly-ought-to's" in her life and anxieties about older age, with accompanying loss of short-term memory. We love the special times when she lets herself be cared for by Perry and me at Sea Ranch--when she lets us enjoy her company and we enjoy hers.

Margot S. Biestman

October 1992
Sausalito, California

INTRODUCTION--by Joan Sinton Dodd

I have been asked by Suzanne B. Riess, Senior Editor of the Regional Oral History Office of The Bancroft Library, to be one of the persons to add some introductory statements to Nell's history.

I am Nell's second daughter, Joan. I am struck by my feelings of resistance at taking time out to compose my thoughts for this letter. The writing of this letter takes time away from my own drawing and painting which are currently my top priorities. I feel frustration and resentment at having agreed to write this letter. Now I can begin to finally appreciate those very same feelings that my mother had in the 1930s and 1940s in confronting her responsibilities of bringing up her children and struggling to find a satisfying balance with her lifestyle and artistic ambition.

What I would like to do in this letter is to recapture the rare and irreplaceable qualities of that artist which she could not help giving to me. As a child, I never felt as important and valuable as the exciting "magic" that went on in her studio--a place she called the "closet." I remember it measuring about six by ten feet. It was on the second floor of our Pacific Heights house with a north window overlooking the San Francisco Bay. Standing outside the "magic closet," with the delicious odors of oil paints and turpentine, I peeked into the lush velvety colors on her palette and knife dipping into them and smearing the riot of colors and hues onto the canvas. I saw her as some lofty priestess in her blue Chinese coolie coat, which served as a smock worn for that special time of creation. I also saw her as a raging lioness, should any of us children try and distract her from her painting. I was mesmerized by what I saw as a powerfully mad figure in the attic.

I did feel honored by her perception of us as meaningful in her life through the splendid photographs she took of us as children. She created a record for all of us: from our nannies giving us baths, to dance performances, birthday parties, outings to the beach and mountains. She developed and printed her own photographs in a darkroom in the basement. She also took movies of us, and I can remember her great irritation at trying to splice bits of film strips together in a clunky machine on her desk. Occasionally, she did paintings of me, my sister, and brother, but from a distance; for example, placed at intervals down our long hallway or on an outside balcony of our house. I recall two portraits of my brother and sister which had little development of their facial features and another one of myself in bed with "yet another cold" which I saw as a cartoon of myself. A great exception to these is a portrait I have now which she painted when I was eleven years old. It portrays me, wearing a bright wreath of flowers (in reality, it was watercress) and my pet

canary perched on my head. Another painting I treasured was of a little girl with a balloon, wandering down the hallway which darkened at the end of the corridor. Wisps of fog floated through the air above her. A stuffed green chair and a table was set for tea and pastries, in the beginning of the hallway. Who was that little girl? Was it me or possibly she? I never asked but felt a deep connection to the image. My great aunt Marian bought this oil painting and I expressed such disappointment and upset, my mother did another smaller one as a gift for me. I was overwhelmed, understanding her dislike and impatience in repeating an art piece.

I cannot remember my mother ever giving us art lessons. I soaked up her unique way of seeing by saturation, by osmosis.

Regardless of her painting styles: from realism, to surrealism, to impressionism, and then abstract expressionism, her paintings all emanated magnificent color and intriguing spaces and powerful and dynamic relationships.

As the years went on, I recognized an ominous and shadowy quality in her work. Some illustrations of this were manifested in the mysterious linen closet, the stairs to nowhere, the engineer looking backwards as the train proceeds to who-knows-where, the cold and glacial portrait of her mother which now hangs over her own fireplace. I felt we bonded in living with a constant and enigmatic spirit in our lives, past and present.

During the 1970s and 1980s, I became more consciously aware that her paintings expressed some of my own visions. I was flattered that she asked me to suggest titles for her works in her show at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in September of 1970. I was drawn into and intrigued by her inventions and three dimensional constructions within boxes, secret worlds within worlds which I could not interpret verbally. They held collections of special bits and pieces put together in mysterious ways.

In the last five years, I have felt more free to give full attention to my mother's work. I am astounded by the energy of her construction machinery in the landscape, the "topsy-turvy," earthquaking quality she accentuates in her paintings of San Francisco streets, and the destruction of the cumbersome Embarcadero Freeway. She expressed a profound and ethereal quality of light and space in her bedroom, a strength and power in a painting of my husband, Bruce, amidst tiger lilies in the woods, and an exquisite delicacy of our daughter, Bekah's, back at the age of ten. I love a drawing of a prickly chestnut, barely resting within her hand, magnified about five times its own size.

Since the days of abstract expressionism, I feel her paintings are less fragmented, more cohesive, and whole. There are exciting surprises and jarrings that are both purposeful and unconscious. These positive changes in my mother's expression, toward the more personal and integrated, evolved during her association with the Institute for Creative and Artistic Development. However, I think my freedom to openly enjoy and reveal my own feelings and responses with my mother has only been made possible by my having left the Sagan Institute with its psychotherapy and classes. The programming at the Institute recreated and continued the psychodynamics and some of the rigid structuring that I experienced in my own family of origin. This had the consequence of distancing the relationship between my mother and myself. In its beginning, the Institute seemed to promise a freeing up of forbidden areas of expression, but ultimately it did not contribute to a confidence in my own artistic expression and understanding.

Since leaving the Institute, I have been able to separate myself as an artist from my mother. I now can accept and appreciate our similarities and differences of approach, execution of technique and skills. This new beginning has helped me to be comfortable to do my own work and love and admire hers without the heavy burden of competition and comparisons on the basis of a good-bad continuum. I enjoy visiting museums and galleries with her now, and we can talk of appreciations and criticisms about artistic choices in various works. With the permission to travel my own road, I am able to have a deeper knowledge and respect for her courageous struggle to become the accomplished and singular artist that she is.

Ultimately, I believe that her artistic nature, her sense of curiosity, daring, and capacity for awe and wonder, has made us creative survivors of our personal histories. It was those qualities that connected and grounded us to the world through drawing what we see, line to line, color next to color, lightness near to darkness, positive with negative spaces, and motion and stillness, from moment to moment.

Joan S. Dodd

October 1992
Berkeley, California



INTRODUCTION--by Ruth Braunstein

How do you write about Nell Sinton? It's not easy, but who is one to pass up an opportunity like this: to express my feelings about one of my artists and one of my friends; a rare combination.

I am an art dealer and represent the work of Nell Sinton. Nell's work was recommended to me by James Newman who was the director of the Dilexi Gallery in San Francisco. Nell was doing collages and boxes. A studio visit was arranged, and from out of that visit, we presented her first exhibit at the Quay Gallery in 1968. It was a gala affair with every important celebrity of the art world present, a great tribute to Nell, but then she had been a supporter of the art world, and it was wonderful to see how the artists all supported her. A lavish party was held with Nell sitting at the head table as "Queen for the Evening" and the rest of us actually performing before the Queen. It was a memorable evening. From that moment on until now, Nell and I have worked together as artist to dealer, and as my mentor on "aging gracefully."

Working with Nell professionally has been a rare experience. Her background and knowledge of the art scene in California is endless and we have spent many hours talking about it. For her exhibits her work was always ready on time: ready to hang, her mailing lists up-to-date, she was warm and gracious at her openings. What dealer could ask for anything more? And we even sold her work.

She has been a mainstay of the art community for many years even if she does not want to admit it. She has shared herself and her knowledge generously with people who were learning about the art scene here in the forties, fifties, and sixties. She has the eye and the good sense to zero in on many young artists of that time, and we all have enjoyed seeing her collection which occupies the majority of her house. Not too many Sintons around. That alone is refreshing.

Nell is a diligent artist. Working in her studio is a way of life. She has mastered the art of "working at home" while maintaining her regular style of life. I have found her very grumpy when she has not been in the studio, so you know that from 9 a.m. to noon, don't call Nell. Looking at her art from the sixties until now, there is a constant thread, her use of color. No matter if it's a recent landscape or an early abstraction, you can always identify her work. As she is growing older I find that she is doing more work about things that have affected her life as a life-long resident of San Francisco. A visual journey which can only be expressed by an artist.

She works in many mediums, including oil, collage, assemblage, and watercolors. Watercolor has been her latest challenge, and it is refreshing to see the growth of her work. It is the same kind of spirit, energy, and curiosity that has kept Nell "young." She has been an inspiration to me over these years, and what I have learned from her is that "growing old is not for sissies."

Ruth Braunstein
Braunstein/Quay Gallery

October 1992
San Francisco, California

INTRODUCTION--by Tony DeLap

In 1963 I started showing at Jim Newman's Dilexi Gallery. I was doing some work for the San Francisco Art Institute and showing in their Annuals at the San Francisco Museum of Art. I was asked to be on the Art Association Board, and it was about this time I met Nell Sinton. I had never met such an articulate, sensitive, and sophisticated person.

We became friends.

Nell had a Morgan sports car and so did I. One day we went down to the Lanyon Gallery in Palo Alto and Nell bought a Robert Hudson. Nell and Stanley had wonderful parties--mostly artists. The artists all loved her, and respected her, because first of all she was a good painter. Nell gave me great moral support in those days--always a friend, always supportive, never patronizing.

When Kathy and I were married in 1964, Nell and Stanley were at our wedding. Nell loves Kathy and was happy for us both. It has always shown in all the years since.

We moved to Los Angeles in 1965. Over time, distance became greater with so many friends in San Francisco, but it never did with Nell. She visits us here, and when we are in San Francisco, it is unthinkable not to see her if possible.

We talk on the phone.

She sends us restaurants to go to in Paris, and recipes, and art reviews, and wonderful post cards. We try to do the same, but never as well.

In 1987 Kathy and I stayed six weeks in Santa Margherita, Italy. Nell came for two weeks and visited. We painted watercolors on a cold day at the beach. We all drove to Florence. Nell knew great places to eat. We went down the Ligurian Coast one day to a fishing village for lunch. It was cold and rainy and Nell loved it. The three of us often talk of this trip.

Recently we traded our art. I think we both loved this. Writing this I miss Nell--I think I will call her.

Tony DeLap

October 1992
Corona del Mar, California

INTRODUCTION--by Philip E. Linhares

While I don't recall the specifics of first meeting Nell Sinton, it had to be in the fall of 1967, following my appointment as Director of Exhibitions for the San Francisco Art Institute. Nell was a member of the Artist's Committee, an advisory group I was to work with; she and other members of what I considered the "Old Guard," such as Ruth Armer and Ralph DuCasse, graciously welcomed me to the Art Institute.

The Art Institute was a place filled with tradition, and Nell was a part of the tradition through many connections, as I was to discover. First, she studied there in the late 20s and again in the late 30s, the second time as a "resumer," a wife and mother. The gallery that I directed, after 1969 was named after her uncle, Emmanuel Walter, an art patron in an earlier era who gave the school many works from his collection.

Nell, Ruth, Ralph DuCasse and other members of the Artist's Committee participated in perhaps the first two exhibitions I organized at the San Francisco Art Institute, and I remember their encouragement, and their pleasure at the opening reception in how the exhibition looked. Their reaction gave me a great deal of confidence. There was a subtle quality to how this happened, and for as long as I have known Nell she has extended this sense of "giving confidence" to me and my family.

During my years at the Art Institute Nell was for me a source of good advice and counsel. She has a very particular and often unexpected way of looking at people and situations; she is an astute judge of character, and her personal opinions on people in the art field astounded me. Those judgements always seemed to be accurate, I learned, as I gained more experience in the field.

I probably got to know Nell best during 1979-1980, when I was working with her on her thirty-year retrospective exhibition for the Mills College Art Gallery. We spent time going over her work stored in the basement and at Quay Gallery, and she talked about the sources of the work and told stories that pertained to the work, or to exhibitions in which it appeared. I greatly enjoyed hearing stories of her early life.

Some of the early paintings in Nell's retrospective prompted the stories; paintings like The Neighbor's House, 1947, Child in Bed With a Cold, 1948, Old Pope House, 1950, for example. My wife Sharon Golden, a graphic designer who designed the catalog for the exhibition, and I delighted in hearing about some of the customs and traditions adhered to by people of Nell's social class--the fad of outdoor sleeping porches, the servants' quarters, entertaining at Lake Tahoe each summer, and the twenty-five steamer trunks accompanying the honeymooning couple!

Nell's show at Mills College was one of the most memorable and satisfying exhibitions I have produced. The installation, I thought, was just right, it showed her work to great advantage. And the range of her work was so impressive, starting with the early realistic work, then to the abstract expressionist paintings, surreal constructions and boxes, then the more recent figurative paintings, and finally, the scrolls and new work. My recollections of the exhibition are that it was so substantial, and that each work and group of works was so strong, that it was difficult for me to comprehend why Nell's work had not received the attention and acclaim it deserved. I think Nell was very pleased with the exhibition, but disappointed, as I was, that the catalog was not available during the show but after the fact.

In recent years Sharon and I, and sometimes our four-year-old Regine and twin babies Celeste and Gabrielle, visit Nell at her home for lunch and conversation. Nell's home is one of the most wonderful environments I know. The art she has installed, the loft-like spaces, the view and the light all combine to create a space that is so very fresh and alive. It really exemplifies Nell. It is not the home of an old person.

Nell, despite her age, will never be an old person in her thinking and her approach to life. Like Bob Howard--Robert Boardman Howard, the late sculptor--who in his eighties travelled to Afghanistan and rode in jeeps to seek out nomadic people, Nell continues to travel, read, visit exhibitions, explore new restaurants, and in general do the things that artists do to be a part of the here and now. I don't know anyone less sentimental than Nell Sinton, or anyone who has savored life with more attention and appreciation.

Philip E. Linhares
Chief Curator of Art

December 30, 1992
The Oakland Museum
Oakland, California

INTERVIEW HISTORY--by Suzanne B. Riess

Nell Sinton is a San Francisco artist whose paintings are full of light and texture and pleasure for the viewer. She works in oil, watercolor, and collage. In her biographical statement for this oral history memoir she lists as her occupations "artist and visiting teacher." Nell teaches about color and method, as well as important and original techniques for locating and expressing what is within, and "how to make mistakes."

When the Regional Oral History Office proposed to Nell Sinton that she do her oral history memoir, we knew it would be an important addition to the history of art in the San Francisco Bay Area--the art institutions, the museums, and the artists. In interviewing Nell we would also be reaching into the collective history of the Walter family, a lineage of sensitive and supportive art patrons as well as artists.

Nell grew up surrounded with aesthetically pleasing objects, and with a sense of responsibility to art. But stronger than the custodial heritage was Nell Walter's own wish to be an artist. The oral history is the story of the wish, the determination, the fulfillment, and along the way the revelations of self.

Nell is "well-rounded." Swimming, including across the Golden Gate, playing tennis, speaking French, walking and hiking and discovering vistas to paint, writing both autobiographically and instructionally, cooking and gardening, travelling and photographing, even singing an aria. She married Stanley Sinton when she was twenty years old, and she is mother of three children, and grandmother and great-grandmother.

To put "well-rounded" in quotation marks is to bow to Nell Sinton's sense of the ironic. Today her over-the-shoulder glances at history, and forays into autobiographical writing--her Autobiography is appended--make her both her own sharpest critic, and yet insightfully critical of being critical!

If the reader registered the "well-rounded" list as really a list of amusing recreations, Nell would probably not disagree. But a list of responsibilities, home and hearth, committees, commissions, threatened to thwart the artist. Nell realized that she had determinedly to resist certain expectations--the committees, the social demands that the committees implied--and she had to get time for herself. Her daughters remember calling through a closed door to get their mother's attention. Behind the door, Nell was painting. Closing and locking the door was the only way to get to that important work.

* * *

The opening five introductions to Nell by her daughters Margot Sinton Biestman and Joan Sinton Dodd, her dealer Ruth Braunstein, her artist friend Tony DeLap, and her curator friend Phil Linhares of Mills College and The Oakland Museum, as well as a number of reviews and critical pieces about Nell in the Appendices, together provide a good look at the person and presence that Nell was, and is. However, in this history of the interview I want to say what it was like to do the twelve hours of interviews with Nell, interviews which began in April 1992, and finished the following September.

I took notes after the initial interview session, about the place I had been, and the people I was meeting for the first time. Before we began to interview we walked through Nell's house. She lives in an airy high-ceilinged, big-windowed William Wurster-designed house in San Francisco on Russian Hill, a house oriented to a view of Bay and Bridge. The foreground view is through the tracery of the Ghirardelli Chocolate Factory sign. More immediately she looks down to a separate studio not now in use, and a colorful garden below. That day Nell was working in the studio in the house on a painting from a photograph of herself with a grandson. For the interviewing we settled into the skylit and bright with south light room of the painting "The Beaded Curtain" [illustrated].

Margot Biestman was present, as planned, for the first interview. Both mother and daughter were dressed in bright t-shirts, leggings, especially decorative socks--conversation-piece socks. They looked athletic, wore their hair neat and short. Because of problems with her back Margot ended up lying on the floor with her feet on a sofa, for relief.

I, on the other hand, was dressed to represent The Library and I perched on a chair, focussing on Nell, but attending also to soto voce interjections from Margot. As will be seen in the oral history, in the "process" discussions, Margot inquired whether her presence was okay. The thought was that without Margot the effort for Nell to remember would be daunting--and an important part of the idea of "remembering" for Margot and Nell was taking appropriate credit, remembering what was really true, and "authentic." We discussed alternatives, such as having Nell and Margot go over material between and after sessions. The decision was to have Margot part of all the tapings.

The second interview was in Sausalito, where Margot and Perry Biestman live. They too are blessed with an inspiring vista, over treetops and out to Bay and Islands. The scene felt familiar, like a recent painting of Nell's, and it was very much a reminder of how the artist translates the postcard view into original and significant art.

For each of the interviews--the rest of which were held at Nell's house--Nell began by wanting to talk about or read something that was more or less prepared. Usually she and Margot had previewed the upcoming interview beforehand, knowing what I wanted to cover in that session, and usually they both had had an opportunity to talk with Juanita Sagan, Nell's very close friend and confidant--often a point of reference in the interviews.

As already indicated, Nell felt strongly that some of her best work was in her teaching, and the inclusion in the Appendices of lesson plans and essays by Nell is testimonial to the importance of the teaching. She wanted to talk about that. She was also proud of her Scrolls, the wit and inventiveness and the meaning of them, and wanted to explain and to enjoy them all over again with the interviewer.

* * *

A few months before the last interview session I wrote to Nell and described to her the editing task that lay ahead. I had been given access to all of her writings, and reviews, and so on, and I promised her that I would include the full Autobiography. I wrote in my letter:

"You are such a good writer. Clearly you put a lot into 'getting it right' in writing. (Right here and now, parenthetically, I want to say how much I hope that you will let the oral history transcript remain true to itself, the conversation of three people--Nell, Margot, and Suzanne--enjoying trying to 'do the historical thing' about a life. The way the oral history will be of undisputed, unique value is if you can permit it to stand as it is--barring corrections of fact--allowing the reader to 'hear' you thinking things through, laughing, puzzling, bemused, listening, uncertain. That version of you will bring the bound volume of oral history etc., leaping to life!)"

I also wrote:

"Nell, what have we created in terms of an object? This verbal collage is in some ways another version of your autobiography, illustrated, with laughter added! As well, as samplings from your desk and filing cabinet! A very pleasing version, tidy, but not too tidy, colorful, but black and white, too. A book, with a table of contents and an index, and with you content to let it represent you."

Nell liked that idea of the collage, and when she and Margot reviewed the transcript they made very few changes.

One afternoon after the interviews were finished the three of us spent a pleasant couple of hours looking through neatly labeled envelopes of old family pictures--one might not know without being told how orderly this artist Nell Sinton is--and selected a group of family pictures, in many cases by important photographers, to illustrate the volume. We also included good photographic reproductions of Nell's paintings.

It was a pleasure to work with Nell and with Margot. My thanks to them, and to the agreeable gang of "introducers." Thanks to J.R.K. Kantor, retired University Archivist, for his proofing of the final transcript. Thanks to Katie Crum and Mill's College for providing us with copies of the Catalogue of the retrospective exhibition. Thanks to Ruth Braunstein and the Braunstein Gallery for showing me Nell's paintings, giving me use of their slide collection, and for the exceptional and generous hosting of the presentation of the oral history.

The Regional Oral History Office is under the direction of Willa K. Baum, and is an administrative division of The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley.

Suzanne B. Riess
Interviewer/Editor

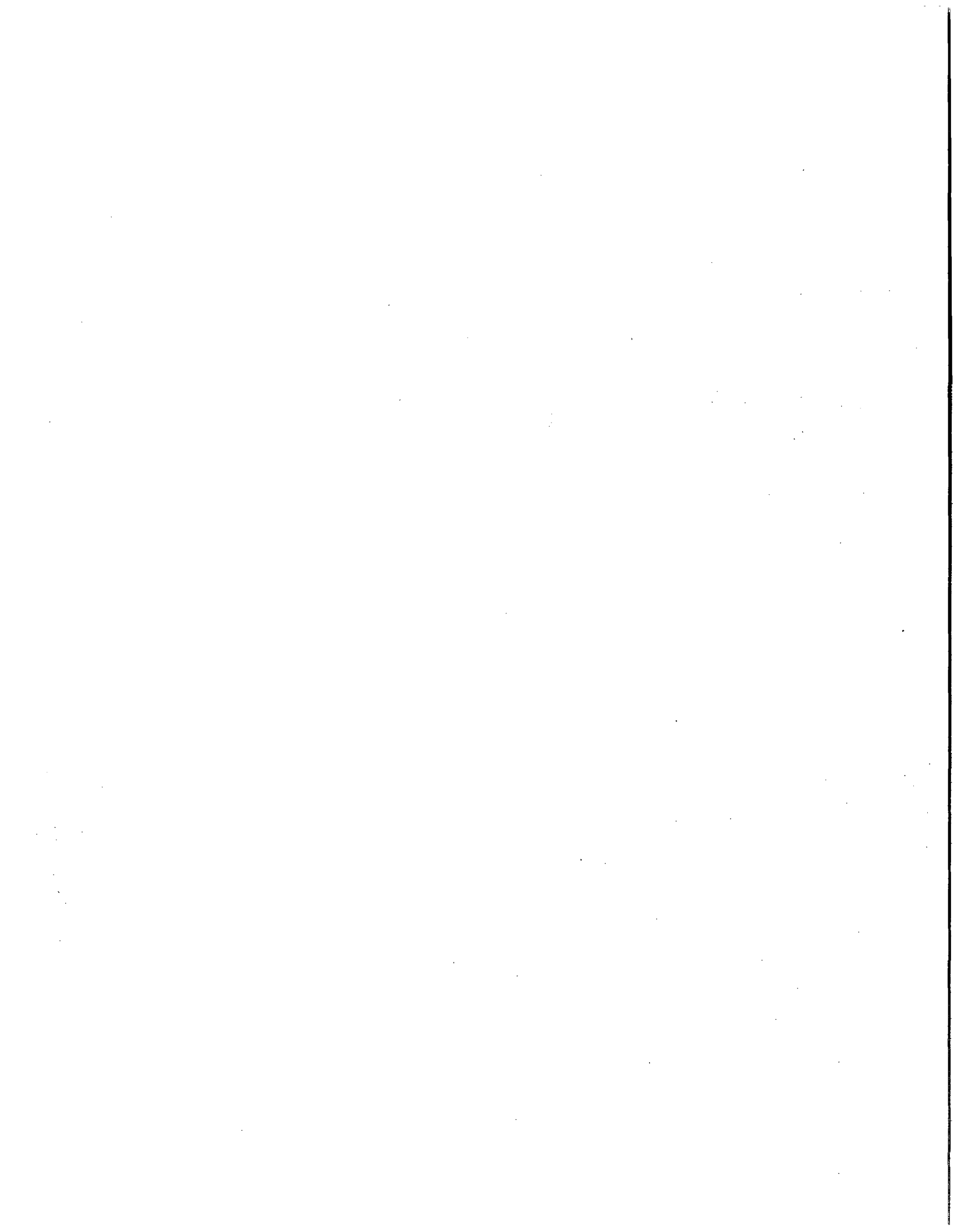
June 28, 1993
The Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

Nell's sisters, Marjorie Walter Seller
and Carol Walter Sinton do not share many
of Nell's criticisms regarding their parents.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name Eleanor W. Sinton
Date of birth June 4, 1910 Birthplace San Francisco
Father's full name John J. Walter
Occupation merchant Birthplace San Francisco, Ca.
Mother's full name Florence Schwarz Walter
Occupation Book Binder, artist.
and Housekeeper
and Hostess Birthplace San Francisco, Ca.
Your spouse Stanley Henry Sinton Jr.
Your children Margot S. Bieatman, Joan S. Dodd,
John Walter Sinton
Where did you grow up? San Francisco, Ca.
Present community San Francisco, Ca.
Education Miss Burke's School, S.F. San Francisco School of
Fine Arts, (S.F. Art Institute)
Occupation(s) Artist, living in San Francisco. Visiting teacher
at the following
S.F.A.T., Smith College, Mt. Holyoke College, Mills College
U.C. Inverness, U.C. Berkeley, Agona Beach, La., U. Baton Rouge La.
Areas of expertise Colleges in Hawaiian Islands.
Painting in oil and watercolor, collage.
Other interests or activities Swimming, tennis, Tai Chi, French language,
music, walking + hiking, Institute for Creative and Artistic
Development, writing, cooking, travel, gardening.
Organizations in which you are active none now. I am involved in
painting, travel -



I FAMILY BACKGROUND AND INFLUENCES

The Greenebaums and Walters

[Interview 1: April 29, 1992] ###¹

Suzanne: [asks question before tape recorder is on about what Nell Sinton and Margot Biestman want or expect to come from doing an oral history]

Nell: What I see coming through it all is energy. I always had a lot of energy, but I never knew my direction for a long, long time.

Margot: But to answer Suzanne's question about "What do you want to come out of this?"

Nell: What I want to come out of it is that I definitely--I don't know why I care so much about being known as an artist, except that it's been so hard for me to get such recognition, I feel, because of my background, mostly.

Suzanne: Because of which part of this background?

Nell: My social situation. My silver spoon. [laughter] I kept wanting to get tarnished all the time, but I liked the privilege, and so I was confused.

I was born into an artistic family, to a certain extent. Yes, a large extent. Don't you agree, Margot?

Margot: Half of them were artists and half of them were businessmen.

¹### This symbol indicates that a tape or segment of a tape has begun or ended. A guide to the tapes follows the transcript.

Suzanne: The art part is your uncle Edgar Walter and your mother, Florence Walter?

Nell: Oh, how do you know about that?

Suzanne: Because of her book-binding.

Nell: My family--. I can show you briefly some time, if you want to see it, in my father's notebooks--. The whole family was greatly given to jokes and observation of birthdays and stuff with parties and written stuff, and plays and all that. And my father turns out to be a very good cartoonist. My grandmother's brother, Joseph Greenebaum--

Suzanne: Greenebaum?

Nell: Greenebaum, which was shortened by many of the Greenebaums to Green because--I don't know whether it was anti-Semitism that made them do that, shorten that, or as they said, "It's easier for people to say Green than Greenebaum." Or, "It's hard on the children at school to have German names." I don't know.

Suzanne: The Greenebaums were in San Francisco?

Nell: Yes, the Greenebaums were all living in San Francisco, except Uncle Joe, who lived in Los Angeles. He was a very poor artist, but he supported himself. But they never left him alone, and they were picking on him and letting him know he was not a good artist. So they were confused.

I mean, if you were going to be an artist, then you would be like Edgar Walter, who was an official artist, an architect's artist. He went to the right school in Paris, and he stayed there for some years. He was a very attractive man, and very suitable at dinner parties, and he knew all the artists, besides. He was very stylishly bohemian.

Suzanne: Did that mean that he had broken away?

Nell: Yes, but he was a Bohemian Club-type artist [and they] were very acceptable, because it was very hard times here socially, because there weren't many artists around, and there weren't many musicians or artists of any kind. So when an artist turned up, painters, sculptors, musicians--Mischa Elman was one who lived here--these people were thrilled.

What happened to lots of German refugees, or let's call them something else, let's call them--what do you call somebody who just arrives in a place?

Margot: Immigrant?

Nell: Immigrant. They had been planning for this in Germany. The parents were merchants, business people, they say. They trained their boys, and there were many of them--the Walters, I'm talking about--to emigrate to the United States.

Suzanne: Did an eldest son stay behind, and the rest come seek their fortune?

Nell: No. Well, wait a minute? Did somebody stay home?

Margot: My understanding was that everybody came. There were nine Walter boys who came.

Nell: Yes, I think they all came. Well, see, I'll go into this. I found this out much later. My parents--we went to Europe often, but we never went to the old birthplace. It was never mentioned until a few years ago, when my son John, who is a professor at a college in New Jersey, was sent to do some work in Switzerland. With his family, they went for a year. And he decided that he wanted to know about Reckendorf, because we only knew the name.

He invited me to go with him, and it was extremely revealing. It's a tiny village, smaller than Tahoe City, a really tiny village. There was a mayor who showed us around. He had been in the last war, and he was a prisoner of war in Texas. There was a still thriving and important brewery in Reckendorf, and it was right next to this town called Bamberg, which is a thriving business town.

I was taken to the cemetery, a beautiful little cemetery, where were the original relatives of the Haases who moved to San Francisco, the Hellmans who moved to San Francisco--Jewish, all Jewish. It was a Jewish village, I think. But Hitler didn't seem to get to it. I asked, and they said no, but who would know if they were telling the truth or not?

Suzanne: Even on this recent trip they wouldn't have been telling the truth?

Nell: I don't know.

Suzanne: You actually talked to the mayor?

Nell: The mayor was a pompous German who didn't seem to know anything about anything. He told me the files were in the city hall of this village, and I asked to see them, and he wouldn't show them to me. I said, "Could I pay to see them?" and he said, "Yes, I'll send them to you," but he didn't.

Suzanne: But in any case, it was the village for more than the Walter family?

Nell: Oh, and the Slosses, many of the Jewish families came from there, and they all moved here. I'm interested that the Hellmans and the Walters had the biggest houses next door to each other [in Reckendorf]. When they moved to San Francisco, they lived next door to each other on Franklin Street, and they went downtown together to work. [laughter] It all kept on going.

Suzanne: But nobody ever mentioned this connection?

Nell: Yes, they mentioned the name of it, but it was as if-- [to Margot] What?

Margot: Can I inject something here? From the stories that I have heard, the Hellmans, the Haases and the Walters were in very stiff competition with one another, and most of them--the Haases and the Hellmans all had to do with business. The Walters had some artists in their family.

Nell: Oh, that's important.

Margot: And so the competition of who would make the most money, coming from this little town in Reckendorf, was always kind of under the table. And the Walters always came out on the short end of it because they were stuck with these artists. [laughter]

Nell: I can compare them to a couple of New York families, one is the Seligmans and the other is the Warburgs. The Warburgs were bankers from Hamburg. They all came about the same time to the United States. The Seligmans had a lot of artists in them, and the Warburgs were tremendously rich, are tremendously rich, as are the Hellmans and the Haases. But theirs is by marriage, I think, mostly. What's the name of those relatives, the Haas relatives? I forget.

Suzanne: Koshlands?

Nell: No, they weren't terribly rich. Yes, they were all part of the crowd, but the ones who made money--Margot's right--were bankers and business people.

The Artistic Component

- Margot: And the reason why I felt that background information was important was it laid the groundwork for part of why it was so difficult for Mom to get status as a professional artist in that family.
- Suzanne: Because there was so much ambivalence about it, or what?
- Nell: Yes.
- Margot: Well, yes, there was ambivalence. But there was a lot of put down attached to being an artist. Besides that, being a woman meant you couldn't be professional.
- Nell: But it was also important to encourage children in the arts. You know, "My child is a ballet dancer," "My child plays the piano beautifully." It was attractive to have talented children--at least until they grew up, when they were supposed to make money or marry money. And Margot's a very good example--we were very proud of her dancing and she loved it. I spent nights up at the Opera House when she was a page in "Sleeping Beauty," and encouraged her enormously. And so, when she was ready to go to college--. She was accepted at Stanford. We wanted her to go to Stanford, but Mary Martin or somebody was in town, and they invited her to go to New York with them, with the company.
- Margot: It was Katherine Dunham. I wasn't invited, but I wanted to apply.
- Nell: It was Katherine Dunham? She just died, I think.
- Margot: And my parents wouldn't support me to try for that career.
- Nell: No. We said, "Yes, okay. Well, if you first go to college, and then after that we'll consider the dancing part." Where, as Margot said, we should have said, "Yes, okay. Go ahead, go to New York. We will give you some money, but not enough to support you, so you'll have to work besides." We should have said that. But we didn't.
- Suzanne: Was it a decision that was thrashed out for a long time?
- Margot: Yes, quite long. And there was a perfect example of the conflict of values, because Mom hadn't gone to college herself, and thought that was a value. It was one of the conventions. That also played a big part in Mom's difficulty in taking credit as an

artist, because after all, she hadn't been to college. However, she taught in college, which is another subject.

Nell: [laughs] That was, I think, my greatest pride late in my life, when I learned to teach. I mean, I never crossed a campus without saying, "You didn't even go to college." [laughter]

Suzanne: When did you start having this sense of family significance?

Nell: Well, I always knew it because the house--my parents entertained a lot, and in the house we invited artists, and my father was the president of the San Francisco Art Institute, which was called the California School of Fine Arts then. He was the president of the board. I have a lot of newspaper clippings about him. He was very important in saving the Palace of Fine Arts when other buildings from the Panama-Pacific Exposition were being destroyed in 1919, stuff like that.

And my uncle was around and always drawing little pictures. The house at Tahoe was furnished with baubles and Oriental gewgaws. I knew everybody was an artist. But I thought everybody else was, too. At first I thought that; I didn't know we were so unusual in the crowd.

The Religious Component

Suzanne: Actually, I was asking a different question. I was asking in what sense did you get that message that your family was an important Jewish family, an important San Francisco family?

Nell: My father was also, might also have been the president of the board of [Temple Emanu-El]. We had to observe the important Jewish holidays. We had to do that side of it. I didn't put that in with art at all because I hated it. I thought it was hard and harsh.

Suzanne: They were unusually observant?

Nell: No. If you came from Reckendorf and all those towns, it was appropriate.

However, it was mixed with anti-Semitism, because it was very important for this particular crowd of Jews to be able to join any club, which they couldn't do, they were excluded. My father belonged to the Olympic Club, okay. He could not belong

to the Presidio Golf Club, certainly not Burlingame, but I think he would have liked to.

There is a very bad dichotomy here about anti-Semitism from the Jewish people as well as from outsiders. I had to go to Sunday school, but it was very confusing, because [in my home] I heard the Jews laughed at, the religion, and there were so many putdowns in the family, and then Jewish friends put down other Jews.

Suzanne: What was the kind of Jew that would be put down?

Nell: Well, certainly what they called kikes. That's a terrible name. A kike is a Russian Jew. If you had to be Jewish, you had to be German, otherwise forget it! Because the others came later.

Suzanne: I had thought the German Jews didn't go much to temple.

Nell: Oh, yes, they did. It was customary, whether they wanted to go or not. Jews don't have to go now, but the ones who do, seem to be really devoted Jews and serious about their religion. Also Jews are now more acceptable in the community.

[to Margot] Was it hard for you, too, to be Jewish?

Margot: Yes, it was.

Nell: Well, I tried to make my children go to Sunday school, because I had to. I tried to make my children do everything that I didn't like to do.

Margot: What was hard, I think, at least for us, and you've talked about it yourself, is the difficulty in the conflict in being Jewish and then coming from a family who hated to be Jewish. So that your mother went to the extreme. She couldn't stand to have noses discussed at the dining room table. And I can remember as a little girl going like this [does some pushing up motion of her nose], so that my nose wouldn't get too long. And my friend who was Jewish actually got a line across her nose.

Suzanne: Because of sort of attempting to disfigure herself?

Nell: It's as if, "People won't know that I'm Jewish if my nose is shorter."

Suzanne: [to Margot] Your friend actually got a line because she pushed her nose up so much?

Margot: Yes.

And then Gaggy, your mother, one of the things that was important, I felt, in her being an artist and becoming a bookbinder--and she didn't until she was fifty--was that because she hated being Jewish, one way of being accepted was to get into the cultural scene in San Francisco.

So, to answer part of your question that you asked Mom, with all of these different people coming to the house, with this lavish entertaining, both artists and cultural people, symphony conductors, and these famous people--

Nell: Not necessarily Jewish.

Margot: --maybe knowing famous people would help change your family's poor self-concept so that they would feel better. They'd have status.

Nell: And being with artists and famous people would enliven our social life. We had a social problem because I had gone to Miss Burke's School. As I say, I didn't want my children to have anything better than me, so they had to go to Burke's School because I hated it. [laughter] But they did much better than I did. I was too outlandish.

Suzanne: What was the outlandish behavior?

Nell: I was just impertinent, rude. If there were any mischievous girls in the class--I think I was told by Miss Burke that I was not a leader, but I certainly followed them.

It has been extremely hard, I think it still is, that you go with these girls that you meet at this school, you see them every day, you come to graduation and you're in the same social category, and you're not invited to the Cotillion. Jews were out. Until recently, when things are much better, I think. But you have to be a certain kind of Jew, a certain category, I think. Well, you have to be a certain kind of Gentile, too, to get invited to the Cotillion. But since this was a private school for girls, we didn't know too many kinds of people in those days. So it was confusing.

Suzanne: When you were mischievous or bad or whatever, was your mother very disapproving, or did she sort of congratulate you inwardly?

Nell: No, no, my mother didn't have a huge sense of humor.

She was a very beautiful woman, extraordinarily handsome. I don't know that she had anything to do with us about school. My father did. He just deplored me all the time. "There, you did

it again!" I dropped something, I forgot, I was sloppy, I was generally--unattractive behavior, and mostly insolent. Mostly very insolent. Because nobody was on my side. But they were in a way, they were proud of me.

Nell, the Eldest

Margot: One of the things that we've talked about that I thought was so important, some of the reason for your behavior, was that your brother--. She had an older brother.

Nell: Oh, I forgot.

Margot: And two sisters, younger. And her brother died when he was eleven and she was eight. Her family handled that so, so badly. Her mother went into this deep grief for like forever and ever and ever and ever. But Mom's feelings were never taken into account, she could never talk about the brother. She was embarrassed when she was asked on the street-- [to Nell] do you want to tell that?

Nell: After he died, we had a nurse, and we would walk in the neighborhood and play in the neighborhood. Often the neighbors-- the grown-up neighbors, not the kids--would say, "Where's your brother? Haven't seen him around lately." "Oh," I had to say, "he died." That was terrible.

Suzanne: It was a family secret in some way?

Nell: I don't know. The family didn't really know the neighbors particularly.

Margot: Well, it was a shame, shame was involved.

Nell: Shame was very much involved. You're not supposed to lose any child, and to have it be the only boy and the oldest--.

Suzanne: A kind of basic shame, where any deviation from the norm is heightened.

Nell: Yes, that's right.

The Snobbery, the Friends

Suzanne: Let me tell you an impression that I get from our oral histories. If you would look through the collection, you would think the thing that was good to be in San Francisco was German-Jewish. Well over half the oral histories are with generations of these people.

Nell: Really! That's interesting.

Suzanne: And pity the poor Catholic or Christian of some sort who tries to make their way.

Nell: I pitied them sometimes, when I went to my girlfriends' houses, and there was nothing much--. I went home, and my father always said, "Do they have any books?" And I said, "No, I didn't see any." "Well, paintings?" "Only Jesus Christ over the bed." [laughter] That's all I ever saw. "Do they have any music?"

Margot: [talking in background] I'm fascinated by Suzanne's comment.

Suzanne: It's almost like a set-up here, because who was there to feel threatened by?

Nell: Who?

Margot: Who was out there to threaten? Is that what you're asking?

Nell: Mr. Crocker.

Suzanne: Who were you daunted by? Mr. Crocker?

Nell: See, once I said--I think I thought, I may not have said it, maybe I've even written it, I think I wrote it--you'd think my parents' families who came from Germany were related to the Kaiser, because they put themselves on such a level, and all of their friends did too, on such a social level, that if they couldn't get into the Burlingame Country Club, there was no other club. You couldn't join anything then. And for instance, you had to marry a Jew because the Gentiles had such terrible food in the houses, and they didn't have any pictures on the walls or any books or anything.

Suzanne: In other words, it would be marrying down.

Nell: Marrying down. The only thing that you could marry up to would be Burlingame society, which you couldn't possibly get anybody to talk to you about because they were really bad snobs. I didn't

notice that they had so much either, except that they were earlier refugees.

Suzanne: Because you were more associated with the arts and the musical world you could mix more freely among these groups?

Nell: Well, that, and the arts and musical people weren't all Jews at all. But a lot of them were.

Margot: That was the hugest, the greatest gift, Joan and I feel, that we ever got from my mother, that she was an artist. Otherwise, we really would have been closed in those walls, and we couldn't have broken out.

Nell: Those kinds of people still are--. Friends--

Suzanne: They are still marrying each other is what you're saying?

Nell: They're marrying each other, yes. My sister said one day, "Nell, do you realize you hardly see any Jews?" I said, "I guess so."

##

Margot: The family really didn't accept who they were either, nor did the Gentiles. So it was such a conflict.

Suzanne: Jim Hart was a friend, wasn't he?

Nell: Yes. The Harts lived across the street [Buchanan Street]. His sister Ellen Bransten, was one of my best friends. Jim was too young for me. As we both grew old together I saw him more and more, and our interests were very much the same.

Suzanne: What about his family? Was there an artistic background there?

Nell: Oh, I don't know. Mr. Hart was terribly socially-oriented and I think drove his children crazy. They had relatives that were really New York social. I think keeping up--their mother, Jim's mother, died when he was about twelve, and then he was left with his social father.

Suzanne: Was he interested in books and fine printing early?

Nell: Even when he went to Stanford. And he roomed with some rich boys from Los Angeles, and he started a magazine, and they were simply awful to him about that. They hid it from him, they teased him, they burned it.

Suzanne: Why?

Nell: It wasn't what they liked to do. They thought he was crazy. It was hard. And he had this social father, and no mother. Who was a wonderful lady, apparently. He had his sister Ellen, but she had her own life to lead.

Suzanne: Was this anti-Semitism?

Nell: Well, partially, yes.

And so he married my sister Carol's best friend, Ruthie. Did you know her? I loved Ruthie. Wonderful, just wonderful. And she was around at Tahoe all the time, all the time, all the time, because she was my sister's best friend. Jim, I didn't see much of him, because he was a little younger than I, but as we grew up, and he got interested in museums and books, and his dictionaries or whatever they were, biographies, and all of that, I enjoyed him a whole lot. He was a friend. He used to come up to Tahoe with Ruthie, a lot. And he was entertaining, he never stopped reading.

Suzanne: And he was a collector. And interested in fine printing.

Nell: Yes, and David Magee, the book man, he was a very, very good friend of my mother's, and my mother was a big book collector. She had great books. You know what I have out of her library? Who's the Irish poet? Joyce. Ulysses. Mother got a kind of ordinary edition, but then found out later--oh, it was illustrated by Matisse. It was a press book, but much later we found out that the book was signed by both Matisse and Joyce.

Suzanne: And you still have it?

Nell: I got it, um hmm, and it's worth a lot of money.

But Jim Hart, he certainly made our summers at Tahoe enjoyable. He was always in good humor.

Post World War II Liberation. A Different San Francisco

Nell: I was personally thrilled with the influx of strangers who came about 1950, after the Second World War. I got to meet all kinds of new people. I didn't have to go with the temple people or that small crowd who counted their money. I got to meet all kinds of people.

Suzanne: The influx of artists who came?

Nell: Oh, the artists came later. By that time I was very much connected with the Art Institute here, and I met new artists, and, oh, all kinds of people. It was a big help.

Suzanne: But just in general, it all felt different after World War II?

Nell: Oh, yes. Don't you think so?

Margot: Or during the war. A Javanese prince would come, and all these wonderful Navy people, and none of them were Jewish, and it was a perfect opportunity to break out of the ghetto. And that's how I saw you.

Suzanne: How did you necessarily meet these people?

Nell: War work. And museum work. I was already getting involved with museums.

Mother, the Schwartz Girls

Suzanne: Where was the house you grew up in?

Nell: It was a marvelous, ancient Victorian on the corner of Clay and Buchanan streets in San Francisco, with an enormous lawn. A huge house, red-painted, dark red, and a dark red-painted garage, where my grandmother's chauffeur slept. We didn't have a chauffeur, my grandmother's chauffeur was there.

My uncle, Edgar Walter, when he was in town--

Suzanne: It was your grandparents' house?

Nell: It was my [mother's] parents' house. That happened a lot here. When some young people got married they moved in with the parents. The Haas-Lilienthal house--they were our cousins--when Mr. Haas died, one of the daughters, Alice Haas Lilienthal and her husband, Sam, took it over. And the Haas grandmother moved in with the married children.

Suzanne: Was it a marriage of love between your parents?

Nell: Apparently very romantic.

My mother had an exotic background in that her parents didn't come from Germany. They came from, well, it was almost Poland. The father, Mr. Schwartz--I didn't know him, he died

before I was born, before my mother was married. And his wife, my grandmother, came from Keokuk, Iowa.

You know, people made money awfully quickly in those days, who moved out here. This man [Schwartz] went into business with a relative name Stahl, and they dealt in coffee and tobacco in Guatemala. That meant my mother and her sister were taken to Guatemala quite a lot. I used to ask my mother about it, and she wouldn't talk about it. In those days Guatemala must have been quite complicated to get to. But anyway, they traded; they were in trade.

Suzanne: She wouldn't talk about it?

Nell: No, because it was different from the German, Haas-Lilienthal people, and all those other people.

Margot: She always put herself down for where she came from.

Nell: She was singularly beautiful, and so was her sister, and they [the family] made a lot of money. One day apparently--well, they came home from an extended trip to Europe, and the earthquake came in 1906. The mother had mysteriously died. They were living in the hotel, because the house on Clay Street, Clay and Buchanan, was being renovated, and it wasn't ready yet. So the mother and the two girls lived in the St. Francis Hotel until the house was finished. Subsequently, the mother died almost immediately. (I never could get this straight, none of us can.) So I think the girls were alone in the hotel.

The Walter Brothers, John and Edgar

Nell: My father heard--he was a young man in his twenties, and so was Edgar Walter, his brother--they heard that there were these two absolutely beautiful, exotic young women in the St. Francis Hotel who needed help. It was very romantic. And so they went to call, and they each married one of the sisters, one of the Schwartz girls.

Suzanne: What was your father's business?

Nell: David Nathan and Emanuel Walter and Company. D. N. & E. Walter. Isaac, my grandfather, was the youngest brother. He became the president after D. N. died. It was a business of floor coverings and draperies, wholesale and retail. They were successful so quickly, like all the businesses of the German--what would you call them, refugees?

Margot: Immigrants.

Nell: Immigrants. In no time at all they had this huge building. They traveled extensively, they didn't mind a bit getting on trains, such as they were in 1906 or so, after the earthquake. They worked hard, and it was very easy, apparently, to make money, and they were all in it, except some of the Walter brothers--

There were nine Walter brothers, and some of them moved back to Germany, or France, and one of them made a collection of paintings that was notable. It was the Emmanuel Walter Collection, which for a long time was in a museum. Then it was in the [San Francisco] Art Institute, and when the Art Institute built a new building and wanted to have a new exhibition room, they sold the painting collection to get money. But those were the artistic people.

Margot: To go back to your mother's family--I don't know if you are interested in this--the two Walter boys married these two Schwartz girls, and lived together, the four of them, in this big mansion.

Nell: Oh, they didn't, really. They got married two weeks apart and the Edgar Walters moved to Paris because he was an artist and he liked being there. My mother's sister, Pearl, she got pernicious anemia. So they moved back to San Francisco and lived in the house with the John Walters. That's what they did, but only for about two years. She took about two years to die.

Margot: While he was sculpting the model in the garage.

Nell: Uncle Gar, that's Edgar Walter, was sculpting the model. Which is restricted material, although everybody knows it now.

Suzanne: What kind of model are we talking about?

Margot: A lady.

Nell: If you're going to write about it I don't--oh, I guess it's all right, everybody knows it. What do you think? [laughter]

Margot: It was pretty long ago.

Nell: It was the only gossip we knew.

Margot: No, that's not true at all. [laughter]

Nell: Well, anyway, my mother accepted this insult, of him living with his model, which was dumb of him, he should not have done that,

because his wife was dying there, and he spent every night over in the garage with the model.

Suzanne: How old were you? Were you around?

Nell: Like two or three. It was all right, I guess. But when I was thirteen then he married her, and we had to withdraw speech from our uncle, we couldn't see him, we couldn't speak to him. A rift.

Suzanne: Is that where that story ends? Or did that rift heal?

Nell: That's all. Oh, he went on to fame and fortune in doing his sculptures.¹

Margot: No, it never got healed.

Nell: Oh, no, it never got healed.

Margot: My grandmother was a great grudge-bearer, to the max.

Nell: No, she was too hurt.

There's something we forgot that I want to tell you. An awful lot of people were dying in those years, but when my brother died--

[tape interruption]

Nell Becomes the "Only Boy"

Nell: I wanted just to say that another reason I was so changed by my brother's death was that I immediately became not only the oldest child, but my parents treated me as the only boy. And I did have a very good time because of my power then. I was everybody, I was the boss. My father took me to prize fights and football games and baseball games and I was the kingpin.

¹Edgar Walter did the spandrels over the arch of the stage of the San Francisco Opera House in 1932. Also the figures over the entrance to the PG&E Building, 245 Market Street, in 1925. [SR]

In 1932-1933, under the auspices of the WPA he made a sculpture in an architectural triangle in Washington D.C.--the most important thing he did. [NS]

I had been a little girl, only the second child, with curls, and all of a sudden I got very bossy to my sisters. And my whole social life had to change; I had to take my brother's place at parties because otherwise people would know there was a gap. It isn't that I disliked it. I became very important, but I didn't know how to behave, that's all. My behavior left a lot to be desired.

Suzanne: Were you close to your two sisters?

Nell: No. Well, Marjorie, my second sister, has always been jealous of me, in spite of the fact that she has qualities and talents that I haven't got at all. And my little sister, well, she's seven years younger. I was fond of her, I liked her. I read stories to her when she was very young and always in the hands of the governess. My mother wasn't able to take part in any family gatherings for about ten years.

Suzanne: Because of her tragedy?

Nell: Her tragedy, yes.

Suzanne: Had you and your brother been great pals?

Nell: My brother and I had been pals; yes, we had been friends.

Suzanne: So it was a tragedy for you.

Margot: And it was never--she [Nell] was never comforted, not dealt with at all. Only the mother got all of the sadness.

Nell: We had to wear black for a little while.

Margot: And you weren't allowed to talk about the good times that you had with him, you weren't allowed to mention his name.

Nell: No, because it made mother cry to have his name mentioned. It wasn't like Irish people must be, who have those wonderful wakes and enjoy themselves so much.

Generations of Summers at Rampart, Lake Tahoe

Suzanne: In a couple of our oral histories there have been references to "Rampart" [Walter home at Lake Tahoe]. Great times, laughter, merriment, wonderful sitting around the table. [Margot laughs] What's wrong with that picture?

Margot: Oh, God!

Nell: But we did have a good time. I mean, partly a good time--a different kind of time. Mother worked like a dog over the social part of it. She kept the place full of people her age, people of my age, Margot's age. Sometimes there were seventeen people for dinner, and lunch and breakfast, for three weeks at a time.

Tahoe itself was such a release for me, just to be at Tahoe, although I felt trapped. I was trapped by being Mrs. Hostess, helping my mother. I always felt I had an obligation, and at Tahoe it happened to be being a junior hostess. Someplace else I had an obligation to see that Mother didn't cry, or that the conversation was kept level. So being the oldest, I had many obligations. Of all of them, Tahoe was the best, although we did spend an awful lot of time panning the guests. I don't want to talk about that. [laughs]

Margot: That was the whole negative part of sitting under the blue umbrella, and both Mom and I have written stories about how awful the people-bashing was. I mean, one guest would arrive, and everybody around the blue umbrella would guess what they were going to be like, and after the guest had left--they hadn't even crossed the bridge across the Truckee River to Rampart before they were totally bashed. It was ghastly, the put-down, and the superficial conversation. When Mom talks about the good part, she means swimming in the river, tennis, and nature walks--and she would steal herself from the crowd to do her artwork, whatever it was, her art projects.

Nell: Like making this table, like this. [points to table in sitting room]

Suzanne: Pebble mosaics, yes.

Nell: I did a lot of that stuff. I also made a huge photo collage of all the guests who had visited us.

Margot: It was a tremendous social pressure, just tremendous. And it took its toll on you.

Nell: Yes, it made me scream.

Margot: She just screamed, yes.

Nell: I gave orders. To the children I said, "Get off the porch! This is the grownups' porch, go and take care of yourself." I screamed and yelled at them. And one time, one little visiting

child, somebody's kid, said, "Doesn't that lady like her children?"

Suzanne: I was reading about the days when you were a teenager, and people were coming up like Jim Hart, and Sally Lilienthal, and Ruth Arnstein, these people.

Nell: I enjoyed them. Sometimes the generations would cross, and mother would have her guests. And some of them I liked. Dorothy Liebes was quite a kick. She was enjoyable.

Margot: The constant pressure, as you've talked, that I've understood, the constant social pressure, and having to meet convention and what was expected of you! And then you described the parties that you went to in the '20s as being so superficial, and, "Let's try and have a good time, Charlie." [laughs]

Nell: In spite of the fact that every night--see, we didn't go out much, I mean to the night clubs and the road houses. We didn't go out an awful lot, maybe once a week. So we stayed home and played parlor games a lot.

Suzanne: This is at Tahoe?

Nell: At Tahoe.

Margot: They were very competitive.

Nell: Very competitive. Margot's husband couldn't stand it, he wouldn't play--before they were married. He said he wasn't going to be living in a house like that. [laughter]

Margot: Before he ever arrived on the scene, the spirit was always one of competition, and divide and conquer within the family.

Suzanne: Your father had died, and your mother wasn't a big power anymore, was she?

Nell: Oh, yes. She was the power. She was quiet, and she didn't yell and scream like I did, but she was powerful.

Suzanne: So you were delegated to be her voice.

Nell: Well, it was never said, but I knew it was my duty.

Margot: That's very perceptive.

- Nell: I suppose the best time of my youth was when I was a jazz baby, that was the most fun. You [Margot] weren't born, I wasn't married. [laughter]
- Margot: You've described that as how you were able to get out from this horrible cloud of depression from your mother, to go to these parties and be a jazz baby.
- Suzanne: Did you have nannies and nursemaids and private schools from the very beginning? Did you ever have a public school experience?
- Nell: No. Never did that. Had nurses until I was eight.
- Suzanne: Were they good souls?
- Nell: Some were. They were Irish ladies. Well, they were necessities. They used to take me--Katherine Lynch--she used to take us. She had friends who were nurses, too, in the neighborhood. And we didn't necessarily know the children that she took care of, that she was friends with the nurses of. But we used to go over there for cocoa and chocolate, and we'd meet the other nurses and play with the other children. It was quite fun. Sometimes we went to the employment agencies, while she was looking for other jobs. [laughter] We liked that kind of gossip, too. Any going anyplace, as far as I was concerned, was wonderful. Just going anyplace.

Early Visual Memories

- Suzanne: You must have gone to the [Panama-Pacific Exposition] Fair.
- Nell: Oh, yes, I should say so. We went all the time.
- Suzanne: Do you remember it well? You were five years old, or so.
- Nell: Oh, yes. Absolutely. It was fantastic.
- Suzanne: A real eye-opener for you as an artist?
- Nell: I think at that time one of the most important things in my artistry, artist-ness, was observation. I observe now, I think, more than I ever observed. But I know now that I observe, and always have observed, things that other people don't observe. I've traveled a lot, first with Stanley, and then after I was divorced I used to go on trips with groups, because I didn't have a husband to go with. And I noticed in the groups, everybody

knew where you buy stamps, or where the toilet was, or where all these necessities were, and I didn't.

I didn't realize until much later that I knew things they didn't know. I knew about birds and trees and buildings and people's faces. But [that realization] was much later. I used to say to them, "How do you know where to buy stamps or aspirin?" "Well, if you'd only look around, you'll see." [laughter]

Suzanne: Do you think that your eyes were very open when you were five years old?

Nell: I know they were. I can't at this moment make an example, but I knew if people had freckles on their faces and stuff like that.

Suzanne: What was your bedroom like?

Nell: My bedroom. I had to share it with my sister for a while. There was a sickroom where you'd go when you had flu, and my brother died in the sickroom. After they got it all fumigated that became my room, my own room. I didn't see any spooks there because of his death. I was happy to have my own room. I don't remember much except for being yelled at for not keeping it neat.

Artistic Skills

Suzanne: Were you drawing, and putting things up on the walls?

Nell: No, they had other people's stuff on the wall.

Suzanne: But in your own room?

Nell: No, I didn't do that, not until I was a teenager. Then I did.

Suzanne: I wouldn't think it would be common, incidentally. I'm not saying that other children were permitted to nail their artwork on their walls.

Nell: I did when I was ten years old. They were so proud of a Christmas card I made that they had it printed by the Grabhorn Press.

Suzanne: Oh, I see. Right to the top. [laughter]

Nell: Yes, who else.

Margot: Oh, God, that's how it was.

Nell: Funny. They liked my drawings pretty well. In fact, I think I wrote it in my autobiography, about the things I did. I made paper dolls. I didn't like the ones you bought. I made my own paper dolls and stuff like that, and I entered contests that were in the newspaper, for children. Aunt Dolly, "Aunt Dolly's Corner."

I remember a thing that happened. I got turned down by Aunt Dolly, I think she said it was untidy. That's the most reason I got turned down for. But my father always took my part on these things, because I was so angry. He wrote a letter to Aunt Dolly. It said, "Dear Aunt Dolly, I think you're a phony bitch."

Suzanne: No!

Nell: Yes, he did.

Margot: That's interesting, because he used to do stuff like that, and yet be furious with you for all of your outlandish ways.

Nell: Yes. For instance, one thing he used to do was flick bread pills when we were in a restaurant. He'd flick a bread pill at you and your table over there. He was so good at it, and I was so jealous, so I would make a pile of bread pills and do it myself, and of course I failed and people turned around and stared and I made a mess. He was so suave at that kind of thing. He said, "You have to stop that because you can't do it. I'm the only person who can do it."

Suzanne: Talk about competitive!

Oral History Process Discussion

Nell: Oh, gee. What time is it?

Suzanne: It is twelve twenty-five [o'clock].

Nell: I have a half an hour more. How about you? What have you got?

Suzanne: You mean half an hour more inside of you, or what?

Nell: No, whatever you want to do, if you want.

- Suzanne: Well, I've got half an hour more, yes. And I'm going to put another tape on.
- Margot: Let me ask a question here. I would like to know how each of you are feeling about my presence. Do you like it, or would you modify it? Do you want me to shut up? Where are you with me?
- Nell: Who, me? Oh, I'm with you so much, I like it fine. It's not like when I used to be with you and we didn't get along a bit.
- Margot: [to Riess] And how about you? Am I gumming up the works? Would you rather I not say so much? Tell me where you are.
- Suzanne: I'm very aware that you're here, because you know where the jokes are, and the issues, so you anticipate things.
- ##
- Margot: I want you to be very clear that if I am in any way intruding, I want you to say, "I don't feel comfortable with that."
- Suzanne: Well, I'd like the stories to evolve. To make it a genuine autobiographical statement, it should be coming from Nell.
- Nell: Maybe the important thing is that I do forget things.
- Margot: I feel that my main thing is to just give you support, to take as much credit as you want to take, Mom.
- Nell: I'm pretty good at credit lately.
- Suzanne: And I'm here on a presumption of greatness. I'm interested in the whole woman-artist thing. I've got ways to approach it, and a serious interest in it.
- Margot: I can tell. I love your questions, they're very interesting.
- Nell: They're very interesting. I like them, too.
- Margot: I enjoy very much being here.

Nell's Father, and the Children's Parties

- Suzanne: I guess chronologically where we left things was going to the Fair. Did you go there with your parents?

Nell: Oh, yes. I only went with my parents. They never stopped talking about it. Once I got lost in the chicken hatchery. You know, little chickens coming out of eggs? In that place. The incubator, the chicken incubator. I got lost. I don't know what that meant. They just lost me there, and they had to look for me. So that was very notable.

Suzanne: Yes, scary.

Nell: I don't remember being scared at all, no. I don't remember the incident. They kept reminding me of it.

Suzanne: Did you have art classes when you were going to Burke's?

Nell: Oh, yes. You know, the Art Institute started out where the Mark Hopkins Hotel is now. What was left from the fire was turned into the Art Institute.¹ That was before they got [the place on] Chestnut Street here. I didn't go there to classes until I was thirteen.

There was an awful lot of drawing and art going on in the house, and I remember--. My father believed he could handle a children's party better than anybody. He loved to do it, and he was very good at it. Except when I got to be a teenager, and he always wanted to talk to the teenaged friends, and I didn't want him to do that. [laughter] Any more than I wanted to dance with him anymore. No, that was--.

Suzanne: Was he a little seductive?

Nell: No. Not that, old-fashioned. I don't think of my father--well, yes. He might have been. I didn't think of him that way. But yes, I think that's true. He loved his daughters. He was all kinds of a person. He was a taskmaster, he was a trickster, a joker, and wonderful at reading to us.

Suzanne: Was he proud of your mother's art and her book-binding?

Nell: She didn't take it up until he died, and she was fifty then.

Where were we?

¹The gift of the Mark Hopkins mansion to the [San Francisco Art] Association led to the establishment of the Mark Hopkins Institute of Art in 1893, an art school, museum, and library lost in the fire of 1906. The School was rebuilt on the same site and became the San Francisco Institute of Art. In 1926 the Association built a new school on Russian Hill, the California School of Fine Arts.

Suzanne: You said there was all kinds of art going on at home. What kind of art?

Nell: Oh, that was it. Well, like my father liked to be at all the children's parties and so. At one party I remember very well, it was Thanksgiving, and he assigned the children at the party to paint or draw a turkey. It was a contest, it always was a contest. You never just did it, you had to win. I loved doing that. I don't know how the other children got along at all.

We were always having contests. I remember at Tahoe there was a contest--I think maybe many children did this--there was a contest once a summer where you had a bottle of fizzy water and you had twelve saltine crackers, those old-fashioned soda crackers. And whoever ate the crackers and drank the water the quickest won the prize.

Suzanne: Something for every talent.

Nell: Yes, everything, absolutely. [laughter]

Margot: It was passed on for generations. [laughter]

Nell: We had another wonderful one up at Tahoe, which was costume, and you had to make your own costume. We didn't have any materials, you had to find them somewhere. You had to wear a costume; it was a costume party. And so we were all very busy for a long time, making these costumes out of flowers and grasses, and oh, rags we found around. Once I went as, oh, it was something in the war--. Not the war. What was it about? There was a boy and he had on war stamps or thrift stamps or something.

Margot: It was the war; you made me that costume.

Nell: I thought that was my father's idea, and he wouldn't have been alive.

Margot: No, it was your idea. Well, I don't know about your father, but you made me that costume.

Nell: Did I make that costume?

Margot: Yes.

Nell: Well, but that was his idea, anyway. He always started that kind of a business. He also was an excellent fisherman, and he taught me to fish. Those were wonderful times I had with my father in the river, fishing.

- Suzanne: This just came from him naturally, or was this some sort of theory of child-rearing? So much energy, so much family involvement is very impressive to me.
- Nell: Oh, there was a lot of family involvement.
- Suzanne: You're talking about the competitive side of it, kind of the down side of it.
- Nell: Oh, when I'm talking about it now it reminds me of many Victorian novels. The children were always urged to do something, for God's sake, and make things, you know.
- Suzanne: Of course the more poignant story is of the child who lost. But you weren't that one, were you?
- Nell: Well, if it was card games, I could lose. [laughter] If it was anything to do with art, I could win. If it was oh, what do you call those? We had all those races, with an egg and a what?
- Suzanne: Oh, egg and spoon.
- Nell: Yes, egg and spoon. All those, we had all those.

Teachers and Coaches

- Nell: I was competitive. After all, I don't know if I wrote about it, I swam across the Golden Gate when I was seventeen. My father was just thrilled about that. I used to swim in the mornings before school, out at Sea Cliff, with boys I knew. We had a wonderful time. I was the only girl. We were training to swim across the Golden Gate, and my father went along in a boat. He was very encouraging about that kind of thing, because he loved that stuff. He loved sailboating. He loved being a sailor; he wore sailor suits on weekends. [laughter]
- Margot: Was he the one behind your winning horse jumping contest?
- Nell: My horse--.. Yes, my picture got in The New York Times with my horse, with my arms full of silver cups. I'll show it to you, in the rotogravure section.
- Suzanne: What a childhood you had!
- Nell: I did. I had everything.

Margot: Montessori School.

Nell: I didn't go to Montessori School, did I? Yes, I did. It was preschool. I didn't learn anything there. It was very against art. I learned how to lace up a shoe. Then I had Miss Lazarus until I was eight.

Suzanne: And who was she?

Nell: She was a little old lady, I guess she was Jewish. She came to the house, and we had a schoolroom in the house. It was set aside as a schoolroom.

Suzanne: For you and your sisters?

Nell: Me and my sister Marjorie. Carol wasn't there, she was too young. This teacher made me furious because she always called Marjorie "Apple Cheeks," or something like that. She was saying she had such beautiful pink cheeks. I wasn't about to stand for anyone saying anything nice about my sister.

Suzanne: What was she there to teach?

Nell: Oh, arithmetic, adding and subtracting. We had French teachers come to the house.

Margot: What about that modern dance business?

Nell: Oh, God, that Mrs. Rush, a protégé of Isadora Duncan. Modern dance. In the Haas-Lilienthal house they had a ballroom in the basement there. It was the worst kind of dancing. It was called--

Suzanne: Expressive?

Nell: Yes, expressive. And we had to dye our own silks that we wore; sort of a drapery. We had to have the experience of dyeing them. That was quite fun; I liked doing that. But I simply could not see myself as anything but a clumsy lout, and I wasn't about to try floating around with a balloon. [laughter] Yes, oh, we had everything. [also see page 67]

One time my parents went to Cuba with some friends of theirs, went there for a vacation. They came home absolutely thrilled with Cuban music and dancing. They brought us, each of their children, a pair of castanets, and arranged for us to take castanet lessons. [laughter] We liked that.

We had Mrs. Somebody-else, oh yes, Mrs. Sharman, an Australian woman, who gave us elocution lessons. We were only successful if we could say all of "This is the house that Jack built" all in one breath, then we would have succeeded. A deep breath. We had that. We had French. We had French so that when I grew up I could really speak French, write French, and read. I've forgotten now, mostly.

Bookbinding

Suzanne: Did you later learn bookbinding from your mother?

Nell: [laughs] Have you ever seen anybody bind a book by hand? The stages they go through? Just getting the leather ready--. You have a piece of leather, and it's pretty thick, and you scrape, and scrape, and scrape--and it's expensive, if it's good leather--and if you slip you make a hole, and you throw away the whole skin, practically.

I used to help Mother dye the end-papers sometimes, because I enjoyed doing that, and that's easy. I forget--is it you put oil on water, and it makes it marbled--I helped her with that. I helped her with the designs sometimes; when she was stuck she used to ask me to help her. But those tools [gasps], if that slips--the gold tooling--and it's hot, it has to be hot--. Forget it, it's awful. It's very compulsive, it's just so compulsive.

Suzanne: Do you know Marjorie Stern? She is the daughter of Morgan Gunst, the book-collector?

Nell: Yes, the Gunsts were great friends of my mother, particularly Mrs. Gunst, Aline Gunst. She was a very beautiful woman, really beautiful. And they were interested in clothes together. But she was the kind of a grande beauté that I think is harmful to people, because you're so busy reconstructing and keeping up if you have that kind of beauty. But I liked Mrs. Gunst, she was nice, she was good to me.

The German-Jewish Ambivalence

Suzanne: How about German? Did you learn that?

Nell: No, no.

Suzanne: Never a word? Was German spoken at home?

Nell: They used German words.

I have a personal conviction--. There are people who have had no experience of language, other language than their own. They have an awful time speaking French, or any other language. I'm convinced that it's because they never got used to putting their mouths around strange words, the way we did at home. We knew slang, Yiddish slang, and German. My parents laughed like anything about something [a book] called Die Schoenste German Lengevitch." Now that's no real language. It's made up of German, English, Yiddish. Somebody wrote a book about using this made-up language. They put these things together, and that made them laugh a lot.

Suzanne: So you did use the Yiddish?

Nell: A little Yiddish. That was absolutely--what's the word? I don't mean illegal--.

Suzanne: Verboten? That's too hard.

Nell: No, it wasn't verboten. Well, there were so many wonderful writers writing that kind of stuff, like Hymie Kaplan, who did a whole thing about school lessons, all in funny made-up language.

[to Margot] We always talk funny language, don't we?

Margot: Oh, I've always known funny language since I can remember. We loved to make it up. That was also a big contest and competition, the different languages, and copying, and the acting.

Suzanne: But would the Hellers and the Haases and the Lillienthals and the Sintons and the Walters and so on use Yiddish among themselves?

Nell: They would laugh at a Jewish comedian, which, thank God, I don't think they do anymore. I won't listen to it because it was such a putdown. It was never used in a way that was growing, or legal, or you know, a language. It was always making fun of. I can't even listen anymore to any Jewish comedian, because they never do anything but putdown; they don't build themselves up at all. That's not funny a bit.

Music Lessons

Suzanne: Did you have other music, other than the castanets? [laughter]

Nell: I had a terrible piano teacher, who couldn't teach me, or anybody, because she had a new theory that she was trying out, and it swept right by me and also some friends. My friend Cassie Lilienthal didn't get anything either. I was disgusted, because my friends were all playing Chopin, and I couldn't play anything. So as a matter of fact, that was--.

I just love music. I've always loved music, I know a lot about music, I loved going to the concerts. But I wouldn't practice. I don't know why I wouldn't practice, because I loved my other teachers. The last teacher I had was terrific; it was Albert Elkus. Do you know him? He was awfully nice, his wife is awfully nice. She's swell, I like her.

Suzanne: That meant you had gotten the best teacher.

Nell: That's right. And I wouldn't practice, and he just was beside himself, because he liked me. One day he threw up his hands! He said, "I know, you didn't practice. You didn't practice because you were too busy swimming across the Golden Gate, weren't you?" I said, "I was. How do you know?" And he didn't. [laughter] He thought that was just an outrageous guess.

Suzanne: You made that swim?

Nell: Yes.

Suzanne: And was it written up in the newspapers?

Nell: No, it wasn't, because Gertrude Ederle was ahead of me, and some other Europeans who had swum across the Channel. And somebody's horse. Somebody who owned a nightclub out on the beach had a horse--

Margot: Shorty Roberts?

Nell: --who swam across the Golden Gate. His horse swam across the Golden Gate.

[insert from notes added later] As a young girl my parents took me to a French theatre, André Ferrier, where plays by Moliere and Racine were performed. And, I guess, every comedian you ever heard of performed in vaudeville shows at theatres here.

There were also amateur groups who played O'Neill, Shakespeare, etc.

And of course there was the San Francisco Symphony. The conductor, Alfred Hertz, apologized for the squeaky horns by telling us that the mistakes were caused by the San Francisco fog. They did sound like fog horns.

Later on I was taken to the Opera where, at intermission, my uncle introduced me to a cousin disguised as Tito Schipa, the opera tenor. I was thrilled, until he ripped off his disguise. Practical jokes like that were common in those days. I call it cruel treatment--of an innocent person. [end insert]

Preparation for Marriage to Stanley Sinton

Suzanne: What were you being readied for? What is your sense of what your life was going to be?

Nell: You mean in my parents' eyes?

Suzanne: Yes.

Nell: I was going to be a proper young lady. I'm not sure they were thrilled with the man I married.

Suzanne: Were you dating?

Nell: I was dating a lot of boys, but I didn't like any of them, because I was in love with Stanley.

Suzanne: When did you meet him? When does this begin?

Nell: Stanley Sinton, Jr. was the ringbearer at the wedding of my aunt, Marian Walter, to Edgar Sinton. I was flower girl. Stanley was twelve and I ten years old then, and he lived in Boston. So we got into this crazy correspondence, which began right away at this age of ten, "I love you dearly. Will you marry me?"

[to Margot] I think we have that correspondence, don't we? Doesn't it say that?

Margot: Yes.

Nell: And I thought, "Are you crazy?" But I liked that attention, and I answered the letters. I suppose I told him what I was doing all day, or something. And he kept writing and writing, and then he went to Phillips Exeter Academy, and continued to write these letters. Meanwhile, he would visit his aunt and uncle here in the summertime, with his brothers and his parents. So we had him up to Tahoe and we simply, in some way, got engaged.

Suzanne: How amazing! So for years and years you played together in the summers. And you were committed, you felt committed to him?

Nell: Only when I got to be about fourteen. The other times, no. It was just riding horseback and swimming.

On some level I had to know that this was not a good thing.

Suzanne: When did you get married?

Nell: I was twenty years old. We were going to get married, my father was very, very sick, and we were engaged for something like three years. Stanley was in Boston and I was here, otherwise I think it would have busted up. But he was never here.

Suzanne: Stanley was a great letter-writer? That can be very powerful.

Nell: I think I was a good letter-writer.

Yes, he told me the events of the day. I don't think he went into it as deeply as George Bernard Shaw [laughter], or me, even. But he professed very much to want to marry me. And when the chips were down and my father had died, and he had already promised my father that he would take his place in the D. N. & E. Walter Company, he was stuck. I didn't know what to do about it, so--. I couldn't stay home with my mother; I wasn't trained to do anything.

Suzanne: He was stuck or you were stuck? Who was feeling stuck?

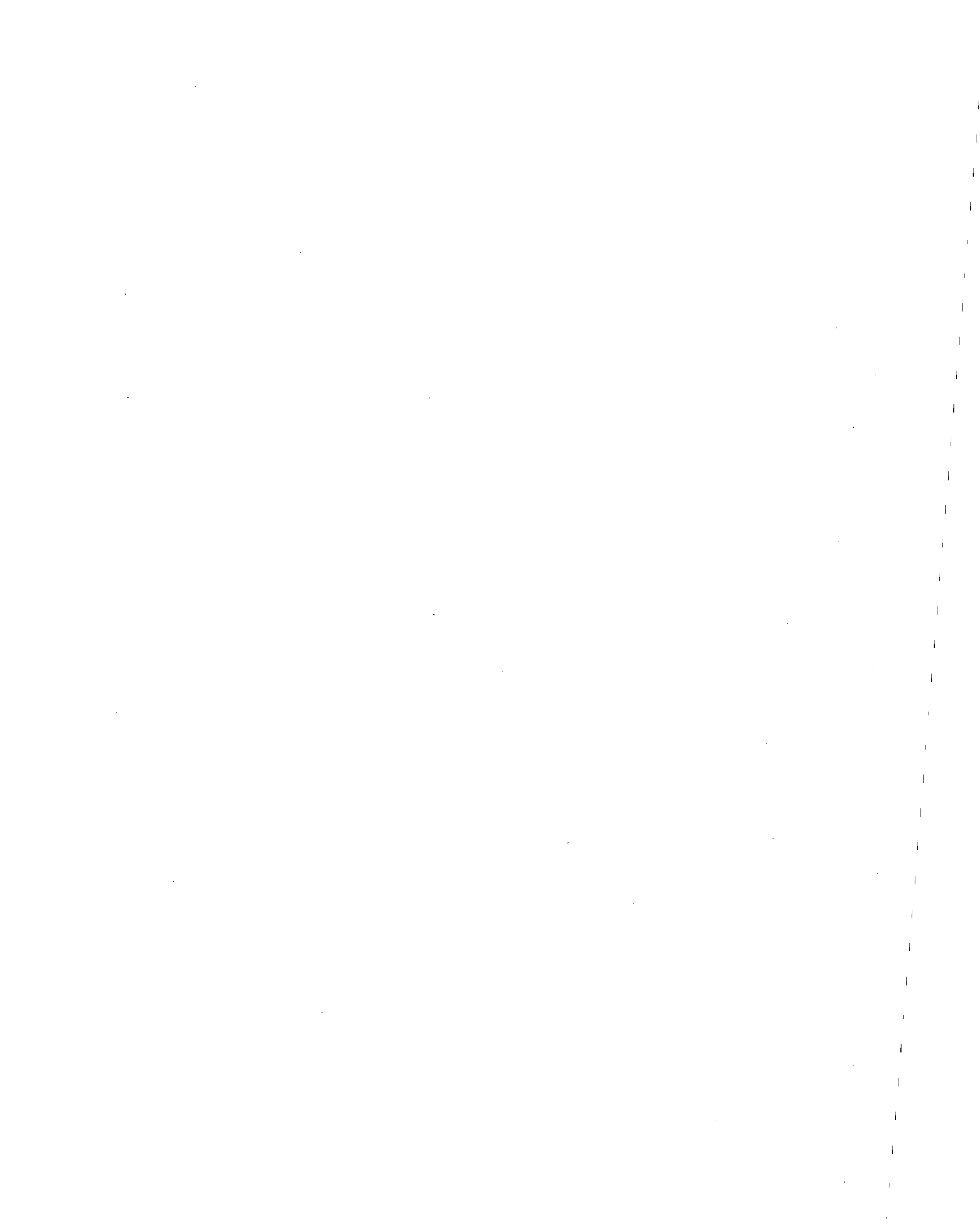
Nell: Well, I wouldn't admit I was stuck. But I knew it later. He had the feeling of being stuck, but he couldn't get out of the trap. I wasn't about to let him out.

Suzanne: Did your parents take you away for a summer, or do anything to actually defuse this relationship?

Nell: No, I think my mother very much wanted Stanley, because she needed somebody in the business. She needed a son-in-law.

Suzanne: But I think you prefaced this by saying they didn't approve.

- Nell: Well, I think they didn't approve, but after my father died she was extremely interested. My father really wanted someone to inherit the business, and he didn't know anyone else to do it.
- Margot: Was it that they didn't approve of Dad's family or they didn't approve of Dad?
- Nell: They didn't approve of him, they really didn't. But, any port in a storm when you're hysterical.
- Suzanne: Well, let's see. He went to Exeter, and then what did he do?
- Nell: Went to Yale, Phi Beta Kappa.
- Suzanne: What was not to approve?
- Nell: I don't know. He was flighty. He didn't really plight his troth very seriously. You could tell. Of course we got married, and he was twenty-one only. That was crazy. I think that was largely one of the things he didn't want to do, was get married at that age. My parents might have had some sort of feeling of that, too.
- Margot: Well you said also, and he said, that he didn't really want to be in that business, and never did, and yet he made a lifetime commitment to it.
- Nell: Well, he was indecisive about any future plans and didn't see any alternatives, but he became the president and ran it very successfully until he died.



II AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ASIDES: YOUNG NELL

Transactions Under the Table

[Interview 2: May 8, 1992] ##

Nell: I want to say to both of you, I've been thinking about it for quite a while, I want to be sure to mention my children and grandchildren in this. I want them to get credit for very, very, very much.

Suzanne: Good, we will.

I want to mention something from an oral history that I'm doing, with a woman psychoanalyst. Her motivation in going into psychiatry was something of what I felt from reading your autobiography, the discrepancy between what people say and what people do. It disturbed her. Does that sound familiar to you?

Nell: Well, the first thing that comes to my mind is one time I needed an electrician, and he came immediately. I said I was stunned. He said, "Why? I told you I was coming." I said, "Don't you know how unusual that is?" He said, "Well, I had an uncle who, when I was a little boy, said, 'If you want to be unique in the world, do what you say you're going to do, because nobody else does.'"

Margot: Well, your whole scroll of the "Donner Party" is about that, people saying one thing on the top of the table, and underneath it, another.¹

Nell: Oh, yes, doing something else.

¹"Under the Table at the Donner Party," Nell Sinton, 1974.

Suzanne: Is that what "under the table" means, essentially?

Nell: Yes. "Under the table" means you're doing something underhanded. On top of the table you smile politely and under the table you're kicking the person next to you. It's like telling your dinner partner how much you love your wife, while planning secretly how you'll see your mistress in two hours.

Suzanne: You had said that your father and your husband were masterful at this.

Nell: I don't know about my father. Did I say that?

Suzanne: Your husband and your father "both delighted in making mischief in under the table contracts." [Autobiography, p. 14]

Nell: Stanley?

Suzanne: Yes, you grouped them.

When you refer in the Autobiography to "undiscussable subjects" in your family, that would mean your brother's death?

Nell: That would be one.

Suzanne: Your father's illness?

Nell: Another. And what somebody did at the bridge table last night might be gossip, but it depends who you say it to. That's when people say, "Promise me on your word of honor that you won't repeat what I'm going to tell you." [laughter] But of course you do tell somebody, and it goes on and on. I don't believe there's any such thing as a secret in the world, hardly.

Seeking Answers, Analysis

Suzanne: In the Autobiography you refer to yourself back then as someone troubled about one thing and another. I have interviewed some people who went off to Europe for an analysis, or their parents, or friends of the family, went to see Jung in Zurich. I wondered if that was happening at all among people you knew.

Nell: I didn't know anything about it. I knew only after Mother died and we were going through the library I was amazed to see there were books by Jung and books by Freud, but no one ever mentioned them. My mother and father, my mother especially, took up with--

what do you call them? Things that were au courant, things that were in a way fashionable, but not psychiatry or analysis.

Doctor Somebody-else, Dr. Coué, said, "Every day and every way I'm getting better and better." That was some fad. Mostly they laughed about it. They were not taking it seriously.

Suzanne: There was a lot of that kind of searching, and it crossed the religious spectrum. I read in Elise Haas's interview that she was brought up in Christian Science.

Nell: Lots of them were Christian Scientists.

Suzanne: Even someone from a Jewish family?

Nell: Oh, particularly.

Suzanne: Why?

Nell: Well, it got them out of being Jewish, I guess, for one thing. Although, you know, once a Jew, always a Jew, once a--what did that originate with, Margot?

Margot: I don't know that.

Nell: Once a Catholic, always a Catholic. Anything that's a prejudice.

My ex-husband, who I will continue now to call Stanley, Stanley's aunt, Gertrude Eiseman, was a very famous Christian Scientist. She was the head of the church in Boston, and she was Jewish. She was a wonderful woman. I loved her because she had the courage of her convictions in a place where she would be getting nothing but criticized. But she was very important, and she had made one of these terrible marriages that a lot of women did.

I think we discussed that last time. A beautiful and impoverished woman marries a rough German--he might have been Jewish or might not have, I only know about the Jewish ones, I guess--a really, noisy, rough person. She was very--well, she looked fragile, but I guess she wasn't. So she took up Christian Science, and she was very serious about it. She saw customers, clients. She practiced, and she always, of course, being a Scientist, had a smile on her face. But people teased her, and it was awful.

Suzanne: That's interesting, that aspect of San Francisco, the seekers, seeking answers.

- Nell: Yes. Well, there were a lot of people who weren't altogether happy, and they were seeking for something to make them feel better.
- Suzanne: But what about the world of Jung and Freud, and the idea that it was fashionable to go for an analysis?
- Nell: And besides, you could get a trip to Switzerland.
- Margot: But ever since I could ever remember, nobody ever talked about psychiatry. I have a feeling, Mom, I'm not sure if I'm right, but I think it went along with the shame. We should never pursue anything like that because "of course we don't have problems." That would be admitting that we did.
- Suzanne: And it couldn't be done as an intellectual pursuit?
- Nell: I didn't hear about it that way. People who saw psychiatrists were sorely troubled. I guess there was a certain amount of cachet if you could afford it, and you could go all the way to Switzerland--it's like taking a cure. I only knew of Annette Rosenshine who did that. But I didn't know too much about it. I couldn't have cared less, I know that.
- Suzanne: I probably shouldn't take too seriously, then, your remarks about "investigating the underlying reason for your pain."
[Autobiography, p. 11]
- Nell: [tape interruption] When I wrote that, I was already being therapized. So, you know, enlightened as I was I was able to say, "Stanley didn't look to see what was really the matter with me. He didn't say, 'Why don't you call up Doctor So-and-so.'" I wasn't thinking that way. When these things happened, my pain was unmentionable because I was a young lady who had everything to be grateful for. I mention that someplace in my Autobiography I think.
- Margot: You would have been put down terribly for being so ungrateful.
- Nell: That's right. Very ungrateful. "What more do you want?" Stanley would say.
- Suzanne: I'm trying to get a sense of that time when the world began to wake up to psychology and psychoanalysis.
- Nell: Well, I explain it this way. How old was I when I got a divorce? Sixty, almost sixty. And I was really very, very, very unhappy, and I didn't see why life didn't change. It was when I first discovered reality. Real reality. It was such a relief to know

that these things that I don't like in my marriage are not going to change; you better go out and do something for yourself. Don't worry about somebody doing it for you, nobody's going to. That was a big relief.

But what was I saying? I know. Finally, I think Stanley was the first one who said, "I'm just going to go and see a psychiatrist." Okay. I don't know how soon after I said, "Well, I'm going to get myself a psychiatrist, because this isn't working out," and I went to see a psychiatrist. The doctor said, "Okay, now here's a calendar. I'll need to see you about three times a week." Oh, I almost fainted.

Three times a week! I thought I was only going to have to go once, and never go again. I didn't know anything about the subject. Well, I just was paralyzed to think of that. What in the world were we going to talk about? I told him my problem, he didn't help me, so, goodbye. But of course I went back.

Margot: The question about your family and psychiatry is so interesting. It goes back to what I think I said earlier. I think that shame was hugely involved, because Joan was the person who really introduced the family to psychiatry. Joan was the one who realized when she was twelve that something was really the matter and even wrote that if she could just talk and someone would listen, things would be better. She was very brave when she was about sixteen, and this was about 1951, when she knew she felt disconnected and alienated and that there were real problems in the family. It was not great at all.

Nell: No, Margot, she was at Smith.

Margot: Yes, but she said she wanted to do this when she was sixteen, and tried. So that was by '51, and at that time I remember you and Dad were having just an awful time with that, because what it meant to you was that there must be something the matter with you if Joan had problems. So it was a big shame thing. Other people had problems outside of your family, but your family had no problems.

Nell: See, but it really was when Joan was at Smith.

Margot: Well, that's when she was seriously depressed and really needed more medical and psychological help. She was trying to investigate when she was much younger.

Nell: When she was much younger, yes, and she had a friend at school whose father--was he a psychiatrist?

Margot: Yes.

Nell: And she was always interested in the whole subject, always. So that's right.

Suzanne: You had joined the world of artists, where maybe it's not shame, it's a point of pride, practically, to be in analysis.

Nell: Not in the crowd I was in. I got very tired of listening to people's problems. I thought, "Oh, forget it," until it really affected me.

Margot: It was for other people, that whole movement, which is really interesting, especially when you mention it in terms of where it was in history. It was a no-no in our family. Other people had these problems, this family had no problem. Which is also the reason why I think Mom's pain was so terrible, because it went so unlabeled.

Nell: That's right. I couldn't figure out why, since my parents used to say, "You've got everything to make you happy," why was I so unhappy? What was wrong? It was a lack of authenticity that was bothering me.

Friendships, Social Life

Suzanne: Who were your best friends?

Nell: Bleah! [laughter] Best friends when?

Suzanne: Well, your neighbors were the Dibblees, the Forans, the Harts, the Fagans and the Arnsteins. Did these families generate the sons and daughters that you played with? And then who became the good friends?

Nell: Well, good friends, that's quite a description. Let's see. Mostly, my friends were Jewish. I saw them on weekends--they didn't go to my school. I think we've discussed this before. You can have a best friend at school, but come the weekends they go to their parties and I go to my parties. So it was a little difficult. We talked about different things, and I went to Sunday school simply because I wanted to meet the boys that I've always met at dances. I liked them; that was fine.

I was anti-Semitic, it's true, but I hated the material we had to learn at Sunday school, it didn't seem real, it didn't

seem to pertain to anybody or anything. So, they have Hanukkah, we didn't have Hanukkah. We're not that kind of Jews, with Hanukkah. We had Christmas like Gentile people. [laughter] You know, when you're a young person, you do some of the things you're told to do and just go through the motions.

Suzanne: What would happen if you put your foot down about Sunday school?

Margot: [laughs]

Nell: Oh, well, my dear. My father was the head of the board of Temple Emanu-El.

Suzanne: Oh, so it would have been a sort of embarrassing moment?

Nell: Yes. And as I said, I liked the social life at Sunday school. I didn't bring it today, but I have a great, big, fat scrapbook from my teenage years. It's mostly dance cards and dance invitations, party ball invitations. That's what it mostly is. And you would be surprised to see the names and names and names and names.

I went to--do you know what a subscription party is? Were you ever invited to subscription parties?

Suzanne: No.

Nell: You didn't--? Where were you a teenager?

Suzanne: In the country in Pennsylvania.

Nell: Oh, well they had them all over the country.

The subscription party was, your parents paid a certain amount of money and then you could go to a dance. No, they probably paid for six dances, paid for the orchestra and the hall and so forth. Oh, but they weren't Sunday school people, they weren't. Some Jews were invited, a few. I was one.

Suzanne: What families were organizing these?

Nell: Social families. The ones you just mentioned.

Where are we now?

Suzanne: Well, your social life, but I think that's not really what I meant. I meant really good girlfriends. Or were you the kind of girl who always liked the boys better than the girls?

Nell: I always like the boys better than the girls. Except, I liked the girls a lot at school. It was a girls' school. I quite liked the girls, but I hated them at parties because they were always gathering in the toilet, in the dressing room, you know, to wait out the dances they weren't invited to be danced with.

Margot: I thought you liked one girl very much.

Nell: Oh, she was wild. I won't mention her name. There was a very stuffy family in town. They had four daughters who were the wildest girls I've ever known. I was talking to an old schoolfriend the other day about them, Elinor Deamer, who was the president of the class. Actually, she turned out to be my best friend at school. I'll just digress for a second and tell you.

Suzanne: Yes, do.

Nell: I never saw her after we graduated. Actually she went to Stanford, and certainly I didn't. She had a whole other set of friends, and they were the ones we went to school with. They never seemed to branch out much. Anyway, I just liked her a whole lot at school, and she liked me. We were friends. But I never saw her for how many? Thirty, forty years.

Then there was publicity about one of my scrolls when it was first exhibited at the Oakland Museum, and apparently she went to see it. She wrote me the most wonderful letter that said, after all these years, she really had felt she had to see me again. This was so important, she didn't even know I felt like that. We never discussed anything unpleasant. Since that day, that was some years ago, we're friends again. We meet, well, not exactly regularly. She's a most interesting person, I can see why she was the president of the class. She's very fair, and is organized, with a good sense of humor and is a wonderful listener and is very honest and direct. She's interested in people. She married a very reputable Bay Area doctor, who died.

Suzanne: Was she saying to you that there was common material between the two of you?

Nell: No, the scroll just impressed her.

Margot: I think it was your authenticity that drew her. I think up until that time, all the things that Mom talked about were simply not discussable, and when she put them out on the scroll, the woman related to them, and said, "Ah, this is real."

Suzanne: Tell about your wild friend. What did she do?

Nell: One of the wild ones was in my class, Elinor's class, one was ahead of us. A third was behind us--they all had the same habits--and the fourth was behind. There wasn't any sexual encounter that they didn't try out and let us know about.

Suzanne: This is at Burke's?

Nell: Burke's, and they weren't expelled. Everybody knew it, what they were doing. And then when they weren't doing it, they were writing about it, and sharing these pamphlets, practically pamphlets, about experiences with boys, about all their sex experiences. Or other people's. They made up stories, like college humor, and they were fascinating.

In fact--and I was talking to Elinor about this the other day--I was very spoiled. My parents gave me a yellow roadster for my eighteenth birthday. That was the last year of school, and so I was taking girls around, driving around and around and around, no place, after school. One time the oldest wild girl asked if she could come along, because she wanted to stop by some house to see a friend.

No, it was that she was going to be there, she wanted us to pick her up, after she'd been in the house with this young man who was in the orchestra of Anson Weeks, who played at the Mark Hopkins. (Every Saturday night we went "Dancin' with Anson.") So we picked up the wild girl, and she had been just screwing [laughter] four boys in the house, and talking about it. It was amazing! It was fascinating. It was something that for me, I didn't want to do that, but I just loved hearing about it.

Suzanne: You'd get expelled from Burke's if anyone knew. No one knew?

Nell: I don't know. They're supposed to know everything. For instance, Miss Burke had a--there weren't so many movie houses, but if we went to a movie house [she knew].

##

Suzanne: You mentioned in the Autobiography that there was a girlfriend whose friendship made you very wary of other female friends.

Nell: Oh, I won't mention her name either. She turned out to be the most venal woman I've ever known in my whole life. She did nothing that wasn't connected with money and position. Her mother used to send her to my house--well, she came to my house anyway, our house, my parents' house--and wanted her to borrow my clothes so that she could have them [copied], [clothes] which came from an expensive dress designer who came to our house. We

got children's clothes, mail order. Of course the designer came to our house with a trunk or a suitcase to show the samples.

Her mother instructed her to borrow one of my dresses so that her seamstress could copy it. I was furious, and my mother was beside herself, she was so angry. These things are important! [laughs] Anyway, she clung to me. She was very brash. Oh, she was a pain in the neck. She committed suicide. But not when she was a girl, when she was married.

Margot: And you always talked about her, when she came from the East out to visit. You always dreaded it, dreaded it, and you always said "yes." You couldn't say "no," ever.

Nell: I know. It was hard. She was so possessive. Oooh.

Academic Record

Suzanne: Can I take this seriously, that Miss Burke really refused to recommend you to colleges?

Nell: Yes. Absolutely seriously. But you know, I was so upset about my bad marks, and I thought I was failing and being kept in school so Miss Burke could have the money. [laughter] Then Juanita [Sagan] one day said--not so very long ago, about five years ago--she said, "Listen, you call up that school and ask for your record, and we'll see what you got and how you did."

Margot: Did you?

Nell: I still have my record, yes. I sent for it, and they mailed it to me. It wasn't bad.

Margot: Really?

Nell: It was a couple of A's and some B's and a few C's. It was ordinary. But I couldn't do arithmetic, I wouldn't do arithmetic, and I think that would have been hard to accept at any college, I think. Although my friend Cassie Lilienthal, who was Cassie Arnstein, her mother got so mad when she heard that her daughter Cassie wasn't doing well, she went to school and she said, "You've got to get this girl through school so that she knows something and so she can graduate with marks." And so she got into Smith College.

Suzanne: She was tutored.

Nell: Yes.

Suzanne: But that didn't happen with you?

Nell: No, my parents didn't seem to care about that. I don't understand it, because my father cared a lot about scholarliness and Greek.

Margot: Was college really just for boys? He only considered it important for boys?

Nell: Oh, no. As I was getting ready to go to college it was being discussed, but he was terribly sick, he was dying. I don't think he cared a lot about whether I got into college or not. And obviously I didn't.

Suzanne: Because you already were engaged.

Nell: Oh, yes.

Suzanne: What are "the anti-Semitic finishing schools in the East" that you have referred to in the Autobiography? Would that have been your way of looking at Smith or Wellesley or Vassar?

Nell: Oh, that was out of the question. Colleges, I couldn't go to colleges.

Suzanne: But finishing schools?

Nell: Finishing schools they tried afterwards, after the colleges all turned me down. I don't remember the names of them now at all, but they're all well-known names.

Margot: The Garland School for Homemaking?

Nell: That's what I got stuck in. That's a fine place for an artistic girl. [laughter] I didn't care. I just had to be in the East so that I could see Stanley. I didn't want to go home. My father was so sick and it was gloomy.

[insert from notes written later] I put all my children in private school because I disliked it so much that I didn't want them to have anything better than I had. I thought private school would get them into universities more than public schools would, and they'd meet the right people. But they weren't the right people, and I began to hate them all. My perversity was an issue.

But I was more confused than perverse. I asked, "What do I really want?" If I'd had the right support, would I have had the right values at public school? I doubt it. I was too much in conflict with myself. It was a confusion.

By the time my children went to school I was already seriously into art. I went out of my way to look and dress like a hippy. But in the end I was extremely interested in fashion. My mother and I agreed on this subject. I had a great wardrobe.

I really needed to rebel. I was an artist in spite of everything. "So I'm going to be an artist and not go to college and not learn anything. I'm going to be an artist, and that's where my focus will be." (I had so much trouble saying that I gave my children my artistic vision, and saying that they were smart enough to accept it.) [end insert]

Suzanne: Did you keep diaries and journals when you were a young girl?

Nell: No, I didn't. I was afraid everybody would read it. When I was corresponding with Stanley and we were engaged, one time I came home from school and found Mother reading his letter. Well, she didn't know what to do. I refused to speak to her again. I said, "We are through, you and me together." My father had to bribe me to talk to her. Oooh. I suppose everybody's been through that, though. Don't you think?

Margot: No, I haven't.

Nell: I didn't read your mail, which sounds like a protest.

III MARRIAGE AND A HOUSE

Suzanne: Tell me the narrative of getting married to Stanley and getting started on life.

Nell: I have to say, I think I thought it then, that marrying Stanley was an escape. I think I was aware of it, because my father was sick, and life with my mother would have been terrible. I wasn't prepared to do anything. I don't know what I would have done. She wouldn't have wanted me to work, she wouldn't have wanted me around the house. Oh, she wouldn't mind if I painted, I guess, been a lady painter. What do you think?

Margot: I don't think that was a real option. I think that you would have been too much of a failure if you hadn't gotten married. That was expected, the arrangement had been made since you were very young.

Nell: Yes, all right. So.

Suzanne: And you had to come back, because the arrangement had meant that Stanley would live here--that you'd be back here.

Nell: He had a real problem, because he had made all these promises. He was going to marry me, he was going to help my father in the business, and be Mr. Good Boy. In the end, he really didn't want to get married. I wasn't about to let him out of that.

Suzanne: Did you have a lavish wedding?

Nell: Oh, no. I never cared about that. I'd been a bridesmaid often, and I didn't really like that whole business at all. But, as a matter of fact, the problem--we were going to get married at Tahoe, and that couldn't have been a very big wedding. That's what I wanted to do. But then my father died a couple of months, I suppose, before the wedding, and so hardly anyone was there. It was in the house on Clay Street in San Francisco. I had a

pretty blue dress, and maybe an aunt and uncle, maybe ten people were there.

And then we had this enormously elaborate honeymoon. Goodness, it started out with the Hotel Del Monte, and a train ride up to Canada, and across Canada, with elaborate baggage. Oh! And from Canada on the S.S. Majestic, or one of those boats, to England. We were gone for two months. Two months. Here's this kid, Stanley, just out of college, he just had graduated. Me, I'm twenty. He's twenty-one, I guess. Well, it's written down somewhere.

Suzanne: In your Autobiography, and it sounded like fun, flirting with life and meeting people.

Nell: A lot of it was a lot of fun; it was a lot of fun. It was too much, really. It was really jeunesse doré, I must say, all over the place.

And then we came home, and we had this house. This was a little house that my mother and mother-in-law--neither of whom had anything to do, so they annoyed each other terribly, and also much more me, because they furnished this house--they got the house and furnished it, which made me sob. I cried and cried over that. Then I was swept into a world of charity, charity balls, social events. [sighs, laughter]

Nobody said, "Is there something you might like to do better?" Or, "Are you happy, are you fine?"

Suzanne: Did you get pregnant right away?

Nell: Not on purpose. Not right away. We were married in June, and I got pregnant in January. And that was nice, I liked my child, except I didn't know what I was doing. I could only tell you, "Well, doesn't everybody have a child? Isn't this the world?"

There was a depression on, but it didn't affect us. After being in that house for three years we built this beautiful house on Divisadero Street.

Suzanne: Who was the architect?

Nell: Oh, it was a terribly boring architect. I wasn't that far yet. Angus McSweeney. He did half-timbered and brick English houses. But I wanted very much to have an American Georgian inside, and I suppose that was part of the beginning of my education and involvement.

We had to go to New York quite often on Stanley's business. I always got taken along, thank goodness. I spent all my time in the Metropolitan Museum, in the American wing. I studied and studied and studied that furniture. I also wrote to the movies, where I'd liked the sets, and asked them if they'd send me pictures of the sets. And they did. So I knew just what I wanted. A lot of nice things happened. There was a depression, and a wonderful woodworker, who lived in Monterey, I guess, made all this hand-made furniture, and hand-carved, and it was unbelievably cheap.

Suzanne: Do you think you were asserting some taste of your own, also? Or was this just a matter of "good taste?"

Nell: That's a good question, real good question. No, it was largely my own taste. The evidence of good, modern, contemporary furniture was not very clear right then, that I knew of, in my scope. I guess it was clear, but not for me. Because I wasn't ready to go out in the field very far yet.

Suzanne: I'm trying to think when Betsy Church brought back [Alvar] Aalto furniture. After the war maybe?

Nell: A good deal later. That was about 1940 or '45, maybe even later than that. Have you been to Betsy's house? It's charming. And I owe her a visit.

Suzanne: She and Tommy [Church]--and Bill Wurster had gone with them to visit Aalto--they decided to import furniture.

Nell: They did a good job, both of them.

Suzanne: But in any event, that kind of furniture and that look wasn't what you were after.

Nell: Well, that was a little fancy. Well, no. The new furniture?

Suzanne: Yes.

Nell: Aalto I was just beginning to enjoy. After that we changed the furniture all the time, got new furniture.

IV NELL, THE ARTIST

Collecting. Galleries

Suzanne: Were you also taking painting classes at the same time?

Nell: No, I was just going along in that life. I did that for about ten years.

Suzanne: Did you go to galleries? Did you hang around the art world?

Nell: Yes, I hung out in galleries some. But I didn't have the right people around me. They weren't interested like I was. I knew people, older people, my parents' friends, like Mickey [Albert] Bender. He was kind of a rascal, you know. He was like a little elf. He was tiny. You know, we saw so few exciting people, at least I thought they were not very exciting. Everybody loved Mickey Bender, he always brightened up the drawing room.

He always told people he bought artists' work. But he didn't buy mine. He asked me for it, and he gave it to a museum. I've heard other artists complain, too, that he took our work, he asked for it. But he always put these things in museums, he didn't keep them. He made a very generous gift to the museum without having paid for it. And of course I'm not complaining about it, because it was a way of getting my work aired.

Suzanne: He has a reputation as a friend of the artist.

Nell: Well, he was, in a way, if he'd get their work exposed, and they're only beginning. Everybody should be paid for their work, but this wasn't that bad. For me, I was very pleased to give it to the San Francisco Museum.

Suzanne: Had he been a friend of your family?

Nell: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Very, very good friend of my grandmother and my parents, yes.

Suzanne: Were your parents collecting, or was your mother collecting work that you would now find wall space for?

Nell: Well, I lost patience with it very soon, when I really wanted to be an artist. I wanted to give up almost everything I'd seen around in California, which was silly.

My grandmother, when I was eighteen, asked me what I wanted. I said, "I want a painting." And so she bought a big Armin Hansen painting for me. But when I really grabbed onto modern art I sold it. That was foolish. It would get quite a lot of money now. [see also page 164]

Suzanne: The other thing about Bender is that he was always giving little gifts to people.

Nell: Oh, he gave me a wedding present, some dishes, some Chinese dishes. I still have them.

Suzanne: You said that Grace Morley referred to your parents as being "on the growing edge." I'm wondering if that meant in terms of art or in terms of what?

Nell: Yes, in terms of art.

Suzanne: What were they doing that made them on the growing edge?

Nell: I got very snooty about that, because I thought, "Oh, they just buy baubles." [laughter] They weren't buying anything really contemporary. By then I was involved with artists. It didn't take long. She meant that they were getting into the swim of contemporary art.

Grace did more than anyone for that museum [San Francisco Museum of Art]. She was wonderful, wonderful to the artists. And she was so respected in the art world that she could just snap her fingers and get a whole Paul Klee show for that museum in a trice.

Suzanne: And was your mother on the board?

Nell: No. My mother didn't do that. She was on the book club board. She collected books.

Margot: Was your grandmother the one who was responsible for your beginning to collect art?

Nell: Perhaps. She asked me what I wanted for my eighteenth birthday, and I said I wanted a painting. So she saw to it.

Margot: Because your collection of art has just been a phenomenal thing in your life.

Nell: Yes. Well, I guess since my first trip to Europe.

Suzanne: Was buying art one of the things you and Stanley did in Paris?

Nell: Yes, he was very good about that.

But when I first went to Europe, when I was fourteen, I simply could not manage to leave museums. I sat in front of a Velasquez painting I think for hours. [see also page 165] That reminds me of that book by Samuel Butler. What was that book, do you remember? It was a famous book. When he was a kid he did everything that he was supposed to do, and one of the things he was supposed to do--this was in England--was enjoy art. He used to be sure that the family and friends all saw him looking at paintings. And he clocked it.

Suzanne: Would you be left behind by your family? Or would your mother and you try to share what it was that you were experiencing?

Nell: I don't remember anybody caring. They loved me to be in the museum, that was all right, that was fine. But we didn't discuss the pictures, the paintings, the sculptures. We didn't much, except oh, yes--Oscar Wilde, no, he's not a painter. The other one. Aubrey Beardsley was very stylish then, and I have a lot of Aubrey Beardsley.

Margot, do you know them? Have you looked in all those books? They're wonderful, I love them, I just love them. But they're more decoration. They would fit in with your Klimt, your Viennese.

Suzanne: That was 1924. You were fourteen or so when you went to Europe. When you were in Paris, were there inklings of the Modernists? Did you recall going to galleries?

Nell: No, just museums. We went to all the museums; we didn't go to galleries.

Suzanne: And then with Stanley did you go to galleries?

Nell: We went every place. Stanley had a huge appetite for looking at art. Mostly, we always figured he did it so he could--he laughed, himself--he used to say, "I always say, when I get into

that situation with people, a social situation, I say, 'Ah, but the Goya.'" [laughter]

Margot: He wanted to memorize the artists.

Nell: He memorized them and he memorized music.

Margot: So then he could tell people that he knew all these things.

Nell: Yes. Yes, he did. He enjoyed--I don't know whether he enjoyed it or not; it might have been one of his duties. I will say that several times he bought things for me. When I became interested in Hans Hartung--he was just beginning, Hartung was--Stanley bought me two Hartung paintings. The prices, of course, were--well, we got in on the ground floor. He sat and sweated with me at a gallery where I bought a Miro--you probably have seen it. He was very interested when I got started, because I was making good choices, so it was a good buy. He liked it to be a good buy.

Margot: In actuality, your collection turned out to be extremely valuable.

Nell: It did.

Margot: Which is really the best business deal. I mean, here was a family of business men, and Mom was the one who really made some of the best business deals there ever were, in her art collecting.

Nell: But it seemed very simple to me, because if the paintings I liked cost more than--not more than I could afford, well, yes, or more than a certain amount of money, I wouldn't have bought them. It was simple. If the price was right, I bought the painting, if I liked the painting. I was lucky, because in those few years paintings were really cheap, really cheap. The Miro painting cost seven hundred and fifty dollars.

##

Margot: I liked that you wanted to buy stuff regardless of whether it was accepted or not. If you liked it, you bought it.

Nell: Oh, that's right. That's true.

Suzanne: You continued in those early years of your marriage to travel to Europe?

Nell: Oh, no. We had children.

Suzanne: When did you buy the Miro?

Nell: We bought all that after the war, in 1950, about.¹

Suzanne: Were you collecting from galleries in New York when you would go to the East Coast?

Nell: No. Oh, I bought a--what's the name of that drawing? An artist who drew, I forget. A small drawing. I guess I have some New York painters, but I think by then they were pretty expensive. I have drawings, I think. I'll look and see. I forget. Oh, it was a Rothko watercolor, and a Jack Tworikov drawing.

1930s, Art Studies

Margot: But I was wondering, when did you start going up in the attic in the house and painting? That was in the '30s.

Nell: Oh, in San Francisco. Let's see. Before I went back to school. I went back to school in 1939, about the time of the Golden Gate International Exposition.

Margot: You were painting before that, because when John was born--.

Nell: I know why. When we moved in 1935, one reason I really wanted to have that big house was I wanted a studio. I didn't have any studio. I had no place to paint. That was another of my malaises.

Suzanne: You were still relatively unschooled as a painter, weren't you?

Nell: Well, no. I'd been around the art school a lot in my teens. I was around there, I took classes a lot from the old-timers.

¹[from notes written later] In the late fifties Stanley and I traveled to Europe. This was a most important trip to me, although I had been there three times before. But this became a shopping trip. The timing was right. We went with our cousin, Bill Koshland, from New York, who took us to lunch at Bernard Berenson's Villa I Tatti, near Florence. And in Paris we made our first significant art purchases. We bought a Miro pastel, two oil on paper Hartungs, and a Picasso lithograph. And then in London we started to collect beautiful furniture. That year was perfect in terms of "right prices" and available purchases.

Suzanne: The new art school [California School of Fine Arts] was built [on Russian Hill] in 1926.

Nell: Yes, but I was over at Mark Hopkins when the school was there, too.

Suzanne: You put in more than what looks to be one year on your vita.

Nell: Oh, yes. I went after school. At the end of the '30s, when I went to the new school--though I had been to the new school before that--I went to classes much more than once a week. I went quite a lot. Then my mother said I was out of the house too much because I had children to take care of.

Suzanne: Your mother was totally in touch with your every movement still?

Nell: As many as she could be.

Margot: She was.

Suzanne: First you studied with Lucien Labaudt. Let's talk about him a little bit.

Nell: I had him. Labaudt was terrific. Also Maurice Sterne. I found most of the teachers there before the foreigners dry as dust. Oldfield and Spencer Macky, they were really very boring teachers.

Suzanne: There were a lot of things going on. Diego Rivera came in 1930, Hans Hofmann was around in 1930 or so.

Nell: I didn't ever meet Hans Hofmann. I didn't know Rivera, although once in a while I met him at a party.

Finding a Community

Suzanne: The Gallery Beaux Arts opened in 1925. That's Beatrice Judd Ryan.

Nell: She had one gallery in the City of Paris.

Suzanne: She was selling modern work?

Nell: Oh, yes. She had fiery red hair. Yes, she was okay.

Suzanne: Was she influential? Did she help you?

Nell: No, I hardly knew her.

Ruth Armer was a very good friend of mine. She was much older than I. I don't know where I met her, but she was very helpful. She was one of the first artists who said to me--who else did? I don't know [laughs]--she said she wanted me to come to her studio and paint with her, have a lesson. She was a teacher. That was nice. And from that day on we were friends.

And Leah Hamilton, an artist friend of hers, was another one I knew. She died very early.

Margot: And you used to go with Ellen Bransten to the gold mining country, and you painted and she took photographs.

Nell: Yes, we did that.

Margot: That was a nice collaboration.

Suzanne: Interesting. All these women.

Nell: Oh, there were loads of women, and pretty soon I belonged to the San Francisco Society of Women Artists, who were very, very nice ladies. But they didn't have pizzazz--most of them didn't.

Suzanne: They didn't take themselves seriously?

Nell: Not really. No, they were sort of lackadaisical. Except a few, who were quite fiery, whose names all--where would I find their names? Under the table? [laughter]

Margot: I remember something that you used to talk about, and I think this was one of the things about the women artists. You always were upset with their lack of fieriness, and it wasn't until you met Juanita in 1967, I think, that you found your authenticity. You just starting shooting way ahead with that fiery strength that you put into your pictures because of the authenticity. But I remember you struggling with the namby-pambyness for a long time.

Suzanne: [to Margot] You're remembering thirty years of your mother as an artist? You always knew that your mother was an artist? If someone asked you, it was, "My mother is an artist."

Margot: Oh, yes.

Suzanne: But frustrated or something.

Margot: Yes. She was very frustrated. In fact, when I was very young she painted upstairs in the attic of our house, but it was like it was really private. I think a lot of it was that people made disparaging remarks because she "should" have been more of a mother and housewife, and so she would go there and hide. And then when my brother was born, she had to give up the big studio--this is in '39--and give the bedroom to me. And then she went to paint in the closet. For years she painted in a closet, just a little closet.

Nell: It had a window. It had a little window.

Suzanne: Well, why disparaging? Who would dare?

Nell: Only people who were jealous.

Margot: But you didn't know that.

Nell: I didn't know that. I just knew that they would sneer and say, "Oh, painting again?" or "Still painting?"

Suzanne: That sounds like a male.

Nell: They would do that, too.

Margot: And females wouldn't understand.

Nell: Females wouldn't understand because they were going along with their regular lives and painting on the side. I didn't want to paint on the side, I wanted to paint in my regular life. It was criticized.

Suzanne: Helen Salz, could she have been a role model?

Nell: No. [laughter]

Suzanne: Well, why not? She took herself seriously, she had "a room of her own."

Nell: She could have been a model in that way. She did what she wanted. She was much older than I was, to begin with.

Suzanne: But that's even better.

Nell: Well, there was her. Yes, I think I spoke too soon. I didn't know enough about what Helen Salz was doing. I knew her kids some, a little bit. I saw one the other day, Anne Perlman. Helen Salz did go out in public, and she had a dealer, I think, maybe in the City of Paris. What's her name? You mentioned her.

Suzanne: Beatrice Judd Ryan.

Nell: Yes, maybe. I think so. I thought she was pompous. What's that mean? She was too old for me.

My friend Ellen Bransten, who I should have mentioned before, was frustrated. She wanted to be an artist. She wanted to be an artist photographer, and she worked like hell over it. She worked and worked and worked. She did good photographs, and it was never enough. She wanted to be really part of the crowd.

Suzanne: What's the crowd?

Nell: Oh, David Park--he's dead. And there was Elmer Bischoff, and he's dead, and Dick Diebenkorn. That crowd, they were friends of these people. Well, Ellen's brother is Jim Hart, as you probably know. He liked them, too.

Suzanne: There is a Bransten who was involved in starting Pond Farm.

Nell: That was Jane Brandenstein, and yes, she was fine. She was a very, very good person. Really good person, and very sincere. She got--oh, I forget her name. The potter.

Suzanne: Marguerite Wildenhain? There is an exhibition of Pond Farm work at the Crafts Museum at Fort Mason, an historical exhibition.

Nell: I have a Wildenhain pot. Jane Brandenstein was a wonderful person in many, many ways. Cheerful, hard-working, good humor, terrible husband. And she died very early.

Margot: There was always something going on at that time in our house. There were meetings that you used to have with your fellows, Ruth Armer, Ellen Bransten, and you used to meet at the house to talk about art and things like that, and what was going on at the art school. I met other artists after the war. Then you had slews of those.

Nell: Then I had slews of those. And J. [Jay] DeFeo [Nell prefers J.] fell downstairs, cut her head open. I liked J. very much, and I liked--she's still with us. What's her name? No, she's not. She died in a terrible way, Joan Brown. She was a friend.

Suzanne: J. DeFeo and Joan Brown, they're another decade, aren't they?

Nell: Yes.

Suzanne: And Ruth Armer and Ellen Bransten come from the same San Francisco background as you?

Nell: That's right.

And then there was--who's the guy who does all the dogs? I have a lot of his paintings. Roy DeForest. He's very good.

Suzanne: But these people who arrived here after the war?

Nell: Well, this is after Douglas MacAgy came in and took charge. I told you before how wonderful it was to get people from out of town, just wonderful. We had an awful lot of good times, and Bob Howard was such a good party-giver. And Addie Kent. It got to be really, really a good scene.

Issues of Gaining Confidence

Suzanne: Margot said that after your sessions with Juanita Sagan you "found your authenticity." I'm curious whether you would really agree, that for thirty years you had been painting and not quite, you know, not quite there in some ways.

Nell: Well, not exactly. The day or the time that I was finally able to just throw paint, and do a lot of abstract expressionist work--it's true, everybody was doing it, it wasn't my idea, I didn't invent it. But I had a wonderful time with it, in this experimenting. That was in the '50s. But there were some parts of my paintings that were inauthentic.

And so what I got from Juanita more or less would be permission that I could continue in this way. Because even though I was selling paintings in the '50s, I didn't always have the confidence I got from Juanita. I loved painting, but it was always a surprise to me that somebody would buy it. I didn't get the confidence.

Suzanne: The confidence you're talking about is not just Juanita saying, "This is great!" but Juanita explaining to you that you could say that it was great.

Nell: Yes, or else finding out what was the inauthentic part of my paintings.

Margot: Maybe the story would be helpful of the first time that you ever met Juanita. You were looking for your humor. And you found your authenticity as well as your humor. Do you remember that?

Nell: It might be.

Margot: Do you remember what happened there?

Nell: I remember what you're telling me, but I don't remember what happened.

Margot: You don't remember going to see her with Joan and me? It was just after your divorce, and you said that you were looking for your humor. And I had said that Juanita was a good art teacher, and you said, "How could she ever teach me about art? She's just in education." Remember?

Nell: Yes.

Margot: And then she had you for the first time close your eyes and use your unaccustomed hand and do a drawing, and you opened your eyes so wide and you said, "Oh, my God. That's really me." And it was the beginning of your being able to discover--.

Nell: That's right. You tell that very well. [laughter] That's true. That's absolutely true.

Issues of Success. Money

Nell: Where before I was getting to be successful, but I couldn't always count on it--. I can't count on it now, either. As a matter of fact, success, if that means money, doesn't really mean anything to me anymore. Oh, I like it, I'm not going to kick it particularly, but I might suspect it.

When I read in the paper this morning that--what is that artist's name, that New York artist who does tomato cans, hundreds of tomato cans [Andy Warhol]--is getting more than one million dollars? I thought, "Well, it isn't worth it."

Suzanne: Bay Area figuratives like Elmer Bischoff, Joan Brown--not Diebenkorn--preferred to lead the artist's life as the artist's life is led out here, and I guess they were prepared to accept less money. I'm surprised that you say that "if success is measured by money--"

Nell: Well, generally.

Suzanne: I'm wondering if you're saying that ironically. Do you think it is?

Nell: No, no, because too many artists are recognized mainly by the rise in price of their paintings after they die, rather than the aesthetic value of their work.

No, I don't mean that. Diebenkorn is singular. He's talked about in art circles as having, on his first trip to New York, walked into--what's her name, she's not a dealer anymore, I forget her name, a good dealer in New York--and he simply said--this is the way he talks anyway--I'd like to show you some paintings."

"Who are you?"

"Well, I come from Berkeley." But he didn't--she told me this once, the dealer--he didn't have any calling card, portfolio, or anything. He was so low-keyed, and I don't know anybody else who's ever done that. That was the beginning of his acceptance in the New York market. But that isn't why he's so successful, really. He's an unusually fine artist and his work is unaffected by monetary success.¹

Comments on Maurice Sterne, Frida Kahlo

Suzanne: Before we finish today, tell me what was so special about Maurice Sterne? What did he bring to you?

Nell: He was Russian. [laughter] I didn't know anybody who had an accent before.

Suzanne: Hassel Smith says he was a "hell of a draftsman."² You had to enter his class by special permission.

Nell: Well, I didn't know that.

Suzanne: Hassel Smith said that the class formed "a nucleus of people who were prepared to make certain propositions other than that Mexican crap."

Nell: Hassel said that?

Suzanne: Yes.

Nell: Good for him.

¹Richard Diebenkorn died on March 30, 1993.

²Thomas Albright, Art in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-1980, UC Press, 1985.

Suzanne: So it sounds like Diego Rivera was looked on by "real" artists as "that Mexican crap?"

Nell: He didn't get much attention, really. He got attention from people who wanted to have a mural in their houses or schools or something. There are fans, still, of--no, she came into it really, really lately, Frida Kahlo, getting a lot of attention. I think she's a folk artist. Nothing the matter with the folk artists, but I don't think she's what people are saying she is. She never painted anything but her face, her own face, all the time. And she made a regular sainthood of herself. Thick, brave, courageous. [laughter]

Suzanne: Eyebrows.

Nell: Eyebrow! Only one, one eyebrow. [laughter]

Suzanne: Diego Rivera's was not a visitation that was important to you?

Nell: Well, I wasn't in it then. All I know is that he was invited to all the dinner parties. I wasn't there.

Suzanne: And as I mentioned, Hans Hofmann, that was not the received word also, as far as you're concerned?

Nell: I don't know if he ever really materialized, because I don't hear a lot about him. I think he's pretty good sometimes. A good colorist. He's very good at color.

Suzanne: He was associated with the art department at Berkeley, and maybe that's really a big difference.

Nell: Yes, he was.

There were some things that happened. I want to first tell you about Maurice Sterne, just a small thing. It's a big thing. He had this knack of coming into the room and standing, and he was getting kind of old and he breathed heavily [sniffs loudly], and you could hear him. Breathing over my shoulder, I heard him, breathing and breathing. And I thought, "My God, when is he going to get around to saying something?" And this is the kind of thing he finally would say:

The model was posing. He said, "What are you drawing?" I'd say, "What do you mean?" He said, "What are you drawing?" I'd say, "The model." He'd say, "Oh, what model?" He was really cruel. And then after he got all that out of him, he said, "All right, I want to talk to you about this, this, this, this," you know, "what you could do better, what you haven't noticed, what

you haven't--." He was a bastard, but he was very charming. Very, very charming. I got a lot from him, I learned a lot.

Artists Parties, Balls

Nell: One thing that happened in the school that was wonderful, that stopped--. First they had these great balls, where the artists really took part, and they were fun. They were just wonderful. And the artists really did help it a lot, and they mixed up with everybody else. Afterwards, it got to be a party for the board of directors, and that was no fun anymore, but the artists still loved to have parties, and they would make these fabulous toys and things.

J. DeFeo, that whole crowd, Wally Hedrick, they made these wonderful toys, and sometimes they wore them. They made wonderful posters and people bought them. And then it all fell apart because things got too commercial. They weren't getting enough money. They weren't going to do anything if they didn't get money. Before, they would do it for nothing. I don't know if that's good or bad.

Margot: You used to love those parties. You were crazy about those parties.

Nell: I did. Oh, I worked hard in those parties. I loved working with everybody about the decorations, and we had a good time. But it didn't last very long.

Suzanne: When was that? The '50s?

Nell: Yes, '50s and '60s.

Margot: Well, there were some going on, it seems to me, when I was much younger than that, because I moved out of the house in '52.

##

Margot: [laughter] Oh, my God, here was my mother--I'll never forget it. I went to one artist's party, I remember. She asked me to go to the first one, and I was going along with her, feeling really very shy and kind of dwarfed by the whole event. Everybody was so wild. And all of a sudden, Mom stopped by in one room to say hello to--I think her name is Florence. She's a model?

Nell: Oh, she's everybody's friend. Flo Allen.

- Margot: Flo Allen. Well, there she was, standing there. And Mom said, "Hi, there, Florence!" and started this conversation with her. And I thought, how could my mother have a conversation with a naked model! [laughter] At a party like this?
- Nell: [screeches] Oh, you never told me that. [laughter]
- Suzanne: But was your mother completely different at the party anyway?
- Margot: Yes, she was very free. She was very, very free. Some of it was brazen, but was very free, and she had just a really good time.
- Nell: Was your father there?
- Margot: I don't think he was at that one. But he often went.
- Nell: He liked those parties.
- Margot: To get ready for the party, she would go over the neighbor's fence next door and pick all the roses and the rhododendrons that she could reach, and we were at one time caught, and she behaved like she was about seven years old, being caught. [laughter] She and Joan and I, all of us, picked flowers and they would float them in this big fountain at the California School of Fine Arts.

And getting ready for the party, Joan and I--I don't know about Joan, but I think so--. Anyway, I enjoyed immensely these times, because Mom was in such a good mood. She was doing what she really wanted to be doing. So I both liked that and disliked it, because I wanted some of that for me with her.

But the party--I mean, I thought this was just wild. This was a whole other scene I had never seen before. So since I picked up the same conflicting values that she had, this was a whole other side. I mean, I didn't hardly belong there. I didn't know what to do. My mother suddenly was a big figure in the art world, so different from at home. She wasn't frustrated anymore, so it was that.

- Nell: My parents went through the same thing in their generation. They went to all the balls at the Art Institute. My father was the head of the board of directors for a long time. They were huge parties. Were they at the museum? No, they were at the Civic Center, I think. I went to one of those, too. Yes, they were huge. I liked the ones at the school best.

V THE SAN FRANCISCO ART WORLD

The Bricoleur

[Interview 3: May 21, 1992] ##

Nell: [speaking of an old friend] I had seen her only once since I left school in 1928. That first time I saw her was about five years ago, just in passing. I said, "What are you doing now?" She said, "Well, nothing." I said, "You mean really nothing?" "Well," she said, "I'm married, I have one child, I have one husband. I'm going home now, I'm going to cook dinner." So I saw her the other day, on Chestnut Street, and I said, "What are you doing now?" "Same."

Margot: I think, Suzanne, that part of what makes Mom unusual is how hard she works at changing what she doesn't like in her life.

[tape interruption]

Nell: I'm reminded of something. Someone, in a critique of my work, or talking to me or something, called me a bricoleur. Do you know what a bricoleur is? It's a French word for a jack-of-all-trades. I can't exactly remember the conversation, or who said it--I wish I knew. Somebody to do with a museum or a gallery or something.

I said, "Is that good?" A jack-of-all-trades? I said, "You make that sound like I'm a dilettante," which is a huge subject, because I was thinking of--do you know Lewis Callaghan? Did you ever know him?

Suzanne: No.

Nell: Well, maybe you'd call him a dilettante, but he knew as much about photography as any photographer I know. He took gorgeous

pictures in India, and he did terrific portraits of me. He did a series of very well-considered and worked-at pictures of the Embarcadero Freeway, and the bridge. I mean, he knew so much about it, he took so many lessons, and he was artistic, and he loved artists. Emmy Callaghan, his widow, she's very nice. He married her and turned her into a person interested in art, all the arts.

So, I would think, [if that's a dilettante] "That's not bad." But to be a dabbler--I don't like that, not at all. I might be a bricoleur, because I'm really interested in everything. But I can't do everything. I don't even try to do everything.

Margot: What could he have meant? That you can't be pegged at anything like, "Oh, well, she paints machinery, or she paints only one subject." Could he have meant that positively?

Nell: No. But I don't care what I'm called. Some people think a bricoleur is a put-down but others consider that a bricoleur is curious enough to make many experiments.

Dropping Names

Suzanne: Let me pursue my request [by letter] of you that we talk about the people you associated with in art classes since the beginning.

Nell: I have them all written down. Do you mind if I go downstairs after my list?

[tape interruption]

Now, do you want to see this list of artists I've known and worked with?

Suzanne: Yes, why don't you talk about them. I think that my predilection to do everything in a chronological way is just going to drive us all crazy.

Nell: Oh, I think that's a waste of time. [laughter] But then I'm not a historian, and I get impatient with historical reasons.

Suzanne: I want to know about artists who were important to your art, and life. Pablo Picasso? [laughs]

Nell: Oh, yes. We were best friends. [laughter] I never met him, but I have a wonderful picture of Frank Perls with him. A photo.

Suzanne: Did you visit his studio when you were traveling in France?

Nell: No.

Suzanne: Ruth Cravath?

Nell: I knew her. These are people--when I say things like, "I knew her, I knew him," that doesn't mean socially I saw them, unless it was at a meeting or a show. I didn't have them in my house or didn't go to their houses.

Suzanne: Edith Hamlin?

Nell: I knew her.

Suzanne: Maynard Dixon?

Nell: Never knew him.

Suzanne: Otis and Helen Oldfield?

Nell: Oh, yes. Otis was one of the best of that--what would you call them?--uninteresting people.

Suzanne: The "best of the uninteresting people?"

Nell: Yes. Now, he was really pretty colorful, Otis. He had a certain amount of imagination, in my opinion. He was nice. He was nice to me.

Suzanne: Jacques Schnier?

Nell: I just knew him, "Hello," and his wife was almost a relative. [to Margot] Did you ever know Dorothy Lilienthal?

Margot: No.

Nell: She was married to Jacques Schnier. Jesse Lilienthal was a very good friend of my father's, part of the crowd.

Suzanne: Dorothea Lange?

Nell: I only knew her professionally, because she took marvelous pictures of my mother's children. It was embarrassing for children.

I was about thirteen or fourteen, and I remember myself in a Grecian garment of diaphanous silks, that were dyed like clouds and rainbows. The dancing teacher was somebody called Mrs. Rush, a student of Isadora Duncan. We were supposed to float around, and our hair hung dankly down. [laughter]

My mother had Dorothea Lange photograph us in those costumes at her studio on Sutter Street. I just couldn't stand it. It was not my real life or any part of it. But it was considered artistic. So she took me and my two sisters' pictures that way.

Suzanne: Later in life did she take a more characteristic portrait?

Nell: Never did. Never.

Suzanne: How about Imogen [Cunningham]?

Nell: Imogen, I knew her. Not terribly well. I knew people who knew her very well. She was nice; I liked her.

Suzanne: Did you have your children's portraits done?

Nell: By lots of them, yes. John Gutmann. I got to be kind of friends with John Gutmann.

Suzanne: And he was available for that kind of work?

Nell: Well, he needed money, I guess.

A Peter Stackpole Photograph

Nell: [to Margot] Who else took your picture?

Oh, Peter Stackpole took that fabulous picture of me at Tahoe with Billy Koshland. Peter Stackpole was doing a series for Life, and he happened to be at Tahoe when we were. He was staying with the Phil Lilienthals, Phillip and Ruth Lilienthal. I was over there for lunch and he took this fabulous picture.

Suzanne: In a very informal way?

Nell: Oh, gosh, yes. We were climbing on rocks: me, my husband, and Billy Koshland from New York. He's an old friend, part of the Koshland family in San Francisco, who has been at Alfred Knopf for all his life.

- Margot: That's a fabulous picture, because it portrays all of the--what shall I say?--decadence and trickiness of the twenties, all the games they played. A very, very fine photograph.
- Nell: And there's another person in it besides Stanley and me. There's Rosalie Wolf, who was a relative, and also an old, old friend.
- Suzanne: How does it portray the decadence and the trickiness, as Margot says?
- Nell: Well, Margot didn't live in that time, and so I think she's talking about--it really wasn't, it was after the Jazz Age. That stopped after the twenties, and Prohibition.
- Suzanne: What's happening in the picture?
- Nell: We're trying to meet each other along a stretch of rocks. It could have been dangerous, I suppose, but I didn't think so. None of us did. We're just sort of--what are we doing, attacking each other?
- Margot: There's no communication. There's a lot of sneaking around the rock to try and catch the person unawares, while the other person is walking around the rock to see what's around that bend. There's no communication at all. It's just one chasing after the other.
- Nell: It's rather muscular, isn't it, kind of muscular? I'm not sure I would call it decadent. I don't feel that I was part of a decadence. I'll show it to you sometime. It was sort of a hide-and-go-seek. I'd rather call it a hide-and-go-seek.
- Margot: And it was representative of the under-the-table contract that went along with the Donner Party scene.

More Artist Friends, Ellen Bransten and Ruth Armer

- Nell: If you find me bothering your tape with my coughing, it's because every single morning I get a post-nasal drip at eleven o'clock, every morning of my life. And it lasts about half an hour.
- Suzanne: [laughter] Okay.

Now, you have in front of you a list of people who came to mind. People who you were involved with as fellow artists?

Nell: Yes. Do you want to see it?

Suzanne: No, I want you to use them as your text.

Nell: Well, there was only one from my old world and that was Ellen Bransten, Jim Hart's sister. We were childhood friends. She was very interested in the arts, and very envious of people who actually were doing art. So she was restless. My, she was so restless. And she had to deal with a social life with a husband, Joe Bransten, who was a very nice guy, but she couldn't bridge it. She wasn't talented, really, as a painter. But she was appreciative! She collected art, she was a very, very good collector, but she was over her bounds in trying to be a painter. She was an appreciator.

Margot: Wasn't she also a very fine photographer?

Nell: Yes, she was a good photographer, but she didn't get around to that until--. We weren't artists when we were children. [laughs] We were playmates. Her husband Joe wasn't easy to live with. He was jumpy. He was on the board of the Legion of Honor Museum, and he liked the arts. He was a trustee and a patron. Ellen was a sort of a flibbertigibbet in her youth, and didn't give a darn about education or anything like that. Well, neither did I, much. But we were different.

She loved parties. I did, too. She married Joe, and he said she didn't know anything. She was uneducated. I think that that's right. She paid no attention to any education. Her mother died when she was young--wonderful lady--and her father was a poppinjay, sort of an awfully pompous socialite. So she didn't get much chance. Nothing much was offered to her. The rest of the family were very social.

Joe--he always said later he wasn't sure he was glad he did this--he took her to Europe to educate her, because he couldn't stand her flimsiness. Well, it took. She decided she was going to get deeply involved in art. Oh, she took courses, she went to art shows. Painting was what interested her the most, not music. She wasn't involved in that, or any other art, but she was crazy about--she introduced me to a lot of artists, because she was a lady patron down at the Legion of Honor. And she was a very good friend of Walter Heil, head of the de Young, very good friends with him. So she had an interest in museums. I met a lot of artists through her.

Suzanne: It sounds like it was hard to rise above the level of loving art, really hard to be taken seriously. A lot of people were interested in art, weren't they?

Nell: Oh, a lot of people were, lots of people were interested. For me, it was extremely hard, because I didn't want anything to do with the social part of it.

Margot: That's very astute. It was very hard to rise up.

Nell: I felt that I wasn't being taken seriously, and I wanted to be taken seriously. So I had to do an awful lot of work.

Suzanne: In looking at the catalogue for the California School of Fine Arts in 1937-38, only in very small print and sort of awkwardly placed on one page is there reference to the idea that one might take art classes for credit. It's almost as if the school, at least in this period, recognized that they were serving a public of dabbling women.

Nell: Can I see that a minute? Is it mine? Do I have one?

Suzanne: This is yours.

Nell: Oh, that's my painting.

Suzanne: Yes, this illustration is a nude of yours, probably from an earlier year, which shows that you were doing hard, serious work there. Who do you think you might have been taking the class from when you did that?

Nell: Oh, that was Maurice Sterne. He's the only teacher I had who turned me on.

Suzanne: His class was a life drawing class that was every morning from nine to one, five days a week.

Nell: I guess I did that, then. Because I only can remember going once a week to art school. That was about 1930? No, no, 1938. I would have been twenty-eight years old. I just couldn't stand my life any more. I didn't like going to the Beresford Country Club, I just hated it. And I behaved so badly, crossed the tennis court when somebody was serving. Didn't like my golf lessons.

Suzanne: But you had to keep doing all that.

Nell: Well, it was part of my--what was intended.

Suzanne: Were there any women here who had just shoved the whole social expectation thing aside?

Nell: Good question. Ruth Armer, and she had been friends with artists in the art school, much better than I. She was probably ten or fifteen years older than I. A most marvelous person. Generous, humorous, and most of all, she said it was her aim to teach me patience. [laughter]

Suzanne: In the sense of being patient with the situation you were in?

Nell: I guess with that, but mostly it was at the art school.

Somehow--I can't remember how I got to be on all those boards. I don't know who would have had me.

Suzanne: Was Ruth Armer married? Did she have a position in the community?

Nell: She was married to Joe--

Margot: Bransten, after Ellen died.

Nell: No, she was married to a Joe first, a lawyer.

Margot: Was her married name Armer?

Nell: No, that's her unmarried name. Joe I only met once or twice. He wasn't interested in the arts, but he was very much interested in his wife. I think they lived together for many years before they got married. So he didn't mind that they had artists to the house once in a while. He was awfully nice, good man.

He died, and then for many years she didn't have any marriage. But then Ellen Bransten died, and Joe Bransten just had to be married again, and for some reason Ruth Armer agreed to marry him. [laughter] He wasn't her type at all. Well, he was a very, very kind, nice person, but he wasn't an artist. Nor was he quiet. He was very jumpy. People called him Jumpy Joe. [laughs]

Margot: Ruth Armer taught the children's Saturday art classes during the years from '37-'38 when you were a student. So I don't know if you knew her there or not.

Nell: Oh, yes, I did.

Suzanne: The idea of having artists come to your house, was there some proscription against that?

Nell: Not this home. Stanley didn't mind a bit. Well, my mother and father had artists to the house all the time, musicians, and Mother had music in her house. A quartet from the Symphony.

Suzanne: But it was more in the sense of "I am entertaining artists?"

Margot: Yes.

Nell: Until my father died, and that's when she became an artist-bookbinder.

Suzanne: And then she was clear that she was an artist, or was she still "entertaining artists," I wonder?

Margot: Oh, yes. She was clear she was an artist and she also entertained them. And she sometimes mixed them. Like, "This is Mrs. A.B.C. Dohrmann, and Belle Young, and Dorothy Liebes." So she saw them both socially as well as-- . But by then Mom was more established.

Nell: She wasn't doing bookbinding when I was a child at school.

Margot: No, no. Definitely not.

Society of Women Artists ##

Suzanne: You had joined the Society of Women Artists.

Nell: Yes. And so I knew a lot of lady artists, lots of them.

Suzanne: Was that by invitation?

Nell: I don't know.

Suzanne: Did you have any ambivalence about joining that?

Nell: Oh, yes, I definitely joined that knowing that it wasn't what I really had in mind for myself, because at that time being a "woman artist" had very little status or prestige in the art world. They were doing it because they couldn't get in any other place, or couldn't get in with the Art Institute or Art Association. So they had their own group. They were perfectly nice, happy women artists, very kind and nice.

Suzanne: Why did you join?

Nell: Alice Arnstein, I think, wanted me to get in there. I think she might have been one. She was not an artist; she was an amateur. [laughs] She was an amateur artist.

What have I said? I wanted more.

Margot: Yes, your need for recognition, I remember you fought very hard. I remember your saying with fury about the women artists, you didn't want to be really associated with them.

Nell: They were so nice to me, and I kept winning prizes. But I noticed much later, as I went along, an awful lot of artists first take what they can get, and they know they're going to leave the place that they've got into, because it's not enough for them. Well, the women artists weren't aggressive enough for me, actually.

Margot: You reported that they--I'm paraphrasing, so change it if you want--they lacked strength and vitality and authenticity. Is that correct?

Nell: It was a very weak crowd. And they were very happy to be by themselves; they didn't want anything more.

Suzanne: I noticed among your papers that you have an article about the new National Museum of Women Artists in Washington.

Nell: That was a big mistake. I lent them one of my scrolls.

Suzanne: In the article the criticism of the museum is a bit what you're saying about the women artists, a lowered common denominator.

Nell: Yes, but they weren't rich ladies. They were not society ladies. The Washington museum only exists because of this enormously rich woman. One of her curators or somebody, or some friend or somebody, would recommend, "Well, now, you better have oh, some famous woman artist, in this group." Which she did do, on occasion. But she had no interest in art at all. In 1991 I removed my painting [scroll] from that museum and placed it in the Krannert Museum in the University of Illinois, where they really cared about having it.

The Society of Women Artists in San Francisco was not like the Washington museum at all. They were "lady artists." They wanted to paint, and they did paint. They were nice ladies, but they were missing a spark. See, they loved each other--it wasn't a lesbian group.

Suzanne: How did they deal with you?

Nell: Oh, I don't know how they dealt with me. [laughter] I think because I was on the make in the art world, I knew enough to be polite. [laughter] I think I must have. I was so glad to be out of being on the board of Mount Zion Hospital, or one of those jobs where I couldn't be polite. Because these ladies--there's nothing the matter with them except they weren't going anywhere. I couldn't discuss contemporary art with them really. So I got prizes. I won prizes.

Suzanne: Who could you discuss contemporary art with?

Nell: Ruth Armer. And Leah Hamilton. Are you talking about ladies?

Suzanne: Yes. Well, just in general, people--that's a silly question.

Grace McCann Morley

Suzanne: I'm going to go back to my list. The San Francisco Museum of Art opened in 1935, and Grace Morley appeared on the scene. Does that stand out as a really important year in your life?

Nell: Extremely important, extremely important. She was the first director. There wasn't anybody before her.

Suzanne: And there was not a modern museum before that.

Nell: No. What was that place? It was part of the veterans of foreign wars or something, the War Memorial Building. Well, the Crockers were singularly astute in wanting a real director. They were very generous. I didn't really know them.

I knew Helen Crocker Russell [Mrs. Henry Potter Russell]. She was awfully good. She was good to me. I had an awful lot to learn. I was young and I didn't know anything really. She used to scold me. She was the head of the board, she was the money person. She used to say, "You'll just have to stop that behavior. You can't always do what you want to do." It was things like that.

And I was how old, thirty-five or something, or thirty? I said [in a meek voice], "Oh, okay." [laughs] I was respectful. I listened to them. They were most all older than me, than I. And they were sincerely interested in a proper museum.

Mrs. Russell was wonderfully supportive of the director that the Crockers appointed, Grace Morley--I don't where they got her,

from the East--who was wonderful, and difficult, very difficult, and serious.

Grace Morley was very good to artists. She cared a lot about the artists that were invited to show, and she had a very friendly relationship with the local artists, so friendly that when she left San Francisco many of the artists presented her with examples of their works. And I haven't heard of this happening ever again. But then I don't believe most local artists even have met the present director.

Suzanne: Was it difficult for her to balance the artists and the boards and all of these things?

Nell: Mrs. Walter Haas was responsible for her being fired, because she was just as bossy as Grace Morley. Did you know this?

Suzanne: No, I didn't.

Nell: Well, Grace, at the time of the war--gee, she couldn't have been there very long, she traveled a lot. She was involved in a State Department job. And so she went to Europe, Paris, a good deal. She was out of town, and I don't know if things came to a bad pass then because she was away, but they started to run out of money. Helen Russell had died. Mr. Crocker died.

Elise Haas was in charge of the board of directors, and they had little money. So they decided to have a fashion show to raise money, they had to do that. And nobody had done that before. They had a fashion show. Grace Morley sent word, "Over her dead body would they have a fashion show." That had nothing to do with art. Mrs. Haas went right ahead. Grace said then she would have to leave, and she did. A lot of--oh, the artists were terribly upset, because she had been so good to us. See, they had shows--.

Well, you know about this. It's boring. They used to have annual shows, started by the Art Institute. They used to have four shows a year. There was an oil painting show--I think sculpture went with it--a watercolor show, and a drawing show. Three shows a year. They were juried.

Suzanne: Out of town juries?

Nell: Well, sometimes they were from out of town, sometimes local. The Art Institute chose them. Grace liked that idea.

Then that became expensive. Grace was fired. I don't know whether that was before or during the Art Institute shows. I really don't know.

Suzanne: Grace Morley was fired, or at least moved on, in about 1960. She had lots of rocky times in between, where she was really taking on her board and letting her feelings be known.

The women's board leaders, Mrs. Liebes and Mrs. Cabot Brown, Mrs. Henry Potter Russell, Mrs. E. T. Spencer, Mrs. John K. Kittle, Mrs. Duncan McDuffie, Mrs. Sigmund Stern, Mrs. Milton Esberg, Mrs. E. H. Heller, Mrs. Jerd Sullivan, Mrs. Nion Tucker, Mrs. Lloyd Ackerman, and Mrs. Drew Chidester, were they more than Lady Bountiful? Could they talk knowledgeably about modern art?

Nell: I don't--no, they couldn't. Mrs. Lloyd Ackerman, she made ceramics. Was Dorothy Liebes on there?

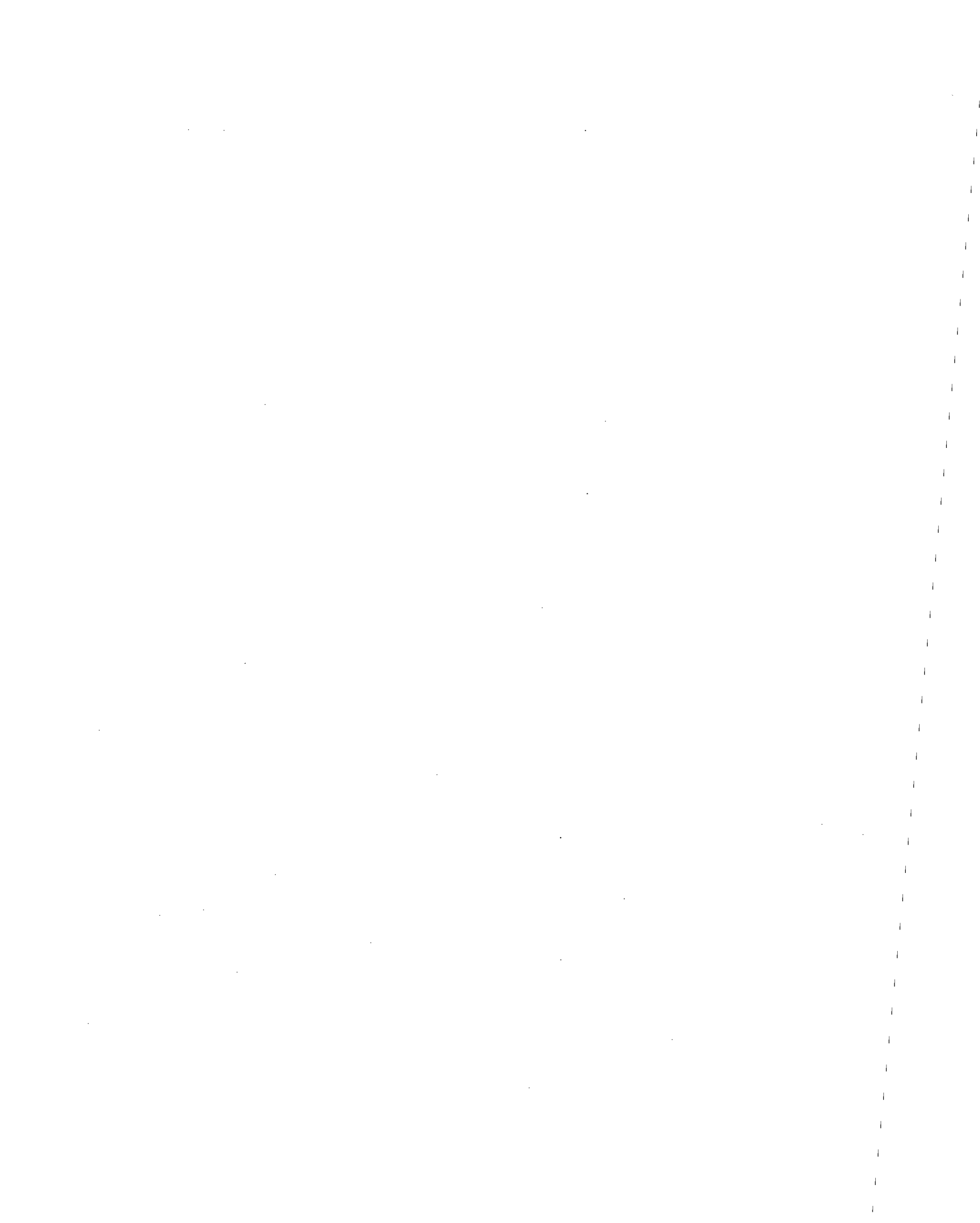
Suzanne: Yes.

Nell: Well, she designed materials. They were crafts-people. But they were accepting of Grace Morley because she had so much authority, and she commanded respect.

She had access to lots of kinds of terrific paintings and sculptures from the East [Coast] that she could borrow for shows. She could order a show from Europe, like Paul Klee, and it would arrive. She could order a show of Mark Rothko from New York, like this [snaps fingers]. She had great authority. They abided by that. They knew they had something good. The critics were so partial to Grace. She had a lot of support.¹

Respect for the museum director, and the board of directors--and in the old days these were the benefactors--respect for the benefactors and respect for the director was the rule. Nowadays, and for the last many years, the members of the board are usually used as sources of income.

¹Elise Stern Haas, The Appreciation of Quality, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1987; Grace L. McCann Morley, Art, Artists, Museums, and the San Francisco Museum of Art, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1960.



VI THOUGHTS ON:

Heated Discussions About Art

- Margot: I remember during that period of time--I don't remember whether it was in the fifties or the forties, I guess both, but the forties for sure--when people would come from the Art Institute to your house, or the museum, and you would have heated arguments and discussions, and it was very lively. It was just after the war, I guess. Just very, very lively about the goings-on and the politics of the museum, and you got so angry, and there were big discussions about what was "art." Certainly these crafts-people were not art, and there was a great distinction between--.
- Nell: So what's new? [laughs]
- Margot: And there were many people coming to the house.
- Nell: But those were not museum people.
- Suzanne: The Art Institute and the Museum were at odds a lot, weren't they?
- Nell: Yes, I think so. It got worse, because they all wanted a piece of the pie.
- Suzanne: Were you really discussing "What is art?"
- Nell: We were, in terms of the difference between craft and art. I don't know that we were discussing--well, probably we were talking about all the artists. [laughs] I don't know.
- Margot: That's what I heard, as a little kid.
- Suzanne: Did you ever have any question about what is art? Or did you know what is art?

Nell: Oh, yes. No, I didn't know. The thing I had to learn the most about was what is authentic. What is the difference between phony and authentic? I get this distinction from seeing and looking, and seeing and looking, and doing.

Suzanne: Is this a hindsight revelation? Or did you suspect phoniness when you were painting in your closet?

Nell: I didn't--I wrote about it--I didn't know if I was suspicious. I think I write in my autobiography that--I did, I wrote that my work was redolent, or something, that wonderful word, of copying other artists.

I wrote that I was just crazy about Matisse and Picasso. I had no idea then of the seriousness of their involvement in what they were doing, what the difference was then between Matisse and me, for instance. What I saw was pretty flowers, good color, all good cheer. I laughed at Picasso, I thought he was great. I had no idea of the serious work that all these people, all good artists put in, in their search for authenticity. I knew I had a lot to learn. I was trying to learn all the time. That's why I saw so many paintings, made an effort to see everything.

Suzanne: You mean when you traveled.

Nell: Yes. Well, everything that came to this town I saw, too.

Margot: Well, here too, and also in nature.

You wrote about it yesterday in my class, about how you go on a walk, and how different that is often from other people who don't see as artists. You saw, like what you wrote yesterday about the little bud in the tree, and you loved the idea of how things change, and everyday things were important to you.

Nell: Yes.

Suzanne: Do you still feel somehow a need to check?

Nell: I'm very suspicious of myself. Well, sometimes, I quite frankly say, "I think I'll copy this." [laughter] "I'll see if I can copy this." I soon learn--it's always a failure. I can't do that. I don't know how.

But we used to argue about--this is something we did argue about: if we don't copy other artists, how do we learn? Because kinds of painting--abstract expressionism, all kinds of words that you use for painting--started somewhere. We know that people sit in museums and copy. I see nothing wrong with that;

they're learning. The only thing that's wrong is if you sell it as your own. [laughs] It's a way of learning. I never did that, because I wouldn't enjoy it. I wouldn't have a good time. It would be too hard.

Problems of a Self-Portrait with Grandchild

Nell: I'm just finishing a portrait that I'm doing from a photo of me holding my newest great-grandchild. Oh, I can't stand doing it. It's just awfully hard! I can put in some of my own kind of work, but it's too hard.

Suzanne: Because you are not being your own kind of painter in this, or what?

Nell: Not really.

Margot: Is that really true?

Nell: Well, I put a lot of me in it. It's just that I don't like my perfectionist. I do not consider perfection as a goal. I went through a long period of abstract expressionism which is wonderful. It's just very freeing and permissive. I loved doing it. And it's the same thing. Whatever I paint, it's the best I can do at that moment. I'm not a perfectionist. I don't care if it isn't exactly what I had in mind. It changes.

Suzanne: So at that moment, then, you would stop, and you would not come back?

Nell: Yes. Probably not.

Suzanne: What is the impatience?

Nell: I can't do it. I'm really not impatient. I'm terribly patient with my paintings, and it takes me forever to do them. But there's a certain amount of facility that I can't accomplish--in my mind, and in my work. I can't do it. I'm not able to do it. And I don't want to.

Suzanne: Is this technique you're talking about?

Nell: It's not even technique. It's just--. Impatient. That is impatience. I don't want to go any further. I just don't want to go any further, it isn't helping anybody or anything, or me. As I said before, perfection is not my goal. But I can admire

the painting. I can say, "That's okay." It's a very complicated situation.

Suzanne: When people say, "Oh, I just really love that," do you at that point register, "This is something that I quit on because that's as far as I could take it?" Does it have an integrity of its own even though you quit?

Nell: It has an integrity of its own because I have chosen the colors. I've made mistakes with the lines, or the weight, or the quantity or the--.

Suzanne: So you don't apologize for anything.

Nell: No.

Suzanne: Is that something that you had to grow into?

Nell: Oh, yes, you have to grow into it by just--I was looking for a painting this morning down in the storeroom. Gosh, there's a lot of bad painting down there. [laughs]

Suzanne: But you keep it.

Nell: I keep it, temporarily.

Suzanne: I was going to ask you whether you have purges.

Nell: Oh, yes, I do. I throw paintings away. Some of the paintings I saw this morning, I don't find any use for them. Someday when I'm good and strong--. You know, it's not easy to throw away an oil painting. You have to undo it from the stretcher bars, and what do you do with the stretcher bars?

Margot: I don't think you've ever been really influenced by somebody coming in and saying, "You know, I really like that painting." You say, "No, this is not good. It's not what I intended." You don't get swayed.

Nell: Well, it's very confusing to the spectator, because they then naturally say, "Well, then why don't you get rid of it, if you don't like it?" Well, it has parts that appeal to me. I don't ever plan to go back to that painting, but I can use the mistakes. I tell that to students: you can use your mistakes. It's very useful. Because they might turn out to be not mistakes at all. It might turn out to be the right thing. You have to look at it a long time.

Suzanne: You used the word "use" just a minute ago. It seemed odd to apply a use criteria to a painting. [laughter] I can't remember exactly what you said. Do you, Margot?

Margot: She said, "I have no use for it."

Suzanne: Right. And in fact, who is the painting for? It is for you in that sense, and so you will determine whether you have any use for it.

Nell: Yes.

You know, you're sitting in the sun. Aren't you very hot? Would you rather sit over there in the shade?

Suzanne: I'm very hot, you're so right. [moves]

Margot: In learning, it has no use for you?

Nell: No, it's too much wrong for me--it's lost its balance, color, doesn't interest me. Other times I find surprises and that does interest me. Then it's useful.

You know, painting is fascinating, it's just fascinating. You never know exactly what you're going to find. The slightest brushstroke might change everything. Nothing is for keeps.

Suzanne: I was reading an oral history with Francis Bacon--

Nell: Gosh! Wasn't he a miserable man? And a wonderful artist.

Suzanne: [laughs] He would do things to a nearly finished work, throw a little paint at it to see what would happen, for instance.

Nell: Yes, we all do that.

Suzanne: At a point where you're dissatisfied?

Nell: Yes, just can't stand it another minute. What I do the most of is put on the color that I think is the worst. Because then there's only room for improvement. [laughter]

Margot: That's a really good idea.

Nell: And so I can work from there. I can't work from nothing as well. Oh, I have to work from nothing--an empty canvas is nothing.

Margot: Does it ever happen that the thing that's so ugly that you threw at it, does that actually turn out to be a good part?

Nell: Yes.

Suzanne: Bacon was saying there was something very authentic about that decision, that there is control there.

Nell: Yes. His work--.

Suzanne: You don't feel like being grouped with him?

Nell: I wouldn't mind a bit. He's a terrific painter. He's a wonderful painter.

Margot: I think you were always interested in artistic decisions.

The course that she taught for years was called artistic decisions. [to Nell] At some point I think it makes sense to talk about you as a teacher and how that developed.

Suzanne: We will.

This is a self-portrait that you're working on downstairs. Have you done many self-portraits? Is that one of the problems, that it's a self-portrait?

Nell: It's tiresome. Because yes, there are so many reasons--I mean, what do you expect of yourself? It becomes for me--I try to make it--what's the word? Not me. It's what I see in the mirror, or a picture--a photo. I'm not sure I really know what I look like. My face and attitude and expression change so often. And the technical measurement of features borders on perfection trouble.

Art as Spaces and Shapes

Margot: I hear you talking about not liking the technical aspects of it, but you're not talking about the depth that you have to go into who you are to put that rich color and the rich--the whole thing together, which is very authentic. You're really just talking about the, "I can't do the technical skill measurement," I think. Is that right?

Nell: I'm bored with measurements. I'm bored with arithmetic. I hate it. I can't do it. I just can't do it. So, as I said, I get as close as I can, and it's really not any different than anything I paint, whether it's abstract or real.

- Suzanne: Are you having as much trouble with the child as you are with your face?
- Nell: No, not the child. Although in a way, I do, because you know, children have no delineation--babies. It's a baby. They don't have any--they've got nostrils and yet no bridge to the nose.
- Margot: Yesterday you told me you couldn't possibly paint the child, but you could paint yourself. So I think that this one's difficult because it's in process.
- Nell: I've about finished. The child was driving me crazy yesterday, that's true. It's much more than I can really discuss or handle because--because I'm not a perfectionist. I don't care about that subject. And I can't say either, "I'm interested in what's inside the child." [laughs]
- Suzanne: But you do care about grandmothers and grandchildren.
- Nell: Oh, I care a lot about that. I care about that a whole lot, but their expressions are so changeable. Painting is--it should move, because of the colors and the contrast.
- Margot: Do you feel the same way about the portrait that you did of yourself and two of my grandchildren?
- Nell: Yes, in the end it turns out--especially I found it out with yours--spaces and shapes, spaces and shapes. The older I get, the more I'm involved in spaces and shapes, and forget teeth and nostrils.
- Margot: Yay!
- Nell: What's the space? What am I looking at? Dark, light? So when that becomes abstract, that's fine too. If it does. But that's right. Thank you. I forgot about my spaces and shapes. I see that when I walk: I see spaces and shapes every place. Or shadows.
- Suzanne: [looking around the room] It's almost impossible to concentrate on words when you can see dark dangling shapes shifting against pale floors, and light teal against dark teal on your t-shirt.
- Nell: Yes, everything.
- Suzanne: Is this beauty, or is it just forms, and interesting?
- Nell: Anything can be beautiful. Ugly can be beautiful.

Margot: But you say "pretty will never make it."
Nell: [laughs] Who said that?
Margot: You always tell me that.
Nell: Did I say that?
Margot: "Ugly can be beautiful, but pretty will never make it." And you taught that, too.
Nell: Oh, that's true. Oh, pretty, ugh.

Art Festivals

Suzanne: About the Art Festivals. The first one was in 1941. Were the San Francisco Art Festivals a cut above the usual amateur art festivals?
Nell: It's always the same, I think. The main reason that it isn't any different is because nobody wants to leave their work outdoors. Today it would be out of the question to have an art show in the park. You couldn't do it.
Margot: You had heated discussions that I recall about that, heated discussions.
Nell: Yes, I did.
Margot: About how art festivals should not be, and this was not professional.
Nell: Oh, that--yes, what is professional. Should the professional artist be in it at all?
Margot: Yes, that was the big one.
Nell: I can't remember how it ended. Its real meaning was not defined. What is an art festival? Who is it for? You can have an art festival, and you do have, once or twice or maybe more down at the Marina. I don't know yet what it should be. I don't care any more what they do. [laughter] I used to care, a lot.

VII MORE SAN FRANCISCO ART WORLD

Clare Falkenstein

Suzanne: Clare Falkenstein?

Nell: Clare was a friend, and I saw her a lot. I saw her in--she lived in Paris for a while. She was a difficult person, because she was very strong and dynamic and noisy. Sounds like a description of me! [laughter]

Suzanne: She overwhelmed you?

Nell: Yes, she was very overwhelming. She was a good person, just terribly raucous and demanding. She lived in New York. I used to see her down there--I mean down in SoHo, I guess, or the Village.

Did I write her down?

Suzanne: No, I wrote her down.

Nell: Yes, she is important. Very important.

Tell me, what's the name of Whitney? She's an art historian, Whitney Chadwick. I think about a year or two ago I was doing something at the Legion of Honor with her and some other people--artists and historians. It was a program that whoever is in charge out at the Legion of Honor wanted us to do on the history of art in San Francisco.

Suzanne: A panel?

Nell: Yes, it was a panel. Thank you, it was a panel. I interrupted you. Go ahead.

Maurice Sterne, and Federal Art Project Work

Suzanne: The nude in the California School of Fine Arts catalog, you said you did that under Maurice Sterne. Did that work already have something about it that was the reason that he chose you to work on the Federal Art Project with him?

Nell: No, not at all.

Suzanne: How did that all happen?

Nell: I was a good student, and so were the other guys, Jack Wilkinson, who left town later, and Charles Voorhees. Voorhees was a milksop, he wasn't much of anybody. Jack was a comer.

He [Sterne] was doing this job for Washington, D.C. It was the Hall of Justice. What he needed us for was to--oh, and he was also doing a sculpture for someplace in Washington--so he needed huge tubs full of water carried for him up from the basement to use for the modeling clay.

And I'll just never forget--I was pregnant, I mean quite pregnant. He had a really nasty--he was very charming, but he had a nasty streak, too. I had washed my hands in a tub of water, and that meant with soap. He couldn't use soap for his mixture of water, just plain water for his clay. So he said, "You will take this bucket of water--" it was more than a bucket, it was a big tub-- "and fill it up again, because I need clean water."

Well, I was too pregnant really to enjoy this chore, but I did it. So when I came back with clean water, he laughed and laughed and laughed. I thought he was going to split.

Margot: What a bastard!

Nell: Yes, he was a bastard.

Suzanne: And what were the men doing who were his apprentices?

Nell: Oh, he wouldn't ask them, because they could do it, and it wouldn't be a joke. So that was mean, very, very mean.

But he was equally generous and kind, and when I wasn't doing that, I was helping him. I learned a great deal about color. He had special sticks of color mixed with wax that he painted on these huge panels. That meant he only had to dip them

in turpentine, and then they would be wet enough to draw with. It was a good invention.

Suzanne: That was his invention?

Nell: Yes. He made them, but I did too. He taught me how to make them, so I was busy with that. And sometimes I was asked to trace a drawing, or trace something like that. It wasn't a creative job for me, but it certainly was wonderful to see what he was doing, how he was doing it, and the whole--oh, it was exciting. That whole ambiance was--you know, me in the master's studio?

Suzanne: And this was taking place at the school?

Nell: Yes. And he was given a studio.

Margot: Did he choose you because you were a good student, or because you were pregnant, or because you were willing to carry water?

Nell: [laughs] Well, I was a good student. Mainly, I think, because of the episode of his insults.

Margot: Oh, and you lived through it.

Nell: I told you that. He was doing critiques. He came to me and said, "What's this?" Remember?

But you know, he was so much more stimulating than any other teacher I'd ever had, so I can take that kind of crap if I'm getting something for it. Because he gave me a serious critique, and always did.

Suzanne: When you were working for him, where were you in your own life? Was this your first child you were pregnant with?

Nell: My third.

Suzanne: Your third. And so how much time could you give to the project?

Nell: I don't know, probably twice a week. I gave enough time so that my mother said, "Now, you stay home." She said, "You belong at home. You do not belong out of the house all the time." So how many hours? Oh, a whole morning. Like three hours.

Suzanne: That's the kind of criticism that women artists would be vulnerable to, that you were not serious about it if you were not toting water five days a week.

Nell: [laughs] Yes, that's right, exactly.

More Name Dropping

Suzanne: Maurice Sterne was the best of the bunch. What about Spencer Macky?

Nell: Boring! Stuffy. Didn't enjoy his work, I could tell.

Suzanne: How about Lee Randolph himself?

Nell: He was the director of the school. Awful, stuffy, just awful.

Suzanne: Constance Macky?

Nell: She was a nice lady.

Suzanne: You knew her.

Nell: Yes. She was a nice lady. She was okay. Oh, I know, you forgot to write down Piazzoni.

Suzanne: I was going to ask you about Piazzoni.

Nell: I really didn't know Piazzoni, but I knew his daughter a little, whose name was-- [Mireille Piazzoni Wood]

Suzanne: He did those great empty landscapes.

Nell: Beautiful. The ones in the public library? They're beautiful, I think.

Suzanne: Did you take classes from him?

Nell: No. I'm not sure he was even teaching there.

Suzanne: He was on the faculty.

Nell: Well, I didn't know that.

Suzanne: Jane Berlandina Howard?

Nell: A fake. [laughs]

Suzanne: And the rest of the Howard family? Bob Howard, what about his work?

- Nell: Fine. See the thing outside my front door that rolls around? He gave me that.
- Margot: He was a good friend of yours.
- Nell: Yes, he was a very good friend. He was a very good person. As he got deafer and deafer he got more and more irritable. But he was generous. He gave marvelous parties--nobody else did like that--beautiful parties. And I liked his wife [Adeline Kent] very much, too. We had a lot of good times.
- Suzanne: And John Langley Howard?
- Nell: I never knew him. It just was, "Hello," or something. I didn't know him.
- Suzanne: Madge Knight and Charles Howard?
- Nell: I didn't know them. They lived in Italy when I was around.
- Suzanne: You were more of a modern than any of these people.
- Nell: I was, I was younger. My friends were J. DeFeo, Joan Brown, Roy DeForest, Dick Diebenkorn.
- Margot: They were all younger than you.
- Nell: Yes, everybody I know is younger than me. Otherwise, they'd be dead. [laughter]
- Margot: No, but I mean, even then. Even then, the people who became your artist friends were all younger than you, who you associated with.
- Nell: Were they? Not Leah Hamilton and Ruth Armer.
- Margot: No, those were the only ones.
- Nell: Sonia Gechtoff--well, she's younger, too, I guess.
- Suzanne: David Park was your age. [Park was born 1911]
- Nell: Yes.
- Margot: What about Ralph Ducasse?

- Nell: Oh, God, I forgot Ralph. I was pretty good friends with Ralph. I felt badly when he fell off a scaffold and then we didn't see each other any more.
- Margot: And Fred Martin, is he younger than you?
- Nell: Fred Martin's a good deal younger. But I saw him all the time.
- Suzanne: You were taking prizes in shows along with Diebenkorn and Park.
- Nell: Well, I wasn't taking as many prizes as they got, but I took some prizes.
- Suzanne: You were in group shows with Roy DeForest and Tony DeLap and Fred Martin, and with Karl Kasten and Fred Reichman. You were often in group shows with two or three men.
- Nell: Yes. I was, I guess.
- Suzanne: How did that happen? Is it that your work looks right with theirs? Or does a curator want to have a woman, do you think, a token woman?
- Nell: Maybe. I don't know. Our work was different. I don't know how they did that, what the system was. I don't really know. I think most of the juries were selected by people like directors or--not by other artists, always. Sometimes I was a juror, several times I was. I don't remember how that goes.

Ruth Braunstein's Gallery

- Suzanne: When did you become acquainted with Ruth Braunstein?
- Nell: When she had a gallery in Sausalito, I heard about it, went over there.
- Suzanne: When was that?
- Nell: Before she was here. I don't know.
- Suzanne: Has she been important in directing your work?
- Nell: No. She doesn't interfere.
- Suzanne: Dealers might say, "This is going well, and that isn't going well, and let's have more of these large, dark ones."

Nell: [laughs] "Let's have some more dark ones." No, she's never been that way. There's a perfect word for that: she's never been-- qualitative? No. Critical in a constructive way.

I went to see her to see if she would be my dealer. I asked her, and she said, "Yes." But I didn't ask her why, [laughs] and I don't know now. We never discuss that, ever.

Suzanne: Why did you choose her?

Nell: Why? Because not too many others were asking me, for one thing. Mrs. Gechtoff [mother of Sonia Gechtoff, a painter] asked me, though. She was a dealer at the East-West Gallery in New York. She was excellent, and I was signed up for a show, and I was delighted, but she died before the show opened. So I went over to see Ruth.

But no, I couldn't have, because before Ruth I had another dealer--the architect, Bolles. [John Bolles Gallery]

Suzanne: Why did you leave Bolles?

Margot: I thought you were happy with Bolles.

Nell: Oh, he was doing pretty well for me. I think he died. Or he stopped dealing. Maybe then I went to see Ruth. And she said, "Sure, okay." By then she had moved to lower Pacific Avenue.

Margot: So that was a good location, and also she did show your work in New York.

Nell: That was after I'd been in her gallery here. Yes, she did. And then--I don't know where the scrolls fit in. I showed those at the Art Institute. They had a gallery there, you know.

Margot: And the Oakland Museum.

Suzanne: Let's talk about the scrolls next time. We should be looking at them, or a reproduction of them, when we're talking.

Margot: We have fifteen minutes.

Suzanne: I am interested in how dealers function, how aggressive they are, how hard they work at getting the critics down to review the shows. What is your experience?

Nell: They phone the critics a lot.

Suzanne: You got very nice reviews from Frankenstein.

Nell: Yes. I got good New York reviews, too. And Frankenstein, yes, was a friend.

##

Nell: Yes, I have had pretty good reviews.

Suzanne: I was asking how aggressive Ruth Braunstein was in promoting your work. That's why a person stays with a gallery, I guess.

Nell: Well, yes. Ruth is aggressive enough. I don't think I even went to John Berggruen. He's practically commercial art. I don't think I'd even want to be there. That's not my type of gallery.

Suzanne: Charles Campbell?

Nell: No, I wouldn't like that, either, because at that time I wanted a downtown dealer. He's done some wonderful things, especially with old-timey--well, they're not old-timey, they're people who died, like--oh, he was a friend of mine, a nice guy? He did a drawing of me. Gordon Cook.

Suzanne: Anyway, you were content with Ruth.

Nell: I think Ruth's a good dealer, and she's a good friend to her artists. She's very loyal. I enjoy her.

There was somebody--who was it? Oh, I know who I like as a dealer, but he doesn't have any painters I like except Tony DeLap, and that's Martin Mueller on Market Street at the--I forget the name of the building, oh, Monadnock. He's Swiss. He had a find in Russian art from the Revolution, all that beautiful stuff. His father took him to Russia on trips--this was long after the Revolution, of course--and they bought little tiny drawings, they bought all kinds of stuff. He had loads.

He came out here, and nobody was a bit interested, because we were so really slow artistically, I think, in many ways. Until, practically, the whole business with Russia was over, and now everybody's dying for--oh, the price raise is just enormous! You can hardly get anything now. He's very nice, Martin Mueller.

Oh, I know another person I forgot to mention: David Simpson.

Suzanne: He was at Berkeley, wasn't he?

Nell: Yes. He still is. He shows at Mueller. Oh, and what about--you know that feather piece I have that I took down? What's his name?

Margot: Carlos Villa?

Nell: Thank you. I think I mentioned Carlos Villa. Maybe not.

Suzanne: You've a lot of names on the list that you haven't mentioned to me.

Nell: I guess I knew everybody, don't you think? [laughs] Almost, of a certain age.

Importance of New York for Artists

Suzanne: Were you ever tempted to go to New York to study, or work there?

Nell: No. It's too hard. I didn't want to work that hard, I didn't want to live in New York. Well, live in New York, I wouldn't have to, but I would have to work--. You have practically zero chance, going in there cold. If my dealer, some dealer, had pushed me or known some dealer in New York, that would have been different.

Margot: But your life took a different turn, and instead of painting in that kind of competitive way, or to get yourself known in New York, you chose to teach, and you traveled.

Nell: That's quite true, but I don't think I could compete in New York. Maybe in seventy-five years I'll be discovered.

I did have--. Somebody brought George Staempfli to visit me, from New York. Maybe it was Grace Morley.

Suzanne: Staempfli gave Elmer Bischoff shows in New York.

Nell: Yes. He [Staempfli] was a bastard, too. I think he was a really mean man. Not because he turned me down, that wasn't it. He just was a tough, mean man. He took three of my paintings and sold them. But that was the end of that. He didn't want me back, because he should have taken more paintings and sold more paintings, but anyway, he didn't. He also asked me to introduce him to other painters, and so I took him to see J. DeFeo and Joan Brown.

Margot: How about Deborah Remington?

Nell: She was a friend. She's in New York.

Joan Brown, who was a good artist, and I enjoyed her company, he sold her paintings, and he wanted them, but the money was so little she said she was not going to stand for being exploited like that, and goodbye. And she wasn't nearly as well known then as she became later. I don't know what happened with Jay.

Suzanne: Was there a lot of discussion of the whole East Coast-West Coast thing? Isn't that a favorite discussion, whether you ought to bag it all here and go back where the big time is?

Nell: Yes, but I think it's not so much discussed now. Because it's really-- Well, I don't know, I was going to say it's quite different. In a way it's quite different because New York has gotten very rarified. But now my friends, Bill Brown and Paul Wonner, they have dealers in New York. I don't think they worked harder for getting them.

Suzanne: But they haven't taken their careers back there.

Nell: No. They show back there.

Suzanne: Some of the Bay Area figuratives felt that they could work comfortably here, and they just didn't want the rat race.

Nell: Oh, they were plenty ambitious.

Margot: You never wanted to move away from here. I've never heard you talk about wanting to.

Nell: The figuratives didn't move away.

Suzanne: No, they didn't move away. It was comfortable here.

Nell: Yes, it's a comfy little place. They also show in Los Angeles. I had one show in Los Angeles. I forget the name of the dealer.

Margot: You used to get very, very annoyed that the big stuff was going on in New York and Los Angeles, and you'd get very mad at San Francisco for being so provincial.

Nell: I did. But that was a waste of time.

Margot: But you never wanted to leave.

Nell: Oh, no, no.

San Francisco Museum of Art. and Oakland Museum

Suzanne: How could you make more big stuff happen around here? Do you just have to have a wealthier clientele?

Nell: See, this is a hick town. The San Francisco Museum present director holds in his two hands the richest collectors that we've got, and he doesn't even know the names of any San Francisco painters, I don't think. Hardly any. And he makes these rich people buy the last word from Germany, paintings that cost \$500,000. Or he makes them buy--I don't even know if they buy New York any more. It's a whole exotic crap. Because, if you go to any established wonderful museum in Europe, their first floor is always full of their own paintings. In Switzerland, it's Swiss painters, you see them first, yes. And then you can go upstairs and see the famous New York painters. Isn't that right?

Margot: Oh, yes.

Nell: They're very sophisticated. They know where they are and what they're doing. Out here, it's a really hick town.

Suzanne: You have to go to the Oakland Museum to see the California artists.

Nell: Yes, and I dare say that some day that's going to be a very valuable collection. At least it may be.

Margot: That's always been one of your bitteresses.

Nell: Yes, that makes me very bitter, because it's childish. The people who support the San Francisco Museum, every time they get one of these big European paintings they say, "Well, now we can compete with New York and Los Angeles." They can never compete. So I'm tired of it now. I don't think about it.

As I said, I've never met the new head [John R. Lane] of that museum [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art]. I forget his name. But then I don't go to the social events where he might be present. The other museum directors were all nice to me. When they get the new museum downtown here, they say then they'll be able to show their local artists. But I don't believe it. Maybe they'll show Diebenkorn.

Margot: The famous people.

Nell: What's the name of the sculptor who sculpts wedding cakes, [Robert] Arneson? I know him, but not really.

Margot: But Mom, there's one thing I know to your credit, that in your need for recognition, and a lot of other people's, you never would compromise your authenticity to gain it. Much to your credit.

Nell: No.

Deborah Remington, three or four others, left town. And Jeanne Reynal. She was wonderful. She was a New Yorker. Delightful. [see page 173]

Nowadays I feel a growing interest by Bay Area collectors in adding local artists to their collections and I'm pleased about this.

Margot: We have to stop now.

Suzanne: Next time let's take a leap into therapy and teaching.

Margot: On your birthday!

Nell: Whose birthday?

Margot: Yours.

Nell: Is it? Oh, that's an occasion.

Suzanne: What's traditional?

Nell: Traditional is somebody in the family has me for dinner. Or somebody has a birthday party, and the most traditional almost of all, I guess unbreakable, is dinner with Bill Brown and Paul Wonner, which always takes place two weeks later, because we never can do it at the same time.

Art Commission, 1959-1963 ##

- Suzanne: You were on the Art Commission, from 1959 to 1963. You were replacing the other "art member," John Garth.
- Nell: That was a source of great pride for me. He was a terrible artist. His best work is a mural on the Safeway Store [Marina Green]. And he went to Yale, besides.
- Suzanne: Who appointed you?
- Nell: Harold Zellerbach appointed me. And he was very good about this, very large-minded about statements, and change, and stuff. He was fine. He was extremely good with all the people on the commission. He was very clever.

He asked me--I guess he liked me--he asked me if I would pick out of a show at the San Francisco Museum, a local show, if I would pick paintings for his offices down at the Zellerbach Company. And I did. But of course that was a big mistake because secretaries don't like people putting pictures in their offices that they didn't pick out. They like to have photos of their wives and children. At least in offices I've been to. I don't criticize them for that. Well, I enjoyed that job, and then he invited me to be on the Art Commission.

You see, you have [the Art Commission] a motley crowd--not a crowd, just a few people. I was very grateful to be there with Joe Esherick, who really knows how to handle groups and be tactful and get something done. He's a wonderful guy, humorous, and helpful to me. The sculptor member was somebody--Spanokoupolos, maybe, some Greek name. He was a very poor artist, very conventional, he wasn't up to date at all, and he wasn't helpful. Then there was a lady, maybe she was an interior decorator; anyway she was only interested in getting some variances for her property on Broadway. [laughs] I don't know.

Then there was that nice old man, the book man. Everybody knows him. He's over a hundred now, I think. No, he just died. You know him. Billy Koshland, when he's here from Knopf every winter, went to see him. I can't remember his name, very prominent, and I guess he had been a book dealer. But he was too old to take part, even, so he wasn't much of anybody. He wasn't objectionable, he was all right.

- Suzanne: Esherick's was the strongest voice?

Nell: Yes, and his words to me were, "Now, listen, don't expect too much. The best we can hope for is that whatever art they take down--. Don't ever take down anything, or vote for it to be destroyed, unless you can replace it with something better."

Suzanne: Did you deal with the height of buildings?

Nell: Not the height so much but with the artistic elements. For instance, when the Park Commission saw a particular need for an artistic decision, they consulted the Art Commission. One day someone on the Park Commission complained about an inartistic fence in Golden Gate Park. Walter Haas, also on the Park Commission, always voted to have a fence made of barbed wire, or something, didn't think that it needed any artistic development. [laughs] But to placate the complainer, he was willing to ask the Art Commission for help.

But most of the time I thought it was fun on the Art Commission. I learned so much about the way decisions are made in a civic group setting.

Suzanne: What public art and sculpture was put in place in the time you were on the commission?

Nell: A statue of Columbus, I think, a present from Mexico. What were we going to do with it? It's on Dolores Street, way back in a park, and I never see it without thinking how we argued about should it be on Telegraph Hill, where Columbus surely would have been seen--boats, and all. [laughter]

Suzanne: Did you get outrageous on the commission?

Nell: I could have been a little outrageous. But mostly Joe and I passed notes under the table, and that kept me quiet.

It was an absurd idea. If you're going to be democratic, and pick people from different parts of life, some of whom couldn't care less but they like the honor, well then they have the right to vote. And what are you going to get? Columbus.

A List: A Few Friends and Acquaintances

[Nell Sinton wrote and submitted the following list of friends and acquaintances]

Philip Linhares, curator, Oakland Museum; Charles Campbell, dealer; John Coplans, photographer; Ruth Armer, painter; Flo Allen, model; Leah Rinne Hamilton, painter; Katie Allen, model; Joel Barletta, painter; Joan Brown, painter; Dima Birich, my model for many years; Wayne Thiebaud, painter; Juanita Sagan, my therapist and friend; David Park, painter; Fred Martin, painter; Bonnie Lloyd; Richard Shaw, ceramicist; Nancy Bechtle; James Melchert, sculptor; Delia Moon; Diane Johnson, author; Sedge Thompson; Bill Brown, painter; Bill Koshland; Paul Wonner, painter; Theophilus Brown, painter; Roy DeForest, painter; Bob Howard, sculptor; Hassel Smith, painter; J. DeFeo, painter; Manuel Neri, sculptor

VIII PSYCHOTHERAPY AND ART

Eugene and Juanita Sagan

[Interview 4: June 4, 1992] ##

Suzanne: We've referred throughout to the importance of your relationship with Juanita Sagan. And drawing with the left hand. When did these things happen? What is the sequence of events?

Nell: We spent the whole session [with Juanita Sagan] yesterday talking about this.

I got a divorce in 1968, and had been in sort of formal therapy for a couple of years, and getting very little out of it. I was getting a divorce--. I hadn't even told my children I was considering a divorce, but I had been thinking about it for a year or two. The whole thing, of me in an analysis kind of therapy, and divorce, was new to them, because I had been putting on a front for the world, and even the family.

So, Margot said--after a few lunches and meetings and so forth--"Well, Mom, I'll help you." I was down and out. Margot offered Eugene and Juanita Sagan as therapists at the Institute for Creative and Artistic Development. Margot had discovered them. Joan came in at the same time as I did, or a little before me.

Meanwhile my son John in the East was getting a divorce at exactly the same time. And he had three little children, the youngest of which was two and the oldest of which was five, I think. [laughs] And so we were sort of a shabby family.

So, I did, I said, "Okay, what do you want me to do," even though I really didn't think they could help me. But I was so down.

Margot: I want to interrupt here, because I don't believe you're taking enough credit. You saw that what I was getting was very important, and you were willing, at your age, to go and try something new. Even though you didn't trust it, even though you said that Juanita couldn't possibly help you with your painting.

Suzanne: The idea was that it was to be a family therapy?

Margot: Yes. I went, and I was the presenter, and Eugene said, "I want to meet the whole family."

Nell: Including Stanley.

Margot: Yes, and so everybody came, every body! All of us, all our kids, everybody. The idea for the whole family to be involved was so they might learn about one another, come to more understanding, respect differences, and to help one another to grow. Some really liked this approach, and others didn't.

Nell: We had regular meetings then, of the families, and the children. Didn't we?

Margot: My children and Joan's children were separate, though. I mean, we didn't all meet together.

But after you started to get stronger in working with Eugene and Juanita, then I said to you, with Joan, "Juanita really can help you with your art work. And you said, "Poof, she can't possibly teach me anything. She's not an artist." But you went, and you said, "Okay, I'll just see."

Suzanne: [to Nell] Is this what is in your notes there?

Nell: Yes, I want to read it: "Juanita helped me to look at my family, my environment, and options in my life. I have a lot of perspective when I teach."

Suzanne: Is this a statement you have just been working on?

Nell: It's a rehash. We've been talking about this for years. [laughs] I mean, we're experienced in it.

Well, this is out of context--.

[Nell reads from her notes] I don't get appropriate recognition. Nowadays the San Francisco Museum does not show the work of San Francisco artists, until they are first famous and have shown in New York, or are extremely avant garde.

I didn't go to New York to study and work and to make my way because I preferred to stay in San Francisco.

Credit-Taking, and Inclusion

Margot: One second. In reference to the picture [from California Magazine, 1984] that Mom showed you, you [Nell] said that that had to do with what you were talking about.

Nell: Yes, in this I am looking peculiar, as if I wished I could not be in the picture, because---

For the many years that I was tied into the museum, and working closely there, especially with Grace Morley, who was wonderful, they had a lot of events for the public. And I gladly joined the other artists--we didn't get any pay at all--and we worked hard, we made decorations, we fixed up little props, all kinds of stuff. Nobody paid us, we didn't expect to get paid. But it was afterwards that I realized, "Gosh, this museum's getting all this stuff for nothing from all us artists. We don't get any pay. And we don't get any shows, either."

That wasn't exactly true of Grace, at all. Not even "exactly," it wasn't true of Grace. I had several shows while Grace was there. One of them was with Bill Brown. He's a painter, a very good friend.

Suzanne: This group portrait from 1984 suggests that these are San Francisco's artists and this is their museum.

Nell: Yes.

Suzanne: And you were physically irritated, and appear to be withdrawing.

Nell: Yes.

Suzanne: Was this a common complaint?

Nell: Yes! Nowadays the San Francisco Museum, with John Lane as director, does not show the work of San Francisco artists, unless

they are first famous and have shown in New York, or, are extremely avant garde.

This is a generality statement. There are exceptions. I think of Dick Diebenkorn, who is really unusual. He's having a show at the San Francisco Museum. He never put on any affectations. He didn't do anything unusual, except he's a very, very good painter. Where was he teaching? He was teaching at the Art Institute. I don't think he had taught at Cal then. He had taught at Illinois. I think he's a very authentic, very good artist. But he's unusual. Most of the others put on some sort of dog and--what is it called? Dog and pony show. [laughs]

Anyway, I don't want you to think that everybody was left out. Of course there are unusual artists, and I don't expect to be included with them. I just expect to be included with the group I knew and was, what? acquainted with, painted at the same time.

Margot: You've been much more recognized by Oakland [the Oakland Museum] certainly than San Francisco.

Nell: Every local artist is. Oakland is making a very good precedent. For many years now they have been collecting California artists when nobody else was.

Suzanne: Was the therapy with the Sagans what started you doing your writing that goes with your paintings, or your autobiography? Would you not have done that before 1968?

Nell: Well, they gave me the credit-taking apparatus that I needed to have. I was low down, low down in self-esteem. I just didn't think I was worth anything. Really, what they did was in showing me what I could do, what I really was doing, that it was okay! And I like to write, to clarify my thoughts, and just because I like to. I'm an excellent letter-writer.

Suzanne: I think the Sagans were doing unusual work as therapists. It is worth talking about, historically. For you, they were your therapists, and they pulled you through it. But you had just had a traditional experience of psychotherapy. What was immediately different with the Sagans? How fast did things happen?

Nell: There's just no comparison. Old-fashioned Freudian therapy takes forever.

Suzanne: And did it make you feel better?

Nell: Oh, no, Freudian therapy made me feel worse! Haven't you ever been analyzed?

Suzanne: [laughs] You say it.

Nell: They give you no crutch. They give you nothing to deal with. You say, "Well, what'll I do now?" They say, "Well, that's up to you."

Suzanne: You've been analyzed, taken apart.

Nell: Yes, then I guess I'm supposed to put myself together.

Suzanne: Did you leave that analysis at a point where you were not finished, according to the therapist?

Nell: No. He admired me, he actually did, he thought I was pretty strong.

[to Margot] Had I left when I went to [Eugene and Juanita]?

I had been there a year, and I told him I was finished, and he said, "Well, if you think so, well okay."

Suzanne: Was his agenda to put your marriage back together?

Nell: He was doing something he admitted was foolish. And so did the previous one, who recommended me to Dr. Michael Zeligs. Dr. Melvin Somers was the first one, and Dr. Zeligs was the last one--second. Both of those doctors saw me and Stanley, but not together. Which they admitted afterwards was a mistake. Because they felt manipulated.

Margot: [laughing] I remember you and Dad saying to Joan and me, "We're going to tell you a secret. We've been in analysis." And Joan and I went--[she nods]. And then you told Eugene, and Eugene said, "The secret is"--Stanley, my father, saw an analyst for ten years--"the secret is that he didn't get any better."

Nell: You know, dealing with Gene and Juanita was like dealing with human beings. They offered tools to get out of difficult interactions, make choices, explore alternatives I never knew I had. I could use art, writing, theater--not just talk. And I could celebrate. How can you deal with somebody who says they won't talk? Just makes you talk all the time. Or sees something peculiar in a gesture.

Suzanne: During those couple of years of being in analysis, what kind of painting were you doing?

- Nell: I think I was experimenting, but mostly with shit.
- Margot: The ball and hammock stage? Balls and hammocks.
- Suzanne: Was the analyst interested in seeing your work?
- Nell: No, they admitted that they knew nothing about it, and didn't feel equipped.
- Margot: I remember when you first saw Eugene and Juanita, you were so excited. It was like you suddenly had your energy and your excitement and your humor back. And the main thing, which you wrote about there, was your authenticity.
- Nell: Oh, authenticity was absolutely a knockout, because I didn't know what that meant. And neither does anybody else when I mention the word now, right now.
- Suzanne: Explain it.
- Nell: Well, authentic as opposed to phony. Well, how do you tell the difference?
- Suzanne: Hard to think that someone could come along and give you authenticity if all your life you had been feeling phony.

Learning to Draw People, the Feeling Inside

- Nell: All my life I was fighting phoniness, but I didn't know it. I would do peculiar things. And it's hard to describe, because you could say, well, I was showing off, I was trying to get attention. And it's probably so.
- Margot: Mom, the best example, I think, that you have of authenticity versus phoniness, which you have just written about here, and that you talked about yesterday, was the example of how you used to really copy things. And when you started to draw with Juanita, and she had you sit in front of the mirror, and you said, "I can't draw people, I can only draw"--well, hammocks and balls, your abstract things--"I can't draw people."

She had you sit in front of the mirror. Do you remember? And you were to look at yourself. And you were to draw, with your eyes closed, what it really felt like to be inside of you. Do you want to read that?

Nell: Yes.

I think I want to lead up it, though.

[reading] I became a good teacher because I learned how to teach from Juanita. I didn't go to college or anything, certainly didn't study art at Miss Burke's School. Juanita taught with me at the San Francisco Art Institute for a couple of semesters. And she taught me a structure.

Just because a person is an artist, it doesn't mean he knows how to teach. I learned how to structure a lesson plan, and how to take the student step by step through the lesson plan. And I learned to never put a student down. My students have been young people, retired people. Some were university students, and some had never been to college. They learned their own style.

[to Riess] I have lesson plans downstairs I can give you if you'd like to see what they are.

When my life was falling apart, divorce, etc., my children suggested Juanita. I said, "How can a family therapist teach me about art." Then Juanita had me draw with my eyes closed, and using my unaccustomed hand. [We say "unaccustomed" because for some people, if you say the left hand, that's their accustomed hand.] That was my first real touch with authenticity. That was for me the key word.

We talked about that a lot. I wrote about it, how authenticity has to do with people's feelings, words, actions, and behavior that need to match. Then they are genuine and believable--not like when people say they feel nice and fine but they look mean.

Suzanne: The authenticity that comes out of having your eyes closed and using your unaccustomed hand, is the idea that what you are drawing is more visceral, or less intellectual?

Nell: Less intellectual, yes, and more visceral. I think I described it here.

After I learned about that word, I wrote about it, and talked about it, and my painting became much stronger. I switched from abstract to figurative work. My draftsmanship became elegant. Many positive things

happened. And as an artist I grew. Margot said I was "leaving the stage personalities, becoming more honest, real." Even my color became warmer and more sensual. After 1968 I flourished as a colorist.

My therapy was unique. It touched my creative soul and my authentic forces, and my painting grew. And these qualities were recognized. Juanita asked me why I didn't learn all this at the Art Institute. I told her I couldn't because I didn't learn to use my own style or observe myself at the Art Institute. The teacher came around and corrected my work by drawing on it.

Theoretical Basis for Creative Teaching

- Nell: And if you ask me how I came to improve my work, I stuck with Juanita.
- Suzanne: What is her background working with people in art?
- Nell: Who was she working with? Bauhaus people.
- Margot: She had studied a lot of stuff that Klee and Kandinsky had done. And she worked with some of their disciples. Fritz Faiss was one. She had taken a lot of workshops with Fritz Faiss, and began to study what happened to students when they drew with their eyes closed and their unaccustomed hand.
- Suzanne: This was a technique of Fritz Faiss?
- Margot: Um-hmm. In fact, the teachers at the Bauhaus, as I understand it, had their students draw with their eyes closed and their unaccustomed hand, because it broke up the perfectionist, and authentic feelings came through.
- Suzanne: It is the idea that the material comes from the unconscious?
- Margot: Yes, that's where the authenticity and the creativity came from. All of a sudden Mom's work just became alive! It was not anything like the early work that she had done. It just had a spark that came from inside her guts.
- Nell: I'd like you to see my scrolls, because they're all done with my eyes closed and my unaccustomed hand. I'll get one.

I'll finish reading this little page now:

[reading] Suddenly I began to see, because I removed myself from the teacher who drew on my [that's a terrible thing to do--it destroys self-esteem]--so then I took myself away from doing the "right thing," and I drew with my eyes closed. I said I had nothing to lose, and everything to lose. I stared at the model with open eyes, and then closed them to do the best I could with my eyes closed. In this way, all pre-conceived notions about "the way it ought to be" were useless. The results were simpler, more authentic, and real.

You're up against it, and you don't give a damn, because you don't expect that this painting will be shown in the Louvre.

Suzanne: When you open your eyes, after a passage of drawing, or painting, then is that a sketch, or is that it?

Nell: This is it, though it may look like a sketch to you. But many, many paintings I've made from my sketches. And you would be surprised. I've taught a lot of this kind of class, and it's thrilling to see those hard-working students who have been doing itsy-bitsy "I want to do it right" paintings, that look of amazement when they see what they've done makes them think, "My gosh, all these years I haven't done anything as good as this!"

Isn't that true, Margot? They're just thrilled. It's just the most thrilling kind of teaching I can do. I love to do it.

Suzanne: What about your old standards, your old expectations?

Nell: I hated my work, my old standards. I didn't know how to do anything else, and I didn't like my work. I was a put-down artist of myself, as well as everybody else.

Suzanne: I thought the put-down was you weren't liking yourself, and the art went along with the package. But that the art wasn't that bad.

Nell: It wasn't that bad, but it wasn't exciting, it wasn't what I wanted to do. Not what I had in mind for myself. [laughs]

Margot: I want to go back also to the teaching thing. There are two things. The way you started to teach, since you hadn't had any formal schooling yourself, you mentioned the part about Juanita, but you and I taught together, and I used to kick you under the table because you were talking out of line.

What Juanita and I both, I think, helped you to do, and helped you to really shine, was in the way in which you gave critiques. You gave critiques in such a way that the students could really grow from the criticism, rather than feel just awful and put down. And so everybody really wanted your critiques more than anything else.

Nell: All right. Thank you!

Suzanne: You started out teaching together through ICAD [Institute for Creative and Artistic Development]?

Margot: No, she taught with Juanita at the San Francisco Art Institute [1970-71]. But I was the first one she taught with. Where was that, Mom? Oh, the Student League of San Francisco.

Nell: It was in a rehabilitated funeral parlor. [Nell leaves room]

Suzanne: [to Margot] Is authenticity the key word in the Sagans' therapy, or is it just a key word here for your mother?

Margot: No, it is inherent in their work. It's the core, who the person is, including all of their negative and positive parts--including the phoniness.

IX "UNDER THE TABLE AT THE DONNER PARTY"

Introduction

Nell: [brings in scroll, which is in a plexiglass case 12" by 48", allowing the viewer to roll the scroll from end to end, protected behind the plexiglass. The photocopied scroll is approximately 120" in length.] I tell you what. Will you move that stuff please, Margot?

This is my first scroll. My other scroll is better, it's much more interesting. But I like this one anyway.

Margot: The other one is fascinating, because it's the development of the American female.

Nell: The social development of the American female.

It's so long since I've had this out of here--.

Suzanne: Where is the original of the other scroll?

Nell: The University of Illinois.

Suzanne: It's traveling?

Nell: No, it lives there, recently.

These scrolls--[to Margot] I should help you--they are big. They've been exhibited all over the place, and they hold up pretty well. They take up a wall and stretch around a corner.

Suzanne: Hold up well as works of art, is that what you are saying?

Nell: As works of art. But I mean, they don't fall apart!

Margot: Mom, that's really important. Juanita told me that you went to no end of trouble to make those scrolls. It took you a really long time because you had to learn many new techniques--even studying how to make different kinds of paste so you could attach paper to cloth. It was demanding because it was a whole new medium, and you were diligent.

Nell: That's true. I don't remember how I ever got started with them, do you? Well, I know I'm a curious, investigative person and I was looking for something new to work on.

Margot: I remember that Juanita was helping you to find something that fit your definition of yourself as curious and investigative--and you and she came up with the idea of a slightly new slant on something very old, which was scrolls.

Nell: Yes, scrolls were really history books with elegant illuminations and illustrated. And our friend, Pennfield Jensen, who was in our Creative Behavior Writing group, told me to go to the public library.

Margot: And then from there you began to work on what your story was--what happened in your family--that made up your scroll.

Nell: That's right. I like to make use of the past, because it helps me to understand the present.

This is a photo--[talking while getting the scroll out of the plexiglass case]--done by Andrew Hoyem. I made eighty copies and hand-painted them. So, it is not the exciting thing that it is in its original self, because the collage elements are photographed instead of natural.

Suzanne: From the start, was this to be a work of art?

Nell: I knew it would be a work of art.

Suzanne: And it would unroll and read from left to right?

Nell: Yes.

I got fascinated doing it, because I had the whole subject in my mind. [to Margot] It would be easier if we took it out and looked at it on the table.

The original of the scroll is on canvas. It was about this high [gestures]. I used paint, here.

Do you want to take the time to read this now?

Suzanne: [reading text of scroll] "Two men are making a deal. One is emphatically pointing out the words of the contract. The double-cross is almost smudged out by black shadows. The man on the right is going to be the patsy. He knows it, partly because his hand has the face of a scared rabbit. And he is loathe to grab the paper or sign it."

Describe how you did this, this whole process? Is this a section?

Nell: This is a section. It's glued together here. This is a--[she points to a piece of German money on the scroll]

See, I am a pack-rat. Once when we were in Germany--I was only fourteen or something, with my parents--our family was a big family, there were seven of us, and we'd arrived in Berlin from Belgium. My father had to get this family of women across Berlin to another train station, but first he had to cash a small check. There was such a terrible rate of inflation in Germany that the amount of money he got was so huge on the exchange rate that he had to carry the load of it in big suitcases. He saved some as souvenirs.

Those are old marks. I used that one [Zehn Reichsmarks] in the collage. That's one of the things I used, and this I think is a cigarette coupon.

The Meaning of Under the Table

Margot: Do you know the meaning of that collage, Suzanne, did she ever describe that to you?

Suzanne: We talked about "under the table transactions." And the Donner Party is a play on a dinner party?

Margot: Well, the cannibalism. They ate each other, the Donner Party.

Nell: That is the main idea of it.

What is going on under the table is what was really going on. On top of the table everybody is being very polite, eating properly, talking properly to each other. But under the table is all this dirty stuff.

Margot: Juanita helped to bring out the understanding of the interaction, so that Mom could use it in an artistic kind of way.

Nell: Juanita and I were trying to talk about, I think, the difference between authentic and inauthentic, and crooked and real interaction. I was probably complaining about dinner parties where I had to talk to somebody I didn't like and do something I didn't want to do. I hated listening to polite conversations knowing that something else was really going on under that polite chit-chat. So, we got to talking about how underhanded that was, like "under the table." And it was my idea, suddenly with a flash of lightning, "Oh, like the Donner Party. They were cannibals."

Joe Goldyne, a San Francisco artist, wrote a very nice booklet about this. It was sort of like a program.

Suzanne: Was writing the text like therapy? What about all these words on the scroll?

Nell: I like to write. I just like to write. [laughing] I don't think I was thinking of therapy when I used art and writing together. I was just involved with the whole idea of what goes on under the table.

Margot: I think you had talked with Juanita a lot about your misery about the dinner table and what was going on underneath, and either she or you or both of you came up with the idea to write about what was going on, and then put it together with the art work.

Suzanne: You added the writing later? I am pursuing this doggedly!

Nell: No, it went right along with it; I had to do both.

Margot: The writing was a description of the art. Your questions are good, because they lead to some of the steps of the Creative Behavior Process that Gene and Juanita developed.¹ First the person has a response to an experience, the experience in this case being Mom at the dinner table, how it was like the Donner Party. And then the second step of the process was describing that experience in another media. She chose two media: one was art, and one was writing. And the third step of the process is to identify with the characters she described.

Suzanne: Identify with the characters?

¹Nell and Margot ask that the Creative Behavior Process be capitalized throughout.

Margot: Mom has all of those parts in herself that are in that work. She can identify the part of herself that is cannibalistic, for instance, as well as the person that is making the dirty contract, and the person who--

Nell: --is throwing the food on the floor.

Margot: She has all of those characters inside of herself. And she also sees those parts in other people.

Suzanne: [to Nell] Does that sound true?

Nell: I think about things like that.

Margot: She was amazing about that. She was amazingly courageous in accepting the negative parts of her. Amazing.

Nell: But it seems not difficult to make these analogies. Because that's what--. I mean, I wouldn't be surprised if you said, "I hate this dinner"--this [in original collage] is full of third-dimensional pieces of crud, plaster and stuff. I would have to control myself from saying, "Well, throw it on the floor." That's not polite!

Suzanne: That's what you'd say now?

Nell: That's what I said then, to myself. I've always thought that kind of thing. That's part of my rebellion. [Margot laughs] I don't have any problem with this. I don't have any problem with him taking his shoes off. [laughing] Or this snooty guy, he's looking under this lady's skirt. The whole thing is about naughty things that polite people aren't supposed to even think about, but they do!

The Events and People Under the Table

Nell: Do you want to see more? Roll up your side of the scroll.

Suzanne: I'll read as we go.

"His suspicion may get him out of this shady transaction. But he doesn't look strong enough to make another one, a straight one. The guy with his shoes off is rubbing his feet together, as if the shoes had been too tight, so he is relieved of that misery. He

is either a charming individualist, who wants to enjoy the party better by having removed at least one constriction, or he might be a miserable misfit."

Nell: Yeah, you can't tell. Don't you think about, "What's this person like that I've got to sit next to?"

Margot: [laughs]

Suzanne: It's yourself.

Margot: It's crawling inside of yourself in the other person.

Suzanne: "Embarrassed by a pushy hostess, this person prefers to throw her food on the floor, rather than call attention to herself by admitting she doesn't care to eat it. If she's found out, she probably will attempt to cover up this faux pas with a virtuous, self-effacing bumbling apology.

"The lady is primly folding her hands in her lap which is large and capacious. Her hands are also large, and may be grabby. Her dress is long and full, her feet, insignificant and small. She has all the outer aspects of respectability, which the man does not believe, as he tries to hold one of her hands while simultaneously putting his long neck and nosy face under her skirt. He is a masher, a wise guy, a rubber-neck."

Nell: Many people are amused by the language, young people, because they don't know these words.

Suzanne: "This is a serious, square man, who is no fun to be with. He is a stuffy person, busily addressing himself to his newspaper. That is why the child under the table has chosen him to annoy and heckle. She is not going to find an ally there. She has a good victim, who probably will expose her."

Each of these people, if I were to push to have these identified by you, you could give them a name, someone you really know? Some member of a good San Francisco family?

Nell: That's your imagination. We haven't heard anybody do that.

Suzanne: But in your painting "The Guests" in the Garden Party series, hasn't there been some identification of persons there?

Nell: And I've written about them.

Suzanne: And hasn't there been for this scroll?

Nell: I guess so, but not notably, I don't think.

Suzanne: That wasn't in your mind?

Nell: A certain identification? No. He was Mr. Anybody.

Suzanne: "The jealous green hand looks more like a foot, which would make the dog a boot-licker, wouldn't it? She doesn't seem able to attract the men on either side of her, else she wouldn't be bothering with the dog, who seems really a rather appealing mutt, even though he has the tail of a skunk."

Nell: [laughing] A nice group, isn't it?

Margot: This is why I think this scroll is a very good example of authenticity, because she has all of the comments that people simply don't say in public. And there they are.

Suzanne: "Green arm or leg really drew two lemons, the square on one side--I bet he shovels food in like a truck-driver--and on the other side, such an isolated, ingrown masturbator that he knows only one thing to do to pass the time. His feet are even turned in and stepping on each other.

"Mrs. Pink is attacking the Lothario on her left. She is aggressively flirtatious, she makes no bones about it. Even though her legs are crossed she is more likely to get the guy than Mrs. Blue.

"The life of the party, in between Pink and Blue, he is having a fine time. He is God's gift to women. His legs are crossed, and probably his fingers are crossed too, as he plays the field. Be sure to use him for a good time, but don't count on anything permanent."

Nell: I don't think you want to meet him, though he might give a good time. Maybe. No, you'd get tired of him soon.

Suzanne: "Blue Lady. Well, she has crossed her legs and put her foot in the way of the gentleman on her right. He likes her a lot. She is more subtle than Mrs. Pink. She is assured and experienced in social situations, good at airy persiflage. Her other leg is shrunken and shriveled, while Mrs. Pink's other leg is heavy and club-footed."

Now, here is a great gory section, and if it looks as gory as it does photographed, it must be very intense.

Nell: Oh, it does.

Suzanne: "Two hands holding a heart with a crack down the middle. I think the heart belongs to both of them, even though they might need one apiece, so they are each saying, 'Have a heart.' It's sad, because there's only one, and in wrestling with it, it falls on the floor, broken. I wonder if one of the people still has a whole, unused heart inside him or her which has never been touched. If this is one person struggling with his own one broken heart, it is also a tragedy."

Nell: Isn't that sad?

Margot: That was integrating, I think, yours and Dad's divorce.

Nell: Do you think so?

Margot: That's what I thought. That's kind of around the time you were making the scroll, or a few years after.

Suzanne: As you were doing the painting, these words were in your mind?

Nell: Yes.

Suzanne: The writing seems scratched, kind of tortured.

Nell: I was using a quill, if you're talking about the penmanship--.
[laughs] I wanted it to look like that, I wanted you to work a little.

Suzanne: Here's a place where the collage comes leaping out:

"The skull and crossbones, symbol of poison, death, and piracy. Under the table this person is a destructive desperado who is considering actions which will send him to prison if he tries them above the table. Beware!

"Who passes notes under the table? A male and a female, with a real understanding of mischief and when to do it. They have finesse. They probably never will get caught."

And the note is addressed to Nell Sinton.

Nell: Actually, this, in the real thing [scroll] is a real letter--it was sort of a love letter--it's a real letter with a real envelope and everything.

Suzanne: And how is this a real ending?

Nell: Death, end. It's just all the things I know, and I had come to the end of what I was wanting to do. So.

Suzanne: It's great.

Nell: I'm glad you like it. I think you'd like the other scroll. The other one has a movie attached, and it's much easier to see. I could show you the movie of it if you want, sometime.

More Creative Techniques

Suzanne: Have you had your students try doing a scroll? Have you used the idea of doing a scroll and a narration?

Nell: No, that's a little elaborate. I haven't had them do any of that. I have them--.

Maybe you'd like to see my lesson plans sometime, I have them all. I have the students--. Mostly they have to think up what they want to do themselves. I try to help them.

Margot: Tell about the lady with her purse.

Nell: [to Suzanne] I didn't tell you about the lady with the purse?

Suzanne: No.

Nell: Well, when I was teaching down at Louisiana State University--I taught for a semester, for three months--the last assignment I gave them was, I wanted them to think of something they liked very much, and draw it, paint it, collage it, do anything they wanted with it, sculpture, anything.

One young girl, she couldn't do it, she couldn't think of anything she liked very much, or anything. And so I said, "Well, what do you have near you that you see every day that you like a lot." She said, "My purse." Quickly, she gave me that answer. I said, "Fine, then you must paint your purse, paint a picture of your purse." Well, she did the most beautiful job you ever saw, it was just wonderful.

Margot: But the issue was, instead of teaching painting of technique and composition necessarily, Mom really taught--her course was called Artistic Decisions. And she was really teaching people to find their own style and their own authenticity, who they were, not copied from anything or anybody else, or the fine line, or the right way.

Nell: Listen, this whole subject, artistic decisions and ways of doing things, is so full of promise. I got teaching unaccustomed hand, eyes closed--.. For instance, I think the last place I taught was over in Kentfield [College of Marin]--I taught there about five years--and when I said, "Close your eyes, put your crayon in your unaccustomed hand," they did that so well, several of them said they couldn't work any other way. They loved to do it.

It's very comforting to know that you're not competing with somebody else in the outside world. You're not competing with anybody. Nobody is going to say, "But that's ugly," or, "It doesn't look like a person."

This kind of class is associated also with another class of collage, self-portrait in collage. You'd be surprised what these people do. It's fabulous. There are no grades, and no requirements, other than to express yourself.

Suzanne: When your eyes are open, as for instance working on the portrait downstairs of yourself and--

Nell: And the baby? With my eyes open, I'm trying to include some semblance to the person I'm painting, but the details are not important. I'm not interested in a photographic rendition.

About Scrolls

Suzanne: How was the scroll received as a work when it was first exhibited? Was it taken seriously?

Nell: Yes, it was liked, it was admired.

Suzanne: There is the David Park scroll--I'm thinking of precedents for scrolls.

Nell: His was different. His--I don't really even know what it was about. I know it was occupying him when he was dying. I think he probably was doing what gave him pleasure, color-wise, and trying to think, maybe, about what he could remember about the swimmers, or whoever he had been painting, and putting it in small scale. Just using his imagination. I don't think there was any rule. I think, I'll never know.

I thought up my scroll, and I said, "I don't really know anything about scrolls." And she [Juanita] said, "Then you'll have to go and see the Nuttall Codex in the San Francisco Public Library." It's an ancient Mexican scroll [forty-two leaves].¹ So I did, and I saw that the Mexican who did it, or the group of Mexicans, artists, were obviously painting and drawing news of the day. And that gave me a lot of ideas.

¹Zeila Nuttall gave the Codex to the Peabody Museum at Harvard, and the San Francisco Public Library has a reproduction.

X A FAMILY IN THERAPY

Nell: The Sagans are a mine of odd information that I wouldn't have heard of any other place.

Margot: You have said that one thing you got from the Sagans was tools.

Nell: Oh, lots of tools.

Suzanne: Physical things, real tools?

Margot: Not physical things, the tools were in exploring alternatives. Like how to make the best use of your creative abilities, giving yourself every opportunity to paint and explore new fields rather than waste your time in activities which don't interest you any more. Or what could you do instead of putting yourself down when you were criticized. There were always ideas and suggestions for what you could do that were innovative and fun, and humorous, even. And one always left the therapy hour, almost always, with a sense of celebration, rather than, "Ohhh"--this heavy feeling.

Nell: Almost always. Just an endless supply of suggestions, and a lot of support and acceptance for who I really am.

Suzanne: You all started together, the whole family. Then did it break up?

Margot: Let's see. Dad only came to a couple of sessions. He hated it. Then Mom and I and Joan had quite a few together, just the three of us. Then sometimes Joan and me. And sometimes Perry and me, and my mother and father, and Joan and Bruce. That was when Mom and Dad were in the middle of getting a divorce. Then there were sessions for just me and Perry. Or Joan and Bruce would have sessions for just themselves or their kids. And then I would bring my children in. And then sometimes Mom had it by herself. And my brother John, when he was out during a few summers, and his kids. All kinds.

Nell: All kinds.

Margot: Then it broke apart--. Dad broke away within a year, I think.

Nell: Went back to his old therapist, psychoanalyst, didn't he?

Margot: I think he did. I don't think he ever gave him up.

Nell: He couldn't fool the Sagans.

Margot: No, that's why he left. Eugene was a past master at catching people, sometimes kindly, and sometimes not so kindly.

And then, oh my goodness, Mom and Joan and I continued until about 1980-something or other. We would meet monthly, to talk about problems of--anything from aging to taking credit for how we worked together, or Mom's art work, or something. Or how we were going to support her in a show. Bringing together the family as a family in a way that made sense, but still leaving room for those who didn't want to do it.

Then Joan left the institute to explore other alternatives on her own. And Mom and I still see Juanita and continue to learn from one another.

Suzanne: And you have other kinds of relationships, collegial sorts of relationships? You teach together?

Margot: Yes, it's multiple. Like I can teach with Mom and be very much my teacher self, or co-teacher self, or assistant teacher.

Nell: I think, listening to you, Margot, what we learned an awful lot of, that we didn't have before, was not only self-respect, but respect for other people. Don't you think, really, a lot?

Margot: Yes, and for their differences, not trying to make everybody the same. And that gave you a certain amount of freedom in your art work as well.

But we have had multiple role-relationships, yes, like Juanita and Mom have taught, or co-taught. Yeah, pretty much. And we can shift the roles a lot. That's very unusual.

Singing Lessons

Nell: I tell you one thing. Eugene and Juanita had these wonderful suggestions. One time, when I was feeling really low down, I guess, Eugene said, "What did your family tell you you couldn't do at all well, and don't bother with it?" I said, "They said I could never sing."

"Then why not try singing lessons?" Eugene asked me. So they introduced me to an old Russian lady, a singing teacher, and she was terrific. She had a lot of serious students, like Johnny Mathis, or Johnny-somebody, a singer, and she had some opera singers, too. I had a lesson a week.

Then one night a month all of her students gathered together, and we would all sing. Not chorus, necessarily--. But, well, for instance, a man and I in the group were assigned to sing, "La chi darem la mano." And I was so thrilled! I just couldn't believe it that I could sing that, get through with that even. Although I had been practicing.

Suzanne: I am not recognizing it by name.

Nell: It's a Mozart aria, from Don Giovanni. [Nell, Margot hum the tune] Well, my singing partner and I finished at the same time!

I thought it was the most thrilling thing I ever did in my life. The Sagans gave me opportunities like that. They also let me know when something was impossible, but you'd be surprised at how many things were possible that I'd never dreamed of.

"Alternatives to Failure"

Suzanne: How widely has this teaching spread? What kind of following? Are there art lessons in the public schools modeled on this technique?

Nell: I don't know. Margot might.

Margot: I do. I know that lots of public school teachers use the art lessons, with modifications. One of the things about the Creative Behavior Process is that it isn't just for artists. Juanita's work has spread to--there's a whole institute that's opened up now in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and that was opened up by a dancer, Gerrie Glover.

Suzanne: And what is that called?

Margot: That's called New Mexico Dance Works.

Some people use Creative Behavior alternatives to solving academic and social problems and innovative lesson plans in their elementary school teaching. And Juanita has established another Creative Behavior Institute in Portland, with Fred Newton, an administrator. He wrote a book with Juanita and Jay Greenwood--what is it called?--Alternatives to Failure, for an educational project for the Multnomah County School District, using Creative Behavior to help students who have not done well academically in school, and they're considered failures. In that book, Juanita writes some of her theory and she uses art, writing, and language arts.

And then she has taught a huge, wide range of people. Writers, actors, and nurses use it in their profession. I used it in my public school teaching, in programs all the way from here to Lebanon, New Hampshire, and all over, different parts of the country.

Nell: [to Margot] It occurs to me to ask, does Juanita have any clients who have no profession, no jobs? I mean, is everyone gainfully employed who goes to Juanita?

Margot: Well, some of them have started out by not being employed at all. And some of them have risen to huge professional heights, and some have retired.

But also, I think one of the strengths is that Creative Behavior, Juanita recognizes, is in many people who have never had any training in Creative Behavior. It's how they respond to life's experiences--their attitude. Juanita believes that there is an "artist" within everyone, whether a cook, a housekeeper, a business executive, a parent. It's how they view life in an artistic way, how they use alternatives.

Nell: And it's terrifically important in things like family fights. You can avoid them, you can really avoid them.

Suzanne: And you [to Nell] and Juanita are working on a book?

Nell: Yes, we've been working on it for years.

Margot: She says it will be published this year.

Nell: She does? Oh, that's good.

Oral History Process Discussion

Suzanne: I wonder what Juanita thinks of doing oral history. An oral history ordinarily is a fairly straight-forward narrative of one's life, although this oral history is like a collage, not a straight narrative.

Nell: Juanita says that my oral history emphasizes my artistic way of living. I like what you're doing, and what you're expecting to do with this project. It sounds good to me. I like that you see it as a collage. I think I don't want to hear too much about names, not too much about names.

Suzanne: Like our effort last week to link you with the art world?

Nell: Maybe. But in general I don't think long lists of names are interesting.

Margot: I think this will be fine as a collage. I think this project has artistic qualities. And I believe that Juanita might say that an oral history can be either artistic or dull, depending on the oral historian's attitude, and also the interviewee. This one, from both points of view, is far from dull!

Nell: That's because we're bricoleurs. Bricoleur, I love that word.

Suzanne: It was Charles Shere who used that word in his introduction to you.

Nell: He uses it a lot. Maybe he used it first.

Margot: I think he did.

XI NELL SINTON, A THIRTY-YEAR RETROSPECTIVE

Suzanne: [reading from Nell Sinton, A Thirty-Year Retrospective, Mills College Art Gallery, 27 January-8 March, 1981.]

"...she is something of a bricoleur, the antithesis of the heroic romantic artist who must cultivate his own style at all cost."

Shere also says:

"Sinton looks at herself as she is, at her world as it is; only by looking at it objectively can she understand herself. We look at her painting, look at her looking at her world, see her world as she records it (the content of her painting) and see her seeing her world (the double of the content of her painting)."

Nell: [sigh] Well, I like the idea of it. I like it. "Her world." Would he say that about everybody? I don't know.

Suzanne: What I get from that is that he is saying that your subject is your style, and that is what is unique. Your technique is not unique, but your content is.

Nell: There is the bricoleur back. [pauses]

Suzanne: As a feminist you might want to argue with that, that he is saying that this is all about a woman looking at herself looking at herself.

Nell: [sighs] I don't see what Shere proves. If I were the spectator, what would I get out of looking at the painting and then reading what he wrote.

He could finish off his statement with authenticity. With saying, "This artist makes authentic statements."

I don't know why feminism is an issue, but many people make that assumption. I'd rather they say "this artist" instead of "this woman." I was thinking about that the other day, when somebody was talking about a woman artist, or a woman something else, or a woman statesman. And I was thinking, "They don't say that it's a man statesman." I think there's too much emphasis on the word female.

See, I'm not a particularly feminist person; I'm bored with the subject, and I always have been. I used to speak out about it and say, "Let's talk about art, or let's talk about something else." I don't care about women being persecuted. I'm sorry if they're persecuted, but I have to do my work. Sometimes women get awfully off onto propaganda and politics.

Suzanne: Have you been asked to speak out as a woman artist?

Nell: No, I don't think so.

##

Nell: [looking at Shere introduction] Oh, I don't think that's very nice, "[The approach is practical, down-to-earth;] typical of 'regional' painters and Sunday painters..." I don't like that. "[...and it forms] a significant part--though not the only part--of the perspective her art brings to the overview of California painting from Matthews to Martin. The use of "found styles... characterizes a fair amount of recent painting, and must now be seen as historically determinant, not aberrant."

Well, it's like trying to say I'm doing something up to date.

One thing [word] I don't like, a word used in reviews, is "it is not original," or words to that effect. "It may not be original, but it's good painting." Why should it be original? That what I don't like. "Her nonobjective painting of the sixties saw an exploration--not a one-line elaboration--of loose formal [composition informed by clear references to landscape and the still life...]"

"Loose, formal?" Well, he's a nice guy, he's very nice.

I don't want to read it anymore. He has moved, and he's not a critic anymore.

Suzanne: In his review of the Mills show for the Tribune he mentions gaps in your work, from 1950 to 1958, for instance. Was that a time you were not painting, or did you choose not to show that work?

Nell: Maybe I was turned down, I don't know.

Suzanne: The sixties, "spottily represented." He asks, "What was going on in the sixties..?"

Were you censoring your work for this retrospective?

Nell: I was betwixt and between. I think most popular artists then were doing figurative, and I wasn't. I think I was doing abstract.

Suzanne: Did Phil [Philip E.] Linhares [the curator] reject things for the show?

Margot: Was it because you were so interested in your new stuff and it was so much more exciting. Was that it?

Nell: Or was I doing an awful lot of collage?

Margot: In the fifties and sixties you were.

Nell: That's what maybe.

Margot: And that was also the hammock and balls stage. [laughter] I think they just weren't as interesting and good as what came later.

Nell: Anybody who really wants to know, everything I've done has a card, a catalogue card, in boxes. I could look it up myself.

[tape interruption]

Nell: I wrote about "Secret Places." That was a very interesting show. There was so much imagination in it, where I wandered through the house, this enormous house. I don't remember anybody else going with me. I found a trunk up in the attic, and there was a dead parrot in the trunk, and I was scared of it, I didn't like it, and I wondered why it was there. What it really was was a decoration for my mother's hat, an ancient hat of hers, a costume hat, I guess. Still, it always reminded me--.

It stuck with me, I didn't like that dead parrot in a trunk. I painted it several times. I showed it in some exhibition, and one of my sisters said, "Now, listen, Nell, I came from the same

house you did. I did not see any dead parrot in that trunk." I said, "That's what you didn't see." She sort of did that a lot.

XII THOUGHTS ON:

Writings

[Interview 5: June 18, 1992] ##

Nell: [discussing writings] I used to, when I was doing these serial shows--Ruth Braunstein didn't think the paintings needed written explanations but I thought it was important so I made hundreds of copies for the viewers, so there would be sort of a translation or an interpretation of the paintings.

Suzanne: And Ruth felt that gave too much of the game away?

Nell: Yes. But I wanted them to know. She thought it would take away from the experience of looking.

Suzanne: I've seen the statement for the Landmarks show. I thought that was terrific.

Nell: I love to write.

Margot: Yes. Well, why don't you give these papers to Suzanne.

Nell: This--wait a minute, what's this? [looking through papers]. You'll find all kinds of things in here.

This may interest you. A film was made of Scroll Number 2, and Bill Brown--his real name is Theophilus--the artist, friend, he chose the music to go with it. He played the piano. I like to give him credit for it, too. Here's the opening. (I forget who did the film.) "Tilt down from San Francisco Bay, Nell in the garden, childhood section of the scroll. Photograph Section 1. Nell thrown into society."

Margot: Yes, this is very good writing here. It's her commentary about that scroll, it's very good.¹

Nell: There's a background statement. Here's slides. There are slides for Scroll Number 1, too, but I don't know if they're in here.

Museum Docents

Margot: Another one that we have to look up, Mom, that I think is a critical one is Ways of Looking at an Exhibition.²

Nell: I don't know if I have that here. That's a talk I give to docents, because I don't approve of most docents' talks. I think many are unlearning, unartistic, and unhelpful.

Suzanne: The docents at the San Francisco Museum?

Nell: Docents in any museum.

Suzanne: When have you presented it to docents? What museum?

Nell: It's been presented at--what's that one down south of Los Angeles? Newport Harbor. I presented it there, and many of the docents there didn't like what I did. I'm giving them an alternative, what they can talk about instead of brush strokes and anecdotes. They're always telling you about Vincent Van Gogh's ear, and stuff like that. I have a whole lesson for them there. But they don't like that.

Suzanne: [to Nell] Margot's having a problem with this conversation. You see her there writhing?

Nell: [to Margot] Well, why don't they like it?

Margot: It's not that. I sense that you are not with yourself and your credit this morning. I sense that what you have offered the docents, and what you have offered museum people, and museum-goers, the huge thing that you have offered is for them to look at things in a different way.

¹See appendices.

²See appendices.

Like, instead of the technical aspect, you ask them to look at what do they actually like about the painting? What don't they like about the painting? And it's not the issue that they like or don't like your lesson or your question. You've asked them to look at a different way of seeing, and they've never thought about their own preference or opinions as being critical, and that's your gift.

Nell: I will tell you exactly what you're talking about. Now, listen to me. I selected a Diebenkorn non-objective painting to discuss that day. I asked them questions like, "How do you like the color?"

I don't tell them how they like the color, because usually that's what happens. Many docents tell the viewers what they should like. I give them a choice. I say, "What do you like, what do you think? What's your opinion?"

This time, in this particular instance--this is the first time this ever happened to me--they came in late. It was for the lady docents. They came in late, and they walked across me as I had already begun, in order to discuss a lunch date they were having with somebody that day, swinging their tennis rackets.

So we got through the whole thing. In the end, one of the end questions was, "Oh, now we're going to take up the subject of color. What have you got to tell me about the color? What do you think, what do you like, what do you dislike? If you know why, please tell me." And one lady said, "I like the color of this painting because it's the same color as the flag on our yacht." I said, "That's wonderful. You have made a decision." Her friend said, "You must not say that! That's not good!"

I said, "What's wrong with her saying that? That's the way she feels about it. She's connected with the painting." Her friend said, "But that's not important." I said, "It's extremely important to this person."

Afterwards, I thought a lot about this whole particular little group, and I thought, I'm glad I did that. If this lady had responded about the individuality of the brush strokes, she would have gone home and told her husband, and he would say, "Shut up. I don't know what you're talking about." And this is her life, and this is--her yacht is her life, part of her life. This gives her pleasure--maybe pleasure. At least she gave an answer; nobody else did.

Suzanne: And what you're saying is that there's some truth about each painting that you have to extract.

Nell: No. That's exactly right. When an art professor down at Stanford talks about Rodin--. One time I was sitting next to him at dinner somewhere. He told me he was taking a group on a museum tour in Italy. I said, "Well, tell me about that. When you take people on a group, do you tell them what they have to like, and what's good about the works?" He said, "Of course. They don't know anything." What a put-down!

And I say, "What's the use of telling them, then? Let them have their own experience about it."

Suzanne: Well, then, what about Ruth Braunstein's argument that she'd rather that you didn't write up an interpretation?

Nell: I don't know, maybe she doesn't want the paintings to be deflected. But that's not what my writing does. My writing adds another dimension.

Margot: When a person comes and looks at a painting of yours, they respond to that. In addition to looking, if you have the writing, it's an additional personal statement about you and how you relate to your painting.

Nell: You mean that's an added attraction.

Margot: Yes. I don't think your writing takes away from their looking, because what you're doing is describing you and where you were with your own work, which is not to say that they can't experience your work from their own feelings and opinions.

Motivation, Confidence

Nell: You know how often people come to a show and say, "Why did you paint it this way? Why do you do this?" Well, the most I really feel like saying is, "Because I liked the idea."

Suzanne: Do they really do that?

Nell: Oh, they do. They profess interest.

Suzanne: Why are you skeptical about that interest?

Nell: Oh, they like to go home and say, "I talked to the artist."
[laughs] But sometimes something soaks in.

See, I like teaching. I love to teach. I love it when I've been teaching color, and teaching it and teaching it and teaching it to this class, and they don't know anything about it, and suddenly a young man--this is true, in Chicago at the University of Illinois--came to class one morning and he said, "I picked out my own shirt this morning. I picked out this color. What do you think of that?" I said, "I think it's simply beautiful. Do you like it?" He said, "I'm proud of it." He said, "Usually, I just get up in the morning and grab a tie, grab a pair of pants, and never think about what's the color."

Margot: I think by your letting people really experiment with color, and experiment with their preferences of what they like, and what they don't like, [it] puts them in touch with looking at something and discovering it in a whole new way, and then you-- what I see happening, anyway--you get recognition from your students through teaching. You've gotten a lot of recognition, not only for your artwork, but your critiques in your teaching.

Nell: Yes. Well, the teaching lessons originated--I got them from Juanita and Bauhaus writings. They're wonderful, they're really reliable.

Suzanne: This is a way in which your idea of why you were an artist changed after the late sixties, teaching and the effect that you could have on people's lives?

When you started painting, why do you think you painted originally? What for?

Nell: Why did I paint? I was fascinated, and I had to do it.

Suzanne: What did it have to do with other people?

Nell: Nothing much.

Suzanne: What if people didn't understand your paintings? How did you deal with that?

Nell: Well, unfortunately earlier, I didn't have much confidence. But I kept going because I loved to do it so much.

I had to paint. It's my metier. I had to do it. I always had to do it. And it was exciting, when I used to finally do something that I hadn't believed I could do. It was a surprise to me.

That's one of the important things about being a painter: you may get a surprise, but for heaven's sake leave it there,

until you feel you need to change it. But leave it for long enough so it becomes either acceptable or atrocious. But all artists get surprises. You mustn't rub the doubtful parts out right now. Maybe later.

The Pleasures of Painting, Teaching, Making Mistakes

Nell: It's a wonderful thing to do, for me. I just love being an artist. It's so much--it's so fascinating, it's so possible--and impossible. It's a challenge, that's what it really is. All artists get into conversation with their paintings. They say, "I'm going to beat you up, I'm going to destroy you, or you're going to destroy me." We have these fights, and I've written about it. We have these arguments.

Suzanne: I like your passionate statement about the pleasure of being an artist. You started out talking about the pleasure and importance of being a teacher, and the way you talk about being a teacher is about how you can make other people's lives work better for them.

Nell: Well, it makes my life better, because it's a big kick for me if they recognize something. The middle-aged people that I had in College of Marin were all disappointed women, mostly--there were some men, too--disappointed because of the rotten way they're taught in school.

In my opinion, many students I've had are taught "art." It's called art, but it's like typewriting. "You must be accurate," they say. "You mustn't make a mess." That's killed already. Or some teachers say to a little child, instead of saying, "That's beautiful," the teacher says, "What is that?" or "Sky isn't purple, it's blue," or "You forgot to draw the ears." That's terrible to say that.

Or, even with grown-ups. They've done such good work, and they smile when the teacher tells them that, they're happy, and they take credit for it. They go home and they say--if it's a woman--the husband says, "Well, so what is it?" That's the end. I've lost students that way.

Margot: But one of the greatest things I think in your teaching--and you use this in your own art work, and it began to free you up from the techniques--was your appreciation of mistakes.

[to Suzanne] So when she says to students, "I would like you to make your mistake bigger, or enhance it," they are just simply delighted!

Nell: [laughing] Especially with kids. A kid will make a drawing and start it on a huge piece of paper, and get this far, and say, "I need another piece of paper." I say, "You're not going to get it, because you're going to make something out of that mistake--make it bigger or decorate it. It may not be your original idea, but keep going."

Margot: Her teaching for me opened up the idea of alternatives, that she was not, and the students were not, stuck in just one path. Suddenly opportunities opened up. It's like the world, like how Mom opened up after she met Juanita. It was like the doors were opened.

Nell: Yes.

Suzanne: Did you have your students write also, since writing has been part of your creativity?

Nell: They write about what they've just done and they read out loud to the class.

Suzanne: What do you ask them to do? How do you give them the instruction to write? What might you say to them?

Nell: I might say, "Write one statement about what you like about your work, and one statement about what you don't like. And another statement about what would you do differently if you did it again." The "like" statements are charming.

Margot: How about describing their experience in the process of doing it. That's more important than what the actual product was.

Nell: Yes.

Margot: Their experience in mixing the paint.

Nell: They love it, yes.

Suzanne: Does this come from the Bauhaus? Or is this from you?

Margot: It comes from integration techniques that Juanita and Eugene developed.

Nell: Yes. I learned how important integration is, because that's the only way you swallow, digest, what you've done. And that makes a person feel good, to know what they've done.

Margot: Also so they can use what they discussed for the next thing that they go ahead and do. So it just doesn't stop right there.

XIII "LEGEND OF RECKENDORF"

Suzanne: We were going to talk today about the painting that precedes the "Social Development of the American Female." It was your return to figurative painting.

Nell: I got that for one part, and the next is the scroll, and then third was my relationship to my children and grandchildren. But I left out--what did you say?

Suzanne: Reckendorf.

Nell: That's not as important as you think. [laughs] I don't think.

Suzanne: What I thought was important, and I'm picking it up from Charles Shere's review, was that "the figure begins to emerge recognizably in the wonderful 'Legend of Reckendorf.'"¹ The whole program for deciding to do that painting--was that painting therapy? You must have started it in 1969, '70.

Nell: Oh, I think it was therapy. It was after a party I'd been to, which really made me sick, it was so phony. It was a party where people--I think they were supposed to be dressed as Gay Nineties, but they weren't. That was phony, very inauthentic. There was a pretend marriage, wedding party. It was a fake party. I didn't enjoy it at all. The groom was gay, so what was the use of that?

Margot: Jesus!

Nell: Yes. The bride was all gussied up outrageously. It was supposed to be--I think the theme was Gay Nineties, but nobody seemed to have ever heard of the Gay Nineties, and everybody wore--it was a total phony. There was a gambling table. Oh, the bride threw that damn bouquet, and everybody cringed, except--yes, including me. I just couldn't stand seeing it lying there on the floor. Nobody caught it. I wasn't going to catch it.

¹See appendices.

Suzanne: Very surreal.

Nell: Bizarre. All wrong. And then there was a gambling table, and some man just stuffing a corsage down the back of my neck. I was playing--I don't know what it was.

Suzanne: What social crowd are we talking about here?

Nell: I'd rather not tell you who gave the party.

Suzanne: It's the art gallery scene.

Nell: Sort of. It was a mixed crowd.

Suzanne: It was very distressing.

Nell: To me, it was very distressing. I don't understand--I don't remember why I called that painting the "Legend of Reckendorf."

Margot: That sort of came back to your origins, to some of the horrors of where you had come from.

Suzanne: But had you made that return trip to Reckendorf?

Nell: No, I went with my son John, later on. No, I hadn't seen Reckendorf when I went to the party, but I knew that the people who really lived in Reckendorf back in the 1800s were pretty straightforward people who were really anxious to come to the U.S.A. and make money. I don't see them as being crooked like these other people. I don't understand what I was doing.

Suzanne: What is the mood of the painting?

Nell: The mood of the painting is what I just told you, the bride throwing the bouquet, the people gambling at the table, all those things, and then in the end I depict me, myself, the patsy, just being out of step with the party. And then, in the end--I don't know why I felt so satisfied and happy. I'll have to study that again.

Margot: What I recall about the thing was that it was an outlet for your feelings of what actually was going on underneath the trappings of the Gay Nineties, in the same way that you did the Donner Party. It was your way of moving through to another level of development in your painting.

[to Suzanne] And when she got all those characters out in her paintings, that produced some of the beautiful--when she got through with her hating these kinds of parties and being so

involved in those frivolous events, it enabled her to move on to these other kinds of beautiful paintings.

Nell: I don't mind frivolous too much. I detest phony, I just can't stand it. I just can't stand it when things are dishonest that way.

Margot: So when she actually painted them--and some of those people actually had come from--her origins certainly were in Reckendorf, and that's how she was brought up to go to these kinds of events and these parties, and all of that phoniness. It was kind of like breaking through.

But the thing Charles Shere said about that you're back to the human figure, I think that goes back to when you first said to Juanita that you could not draw people, and she said, "Nonsense," and you sat in front of the mirror naked, and drew yourself. Then, you began to draw stuff like from the inside out, and then you were able to really draw people from their insides out, showing their character.

Nell: I was surprised. In spite of the fact that that picture isn't too bad that's in the school catalogue. I did that before I met Juanita, and it was before I told her that I simply couldn't draw.

##/##

Suzanne: As far as you're concerned, the "Legend of Reckendorf" is not an important painting, that's not a landmark work?

Nell: It's kind of crowded. No, I wouldn't have given the museum [exhibited] a painting I didn't like. I guess I thought I liked it. I haven't seen it in so long. I'd like to. I can go down there in the closet and look at it. [laughs]

Margot: It has some very good things in it. As a piece of artwork, it really was something.

Suzanne: And very big, isn't it?

Nell: Pretty big.

Suzanne: Were you being forced onto bigger and bigger canvases as you took on these subjects?

Nell: Yes. Well, for instance--what's it called? That painting, "Secret Places." That's full of symbols and memories of places and people.

Margot: Do you have your writing of that?

Nell: Yes, somewhere. I have writing about everything.

Margot: I'll collect those. She has really nice statements about that.

XIV THOUGHTS ON:

The Eyes of an Artist

Margot: You made a really nice statement, Mom, yesterday, that I don't want you to lose, about the gift of your art itself that you pass on to the younger generations.

Nell: Is it in here [in my writing]?

Margot: Yes. Want me to find it?

Nell: No. Probably I'm going to read it.

Margot: The writing actually comes from Mom as a student in my class, Creative Behavior in Aging.

Nell: That's right. I didn't make it up yesterday. I'm not responsible. [laughs]

[reading] My talents are an ability to take notice and to see with the eyes of an artist. I am grateful to have these eyes, which communicate themselves with my stomach and my brains and my ability to love and laugh and communicate. I try to keep some of my life's formalities as minor necessities. They are often useful, and I try to behave appropriately. But I enjoy the surprises of sudden bursts of humor and consequent laughter. I find the intelligence and compassion of others to be refreshing, and I think my life is very worth living for.

Yes. [laughs] Isn't that cheerful?

Margot: And here is this one. [Nell objects] Well, you can tell me not to, but you said such really neat things yesterday, and I don't want them to be lost.

Nell: Margot, I have to admit something.

Margot: What?

Nell: You're clearer than I am. You have a much clearer ability, an ability to clarify.

Margot: Oh, here! [has been looking through papers] This piece.

Nell: "My relationship to children and grandchildren?"

Margot: You were talking about how you treated your children the same way as you were treated at first, and because you were confused and--

Nell: Oh, "When I was confused and in conflict about my own values."

[reading] But now I can appreciate their differences. The single most important gift that I have passed on is how I see the world through the eyes of an artist. When I relate to my children, I relate to them through different things I've given them. I relate to them about literature and the environment, how I use my insights about people, and flowers, to develop caring relationships, which I didn't have when I was growing up. It's been satisfying for me to learn from my children as well. And with grandchildren I have satisfying reciprocal relationships.

That's that piece.

Flowers

Suzanne: What about flowers?

Nell: Oh, I am crazy about flowers. I have inherited a deep love of flowers and all growing things. You wouldn't guess it right now, I've been too busy to fix flowers.

I had a friend called Peggy Brown--[to Suzanne] did you know Peggy Brown, Mrs. Cabot Brown? Well, she was friends with me,

and we both were in Tahoe together. She had a place on the lake, and my parents' place was on Truckee River. Peggy was endlessly patient. She worked at the Golden Gate Park Arboretum [Strybing Arboretum]. And she enjoyed teaching me everything about wildflowers. We walked and walked and walked, and picked and picked and picked. You could pick flowers then. I read about flowers, and I learned a lot.

Suzanne: You learned the botany?

Nell: Well, no, not too deeply into botany, but just into petals.
[laughs]

I have done some flower paintings. I don't remember when.

Margot: I have a beautiful one in my house.

Nell: I have a gorgeous flower right downstairs.

Suzanne: When were those summers in Tahoe where Peggy Brown would have been there and you would have been there?

Nell: In the forties and fifties. She had a very, very sad death.

Margot: The flowers, I wanted to say something about where and how the love of flowers originated, and what happened with them a little bit, because the flowers were such an important part of Mom's life that came from her mother. Her mother always was fixing flowers at Tahoe, and both my grandmother and Mom would really get in touch with--Joan and I noticed this--with their softness when they were with flowers.

I just loved to be with my mother when she was arranging flowers, anywhere, anytime. They've become a huge part of Joan's life and mine. I mean, you mention flowers, and we all just melt. All of us arrange them absolutely artistically beautifully, and one of my stories that I just wrote, one of my Grammie stories,¹ has to do with my mother and me learning about flowers together, and going swimming in the river at Tahoe. I lived for those moments of flowers, and that's where she was, I think, most in touch with herself and her artistic sense.

Nell: Thank you. There was some other thing about it that was very interesting, which I suppose has to do with history. Well, I've always felt this about perennial flowers especially. I don't

¹Margot S. Biestman, Grammie Stories, audio-cassettes, Pergot Press, Sausalito, 1992.

give a damn about annuals: you put them in and take them away and you buy new ones. But a perennial flower is like life, they have a life. And to know that I'm going to see them again next year is very exciting. And how are they going to look next year?

- Margot: Oh, the excitement of seeing the first flower of the season always was just--it was like a rebirth, every year.
- Nell: Yes, it was. And it still is.
- Suzanne: Speaking of flowers, what do you think of the flower paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe?
- Nell: I don't like them, I think they're empty of emotion. I think they're good, I have nothing against her being a swell painter, but I'm bored with all that perfection, all those uteruses and vaginas and--. They are really not exciting. No mistakes. I like mistakes, they're human.
- Suzanne: [to Nell] Did you have that same sweet feeling when you watched your mother working with flowers that Margot remembers?
- Nell: Well, yes. It was one of the few subjects we could even discuss. My mother was a depressed person. We could do two things together: one was buy clothes, and the other was pick flowers. She was very good at it.
- Suzanne: Isn't there a third that you can think of?
- Nell: A third? [pause] I'm hard put. [laughter] Oh, she gave me the opportunity to listen to music and to read good literature of all kinds.
- Margot: And what about gossip?
- Nell: Well, yes. I could stand a certain amount.

Divorce. New Liberation

- Suzanne: I was looking at a list of the artists who were in a show of the Society of Women Artists, and your mother was there, and Carol Sinton was there, a large family representation.
- Nell: Oh, that was very nice. Mother and I were often invited to the same parties. We had mutual friends, like the book people. I

liked the book people, I liked her introducing me to them. She took a certain interest in art also. She bought paintings.

Suzanne: Was she alive through this period of your own transformation?

Nell: Oh, yes. [laughs] It was not well-received. My divorce was not well-received.

Suzanne: But the person that you turned out to be, how was that received?

Nell: Well, she was proud of me, except that she said I shouldn't go out so much and be out of the house so much when I was younger. I was going to meetings and going to shows and stuff. I had help in the house. Because she said I should be home with my children. Well, she didn't mean that.

Suzanne: That was not an issue, by the time you got divorced.

Nell: Well, she loved to go to my shows. And she loved to go to any art shows.

Margot: She was very proud of you.

Nell: Yes, by then she was.

Margot: And relied on you.

Nell: She didn't like it when I said, "Mother, I'm not coming to your Christmas dinners any more." She didn't like that. And then when I said, "I'm not going to go to the Symphony with you either, I've been doing it since I was thirteen, every Friday afternoon. I'm not going to do it anymore." I got liberated when I got a divorce.

Good Memories

Suzanne: Was your relationship with your mother anything like yours with Margot?

Nell: No. She used to ask me if I would help her with her bookbinding, if she was stuck on a pattern. And I was glad to do that. She got to appreciate that "No" meant "No," and that I was not somebody to be tampered with, I think. She got very respectful.

Margot: She got respectful, but not affectionate.

Suzanne: When you said she was depressed, were you able, because you were getting very smart and insightful, to bail her out?

Nell: No. Not really. She wanted--she had to be in that depression. Because the answer always--lots of times--would be, "Well, Nell, you don't know what I've been through."

"Yes, Mother, I know what you've been through, and what you're going through now." [laughs] Her humor, she could have used a lot more humor. Don't you think, Margot?

Margot: Yes. I guess I feel so sad about her life and relationships, how her humor couldn't be developed, but I'm very interested in your sense of the history.

[to Suzanne] A really caring relationship between mother and daughter really didn't begin with my grandmother and my mother. It began more with my mother and me. There were little pieces, I think, with my grandmother and my mother. And then my daughter Annie certainly has that, and Joan's daughters too.

Nell: My mother was fantastically important to me whenever I was a sick child, when I was in bed with the flu or something. She always supplied me and everybody else with games to play, and things to cut out and things to make. She was very, very patient in helping. She didn't put me down and say, "Oh, Nell, you've spoiled it." She was very, very good at that. I think she loved a sick room in a way. We had a lot of sickness and deaths in the family. She was good at that. And she was good at shopping.

Margot: She was great at doing anything with her hands.

Nell: Yes. Oh, and she saw to it that her children would all be doing things with their hands. She presented my sister Carol with a very good weaving loom, and that became Carol's metier. She said, "Carol, you need something to do," and she just handed her a loom. She didn't even say, "Would you like to have a loom?" Carol became a professional weaver. I think her work is imaginative and creative.

Suzanne: Sort of like keeping you out of trouble, keeping you busy.

Nell: Yes, keeping you busy. My other sister, Marjorie, sewed beautifully. She has spent a good deal of her life involved in Oriental art. And my mother was a great knitter herself, very perfect handcrafter. Perfection was a little bit too important. No mistakes, no mistakes.¹

¹See oral histories with Carol Walter Sinton and Marjorie Walter Seller in The Bancroft Library, Donated Oral Histories Collection.

Teaching

- Margot: [looking at Nell's notes] This is going back to how you felt when you were a teacher, when you became a teacher, when you hadn't been to college yourself. I like this sentence, and the next one.
- Nell: [reading] Can you imagine how proud I was to be crossing a campus, and I hadn't attended college myself? [As a teacher, I meant.] My rebellion about not going to college came out in my anger and resentment in general, so it was a thrill to be able to teach, and that's where I really got appreciation and recognition, not only as an artist and teacher, but as a person in the world, as a valuable person who had lots to give.
- Yes, that was an important statement.
- Suzanne: Did you at some point let your students know that this was the case, that you were untutored?
- Nell: I don't think so.
- Margot: Yes, you did.
- Nell: Did I? Oh, when they got discouraged, I told them not to be discouraged, that--yes. Oh, good.
- Margot: Yes. You said it so proudly, you said, "Here I am! Here I am in the classroom." It was like you couldn't believe it.
- Suzanne: I should think you'd have to tell in some way, because by not telling you would be keeping a big secret.
- Nell: That's right. I think I told them--I found a good audience in Louisiana.
- Suzanne: How did you get the call to Louisiana?
- Nell: Through Jack Wilkinson. Back when I was a student at the Art Institute, and Maurice Sterne, the visiting teacher, had chosen me and two fellows to help him, because he was doing this huge work for Washington D.C. Hall of Justice, one of the guys, Jack Wilkinson, we kept being friends after Maurice didn't need us any more.

Years passed, and he was working, painting up in Washington, Seattle I guess. Then he was teaching down in Louisiana, Baton Rouge. He phoned me one day--this was years later--and asked me if I'd like to be a visiting artist down there for a semester, for three months. That's how.

Suzanne: You'd been keeping in touch. He knew you'd been exhibiting?

Nell: Yes.

Suzanne: Did you have any second thoughts about it? You'd already been teaching with Juanita.

Nell: Yes. I had even been teaching without Juanita. I'd been East, I'd been to--well, spots, Smith, Mt. Holyoke.

Margot: Those came after Louisiana. You forgot you had been teaching with me for a long time.

Nell: [laughter] Oh, how convenient. Good. Yes, at that Student League--held in that horrible place--a refurbished funeral parlor. And I taught in your classes and Joan's first grade. And my son John invited me to teach a class in Stockton College in New Jersey, where he teaches, and he arranged for a workshop at Portland State in Oregon. I taught with Juanita at the San Francisco Art Institute.

Suzanne: You were in Illinois, you were at Champaign-Urbana.

Nell: Oh, the reason I got to Illinois was that one of the people in charge in the art department--they had a wonderful program, that if you were a freshman and had time on your hands and wanted to enrich your program, you could join an artists-in-residence program. Sometimes the visiting artist was a musician, or a painter--I was a painter. The person who chose me had been to see my scroll at one of the museums here or someplace, and she went home and said I was somebody she would like to hire. That's how I got that one.

Margot: That came after the Louisiana one, wasn't it?

Nell: Maybe so.

Margot: Yes, because Louisiana: I remember your leaving home. It was like Joan and I were saying, "My God, Mom's leaving home for the first time in our lives. She's going off to college."
[laughter]

Nell: Oh, that's nice.

XV "SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF AN AMERICAN FEMALE"

The Message

Suzanne: I think that one of the things you've given me related to your second scroll, the "Social Development of an American Female," is dated 1984, and it's called a Workshop for Scroll Talk,¹ with questions like, "What was significant about your grandmother for your growth?" When would you use that?

Nell: Oh. I traveled with that scroll, both my scrolls. I traveled a lot, for a two-day or two-night show in the art departments of places who either invited me, because they'd heard of me, or I wrote to them and asked them if they'd like me to come--I don't think I did that much, though, I think I got invited, mostly. And it was a workshop, and always that means they were included in the work. They had to draw something, and they had to write something, write their impressions. Does that answer?

Suzanne: Well, this question [in the Workshop] goes strictly to the content of the scrolls: "What are the social values which you've chosen from your parents to--?"

Nell: Oh, yes. That was part of the workshop I gave, I asked those questions.

Suzanne: But it doesn't go at all into technique.

Nell: Oh, none of it. None of my--I was never teaching painting or drawing or anything like that in these scroll workshops. I was asking them to think about my scroll as reference to their lives.

The students I loved the best were the boy students, male students at Illinois, they put that scroll out--they're huge,

¹See appendices.

these scrolls, bigger than the carpet or anything like that--the students were like a bunch of monks, staring at this scroll on huge tables, and they were so quiet and silent, and then they wrote the answers to the questions I gave them.

Suzanne: Do you think that they really started thinking about mothers and grandmothers?

Nell: I'm not sure what they were thinking about, the boys. I know they were deeply involved. But I know the girls--once I was there [University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana] for a conference of women's work, women artists. It was a whole conference of women, and they were going to talk about lots of things that women have to talk about when they're in a conference. And the tears were rolling down their cheeks, the young ones. They cried, because they were realizing what we've been through as women.

Suzanne: Empathy, you mean?

Nell: Well, empathy in the sense that they were realizing that they had been through this also. It had an appeal that way.

Margot: Universal.

Nell: Yes.

Margot: Your statements are so personal that they touch universal.

Nell: So were the paintings. The paintings were universal. All done with my left hand and my eyes closed, so that makes them more authentic.

Suzanne: How universal is the scroll? When you describe it as "the struggles of a community of women whose forebears were German-Jewish pioneers in California to find an independent professional life, and to get acceptance for this life from their families," I feel excluded.

Nell: May I see it? I wrote this some years ago. [re-reads]

Suzanne: I think that statement programs one to look at it as the story of "someone else." I wonder how you present it at workshops.

Nell: That's right. "It deals with the struggle of a community of women whose forebears were German-Jewish pioneers in California--"

[laughs] Well, I don't think they came in a covered wagon, so they didn't do a lot of work like the pioneers.

Suzanne: Could you have left out the phrase "German-Jewish?"

Nell: "The struggle of a community of women to find an independent professional life, and get acceptance of this life from their families." Well, why don't I say that?

Suzanne: You can't change that.

Nell: You're talking about my point of view. I don't think I thought too seriously about them.

Margot: I don't know, Mom. I think that was an important statement in that it had to be very personal. And that was your experience. Just because it was a group of German-Jewish immigrants didn't take away from the fact that it was still a universal kind of statement.

Nell: [reading] One of the reasons for making the scroll is that I wanted to get clear about the paradoxes and conflicts which faced me while I was growing up by the use of several devices, including drawing, writing, and collaging--

I think it's authentic if I write it this way.

Margot: Which is not to say that Chinese families or Mexican or whatever don't go through that same type of conflict.

Nell: Well, if it were happening today I would say, why aren't these women out there in the world working? and why aren't they getting a fair deal? and why are they having to scrub and wash when the men are going fishing and catching buffalos?

Suzanne: It's more political today.

Nell: Look at how political birth control is. It has nothing to do with people's real reasons. It has to do with Republican and Democratic, whichever party you belong to. It's awful, it doesn't make any sense at all.

Well, it [scroll] does deal with the community of women.

I think I'm kicking altogether, in that scroll, about the treatment women get. It begins with a baby getting a raw deal,

and it goes on and on about--well, I think in that bunch of stuff I gave you there are statements about women.

Suzanne: Is the raw deal coming from men?

Margot: And other women who buy into it.

Nell: Oh, there are some flirtations going on, which is buying into it.

Margot: I think one of the remarkable things that has changed is that in Mom's art work, the ones we're talking about, where men did put women down and didn't accept them seriously in their professions, particularly hers, she now has relationships with men, like with my husband, where she sees him as a creative artist as a businessman, and also as an artist, and how he makes his house artistic. So that was a big, big change.

Nell: That's right, compared to how your father, Margot, treated my mother, or how Perry treated his mother.

Margot: You changed how you saw men, or some men.

Nell: Some men. I'm pretty fussy about men. [laughs]

Suzanne: How is Perry a creative artist as a businessman? By what definition?

Nell: Well, I don't put him in a corner and say he'll never understand me. Or that, "I would never bring up this subject with him." I bring up these subjects with him.

###

Nell: He's pretty rare, he's pretty unusual. We talk about many things together, he takes care of my finances and has very creative alternatives and questions he asks me to think about so I make up my own mind. He doesn't make me feel stupid. And I talk with my other son-in-law, Bruce, about architecture and art, and with my son John about travels, literature, and his work on the environment.

But then remember what my father-in-law said about me? (I had a pretty nice relationship with my father-in-law.) He used to go around telling people, "I really like that Nell, she's just like a man." [shrieks of laughter] Oh God, if he said that to me today, I'd kill him!

Suzanne: Must have made his son's blood boil, too.

Nell: No, his son didn't care. Did he? Yes, he did. No, I suppose Stanley thought that was quite unusual to say that, a great compliment.

Critical Reception

Suzanne: Thomas Albright reviewed the Social Development scroll at the Oaks Gallery. He was not totally 100 percent thrilled.

Nell: No. He never was.

Suzanne: He wasn't? I wondered.

Nell: Not particularly.

Suzanne: Frankenstein always was.

Nell: Yes, he was. Always was--they're predictable. This one now, Kenneth Baker, gave me an awfully good review last year or the year before, excellent.

Suzanne: Well, Albright's words about the scroll were about "a disturbing sense of self-advertising."

Margot: That says more about him.

Nell: Oh, that's too bad. I don't know what that's got to do with anything.

Reviewers, talked about in artists circles, are always considered not entirely reliable, or having some jealous thoughts about wishing they had been artists and not critics. Well, we make up all kinds of things about them, and I don't know if it's true or not true. I know we all--most of us, the ones I know anyway--say, "Well, what do you expect of a critic? Don't take it too seriously."

And other people say, "Listen, whether it's a good review or a bad review doesn't make any difference, you got your name in it [the newspaper], didn't you, and people always read it. And then they don't care if it's bad or good."

Margot: That's debatable.

Nell: I don't know, I don't expect--. It would be nice.

Suzanne: Albright--I'm going to try out a few more of his phrases. He said, "It would have been devastating a few years earlier, but it was just another statement now."

Nell: It would have been devastating if what?

Suzanne: If you had done it in 1970 or so, closer to the women's movement. I think that's what he's saying, that this is a kind of also-ran on the women's movement.

Nell: Okay. If you can remember Judy Chicago laying a table full of plates, and each one was a picture of a vagina, how boring. How absolutely obvious. I mean, what? Urging a woman or a man to eat off a plate that looks like a vagina? What is that going to do for anybody? [laughter] I think that's a typical men's response.

I really in a way don't blame him. I'm all for the women. I vote for them and vote for them, and I'm all for them, but they can be obnoxious and objectionable in their anxiety to get there first. And they need it.

You know, it's wonderful to get a good review. I loved getting those good reviews in the eastern magazines, Art Forum and those magazines, that was wonderful.

"Reviews Are . . . Not Why I Paint" ##

Nell: I like to get reviews, but that's not why I paint. [laughter]

Suzanne: When you started painting subjects like "The Garden Party," and the "Social Development of the American Female," reviewers began to discuss you in terms of your background. You didn't have any anonymity. Did that frustrate or annoy you?

Nell: Well, I think it is a disadvantage for anybody in any field to be known as "a member of an old family," or as somebody with money. I think it is a disadvantage because--the reasons I really don't know, but I know it's harder to be taken seriously. You are not taken seriously if you have any social or monetary background.

Margot: I know that's true.

Nell: I used to rail against it; I've had a terrible lot of trouble with temper tantrums. But at my age--. I don't do that any

more. I haven't got the energy. But neither am I that angry anymore. That's the way it is, so get on with your work and do the best you can! I'm not a lifesaver; I'm not going to get into a thing and work for it, or against it. Not now.

This is the best time of life, I assure you. Really, in some ways this is the best time of life.

Suzanne: How?

Nell: Well, it gets me closer to just being me, and just wanting to paint, and further from ambitions which I could probably not ever achieve, or if I did, I wouldn't know what to do with them.

Suzanne: Ambitions for your painting?

Nell: [thinking] I'm ambitious for my painting. I am, I'm ambitious for my painting. And maybe when I'm dead other people will know that.

[to Margot] What's wrong?

Margot: Wait a minute, what I heard you saying was, giving up a lot of your ambition to fight for causes.

Suzanne: Is that what it is?

Nell: Yes, throwing in the wastebasket requests.

Suzanne: Causes like more exhibitions for San Francisco artists in San Francisco museums?

Nell: Yes. I don't care any more about that. Because time passes.

Suzanne: You say in the Autobiography: "I love to paint, not because excellence is my goal. I think that excellence is not only unimportant to me, but unattainable and impractical."

Nell: Um-hmm, that's true. That wouldn't be said by a scientist, of course, because he has to be perfect at his work. But I don't have to be perfect.

Suzanne: "Perfection is not the point. What I achieve expressly and by accident is enough."

Nell: I believe that. You see, I have to have a good time. I can't beat my brains out.

Suzanne: But you work very hard. The self-portrait of you with your grandchild, it seems like you beat your brains out on that one.

Nell: I really did. I'm finishing that this week. I am fascinated in getting it done, and getting it done as well as I could, I suppose on account of my relationship with the people in it. But it's not my favorite kind of painting, at all. And you might say, "Well, why don't you paint it another way?" Well, I could. But in the back of my mind is pleasing the customer. [laughs]

"The Garden Party"

Margot: Then how come you decided to make a whole new series of paintings about, what was it? A party?

Nell: Oh, well then I can get in my kicks about how people look.

Margot and Perry had an anniversary, and we had that nice photographer--.

Margot: Oh, my birthday, my 60th birthday. Alice.

Nell: Alice--what's her father's name? Richard Shaw. He's a delight, he's a ceramist. Anyway, his daughter Alice came and took pictures of the party. I told her I wanted her to take them not formally, to take what she wanted. And she did a group of swell pictures. I loved them. Everybody is--. Well, sometimes they're talking, and sometimes they're sad, and sometimes they're out of order.

If you've seen my scroll, that's the kind of drawings I want to make that I do with my left hand and my eyes closed. I love to do that, and I haven't done it for a long time, since I did my scrolls. So I wanted to do this party.

I seem to be given to parties. I seem to want to do parties. "The Garden Party," and the groups, it has to do with what people do.

Suzanne: I've seen reproductions of "The Garden Party" and the Guests. One is a painting, with fourteen people, and one a collage of the same grouping? The figures in "The Garden Party," are they from photographs? And how do you work from photographs if you are working with your left hand and your eyes closed?

Nell: I don't with those. But I certainly couldn't have done "The Garden Party" people like I'm doing that picture downstairs--I'd never be finished--because I've taken such pains with that painting downstairs.

I don't know these people--. Well, yes, I do. I had a model, actually. I had Dima Birich. She was modelling for me then.

Suzanne: There are fourteen people in that huge canvas.

Nell: Um-hmm. And I did a pastel, too. And in the end--I rid myself of all obligation, practically, by doing--.

The end picture, painting, is a pastel, and it's abstract! The Young Man Who is on the Make is a serpent, a snake. [looking at reproduction that Margot finds] Oh, this is the original painting, and this young man turns into a snake. She's--I forget what she is. I forget what the whole thing is. I have pictures of all of these, I have slides. And regular pictures too.

This is The Pretty Lady. This is The Object of Our Affections. This is my husband and me when we were engaged. [laughs] This is the drunk. This is The Lady With the Hand in the Cookie Jar.

Suzanne: That of you and Stanley is pretty photographic.

Nell: Yes, I was looking at a photo. So I mixed them.

This is a photo from the Gay Nineties. The Aristocrat, The Gambler. I don't know who this was. But I'll tell you what, after I finished this I not only made the whole thing into abstractions, but I took each one out and had him be in a different place, made separate paintings. What was this man doing when he wasn't pointing his hand?

Suzanne: Were they shown as a suite of work?

Nell: Yes, it was a whole show.

Suzanne: Did you sell parts of it?

Nell: No, nobody seems to want it.

Margot: Well some people have. They've bought them.

Nell: Oh, yes, you're right. [pause]

This one, one of them, I made have a blue face. I had a lot of fun with this, it was full of imagination.

Suzanne: I like the Lady with the Gloved Hand, the pose.

Nell: This one? That's my mother. I made that up. She was very elegant. She is the Lady with the Spyglasses, the Voyeur.

Suzanne: Did she know that?

Nell: She was dead. She didn't know.

And there, that's my grandmother. She's shocked. She's looking at this scene. You can see by the back of her that she's shocked. [laughing]

Suzanne: You were saying you had "rid yourself of all obligation?" You were finished with it?

Nell: Yes, I am finished with it. I did that, and I did them individually, and I did it abstractly, and then I didn't worry about it anymore. They worried me. I wrote about them as being a worrisome lot. [laughs] They had been bothering me for a long time. You might say, well, that's a very frivolous kind of people to be involved with, but I was involved with them. It was, I think, all part of my resentment at my background. I think.

Suzanne: This work which you are contemplating, inspired by photographs from Margot's birthday party, is it going to be a canvas, or a scroll? What are you thinking about?

Nell: I don't know. Not a scroll. No, I think it'll be individual pictures. Somehow I'm thinking of the French painter, Pierre Bonnard. You know, those French painters, some of them, always were doing domestic scenes. I might be doing that, but I don't want to get involved in details now, anymore.

[to Margot] What did you want to read?

My Family

Margot: I thought that this was a nice statement, that you haven't made quite yet, about your relationships with your family. And the reason I felt that was important was because your own family was so different from the family that you have now.

Nell: [laughs] My adopted family?

Margot: It says something about the legacy that you leave.

Nell: [reading] I feel pleased to write about my pride in my three children, my twelve grandchildren, and my five great-grandchildren--now six and a half. I am grateful to them for enhancing my life with their young points of view, which makes them entertaining company. I like hearing their news, and I like it when they ask to hear stories of my life and times.

My children have been, and still are, empathic to me when I need to be helped over the rough places. We have different ways of taking care of each other. It hasn't always been like this. It has taken time to figure out our similarities and differences, and interests. My grandchildren, as well as my children, have artistic ways of living their lives. Two granddaughters have M.A. degrees in art, and are making art for their livelihoods. They exhibit their work publicly.

Suzanne: What are their names?

Nell: Liza Dodd Merris. She's just really beginning. She just had a baby, and she hasn't been married very long. But she has--. I went to a show of hers in some gallery in Oakland, I forget the name of it. And, oh yes, she's shown a lot at the College of Arts and Crafts.

The other one is Katie Dodd, who lives in New York and has shown countless places. She thinks nothing of--somebody sends her a letter and says, "You want to be in this show?" and it's in Brooklyn, or it's in--the Brooklyn Bridge was the last one--and she brings all her materials with her and she sits down and makes stuff while the show is going on. That's one of the things she does. It's called "site-specific."

And she has been invited to McDowell Colony, which is pretty wonderful. She went to the art school in Brooklyn, Pratt.

Suzanne: Have you taught those girls?

Nell: No.

Margot: I did, and Joan has, at the ICAD summer school.

I want to add something here. You're talking about the ones who do the actual painting, but you have other children and grandchildren who do other things in the arts.

Nell: Like Annie Biestman.

Margot: Like Annie Biestman Carofanello. She is a graphic artist, but she's also a hair stylist, and manages a salon.

Nell: That's true, and does it in a very artistic way.

Margot: And Joan is now painting.

Nell: I say that somewhere. And you are.

Margot: Yes. But I think the point I am trying to make is it is not just the visual arts. She [Nell] gave her family, including her in-law children, a way of seeing, in different kinds of ways, It's just a different way of looking at things.

Nell: [reading] My one single gift that I have is how I see the world from the eyes of an artist.

The first thing I have to do about my children is appreciate them, and let them know they have talents. So I help them learn to look. I want to share this gift with my children, and grandchildren, and know I appreciate them, because I couldn't take credit for this--.

When we were young, I refused to discuss it or even let them see my work.

Suzanne: When you were working in that room at home?

Nell: Um-hmm.

Suzanne: Joan and Margot would knock on the door, "Mommy, Mommy?"

Nell: And John. "Mommy."

Suzanne: [to Margot] That's really true?

Margot: No, she shut us out of it. That was her private thing.

Nell: [reading] Instead I encouraged them to look at nature. I look at it all the time. I have a good many books about art in my library, but I didn't stress that part of my interests any more than I was willing to talk about my paintings.

At any rate, all three of my children are professional teachers. Margot and Joan are artists as well. Margot is a metalsmith and now a Saturday painter. Joan is a painter. And John is a professor of environmental studies at Stockton State College in New Jersey.

Margot: And also a writer.

Nell: He is, he has written a book.

Margot: And Joan writes beautifully.

Nell: And who else has written a book? You, you have written a book!

Margot: I've written several!

Nell: I'm stingy.

[reading] My children are graduates of Stanford University and UC.

John and you both went to Stanford.

[to Margot] What are you eating?

Margot: A plum. Would you like one?

Nell: No, I had two for breakfast.

Another List: Relatives

Nell: [notes written later]

John Walter, my father, deceased. He was a merchant, the president of D. N. E. Walter Company. He was an early president of the board of the San Francisco Art Institute (California School of Fine Arts).

My mother, Florence Schwartz Walter, deceased. A well-known artist and bookbinder in San Francisco. Her books were exhibited at the Brussels International Exposition as well as the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco. My mother was also a book collector. She had a complete collection of Grabhorn items.

My two sisters, Marjorie Seller (Mrs. Robert Seller). Her interest is in the Society of Asian Art in Golden Gate Park. She is a member of their board. Carol Sinton (Mrs. Henry Sinton). She is a weaver. She is the president of the board of the California Crafts Museum in Ghirardelli Square.

Marian Walter Sinton, deceased, my aunt. She was a painter, a sister of John Walter, and Edgar Walter, a sculptor, my father's brother, deceased. She was married to Edgar Sinton, who was my husband's father's brother. They and their three children, Jean, Ruth, and Marian Aline lived in Hillsborough.

My Aunt Marian was important to me in that she was also an artist who showed great interest in me and my work. She was a dreamy painter who was supportive of local artists and made them her friends. Every time my work was exhibited locally in a gallery or museum she bought a piece. Furthermore, she became interested in the German Expressionists and bought quite a few important paintings. Aunt Marian also quietly and stubbornly withstood the sarcastic remarks and laughter of some of the relatives and friends who took no interest in her courageous collection which of course increased a great deal in financial value as the years went on. She left many paintings to the San Francisco Museum when she died.

My three children: Margot S. Biestman, teacher, artist, writer, married to Perry Biestman, broker. Joan S. Dodd, artist, married to Bruce Dodd, architect. John W. Sinton, professor, married to Wendy Sinton, therapist.

I have twelve grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

Relatives of Eleanor (Nell) Walter Sinton

Grandparents: (Mother's Parents)

Isadore Schwartz (married Henrietta [Nettie] Cohn)

Mother:

Florence Schwartz (married John I. Walter)

Aunt:

Pearl Schwartz (married Edgar Walter, who was the brother of Nell's father; died before Nell was born)

Grandparents: (Father's Parents)

Isaac Walter (married Caroline Greenebaum)

Father

John I. Walter (married Florence Schwartz)

Uncle

Edgar Walter (married Pearl Schwartz, who was the sister of Nell's mother)

Aunt

Marian Walter (married Edgar Sinton, who was the brother of Stanley H. Sinton Sr. [Nell's husband's father])

Self, Brother, Sisters

Children of John I. Walter and Florence Schwartz Walter

John I. Walter Jr. (died age 11)

Eleanor [Nell] Walter Sinton (married Stanley H. Sinton Jr.)

Marjorie Pearl Walter (married Paul Bissinger, then married Robert Seller after Paul died)

Carol Walter (married Henry Sinton, who is Stanley H. Sinton Jr.'s brother)

Parents-in-Law

Edna Hortense Eiseman and Stanley Henry Sinton Sr.

Children of Edna Eiseman Sinton and Stanley H. Sinton Sr.

{Husband, Brothers-in-Law, Sister-in-law}

Stanley H. Sinton Jr. (married Nell Walter)

Robert Sinton (married Joan Salz)

Henry Sinton (married Carol Walter, who is Nell's sister)

First Cousins

(Children of Marian Walter Sinton and Edgar Sinton)

Jean Sinton (married Ephraim Engleman)

Ruth Sinton (married Paul Steiner)

Marian Aline Sinton

Children of Nell Walter Sinton and Stanley H. Sinton Jr.

Margot Sinton (married Perry B. Biestman)
 Joan Sinton (married Bruce C. Dodd)
 John Walter Sinton (married Sandra Orris, then Wendy Weber)

Nieces and Nephews**Children of Marjorie Walter Bissinger and Paul A. Bissinger**

Peggy Bissinger (married Peter Pressman)
 Paul A. Bissinger Jr. (married Kathleen Bell)
 Thomas N. Bissinger (married Kristen Cutler)

Children of Carol Walter Sinton and Henry Sinton

Patricia Sinton (married Ronald Adler)
 Peter Sinton (married Beverly Kohashi)

Children of Joan Salz Sinton and Robert Sinton

Michael Sinton
 Barbara Sinton (married John Trimbur, then Christopher Wilson)
 Douglas Sinton (married Wendy Chaikin)

Grandchildren**Children of Margot Sinton Biestman and Perry B. Biestman**

John Perry Biestman (married Lori Lee Landau)
 Mark Stanley Biestman (married Karen Williams)
 Anne Biestman (married Mario Carofanello)

Children of Joan Sinton Dodd and Bruce C. Dodd

Katherine Anne Dodd (married Noah Brauner)
 Elizabeth Joan Dodd (married Michael Merris)
 Hugh Dodd
 Rebekah Nell Dodd

Children of John W. Sinton and Sandra Orris Sinton

Jonathan Sinton (married Rebecca Ding)
 Christopher Sinton (married Diana Stewart)
 Alexander Sinton

Children of John W. Sinton and Wendy Weber Sinton

Joshua Sinton
 Toby Sinton

Great Grandchildren

Children of John and Lori Biestman

Jennifer Lee Biestman

Robert Perry Biestman

Children of Mark and Karen Biestman

Ross William Biestman

Jeffrey Mark Biestman

Children of Katherine Dodd and Noah Brauner

Sarah Dodd Brauner

Children of Elizabeth and Michael Merris

Jonah Dodd Merris

Children of Jonathan and Rebecca Sinton

Max Ding Sinton

XVI COLLECTING

A Start

[Interview 6: September 24, 1992] ##

Nell: Collecting art has been a family hobby since the Walter and Greenebaum families came here from Europe. Mr. Emanuel Walter, my granduncle, my father's uncle, he'd bought a whole bunch of pictures--including a Rosa Bonheur, of all people--and he presented his collection to the San Francisco Art Institute--it was called the California School of Fine Arts then--when he died. And in about 1970 it was sold by the Art Institute in order to build an exhibition space at the Institute. So those paintings don't exist here anymore. I don't know where they are--in private collections.

Suzanne: Why Rosa Bonheur, "of all people"?

Nell: Well, I didn't like the collection very much. It was very--what is the word?--safe, and academic.

Margot: But you described once to me how as a child you were so excited about collecting your first piece of art.

Nell: Oh, I was. It was given to me by my grandmother, on my eighteenth birthday. And I said I wanted an Armin Hansen painting. So she gave me one. It was a painting of a very angry ocean. I don't even think I liked it very well, to tell you the truth, but I was so impressed at having a painting that grownups would value. I don't know that I was present at the purchase, I don't think so. Probably my father picked it out. I don't remember enough about it.

I do know this, that as time went on I stopped looking at it, and when we moved from that house on Divisadero Street to

here we sold it. Now, I made a small mistake. Armin Hansen became a known California painter, and we probably could have gotten more money for it. I think I got a thousand dollars for it, or maybe that's the price she paid for it. Really--I'm foggy about it.

In 1951 when my mother moved out of her old Clay Street house up to this house here on the hill [2745 Larkin Street] she asked me--I got to be an authority in the family--she asked me what she should do with these small California paintings, etchings and things, and I said, "Oh, get rid of them." That was stupid, because some of them are very well-known, and probably very expensive right now.

Suzanne: Like the Society of Six group?

Nell: I don't think they were as important as the Society of Six. In a way they were. They were Carmel painters, mostly.

Suzanne: Why were you so dismissive?

Nell: I didn't want them, so I thought nobody else would. [laughing] Because I was the boss of the painting department in the family!

Traveling. Looking. Shopping

Nell: When I had been to Europe, once when I was sixteen, and when I was eighteen, I suppose, I was literally so bowled over by the paintings I saw that I couldn't leave the room. I couldn't leave the museums. I hadn't seen anything like that, anyplace. In New York I hadn't seen them because I wasn't doing that kind of thing in New York.

Suzanne: What were you particularly bowled over by?

Nell: Oh, Impressionists, and all the way back to, oh, that Doge. Who painted the Doge?

Suzanne: Velasquez?

Nell: Yes. Such a gorgeous painting, I just couldn't get over it. I just sat and stared at the Doge.

And they let me be there by myself. They didn't say, "Come on, we're going now." My parents were very good about that. Because nobody else wanted to stay that long.

Oh, and some English painters. Who were they? Oh, Turner, and Francis Bacon. There was a young English painter. I think I bought one. No, that was when I was married. We bought an English painting, but it wasn't very successful.

Suzanne: Did you buy prints, and smaller things when you went with your parents?

Nell: No, I didn't buy anything. No, but I was very much involved also in a wonderful silk wig in Paris. The silk was very shiny and like small ropes, and it was like for a ballet dancer. It was sewed down the middle, and down here, and then flowers all the way around. It was so beautiful. And they didn't think that was crazy. They said I could have that wig. And it was beautiful.

Suzanne: Has that turned up in any of your paintings?

Nell: Um, unh. And I don't know where it is, that's the awful part. I thought I was saving everything. I didn't save anything from our moves, really. There's nothing around anymore. That's just as well.

And my mother bought beautiful clothes at Fortuny. Oh, so beautiful. And she bought clothes at Lanvin. She bought me a dress at Lanvin. And I was only eighteen. Oh, it was beautiful. It was pale green tulle. A party dress.

And then they bought me--and this, I got a bad mark for it-- a very fine Spanish shawl. They were stylish then. I mean, a really good one. And I left it around at some big wedding, and of course it got stolen. That made them very unhappy.

Margot: That actually is very significant, because you've mentioned that several times.

Nell: You bet.

Margot: It affected you so to this very day if you lose something you just go crazy. It's a very big no-no.

Suzanne: You were the only one taken on that trip?

Nell: Oh, no, everybody went. Me, and Marjorie--. She got given presents, too. I don't know how much she liked the clothes. I don't think I paid any attention to what she was getting. Carol was too young. She had a little pongee dress from England, I think. [laughs]

Buying Important Contemporary Work

Margot: Can I interject something here? One thing that I think is so important, if we didn't mention it before, was that through Mom's collecting things only that she really liked--and I know that often you were made fun of for your collecting by the business people in the family, it was just "one of your things"--that actually, one day, the paintings that she bought made much money in the art market. While the men were making money in their businesses, she was making money in art, both important contributions to the family.

Suzanne: Did she sell the paintings?

Margot: She didn't sell them.

Nell: I actually gave them away to my children.

Margot: She very generously gave them away.

Suzanne: What are they?

Margot: Two Diebenkorns. And she gave away a Hartung. And a Miro.

Nell: And a Rothko.

Margot: What else?

Nell: Oh--a Berkeley artist.

Suzanne: Stephen De Staebler.

Margot: And there's one that you gave to John that the fellow down in Los Angeles valued so highly. It's a sculpture.

Nell: That is Bruce Naumann. Very popular now.

Suzanne: Were you buying as an investor? Or because you needed to have them on your walls?

Nell: I needed to have them on the walls, and they had to be the right price, so I wouldn't be buying Matisse. I wanted to buy in my price range. So I got avant-garde painters, avant-garde at the time.

Margot: And you bought them inexpensively.

Nell: Yes, very.

Suzanne: Where were you buying them? From the artists, or from galleries?

Nell: I bought the big Diebenkorn here from him. He had hardly shown anything then. Then I bought the other Diebenkorn at a little auction at the Art Institute for sixty dollars. And I knew it was a bargain. I knew pretty well about those things.

Suzanne: The whole house is lined with large and small pieces by your contemporaries. Were you buying from them?

Nell: I traded a lot. We traded. I traded anything of mine that they liked. That painting by Joel Barletta, I traded him for that. That plate [by Peter Voukos], I don't like it, I don't like Voukos's work very well, but somebody had bought a painting from me and decided they didn't like it, and traded me back my painting--. No, now what happened? Who gave me the Voukos?

Suzanne: What is this sculpture?

Nell: That's Robert Hudson. I bought that from a gallery in Palo Alto. It's dusty, now.

Suzanne: Why did you buy that?

Nell: I love it. I like it. Because it's very imaginative, and I think that the pieces fit together. And I have one little rule: when I see that a piece, a painting, or a sculpture, continues itself, and I can follow it with my fingers, then I think that that's something to look at. If it stops me with big awful color, and I can't go on, then I don't like it. But this is at first; I have to see these things sometimes three or four times before I buy them. I don't just go up and say, "I want this."

Suzanne: Do you bring things home, and then maybe return them?

Nell: I don't like to do that. I don't remember having done that.

Margot: You used to take me to shows, and you'd say, "Oh, I think this is a good one. I think you should buy this one." And I would say, "Why?" And you would say, "Well, because it's imaginative." Or, "Look how she uses the color here." Joan Brown. You helped me to buy Joan Brown. And you helped me to buy--. Who's the guy who made those wonderful photograph collages?

Nell: Oh, Jess Collins! I love those. I like Jess very much. I never knew him. He was personally very shy.

Margot: You bought one for yourself, and then I bought one. And Joan got one. And you were so excited, and I was so excited. "Oh, my

goodness!" And we hardly paid anything for them. But I loved them too, and by then I think she had taught me a lot about looking at things.

J. DeFeo

Nell: I knew J. DeFeo very well, and I know she was hugely successful, but I am sorry I never could really--. Yes, I did, a couple of paintings I bought to save them from destruction because she was very destructive. But I soon realized--.

This is a terrible thing I did. Oh, it isn't terrible. I bought a huge painting that she'd left lying out in the rain for months, I bought it for a hundred dollars or something, and I didn't think it was that bad, but it started to buckle, and I thought, "Things can only get worse," so I gave it to the San Francisco Museum.

Suzanne: I don't understand. She would be throwing things away?

Nell: That happened by my seeing this one particular painting lying on the grass outside the house.

And she needed the money. Her teeth were falling out, and she needed the money. So I traded her the painting for the money.

Suzanne: Are there other stories like that about some of the pieces you have?

Nell: I didn't do that that much. No, not that I remember.

One thing I did contribute to, and I wrote about it, but I don't think I put in this detail. It's J. DeFeo and Wally Hedrick's Christmas parties. Remember? They were wonderful. One year, somehow J. let me know that they ran out of party money. They couldn't buy any materials for their beautiful decorations. So Ruth Armer and I agreed to underwrite the party for that year. I think we only did it once. So Ruth and I did that.

Suzanne: Those things could be awkward.

Nell: There was an awkwardness. J. sent me this wonderful thank-you letter for our having paid for their Christmas party. I opened the envelope (which had gotten through the mail all covered in

gold paint and flowers and stuff) and tons of paper flowers tumbled out of it. It was very appealing. I wrapped up the envelope again and I took it to the Archives of American Art in the de Young Museum for safekeeping. That envelope contained confidential material.

Oh, that reminds me--about the same time another piece of work was confidential. It's an entirely different story.

A nervy little girl student at Mt. Holyoke College in Massachusetts was permitted by the college to select an art show of works by some California artists and poets who were active with the Beat Generation. This was in 1975. She had a brilliant idea to put all of these artists together--they were making an expressive statement together in a new kind of way--very innovative. She talked some of the quite straight-laced faculty at Mt. Holyoke College into allowing her to do this, and the authorities approved of her going to the San Francisco Bay Area to select poets along with painters and sculptors.

It was going to be a giant success, and it was, I guess, except that the girl didn't know how to carry it all out. She had a catalogue printed that cost a lot of money and the college couldn't afford the catalogue, so they got really in debt on account of this eighteen-year-old girl's willful error. I was delighted to have one of my scrolls included in the exhibition, and I had a great time in Massachusetts with the other artists.

Now, the reason I'm telling you about this at the same time I mentioned the DeFeo-Hedrick Christmas party is that Paul Karlstrom (director of the West Coast branch of the Archives of American Art) was furious because the young upstart from Mt. Holyoke had gone to the Archives in Golden Gate Park and kidnapped the confidential material from the de Young Museum as well as the correspondence from the DeFeo-Hedrick party. None of this should have been leaked.

Boxes

Suzanne: Let's talk about the boxes you have done. You mentioned Bruce Conner's work out here. The other person who did boxes was Joseph Cornell.

Nell: Yes, that's right. I am just in love with Joseph Cornell. And I don't have one, they were too expensive by the time I got around to seeing his work.

Suzanne: You said about the boxes that you did them because you had things, objects, that you couldn't use in your paintings?

Nell: Things that meant a lot to me at the time, and I couldn't get them into a painting and make them fit. And so I decided they would be used in boxes. And another reason for the boxes was the material.

They were more or less jokey. Some were sad. But mostly they were jokey. And I wouldn't put stuff like that in paintings because it looks like some kind of stupid propaganda or something.

[looking at box] This box came from Germany. And one time a friend of mine gave me this little music box. I had bought a set of type, old-fashioned type, and of course type is upside-down, and I have his name across the top and bottom, J I M R E I N E K I N G.

Suzanne: "The Student Prince."

Nell: That's the music, supposedly. Let's see if it still works. [winds the music box, the key of which extends from the back of the box, and the music plays] And since I was involved in printing here, I saw this in a magazine, or paper, so it became sort of a lesson.

Suzanne: Cursive writing on a blackboard.

Nell: That's all.

Suzanne: But it's that sense that you brought something together.

Nell: Yes, something together that, well, might be unusual.

##

Margot: She also made collages and boxes for commemorative events. My first box was when I was sixteen, and it was feathers and a dancer, because that's where I was. When I was thirty she gave me another box, which was more a statement of where she was, where I was getting older, and she had ashes down at the bottom. And a psychologist came to our house and said, "Do you know how much your mother hates you?" [laughter] And so--. I thought about that for many years.

By the time I was forty, Mom had changed a lot, had grown a lot, and so had I, and she saw me as a peach, and she made me this beautiful box that had a picture of a peach in it, and then

there were some mirror kinds of things, and it went around in a circle and said, "My daughter is a peach." And then she had more of these [type letters] for the top of the box.

When I was fifty she put a whole beautiful collage together, of my life, and how I got to be where I am. Beautiful colors and shapes. It all fit together.

Nell: Then I stopped. I made boxes for all my children, didn't I?

Margot: Yes, you did, and for other people, too.

You used to go to the junkyard to collect things for boxes, with Ellen Bransten.

Nell: Yes, we did. We went to junkyards, and we went on a trip to the mining towns, and took pictures. She took pictures in the graveyards.

Suzanne: Did you do any sculpting with the things you found?

Nell: No, I can't do that stuff. I can't even sculpt in clay. I can't get three-dimensional. I gave up on all sculpture, doing for myself.

[looking at another box, with compartments with shells and other objects in the compartments] These are mysterious. They are meant to be mysterious.

Suzanne: This is called "Plumage, 1970." Were these exhibited?

Nell: Yes, they have all been in exhibitions, and surprisingly, I've sold an awful lot of them. I don't have so many left, but I have some big ones left.

Suzanne: Why does it surprise you that they sold?

Nell: Well, I think they're rather queer and--. But for that, I'm proud. I like to be queer, about this kind of thing.

Suzanne: Are they more personal than paintings?

Nell: No, I think they are difficult to read. People would say, "What did she do that for?"

Margot: I remember, at your box shows people would say, "What did she do that for?" And "What does it mean?" "What does your mother mean?" And I would say, "I don't know what she means. What do you feel about it?"

Suzanne: Whereas they would have stopped saying that about painting?

Nell: Yes, they know they're never going to find out. [laughs]

Suzanne: Here's a peacock feather.

Nell: I love them. In India I couldn't stop buying peacock feathers.

I do this all the time. Up at Margot's place in Sea Ranch I pick up stuff like this, and I put it down someplace, some open place, not where its cared for, just on a bench or somewhere, and I make designs with it. So it's not so permanent. But I just love those teeny-weeny things. There's something childlike about that.

Margot: She somehow imparted that to Joan and me so we do the same thing. We go and we pick up these things, and we arrange them in different ways and places, and just major in esoterica, and I don't know why. They just look pretty.

Nell: Margot does it very well. She makes beautiful things.

Pebble Mosaic, Projects

Nell: [looking at end table] This was I guess my biggest [pebble mosaic]. I did several of these at Tahoe, to avoid the social stress.

Suzanne: When did you do this pebble mosaic table?

Nell: In the 1950s, I think.

Suzanne: Did you learn how to do this from someone?

Nell: Yes. There was a New York woman, from the famous publishing family, terribly attractive, wonderful person [Jeanne Reynal, New York mosaicist]. I met her through Bob Howard. She rented somebody's place at Tahoe. She was a real runaway from--what is that stylish place in Connecticut, or Rhode Island. Some beach? Newport Beach. She had been married several times.

She borrowed somebody's house up there [Tahoe], and we got to be friends. She was making mosaics up there. She had all these rocks, crystals, all kinds of stuff, and when she left Tahoe I was over there, and she took all her stuff and threw it out, so that the whole world was glistening with her dirt. And I

went around, picking up all this stuff. These pebbles comes from the beaches near San Francisco, but that's when I started doing mosaics.

Margot: And you taught me, and that was the first art thing that I was willing to do. And we collected pebbles and segregated them, and I watched Mom work, and then I made one and gave it away as a wedding present. To John and Rena Bransten.

Nell: To Rena and John.

Margot: Yes, and it went right into their attic. [laughs] But that was Mom's and my first collaboration together on anything to do with art. Joan did it much earlier. Joan painted.

Suzanne: [to Nell] And you said that your mother kept you and your sisters busy doing art projects.

Nell: Yes, busy hands. We always did that. We even did sewing and embroidery, and knitting. All of that.

Suzanne: [to Margot] And did you do all of that?

Margot: Yes, pretty much. My hands were never idle. And I was a jeweler, because I couldn't compete in the same field. But there were cutouts and collages, always, and Joan too, always.

Suzanne: Sounds like there was a great sense of bringing things to completion.

Nell: [laughs] What was my grandmother's saying? "If a thing's worth doing, it's worth doing well." Always finish what you start.

Something from Nothing

Suzanne: But as a teacher and as an artist you believed in making mistakes. Were you able to do that in these projects?

Nell: Well, I was impatient, wasn't I?

Margot: Where I felt that you were at your best was in, "Ooh, look at this. And look at this!" The act of seeing the unusual. It was the collecting, and then the sorting, and the doing. But as far as the actual product, that had to be right. The product had to be right. So that wasn't the best part. The best part was the

looking and the excitement of seeing. Mom would say, "Oh, look I found this color. Look at this color!" And we learned to see.

Nell: I did it with your daughter today. I think she wouldn't have noticed it if I hadn't told her. She was cutting my hair today-- at Corte Madera shopping mall, where she works--and they have this big row of beautiful trees, and places for people to eat, little tables and chairs.

I said, "Annie, I'm going to show you something, and you'll watch this the whole fall. This is a liquid amber. These are all liquid ambers, and you can see that each one has about two brilliant scarlet leaves right now. But they are going to all be very red and scarlet." And she didn't know that.

Margot: When we went walking, for my birthday, Annie said, "Mom, I always see things differently when I'm with you." And I said, "Yes, you know where that came from. That's Gram." She knows that.

Nell: Yes, we have to see it and smell it and feel it.

Margot: But as far as the product was concerned--I now remember something--Mom was never interested in, except for her boxes, where they held together and some of them would fall apart miserably, always something fell apart when she was making something, it never worked. It came unglued, it wasn't cut right, it didn't fit right. And her mother had a total fit, because everything had to be fitting right.

But in Mom's collages, and whatever she was doing, her cutouts with her hands, it was like, it wouldn't work, it would not work, awkwardly, or on purpose. So these two boxes we have here held together remarkably well. It was like, on purpose they wouldn't work.

Nell: [showing another box, wooden, about 4" x 4", with a clasp, and contents in glassine wrappers] This is about now, when so many things are made of peculiar materials. We have here "Nell Sinton, A Collection of Mini-Works." Each one is labeled, like here. This is "Hand-carved bone sculpture, multiple of 10,020." This is the way labels are in museums and in galleries. And it's a spoof.

Margot: It's like plays on words, but it's plays on objects.

Nell: I think it annoys people.

Suzanne: This box seems like so much trouble to make, this small work. Painting involves bigger motions, gestures, doesn't it?

Nell: Oh yes, this is just the opposite. This is dinky. It drives me crazy.

Suzanne: When you were doing the boxes, were you doing nothing else but, for a while?

Margot: No, they were between major pieces.

Nell: I've stopped making boxes, but a lot of them were entirely different from this. These happened to be the smallest ones I could find.

Suzanne: The lettering, is it cut out from something else?

Nell: No, I went to a printer and had him make it.

Suzanne: Have you taught classes in boxes?

Nell: I have taught classes in collage, which is flat, but they could make three-dimensional things if they wanted. Everybody doesn't want to do that. Although it's really much more successful for students to do that, any collage, anything with paste, than to make a painting. I think. Don't you, Margot?

Suzanne: And there are rules in collage? Scale?

Nell: Yes, I think so, and there should be a continuity of something in it, like a ribbon, or road, a direction.

Margot: Also what you've done is you've taught people to do something in one medium, say collage, and it has color and form and composition, and a certain kind of continuity, and then ask students to reproduce that in painting. People would make a collage of found objects, let's say, and then make a painting of that. So it's transferred to another medium.

But the thing that is so much fun about collage is making something out of so-called nothing. It's a way of seeing alternatives. When everything in life is so terrible, and it won't work out, there is always a surprise, and a way out.

Suzanne: But as art, does it require an audience?

Margot: I don't think so. Does it for you, Mom?

Nell: No, because I've enjoyed doing it. No, I don't need an audience. It's nice to have an audience, with money. [laughs] No, it's a big kick to do it. I enjoy it. It's fun. It's a discovery trip, too. Sometimes it's just a game, too.

[tape interruption]

J. B. Jackson

Nell: [talking about taste] Brinck [J. Brinckerhof] Jackson, he wrote a book about it. He enjoys it. He enjoys the originality of the people's idea of decoration, or art, because they've used their own taste. And it's true.

Suzanne: How do you know him? Who introduced you?

Nell: Old friends of mine and Brinck's too, from Santa Fe.

##

Suzanne: What do you talk about, you and Brinck?

Nell: We're both very innovative. Both Brinck and I look at the world around us and see it in interesting ways. Brinck gets a big kick out of seeing a trailer, say, at Tahoe, and the people who have the trailer have planted pansies in an old bathtub. Brinck is accepting of the unconventional.

Some people are only comfortable when they see something familiar or something that pleases them. People's tastes are different. They have different criteria for what pleases them.

Margot: Does Brinck like gnomes and dwarfs in backyards?

Nell: Brinck? Oh, he laughs at those. Other people, like my friend Juanita, appreciate elderberries for their yellow blossoms and purple berries growing in the Sierras, but her sense of aesthetics is different. She believes that California natives belong in Sierra gardens, not pansies in the bathtub. What pleases her is what grows naturally. It's a matter of aesthetics.

This is complex. Aesthetics is another subject--too much for now.

"What Do You See?"

Suzanne: What I want to do now is look at this reproduction of your 1988 painting of the Hall of One Hundred Columns [see reproduction of this painting following p. 125]. Forget you painted it, I want to have you take me through looking at it in the way that you would when you were trying to show docents how to look at art. How would you do that?

Nell: Well, the first thing I would do as a docent is not tell them, but to ask them questions. About things I might talk about.

"What do you think of the scale?" And then you write down what you think.

Suzanne: Okay, that's something that attracts me to this painting, that these columns are so large, it's all so massive.

Nell: Well, see, the title has something to do with it too, though I'm not sure you would have observed the title. This is in Assyria? Persia. It's that marvelous place, Persepolis? One of the ruins in Asia. And that gives you a hint. The scale is enormous. All the scale is enormous in all of the Persian ruins, because they were all made by kings, and they were enormous.

Okay, "What kind of an atmosphere do you see around these objects?"

Suzanne: I see a lot of darkness, but also a distant light, a special light that's cast on the columns.

Nell: Well, yes, it's ominous, but as you said, correctly, the light is coming from somewhere, maybe from the West--I call this [pointing] the West.

"Do the colors please you, and why?"

"And why, if they don't?"

Suzanne: Those colors seem like a rainbow, or a prism. It's very pleasing.

Nell: See, you're giving me more than any of the docents that I talked to in Newport Beach and some other places. They would say, "I don't know. Orange is the color of the flag on our boat, so I suppose I like it." See how far ahead you are.

Suzanne: That surprises me. I would think these potential docents would be well informed, and motivated.

Nell: But the teacher gives them dogma.

Margot: Now, wait a minute, I have such an argument with you about this. When you work with docents, you offer a particular way of looking. And the people who are really interested--and this is so with any group of students--the people who are really interested, say if you have ten students, if you get two people who really are interested in what you have to say, that will multiply out there somewhere, and that's very important, to get those two people. I object when you talk about "everybody."

Nell: Sometimes I used--I won't anymore--I would stand and listen to the docents at the museum, and I would hear the docent talking about Van Gogh's ear, or the next artist's divorce.

Margot: But that's before you have worked with them, like the kinds of questions that you are asking Suzanne today.

Nell: Well, yes, nobody asked them that. But they teach incident, and anecdote.

Margot: Some of them know a lot already and are very eager to use what you offer. This is your addition.

Nell: That's right, I'm showing a different way of docentry, a different way to look at it.

A World of Color

Suzanne: This painting from Persepolis--you have traveled to the Middle East, and Africa, difficult parts of the world. The distress is sort of overwhelming, isn't it?

Nell: Somebody taught me once, if you're going to go to India you have to be constantly thinking that you are not in a real place, that this is theater. This is a theater experience. It's nothing you ever saw before. And if the little babies have flies in their eyes--it's a show, it's not real. Well, you almost have to feel that way, because it's so awful.

But it is real, and it's so full of so many other things. Here are these sick kids, and yet here is somebody playing--there's so much going on, all kinds of instruments, all kinds of music. And somebody is peeing in the street, and somebody is doing their laundry. And they're talking. So it is a kaleidoscope of sights, it's wonderful. So much beautiful stuff. Oh, I love to travel, I used to love to travel. I don't much anymore, it's such hard work.

Suzanne: In other countries colors are combined differently. Do you come back from India, for instance, wanting to paint more reds and browns and blacks, for instance, or something?

Nell: Sometimes. But not much.

It's a funny thing about color. People get so obsessed about their ignorance of color. I'm talking about interior decoration, mostly, and clothes. And so they hire somebody to do it for them, because they can't do it themselves. And I have never seen--hardly ever seen--anything done by a decorator that's possible.

Most decorators make things worse, but I do know some really gifted, talented ones. People should use their own taste for their house. And in the magazines it's even worse. An experienced, gifted, well-educated person can help people develop their own taste.

I've written about why natives in Africa have such beautiful fabrics, and they hang them in their houses, and they do them all themselves, they don't have any decorators [laughs], and I think I came to the conclusion--I wrote this long ago--that they have no money, they have nothing, but they have some sense that color would cheer them. Some sense of something that they needed to dress up their houses. I can't think of any other reason.

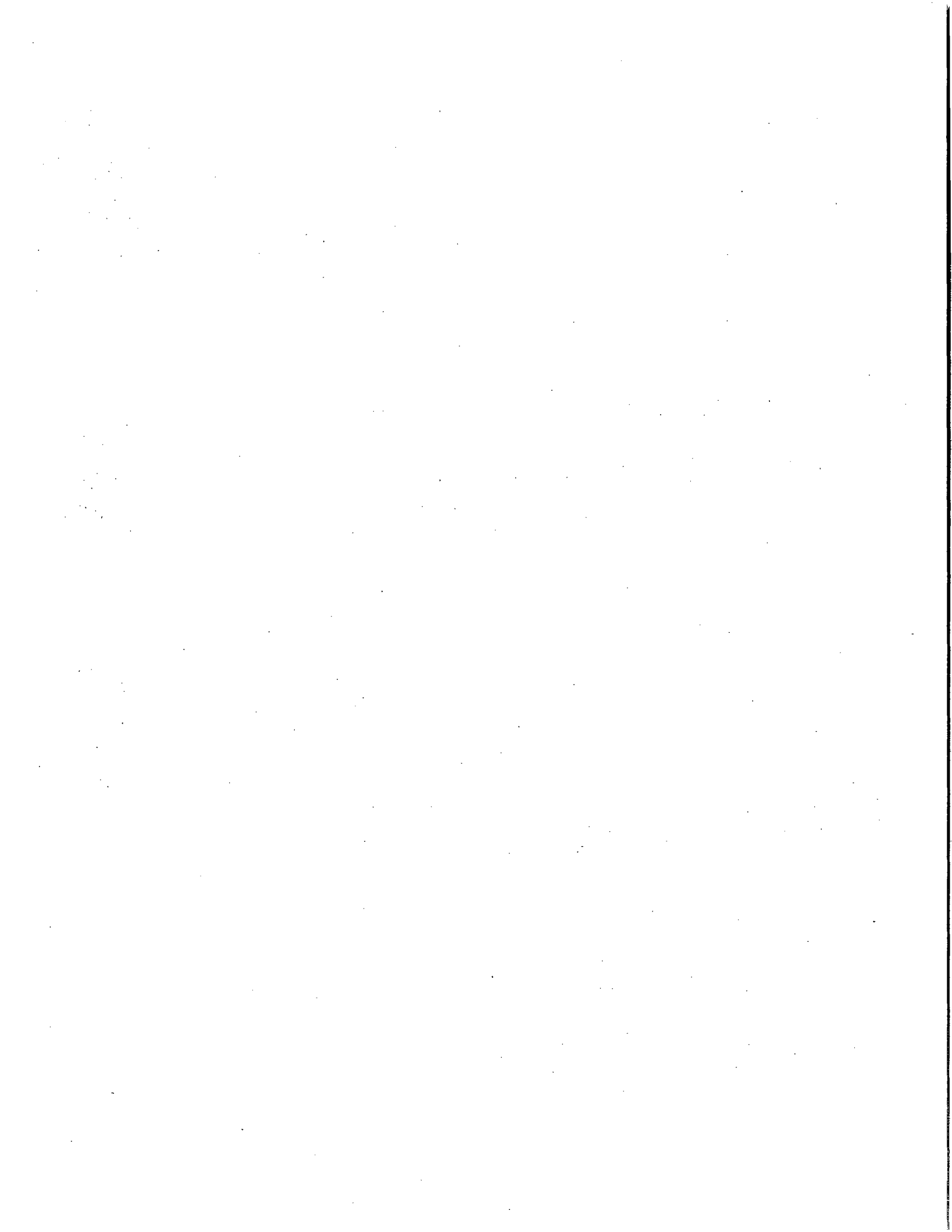
And here we are so confused with advertisements, and movies, and all that stuff, that everybody's confused, and they don't even think about it. You never hear anybody talk about color; I don't. I don't know what they do in school about it, I mean in grade schools or high schools. I know what my experiences are with students, and they are satisfactory, very nice.

An Afterword from Nell

Said on her birthday, June 4, 1993, "I am growing older slower."

Transcriber: Rita Bashaw, Shannon Page

Final typist: Shannon Page



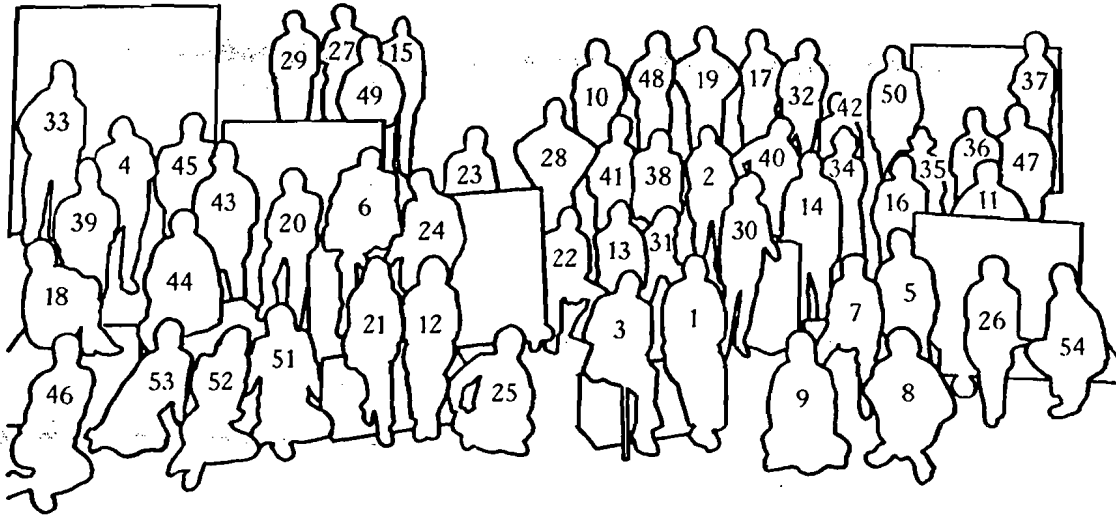
A Word About the Picture

GROUP PORTRAIT: *Northern California Masters (and Five Not-So-Easy Pieces)*, by Patrice Maigneux, four-by-five-inch color transparency, 1984. "It was like looking at all your heroes," ceramist Richard Shaw said afterward. At 43, he was one of the youngsters in a troupe of more than 50 local artists—all with works in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection—who, at our request, posed for a photo commemorating the museum's upcoming fiftieth anniversary. For the participants themselves it was an extraordinary reunion, with David Ireland representing the conceptual art movement, Manuel Neri and Ruth Asawa leading the sculptors' contingent, Marvin Lipofsky the glass artists, Ray Saunders and Nathan Oliveira the painters, Van Deren Coke and Ruth Bernhard the photographers. The familiar faces included husband (Pirkle Jones) and wife (Ruth-Marion Baruch), mother (June Felter) and daughter (Susan Felter), teacher (Elmer Bischoff) and student (Joan Brown). Octogenarian Louis Siegriest won most-senior citizen honors. As painter Mel Ramos remarked, "I didn't know there were that many living artists."

Festivities for the museum's fiftieth birthday in January get under way a month early with a \$250-a-plate Charlotte Mailliard-hosted dinner for patrons on December 6 and a monster bash for artists and friends on December 7. Beginning December 9 and running through February 17, the museum's anniversary exhibition will present the biggest

display yet of its permanent collection. Also to be unveiled December 9 are some dazzling acquisitions. We have it from museum director Henry Hopkins that among these will be oils by Franz Kline and Hans Hofmann, sculptures by Pablo Picasso and Henry Moore, and an important figurative painting by Californian Richard Diebenkorn. Finally, in January, the imperial Grace Morley, director of the museum from its inception in 1935 until 1958, will arrive from India, where she has spent much of the last two decades, for a luncheon and talk.

What's there to celebrate? First of all, that the museum is a live institution serving a local art community of growing national importance. "It's much more open to local artists now," says Manuel Neri. Then there is its world-class photo collection, its wonderful exemplars of Matisse and *les fauves*, and strong individual works by such major American artists as Clyfford Still and Mark Rothko. There is its new Paul Klee study center and the just-opened Department of Architecture and Design. And, under Hopkins's direction, membership and budget have tripled in the last ten years. Without the Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco's leading families might still be filling their Pacific Heights Victorians with painted scenes of grazing sheep and rosy-cheeked goat girls, and California artists would still have to go to New York to find out what their contemporaries are doing. Without it, as photographer Frank Spadarella says, "We wouldn't have anything." ■



- | | | | |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|---------------------|---|
| 1. Henry Holmes Smith | 18. Nell Sinton | 35. Jack Welpott | 52. Richard Shaw |
| 2. Susan Ciriclio | 19. Harry Bowers | 36. John Bloom | 53. Joan Brown |
| 3. Louis Siegriest | 20. Pirkle Jones | 37. Lewis Baltz | 54. Julius Wasserstein |
| 4. Morrie Camhi | 21. Ruth-Marion Baruch | 38. Roger Minick | |
| 5. Don Worth | 22. Al Farrow | 39. Roy De Forest | Left to right: |
| 6. Frank Spadarella | 23. Robert Colescott | 40. David Simpson | Raymond Saunders, <i>Charlie Parker</i> (formerly <i>Bird</i>) |
| 7. Ruth Bernhard | 24. Peter Stackpole | 41. Susan Felter | Nathan Oliveira, <i>Adolescent by the Bed</i> |
| 8. Jim Torlakson | 25. Uninvited Art Student | 42. Squeak Carnwath | John Bloom, <i>Photo-Paintings: Open Secrets</i> |
| 9. David Bottini | 26. Nancy Genn | 43. Mark Adams | Elmer Bischoff, <i>Orange Sweater</i> |
| 10. Marc Katano | 27. Tom Holland | 44. Beth Van Hoesen | Joan Brown, <i>The Dancers in a City #2</i> |
| 11. Elmer Bischoff | 28. Manuel Neri | 45. Nathan Oliveira | |
| 12. Ruth Asawa | 29. Mel Ramos | 46. Brian Taylor | |
| 13. Carlos Villa | 30. Jay DeFeo | 47. Van Deren Coke | |
| 14. Sam Tchakalian | 31. Judy Dater | 48. Jack Fulton | |
| 15. Art Nelson | 32. Marvin Lipofsky | 49. Michael Kenna | |
| 16. Viola Frey | 33. Raymond Saunders | 50. David Ireland | |
| 17. Tony Costanzo | 34. June Felter | 51. Robert Hudson | |

XVII MORE ON THE SAN FRANCISCO ART WORLD: A CORRESPONDENCE¹

Q: What was the impact, importance for you of the Coit Tower Murals, 1934? A chance to see those artists at work, or work with them at all?

A: I wasn't interested in the Coit Tower murals, except as oddities. I didn't see the artists at work. In 1934 I was absorbed in marriage and children, although champing at the bit to get out and around in painting.

Q: The following are notes from a symposium on the Figurative period talking about the period from 1950-1965:

Nate Oliveira, called it an "innocent" time in art, no market really, just "pure." "Hell of a lot easier to stay in San Francisco." Support system was there.

Music and beat poetry all happening. First reading of Howl.
Nell comment.

A: I liked the Beat Poets' (I didn't really know them) work because it was new and fresh. One time I was invited to a Talk and Art show at Mt. Holyoke College in Massachusetts. I brought and exhibited one of my scrolls there. The Beat Poets were there also, and the students locked them in their hotel rooms to prevent them from getting drunk before show time. But somehow they must have had liquor with them because they were very drunk when the curtain went up.

Q: Bars and hangouts, North Beach, the Beat years. 1940s, 1950s. Jazz. North Beach cafes, Black Cat bar, Enrico's, City Lights, etc. Were you there?

¹Questions sent by Suzanne to Nell, September 7, 1992.

- A: I really wasn't there at the night clubs you mentioned. I was a fringe visitor. I was usually home with husband and children, although we did go out a great deal. We visited the night clubs and bars around town, but I never was an habitue. I liked the entertainment. I have always loved "show time."
- Q: Nothing to lose here, no distractions, not much to see. Also, artists could go their own ways. No "scene" here that one had to be present for. Nell comment.
- A: In many respects I agree. There was no "scene" in S.F. S.F. has always been a "comfy little place" for me. I consider that to be its best attribute. It didn't used to be pretentious and ostentatious. Yet, in retrospect S.F. is often spoken of as the source of much important, original and famous talent. How much of a "scene" does it take to have "much to see.?" I like the work here.

During the '50s and '60s I think the Art Scene was in Los Angeles. Perhaps also in the '70s. But I thought it was exciting here. And besides good art there were humorists and writers and musicians, and they were original and fresh, like Lennie Bruce, and Mort Sahl.

The art dealer, Frank Perls, was a friend of mine. In San Francisco during those years the SFAI crowd had public as well as private parties. The artists contributed their work, made especially for the parties, which had themes, such as Norsemen and Visigoths. I remember a quite wild party at the Civic Auditorium in the '30s or '40s.

In the '50s and '60s when Germaine MacAgy was at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor--she was Tom Howe's assistant at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor--the artists were encouraged to make toys, sculpture, paintings, posters, for parties. Germaine installed brilliant shows there, and original ones. She and her husband, Douglas, brought an enormous amount of new, fresh ideas to this town, and she introduced me to the Chinese town of Locke on the Sacramento River!

As time went by, artists were asked to make more and more decorations for more and more parties at the San Francisco Museum. And most of us enjoyed the work. Occasionally a guest or two offered to buy our works. As far as I was concerned, one day I realized that I was working for no pay, and the Museum wasn't exhibiting my paintings, outside of one large group exhibition which was sent to a museum in Washington, D.C. I thought this was not a fair exchange, so I wrote to the director to express my dissatisfaction. That is the end of that story, and I made no more uneven exchanges, nor party favors.

Bob Howard gave great parties at that time in his studio. Another famous party was an annual Christmas affair given by J. DeFeo and Wally Hedrick (J.'s husband) at their studio on Fillmore Street. They would begin making decorations in August, and after the party they didn't destroy the tree but left it standing for the next December 25th, by which time it would have become a coat rack for the guests at the next party. Sometimes there were five or six skeleton trees all waiting for coats and hats. I was a guest at many of the parties given at the Art Institute, and at the artists' studios and homes where my husband, Stanley, and I were invited. The hosts were our friends.

- Q: Richmond, Oakland, San Francisco Museum Annuals were great. Nell comment.
- A: Yes, I think the Bay Area shows were "great." They seemed fresh, new and lively. It was exciting to have my work accepted and I think most of the works had, at least, a streak of authenticity and not too much pretention. Nowadays I think I see some pretention and decadence creeping in.
- Q: For abstractionists you had J. DeFeo and Jackson Pollock. Clyfford Still was "grandiose." Nell comment.
- A: I haven't counted how many abstractionists we had at that time--quite a few, I should think. It was valuable for me to see outside work by artists like Paul Klee (Switzerland) and Mark Rothko (New York). In fact, it was crucially important.
- Q: How did Clyfford Still affect your work? The 1940s at the Art Institute: students included Frank Lobdell, Jeremy Anderson, Fred Martin and Deborah Remington.
- A: Clyfford Still did not affect my work. I found his paintings pretentious and empty, and I still have that opinion. "Grandiose" is a good adjective. I was more affected by the works of: Frank Lobdell, Jeremy Anderson, and Fred Martin. I bought their works and I admire them, especially the Fred Martin piece. I think I functioned in the critical role. I also liked Diebenkorn and Park.
- Q: Absence of competitiveness. Nell comment.
- A: I don't know about absence of competitiveness. I'd say No, because I think about everyone competes for a place in the sun, whether they admit it or not. Competition in San Francisco wasn't like New York. You have to go to New York to know real competition.
- Q: Manuel Neri referred to a motley crowd out here from Black Mountain college. Nell comment.

A: I don't know the Black Mountain crowd.

Q: Joan Brown refers to the parallels to the Beat Poets in terms of an attitude of freedom. Nell comment. All this stuff about the Beat Poets, were you in attendance?

A: Perhaps Joan Brown was right about the Beat Poets' attitude of freedom. But William Carlos Williams was in oblivion for a long time, and I know that he was aware of an attitude of freedom. How hard did he try to feel free? Was his lack of recognition comfortable for him?

Q: Joan Brown talks of the natural and flowing relationships among the artists here. Nell comment.

A: I don't know about "natural" and "flowing" relationships among artists here. I'd say sometimes. I suppose. Just like most people.

[end of symposium notes]

Q: Bischoff, Diebenkorn, Oliveira formed a drawing group. Got models. Nell, did you have a drawing group? Models?

A: I was in a drawing group from time to time with Patricia Forrester, Bill Brown, Paul Wonner, Mark Adams, his wife Beth van Hoesen, Wayne Thiebaud, and Gordon Cook.

Q: Kenneth Baker, San Francisco Chronicle Oct. 7, 1987, reviewing a show at Gallery 871 of Park, Bischoff, Diebenkorn, Neri, Oliveira, Joan Brown, Paul Wonner, Wayne Thiebaud. Backlash against abstract painting. Discusses the local tradition of drawing from life.

Several life-drawing groups of long standing still exist. No question of whether the figures "mean anything, ." Something inherently self-justifying about the human figure as a focus for observation, and "this show reminds us how much art activity in the Bay Area is founded on that ultimately erotic fact." Nell comment. The meaning of the human figure for you.

A: The human figure for me means an exciting challenge because it's alive. After that, it's a matter of shapes and spaces, color, and style. The background is important. So is the foreground. The model expresses him or her self by posing, relaxing, asleep, awake, and the artist's job is to capture his or her essences. Remember, there's life in that body. It's not necessary to copy the body, nor imitate the physical features. Details can become niggling. Watch Out! Look out for movement and direction and look carefully for associations, comparisons, and contrasts. Be aware of the sensuous qualities. Use them. One of my ways to remain authentic is to keep my eyes on the

positive and negative spaces. I try hard to indicate the model's character, or erase it if it displeases me. (That painting won't be successful!) I remember saying, "Ugly can be beautiful, but Pretty will never make it."

Q: Nell, talk about your abstract expressionist work. Would you agree that there is [David Park] little difference between nonobjective and figurative painting, "just different areas in which to work out essential, fundamental concerns of painting..." What is meant by that statement?

A: I don't really understand David Park's statement about no difference between nonobjective and figurative, unless he's talking about positive and negative spaces.

Q: What are the fundamental concerns of painting for you?

A: I always say: "I just want to get it Right." I don't know what that means. Besides that, I want it to be my authentic painting. I wait impatiently for some mistakes to occur, and I hope to recognize them and take care of them before they get rubbed out. Because they may be the backbone of the painting. I hope to recognize that the parts which I have loved and cherished really have to go. They are destroying the work. Nothing in the work agrees with them.

Q: Carl Belz, Director, Rose Art Museum, Brandeis, says Abstract Expressionism was "an urban style, bred in artists' studios against the background of an initially hostile public and in the immediate presence of transplanted Europeans who had actually participated in the flowering of 20th Century modernism. All of this was secondhand at best in California and somewhat incongruous in the California School of Fine Arts setting where one could wander in the courtyard at almost any time of the year, enjoy the flowers around the pool, and absorb the light and color surrounding San Francisco Bay. In New York, one needs myths to survive and anxious competition to grow on; in San Francisco, this existential strategy was largely academic..." Nell comment.

A: I don't know about Carl Belz. He talks like a professor. I don't know what "one" needs to survive in New York, etc. Some professors don't leave a way out, they don't suggest; they speak in definite terms that make me feel: I have to. (I have reread this and decided to give more credit to Professor Belz. I still am unsure about "myths." But New York, like all places, needs an artistic identity, and perhaps "myth" is it. I'd like to talk to you more, Suzanne, about my opinions about labels. Read my article about "Ways of looking at an Exhibition.")

- Q: "Highly-charged atmosphere of romanticism and rebellion...hung in the dark cement corridors and claustrophobic studios of the California School of Fine Arts during the postwar years..." [Albright, Art in the SF Bay Area] Nell comment.
- A: I think Albright assumes. But I may agree with him. If you don't know where or who you are, I guess you have to "live in an atmosphere of romanticism and rebellion." I'd find that binding, not loosening.
- Q: Douglas MacAgy staged poetry readings and seminars, in 1949 the Western Round Table on Modern Art with Marcel Duchamp, Frank Lloyd Wright, Mark Tobey and Darius Milhaud. What do you remember of this Round Table? Ansel Adams hired. "The old monastery was shaking."
- A: I don't remember about MacAgy and Poetry Readings. I wish I did. It sounds very, very interesting.
- Q: Then it ended, by 1954 or so. MacAgy quit--board of directors of the Art Assn. blocked every action he made--and Clyfford Still left immediately after. And then so did everyone else. Hassel Smith says [San Francisco Chronicle, Nov. 9, 1975], "When we all left, serious painting vanished from the scene. Now it's all fun and games."
- A: There may have been lots of reasons for MacAgy quitting and the Board being against him. But I know that Douglas put on a talk show one time in which the speakers were academic stars from the East Coast and maybe even from Europe, and the bill was way over budget. Douglas was fired then.
- Q: When Fred Martin became director in 1965, "he found the Art Institute had produced a generation of students counted among the most innovative and original artists in America, including Joan Brown, Bruce Conner, William T. Wiley, Robert Hudson, Deborah Remington, Roy DeForest, Bruce Nauman, Manuel Neri, and Ron Davis." Talk about what Fred Martin achieved at Art Institute. Any other directors, Stephen Goldstine, for instance.
- A: I wasn't around for Goldstine, but I do know that the artists mentioned were innovative and original. I'm not sure what Fred Martin achieved. I was around a lot when he was there. I do remember Fred having a tough time with rebellious students. Fred kept his cool though.
- Q: Nell in 1966-1972 was an artist member of the Board of Trustees, SFAI. Also, from 1966-1981, member, Artists Committee, San Francisco Art Institute. Frankenstein article, May 1, 1966, when the San Francisco Art Assn. ceased to exist. New self-perpetuating Artists Committee taking the place of the old Artists Council, which used to run the

professional artists' end of Art Institute Affairs. Suggested by the Artists Council itself. Majority felt that large artist membership drag on Institute activities, exhibition program. Lowered standards. Resolution supported in the Council by Wesley Chamberlain, Kathan Brown, Ruth Armer, Nell Sinton, Robert Bechtle, Boyd Allen, Fletcher Benton, Robert Hartman, and John Pearson and Ralph DuCasse. Bella Feldman abstained. Nell, what are your recollections of that decision and the heated discussions. Comment on any of the members of that Artists Committee. (Opposed by Jacques Fabert, Robert Holdeman, Robert McChesney, Daniel Shapiro, Bernice Kussoy, Teresa Hack and Art Grant.)

A: I remember agreeing that the new Artists Committee was messy and overloaded. I thought the Council, as it was, was made up of good, thoughtful, hard-working people. I remember the opposition as weak, stiff-necked and pompous. It was a very disappointing time and I think I remember correctly that the SFAI went downhill for quite a while. I left there with some others, Ruth Armer among them. I did enjoy one thing about that time in the SFAI: Fred Martin invited Juanita Sagan and me to teach a class for a semester (maybe longer). We both like the students, and they were willing to cooperate with us.

Q: Beth Coffelt in San Francisco Chronicle, Oct 16, 1977, says Diebenkorn "has created an atmosphere, a way of looking at things that has become a part of our territorial heritage like the tule fog at dawn, the breast of Tamalpais, the golden curve of hills over the sapphire streak of the bay, that light. California art...anything that pervasive, that palpable, has got to come from some incredible effort. A good deal of the evidence points to Diebenkorn. Art history is, after all, human history, which is made by a very few extraordinary people."

Nell, please comment on influence of Diebenkorn on your work, and how you react to that statement. (Granted, Diebenkorn another generation, a student at California School of Fine Arts in 1946.)

Thiebaud talks about stealing Diebenkorn's color, his juxtapositions that make them radiate and pulsate.

A: About the Beth Coffelt statement. I admire Diebenkorn very much. I think he's a great artist and the statement is harmless, but I found it elaborate. I don't like a critic to label a work so definitely that the viewer--reader--gets a stunted opinion and doesn't grow and expand from his/her experience of looking at many works. I prefer a critic who urges the viewer to find his/her own way of discovery, and gives him/her tools to do it with. (See my "Ways of looking at an Exhibition.")

Q: What would you like to still do in art? On canvas.

- A: I'd like to experiment more with color and shapes and spaces and particular individual qualities and difference.
- Q: Talk about humor and tragedy and what art can do about them?
- A: About humor and tragedy, art can work with dramatic colors, directions, shapes, sizes, remembering to add a little humor and feelings into the work. Well, certainly all art work should provoke feelings. It's important to keep pomposity and verbosity out of it-- it cheapens the work. I prefer a painting which contains humor and tragedy to be abstract. These subjects need to show a good deal of flexibility and poetry.
- Q: Were you ever sufficiently discouraged that you determined to give up on painting?
- A: I was never discouraged enough to give up painting.
- Q: Talk about the boxes? Bruce Conner.
- A: The boxes. I construct boxes which are consistent with the topic they are describing. And I construct them in order to use material which didn't fit into my paintings. By taking objects which I collect (I'm a scavenger) I can use them for making jokes and tricks which don't always fit into my paintings. I have admired Bruce Conner's work very much and also the famous New York maker of boxes and collages. I forget his name.
- Q: What goes into a Series of paintings? Such as your Landscapes. Do you determine that that is the area you will work in until you exhaust it?
- A: What goes into a Series of paintings? I usually plan my paintings, especially when I'm engaged in serial work, i.e., "The Garden Party," "Secret Places," "Landmarks," "Points of View," "Mostly Landscapes." I make careful drawings and sketches and I write about them. Sometimes I think my approach to my work is as literary as it is painterly. Sometimes I plough right into the painting and sometimes I make a whole set of elaborate sketches and drawings first. Sometimes I make a whole set of drawings with my eyes closed. That's how I accomplished both my scrolls. I made hundreds of drawings in making the scrolls. I always teach my students to draw part of the time with their eyes closed. They like it. They feel they have nothing to lose and they are usually pleased with the results.
- Q: Your way[s] of painting over the years. In studio, and out. How much sketching, drawing, do you do, preparatory to your painting, your boxes, your scrolls? When and where? Working out of doors.

A: I used to love to work out of doors, but now I become physically uncomfortable quite soon, and more than that, I've become wary and a little frightened of the kinds of people who come by, even though I don't go out to paint alone much anymore.

Q: Use of the camera.

A: I use my camera a lot, but I prefer to make my paintings and drawings at a chosen site.

Q: Working with others, or alone.

A: As to working with others, I do that sometimes, but mostly I'm along. I also do quite a bit of memory work, and even more, imaginary. That's one part about "getting it right."

Q: Relationship with the model.

A: As to relating to the models, I have enjoyed the company of several models. They have been invaluable to me, and supportive and congenial and hard-working and inventive. A few of them have become my friends. If I don't feel that a model is congenial I don't ask him/her to come back. For a few years I had a variety of young hippies for models-- they seemed to be more interesting than professionals.

Q: Nell's thoughts now on religion. Do you have to believe in something in order to paint? Painting is an act of belief? Issues of permanence.

A: For me, religion doesn't signify graven images or dogma. I like some of what is known as Religious Music. All kinds of music have been important in my life.

First, I have to believe in myself. Authenticity is a form of self-belief. Painting is an act of belief, in my opinion. I question myself as to the reality of my ability and willingness to make a painting work. That it may fail is a real possibility. My enthusiasm can lead me astray. In the end, I must admit that I just love to paint. Success is never taken for granted. Permanence is too capricious a word to consider, it's not always important; the act of painting is important to me.

Religion does not have an influence on my painting. The symbolism of religion is not in my painting. Religion is abstract for me.



- A: I used to love to work out of doors, but now I become physically uncomfortable quite soon, and more than that, I've become wary and a little frightened of the kinds of people who come by, even though I don't go out to paint alone much anymore.
- Q: Use of the camera.
- A: I use my camera a lot, but I prefer to make my paintings and drawings at a chosen site.
- Q: Working with others, or alone.
- A: As to working with others, I do that sometimes, but mostly I'm alone. I also do quite a bit of memory work, and even more, imaginary. That's one part about "getting it right."
- Q: Relationship with the model.
- A: As to relating to the models, I have enjoyed the company of several models. They have been invaluable to me, and supportive and congenial and hard-working and inventive. A few of them have become my friends. If I don't feel that a model is congenial I don't ask him/her to come back. For a few years I had a variety of young hippies for models-- they seemed to be more interesting than professionals.
- Q: Nell's thoughts now on religion. Do you have to believe in something in order to paint? Painting is an act of belief? Issues of permanence.
- A: For me, religion doesn't signify graven images or dogma. I like some of what is known as Religious Music. All kinds of music has been important in my life.

First, I have to believe in myself. Authenticity is a form of self-belief. Painting is an act of belief, in my opinion. I question myself as to the reality of my ability and willingness to make a painting work. That it may fail is a real possibility. My enthusiasm can lead me astray. In the end, I must admit that I just love to paint. Success is never taken for granted. Permanence is too capricious a word to consider, it's not always important; the act of painting is important to me.

Religion does not have an influence on my painting. The symbolism of religion is not in my painting. Religion is abstract for me.

TAPE GUIDE--Nell Sinton

Interview 1: April 29, 1992	
Tape 1, Side A	1
Tape 1, Side B	11
Tape 2, Side A	23
Interview 2: May 8, 1992	
Tape 3, Side A	34
Tape 3, Side B	42
Tape 4, Side A	52
Tape 4, Side B	62
Interview 3: May 21, 1992	
Tape 5, Side A	64
Tape 5, Side B	72
Tape 6, Side A	82
Tape 6, Side B	92
insert from Tape 10, Side A	97
Interview 4: June 4, 1992	
Tape 7, Side A	100
Tape 7, Side B	107
Tape 8, Side A	118
Tape 8, Side B	127
Interview 5: June 18, 1992	
Tape 9, Side A	130
Tape 9, Side B	140
Tape 10, Side A	153
Interview 6: September 24, 1992	
Tape 11, Side A	164
Tape 11, Side B	171
Tape 12, Side A	177

APPENDICES--Nell Sinton

A. <u>Autobiography: The Social Development of an American Female.</u> Written between 1971 and 1980.	194
B. "After Dinner Scroll, Under the Table at the Donner Party," Oakland Museum <u>Magazine</u> , 1973.	222
C. Under the Table at the Donner Party, A Dining Room Frieze. Edition for sale.	223
D. Statement about Scroll II prepared as gallery handout, Oakland Museum. Introduction by Harvey Jones, 1976.	227
E. Writings to Accompany Drawings in Scroll II, 1976 and commentary on Scroll II by Eunice Dauterman Maguire, Krannert Art Museum, 1993.	229
F. Scroll II, script for video.	231
G. Ways of Looking at an Exhibition [class for docents], 1978.	242
H. Artistic Growth and Models, and About Painting Women, 1976.	255
I. Color Direction, 1977.	266
J. The Garden Party, Statement for the Braunstein Gallery exhibition, 1980.	271
Jj. Oakland <u>Tribune</u> review by Charles Shere, February 1981.	275
K. Secret Places, 1983.	277
L. Interview with Nell Sinton, by Barry Gifford, <u>Berkeley Monthly</u> , 1983.	279
M. A Talk About My Two Scrolls, and Workshop for Scroll Talk, 1984.	282
N. The Empty Room is Full of Shadows, 1985.	287
O. Landmarks--Points of View, 1986.	288
P. Notes about my Children, and Education. Written May 8, 1992.	289
Q. "Mistakes."	291

R.	"Creating a Safe Place for the Gifted Child," 1982.	293
S.	Lesson Plans.	296
T.	Newspaper reviews.	301
U.	Chronology.	308
V.	"Nell Sinton, A Thirty-Year Retrospective," Catalogue of Exhibition at Mills College, 1981.	

THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF AN AMERICAN FEMALE

Background and Motivations for Being an Artist

To begin with, my grandmother had two artist brothers. One painted portraits badly and ungainfully and professionally, and the other one dabbled in poetry and puns. They were both unmercifully ridiculed by the rest of the family. To be an artist was a fairly unusual phenomenon then. This was the first generation to emigrate to the Far West just after the Gold Rush.

People were busy getting settled and there was little time for the refinements of life. "Education," "culture," "artistic," were italicized words, not to be taken seriously or used generally in a family which was socially and financially ambitious. These uncles then, had to depend on the beneficence and indulgent patronage of their mercantile relatives for their existences.

Success was measured by excellence in the business world, and since these two gentlemen artists were not money makers, they were considered irresponsible ne'er-do-wells and failures. It was better not to be connected with the arts at all except as a collector, which meant you had earned or inherited enough money to afford this luxury. It was considered best to be in banking or trade, or in one of two professions, law or medicine.

On my grandfather's side, he had a brother who made enough money in business here to be able to return to Europe to retire for the rest of his life. And this would have been commendable had he not returned to Europe which was considered the same as going back to oblivion.

Anyway, he accumulated a fairly large and moderately valuable collection of paintings and drawings, along with financial arrangements for its upkeep and growth, which he bequeathed to his favorite nephew, a sculptor here in San Francisco, who passed it on to the California School of Fine Arts in the form of the Emanuel Walter Collection.

My artistic inheritance from my mother's side is more abstract. Early deaths, family feuds and shallow memories have kept the records shadowy and inaccurate.

My mother's parents died before she married my father, who seems to have wooed and won her very romantically just after the earthquake in 1906. She was remarkably beautiful. Her mother came from Keokuk--my father's mother came from Philadelphia. Both my grandfathers were teenage immigrants from Germany.

There are mysterious hints of my maternal grandfather's adventures and intrigues in Central America and Guatemala, something about his nephew, whose financial operations were of such a suspicious nature that he had to wear false whiskers and black glasses whenever he visited San Francisco. The family was reluctant to give me any more information than this, but it seemed an established fact that the nephew was a crook.

Another sartorial subject, curiously lacking in details, was the yarmulke, worn by an Orthodox Jewish uncle, which the family told me was for the purpose of keeping his bald head warm when he removed his toupee. The actual truth was that Orthodox Jews always keep their heads covered, but my family had to make up this funny excuse for our uncle because they were unaware of their anti-Semitic feelings, and therefore couldn't admit their embarrassment about their relative's observance of Jewish ritual.

They didn't have to invent a reason for their shame about the Central American cousin's disguise because they were quite conscious that his activities were dishonest.

Since this was all too confusing for me then, I gave up my inquiries into motives for observing occasions like High Holy Day Services at Temple Emanu-El, and having a minyan at our house after my brother died. We were too conventional and apprehensive of criticism to relinquish traditions which didn't fit into the lifestyle we had chosen.

Religion and racial pride weren't integrated into our social life. We were too snobbish and insecure and on the make. I liked Sunday School and the dances and parties though, and made friends and felt confident there. At least, it was somewhere, and I was realistic enough to accept it, even though I wished fervently for social acceptance in the Gentile world as well. Since we could not boast of Anglo-Saxon antecedents, it is my belief that my family used the German Kaiser as a model--we always seemed so impressed by royalty.

My mother had another uncle, a bachelor, who had an ancient Rolls Royce which he called his jitney. He came for dinner once a week, always bringing along a box of Orange Blossom Candy--never more, never less. He left most of his money to his secret mistress.

I had a somber, flirtatious, worldly, grudge-bearing mother. Courageous, defiant, prejudiced, she inflicted high moral standards on her children. Privilege and responsibility for her were inseparable. Being a severe task mistress, she set her children an example of conscientious

capability. She had a flare for attractive decoration, good food and entertaining, and lots of personal style. I might have called her elegant if she hadn't been so high tempered, willful and unjust. I was a young child when I learned the futility of striking a bargain with Mother. I consider this one of the reasons why I grew up to be such a tricky and devious woman.

She was short on humor, especially about herself, a snob with too much hubris, and a person keenly interested in meeting and entertaining new and different people and in making them her friends--possessing them even--as long as they served her interests.

She was especially attracted to all the arts and to artists. She enjoyed languages and avant garde activities, although her behavior was entirely conventional. After my father died, she took up book binding. She was forty-six years old then. She studied here and in Paris and developed an international reputation for her skill and artistry in this very demanding, delicate, and esoteric craft. What an excellent way for her to make use of her compulsive characteristics.

Her curiosity was insatiable in the Proustian and Pepysian sense. She adored gossip--the more malicious the better. She loved a good fight and was a formidable adversary. She cared affectionately for her possessions. She was proud of her family and extorted time, fealty and tributes from them. Her home was a theater where she gave support to the players. She was loyal to those she approved of. At the time of her death in March 1972, Rabbi Jacob Weinstein remarked in his eulogy of Mother, "Her hostess chair took on the aspect of a throne in my eyes."

My father chose the family floor covering business for his career. I imagine he would rather have been a pirate or Peck's Bad Boy. He used to read that book to us at bedtime with great relish. He loved mischief and naughty practical jokes, but his need to be a recognized community leader forced him to spend much of his too short life as a Member of the Board of cultural and charitable institutions, as a dignified public speaker, and as a patriarchal family figure.

His capabilities as an accomplished writer of letters and plays, as well as his talent for clever cartooning, revealed a charming and light side, and a good deal of warmth. But he presented me with too many contradictions and mislabellings. He showed me his treasures--his pranks and jokes and ribald asides--and wouldn't allow me to use them or even borrow them. This had a crippling influence on my life. Sometimes I considered his efforts phony, but was too unwilling to break the reverence contract I had with him to express myself.

But, just because of his paradoxical personality, my father left me a very rich heritage. He must have been lonely because he hid his real wants and needs behind convention, conformity, and nineteenth century morality and chafed under the strain. He gave away so much of himself that he had very little left over for him.

This was my artistic legacy.

I think I always thought of myself as an artist.

The way my parents, grandparents, aunt and uncle spoke about the profession of my sculptor uncle who was my father's brother seemed to be with a combination of awe and contempt. They were disgusted that his was not a very lucrative profession, but they seemed to delight in his creative ability, and were impressed by his productivity. He had been educated in Europe, he knew all of the Bohemians of his day, was a "caution" at dinner parties as he drew naughty sketches on the table linen, and he made all the ladies feel attractive and adorable, especially if they were wall-flowers.

This uncle was awarded official city commissions, and his work appeared in public in the form of animals, figures and fountains in commemorative expositions. He designed and executed the sculptured proscenium arch in the War Memorial Opera House. The family thought well enough of him to have assigned to him the duty of designing the family vault at the Home of Peace cemetery, although he wasn't permitted to be buried in it.

He set the style at our home at Lake Tahoe with his Art Nouveau designs and decorations for watering cans, guest books, and such objects. Probably he influenced my parents to bring there bits of exotic Orientalia--Chinese lanterns, picnic baskets of finely woven wicker, lacquer boxes, chests and trunks of pigskin, pottery bowls and dishes, ornaments of all kinds, and local California Indian baskets. Also, romantic rustic wooden furniture of the period. A summer house was a place then, as it is now, for playful experiments in interior decoration.

It was a pity that my uncle made an honest woman of his model by marrying her after his young wife (my mother's sister) of two years died. He fell from grace then, and was banished from our house forever for this act of conventional unconventionality. We missed his glamorous presence, and had to see him on the side by special arrangement with our father behind my mother's back.

Now, in retrospect, I think of him artistically as a fraud and a poseur, too much interested in official approval. But his acting ability was delightful and he was a fine raconteur. His clothes and air were dashing, and he had a certain knowledge of natural sciences which he shared with his nieces in a charming and affectionate way.

I was an artist child. I designed paper dolls and clothes, greeting cards and automobiles, and participated in newspaper contests for kids where they handed out the prizes for neatness rather than artistic ability--I remember a letter my father once wrote to the San Francisco Call-Bulletin in my defense which started, "Dear Aunt Dolly, I think you are a phony bitch."

We lived in an enormous four-storied dark red gabled and balconied wooden Victorian house which occupied half a block on the corner of Clay and Buchanan streets. My mother's father had bought it from Timothy Hopkins, a brother of Mark Hopkins. There were lawns, palm trees, and a carriage house which was spooky to play in with its cellars and lofts and dark corners and mysterious unknown dusty objects left over from livery days. There were also new bits of scrap metal, rubber tires, and rows of old license plates hung on the walls like paintings.

The main house had many rooms and porches and a roof garden. In large Victorian houses rooms were specifically designated for definite purposes and persons, and they were not interchangeable. To begin with, there were five servants, a cook, a parlor maid/waitress, a chamber maid, a nurse or governess, and a house man. There was also a chauffeur sometimes, who lived over the carriage house.

Their quarters were unmistakably less in every way except for those of the governess or nurse who slept with the children. There was a mean quality to them. The floors were covered with linoleum, or, if carpeted, the materials used were cheap remnants pieced together. The walls were painted a dull dun color, the furniture had never been new, I'd guess, and the mirrors always needed re-silvering. Curtains of tawdry, unattractive fabrics hung limply from tarnished brass rings. I feel sure that these rooms looked stale and faded when they were new. It was part of the deliberate scheme to keep the hired help in their places. They were to have no foolish dreams of rising above their stations.

There was a sewing room high up in the attic for Mrs. Rohlf--she changed her name from Küstermacher during the war because it was unpopularly German--to sew in on Thursdays. It wasn't used on other days, I suppose. There were elegant Vuitton trunks up there too, full of finery such as feathers--a bird of paradise and a half parrot with a glass eye--and laces, embroideries, silks and brocades from foreign lands.

I remember that my father kept his gymnasium equipment in one of those top floor rooms. There was a punching bag hanging from the ceiling, too tantalizingly high for me to reach. There were sets of dumbbells also, and stretching devices. He put great store by "keeping fit."

The next floor down had the owner's bedroom and the children's bedrooms. They were fashionably furnished always. I remember flowered cretonnes, very gay, and then Art Nouveau.

Sometimes the health nuts said, "Your kids should be sleeping out of doors," so the bedrooms were turned into porches--nights were often foggy and wet in San Francisco, but we endured them. We thought these changes were novel and fun, if illogical, because we were very carefully swaddled and muffled up by day. We wore our clothing in layers. Next to the skin was a Dr. Deimel linen mesh shirt, then a Ferris waist onto which was buttoned a pair of pants made of such stout twill that I could only outgrow it, never outwear it. After that came a flannel petticoat called a Gertrude, and then another petticoat of batiste and ruffled lace for show.

Over all of these underpinnings was a dress with a guimpe if the neckline was lower than my Adam's apple. And last of all, a sweater or coat. And, of course, a hat--felt for winter and straw for summer. I remember the clamminess of the knotted elastic band I chewed up which went under my chin. We also wore long heavy stockings which were gartered onto the Ferris waist.

During the years when the night air was considered noxious and the porches were turned back into bedrooms, with windows shut tightly, we wore a minimum of underclothes by day and ran out of doors barelegged and coat and hatless in all weather. This has never been explained to me. I guess children have always been guinea pigs for fads and cults.

There was one special bedroom for being sick in--it was always fumigated after the patient recovered. There was a sitting room too for the family to sit in and read and play games in. Affairs of state were discussed there, battles raged, feelings were stamped out. It was furnished in brown, and the furniture was called Mission style--it was quite comfortable and also very hard, ugly and durable. Furniture used to be bought to last a lifetime, in line with the Doctrine of Thrifty Economy always. Don't waste and don't be frivolous. No planned obsolescence in those days.

Downstairs there was a billiard room with a Rocky Mountain sheep's head supervising the games from its place on the wall, and a card room next to the billiard room. The parlor was for callers and for company and for weddings and funerals. It was otherwise empty of life.

There was a dining room. Mother gave the furniture to the Sandy Bowers Mansion in Carson City, Nevada when she moved out of the Clay Street house in 1953. It was a set which consisted of an ornate fumed oak table and twelve chairs to match, upholstered in greenish-brown stamped leather. Extremely hideous, nobody liked it, but it was there always. An unlit Tiffany lamp was a permanent fixture on the table.

On that floor there was also a reception room with gold chairs, which became a playroom for children. Afterwards it was a schoolroom. We had private lessons from Miss Lazarus since we didn't go to school until we were eight, except for occasional experiments at Montessori and other progressive kindergartens.

The kitchen in the basement was black and vast and possessed of an enormous wood-burning stove; the meals were sent upstairs to the butler's pantry by dumbwaiter. The cellar storerooms were stocked with home made preserves and barrels of eggs put down in water glass.

There was a laundry down there presided over by a Chinese with a queue hanging down his back. I had bad dreams about him and his queue. He lived in the "Oriental Room." No one could occupy that room except Orientals, and if I picked up something from the street, I was told to drop it immediately because "a Chinaman might have touched it."

Racism was confined to yellow skins then. There weren't enough black ones to threaten anyone until after World War II. It was a sign of being a smart old-timer to be able to recognize the differences between a Chinese and a Japanese. My father was a stickler for that. Also, to know the delicate innuendos of the substitution of "l" for "r" in Chinese pidgin English, and the reverse in Japanese.

The liquor closet is worth mentioning. It was filled with bottles of very odd and strange liqueurs with gorgeous labels. I remember Creme Yvette, Goldwasser, Strega, Arak. And there were decanters of pure grain alcohol. (What was that for? Cleaning a million thermometers after use? I have since learned that marvelously rare and curious liqueurs can be made with alcohol.) There were also big barrels of wine which my father got from an Italian bootlegger during Prohibition. I have yet to find a use for the Bay Rum which was there, outside of rubbing it into my scalp.

One other thing about that house--there were doors of all kinds. Swinging doors, sliding doors, locked and bolted doors, velvet portieres. Areas were always being sealed off. The windows were heavily fenestrated with several sets of curtains for each window, and shades to pull down as well, to keep out prying eyes.

What were the inhabitants of this house doing that they were so fearful of being seen? It was a shady world to be sure.

The house was visited by a floating population who supplied services. Besides Miss Lazarus, there were Madame Bigorgne, the French teacher, and a list of long-suffering piano teachers--big turnover there. There was Miss Harder, who washed and brushed our hair, Miss Ruth who manicured our nails, Mrs. Bresnahan, who gave lessons in embroidery. Mrs. Sharman taught us elocution. The goal was to hold your breath while repeating all of "This is the House that Jack Built." She gave us stuffed

dates, which we hated, for rewards. Once, after my parents visited Cuba, we were given castanet lessons.

It was lively in that house, and we had plenty of gossipy companionship below the stairs. Above the stairs our relationships were much more competitive, complicated and serious. We had to deal with each other and with our parents and other grownups, relatives and friends.

Life for me was embarrassing, frightening, full of unexplained chasms of somber despair, turbulent, and sometimes unbearably sad and lonely. There were so many undiscussable subjects. We also enjoyed times of gaiety and even good will. My father was bound and determined to spread cheer in spite of his very frequent serious illnesses.

My brother died when he was eleven and I was eight. Even now I have difficulty in mentioning or discussing this painful event. My parents lost their only son and oldest child and were never aware of the burden they placed on me by making me his replacement. Our governess, Miss Jeeves, who left our family for another position for three years, reports that when she returned my brother was dead, my sisters and I had fallen to fighting, our parents were silent and sad, and the whole family was out of kilter.

I couldn't take credit for being alive. That wouldn't be NICE. So, my sense of triumph had to be squelched. I was in despair over my personal feeling of inadequacy and loss, and my parents were too distressed to mention their pleasure at having three children left. I simply couldn't justify my existence.

It was awkward and embarrassing to go out on the street and have people who didn't know about our loss ask after my brother. I didn't know how to put on the right bereaved face. It wasn't comfortable at all to have suffered a death in the family. It was so abnormal. Sometimes I was frightened that in some way it might even have been my fault.

Also, I couldn't get reconciled to the memory of my brother's body laid out on the living room sofa dressed in his blue Eton suit with a bunch of violets in his hands. It was the beginning of many long, gloomy, silent trips to the Home of Peace. (Lest we forget.)

I became so much more tyrannical and noisome that I forced Miss Jeeves to leave again. For that I got benched for two months. No social engagements for me during that time--all privileges revoked. Jeevie returned then, and I had to give up trying to run the show, but my resentment was deep and unlimited.

When I was sick, I passed happy hours with my mother, cutting out and pasting, sewing, embroidering, knitting, weaving, and learning how to do it myself. These times were the ones when I liked my mother best--she was patient and peaceful and capable and supportive and quiet, and so was I. But when recovery set in I remember shouting for joy at my renewed well-being--and then I knew that I was in for it again.

"Nell, you are arrogant, impertinent, impossible to live with." So back I went to temper tantrums and spoiled child antics. Fortunately, there was a temporary cure for that in the out-of-doors. Especially playing in the streets, on foot, on skates, on a bike. Lots of neighborly companions there. I remember each one, the Dibblees, Forans, Harts, Fagans, Arnsteins.

All of this time as I was growing up I knew I was an artist inside, and I was encouraged by my parents who quite approved of this and were proud, but in a restricted way because they aimed me toward the altar, and you couldn't dispose of a career girl in those days as easily as a graceful--which they said I distinctly was not--young lady of amateur talent. No professionalism. In our walk of life we "took" lessons, we didn't get paid to "give them." The penalty for being well-to-do was pretty severe in terms of having to move around, and in and out of one's class, and it was important to move up a step or two on the social ladder if possible. It was never made clear by my parents whether I was supposed to be sacrificed on the altar or Hollywoodly-married for the rest of my life--or were they synonymous?

So I was treated to lessons of all kinds, and enjoyed them, and heckled the teachers to the point of being dismissed from time to time for refusal to do my homework, and for fractious, insubordinate behavior.

Mostly, I was in love with my horse. He didn't get along with me any better than the instructors of music, French, tennis, elocution, dancing (eurythmic), and swimming did, and dismissed me from his presence just as often as they did, but he and I won lots of blue ribbons together --more than I can say for the others.

Another joyous experience was swimming in the ocean with the boys before school in the mornings. The goal was to swim across the Golden Gate, which event took place successfully one December day when I was seventeen.

I don't think my parents realized that this diffusion would fit me for everything and nothing, but I believe the results were intended to make me well-rounded, which I was indeed in many respects. It is ironic that great achievements were expected of young people of my background,

but only if our parents selected them and approved of them. Some structure!

At the Katherine Delmar Burke school I was as unacceptable as an artist as I was as a scholar. I spent a good deal of time in the principal's office. Miss Burke said my attitude left something to be desired, and I was a disgrace to my family name. My efforts toward illustrating the yearbook were turned down. I hated the assignments in art class, which was also the sewing class and the typing class. Emphasis at that school was on scholastic achievement by means of high marks in preparation for college. I was an artistic and scholastic failure, which took some doing. My loneliness made me brazen and defiant and I was inordinately stubborn. Being quite spoiled, I expected someone to save me. No one did.

Meanwhile, I attended the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute) after school once a week and on Saturday mornings. I loved being there. I enjoyed the activity and the energy and the smell and feel of artists' materials, and I wanted ever so much to copy the beautiful pictures and fine finished-looking effects that the slick, successful pupils were getting. They were admired by the instructors who didn't pay much attention to me at all.

I couldn't do the assignments and I couldn't make quick sketches nor even put in backgrounds of my own invention. As I grew older the male instructors made passes at me and I thought they were corny, repulsive, dirty old men--probably they were in their forties.

I was thrilled when my well-known sculptor uncle visited the classroom. He swept in like a celebrated surgeon visiting the operating theater accompanied by attendant acolytes. I could fairly hear the fluttering wings of imaginary doves encircling his head. My father was president of the board of trustees of that school, so I was occasionally recognized by name. But fortunately for me I was not accorded any privileges, nor did I receive praise as an artist. I was bewildered but not discouraged because I wanted so much to be included and approved of.

I did very little in the way of work to merit good marks, I just liked being there and I loved the idea of it. I felt that this was a place where I could respect my elders, and where I could be accepted for my fresh ways which were really very little deviant from my behavior in my conventional home. I actually wanted to get along at the country club, too. I was a very willful, spoiled child and was not aware that an unintegrated person is in conflict everywhere. My sense of humor kept saving me.

My family took me to Europe twice while I was in high school. My curiosity was insatiable. I covered the museums, galleries, churches of Europe, inhaling it all and remembering a lot. I walked the streets endlessly to see more I hoped than there was to see. This was where I needed to use my energy. To my family I was no less a thorn in their sides than before. I heckled them all, fought with my sisters and pushed them around, staged tantrums at every crossing, flirted with the Italian chauffeur and kissed him in the salt mines, fell in love with a boy from New York. I tested out everybody and everything. Having read much before, these travels spurred me on to more and more investigations of art, artists, sources.

After being graduated from Miss Burkes's school I had nowhere to go. Miss Burke refused to recommend me to any college. She was afraid I would bring dishonor on her school's reputation. So my parents tried to peddle me around by letter and application--supplication, almost--to anti-Semitic finishing schools in the East. No takers. I was pretty clever to arrange to keep out of college. I never took credit for it, put myself down instead.

At last I was dispatched to the Garland School for Homemaking in Boston. I was engaged to Stanley who lived there. He was a senior at Yale. (Where else?) We had met at ages seven and five, as ring bearer and flower girl respectively, at the marriage of his uncle and my aunt here in San Francisco.

That homemaking school--I called it home breaking--was very tame. Cooking, budgeting, hemstitching, art appreciation and music appreciation, and a tiny bit of polite social service work were the specialties. I spent one year of misfitted rebelliousness there, always on the verge of expulsion. More time in the principal's office.

I was pretty hard-boiled, tough and resilient by the time I was eighteen. I had suffered a lot already, but suffering was considered a crime in a child who had every material advantage. ("She has everything in the world to be thankful for.") My guilty malaise was to continue because my father and others (who knew what was good for me) tried to cure its outward manifestation, which was callous behavior, instead of investigating the underlying reason for my pain, which I know now was my inability to make sense out of my surroundings.

I was hurt and frustrated by society's hypocritical moralities, attitudes and standards. I couldn't get a reasonable explanation for my why-why-whys. I was never even given credit for a direct approach. It wasn't NICE. I have come to hate that word above all others. How callous grownups can be when they are deaf to children's screams for help.

In some ways it was an aesthetic environment. It certainly was very "artistic" and "cultured" compared to most other homes I knew. There were paintings hanging on our walls, for instance, and lots of books in the bookshelves. Men and women sometimes came for dinner who discussed art, artists and poetry. We had a Victrola, and records for it, which played "Gems from the Mikado," "A Potpourri of Friml Favorites," and "Mighty lak a Rose."

Today, in retrospect, I would say that my parents' interest in the arts was not really serious. They were more involved in decoration. They didn't care for things to be ugly or startling or odd or innovative unless they were known as "curios." But there's a world of difference between a kitschy curio and a powerful artistic statement. Good taste was crucial, and they were too concerned with their respectable reputations to venture out too far. However, they were on what Grace Morley calls the "growing edge," and I give them credit for allowing me to pursue my own way more independently than was given to most of my contemporaries.

I am extremely indebted to my parents for encouraging me to be curious and investigative. For my time, I was permitted a good deal of the kind of freedom that helped me to form a value system which, in a way, has saved my life.

I was encouraged to read whatever was available with no restrictions. My parents made no judgements about works of art except to deride cheapness. I wasn't put down for my views or choices because my opinions were respected, and I was given credit for my talents. But our discussions were only skin deep.

They treated my social life in the same consistent way. I was a teenager in the 1920s, and I remember those years as having been boisterous and lavish and wild as the literature about that period reports. While admonishing me to avoid tawdry and vulgar things and people, they gave me a lot of liberty. This was all very objective, however--they seemed to have a rather high tolerance for cheap feelings.

My family helped me to form my discriminating aesthetic tastes, but they certainly let me down when it came to emotions. Those were held in such cheap regard that I was more than a middle aged person when I discovered how to laugh and cry appropriately, and how to be empathic toward others. How poor we really were.

I had a huge capacity for enjoyment, a crowd to go with, a stylishly flat chest and skinny legs, and was good at dancing the Charleston. There were parties and picnics every weekend and festivities at Stanford and UC, and big bands at the hotels and road houses. It was forbidden for me to go to speakeasies, so I stayed away from those until after I was married.

Somehow I had sense enough not to want to get caught in a raid and wind up in the pokey. Besides, I knew that liquor was safer and better at home.

Those were heartless, snobbish, anxious, tough times. Not much room for shyness or blushes or exchanges of tender concern, as we roared around in roadsters and speedboats. In the midst of affluence we were emotionally bankrupt.

Sexually, I went far enough to stay popular, but I was betrothed at age seventeen, and deflowered by my fiancé before that. It was one of the ways in which I trapped him into marriage.

I learned a great deal about social skills in summertimes spent at Lake Tahoe. My parents' hospitality was boundless. They entertained people of all ages from all over the country. Some came and stayed for several weeks at a time. There were often fifteen to twenty people for three meals a day, not counting the servants.

After my father died at the age of fifty, my mother ran the Tahoe establishment in the same way, although my sisters and I took over many of the duties of entertaining. Playing "guest list" occupied most of our time in the month of May in preparation for July and August. It got to be a terrible pain in the neck. I would never want to be a hostess in that way again.

In looking back, I think three-quarters of our time at Tahoe was spent in character assassination--then colloquially called "knocking." The other quarter went for sports, eating, drinking, and sleeping. I don't remember much loving.

We were held together by smart street lingo, parlor games, barbed wire, and wicked practical jokes. One of those was to ask the unsuspecting initiate to drink to the health of Cardinal Puff. The results were usually disastrous and discomfiting. I could never watch as the fall guy finally threw up in anguish. We were seduced by the fine climate, beautiful surroundings, good food and drink, excellent service and virtually no responsibility. We steered clear of growth and expansion.

Sometime in the Thirties my mother had a tennis court built as a further seductive indulgence to her children and their friends. The court replaced an area which had been used for Mother's cutting garden. Surrounded as we were by mountain meadows full of lovely wild flowers, it either must have been too strange or too much trouble to gather these natives to arrange in bowls in our rooms and porches.

Surely in those days we pretended no ecological morality about leaving the wild flowers to bloom and wither in their uninterrupted cycles. So, after the flower beds were covered with asphalt my mother

chose an alternative which seems amazing to me now, she ordered huge boxes of flowers to be delivered each week by train from a San Francisco florist. Her logic must have been that since crates of fruits and vegetables arrived from the city because the Tahoe City produce was inadequate, then why not flowers?

The place at Tahoe was sold in 1956. Since then I've hardly seen those "friends" who seemed to mean so much to me then and who visited us year after year for over two decades. It is interesting that I've kept the friends who had an interest in nature.

My mother is dead, and the Tahoe house--it was called Rampart--burned down two weeks later.

I am much less lonely now than I was in those crowded, busy, populous, bibulous years. My life has more direction and purpose, and I am enjoying the kind of good time I never thought was for me. My voyeurism has stood me in good stead. I can participate with a good deal of smooth finesse, and also with genuine empathy. I have new critical standards and a focus in interaction which has many variations.

In a society where parents and their children are supposed to be enemies, I have such an enduring relationship with my daughters and son and their husbands, wife, and children that I can scarcely believe it.

My father died when I was nineteen. That was so untimely of him and made the necessity for me to get married even more crucial. He was the second male in the family to cop out on me. I suffered such a sense of personal loss that I thought I would never be merry again. We had been very close companions and I hadn't yet resolved this relationship.

I went into my marriage with the firm misapprehension that my husband would be a carbon copy of what I imagined my charming father must have been as a young man. I also expected to be taken care of. Actually, I think their only similarity was that they both delighted in making mischief in under-the-table contracts. My father's image of himself as a pillar of the community as well as a Jack London-type adventurer, besides his inability to stand up to my mother's temper tantrums, contributed to his early death, I'm sure.

My marriage was like an extended date ending after thirty-eight years in divorce. I didn't find out till last year that my father lives inside me. I wish I'd known it sooner.

After my father died my mother enveloped herself and anyone she could snare in deep, black, inconsolable mourning. She behaved as if the Lord has singled her out of the world's population for tragedy, and she

refused all efforts to help her assuage her grief. She wallowed in it. She was silent and weepy and wouldn't allow raised voices, music or laughter to be heard. Her unhappiness was selfish and lonely and turned in.

It was melancholy and depressing to be near her, and the doctor would come to call and be closeted with her behind closed doors for an hour at a time, four times a week, after which he would emerge and berate us for exhausting and taxing our mother. I was made to wear black from head to toe for three months, so it was with a sensation of a released prisoner that I was married, and Stanley and I set forth on a four-month honeymoon, encumbered by all the trappings of grown ups.

We had two Oshkosh Innovation trunks, and an Oshkosh trunk for only hats and shoes, and about seven pieces of hand luggage, including a portable phonograph and records--78's, the last word. What a burden for two young kids ages twenty and twenty-one. We went to Canada and Europe, the Grand Tour, and had a most luxurious, boozy, gay time.

We were picked up by quite a few European middle-aged couples who seemed to enjoy our youthful American freshness and took us to their homes and befriended us. Berlin was exactly like movies and books have reported it in 1930, decadent, jaded and callous. We were shocked at the sights we saw in cafes and beaches. A married man in Vienna invited me to lunch without my husband.

In Paris, the female half of a couple who danced in night clubs took me to Worth to buy clothes at reduced prices because she was that well-known. I looked twice my age in the slinky white satin I selected. It had a flirty egret feather on one shoulder. Occasionally we met young unmarried people we knew--boys alone, girls chaperoned, of course. I think Stanley was wistfully envious of their freedom. I might have been too, but I wouldn't have dared to admit it.

I look back--between eighteen and twenty-one, three years of NO ART, and no support, three years full of important significant events with absolutely no art. I can't integrate them. I went to boarding school. I got in trouble. I was arrogant again. I got dismissed by yet another music teacher--in Boston this time. I got an engagement ring. I went to loads of glittering dances--I loved the dancing and the music. I was cold-shouldered by the proper girls.

I came home. I watched my gallant father die for a year. It was a frightful year of silence and grief. I was rescued by a marriage and was thrown into a state of more insecurity than I had ever experienced before. I was overwhelmed with material possessions. I wouldn't begin to list the responsibilities which were heaped on me in the name of privilege.

I had a baby. "Too bad it's a girl," they said. "Better luck next time."

Everything I have told you so far has been important like dents and bruises in a new car. The most important is that on account of those three jam-packed years I could learn to sort out, evaluate, and make decisions. I had something to go by. But oh, my goodness, while the time was passing, at that time I was entangled in so much confusion it would have seemed hopeless if I'd known it. As it was I had a litany which said, "You're one lucky young lady Eleanor Walter Sinton, and don't you forget it."

We saw our first peep show there in Paris, and a young man friend of ours from New York stole the dildo and ran away with it as the cops chased him down the street.

When we returned home to San Francisco--pretending to be broke, it sounded chic, at the beginning of the 1930s depression--I was dismayed to find that my mother and mother-in-law had had so much time on their hands that they had not only rented a house for us, but furnished it besides, in taffetas and fringes and formal furniture.

I was obliged to thank them profusely for their kindness and generosity and selflessness in having given so much of themselves, their time and money for us. Inside I seethed with frustration and fury and impotence at not having been permitted to feather my own nest. Actually, those two mothers detested one another and never stopped competing for us. I felt closed in and robbed and depleted. My mother took people along in life as well as in death.

Besides I had had a girlhood friend whose mother was so anxious for us to be together that I cringed and shrank up in her presence. It was that mother who had called attention to my eating habits when we were children. She ridiculed me and made me feel queer for ordering coleslaw instead of chicken-rice-and-peas as the other little girls did. It is nearly impossible for a child to be allowed the courage of her convictions.

I grew up a very doubting female Thomas with not much strength to do anything about it except complain.

I don't know why I put up with this particularly tactless mother except I liked her daughter's willingness to make mischief. She was tough and daring. Her father committed suicide. She did too, much later, after moving to New York, being married, and raising a family. In grown-up life she tried to become so possessive of me that I was reduced to tears by her insensitivity. She was an entirely venal person. Probably this was

another contribution to my fear of intimacy which has stalked me all my life, and caused me to suffer from having something valuable to give away and an inability to find the right person to give it to.

Between my fright of being overwhelmed, and my family's early precept of "Look, but don't touch," I had already at a very early age become proficient at vicarious observations. I was good at watching other people's love affairs and entanglements. I was virtuous because in my associations with men other than my husband I was safely above board as I dallied under the table.

In the next three years Stanley and I had three children, and life revolved around our family and our social life together. Art was put aside while I railed and cavilled and sniped at society, tried to use my talents for things I was unsuited for like golf and bridge, and went out of my way NOT to use them for the things I was good at.

My gifts included crafts, handiwork, art work, conversation on conceptual levels, wit-sharpening, certain abilities in human relations, loyalty, flirtations and general warmth, joie de vivre and vitality. I did not know I could be good at practically anything I chose to do as I flounced about in my un-grown-up, high-handed, spoiled, snobbish way. I knew little of my limitations and alternatives and must have been scared shitless down deep in my heart and stomach.

At that time I was going about my daily life in a pretty conventional and mechanical way. I rose in the morning after my husband had breakfasted and left for work. Our two daughters had been dressed and fed by their nurse. I was served breakfast by the maid, after which I gave orders for the day to the cook in the kitchen.

And then the day was before me. I made a certain number of ritual phone calls to members of my family, friends, and tradesmen such as the grocer, the butcher, the fishmonger, the plumber. I solved or put off for another time some household and family problems. I made dates for lunch at fashionable rendezvous with other young matrons. I went shopping. I went to weekly matinee concerts with my mother. I had my hair and fingernails "done."

I grudgingly accomplished my duties as a volunteer collector for community chests and united crusades and Jewish welfare drives. For this kind of work I had nothing but contempt. It was busy work for dilatory housewives. I was always assigned to impoverished neighborhoods where the residents needed relief--they did not need to be asked for a hand-out. Doors slammed in my face as I called people liars who said, "My husband gives downtown."

Many doors were beginning to slam in my face. I was boycotted from other established institutions. At boardroom tables (bored rooms) of

hospitals and community organizations my attention was so diverted from the business at hand that I was not asked back. As a member of the chorus line in the annual high jinxes at country club parties I deliberately kicked out of step in order to wreck the number. My uncle criticized me for being too sarcastic, pungent and painful and fresh as the moderator of a "question and answer" program at the same club.

I walked across the tennis court in the middle of a serve. I talked out loud when a golfer was teeing off. I was reprimanded for day-dreaming at the bridge table.

In other words, I was again figuratively back in the principal's office much of the time. I was definitely "de trop." My talents were probably recognized, but I couldn't get them harnessed right. I think my friends and peers found me personable and attractive, loyal and warm, but I was getting more and more out of shape.

My photograph appeared in the social pages of the local newspapers. I sneered back at it. I was told that permitting my picture to be taken was one of my obligations to the world's charitable causes.

I enjoyed some of our evening diversions. I liked the company of a few friends and didn't mind entertaining my husband's business acquaintances--if they didn't get too drunk and start pinching my bottom, or wrecking the house in the exuberance. I was proud of being a helpful business wife.

Jazz bands and night club entertainers fascinated me. We were ballet buffs for a few years, until the novelty of the Russian visitors wore off, and the way I knew a trip to New York had been successful was to return from there entirely exhausted from having attended as many plays as we could possibly cram into a week. Another gauge was the boast that "We hardly ever went to bed." Just the prospect of travelling to New York with all its sparkle of museums, shops, and parties so exhilarated me that I suffered pangs of anxiety weeks before arriving there.

I also sought out avant garde affairs and dances and balls. I liked dressing up and flirting. But I resented going to houses where I was bored, and the paying-back game was hateful, restricting and time-wasting. "They" said these were necessary penalties for being a well-to-do, well-bred hostess.

I really required the comfort, solace and challenge of mountains, streams and seashores. I was searching for the equivalent of a religious experience. But my acquaintance with the wilderness was bounded on all sides by golf courses, tennis courts and swimming pools. I was impressed when we were invited to spend the weekend at some suburban houses where

our suitcases were actually unpacked for us by a maid. We had to be pretty up to snuff to save face with that maid.

I cherished my summers at Tahoe. Even though social life there was similar to the activity in San Francisco, it took place out of doors, on real dirt, and under trees, near running water, which made a world of difference, since I needed the space and elbow room.

I have been asked if my life would have been different if I'd made my permanent home in the mountains and my answer to that is, "I doubt it. I probably would have sought out and latched on to remittance men and alcoholic scions of society who had been banished to the Sierras to dry out by working with sleighs and toboggans and snow bunnies in the winter, and wrangling with horses and dudes in the summer--thus, hopefully, to mend their evil ways."

I wasn't acquainted with the kind of strong, understanding persons I know now who would encourage me to construct a more appropriate life for myself. It is clear that at a later time, when I was ready, I found the support I needed to discover my new world.

Meanwhile, back on Divisadero Street, I loved my new house which we had built in 1935, and I took pride in showing it off. I liked decorating it and fixing flowers and fruits in it. I liked to play with my children and read to them, occasionally. I was an ambitious parent and wanted to be proud of their accomplishments. I wish I had suckled my young. I missed this human experience because breast feeding was considered bourgeois, old fashioned, unsophisticated and vulgar then.

We overstuffed our children with material gifts of all kinds. They weren't given the opportunity to pay their own way, and we gave them too many choices of life styles, offering them a smattering of everything in the same way that my parents had done with me. This resulted in value conflicts and confusion.

I take credit, however, for passing on to my children my discriminating tastes and restless, searching habits, my joie de vivre and sense of humor. My children (now grown up) complain that their artistic lives have been stunted because I am too hard an act to follow. I find it difficult to assume this responsibility. Instead, I take delight in their backhanded compliment.

Although I was sentimental about observing holidays and celebrations and made elaborate preparations for them, the earthy joys of gardening and cooking were still to come. On some level I must have known that lots of good things were in store for me. I don't think I was quite aware of it, so I didn't worry about how to go about getting these pleasures for myself. I hoped they would be handed to me on a platter.

I was steeped in obligation and martyrdom. Change would have caused more disapproval from society, and I certainly had enough of that already. I knew that I was positively awed and thrilled by paintings, sculptures, natural wonders and new ideas and concepts in books. In the presence of these miracles my tiresome phony world dropped away. I was able to put aside cynicism and nastiness at those times. I developed a reverence for aesthetics and a critical sense which made me know deep down that my contempt and disdain for charlatany were valid.

I do not remember consulting my family about my decision to return to art school. I think I thought of it simply as taking on another activity. After all, I had no sacrifices to make and nothing to lose. My children were cared for, and my husband was pleased if I was occupied--he was tired of my constant complaints about the kind of world I had been handed to live in where I was getting to be more and more of a persona non grata all the time.

I knew I felt like an artist and that those feelings were incompatible with my surroundings. I didn't permit myself to fantasize myself as a "professional" artist. I had been put down and derided enough for such notions at home by my whole family. "Professional" was an ugly word that was unswallowable for them. But I did know that I was happy and absorbed when I was painting and drawing, and cranky and grouchy when I wasn't.

I would like to say I felt "passionately" about art, creativity and discovery, but that word, like "professional," was frightening and unbridled and not permitted to me. Since emotions were considered an unattractive, uncontrolled selfish display, and they still are, I have trouble even now remembering what my feelings really were then.

I recall tearful outbursts of disappointment when things didn't go my way. I remember forcing myself to be a "good sport" when my feelings were deeply hurt by rejections. I didn't permit myself to be too envious or jealous of others. It wasn't considered NICE. I often felt guilty for not being grateful for material benefits. I was deeply depressed sometimes in the midst of affluence and plenty. Picked on, downtrodden even, unrequited, unappreciated, misunderstood, spiteful, bossy, inadequate, were adjectives I might have used to describe myself.

There must have been something deep down inside me to use for comfort and resource. I developed an abiding confidence in the world of nature. I considered it exciting, challenging and accepting. It approved of me, somehow. I didn't even object to its treachery. I believe this was a genetic quality. My summers at Lake Tahoe were a very helpful accessory, but something besides that let me know that the relief I was seeking from the artificial minuet of my establishment life would be found in the outside world.

Furthermore, I imagined that artists were acquainted with and involved in natural phenomena. I hoped they would be my new friends and would help me in my escape. I am not sure I conceptualized all this then. I knew I was missing something, but I certainly wasn't feeling desperate enough to throw away my whole world. I was only nervy enough to want to get my feet wet. I was hopeful, but afraid to get too excited. I just hankered after that art school. I wanted to go back there.

Art school was the only place left where I felt I might be acceptable, I guess. Where I could have respect and reverence for something. I felt good there. I had enough of charities, hospitals, Great Books courses--I went there once and hated wasting my time listening to other people's dumb questions. I just loved artist's materials, and it was terribly stimulating to be out of the house and not have to hang around home where I had to deal with kids all the time.

Depleted and exhausted, I returned to the California School of Fine Arts to take a class from Maurice Sterne, a dynamic and well-known painter visiting San Francisco from New York. He really taught his class, and I was a willing and delighted pupil. His sarcasm was a goad, and his personal attractiveness was seductive, and he liked me. At the end of that year I received the first prize in painting and the opportunity to serve as one of Sterne's apprentices in executing a commission he had received from Washington, D.C., to do a series of murals for the Department of Justice. That really was a banner year. Our son, John, was born then.

I ask myself now how I felt being pregnant while working for an artist. And I am surprised by the answer. I did not think of gestation as being concerned with creativity, but I considered the supervised, technical, manual labor I did for Maurice Sterne as being very productive. He required strict observance of his orders. This was so consistent with my life style then that I don't know why I am surprised by the insight. In other words, I couldn't take credit for my own work. I did not allow myself any of the earthy sensations of pride in carrying a baby inside of me. I thought of it as being nine months of unsightly overweight. I was blasé about it as well--after all, ho hum, it was the third time.

After another year as an apprentice to Sterne, his mural project was over and World War II began. I gave up painting again, feeling morally obliged to help the cause. I was a floater from dull volunteer job to duller volunteer job, finding some satisfaction from sketching patients in army hospitals. I also liked a San Francisco Museum project called "Artists in War." We made and distributed posters, etc. I learned another skill, which was photography, and stopped that when I felt I was becoming moss-covered in the damp, dank darkroom.

I didn't have the guts to get out and get myself a decent full-time job. This was partly because the Depression was just over and it was

considered indecent for a well-off woman to take work from a poorer one. (We are all equipped with the same qualifications?)

Mostly I was frightened to leave my over-privileged, protected, self-indulged background, and also I was anxious about my marriage, which was not exactly keeping the home fires burning, although I wasn't too aware of that then. I really didn't care to grow up. I really wasn't through with that old way of life I was born into.

There were benefits, however. Domestic help was scarce. I learned to cook, to garden, to care for my children, and to enjoy being with them more. Many formalities disappeared from our social life. There were fewer rules, regulations and restrictions. The country club was a thing of the past for us. No more reciprocal dinner parties. I felt enormously relieved from these social pressures. Furthermore, we were able to meet more kinds of people from other worlds and places.

Because my husband was a naval officer stationed in San Francisco during the war, I had to withstand all the spite and envy of wives whose husbands were overseas. This situation was more complicated than I could handle, because I couldn't cry out to them about the drawbacks of having a husband at home who rarely was. Another example of having to behave NICELY.

Stanley's working hours were around the clock and so were his leisure hours. This was so unsettling to me that when one night our house burned down, I rushed out of the bedroom to escape the flames and one of our children said, "Aren't you going to wake Daddy?" I wasn't aware that he was home asleep in the bed next to mine.

However, one of those things we mutually enjoyed was entertaining at home. Stanley was an excellent host. He made many new friends in the navy and brought them home. They had a variety of backgrounds--they worked in businesses as he did, in banks, and in newspapers. (He was the president of my family's floor covering firm.) Some were lawyers, and some stockbrokers, some government employees and politicians. They were of many nationalities. I remember with affection an exotic young Javanese prince. And San Franciscans we had never known came to our house, and we went to theirs--in fact, we became acquainted with Americans from all over the United States. I was surprised to discover that not everyone living in this town was born here.

Through my own war work I came to know a variety of people too. The new friends I met were mostly artists, educators, and socialites who were involved in museum activities and in the Red Cross Blood Bank, where I photographed donors for purposes of publicity. That was a dismal job. For a brief spell I plotted airplane movements at the Army Fourth Fighter Command installation, but I didn't get much out of that except a few

recipes from other lady volunteers which came out garbled since our work hours were four a.m. to eight a.m.

My family and I learned a lot then about hospitality--when to open the door and when to keep it closed--and a lot about underlying motives, our own as well as others. We had bitter experiences and humorous ones. There were sad and upsetting occasions and lots of frustrations, misunderstandings, and anxieties. Celebrations and conviviality too. I was often much too confused to be able to sort out the gamut of emotions I was feeling.

After the war, an historic meeting of the United Nations took place at the War Memorial Opera House here in San Francisco. I had occasion to be introduced to some members of the Red Press who were here representing their countries from all over the world. I found them extremely attractive and invited them to our house for cocktails, completely disregarding the fact that Stanley was an officer, intelligence officer at that, in the United States Navy. If I had not called off this mischievous event, I guess I would have landed in some Washington, D.C. principal's office--I hate to think whose.

It was an interesting and valuable time of life, a time to grow and stretch, and through these new associations we were able to make more and more friends and acquaintances all over the world as well as at home. Some became lifetime relationships. After the war was ended we began to travel, and in that way we kept our new contacts alive. Gasoline and food shortages taught us that we could do with less and still have more. The war was not an integrating experience for us, but it opened the door to a richer life when we were up to using the advantages. It was a shake-up which is still reverberating.

Beginning to Paint, Studying Painting

When the war ended and I started to paint again I knew for sure that painting was what I enjoyed doing the most. I met other artists who encouraged me--Ruth Armer was the first--and by 1948 I had a one man show. I was not going to be stopped from having a career. There was no turning back. I didn't take credit then for making this serious commitment, but I did have a hunch that the price would be high.

I had support from my husband (for the wrong reasons--he wanted to be free for dalliances) and from other artists who actually thought I was gifted and who even liked me as a person. They didn't think I was crazy, they left me alone. My mother and mother-in-law were very critical of my decision. They didn't want me to have anything better than they had, and they wanted me to stay home where they could get at me.

I became more and more involved in the local and national art world, both professionally and socially. I began to be invited to serve on juries of open exhibitions. Many of the artists and their families in the Bay Area were my friends and we had good times together. I was made a member of committees and boards at the San Francisco Museum of Art and at the San Francisco Art Institute.

In the 1960s I served as the painter member of the San Francisco City and County Art Commission. During the years I spent at the Art Commission it was difficult to initiate new ideas even with the support of distinguished architects who were also members of the commission. I was surprised to find that there wasn't too much respect paid to creative experts by most city employees. By experts I mean those who are considered so by their peers.

Actually I don't think most people care about artistic standards. They are annoyed to be asked to think about them. The degree of preference for mediocrity and poor taste is high. Therefore a minority of us came to be satisfied when we could at least arrest the development of poor designs and badly conceived projects. It doesn't make sense, for instance, to tear a poor building down unless it can be replaced with something better.

There were quite a few lively fights on the Art Commission about the qualifications of certain building designs, parks, murals, and sculptures. These disagreements were colorful and gusty and full of political motives as well as aesthetic convictions. I added to my bag of tricks a new store of patience, compromise and cynicism.

It is my opinion that the public is entitled to the best, but what's best is a large and debatable question in a so-called democracy. It took me a long, long while to learn how to fit these new human experiences into the different slots which were now being offered to me.

One of my most flamboyant gestures of contempt for my past social life was the way in which I wore my clothes. I wore them as weapons, disguises and status symbols. I was really trying to defend my position as a rebel and an artist. I was using reverse snobbery to offend my background, which was establishment. I was as much a stereotype as those I was trying to impress with my phony individuality.

I deliberately went to PTA meetings at the Katherine Delmar Burke School, which my daughters attended--I sent them there so they would get invited to the right parties and also so that they would have the same miserable school experience that I had enjoyed, although surely there must have been as good or better schools in the city if I'd bothered to investigate--dressed in my dirty work clothes, hatless and sandal-footed where hats and pumps were de rigueur.

At artists' gatherings I carefully wore the same costume--dressing down for both occasions, so to speak. Who did I think I was kidding? I had learned from my mother the appropriateness of clothes and the suitable times of day and night which to wear them, and they hung appropriately in my closet. If someone had removed them, thereby reducing my wardrobe to my affectations, I would have acted righteously outraged. For whom was I dressing? Dressing up and dressing down for my confused self.

Many years later I discovered how burdensome it was for me to have one style inside and another one outside. I needed to dress according to a more assured, confident and poised interior. Attracted to costumery always, I incorporated my clothes into myself instead of using them as camouflages. They were to become adornments instead of trappings.

I have not taken credit for all the long, patient hours of work I've put in, for failures as well as successes, for enjoying the search and the chase, for discouraging hours of sterility. For doing something positive to cancel the TERRIBLE feelings I had about myself and my previous life with no art in it when I was impossibly brazen and querulous. For arranging to get thrown out of EVERY PLACE except art school.

If you ask me how I knew I could paint, I can't answer you except to say I was willing to take a chance at failure, so great was my fascination in painting, and so deep was my discontent with other activities. I never even felt like a grind as I poured over books about painting, about artists, about writers, about adventurers, about aesthetics. It was more of a pastime than a labor. But what is hard is to be authentic, to check check check all the time, to celebrate my growth, to recognize every false move. There is no room for fudge.

In 1970 I became involved in painting and writing about my background. In considering the figurative works I painted at that time, I feel they were a synthesis of some of the extraordinary experiences I have had in my life. As a teacher I enjoy my relationship with students and the kind of interaction this provides.

I made a scroll in 1972 called "Under the Table at the Donner Party." It is thirty feet long and fifteen inches high and made of scraps of canvas and collage materials and my drawings. Its subject is all the things I've known which go on under the table. I consider the title to be apt.

In 1976 I completed work on my second scroll, which is entitled "The Social Development of an American Female." This scroll is sixty feet long and thirty inches high. It deals with the struggles of a community of women whose forebears were German Jewish pioneers in California, to find an independent professional life, and to get acceptance for this life from

their families. One of my reasons for making this scroll was that I wanted to get clear about paradoxes and conflicts which faced me when I was growing up.

By the use of several devices, including drawing, writing and collage, I feel that I have accomplished a moving and humorous account of my life so far. I consider this scroll to be a personal as well as universal statement about a segment of society which existed in a particular period of San Francisco history. I have exhibited these scrolls in universities, galleries and museums all around the USA and given workshops to accompany them.

I love to paint--not because excellence is my goal. I think that excellence is not only unimportant to me but unattainable and impractical. It disturbs me to recognize so much shit, but still it is part of me. With all my effort and education I haven't turned into either Pygmalion or Galatea, much to my surprise--and--I guess--delight. Perfection is not the point. What I achieve expressly and by accident is enough. It is a product of many hours of thought and observation--conscious, subconscious, unconscious.

I can say what it wasn't like to begin painting better than I can say what it was like. It was certainly different from cutting out paper dolls. It wasn't like a craft. There were no directions, no explanations, no easy solutions. It was no man's land.

I had attended drawing classes at the California School of Fine Arts. There we had a model and I learned something about measurements, paper and charcoal. I can't remember the rules but probably there were some--there must have been some.

In painting class there were still lives and plaster casts of Greek and Roman statuary set up. I was influenced a lot by what I had seen around town, and illustrations in books and magazines, and antiquities and treasures I had seen in Europe. But I hadn't seen avant garde work. My frame of reference was very traditional and formal. I had no notion at all of my own style, and I was frightened. So my paintings were tentative, academic, and derivative. I enjoyed the feel of the materials and the colors, but I was scared to use them.

I wasn't brought up to make a mess, although one of my favorite ways of flaunting authority was to wade around in mud and dirt and keep my room untidy. I was apprehensive about making a painting kind of a mess, because the results mightn't be good enough, and I wasn't willing to make this experiment. I didn't know where or what it would lead to, and I wasn't up to any departure yet.

I don't remember getting any particular support from anyone. No one assured me that it was okay to be bewildered, or encouraged me to be

daring. So I just kept on learning techniques so as to make a good impression. I wasn't up to recognizing or enjoying surprises or accidents. But I learned about the qualities of colors, how to make things recede and come forward, and to make them dimensional, and I developed some technical facility in putting the paint on. I learned a lot that I didn't know I was learning. I learned something about seeing and looking, but had trouble connecting the realities and fantasies of life with art. I was tied tightly to my background and I had no real commitment.

After I was graduated from high school I didn't paint or draw for twelve years. I had never worked much at painting, but I knew at art school that even if they didn't like me or my work, at least they'd leave me alone and not send me to the principal's office. And some might even like me, and they wouldn't pick at me. I found out later that some students really did like me and they were different from anybody I'd ever known. They didn't tell me "should" all the time. They talked about paint and turpentine and canvas. They were all ages too. And it was so exciting to be out of the house.

Then when I returned to school I felt as if I had never done any art work at all. But I must have been ready to do some because I was able to grasp both drawing and painting with greater ease and ability than ever before. I absorbed a great deal in two years, and I learned to grind paint and stretch canvasses, to use brushes as well as palette knives. But I still wasn't putting any of my own personality into my work.

I was getting very proficient and much more confident. I felt more accepted and acceptable. I was a young matron with three children and a husband--but that was something to overcome, because I was not only older than the other students but I also felt they wouldn't want to have anything to do with me because I wasn't poor, which I thought was a necessary requisite for an artist.

Then seven more years of lay-off because of the war. After that I started to work alone. I was finally developing my own style, which was fairly superficial and derivative of models such as Dufy, Chagall, Redon, Matisse. I had no idea of the depth of emotion and intellect these artists had put into their work. I only saw in the results what I wanted to see--gaiety, good cheer, romance, nostalgia.

When I was a child there had been so much death and destruction in my family that I decided that my grown-up life would be free from all those tragic occasions and troublesome rifts. In my efforts to make this come true, I went out of my way to remain a child. I had drawers full of mauve-colored moralities, all labelled miscellaneous. Maturity was associated with unexplained silences, hostile undertones and somber grief.

I began to paint playground scenes, children and bucolic landscapes. At first I needed the security of accurate representation, so I went to the parks, to the playgrounds, to the countryside, to old mining towns to paint exactly what I thought I saw. Then my own fantasy system began to reveal itself, and I discovered the mystery and fascination of the possibility of painting what I felt, not necessarily what I saw, but how I saw it. Van Gogh must have been an influence then.

I still wasn't getting under the surface. All the time the specter of fashion was picking at my sleeve to censure and approve. I was trying to be proficient, not personal. I couldn't afford to let myself go. The results were cute, and I wasn't getting any younger, so I decided to follow the crowd and paint abstractly. I became an abstract expressionist in time, and it was liberating and gave me a real opportunity to use color and energy and vigor. It was a fine way for me to paint, and I was able to give up some control and enjoy the sensuousness and richness of oil.

My work was still pretty disorganized. I kept having to put ALL my ideas into each painting from lack of confidence. But they were pretty full of vitality and startling paradoxes and mystifying titles. The images had a certain personality. They were isolated and fragmented like me. In this way they were authentic.



After Dinner Scroll



M eet Mrs. Pink, The Jealous Green Hand, The Lady Embarrassed By a Pushy Hostess and The Guy With His Shoes Off. They (or, rather, their hands, legs and feet) people Nell Sinton's wicked, witty and poignant scroll, "Under the Table at the Donner Party" (1972), on view in the Oakes Gallery.

Nell Sinton grew up in a wealthy San Francisco family that entertained frequently, both in town and at a Tahoe summer home. Hidden under the table, she listened to conversations. She learned about the hypocrisy of adults, their peccadilloes and mean ambitions, and how different their behavior

"under the table" was from their dealings "above the table."

She was impatient, curious and rebellious—she still has the mischievous air of a small boy swinging his legs in an apple tree. After her brother died in 1919 during the influenza epidemic, she became "the oldest child and the only boy." Her father took her to sports events and taught her to fish, and she learned to assume respon-

sibility for her younger sisters and especially for her beautiful, often depressed mother.

She has lived the life of an artist, balancing it with marriage (she is now divorced) and children. She studied at the California School of Fine Arts with Lucien Labaudt and Maurice Sterne, had early solo shows at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor and the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, exhibited with the likes of Richard Diebenkorn and David Park, and served on the S.F. Art Commission. She has taught art in many places and is, by all accounts, an inspirational teacher.

She drew "Under the Table" (and a second autobiographical scroll, "The Social Development of an American Female") with her eyes closed and the pencil in her left hand. Juanita Sagan taught her to draw this way, and Sinton says it's a wonderful technique. "The eye turns inward, and you have to give up every inhibition and ambition because you know you're going to fail in formal terms. It helped break down a lot of inhibitions I had about drawing and painting."

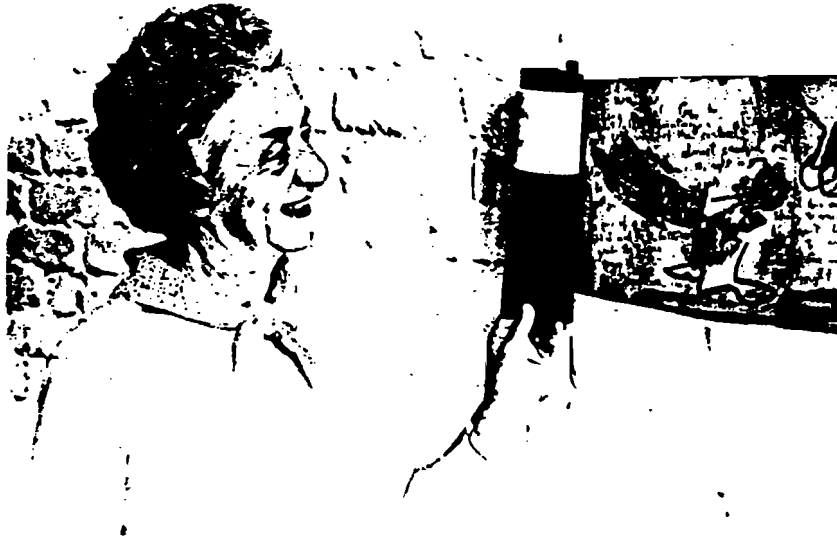
Four of Nell Sinton's figurative paintings from the '70s are included in the show, which will close Oct. 7.

◀ A N N O U N C I N G ▶

AN IMPORTANT NEW GRAPHIC WORK WITH
A "TOUGH AND FUNNY" MESSAGE BY ONE
OF AMERICA'S FOREMOST WOMEN ARTISTS

UNDER THE TABLE AT
THE DONNER PARTY, A
DINING ROOM FRIEZE

◀ BY NELL SINTON ▶



UNDER *the Table at the Donner Party, A Dining Room Frieze* is a major new work by Nell Sinton, an "original rediscovery" by an artist long acknowledged as an important innovator in painting and assemblage. The 15-foot, photolithographed scroll, hand-painted by the artist and handsomely bound in cloth, is now being distributed by the Arion Press of San Francisco in a signed, limited edition of 100 versions.

Of the scroll itself, art historian Dr. Joseph R. Goldyne writes in the accompanying foreword: "*Under the Table at the Donner Party* is a tough and funny tale with elbows that would seem to mock any offer of textual aid. In this sad and witty exegesis, she has imposed appropriately drawn and painted forms on her telescoped recollections of people and events. Her picture is a trail of crude line, wash, and collage punctuated by a hand-written log of observation-commentary, an accompaniment of flowing, staccato narrative.

"Like many another child, Sinton found the darkened pass below the cloth and between the rows of older feet to be a catacomb of secrets and of teasing; of silence and of giggles. It was a place where

the tables were ironically turned; where this time, not Big, but Little Brother (or Sister) was watching—and listening.”

In her own terms, Nell Sinton addresses the scroll as “my interpretation of a slice of my life and times. Although it records some of my personal experiences, I consider it a universal statement about a segment of San Francisco Society during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.” It is a society upon which she is more than qualified to remark. Born in 1910, Nell Sinton is a third generation San Franciscan whose artistic work has been exhibited throughout the United States since the late Thirties. Her work has been acquired for several major collections including those of the Chase Manhattan Bank, the American Telephone and Telegraph Co., the University Art Museum in Berkeley, the San Francisco Museum of Art, and the Oakland Museum of Art as well as numerous private collections. She is represented by the Braunstein-Quay Gallery in San Francisco.

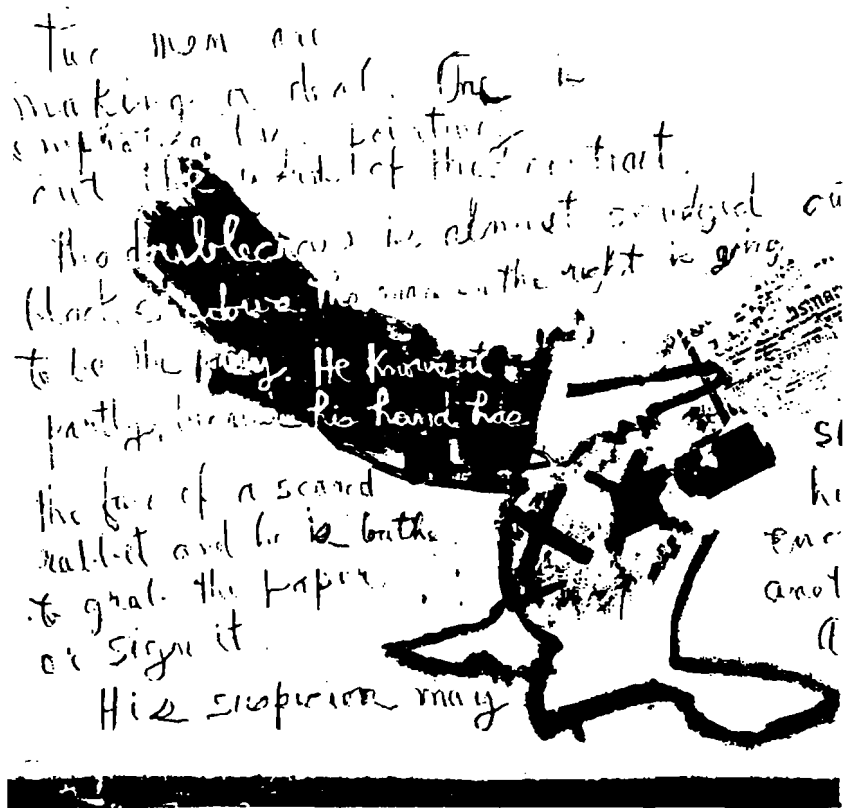
Originally shown in 1974 at the San Francisco Art Institute, where she has served on the faculty and as an artist-member of the Board of Trustees, *Under the Table at the Donner Party* was exhibited in 1975 at Mt. Holyoke College in Massachusetts as part of A Symposium On Art In San Francisco.

Of the scroll-form she says: “It’s an original rediscovery. At first I thought in terms of a large painting and even seriously considered the codex format—the accordion shaped books of the Maya and Aztecs—but the scroll appeared rather naturally, and delightfully, as the only way of telling the story in a completely new way, and having that way be a part of the story, too.

“The content is deliberately whimsical,” she states. “I have created a tableau of different people, all of whom are recognizable types, caricatures if you will, of the true-blue, all-American pioneers who cannibalized each other on their way to the top. It’s a metaphor I enjoyed using, but which is really an appeal to that frame of mind which compels one to look beneath the surface of things for authenticity.

Which leads me to a no doubt pedantic-sounding moral, or comment, as a sneaky way of taking some extra credit for myself in the way of an advertisement: In the end, it is only the authentic which endures—and that's what this scroll is all about."

Dr. Goldyne confirms this: "Nell Sinton has watched and listened very carefully for a good number of decades, and her scroll records a facet of the human condition which attracted her eye and ear. The Sinton tableau does not resolve itself in dramatic disaster or happy evolution, but neither does it unroll without comic relief. People are often sad and silly at the same time, and bittersweet remains a taste familiar to artistic palettes."



The Oakland Museum is pleased to present Nell Sinton's scroll, "The Social Development of an American Female." This work is a unique artistic and personal statement in which many women in the arts will, no doubt, discover a spirit of kinship with Nell's deeply felt, yet humorously expressed, visual autobiography.

A third generation San Franciscan, Nell Sinton grew up in a segment of society which held strong convictions that a professional career was not a proper pursuit for a woman of her background. Her situation, motives, and behavioral patterns were consistent with those of others from her generation.

Nell Sinton was born in San Francisco in 1910, where she later received her early art training at the Art Institute. She has continued to exhibit actively in many individual group shows since 1940. Her work is represented in many private and museum collections on both coasts. She remains active in a number of pursuits that include painting, writing, teaching and gardening. She is currently a Visiting Artist at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Additional materials exhibited with the scroll - photographs, sketchbooks, paintings, collages, and constructions - were selected to provide additional insight into her life as an artist and to indicate some sense of the style and content of her various forms of expression.

Harvey L. Jones
Curator of the Exhibition

THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF AN AMERICAN FEMALE A Scroll by Nell Sinton

One day in January, 1973, when I was feeling displaced and lonely, I undertook the projection of my life history with a crayon on a long roll of paper, and in terms of percentages.

The result surprised me, and led to the creation of *The Social Development of an American Female* as a full-fledged scroll, my second after *Under the Table*. (*Under the Table at the Donner Party. A Dining Room Frieze*, reproduced in a hand-painted version of 100 through the auspices of the Arion Press, San Francisco.) To begin with, I found that my young childhood took up a very long space while my old childhood and most of my married years were like a continuous date... sort of like a social engagement for thirty-five years. The space allotted to my maturity was short and to the point, and the prospect of my life's end seemed very close and threatening.

So, using this graph as a guide, I commenced the long task of creating the scroll itself to record (and interpret) some of the events of my life through drawing and writing. The title, *The Social Development of an American Female* had an amusing, feminist-tract ring to it, especially when applied to the scroll whose size was a complete unknown when I began. Eventually, when fully unrolled, it became sixty feet long and thirty inches wide!

I worked on this scroll for two-and-a half years through difficult and discouraging periods because it wasn't always pleasant to face up to some of the facts of my life, my times, and my relationships with others. So many paradoxes appeared that I often felt anxious about the choices and decisions I had to make. Looking back over my life was, surprisingly, much more of a process of self-discovery than I had anticipated.

To begin with I am a member of a community of women whose German-Jewish grandfathers came to San Francisco as young adventurers in the Eighteen-Fifties to build their lives. They came to the U.S.A. in order to avoid the draft in Germany, and because economic opportunities were slim at that time. Their manners were generally rough and crude, but they were able to cut enough of a swathe to persuade refined young American ladies of established background to be willing to take a chance on their futures and marry them.

I am one among many third generation San Franciscans who grew up having in common their origins, backgrounds, manners and customs. My present life style reveals that I was not a totally unique member of my family. Situations, motives, and behavioral patterns are consistent with those of the whole generation with whom I grew up. We started out the same, but we developed differently. Consequently, the events described in my scroll demonstrate variations which occurred in that basic social structure, and which make it a personal as well as a universal statement about a segment of society which existed in a particular period of San Francisco history.

I examined my past via my own scrapbooks and family albums, magazines, literature, art and music of the time. I also talked with some people who "knew me when," in order to get their impressions. I made hundreds of drawings, but in coordinating them with my writing, I hit a snag. The work looked isolated... detached from itself. My close friend Juanita suggested using a collage technique in order to connect the various parts. The idea appealed to me at once since I enjoy using collage (as well as painting), and because I love to piece scraps together.

So, I did some more research into finding pertinent materials which could be pasted down. This was, as well, an opportunity for further adventures, since I am an insatiable searcher. Up until this time, I had been working with concepts, crayons, and paper. Juanita's idea was exactly what I needed. It gave vitality, cohesion, and clarity to the scroll, and reinforced my statements with a certain inevitable humor as well as tangible evidence.

I discovered a wealth of coincidental material, and I made notes as I went along. Reading them helped me to see what kind of a maze I had wandered through during much of my life. It may be of interest to note that after I had established the patterns of my background while I was growing up, I stopped taking notes.

What became of me as I matured was consistent with the way I was expected to live-out my life until, when I was approaching sixty years of age, I realized I'd have to make some changes if I was going to attain the destiny I had somewhat unconsciously planned for myself, and which I naively thought would eventually be handed to me on a silver platter, if I only waited long enough.

However, I was up against a powerful force: my family's conviction that a female of my background would not have a professional career. They insisted that a woman's first consideration is her home and the people in it. After that, she must give time and energy to doing volunteer work in charitable institutions and then she may devote whatever time and attention are left over to the pursuit of what they called a "hobby." That's what they said, but what they really meant was: "We don't want you to go out in the world because you might leave us, and find something better." (Which was exactly what I had to do.)

I decided I would pay the high price it would cost me to live the rest of my life in a way that would satisfy *me*. So, with a great deal of prodding and constructive support from my children and some friends (my friend, Juanita especially), I feel that I am finally making some sense out of my life, and also taking credit for being in charge of it.

Creating this scroll has been a very exciting and absorbing experience, much more so than I originally imagined. It has also given me a sense of having validated my direction, and of having done something unique in the world of art. It is my hope that my own sense of excitement and celebration can be imparted to the viewers of this scroll, as well as sharing the pleasure of having been able to accomplish this statement in an art form.

Nell Sinton
1976

The Social Development of an American Female: A Scroll-Painting, 1973-75

Nell Sinton

Acrylic paint with ink and mixed-media collage

Lent by John Sinton

Few exhibitions, like this one, consist of a single work. And few works of art, like this one, are disguised as social science. This scroll, so full of personal feeling, of humor and anguish, presents itself under a title suggesting an anthropological report. The title underlines the irony the artist has experienced. It registers her protest as a member of a society compelled to categorize instead of to personalize its female members. The work itself, accordingly, defies classification. It is, in a sense, an illustrated report. Its form as a long scroll was the one books took for centuries before they were bound in volumes. *The Social Development* is also painting, like a Chinese scroll, in which text and images are one continuum. The painted sketches in Nell Sinton's scroll are whimsical, vivacious, and swift. They catch the style of the periods through which she grew. She filters the style through mood-expressive colors and costumes, and highlights visual impressions through juxtapositions of painting and writing with collage, mostly clippings snipped from newspaper and magazine features. The backings vary. They are pieced and patched together, like "a patched life," and "meant to show wear and tear." The choice of more than one paper component and more than one kind of canvas backing is an important element.

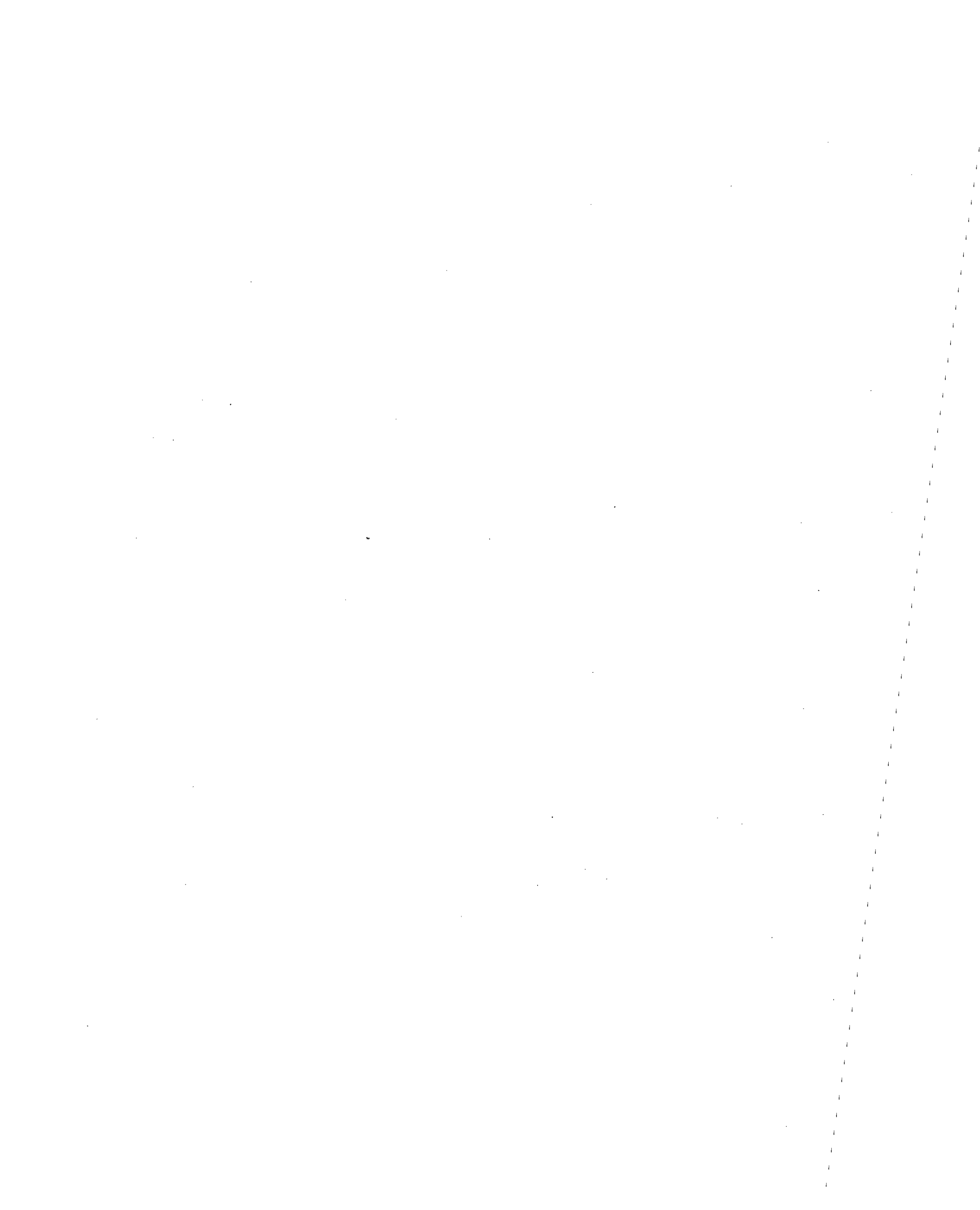
As if in homage to the domestic expectations of her socially ambitious parents, she has begun with a background of subtle, almost subliminally-patterned wallpaper. This paper reappears from time to time, like a diminishing leitmotif. Further along, glimpses of a bare canvas backing betray her taste for coarser, stronger stuff, and for disclosure instead of dissembling. As an artist, she chooses to let overlapping edges of the backing show the work of her hand. This strength and honesty allows for drips of color and slashes of line to qualify the narrative "so she PAINTED." The authority of the painting and the piece-work remove her voice from any hint of hothouse hysteria when she presents a one-word expletive like SHREW. Step by anecdotal step, she marches toward the achievement of facing herself head-on. The mirror of her successful arrival, through many detours, is a pair of self-portraits delineated with Picasso-esque confidence, in the positive color of pink-shadowed red, with the title of a San Francisco Chronicle review: "A Bold Attack on the Figure."

The entire scroll is a bold self-portrait in serial form, the story of the artist's life as it unrolled, and as it holds together reinforced, from her birth onwards. She remembers sharply. "She had dreams full of mauve colored moralities - all labeled miscellaneous." The memories are appropriately textured as well as colored: there is a touch of velvet, a seed-packet glimmer of waxy paper. Little maids all in a row are not what grew in this American woman's garden. In mid-life, after a divorce which left her thinking "she might be a mutilée de guerre," she broke away from straight lines, and planted her life with many seeds, including Insights, Children, Old Friends, Liberty, Choices, Decisions, and New Friends. And "now she is in a hurry as the grim reaper pushes and flails her." That was 1975; she had worked on the scroll as a resident in the Unit One program at this University. It is sixty feet long.

"You have to laugh," Nell Sinton says today. "It's a tough life." Yet "the boys of the class studied it as if they were monks;" and ever since its first showing, for a national women's conference on this campus, women who come to exhibitions of the scroll are often moved to tears. Of all the places where this work has been exhibited, the viewers here in Illinois were the most responsive. The curator thanks Nell Sinton for explaining the history of the scroll in telephone conversations. The Museum is very grateful to the artist's son for lending the work so that local audiences can enjoy responding again, with local pride if not with monkish piety, in the artist's eighty-fourth year.

Eunice Dauterman Maguire
©Krannert Art Museum, 1993

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
AT
URBANA-CHAMPAIGN



WRITINGS TO ACCOMPANY DRAWINGS IN SCROLL II

"THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF AN AMERICAN FEMALE."

1. Her nurse looks like a bear - the baby is being hatched like the embryo eye of a wise owl.
2. Her father flirted and doted and moralized.
3. She is at once childlike and mature - like Minerva fully panoplied. Her bonnet is her cracked egg shell.
4. Beautiful manners cover up sin.
5. I wouldn't like to have to bring this kid up at all.
6. Poor kid - stuffed into that blue velvet couch.
7. You have a very lively child.
8. The stuffy pompous grown up lectures the pigeon toed angry child. She spent a good deal of time in the principal's office.
9. The school girl is visited in her room by her parent's women friends. Where were the men ?
10. She was "shown off" while "they" said that humility is a cardinal virtue.
11. Its too bad because she thought there was a lot of interaction-her parents look so depressed. Affairs of state were discussed, battles raged, feelings were stamped out.
12. At age thirteen thrown into society.
13. She went to dances.
14. She must have been scared shitless down deep in her heart and stomach. Suffering was considered a crime in a child who had every material advantage. (she has everything in the world to be thankful for .)

15. She was pretty hard boiled, tough and resilient. Her loneliness made her brazen and defiant. Those were heartless, snobbish, anxious times. BRAZEN. She flounced about in her ungrownup, high handed, spoiled way. She harassed them all.
16. Not much room for shyness, blushes, or exchanges of tender concern. The underlying reason for her pain was her inability to make sense out of her surroundings. She wasn't given credit for a direct approach. It wasn't nice.
17. She had drawersfull of mauve colored moralities - all labelled miscellaneous.
18. She was vertuous because she was safely above board as she dallied under the table.
19. Married in the midst of affluence they were emotionally bankrupt.
20. It seems as if the young matron as she grew up got to be just like her mother. That's the way girls grow up. SHREW
21. She loved playing with her children and reading to them. She knew she felt like an artist. She hoped that artists would be her new friends and help her in her escape from her family.
22. So she painted.
23. She had one man shows.
24. Meanwhile her mother frowned on divorce and heckled her dear daughter.
25. Daughter, divorced, thought she might be a mutilee de la guerre and always get a seat on the bus.
26. Instead, undaunted, she went to work. Looking back and forth and ahead, she saw that there was time and space in which to grow. She raked up, dug up, turned over, pruned, thinned out, cultivated, planted, reaped and harvested.
LIBERTY CHOICES SELF STYLES NEW FRIENDS DECISIONS CONCEPTS
ICAD TEACHER TRIPS INSIGHTS CHILDREN OLD FRIENDS GROWTH
27. (no writing)
28. (no writing)
29. Now she is in a hurry as the grim Reaper pushes and flails her ---

To My Readers-- This is a rough draft, showing how I worked through my feelings and ideas to prepare my talk to accompany the film. The example shows that if I don't spit my negative stuff out first, then I can't get to my organized and thoughtful self, with clear ideas.

Nell Sinton, January 1993

Appendix F

SCROLL FILM

Script

OPENING

Tilt down from S.F. Bay to Nell in garden

Thumb Under
..Folk Song

Inside studio, Nell introduces Scroll

Synch sound

-- dissolve into --

CHILDHOOD SECTION OF SCROLL

Nell as a baby

Small Child

Nell in school/trouble

Nell and her depressed parents

Diminished Fifth

Change of Time

--F.O.-- then --F.I.--

PHOTOGRAPHS SECTION ONE

15 Nell and friend 34 Tomboy Nell

School :34

33,35 D.Lange pix 1 Nurse 8 Nell, Mother, Marj.

Mother :28

14 Electric auto 9 Nell in riding outfit

37 Portrait of Father

Father :29

7 Baby Nell & Mother (finger) 5 Father, Bro. & Nell/Siblings

:20

-- (transition to) --

ADOLESCENT SECTION OF SCROLL

Nell thrown into society

Dances, invitations

Moralities... "The lecher"

Above and beneath the table

Marriage

Waltz

--F.O.-- then --F.I.--

PHOTOGRAPHS SECTION TWO

36 Portrait 22 Canoe 6 Wicker Baby Climb :31

-- (transition to) --

DECISION PERIOD OF SCROLL

Mother's bad influence
Nell painting Chords Together &
Nell at reception Opposed
Divorce & Mother's disapproval
Bars Complainte

--F.O. then --F.I.--

PHOTOGRAPHS SECTION THREE

31 38 39 Portraits of Mother Mother :27
17 Tahoe 16 Family 28 Wedding Responsibilities
:27

-- (transition to) --

GARDEN AND PORTRAITS SECTION OF SCROLL

Nell planting, cultivating, harvesting Pastorale
Close-up "position" portraits

--F.O.-- then --F.I.--

PHOTOGRAPHS SECTION FOUR

20 Nell (color) 19 Nell & Uncle (1910) Time :20
18 Flower girl Nell Death personified
40 Nell horseriding

GRIM REAPER FROM SCROLL

Silence :37

--F.O.--

DARK SCREEN

Finale' :18

--Cut to silence--

(NO "THE END" TITLES)

Duane 4685679

"SCROLL"

Nell Sinton's Commentary

(School)

34 Sec.

~~I thought it was a terrible education, just absolutely terrible.~~

~~It fitted me for nothing.~~

~~I'm not a bit happy with my school part; not at all.~~

CUT
CUT

That I had any individuality was totally out of the question. I could just be very quiet about that.

I was a cat's paw a lot too.

I had a very big investment in going with girls who were much braver than I in getting into trouble.

If there was a set-up for being fresh to the teacher, somehow they would all set it up and leave me holding the bag.

4.48 min
VOICE OVER

Section ONE (cont)

(MOTHER)

28 Sec.

I'll never forget. Once a glamorous lady friend of my parents came from New York.

And she gave me a beautiful sewing basket filled with spools of thread -oh- and everything you could want.

And I just thought that was the most beautiful thing I ever saw in my life and my mother said I couldn't have it because it was neither birthday nor Christmas just for the lady to give me a present for nothing was -uh- inappropriate, and she took it away.

OUT ~~(As a matter of fact, I don't remember ha ever getting it at a better time, any time, either.)~~

P.

(FATHER)

29 Sec.

One day my Father picked me up at school and we went in the neighborhood to buy a notebook, school notebook.

He gave me a dollar and told me to bring back the change. And I brought him back twenty-five cents.

I bought a gorgeous ledger-type notebook. It was just what I wanted and he said:

"How much did you pay for this?"

I said, "Seventy-five cents."

He said, "What do you think I am, made of money? (Hah!) You go back there and get a ten cent notebook: that's good enough."

leave this
Section TWO

(Marriage)

44 Sec.

One thing I was very sure of: I had to leave home. I just knew I had to get out of that house and get on with my life and I was going to own a lot of things.

I was going to own a husband, and a house, and children, and furniture, and do what I liked to do.

My husband was equally lost and immature and thought that marriage was a license for any number of love affairs which would have been so much fun because he never would have to get caught.

He played a very big and continual under-the-table game.

He was smart. Very very smart. Very good at business. Well, sort of.... Everybody knew he married the bosses' daughter.

side
office

(Siblings)

INTO

SECTION

ONE

20 Sec.

I was the second child, and the first daughter.

My brother died when he was eleven and I was eight -- of pneumonia in a 'flu epidemic in 1918 or 1919.

And then I was at that moment made not only the oldest child but they ^{treated me like I was the} only boy.

Section TWO (con't)

(Thrown into Society)

26 Sec.

~~My parents, ^{cut out} pushed me too soon,~~

~~Partly because I was replacing my brother, and partly because they were socially ambitious as I turned out to be too.~~

But my parents put me in the sandbox.

Most parents do -- they stick kids in sandboxes for social reasons: To meet the right people.

~~It's a trap, it's something, you can't~~

~~escape from~~

(social climb)

31 Sec.

I just broke my NECK to climb in -- and climb and climb and climb and climb -- and I finally made it by the time I was forty.

By conniving and manipulating and making myself available and doing what I felt was attractive.

And when I finally got there, I realized it wasn't any place I wanted to be at all.

I gave up a hell of a lot of time.

~~I wish at that time I had been spending time with people of more value.~~

~~I would have got where I am sooner.~~

(Mother) *IN*

21 Sec.

1/2

(She hung on to her children like - glue -
She was afraid I'd leave home.) *M end here*

*Plong
end
see*

~~And partly because she wouldn't be able to get
AT me, and she needed to get at me whenever she felt like
it during the day, and so did my Mother-in-Law.~~

~~Because that was the pattern of their lives --
using their children --~~

~~And buying their children.~~

*out
M
P*

(Mother)

- OUT

25 Sec.

~~Oh, she was a very big grudge-bearer.~~

~~A very DOOM-saying woman. So full of resentment at the
world.~~

IN 2.

~~(She was the only bereaved widow in the whole world.
The only person who had suffered the loss of a son and a
husband.~~

~~And she took it out on everybody else.)~~

Section THREE (cont)

(Responsibilities)

27 Sec.

First you have to get married. Then you have to take care of your civic responsibilities and be a charitable worker. And you have to have children.

And if you have any time left over you may have a hobby -- you may have a hobby, but be sure that having that does not infringe on your home life.

You can eat well and drink well and dance and play, but:

~~YOU HAVE YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES FIRST BECAUSE OF YOUR PRIVILEGE.~~ *mt*

try to find "DON'T TAKE
money - NO PROFESSIONALISM"

Find a positive statement
about my mother - about
artistic freedom, about taste
I can quote from my autobiography.

Section FOUR

(Existentialism) - OUT -

22 Sec.

I think, existentially, that I'm responsible altogether for my life; I run my life.

I'm altogether responsible. There may have been extenuating circumstances --

I might have been conned.

I might have been led down the wrong road.

That's my fault. I did it; I did it -- nobody else.

(Limitations)

33 Sec.

(Anyway) I don't have nearly as many empty periods as I used to have because I required so much of myself before -- I don't ask so much now.

And there's such a thing as you may have heard of called a brick wall;

And sometimes you know you can really get cut up on it, you can really suddenly get some sense.

How long are you gonna let yourself get clobbered? When are you gonna use the limitation?

So eventually, and much, much later, I found it out.

Section FOUR (cont)

(Time)

20 Sec.

Time has become so terribly, terribly precious to me, that it seems to me, a month is gone like a minute.

The first of September and the end of September are here -- together -- they've all collapsed together.

~~I can hardly bear to think of another year going by -- because -- it went so fast.~~

(Death Personified)

37 Sec.

The reason he makes me nervous is because of my having arrived at a position which isn't the end.

And I want to go further and I have more to do, and I don't want him to stop me; so I feel I'm in a race against him.

I mean it's scary enough for me to even feel him tapping me on the shoulder because I don't want to lose -- mobility -- Who Does? --

~~I don't want to be stopping. I'm on my way.
I'm going someplace, and I don't want anybody to stop me.~~

~~And I'm frightened of infirmity~~

who? The Reaper.

Section FOUR (cont)

(Finale')

18 Sec.

One of my biggest ambivalances is acting like
twelve while feeling that I'm seventy.

In my head I'm thinking -- OH -- I have to
hurry--hurry--hurry--hurry-- 'cause I'll be dead soon ...

~~I'm getting very old.~~

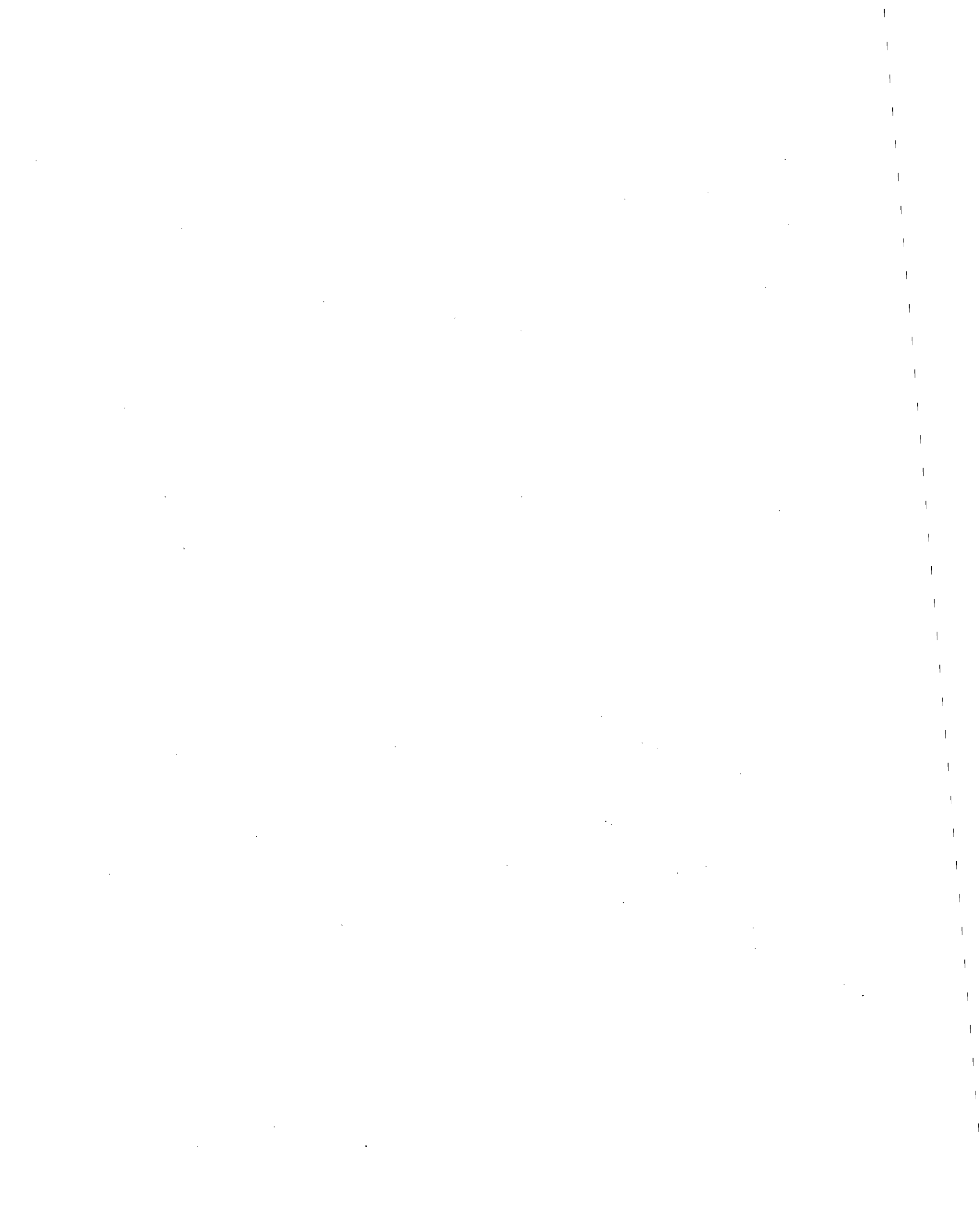
~~And so -- I'm really seventy -- I have no more time.~~

~~I might as well give up.~~

(Room Tone)

20 Sec.

Total time: 8 minutes



WAYS OF LOOKING AT AN EXHIBITION 1978

These comments are for people who have had little experience in looking at works of art; those who would like to know more and feel more about painting, sculpture and related material, and for those who would like to start a dialogue with objects which have been created by artists.

I want to stress some things which are important to me, and I want also to mention some ideas which I have found to be less productive. This is one artist's point of view which I don't consider to be esoteric or limited to artists only. I feel that the questions I am raising here are worth answering, and that the answers can occur to anyone who wants to enlarge his or her artistic experiences. Such inquiries may result in a unique personal experience and may help to dispel an uncomfortable misconception that some people have about what they think they are supposed to find worthwhile about an exhibition of art.

We will explore the following questions which I would like you to keep in mind. We have no time for your answers here today, but it is important that you either answer these questions to yourselves or discuss them with each other. For today, just keep them in mind. It will be to your benefit to answer them either at home to yourselves or to a friend.

How do we approach a work of art in order to have a stimulating adventure and integrate that adventure so that we remember it?

In what ways can we recognize a work by the artist's style?

In what ways can we articulate our feelings about the work?

How and why do artists fit into their historical period and how do their works relate to the artist's own time?

How are our feelings of comfort or discomfort expressed about unfamiliar works?

How are the differences between authenticity and phoniness detected?

How do we recognize strengths and weaknesses in works of art?

What is the difference between a careless empty void and a carefully calculated use of space?

What is the aesthetic difference between an ordinary commercial object and a precious work of art?

How do we gain the perception we'll need in order to be delighted with a detail, an edge, an accident, a color combination?

I find that a condescending attitude which tells me that I am not yet ready to make choices is an obstacle in my progress towards making my own value judgments. I prefer discussions and arguments to dogma. I like to hear a statement of what an artist accomplishes with materials and techniques rather than an emphasis on the materials themselves.

Dealing with anything unfamiliar requires me to pay attention if I'm to get something out of the experience. I can look at pictures without seeing them and listen to music without hearing it and read a book without getting the essence of the meaning of the words. This is a way of passing the time, but it's a thousand times more rewarding if I'll take the trouble to ask myself some questions so that I can participate in the discussion. If we only take in what is told us (as when we're attending a lecture) and don't have the opportunity to give back anything, we are liable to get indigestion unless we integrate the information we've received.

In my remarks I want to de-emphasize such words as famous, illustrious, well-known. We know that dependable scholars have established definite criteria such as; sense of color, organization, adherence to discipline, etc. in order to rank artists and their works; but if we rely on on them only, there is little chance that we will begin to make our own judgments and selections. We'll be afraid of destroying our reverence for the authorities whose opinions we have come to accept unquestioningly, because we have had no substantial basis for making our own judgments. The expert's doctrinaire decisions will have overwhelmed and subjugated us. In other words, what we Should and Ought to appreciate may not be what appeals to us, although we may reach the same conclusions as the experts do from time to time.

In my view, whatever feelings we have about objects of art are valid, but I suggest that you be willing to be responsible for your opinions by giving your reasons for having them. For instance, if you express your contempt for a painting by

saying that a ten year old child could have done it, you might ask yourself if you are making this judgment without having seen other examples of this particular artist(s work, or, how well are you acquainted with his style? And you may ask yourself how much serious attention you have given to looking at children's art work? ~~you are not giving us a look~~

~~ing. The~~ Perhaps you didn't intend your remark as a put-down: did you mean that the painting in question has the delightfully fresh look of a child's painting? Have you a particular child's work in mind which you are comparing to this adult painting? You see, there are several ways of interpreting this cliché about comparing an adult's work with a child's.

I consider children's art in a separate category. It possesses the necessary quality of universality. Archetypal symbols such as circles, squares, triangles appear with frequency in children's paintings and sculptures. A further reason for its validity is that it shows us how refreshing and paradoxically sophisticated an authentic artistic statement can be when the student is not condescended to nor manipulated nor pushed into inappropriate competition.

Adults can retain a youthful point of view, but the years of their life experience will have to show in their work. If they deny this, they'll be guilty of faking it.

I believe that we should be able to permit ourselves to change our opinions in order to make new ones. We are entitled to do this. It keeps us from growing stale. However, we do need a lot of experience in looking and studying, and therefore, I am going to ask you to do some hard work in order to draw your own conclusions. I want to show you a process. What follows are things for you to think about, and think again about the questions I asked you in the beginning.

Let us begin by asking ourselves why we go to a museum or an art gallery. Now, let us ask ourselves what we expect to see after we get there. I would like you to take 15 minutes to write down your answers to these two questions. You may be interested in checking your answers for differences and similarities when our visit is over.

Now, if you are willing, take ten minutes, pick a partner and read your writing to each other. I would like you to select one statement which is important to you to read to the whole group.

When you take your group around you will need to give them time to write down their expectations and to answer the questions.

Let us imagine we are at an exhibition. I will select three paintings or sculptures or a combination of both, and I will ask you if you are willing to write down one thing you like about each of the works and one thing you dislike about each of them. Take ten minutes for this. We will examine these works from the following points of view; SPACE, COLOR RELATIONSHIPS, MOVEMENT, SHAPES, EMOTIONAL CONTENT, INDIVIDUAL STYLE, MATERIALS, PICTORIAL CONTENT, TECHNIQUE, LABELS, and AESTHETIC CONSIDERATIONS. The exercises I will give you will help you to become more familiar with the works we will be looking at. When our visit to the exhibition is over, I'll want you to think about your original expectations. Ask yourself if they were the same or different. You may want to get a notebook in which to begin listing your preferences as well as your dislikes. Then, I will ask you to respond in writing to some questions. For an example, I may say; "This is what I see in this work. But I do not want you to like or dislike this in order to please me. You don't HAVE to like this. I want you to have the experience of liking and disliking. I have six sessions of two hours each which can be given in sequence or they can be arranged as individual events. Today I'm going to give you a sample of one of these. I would like you to answer the questions in writing.

In this first session we will take up SPACE, COLOR RELATIONSHIPS, and MOVEMENT. I will ask you to respond to only one question in each of these areas. There are other questions but in the interest of time I am simply giving you an example. At every session, one work will be selected. I will give you one question to answer. I would like each of you to answer the question in writing. Then I will ask three of you to read your answers. If someone has a different answer please share it. You will have five minutes to answer. Some of you may not be finished but we're going to move on. (Take ten minutes for reading and sharing.)

Does the work give you a feeling of spaciousness, or do you feel closed in and crowded? Whether spacious or crowded or closed in, do you feel comfortable or uncomfortable? Does the work appear to be disorganized? Turbulent?

COLOR RELATIONSHIPS

Are you comfortable with the way the artist has used the colors? Do the colors provoke you? Are they discordant? Are they banal? Notice whether the colors are opaque or transparent and what effect they produce. Can you detect any color combinations which appear to be accidental? If you could change any of the colors, how would you do it? Are the results pleasing or displeasing to you? If you can, give reasons why you like or dislike the colors used. Are you willing to identify your emotional response to these combinations of colors?

MOVEMENT

Can you identify and describe any movement in this work? Do you find the work static? Why? Is it lively or languorous? Describe. Does the movement in the work make you want to stay, or do you feel restless? Would you like to leave: Why? (Read the last paragraph on page 10 as an ending to the first workshop.)

SHAPES

Do the shapes seem to be made by mass-volume, or are they contained by line? Do the shapes stay in the picture plane or do they seem to fall out of their boundaries? If the painting has depth, is the perspective heightened by the dimensions of the shapes? Are the shapes made up of positive and negative spaces? Are the shapes defined by hard edges or do some of the edges seem to vanish into the background from time to time, or do you see a combination of both? Are the shapes easily defined, or amorphous? Are the shapes familiar, or strange? Describe. Are they organic? Are they geometric? Are they harmonious, inviting? Why? Do the shapes combine to make a strong structure or a weak one? How? How do the shapes affect the feeling of the spaces around them and vice versa?

EMOTIONAL CONTENT

Does the work remind you of anything you've seen before? What looks familiar? Does it evoke a sense of nostalgia? Is it sentimental? Trite? Superficial? Is it strange, unfamiliar? Does it have immediate appeal? Or, does it repulse you? Does it tantalize you? If you can describe what you mean by "pretty" and "ugly" write it down. Do you consider "pretty" and "ugly" criteria which are necessary in a work of art? What do those words mean to you? (This is a loaded question. See Aesthetic considerations.) Would like to study this work longer? Why? Does the work make you feel replenished and fulfilled, or drained, disappointed, empty? Do you feel overwhelmed? Describe. Are you bored? Are you stimulated? Are you angry? Does the work affect you at gut level? Does it evoke your tears? Your laughter? Do you find it shocking? Describe.

STYLE

Does this artist's work have a distinctive style? For instance, do you notice a particular distortion (as in El Greco's elongations)? Does the artist use special color combinations, etc.? Does he show an individuality? Describe. Do you detect a personal technique in drawing or applying paint or modelling the sculpture? Can you recognize signs of influence from other artists? Which ones? Can you tell if the artist is working in his time and period? How? Is it the style in which he works? The materials he uses? His point of view? Can you recognize his sources? Does the work have the look and feel of authenticity? Can you place this work in a definite period in history?

MATERIALS

Do you like or dislike the materials the artist has selected? Describe. Do you like the way the materials have been used? Describe.

If you want to, it would add a dimension to your involvement with paintings and sculptures to get some artist's materials and try them out. These experiments will help you to appreciate what the artist is up against, or up to, when he works. Some suggested materials; paper, pencil, pen, ink, chalk, pastels, gouache, watercolor, brush, acrylic, canvas, oil, clay, a variety of plastics and resins, metals, wood. This will give you the opportunity to discover the limitations and possibilities of these materials. You may make innovative discoveries of your own and surprise yourself.

PICTORIAL CONTENT

Some people delight in the stories which paintings depict. These are called "genre" paintings. They describe. They tell a tale. We can make a strictly literal interpretation of these paintings which is a valid way of looking, if limiting, because it excludes criteria such as artistic and aesthetic considerations. This method is in the realm of pure illustration. Another subject under this heading is the anecdote. Stories about the circumstances attendant upon the execution of a work are gossipy and entertaining and add an amusing and human dimension to the examination of a work of art.

Can you find recognizable symbols in these works? Are they familiar symbols? Do you see anything which makes the works extraordinary? Are there unusual or provocative placements

such as lights, shadows, colors? Do you detect a sense of magic? Is there something here which raises the work above the quality of an ordinary calendar picture or a candy box cover?

I would like you to give the lowest priority to the subject matter of the works we are going to examine because on this occasion I want to demonstrate that works of art can be judged by the same criteria whether they are figurative, representational, non-objective, or abstract. Try to look beyond the subject matter and technical skill to observe such qualities as light, color, texture, distortion, scale.

Using these guidelines you might want to write about an objective work as if it were abstract (how the shapes fit the spaces, and vice versa). In other words, a painting might contain discernable objects and figures and landscape which you could imagine transferring into fantasy shapes and spaces. Similarly, if we look at a non-objective painting we might find some very recognizable figurative symbols and forms.

Some shapes can be interpreted as distorted circles, squares, or triangles. Since the beginning of history these have been archetypal symbols. This exercise helps us to become more familiar with the paintings and sculptures we are looking at.

If the title implies an idea of what the work is about, does your idea match what you see in the work? If not, do you prefer the artist's concept to yours? What are your reactions?

If you have noticed any distortions, do you consider them dramatic, humorous, sad? Or do you have other feelings? Do you have the feeling that your imagination has been stretched into enjoying something new and unfamiliar, and that you've been treated to a new way of seeing. Or, do you feel threatened, put on, cheated? Taking a good hard serious look is what gives us the experience that we need to make our choices.

TECHNIQUE

In all art forms technique can be considered as one of several criteria because it indicates a kind of measureable perfection which can be judged by everyone. It's tangible. A Coca-Cola bottle is an example of commercial perfection. During the Renaissance, Andrea del Sarto was known as the perfect painter. Salvador Dali's work is a contemporary instance of technical brilliance. There are many excellent

works of art which contain very little emotion but exhibit great technical skill. It isn't as easy to assess the emotional appeals. Good technique shows that the artist has mastered his craft. I think that technical brilliance without emotional content is a gymnastic performance. It is a superb somersault. After it's over I am left with the memory of a faceted diamond, but which has no signs of human qualities and therefore I feel detached and uninvolved. Perfection is so unattainable for most of us and we stand such a good chance of losing some other warm qualities in our efforts to reach it that I tend to veer away from it. I prefer to see or hear a mistake or two. This is my personal opinion.

I would call a work of art a masterpiece if it contains authentic emotional content as well as technical brilliance. My criterion for a masterpiece is a work in which I can find nothing to change. If any part of it were to be removed or erased I would mark it's absence. I consider it an unusual art work just the way it is, without additions or subtractions.

Some artists whose works communicate emotion as well as technique to me are; Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Delacroix, Cezanne, Klee, Mondrian, Kandinsky, Max Ernst, and Kurt Schwitters. I would like you to ask yourselves if technique is very important to you as a reliable criterion. Are you impressed by technique? Or, are you more interested in the end result (the completed work of art)? Whether technique is or is not important to you, would you be willing to discuss it? Is it easier for you to recognize technical skill than to recognize an authentic statement of deep feeling?

LABELS

Some people like to make a study of labels and indeed the label gives information which is crucial to the complete understanding of a work of art. A label should include the name of the artist or, if this is lacking, as in the case of a primitive work or an unknown antiquity, the provenance of the work (its place of origin), the title of the work, the date it was made, the materials used, the size, the name of the lender. Sometimes interpretive material is supplied as well. This kind of information is essential for scholars and it is important for some gallery goers who specialize in wanting to know which artists

and which works are included in a show, who owns them, and possibly also where and how often the works have been shown and the names of former owners. This material is often found in catalogues, but it is helpful to find it on the walls as well. There is also a snob angle in the desire for this information. You might ask yourself if you are judging works of art by their social and financial worth, or if you'd admire the work without reading the label to find out if the artist is known or obscure.

AESTHETIC CONSIDERATIONS

I have placed aesthetic considerations at the end of this article because I think they can be comprehended best if you have had an opportunity to understand the material which I have just presented. I believe that the best way to reach personal conclusions about aesthetic values is to have had a good deal of experience in looking at works of art...looking often and looking hard. Occasionally, you might try having the fantasy of selecting a work with a purchase in mind. Thus, you will probably become clearer about the differences between pretty and ugly, strong and weak, refined and vulgar, phony and authentic, as you find yourself spending more and more time in the presence of works of art. You will begin to know when you are being coned and put on by an artist, and when he is trying to tell you something which will be important for you to appreciate and keep. You will become clearer about your ability to make personal judgments as to the appropriateness of vulgarity and when elegance is strong and pleasing and when you might find it effete and decadent.

In the last century the above mentioned criteria were handed down as necessary moral dictums, but today these moralities are not considered to be universal. More satisfaction is derived from making personal judgments if they can be backed up with your own experiences. In other words, you will enjoy choosing your own standards of good or bad taste, based on personal experience. Right and wrong are not necessarily the issue.

There is one more way of looking at an exhibition which I would like to share with you. It was suggested to me by an artist friend. Bruce Conner, after he had had the experience

himself. Enter a gallery with the idea that you will look only at the works which catch your eye immediately. You may narrow this experiment by permitting yourself the sight of only one eye catching work. After the work has your attention, then spend as much time with that work as you care to, but don't look at anything else that day. I consider this a very rigidly disciplined assignment since my greedy inclination is to try to inspect everything in sight. It's hard for me to restrain myself. A more strictly brought up art historian friend thinks this is an indulgent assignment because she was educated with the theory that moral obligation should make students examine every painting and sculpture in the gallery or museum, regardless of whether they want to look at them or not.

After spending time with your selection, are you able to say why you chose that work? Would you change your opinion or would you stick with your original choice?

These remarks about "Ways of Looking at an Exhibition" are based on opinions and feeling I have today. I have, of course, been influenced by the writings of my peers, and by fashion which is just as fickle in the art world as in any other. The formulation of personal tastes and preferences in the arts can be subtle. Appropriateness of time, place, and subject matter does necessarily fluctuate. I try to watch for pitfalls, detours, tricks, and exceptions. As times change I hope we will all develop enough flexibility to be willing to add to our experiences and evaluate them. I hope you will enjoy making your own appraisals and that you will derive pleasure from the trips you will be taking in search of artistic adventures.

ASSIGNMENTS

Write a critique of a famous work of art on the basis of the lessons you have had here.

Find a critique of the same painting or sculpture or graphic by a writer whose work you respect and another critique of the same piece by a writer whose work you thoroughly dislike.

I am going to ask you questions whose answers will show me whether you have understood this series of lessons or not. I may also ask you to do some research into finding out what makes the artists whose works we have been studying famous. I may ask you to find information about the lives of the artists, the groups they fall into, the movements they participated in, their sources and influences.

Here is a list of some movements in art. It's useful to know these for purposes of identification. I encourage you to find more ample descriptions of these movements in books and magazines. Identification with a movement or style has nothing to do, however, with the quality of a work of art.

Realism...recognizable subject matter.

Impressionism...a confusing label, derived from a painting by Monet of a sunrise; a kind of formless painting regardless of subject matter.

Cubism...breaking up of forms into sharply angular planes.

Abstract...varying interpretation, elusive at times.

Non-objective...pure shape and color.

Expressionism...free distortion of material.

Romantic realism...limited distortion of recognizable shapes.

Hard edge...precision, no visible brush strokes.

Surrealism...use of subconscious.

Primitive...spontaneous, charming, not profound, unemotional.

Color field...pure color, no recognizable shapes.

Pop...images of commercial objects.

Op...optical illusion.

Conceptual...the idea of the piece rather than the product
(written description, photo, etc.)

Performance piece...theatre event, choreography.

Video...immediate playback of actions and words and music.

The Davy Crockett, Walt Disney, Hiawatha movement...(self-explanatory)

Here are a few styles:

Egyptian
African primitive
Folk art
Flemish
Romanesque

Italian Renaissance
Gothic
Baroque
Medieval
Oriental

ARTISTIC GROWTH AND MODELS 1976

It is no simple thing to set up a satisfactory working arrangement between me and a model. Our demands are often unspoken, mostly because we don't know what we want of each other or for ourselves.

Most artists would agree that physical beauty, according to Hollywood standards isn't important unless you are involved in a pop art statement. But the standard Beauty usually expects an accurate rendering of her outer aspects - something between calendar art and a portrait by Gainsborough. After all, she works very hard to keep this body up. She is probably starving in the process in more ways than one. I certainly wouldn't want to be responsible for her becoming either a ravaged beauty or a noble ruin before her time. And so I am respectful and empathic about the amount of time and energy she spends in maintaining her bodily status quo.

And, although my lip is curled, I am jealous of her endowments since admiration of these very endowments has always taken precedence over all other genetic gifts in my family background. The requirements were simple; brains were expected to be handed out to boys - if they were handsome as well, all the better. Beauty was demanded of girls, but not to be accompanied by intelligence which might keep a young lady from being subservient. To be short in the smarts was agreeable for a female. To be wise and homely would have been a hopeless condition. This amounts to a combination of hubris andchutzpah in my opinion, and usually results in a disappointingly unrealized fantasy.

Back to the model. If she only has outward beauty she and I are not going to get on very well because we will have a conflict of interests. I aim to paint my model as if to discover what is under the skin. I give a lesson sometimes in which the students are asked to inspect, feel and explore some vegetables - a Bell pepper and an onion, for instance. And, having examined them carefully, I ask the students to draw their concepts of the vegetables as if to imagine them from inside out. The students may cut the vegetables open after the lesson

is over in order to compare their work with the actual models. After all, it is our innards and vital fluids which cause our bodies to bulge and undulate in the very individual ways that they do. When painting the model nude, I try to think of her skin as a suit-like a body stocking or a wet suit which goes over and protects her organs, intestines, muscles and bones, as well as her feelings. How we use our bodies is another subject.

I want to finish this discussion of outward beauty by saying that I have found that anyone I like - who appeals to me - to whom I am attracted - cannot be ugly in my eyes. So, for me, it is difficult to agree to any common denominator of good looks. Many qualities can be beautiful to me (which are not so considered in the conventional sense) whether frightening, awesome, shocking, surprising, serene, sad, gay, crooked, or straight. How they are put together and expressed is important. For instance, how comfortable is the model in her own skin? How does she evaluate herself? Does she consider herself up to par? What par? Does she know how to emphasize her strengths and her weaknesses? If she is shy does she use her shyness attractively or camouflage it with brazenness? Opposites can be harmonious. I like to be teased and

to be urged to wonder why. I like a fleeting smile, a frown, a pout, a transient expression, an evanescent shadow, a burst of gusty laughter, a painful sigh. I have had a variety of experiences with models.

Besides figuratively wanting to investigate the underpinnings of another physical presence, I like to know something of the workings of my model's brain and personality. I am a demanding artist and if all goes well we set up a provocative interaction which will benefit us both.

Our periods of conversation and silence are unpredictable, so my model needs to be strong enough to take care of herself and keep her focus. I ask her to remind me that she is entitled to occasional scheduled rest periods. I don't want her to feel so reverently about me that she will suffer untold martyrdom when she becomes stiff and uncomfortable. Neither must she brightly tell me all is well and then complain minutes later of a sleepy foot or hand. I want my model to take a pose which is reasonably comfortable for her, but she must not resign herself to being a rag doll. I can accommodate myself to almost any pose, but I become fretful and uneasy if the model is restless and unhappy.

For the past few years a young woman has been posing for me who is as sensitive and serious about her work as I am about mine.

I feel that our relationship has produced a unique experience for us both. This is what I mean when I speak of focus. A creative focus means concentration to the exclusion of any external interruption. Its a total investment of all your imagination and energy in the task at hand. When you take a focus you do not allow yourself to be disturbed by mental or external distractions. Dima and I take pride in doing our jobs well. Whether our work goes smoothly, or our sessions are stormy, or if we're resting, I feel we understand each other's requirements and I appreciate this very much. It's an unusual support system.

Thinking about myself and my model is synonymous with relaxed and sensuous enjoyment, even though I am tense and watchful every minute that I am painting her. Vigilance is essential to good work. I have a difficult time when professional models function like contortionists and gymnasts. Usually these kinds of persons pride themselves on their ability to hold a heroic pose for inhuman lengths of time. They make me twitch and squirm to observe them. Somehow these poses always remind me of Joe Rosenthal's famous photograph of Planting Old Glory on Iwo Jima. The greatest asset a professional model offers me is an ability to take, hold, and repeat the same pose often. This is important and reassuring.

What I hope to achieve finally is a psychological rendering of my model as she seems to me on a particular occasion. The best way I know to do this is to look thoughtfully and to measure reasonably accurately, to leave alone a distortion if it contributes strength to the picture, and forget the embellishments.

Even though I am in charge during the time we are working together, I don't always have the courage to put down what I see. Francis Bacon says it is too painful to paint the model in her presence. I know very well what he means.

You may have noticed that in mentioning my model I always refer to the female sex. It's not that I don't use male models, but it is because I am writing this fresh from the experience of painting a series of young women. I feel the same about working with professional male models as I do with professional female models. They both take vain and macho attitudes. I prefer the warmth and personality I find in unprofessional male models. Their sexual differences attract me. So does the structure of the male body, the muscles, the limbs, and the torso.

I allow the model to select her wardrobe especially if she knows her own style. But occasionally I ask her to put on costumes

which do not belong to her. Dressing up is good theatre. Some of us are fond of trying out a number of styles from time to time. Wearing a costume helps us to dramatize ourselves in these roles by stressing our various distinguishing features.

It's worthwhile for an artist to turn the tables now and then and have the experience of posing for someone else. I know what it is like to feel the pitiless scrutiny of two x-ray eyes searching for their version of reality.

Another important thing for me is a sense of humor on both sides. Other artists may have different requirements, but I have a need to joke, heckle, complain, bitch, and prattle in order to relieve my anxious concern for my work.

I resisted working with a model for years. Now I find it fascinating. I resisted because I thought I could only use my fantasy system in painting abstractly. I didn't know I could apply it to painting a figure. I really didn't know I was able to draw, and when I became comfortable enough with drawing my work began to take on abstract qualities and still maintain a human form.

I stopped painting abstractions because I thought my work was becoming superficial, petty and decorative. Maturity and self criticism let me know that I had come to a dead

end street. I realized that I was putting all the excitement in little secret parts of the paintings and the rest of the work was becoming ordinary. So, I began to expand the secret parts and that was when I found that I really did have some drawing ability.

When I began to use my experience in abstraction with painting the model, I realized I was going to have something. I realized that my goal was to combine abstraction and reality.

I am always looking for new ways and means to express myself. I have found landscapes in human bodies and vice versa. My career as a painter has indeed been a continual process of discovery. I continue to set new challenges for myself. The only way that artists grow is to set new challenges for themselves. I shift materials from oils to acrylics to watercolors - I make boxes and constructions - I continue to think of new ways to put down different concepts. I try new combinations of colors. This is the issue in keeping my work vital, alive, and growing. This is my purpose. This is how an artist grows.

ABOUT PAINTING WOMEN

1976

My last show was about women. I've been painting women for five years.

When I began painting seriously I started doing figures. Then I became an abstract expressionist and then I gradually shifted back to the figure again. I want to show you some slides later to explain how these transitions took place and how I followed them and made a commitment to painting women.

I have just finished painting and writing a scroll called "The Social Development of an American Female." In working on this scroll I realized that part of how I learned to look at the insides of women is the parallel way that I discovered about how I developed myself.

It is important to tell you that I can't paint conventional pictures of women. The focus of my last few years work and of my last show is the kind of insight that I have allowed myself to develop so that I can identify with those qualities in the other person and project them into a painting. I need to tell you that if you are going to be worth your salt as artists you are going to have to get in touch with many parts of yourselves so that you can project them into your work. You can't recognize the qualities in another person and project them into your work if you don't know about yourself. Psychological insights are crucial.

That's why I can't paint nice girls. Do you know what I mean? I don't mean nice girls as opposed to bad girls, freaks, whores, or jailbirds. I mean those who have not let life touch them or mark them. Those who haven't had enough experiences for good OR bad. If I painted Dima as a nice girl with a suburban background (which she has), I'd be denying her all her life's experiences so far. I'd be inauthentic. My contempt would show. If I know myself as a person with qualities of cruelty, envy, greed, and meanness as well as generosity, kindness, good humor, etc., then I need to show all these in my work.

I also need to make a dramatic theater statement, partly because I enjoy it and partly because it is a way of putting a barrier between the audience and my tears and laughter. It protects my privacy.

If you want to paint either men or women as sex symbols, you're going to have a different statement, but I think there's more to it than that. If you are willing to spend the time and effort you will find that you can display many different inner qualities of men AND women in all different kinds of poses, granted that most poses are conventional and there are only a certain number of positions in which you can place a human body.



COLOR DIRECTION

1977

Three quarters of the originality of an artist's work comes from his individual feeling generator. Many artists are rather spoiled about this -- they don't care to be held to account -- but I have found that it has made sense for me to do some research into my own background for hints about my color preferences. I have checked my emotional reactions to colors and I have investigated the reasons for them so that I can attempt to repeat my successes and try to avoid repeating my failures.

A discussion of color direction is one way for me to plot my course. It isn't important here to have the intellectual information that colors affect each other, or how they do, because for this lesson I am concerned with which way a color or colors move for ME.

I will begin with something I can see in nature. Most new leaf growth is a moist and tender GREEN. There are some trees, such as the California black oak, whose first shoots are a soft, pale pink. As these leaves progress through their short lives they gradually change to greens, then to red or yellow or orange, and eventually they crumble to dust in brittle, dry brownness. This method of documenting a direction can be called a COLOR PROGRESSION.

Here is another example. I'll fantasize some colors and limit myself to one or two of them; being sure I have chosen ones I am comfortable with. I will focus on one concept using specific shapes and forms. I'll have plenty of paper and I'll make a series of paintings, using this meager palette and exploring the full range of one idea to see how different the paintings will be as I go through this technical and emotional experience. I say "technical" because I am planning to use a definite scheme of percentages and amounts of the colors I've chosen; and I say "emotional" because I have an innate gut level reaction to colors.

Certain colors create friction and agitate each other. They are called "complementary." One such combination is red and green. Another is blue and orange. I have selected red and green for this experiment because one color progression which appeals to me is RED going from palest pink to deepest dried black blood. My eye responds to red's intensity so I'll use less of it than its complement, GREEN. Too much red would make me feel overwhelmed and uneasy. For balance, in order to absorb the shock of the red and green, I'll probably add a touch of yellow or ochre.

Since the three primary colors are red, yellow, and blue the range of yellow colors makes a bridge between red and green because green is made of yellow mixed with blue, and yellow and red have an affinity -- both being primary. I could add purple which is a mixture of red and blue, instead of the yellow, and this would also have a steadying influence, but that is not my choice. The next time you look at a painting you might want to notice whether the artist has used yellow or purple as a stabilizer in a red - green situation.

As a still life model I may use a stack of boxes which are square in shape but of different sizes. They are painted in various hues of red. I will modify the green of my background by adding a little red to it. This is a way of neutralizing the green so that it will stay in back of the red boxes where it belongs. If the green background and red boxes were of equal amount and value they would fight with each other for equal space. I will make a series of paintings of these boxes mixing red with white for the palest end of my spectrum and with black for the darkest end of my spectrum in order to keep my scheme of varying intensities of red.

By trial and error I'll find out how to make an organized gradation of colors in order to achieve some experimental sequences and consequently to be able to make the choice of which painting I like the best.

There are various ways of examining the subject of color. There are chemical recipes and formulas, color wheels, pigment charts, mathematical equations, and psychological tracts to study.

The theory of color can also be learned by investigating the science of physics where light waves and optics are used. "How-To" books which describe "Foolkruf" ways of making a fine, finished painting suitable for framing are available. Some of these procedures may appeal to you; and I recommend that an art student be motivated to search for a certain amount of scholarly knowledge, especially if he culls it from books by distinguished authorities such as Paul Klee, Hans Hofmann, and Josef Albers, who were artists as well as teachers and, therefore, had plenty of opportunities to try out their ideas.

Some astonishing relationships occur in colors of both primitive and sophisticated origin, such as I've seen in sand paintings by American Indians and in the clothing and jewelry of nomad tribes in the Middle East. I enjoy these surprising provocations and the chance they give me to make perceptual and instinctive judgments about the innovative sense of color many so called "unworldly" people possess. These exotic influences provide me with the opportunity to make choices which I may later learn are appropriate or inappropriate, but at least I'll have had the experience of choosing.

Tribal people in the Middle East, parts of Africa, India and South East Asia mix all colors in the clothing they wear... the more and the louder, the better. They include sequins, mirrors, colored glass, bits of metal and bells to add flash and noise to their costumes. They make an indiscriminate and discordant art statement.

Perhaps one reason for wearing this garish raiment is that it is a way for them to add sparkle and zest to their limited nomadic lives. It may be their way of keeping up with the Jones's. Also, they want a contrast to their sandy, rocky, arid surroundings.

They appear to choose to spend what little money they have on their clothes. Their mud or straw huts or tents are generally drab and dull.

Even in tropical climates which are lush and green and floral, the natives festoon their bodies with beads, bones, feathers, skins, tatoos and cicatrices; and they ornament their belongings such as shields, masks, and spears. They make these objects the focal points of decoration. They, too, use very little color in their houses.

It would be interesting to go into some reasons why people use color in the ways that they do, but not being an anthropologist or a sociologist I don't feel I've had enough experience or information to make accurate evaluations about this.

I should imagine that economics and religion play a large part in the history and development of color as it is used in various parts of the world. For instance, in contrast to the tribal people who seem to be a group apart, like gypsies, the artists and artisans of many Asian countries were commissioned to produce work for wealthy patrons. Indian and Persian miniatures, rugs, textiles, ceramics are some examples. These artists used very carefully balanced color choices in making their art objects. As you no doubt know, the Moghul Gardens are exquisite in design, color, and use of space. The results are sophisticated. Years of experience with using colors must have preceded these accomplishments. I must conclude that it would be very hard indeed for me to select colors for myself without having seen lots of them beforehand.

Sometimes it seems as though personal choice of color has a very low priority in the welter and confusion of the so called benefits of civilization.

The artistic and childlike part of me relishes the prospect of observing some uncommonly colorful attractions as well as distractions which appear all around us. I want to be prepared to distinguish between them in order to state my preferences with conviction.

Color is a seductive and sometimes troubling and alarming sight, which concerns habits, clothes, experiences, furnishings, customs and climates. Some people think that artists' works can be identified by knowing the region that he lived in -- whether sunny, dry, humid, verdant, foggy, cold, cloudy, austere, urban, wild, impoverished, wealthy. I think this is an individual and controversial view...perhaps it is a romantic notion, fraught with exceptions. Well known examples are Van Gogh's cold, dark, Dutch "Potato Eaters" and his hot, brilliant landscapes of Southern France. Two more illustrations

are the misty, grey paintings by Morris Graves and Mark Tobey who lived in the Northwestern part of the U.S.A.

Sometimes an artist can think a most beautiful spectrum of colors for his picture but, when he actually paints it it turns out to be a chaotic mess. Thinking color and putting color on can be two very different things. The weights and balances may have been wrong. For instance, if I had used a red background with green boxes I'd have had to make the boxes larger in proportion to the red ground. I have seen some marvelous all red paintings, but dealing with two colors which are complementary can set up a terrible commotion if they are unbalanced. Random choice and trial and error are very important, but time consuming, so I must acknowledge the fact that in order for me to make a successful work of art I have to observe some ground rules as well as to take advantage of a lucky accident. If my brush inadvertently slips from the red into the green it will make a good splotch of middle color which will relieve some of the interaction between the red and green. If this is something to be hoped for I'll have to be alert so as not to obliterate this felicitous mistake. But if I'm a hard edge painter I can't afford such a felicitous mistake; it would wreck my plans.

Risk is one of the crucial ingredients in all creative activity. I cannot underrate its importance. The artist, according to his whole environment can endow his work with fantastic and paradoxical color concepts and combinations. He may achieve his goal by an accidental brushstroke if he's a cubist or a hard edge painter. He may or may not be able or willing to explain his work to others, but, if he aims to be consistent within his framework, and wants to succeed more often than fail, he will make some effort to know what he is about by asking himself what his purposes are and how he'll proceed to achieve them.



This writing accompanied a show of The Garden Party, paintings at Ruth Braunstein's Gallery, February, 1980.

THE GARDEN PARTY

Nell Sinton

For more than a year I have been working on a group of paintings and drawings which I call the "Garden Party"

Certain kinds of social events interest me, partly because they are familiar to me and partly because I have an urge to expose and belittle some of the hypocrisies, vanities and mislabellings of a segment of the world in which I live. My continual recollection of my background (sometimes with amusement, sometimes with scorn and sometimes with poignance and affection) paradoxically keeps me up to date. It is a bittersweet experience.

This is the first serial work I have attempted and it delights me to find it so multifaceted and replete with connections and attachments. I think of it as a theme with variations, similar to a musical composition.

My first painting (a large pastel) is a statement of the main theme. A group of people are at the Garden Party. I know some of them, and others are strangers to me although I'm familiar with their types. I am acquainted with their behavior. Then I have made individual paintings and drawings of some of the guests in different postures and situations, and of others who were present at the party but did not appear in the first large painting of the entire group. I had planned to become so familiar with my characters that I'd be able to progress easily to a large abstraction of them for my final variation. But, as time went on I became more and more reluctant to let my people go. I was afraid they'd disappear and I wasn't ready to lose them.

When I first conceived of the guests at this party I thought I would exploit them by putting them on canvas, turn my back on them and let them fend for themselves while I would concern myself with the aesthetics of space, shape, movement and color. I wasn't aware then that the images I had painted were so powerful that I couldn't allow myself to give them up in exchange for abstract concepts. I was so invested in keeping these bodies as my creatures that I felt that if I made any changes other than situational or gestural I would have to relinquish control and give up manipulating them. The prospect was unnerving.

In selecting a theme with variations I also thought that I could eventually arrive at an abstraction by using the technique of familiarity; that abstract images would simply develop out of my habit of drawing the same things over and over again. So much for preconception. My fantasies were too far removed from my reality.

A friend suggested a torn paper collage to free me from my literal shackles. I would be forced to deal with the basic issues of space and form, and not with the techniques of media or details or clutter. I would have to find a way to include my precious psychological insights in a large, unwieldy collage.

But my guests were nagging at me. I wasn't able to manipulate them any more. I wanted to make more drawings and paintings of them, but I was becoming stale. It was time to start working on the collage.

Another hint was dropped; change the subject; Make it a Still Life. What a pun. And, finally I realized that metaphor would be my answer. My people then became things and, they, in turn, became so abstract as to be almost unrecognizable. But, by their gestures and shapes and direction they show signs of life, and I am pleased. My goal may be in sight. I like to play the role of magician. There is more than a shred of reality in this big collage, and so I feel that my progressions are almost complete.

In looking back to what I have accomplished so far I stop here to evaluate.

I find that my watercolor and pastel portraits are the most satisfactory in terms of artistic interpretation because they combine personal expression with technical skill.

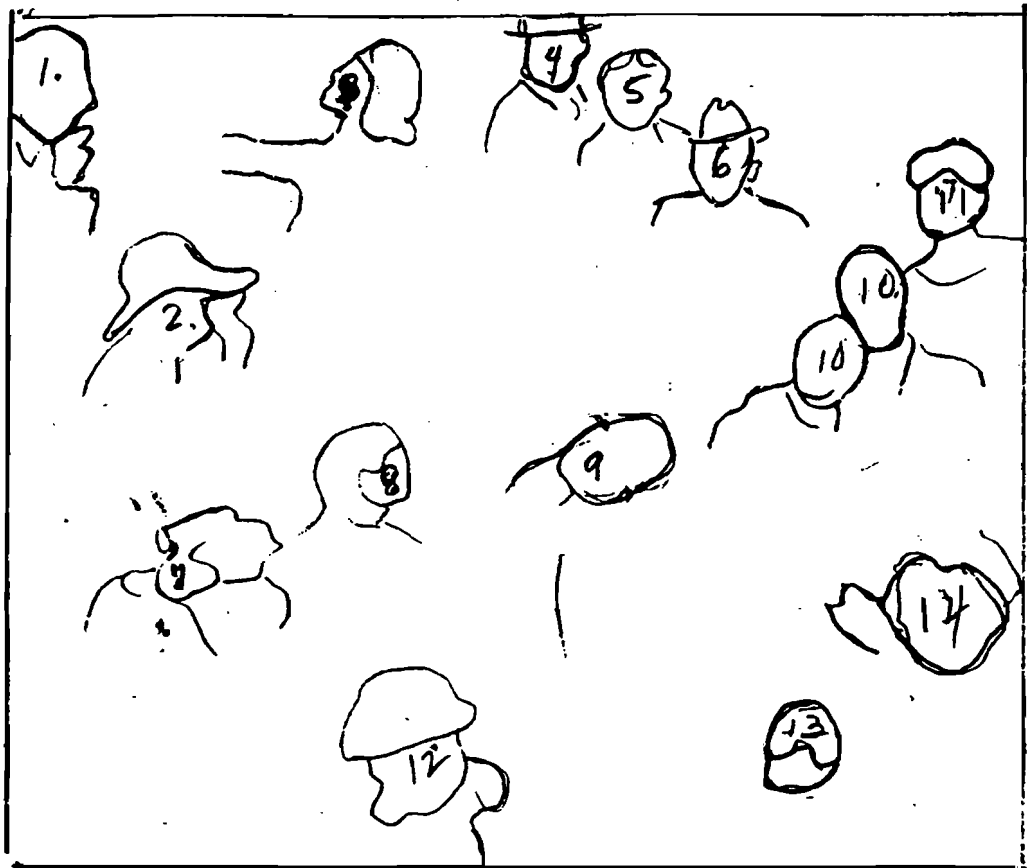
I like my drawings because of the variety of their lines and masses. I think they have a certain elegance and spareness, which appeals to me.

The weight and solidity of the oil painting concerns me. It seems as if they don't put a distance between me and the viewer in the way the other works do. They are a troubled, earthbound, humorless lot. They are strong and formidable and threatening, and they are a burden to me.

I enjoy the collage because I am entertained by the ways in which I have been able to use my materials. The idea of scissors made of tissue paper, for instance, is illogical and yet appropriate; or, the Pretty Lady's elegant bowl of flowers being made from scraps of a tattered Bedouin dress from Israel, or the notion of the drunk being transformed into a potted palm. These sleights of hand delight me.

February 1980.

GARDEN PARTY



KEY TO "THE GARDEN PARTY."

1. The Young Toady
2. The Voyeur
3. The Outsider
4. The Aristocrat
5. The Bohemian
6. The Gambler
7. The Lady With Her Hand In The Cookie Jar
8. The Interrogator
9. The Drunk
10. The Objects of our Affections
11. The Pretty Lady
12. The Censor
13. The Under The Table Lady
14. The Investigator

NOTES FOR MY TALK AT BRAUNSTEIN GALLERY Oct. 22, 1980

I want you to keep in mind that I am a curious person, a restless one, and I am very much interested in change and changes. I have made many changes in my painting styles as well as in my personal life.

When I began to paint seriously - to know that's what I wanted to do in my life, I involved myself first with cute figurative work, and then I became mainly interested in color.

I enjoyed the freedom of abstract expressionism and the physical exercise which went with it. The colorful explosions were exciting.

At the same time I was experimenting with making constructions and collages which may have been the beginning of my present interest in problem solving, which is a very serious concern now.

About ten years ago I returned to painting the figure, but this time I found that I was as interested in exposing some dimensions which lie beneath the surface of the human form as well as in the physical aspects of my models.

Although my paintings have to satisfy me first, I do hope to communicate with you through them. My paintings stand between me and the viewer just as the play stands between the playwright and the audience and the composition exists between the composer and the audience. The only difference is that the playwright and the composer have interpreters in the form of actors and conductors. I'd like you to make your own discoveries when you examine my paintings. I want to share my psychological insights with you without hitting you between the eyes. I hope to evoke your tears and laughter as you gradually recognize attributes which are common to many of us. I'd like you to have a dialogue with my work. I want you to talk back with one another. I am inclined to tease you and trick you and joke with you. You may notice this in some of the paintings.

Brow
G.C.

I have never given up my enjoyment of color. I think of color as sensuous and voluptuous. It's hard for me to work without it.

Another great interest I have is my search for connections. I want to make one thing lead to another either by direction or movement or color or by arranging to have dissimilar shapes and forms relate to each other. I can describe this best by using dissimilar materials in my constructions in order to make an entity. It is a form of discovery.

"Mills College Show Reveals the Process of an Artist's Development"

The retrospective of painting, collage and assemblage by Nell Sinton, on view at the Mills College Art Gallery through March 8, is pure pleasure

Born in San Francisco in 1910, Sinton turned seriously to art in the late 1940s. She had been reared in the oppressive privilege of a well-to-do San Francisco family; culture and even sensibility were taken for granted, but the freedom of expression necessary to art was not.

She studied art in the 1930s; did her share of board and committee work for the San Francisco Museum and the Art Institute; identified strongly with the community. Her postwar divorce freed her to turn to art professionally — with her full attention, that is.

She tells this whole story herself in her 1975 "scroll" painting, "The Social Development of an American Female," which incorporates letters, reviews, and moralizing advice columns with her own painted and written observations of the social forces which marked her.

For that matter, the catalog accompanying the Mills show sets forth just about everything this critic could think of saying about the connections between Sinton's life (and community) and her work, because I wrote the catalog essay. Propriety might suggest that the Tribune refrain from commenting on the show, then.

But Sinton's art doesn't have a lot of respect for conventional propriety; it would be too bad if the catalog essay interfered with the newspaper reader's awareness of this show; and seeing the show itself actually installed brings some additional thoughts to mind.

The first of these is that the show breathes out and in, noticeably, emphasizing the organic process by which Sinton's artistic sensibility has developed. The first paintings here date from the late '40s and record her sense of family and place, of domesticity: portraits of her daughter (herself remembered?), interiors of her home, views of her neighborhood.

"The Old Pope House," painted in 1950, marks her turn toward abstraction. Its darkness is not menacing but enveloping; still, a suggestion of mystery and uncertainty is evident. (The house had burned down; the view is of the exposed basement and foundations.)

There's a gap of eight years; then the paintings resume. The 1958 "Vertical Landscape" and (even more) the "Orange Landscape" of the following year promise a series of light, energetic, open abstracts. The 1960s are only spottily represented: one or two canvases from each year but 1966 and 1968 (and you have to go to the nearby student union to see those, from 1962, 1964 and 1965). What interfered with the succession? The increasing activity with small box-assemblages?

Those boxes are easy to overlook, deceptively emulating Joseph Cornell's well-known "surrealist" pieces. Like Cornell's, Sinton's assemblage is collage first, sculpture second if at all: their point is their juxtaposition of visual references. ("Fortune Teller I" provides the transition from collage to assemblage.)

They reveal the logical hemisphere of her artist's mind, but the logic is still visual, verbal only on a secondary level. "Fred Martin's Box" of 1968 thoughtfully combines Martin's own small painting with bits of material whose origins and appearances recall the context of that turbulent year. "The Student Prince" of 1970 flattens the material out again, making a low relief assemblage-collage whose imagery recalls the arbitrary, elegant precision of New York Dada. (Pica-bia is the obvious godfather here.)

Then, in 1971, the wonderful "Legend of Reckendorf," a large acrylic-on-canvas in which the figure begins to emerge recognizably from the abstract painting of the previous 20 years. Very quickly the figure triumphs: the pastels, first clothed, then nude, of the early 1970s; the masterful, "The Dove" of 1975; "Siberian Reflection" of 1978, (echoing the powerful composition of many of the abstractions); the independent studies and byproducts of "The Garden Party,"

the work which brings us up to the present.

"The Garden Party" is two identically composed works. The pastel is representational, depicting several figures in a garden setting; a collage of the same size (about five by six feet) is abstract, reproducing the same general shapes, textures and colors without the individuating (and therefore restricted) imagery of the guests at this party.

Those guests are the embodiment of the social presences who determined so much of Sinton's development. They stand for acceptability, scandal, hypocrisy, propriety. They emerged again most clearly in the "Social Development;" it may be that the collage version of "The Guests" will have laid them to rest.

Certainly "The Guests," both the pastel and collage versions, recall "Legend of Reckendorf" very clearly. Like that painting, like "Old Pope House," they seem to be articulating points, marking another breath in the slow, measured, organic and reassuring output of this resourceful, energetic and keenly observant artist. "Now she is in a hurry as the Grim Reaper pushes and finishes her," she wrote wryly five years ago on the scroll; ~~there's no trace of haste in the vivacity of her painting, before or since that remark, though, and no need to start rushing now. The work will no~~ doubt continue to lead her forward.

by Charles Shere

This writing accompanied a show of The Garden Party paintings at Ruth Brauntein's Gallery, 1983.

SECRET PLACES

1983

The title of this group of paintings is "Secret Places". The time span of these works is my life time. I have called upon my memory, my fantasy and my reality for all of the paintings.

Within the framework of Secret Places I have listed seven categories. Four of the seven categories are paintings related to my living spaces. These are paintings and drawings about my discovery of half a stuffed parrot in a trunk in the attic of the house in which I grew up. I visited this subject often in my childhood. It provided a source of fascination and horror for me. In reality, the parrot was simply a feather decoration for a hat.

The attic frightened me because it was full of ghosts and unexplained places.

The kitchen in the cellar of the same house had been abandoned in the early 20's. I recall it as threatening, unlit, full of ghostly shadows and imaginary hidden dangers. The memory of a Chinese laundryman as a fantasy enemy is especially vivid. His shadow appears in the painting of the kitchen.

Another separate but related painting is of the old carriage house of my childhood. It was separated by a lawn from the main house where we lived. This dark red Victorian, gabled and shingled building later became our garage. It matched the main house, and I recall a large dog house built in the same style. I remember the carriage house as occupied by automobiles which were kept in mint condition by competent chauffeurs. I remember dark, unkempt, cobwebby areas which were not seen by the casual visitor. A collection of old license plates decorated the folding doors. They hung there like paintings, along with a horse collar and several sets of horseshoes. There was a manhole with a ladder down to the basement where it was said that hay was once kept. My sculptor uncle had his studio on the second floor which was reached by a musty, narrow, circular staircase. It was forbidden to children. It remained a tantalizing mystery to me.

These remembered terrors are some of the subjects I like to paint about. Because I was deliberately searching for spooks, I find them more impressive than the other side of my rememberances which include the excitement and movement of the colorful, stylish cars and the fine figures of the people who used them. My painting of that garage shows rust, decay and darkness. I am still looking for tears, pain and spite under the elegant facades of the beautiful people who rode in the shiny cars. I seem to insist on a two sided view of my world, however topsy turvy it appears to be. Perhaps it is more exciting that way. For me, it is also more believable.

The paintings of staircases indicate that stairs are particularly important to me. Whether they are upstairs or downstairs, stairs represent flights of symbolic fantasy which are exciting and powerful in their color and direction. They represent escape, although most of the escapes I have tried in my life have taken the form of a noose. I

wasn't willing to look at the consequences of working for my freedom. I chose the imagined concept of a noose so as to avoid the price I knew I'd have to pay for living a life of my own choosing.

A collage of a present day bathroom, and a painting of a linen closet are further illustrations of places I like to snoop around in. I am interested in their neat tidiness, and in what secrets I may discover beneath their sanitary surfaces. The bathroom collage hides mysterious bottles and vials and ointments of ancient lineage. I don't know their provenance. To throw them in the trash basket might mean breaking a charm.

In the linen closet, I have indicated an escape hatch through the ceiling in order to introduce some air into this closed up space. The odor of lavender bags paradoxically puts me off the scent, so that I fail to attend to my inquiries into unexplained, dark places. I suspect that some sad, unrequited hopes lurk under the clean, white linens so neatly folded on the shelves. I don't know what I may find there.

There are three paintings in a sixth category which deals with secrets of my travels. One of them is about a childhood incident in the Hotel del Monte. The little girl is trying to attract the attention of the bellboy with her brazen behavior. Another, titled Self Portrait, is remembered from a trip to the Middle East. The third, an episode in the Austrian salt mines, is a vivid, youthful memory of a flirtation.

The seventh category is concerned with botanical secret places. In this area I am not a participant; I am an observer, an onlooker, a voyeur investigating the secrets of plants and flowers. There is a pencil drawing of seed pods and fruits in which I have emphasized secret attributes. I have included a painting of a still life with flowers. However the addition of articles other than flowers makes this a separate statement since it deals primarily with problems of composition. It is titled "The Katie Pillow."

I have made a painting entitled "Approach to the Bridge." This is neither a gateway to an escape like the paintings of stairs, nor an invitation to journeys to other secret places. My concern in making this "Approach" painting is with its shadows. Shadows fascinate me. I am curious about their size, their shape, their color, from whence they come, and who or what may be lurking in their depths. They are the sources of many of my secret places.

Continuing with the subject of shadows, "Behind the Bead Curtain" is a secret place which is my final statement in this series. It is an integration of the subject matter of many of my earlier works. It relates to the "Secrets of the Trash Basket", it deals with the botanical issue of flowers, and it refers to other spaces and places as well as to parts of my modern life which still have the same connotations and connections.

A TALK ABOUT MY TWO SCROLLS

February 1984

I want to talk to you about how I happened to make my two scrolls. After that I will ask you if you will be willing to participate with questions and discussion.

In 1968, although my life as an artist was taking an upward swing, I had arrived at a crossroad in my personal life. All roads seemed to lead to Dead End, and my past, including thirty-eight years of marriage, looked like a hodge-podge of disconnected events--like a series of dates.

When a friend suggested that I make some drawings and paintings in order to clarify and classify the various stages of my life, I was at once fascinated and frightened by the idea. Fascinated, because immediately many images and memories crowded into my head, and I welcomed the opportunity to express them in an artistic format; frightened because I couldn't think of a way to begin, and I wasn't accustomed to revealing my private life. Confusion and hesitation make me irritable. I become impatient when the right answer doesn't show up immediately.

My friend suggested the form of a scroll. My response was positive. Another friend advised me to take a look at the Nuttall Codex made by Mixtec Indians in Pre-Columbian Mexico. Fortunately there is a copy at the San Francisco Public Library, and it was exciting for me to go there to study it.

Then I was ready to begin.

It would be a time-consuming work because there were so many kinds of serious, technical problems to be solved. What materials would I use? What would the dimensions be, what events would I choose to portray? Which ones would I leave out? It was a challenge which I began to look forward to. I like critical thinking, and I enjoy the puzzle-solving aspects of creative work.

I did not work on these two scrolls simultaneously, although I used some of the same problem-solving techniques in both of them. I worked on them chronologically.

I began the first scroll in 1973, and exhibited it at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1974.

For materials, I glued scraps of old canvas and other textiles together. These seemed most suitable since my scrolls would be symbolic of the patched up, rough places in my life, as well as the smooth ones. The

variety of textures and colors of these fabrics was warm and used--even threadbare.

In each case, I made about one hundred drawings, selected the ones I wanted to include, and transferred them onto the canvas in acrylic paint and ink. I worked with my eyes closed, and used my left hand, which is the one I don't usually use. This method gave me freedom of expression as well as control of the concepts. Writing is another skill I employed in combination with drawing and painting. It was one more method of connecting the disparate segments. Furthermore, my writing describes the action in the drawings which, at times, may need emphasis.

As I worked, I discovered that I was still dissatisfied with a certain fragmentation. There wasn't a comfortable flow from event to event. There were gaps. The answer to this problem was collage. Collage provides a repetition which reinforces the strength of my artistic statements. I am an experienced collagist, and I can use my wit and humor in this medium when they aren't appropriate for paintings. Besides, I enjoy the search for paradoxical relationships. Collage is a medium in which I find unrelated materials to put together, sometimes with savage glee, since this often results in surprise and delight. So, I used old photographs, scraps of advertisements and articles from magazines of my early days, and other found objects which were applicable. This was what my scrolls needed to give them vitality, sparkle, and a kind of universality which I consider essential in all works of art.

The first scroll is shorter than the second one because it is concerned with only one area of social behavior: INTEGRITY. It is titled "UNDER THE TABLE AT THE DONNER PARTY," (a dining room frieze). The puns in the title seem an accurate description of some of the behavior which went on at stylish dinner parties I've attended in my life.

The reason I made this scroll is that at the time, I really didn't have the support to know the difference between under the table and on top of it. Above the table were social charades and pretense, and under the table was the hard reality of manipulation.

Although in my family high moral standards were expected as part of our ordinary behavior, I was confused about exceptions, slippages and options, which often appeared distinctly manipulative to me. Some shady contracts were made under the table in the segment of society in which I grew up. Promises were either kept or broken at random. Sometimes I was appropriately punished for unruly behavior, and sometimes my antisocial conduct was unaccountably ignored. At times I didn't feel that the punishment fitted the crime, and often when I questioned what I considered a harsh judgment I was simply told, "Your behavior hasn't been NICE." My haughty, silent response to a grown-up who had put me down with a condescending, rude remark was labeled "not behaving nicely." I felt that my bad manners had been justified.

When I first exhibited this scroll in public, my family was shocked.

In 1974 I began working on my second scroll. I completed it two years later and exhibited it in 1976 at the Oakland Municipal Museum. It is titled "THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF AN AMERICAN FEMALE." For this scroll, which depicts some of what I consider the most important events in my life, I needed a basic structure--a theme which would connect the episodes which I wanted to illustrate so that they wouldn't look fragmented and isolated. I used the kinds of background material (patches and scraps) which I had used for the DONNER PARTY. Again, collage became a particularly unifying device. The scroll grew to be sixty feet long. I am pleased that I was able to keep my focus during the two years I worked on it. I made a strict structure and had a good deal of support from some family and friends.

I had spent a good part of my life labeling as corrupt some customs of the society in which I was brought up. Here was my chance to expose some of the hypocritical manners, attendant injustices and contradictions of the changing times. I don't mean just the discomfort of change. I will be more specific about the kinds of changes I'm talking about. I had chafed at restrictions which were put on me even though I was aware that mine was one of the more liberal households of the period. My family's existing values didn't match the Industrial Age and, when World War I was over, many old and respected customs broke down.

As we begin with the drawing of the baby girl (I will take the observer position, and refer to this part of myself as a separate person), we see her squirming in her restrictive, beribboned swaddling clothes. It is clear that she was a spoiled brat who was already quarreling with convention. As you could see when you looked at the scroll, the collaged excerpts from the magazines of the times are proof of what she would be fighting against. Whether the printed advice was for young parents or for their children, much of it was already out of step with the postwar times. Many popular magazines of this postwar period reflected the customs and habits of an older generation, while young people could discern that their elders were developing enthusiasm for unapproved but attractive liberties, and struggling with whether to acknowledge this.

In spite of Prohibition, alcohol was flowing, sexual freedom was beginning to be apparent, Freud was an avant-garde man, and evolution and revolution were popular subjects for discussion.

There were plenty of up to date, lively periodicals in circulation which were being read by the intelligentsia, but they didn't appear in many middle class homes. They might have carried seditious news of social change to open and boggle the minds of conservative gentry. Explanations would have been required for adolescent readers.

We further examine the scroll to find our pre-adolescent girl, expensively dressed, and behaving like a hoyden. Her energy and vitality

were incompatible in a post-Victorian household, but her world was outgrowing accepted social decorum, and she knew it. Because of her sense of herself as an artist, and her curiosity and quest for authenticity she was a very difficult person to get along with. She was impatient with authority if the authority wasn't rational and authentic. Her parents were proud of her accomplishments, but they didn't encourage her to take pride in herself because that would have been immodest.

When she was sad and confused, she was told that she had everything in the world to be grateful for. She was urged to think of the Starving Armenians. She loved to go to parties, and didn't know why she often felt lonely there. She was ashamed to complain about unstimulating conversations with peers and adults and clumsy, sweaty dance partners. She was frightened of being unpopular while behaving in ways which might guarantee her unpopularity. She felt strangled by over-protection that didn't respect who she was. She didn't understand conflicting values and conventions, and she struggled against them. She knew she belonged in the Jazz Age. At times she waited in vain for someone to hand her tools with which to accomplish her artistic ambitions, and at other times she chafed at the restraints that didn't allow HER to get them and use them.

Her parents could only accept her as an artist as long as her work would be classified as a hobby. For a female to be a professional artist in her walk of life was frowned on. But, this young lady was not up to making any sacrifices of her life style in return for artistic accomplishment.

So, she did what was expected of her and got married early in order to escape into what she thought would be the free world. At the time, she felt she had no alternative. Being spoiled and indulged had not helped her to make appropriate decisions--and she soon discovered that the responsibilities and obligations placed on a young matron took her farther away from achieving her goal of entering the world of professional artists.

After ten years she was socially becoming more and more of a persona non grata. She decided that the time had come to take a huge risk. She took the decisive step without knowing the high price she would ultimately pay for making this move, nor the discipline she would place on herself, nor the unpopularity she would suffer from the disapproval of some of her family and friends.

She made painting a high priority in her life, and worked hard at it. She returned to Art School and did well there. She entered competitions. Her work was accepted in exhibitions. She became a member of the San Francisco City and County Art Commission, and of the Artists Council of the San Francisco Art Institute, as well as the board of trustees of the same institution. She made friends with other artists and was surprised to find herself acceptable. She was using her energies finally in places where she wanted to belong.

Today I can say that the fight has been worth it. Now her children find her cooperative, pleasant and loving.

She has learned a great deal. She learned that she would never get respect from other professional artists unless she found out how to develop discipline and integrity in making her artistic statements. She learned to take seriously what was important to her, and she learned to behave so that others would take her seriously. She learned never to leave her sense of humor at home, and she learned to be flexible enough to compromise where she thought it was important.

I imagine that many of you are also feeling restrictions about your educational and artistic choices, and I doubt that they are very different from mine. Perhaps some of these basic issues would be the same.

WORKSHOP FOR SCROLL TALK

1. What was significant about your grandmother for YOUR growth, or, for who you are today?
2. What are the social values which you have chosen from your parents' time, and how do they affect you today?
3. If the values and customs in your background were restrictive, contradictory and unreasonable, what was it like to struggle against them? What has been important for you to maintain of the value system in your time, and what has been important for you to reject or put aside?

MY PAINTING "THE EMPTY ROOM IS FILLED WITH SHADOWS"

December 5, 1985

I have a frightening image of the windows in flames, but I think that would be cheap and sensational in my painting.

I would prefer to paint the shadows in a way which would produce a dramatic and mysterious effect without losing control--which is perhaps the underlying reason that I didn't want to inflame the windows.

To do this would also set off my feelings of fears of destruction, loss and imprisonment (alive or dead), and consequent blame. I don't want to deal with these.

After all, my only responsibility for the shadows is that I either allow them to be there or I shut them out. I'm not the cause of them unless I call manipulating the blinds my responsibility. I seem to assume that a conflagration would be altogether my fault.

Nowadays I'm conscious of the subject of losses as a growing important issue. Some possible losses are: money, material possessions, physical faculties, relatives and friends, some social skills and contacts in the art world and other. This last loss can be beneficial since it would force me to spend more time with my work and less time to complain about disappointments. But I might become warped and crabby.

In reference to the flames, it may be a forced issue. Maybe Juanita was right. I'm not genetically perhaps--but more probably environmentally --vulgar enough in my work or lifestyle. That's one risk I'm scared to take in order to be a possibly popular artist. The price is too high. My scrolls were risky in subject but not vulgarly presented.

I would rather depict an ominous, brooding situation in shadowy, subtle undertones of spaces and shapes, than an unsubtle holocaust. I would rather have the viewer discuss his own feeling responses to my work than to give him a program of what he ought to feel.

I left out being tricky. Is that included in the shadows description? Is that bad? I don't think so if it's well done and admitted to.

LANDMARKS—POINTS OF VIEW

1986

Nell Sinton

I began this series of paintings in 1984, using landscape as a focus. I didn't think I had a plan other than to choose some familiar places. I did realize that in recent years I have given more thought to ideas about the behavior of shapes and spaces.

As I went about examining some favorite local landscapes, I found that I was beginning to look at them not specifically as earth, sky, water, trees, buildings etc., but as abstract forms. These were becoming my most important consideration because I liked the way they fitted together, whether in harmony or in conflict.

In the Fall of 1984 I went to the Ruins of Sutro Baths (between the north side of the Cliff House at the Beach and Land's End). The sights and sounds out there—seals, gulls and ocean waves invading the remains of swimming pools—made it difficult for me to concentrate on the changing shapes and spaces.

After two months of sketching and painting there I felt I had succeeded and I moved East to Alta Plaza Park, where I worked through December and the first three months of 1985.

At this point, I took time out to assess the development of my paintings, and found that while I had been thinking about shapes and spaces, all the paintings I had completed had an additional dimension. This was a strong tendency to deal with places which have long been familiar to me.

Moreover, my landscapes which had begun with an almost imperceptible hint of built structures combined with nature, were now showing an equal interest in both. Moreover, my oldtime involvement with paradox and contrast was apparent in familiar symbols and metaphors.

For instance, I had used the vehicle of staircases in my last exhibition, "SECRET PLACES." Now, at Alta Plaza, this theme has reappeared—and reappeared out in the open. In "SECRET PLACES" all the indoor stairs led to mysterious places.

Alta Plaza Park is a combination of built and natural landscape. The park was constructed in a curious Ziggurat format, with many flights of stairs connecting the levels which are planted with trees, bushes and lawns. This was a good place for my investigations into shapes and spaces.

I found that color again was becoming more and more important.

In May of 1985 I began to examine spaces and shapes in the rooms of my house. I made a painting of the spaces displaced by two chairs, a piano and a piano bench.

This was followed by a trip to the Embarcadero where I found a structure involved with the same kinds of arches, squares and triangles as I had observed in the furniture at home.

1986 arrived with a series of winter storms during which I remained indoors and looked out of my windows and watched the enormous, heavy cloud formations getting ready to spill over onto the relatively insignificant shapes of waterfront buildings and ships.

At the point of this writing, I have returned once again to interior spaces. I am occupied with light and shadow in my bedroom. Again, circles, squares, rectangles and triangles have become important to me. My concern is with a synthesis of shapes and spaces in the outdoors and the indoors. The subject is the coincidental actions of the sun, a natural force, on internal built spaces (floors, walls, windows), which results in a combination of reality and illusion created by the shadows.

This three year old group of paintings is linked together by a sense of place-ness. Many of the landscapes are about the three watery sides of the San Francisco Peninsula... a definite preference of mine. Exceptions are works which describe my summer in Italy in 1985, and my annual vacations in Santa Fe.

No matter what I paint about, I am demonstrating a personal point of view. I feel that I am beginning to integrate shapes and spaces with familiar places.

NOTES ABOUT MY CHILDREN, AND EDUCATION

I am pleased to have this opportunity to express my pride in my three children, my twelve grandchildren and my five great-grandchildren. I'm grateful to them for enhancing my life with their young points of view and attitudes, which make them entertaining company. They keep me up to date. I like hearing their sad and happy news, and I like it when they ask to hear stories of my life and times. I am aware that the single most important thing that I can give them is how I see the world through the eyes of an artist. Because I couldn't take credit for this when we were young, I refused to discuss it or even let them see my work.

My children are Margot Biestman, Joan Dodd, and John Walter Sinton. My sons-in-law are Perry Biestman and Bruce Dodd. My daughter-in-law is Wendy Sinton. These children are sympathetic to me when I need to be helped over the rough places: we have different ways of taking care of each other. It hasn't always been like this. It has taken time to figure out our similarities, differences and special interests. What is more important is that in our ages I feel that we are compatible.

I put all my children in private school because I disliked it so much that I didn't want them to have anything better than I had. I thought private school would get them into universities more comfortably than public schools would and they'd meet the right people there. But they weren't the right people and I began to hate them all. My perversity was an issue. But I was more confused than perverse. I asked, "What do I really want?" If I'd had the right support would I have had the right values at public school? I doubt it. I was in too much conflict with myself. It was a confusion.

By the time my children went to school I was already seriously into art. I went out of my way to look and dress like a hippie, but in the end I was extremely interested in fashion. My mother and I agreed on this subject. I had a great wardrobe. And--I was an artist in spite of everything. "So I'm going to be an artist and not go to college and not learn anything. I'm going to become an artist and that's where my focus will be." (I have so much trouble saying that I gave my children my artistic vision and saying that they were smart enough to accept it.)

I have talents and some brains which I'm still trying to use to my advantage. My talents are an ability to take notice, but my one single

gift is how I see the world with the eyes of an artist. I'm grateful to have these eyes which have access to my stomach, my brains, and my ability to love and laugh. I try to keep some of my life's formalities as minor accessories. They are often useful. And, I try to behave appropriately when I enjoy the surprises of sudden bursts of humor and spontaneous laughter. I find the intelligence, wit, and compassion of some others to be refreshing. And I should hope so!

Can you imagine how I felt to walk across a university campus to teach my classes, when I had never attended college myself? My rebellion about not going to college came out in my anger and resentment in general. So, it was a thrill to be able to teach, and that's where I really got appreciation and recognition not only as an artist and a teacher, but as a valuable person who had lots to give.

I want to share this gift with my children and grandchildren because I couldn't take credit for this when we were young. I refused to discuss it or even let them see my work. But I encouraged them to look at nature, I investigate it all the time. It's one of my measurements of the rights and wrongs of the world. I have quite a large collection of art books in my library but I didn't share that part of my interests with my family any more than I was willing to talk about my paintings.

Nell Sinton

Written May 8, 1992

"MISTAKES"

[A workshop given by Nell Sinton for children in Margot's and Joan's classes, 1981.]

1. Introduction by teacher. I tell students what I do.
2. General questions from class.
3. Focus on accidents in art. How do you feel as a child artist making mistakes? I tell them I felt terrible. "If a thing is worth doing it's worth doing well...why can't you be perfect like--...there's only one way of doing things..." I tell them they are lucky to have choices. They can have a tantrum if they don't like the assignment, or draw or write about what they hate.
4. How do you deal with accidents you make now?
5. I am here to teach you the value of artistic mistakes and happy accidents.
6. I show a painting of mine and ask the class to point out what they feel are mistakes in the painting. What do the mistakes do to the painting? I tell how I used mistakes. Were my accidents deliberate? What is a happy accident? A good mistake is when it leads you out of a tight spot, but you must recognize it as good and take credit for it. A good mistake helps to solve a problem. A good mistake does not MAKE a problem. A BAD mistake makes a problem where there was none before. It may destroy some good work. It needs to be fixed. You have to have experience to tell the difference between good and bad, or ask someone you can trust to help you. Sometimes we have to take a chance on making a mistake. If the results are good it will have been worth the risk. If the results are bad, then we'll have to try again, but it's okay to make a mistake while we're on our way to a possible discovery.
7. Assignment: draw a portrait of me or the teacher in crayons. Work slowly and make it large. More bad mistakes are usually made in tiny drawings. If you make a mistake don't erase it or throw it away. Don't bring it to us. We will see what happens when what you draw is different from what you see in real life. The picture has a life of its own. You are not expected to be perfect. I want you to have a good time while you are doing this work. You are not experienced enough to be perfect even if you try to copy a photograph made by a camera.

8. If time, ask students to tell if they made any mistakes and how they feel about them and what the mistakes do to their pictures. Tell the students they may ask for feedback from one other student and from the visiting artist.

"CREATING A SAFE PLACE FOR THE GIFTED CHILD"

[A workshop given by Nell Sinton in Portland, Oregon, with Juanita Sagan and Fred Newton, January 12, 1982.]

1. Fred introduces me and gives reasons for him and Juanita being there.
2. Introduce myself. I am a painter. I make collages and scrolls of social commentary. I am here primarily as an art teacher and as a teacher of teachers.

As an artist, my commitment to teaching is to see that my students will be allowed to develop their own resources and have the courage of their convictions in a supportive environment so that self criticism will be at a minimum. Even if they plan careers other than art, I want them to know what it is like to have an artistic experience, which to me means excitement, pleasure, risk, invention, and a sense of accomplishment; the opposite of drudgery.

Since many of us here are artists, I would like to give you a chance to relate to me as an artist, and I'm going to give you some copies of the catalogue of my most recent show for you to share with each other. I'd like you to take ten minutes for sharing, after which I'll be glad to answer any questions you may have to ask of me. (The catalogues were paid for by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts so that they could be made available to libraries and resource centers, but people are expected to pay for them if it's for their personal use.)

Thirty minutes including Juanita and Fred.

I want to comment on the importance of the uses of mistakes. As far as children are concerned, I would like to say that in my experience I have found that in supervising young artists it is helpful to remind them to keep in touch with the childlike part of themselves which contains their spontaneity, their fantasy and their humor, and sometimes what adults might call their mistakes. It is crucial for them to find a balance between their emotions and their intellects. If we overemphasize the intellectual side of gifted children, they will outgrow their peers and become friendless and lonely.

By encouraging the use of simple materials and simple concepts in the classroom, the student has a wider latitude for solutions. Chalks, crayons, colored construction paper and newsprint pads are good materials to work with in these types of assignments, as well as scissors and glue

for collages. Archetypal symbols such as circles, squares, triangles and varieties of lines will give plenty of opportunity for variety in size, color, shape, and scale. Within these limitations young students are able to call upon resources of fantasy, reality and memory because they are not being overpowered by materials and concepts which they can neither handle nor understand yet. Opportunity for pretentiousness is minimized.

It is important to give all young people--especially gifted ones--all the room they can use for experimentation. We can expect to receive some wonderful creative surprises from the things children invent out of their mistakes. They have deep resources which are often untapped because of their fears of being unpopular or unlike more conventional others. I think we have all had this experience more than once.

I urge you to give your students the opportunity to be free just as you give yourselves this opportunity. I enhance many of the mistakes in my paintings by adding things which aren't really there, and by changing the scale while always trying to retain the flavor of the place I am in at the time. I'd like to illustrate this point by showing you several of my watercolors.

Show my watercolors.

Point out: "these are the kind of mistakes which have given me the opportunity to improve on what I actually saw in front of me. In December when I was developing a new style I stood in my studio one morning saying to myself 'I'm just waiting for the right mistake to come along so that I'll know where to take the next step.' Is there any one of you who would be willing to tell us of a similar experience you may have had?" (limit answers to three)

In painting, if I always think of things in the way they're supposed to be, I'd expect very pedestrian results. I'd never see things through metaphor or through fantasy. My personal style would never make itself known.

Thirty minutes.

And now, before I give you an assignment, I'd like you to do some warm-ups. There are several reasons for doing warm-ups. Actors warm up before they go on stage, and so do dancers. All athletes warm up. Singers do and also musicians. It is a form of flexing your muscles in preparation. The warm-up exercise I am giving you was used by the Bauhaus in Germany in the 1920's. For this exercise, if you are willing, I would like you to close your eyes. Many people have learned to draw with their eyes closed. We use this technique as a way for people to bypass their tendency to make critical demands on themselves to produce a "good drawing." The results of drawing with your eyes closed are often more pleasing. However, if you don't want to close your eyes, please focus your

eyes on a spot on the wall or ceiling, but don't look at another person.
Please put only one drawing on each page.

Hand out four pieces of newsprint and one piece of graphite to each person.

LESSON PLANS

1. SPIRALS

Get in a comfortable position. Close your eyes. Explore your paper (texture, size, limits). Explore your graphite (weight, size).

1. Using your accustomed hand (the one you usually use), eyes closed, graphite in your hand, draw a spiral in clockwise direction, starting from the outside and going in. Turn the page.
2. Using your other hand, draw a spiral in clockwise direction, starting from the outside and going in. Turn page.
3. Using your accustomed hand, draw a spiral in counter-clockwise direction, starting from the outside and going in. Turn page.
4. With the other hand, draw a spiral in counter-clockwise direction, starting from the outside and going in. Turn page.

Fifteen minutes.

2. TORN PAPER COLLAGE

Materials: crayons, newsprint paper, white paper 24" x 18", white tissue paper, colored construction paper (all colors) 24" x 18", black construction paper 24" x 18", glue.

Warm-ups: spirals. Fifteen minutes.

Focus: spontaneity, composition, action of colors, shapes, textures, background.

Introduce assignment.

Take a piece of white paper for your background, a black one and a colored one and a piece of tissue paper.

Close your eyes. Explore your papers for their texture--try to differentiate between them. It isn't necessary to use all the paper but I suggest that you use more than you'd like to use, in order to have the experience of the third dimension by making layers.

Open your eyes, and, using your two pieces of colored paper, and your piece of tissue paper, tear them into shapes which are pleasing to you. Close your eyes and arrange them on your piece of white paper. When you feel satisfied, you may open your eyes and decide to change your arrangement, but I'd like you to be able to say why you want to change it. And then paste your pieces down.

Choose to share with partner and discuss or put on board and get it from me.

One hour.

3. MASS-VOLUME

Group 2, Lesson III: Weight and Mass Using a Human Back

Materials: charcoal, paper, crayons.

If there is no model, pick a partner and take turns drawing each other. I would like you to take plenty of time to study the back of the model or your partner. Look at the back carefully, looking only at the area between the hairline and the hip. Think of the structure of this body. Is it different from other bodies you may have studied? In what way? Consider this back as though it were a tree trunk with a spinal column unseen because it is inside and invisible, and also invisible but existing muscles and bones and blood vessels. Think of what is under the skin. What makes the hills and valleys? Think of how this human trunk is supported, and consider its strengths and weaknesses. Think of how the weight and masses are distributed. Think of the balances. What are its limitations? What possibilities has it for movement?

Draw the back. Don't draw the flesh. Draw the skeletal structure. Then gradually draw the whole. You need to be able to draw the spinal cord and the curve of the rib cage. You need to have a supporting structure, the shoulder blade, etc. Especially the cylindrical shape of the rib cage.

The first time only draw the bony structure, in the same way that you drew the membrane inside the bell pepper.

When you are ready, get some charcoal and paper, close your eyes and make a drawing from memory with your unaccustomed hand. Turn the page and with your other hand and closed eyes make a drawing from memory.

Turn the page, open your eyes and draw the torso with your unaccustomed hand. Turn the page and draw the torso with your other hand and your eyes open.

Write, share, discuss.

After the break: draw the front of the model. Draw the bones which you think are there--no flesh. Draw the sternum, the clavicle, the breast bone, the rib cage. See the back bone through the rib cage.

4. THE FIGURE

Group 2, Lesson III--Mills: Torso from Hairline to Waist*

Think of the chest cavity--draw as if from the inside out. Remember the 3D quality of the lesson fruits and vegetables. Concentrate on the insides of the chest cavity. Think of the spinal cord, the rib cage, the flesh and the skin covering. What makes the outside of the body bulge and curve? I do not want you to concentrate on details. I want you to emphasize the masses which you see and envision in your imagination to be under the skin.

Start at the back of the neck just under the hairline. Observe the spine, down to the waist. Look at the bone of the spine and flesh as it goes lower and then the bulge of the rib cage, the clavicle, the rib cage. By using charcoal you can only get the structure statement, not the flesh. I want you to show the structure. Only go as far as the rib cage, but if you want to go further, focus on the upper part of the spine and neck and the line of the shoulder. The body hangs from that. The skeleton is an armature supporting a piece of sculpture. If you go below the rib cage you will have to deal with the waist which is a soft part of the body which has no bones, only flesh.

You may use the flat part of your charcoal and with it feel your way around the body--feel the bumps and depressions. Where you feel darkness, press down and lean on your charcoal. Function as though the charcoal or chalk were moving into a soft substance. If it were slightly pliable and you push hard on it it would move in a fraction of an inch.

Make as many drawings as you like. Read Nikolaides.

*The structure of the invisible.

5. MASS-VOLUME

(Given at College of Marin and at Mills College)

Inside fruit and vegetables. Three-hour lesson.

Bring fruit, vegetables, knives, paper towels.

Onions, apples, grapefruits, bell peppers;; one of each fruit for four people.

Materials: charcoal, paper, crayons.

Integration: (Twenty minutes) 10:20. What do you expect to get from this class? Etc.

Warm-ups. Faiss Spirals. 10:40.

Introduce Assignment: focus: mass-volume--texture--shape--background. Read lesson. Five minutes. 10:45.

Draw fruits from inside out--closed eyes--unaccustomed hand. Forty minutes. 11:25.

Write and share if finished. One thing you like and one thing that you didn't like about the experience. Fifteen minutes. 11:35.

Break. Thirty minutes. 12:00

Cut fruits open. Pain or draw a composition of either bits and pieces of the fruits or the whole fruits. You may work from memory or from sight. Focus on a 3D quality. Thirty minutes. 12:30.

Critique: one at a time. Not everyone each time. Thirty-five minutes. 1:00.

Homework: do the same lesson in different materials.

Bring charcoal and paper, scissors, glue for the next class.

Bring newspapers, scissors, glue, large construction paper.

Give list of materials for other classes. Pads of paper 24 x 18, charcoal, white paper pads, ink, brush, cup of water, paper towels, glue, crayons, scissors, masking tape.

Take roster--Nikolaides.

6. MASS-VOLUME: INSIDE FRUIT AND VEGETABLES

[Probably another version of preceding lesson plan.]

Hand out 10 sheets paper for each student.

Materials: onions, apples, grapefruits, green bell peppers (enough for one of each for every four people). Knives, writing paper, crayons, drawing paper, charcoal.

Put class in groups of four. Supply each group with an onion, an apple, a grapefruit, a bell pepper. Put the fruits on the floor in the middle of each group (or table). Have everyone look at them. Select one piece of fruit. Look at it very carefully; with your eyes closed, explore it by holding it in your hand, using the focus of inside out. Think of its mass, bulk, weight, and texture. With your accustomed hand and your eyes closed, take a piece of charcoal and draw the fruit you have been examining. Do not make an outline drawing. Think of what is in the middle of each fruit. Picture that and show how it grows from the inside...how much it weighs...how smooth or rough it is. Keep in mind that in this lesson the mass is more important than the outline. If you find it necessary, let your drawing go off the page. Imagine what is inside of each fruit separately and draw that. Think about weight and then about line, and the differences. With your unaccustomed hand do the same thing with the same piece of fruit. Follow these instructions, making drawings of each piece of fruit, first with your accustomed hand and then with your unaccustomed hand, keeping your eyes closed.

After you have each drawn each piece of fruit, take a piece of paper and write one statement of what you liked and one statement of what you dislikes about your experience or about your drawings.

Share with a partner and be prepared to show either one of your works or a statement of your writing with the large group. After you are all through we will cut the fruit open.



April, 1957

Alfred Frankenstein

Some months ago it was my pleasure to serve, with four others, on the jury for the annual exhibition at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor. As often happens when juries start functioning, the pictures shown us for a long stretch were uniformly dismal. We had to throw them all out, and were beginning to wonder if we'd have a show at all when suddenly all five votes went positive. The painting before us was a little one. It was light in subject and treatment and it was definitely not important (capital I). But it had something—humor, taste, and skill in the application of paint to canvas. That picture was by Nell Sinton of San Francisco, to whom the Legion has now turned over an entire gallery.

The qualities revealed by Mrs. Sinton in the picture referred to above are repeated throughout the show. She seems to belong to the school that despises the brush and uses the knife almost exclusively for the high, bright, enameled or juicy effect it produces. She has an admirable sense of caricature and all of that is amusing or delectable. By the same token, she is less successful when she attempts somber, highly dramatic or psychologically significant themes. At least I found myself much drawn to things like the study of a Victorian interior called "The Old Look," "Engine House 23 at Christmas," "Three on a Porch," the "Young Girl With a Veil" and the still lifes, and found much less in things like "Desolation," "Decoration Day" and "Picnic." For some years the annual exhibition of the 13 watercolorists has been one of the most pleasant events of the art year in San Francisco. One of the founding fathers of the 13, Nat Levy, is having a one-man show at the Maxwell Galleries, and this is no less pleasant than the exhibitions of the group as a whole.

Alfred Frankenstein,
March 1949.

SPEED and lightness versus speed and weight is the theme of a brilliant new exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art. It is devoted to paintings by Nell Sinton and William Brown, both of whom work at a tremendous tempo, but with very different kinds of impact.

Mrs. Sinton's pictures fairly whirl off the canvas in the flying excitement of their line. However, the swoop and dive of her brush invariably compose—even if in highly individual patterns—and the vigor of her color is in keeping with the vigor of her design. Often the landscape and the flower piece lie just below the surface of her paint, and occasionally they break through, but rarely beyond the stage of hint or suggestion.

Brown does not hint or suggest, and he makes no bones about subject matter. His favorite theme, at least in this show, is football, and he captures its shock and shatter in huge, loose, immensely dynamic canvases. He uses color

mostly to add heaviness and energy to the strife of his line, and while there is nothing literal about his approach, the subject does condition the nature of his results. You may look at these things as sheer abstractions if you wish, but when a man spends a great deal of time organizing his drawing and painting around the choreography of football, perhaps he means us to consider football as part of it.

Art: On an Outgoing TideFeb. 27 ~~New York Times~~, 1962

Nell Sinton's Abstractions at the Bolles Gallery Are High Watermark of Day

By BRIAN O'DOHERTY

EXHIBITIONS in the galleries come and go like a tide. Sometimes the week is borne in a high wave of three or four excellent shows. At other times, weeks can pass with tides close to the low watermark. Though some good artists are reviewed today, the tide was going out.

For this low day, Nell Sinton's work at the Bolles Gallery, 206 East Fiftieth Street was the high watermark. Miss Sinton is a distinguished San Francisco painter, and her work has some of the positive optimism of that most cosmopolitan of provincial towns. Her art is stabilized close enough to reality to leave a strong psychological taint in her abstractions, with hints of landscape visible in the occasional collusion of stroke and color.

Some of her abstractions fall apart, but she is a very good artist whose control and ambitions are matched in most of her work. Her large work is better than her smaller pieces, which is unusual. The size of her work is fully justified at a time in art when largeness is constantly threatened by vacancy.

SAN FRANCISCO

Betty Breckenridge, John Coplans, Joanna C. Magloff, James Monte, E. M. Polley.

REVIEWS

82ND ANNUAL EXHIBITION OF THE SAN FRANCISCO ART INSTITUTE, San Francisco Museum of Art: On the first page of the catalog for this show, a line is quoted from the Bylaws of the Institute as follows: the 82nd Annual of the SFAI "is to exhibit the best and most vital of the various approaches to art in the Bay Area in conjunction with the work of other parts of the country, and to provide an opportunity for unknown artists to have their work recognized." The two words, "best" and "vital" are sure to rankle many persons, artists mostly, who are working in modes which the Institute considers un-best and un-vital. The statement is likeable, though because it says "best" and "vital" without equivocation; happily, so does the show at the San Francisco Museum.

Younger known and unknown painters and sculptors are everywhere in evidence. Lynn Foulkes, William Geis, Louis Guttierrez, Cornelia Hudson, Robert Hudson and Roger Jacobson are all younger people with outstanding work on exhibit in the current show. Numerous other artists whose work has never been seen in this area are included in the exhibit, affirming the last phrase of the quoted bylaw.

The exclusions of a myriad of modern styles such as cubism, impressionism, surrealism and neo-classicism could have been anticipated. In the main, these styles have been corrupted by artists who have in the past and are in the present trying to re-paint or re-sculpt the classic statements which have been done to a turn by their progenitors. In exhuming a past style, even a recent one, the artist must bring a creative drive that re-shapes and re-evaluates the past scaffolding upon which his painting or sculpture rests. The work of Bacon, de Kooning and Giacometti are particularly relevant in this context. The omission of hard-edge work is disappointing but is probably due to few entries. The few examples of neo-dada or pop-art were inferior, generally. One expected to see many more examples of these two idioms which are so widely exhibited on both coasts.

The concept of inviting twenty-four painters and sculptors to participate in the 82nd Annual jury-free, had been bitterly attacked. The fact is, the jury chose a group of the most influential painters, sculptors and printmakers in the entire area, influential both as artists and teachers. The disappointment is that many of the influential artists, and artist-teachers have inferior examples of their work on view here. Frank

Lobdell's painting is not near the level his work usually attains. Richard Diebenkorn's painting is equivocal and unresolved. Elmer Bischoff's work is appallingly inept. James Weeks' painting reminds one of a mishandled Chardin. Nathan Oliveira's drawing is a diluted example of his best work. These five artists have all had a profound influence on the rising generation of artists in the area. It is unfortunate that their work in this exhibit doesn't give a clue to their individual strengths.

Thankfully, examples such as "Honk" by Peter Voukos, are outstanding. This particular piece is by far the finest cast sculpture Voukos has exhibited to date. Hassel Smith's "All American Girl" is a sharp, bright comment which harks back to Smith's earlier work. Nell Sinton's painting is a lovely work with a tighter, more centralized image than is usual for her. (The placement of Mrs. Sinton's painting, and those adjacent, was an error. The high panel dividing the space allows no reflected light into the area.) James Budd Dixon, whose work it is a pleasure to see exhibited again, has a solid painting displayed, as do Joan Jacobs and Robert Downs. Both Julius Wasserstein and Felix Ruvulo display paintings superior to anything either has shown in the recent past. The large, painterly canvas of Julius Hatofsky is one of the highpoints of the exhibition. Alden Mason's "Intruder in a Roman Bath" arrests the interest with its juxtaposition of hard and soft shapes and its exquisite, tasteful color.

For the first time in the history of the Art Institute Annual, the sculpture exhibited tended to push the paintings closer to the wall. The sculpture of the San Francisco Bay Area has reached a maturity in the last two years that was unthinkable five years ago. Michael Frimkess, Manuel Neri, Alvin Light, Wilfrid Zogbaum, Sidney Gordin and Arlo Acton each have high caliber pieces in the exhibit.

The annual this year is not a doubtful success. It is rather a hellbent, foot-stomping, yea-saying affirmation of aliveness. It is the purest example of the image of San Francisco painting and sculpture that has been organized in many years. J.M.

Awards in the 82nd Annual consist of invitations to exhibit up to five works each in the 1964 Annual, which will consist of these works only. The award winners are: Arlo Acton, Bruce Conner, Richard Diebenkorn, James Budd Dixon, William Geis, Robert Hudson, John Inhe, Jack Jefferson, Alvin Light, Seymour Locks, James Melchert, Win Ng, Harold Paris, Deborah Remington, Charles Ross, Felix Ruvulo, David Simpson, James Weeks, and Morris Yarowski. Honorable Mention was given to Jerome Johnson, Dana Goldman, Lynn Foulkes, Elmer Bischoff, Matt Glavin, Rodger Jacobsen, Gordon Cook, Manuel Neri, Gardiner McCauley, and Paul Binai.

Also at the San Francisco Museum of Art is a exhibition entitled "Corridor" consisting of a series of small works by four artists linked by the format rather than any stylistic unity. Of the four (Nell Sinton, Fred Martin, Tony Delap, Roy DeForest) Fred Martin emerges as a genuine and most creative radical. His work, made with gouache and pencil on common papers (as against the handmade paper "my work for posterity school") is closely linked in format and spirit to medieval manuscripts, combined with the spiritual overtones of Zen. His art is completely literal, something he shares in common with Jim Dine, but Martin was the forerunner. He is a provincial eccentric with a genuinely fresh vision, working completely outside the common traditions of contemporary American art. His work is without obvious ego; he writes on one work "Remember it is only ART". His work is also anagogic: he seeks for the mystery of life in a blade of plastic grass. The strength of his art is his dry, matter-of-fact, and totally personal vision.

Delap, who has recently adopted this small format as a consistent element of his art, is an assemblagist. His works contain coins, small pieces of old wood and metal, sides of matchboxes, Coke bottle caps, as well as cutouts from newspapers and other printed media. Littered with dirty pieces of crumpled paper and dark and somber in color, he could be likened to an up-to-date Schwitters, but with a certain freedom and looseness of organization derived from de Kooning and Marca-Relli. He sets out to deliberately make dirt into beauty and he succeeds. His work is nostalgic, ephemeral and very engaging. But he is a miniaturist who has just arrived at an aspect of art that younger artists have already absorbed and use more expressively. In comparison to Lynn Foulkes, who recently filled two rooms at the Pasadena Museum with an enormous number of powerful, large and gripping images in this genre, he is merely a charming Johnny-come-lately.

Nell Sinton, normally a nature lover who abstracts images of gardens and flowers, benefits from this reduced scale which brings out a latent lyricism and inventiveness missing from her large works. She manipulates her material to produce a poetic and delicate surface, but in no way evinces germinal ideas. (But at least she is not afraid to be feminine, an aspect many women artists are terrified of, and as a result try to out-do men by an athletic display of vim, vigor and punch rather than depth of plastic intelligence.)

DeForest's small constructions are not allied in any way to his three co-exhibitors, who all tend to be more graphic, and who shelter behind glass. He merely reduces his normal scale of up-to-date Barbola work (an early and now probably forgotten do-it-yourself colored plastic paste that arty mums used to decorate mirrors, cigarette boxes and sea shells in pre-television days). Several paintings, notably *Sonnet* and *A Long Day in Arkansas* directly derive from Miro, particularly aspects of his Majorcan ceramics. DeForest, to judge by an earlier large and excellent work entitled *Furrier of the Antipodes* (shown in the "Arts of the Bay Area" in this same museum), seems to lack both inventiveness and personality on this small scale.

Art International, Mar. 25, 1963

Nell Sinton's collages, also at Quay, indicate perhaps more clearly than ever before the exactitude, the completeness and the uniqueness of her fantasy. Frequently dismissed as an also-ran in the crowd of collage, as another perhaps more amusing dilettante in the hosts of those who also paint, she proves, on the contrary, to anyone who might give the time to look, to taste, touch and dream, that a woman of culture might be one also of sensibility. The composition of the works is not fortuitous in result no matter how whimsical in impulse; the content of emotion and suggestion and of texture and trash is infinitely refined and exact.

A simple symptom of this thoroughgoingness and firmness of command ("These shall be art") is that no matter how accidental and disparate the source of the elements in the work might be—magazines, playing cards, shells, cloth, soot

—they have all become of one substance, fused out of many. Their spatial organization is of many surprises: the use of many layers compressed into one, of one layer expanded into several by means of planes of glass, and of compartments real and compartments only drawn, all attest to ingenuity and perceptivity.

All this is to the positive—why then are the works not taken more seriously? They are quite probably the outstanding developing works in the collage medium on the West Coast, equal or better than Bruce Conner. I would suggest that the lack of lather in their reception is due to the maturity of their creator. They are not the product of neurosis and do not seek to give therapy or exaltation for troubled souls. They are cool collages, not about despair, not about decay, degeneracy and the diseases of the mind and heart. They are to be looked at with joy taken in the looking by mature people who neither fear, nor fear to fear.

Fred Martin, *Art International*, Jan. 1967.

San Francisco Chronicle ☆

Sat., Sept. 5, 1970

Nell Sinton's Lyric Touch

By Alfred Frankenstein

Nell Sinton comes on this time as a bit of a surrealist, more than a bit of an abstract painter, and a colorist above everything. Each of her local shows — she has had several — is markedly different from its predecessors. The one I am talking about opened yesterday at the San Francisco Museum of Art and consists of 11 recent works.

The forms in these paintings teeter on the edge of description in a manner not unlike those of John Alton, one of whose finest paintings has just been acquired by the San Francisco Museum and hangs on a baffle near the entrance. But Mrs. Sinton

lacks Alton's snap and cynicism; hers is the lyric touch expressed in extremely subtle color.

The paler her color the more effective, it seems to me, is the result. This is an art of nuance, and it speaks more eloquently in the quieter shades. I especially like "Pendulum 1970," "The Great EWS Handkerchief Hoax," and "Cabaret," which has much stronger forms and rhythms than the other two. "Pendulum" and "Hoax," as they would be called in Hollywood, lend new dimensions to color with a luster of tiny reflective beads.

Mrs. Sinton has strewn philosophic observations through her catalogue, and these analects are well worth pondering.

This one is good self-criticism:

"A paradoxical statement is exciting and provides vitality. I set up-down interest-

ing challenges for myself and the audience. I aim for dynamic vibration. Shimmering textures attract me. Cobwebs too. I like a subterranean glow under the surface, and opacity versus transparency, the object which is only half seen on purpose. I like to tease, tantalize, bewitch, joke, to evoke the emotional paradox of laughter and tears."

Another:

"When an accident happens, I rejoice in it and take credit for it. I rejoice and take credit whatever my mo-

tive — whether adroitness, trickiness, miserliness, sloppiness."

The first part of this reminds me of something else:

"Whenever an accidental beauty presents itself, I am careful to cherish it even more than my own invention."

That is part of a message delivered by the ghost of Rembrandt to William Sidney Mount at a spiritualistic seance in 1854.

Who's been whispering subliminal messages into the ears of Our Nell?

By Alfred Frankenstein

Every time Nell Sinton has a show, it's a different show. She has never been one to box herself into a style and stick with it endlessly, and a retrospective exhibition of her work would be a fascinating anthology. In her current exhibition at the Quay Gallery, 560 Sutter street, she explores the figure.

The pictures are quite large, bold in attack, brilliant in color, often with a vigor and ruggedness of modeling such as one is likely to find in a major sculptor's drawings.

The figures are male and female, nude and clothed. One suspects that Mrs. Sinton has at times deliberately played off her studies against historic precedents. Gray-violet flesh, huge eyes, and very free paint-application recall the German expressionists. There is more than a hint of Matisse in some other works, and the one the bottom half of which has been torn off resembles, if accidentally, old fragments of fresco. But these variations within a style fall together to make a style, and one of memorable strength, assurance, and expressiveness.

Thomas Albright, San Francisco Chronicle, Jan. 13, 1977

A more compelling display at the Oakland Museum is in the Oakes gallery, where Nel Sinton has installed a room-sized scroll, and accompanying memorabilia, entitled "The Social Development of the American Female." Its esthetic merits are perhaps debatable, and it may more properly belong in the California history department stairs, but as a document (with ample editorial comment) of upper class life in San Francisco of the early 20th century, and of a woman artist's progressive awareness of its limitations and her efforts to free herself therefrom, it is a more powerful statement than many of the more publicized works of younger feminist militants.

The scroll itself, which encircles three walls of the room, traces the major episodes of Sinton's life via a counterpoint of cartoonish drawings with lettered commentaries, and collaged documentation: Post cards ("just to think of your being a whole year old"); snippets from old etiquette books, French texts, "How to Make Your First Picture" and "Argumentative Writing." There are scholarship records from Miss Burke's school, clips from Society pages, cards to the Stork Club and Leon and Eddles and, finally, clippings of exhibition announcements and favorable reviews.

For all its apparent nakedness of self-revelation, however, there is a disturbing suggestion of self-advertising, too. The difference between a revolutionary artist and a camp-follower lies in the timing, and while a work such as this would have made a devastating statement had Sinton unburdened herself of it a few years ago, it is just another statement now. She notes that a desire to "escape" her family, and find friends among the art community, were strong among her motives for taking up painting, but the fact that she was one of the very few artists in the area ever to hold a seat on the San Francisco Art Commission suggests that the social connections, or at least the fruits thereof, were never entirely cut loose. And all personal development which the scroll traces, those glowing accolades, culminate in a very ordinary recent painting in a not terribly interesting variant of the Bay Region Figurative style.

But Sinton is capable of much stronger work than this, as her previous career has shown. And if the freedom and self-revelation are not yet complete — well, that's what an artist's life is all about.

NELL SINTON, THIRTY YEARS SURVEYED

Change and growth are disturbing wherever I am, and when I outgrow my environment, it is time to consider a change even if it means staying in the same place.

Nell Sinton

Oakland / Andree Marechal-Workman

Back when a woman's place was thought to be strictly "in the home," Nell Sinton boldly decided to embrace the life of a professional artist. In the face of much social pressure, she has lived that life to the full ever since, producing a body of work that places her among the singular painters of the Bay Area. If she has never been a revolutionary or a great innovator, she has a quality that is rarer and probably more important: the ability to become assimilated within a community of painting without fear of losing her identity, the courage to stand fast and grow on her own terms in an ever-changing world of forms and ideas. The art world is teeming with brilliant young wonders who faded out of the picture after dramatic, successful debuts because they could not sustain their creative achievements. It is marvelous, therefore, to find an older painter who managed to maintain her artistic integrity through many decades, and it is both a pleasure and a revelation to see those

decades unfold for Nell Sinton at the Mills College Art Gallery.

Nell Sinton — A Thirty Year Retrospective chronicles the development of the artist from a naive painter of familiar surroundings to a sophisticated social satirist who exposes and discredits some of the hypocrisies, vanities and deceptions of the world in which she lives.

There are many important aspects to Sinton's art, many of which are expertly analyzed by Charles Shere in a well-illustrated catalog. Much has also been written elsewhere, and with a great deal of information at hand, it is difficult to be creative when discussing the retrospective. Yet the work can be appreciated for its sheer visual impact and for the presentation of the story it unfolds by retracing, visually, the thought process of the artist as she proceeds from representation to abstraction, and back to figuration/objectification, without having really left either one.

The exhibition is divided into several distinct periods. The early paintings, from the late 1940s, show influences of the time blended with Sinton's naive interpretation — the charming, intimate landscapes and interiors such as *The Neighbor's House* (1947), the Matisse-inspired *Pink Dressing Table* (1948) or *Engine No. 23 at Christmas* (1947),

whose radiant color splashes hint at the

exuberant palette that ignites the later canvases.

The second section covers Sinton's abstract expressionist period of the 1960s, when voluptuous, loosely formal compositions exploding in a riot of color expose Sinton-the-poet at her best. In each of these two sections, transitional works are included, illustrating the gradual abandonment of one style for the other — in the first, *Old Pope House* and *Roots and Stems* (1950), when she was gravitating toward abstraction, and in the second, such works as *Visitor* (1967) and *Victoria* (1969), which anticipate her next and most successful figurative phase.

Figures, a large autobiographical

scroll and a group of small, mixed-media constructions make up the third section, and the fourth and final one is devoted to the satirical and sophisticated *Garden Party* series — with a small selection of her most recent watercolors shown separately.

At its best, Sinton's work has its own insistent resonance. *Siberian Reflection* (1978) shimmers and pulsates as cast shadows and reflections echo in a symphony of blues. There is more than a hint of Matisse in the purplish umber flesh and modeling of the body through color. But its cool, sumptuous elegance mirrors an attitude that is Sinton's own, creating a work of memorable strength and expressiveness. *The Guests* (1979) — in the *Garden Party* series — on the other hand, vibrates with the compelling movement of its shapes and colors. Through its somber urgency, the viewer sees the artist looking at her models, recording their behavior with ruthless acumen.

At seventy, Sinton is still growing, still changing, still exploiting new vehicles, new possibilities. "I find landscapes in human bodies and vice-versa," she says. "I continue to think of new ways to put down different concepts. I try new combinations of colors. I shift materials, and make boxes and constructions. This is the issue in keeping my work vital, alive, and growing."

Returning to the landscape, she has come full circle with a number of fresh, buoyant watercolor studies reminiscent of her painting of the 1940s. True to her credo, Sinton has decided to change once more, even if it means a return to her beginnings. □

Al Morch, San Francisco Examiner, Nov. 17, 1986.

Nell Sinton, who's showing 25 works (most of them oil paintings in the \$1,000 to 5,000 range) at the Braunstein/Quay Gallery, 254 Sutter St., through Nov. 29, told me

that this exhibition "shows more strength and conviction than I have ever displayed before."

Frequently using overlays of thinned-out oil paint as if it were watercolor, Sinton manages to capture viewer attention by using familiar San Francisco geography as the locale for her new interest — architectural structure, shape and space.

A late-bloomer, and a familiar face on the local art scene since 1949, at which time she had a one-person show at the Palace of the Legion of Honor, Sinton thinks that "finally everything is coming together."

This is evident in the show; although some of the paintings revert to her earlier impressionistic style, and are not as effective.

Among my favorites (and her's too) is the interpretation of Alta Plaza Park. The park is a combination of built and natural landscapes, with many flights of stairs connecting the various levels that have been planted with trees, bushes and grass.

As a result, Sinton had the perfect place in which to continue her painted exploration of shapes and spaces; and does so in "Alta Plaza, 16 Pillars, 5 Elements." The piece not only contains a sense of place, but also abstract qualities reminiscent somewhat of Richard Diebenkorn's early landscapes.

Sinton told me that her shift to shapes/spaces started in the autumn of 1984 when she went to paint the ruins of the historic Sutro Baths (near Cliff House). It was her first serious attempt to capture the changing shapes and forms as the ocean continued its erosion of the building.

"However, I failed. The sound of the seals, gulls and the ocean waves invading the remains of the swimming pools made it difficult for me to concentrate," she said.

San Francisco

Nell Sinton *177 Post*
Braunstein/Quay Gallery

Nell Sinton is a sensibility painter, meaning that her feelings about a specific motif are peculiar to the way she shows what she sees of it, to the paint strokes she uses; that is, she discovers what she feels by painting it. At

76, she has a well-founded local reputation for painting in various modes and for making box constructions and large, intricate collages. (One of the latter—*Gough Street from Fort Mason*, 1985, in the present show—features an actual bite-size paint chip from the Golden Gate Bridge in its center.) That her sensibility once overreached her motifs is manifest in the fantastic whorls and striations that in earlier paintings spell vitality adrift or a subjective caprice. Only for the past three years has she used, as she says, "the landscape as a focus." She is less sure of what that focus implies, of its sufficiency, than the East Coast counterparts her new pictures call to mind—Jane Freilicher and Nell Blaine, among others—but she is more sure of its possibilities than any of the erstwhile or continuing "Bay Area figuratives" with whom she has sometimes been linked.

Very little else in art makes sense as much as taking something real and painting it. But one of the oddities of the Bay Area is how few good painters there do just that and keep on doing it, as realists, and especially in terms of the local landscape. Put too briefly, the reasons for this involve an inherent overearnestness about meanings (making sense is different from preparing a digestible meaning) and a contrary tendency toward interiorizing whimsy. Neither approach says much for the nature of appearances. And then there is the daunting appearance of the coastal environment itself, with its regular dosage of stupefying picturesqueness (including color riots in the acid range), and its relative geologic in-

Bill Berkson, Art Forum
March 1986

fancy and dramatic crosscurrents of weather, all amounting to a Pacific-rim vernacular that won't stay put.

In this regard, Sinton's new landscapes and interiors are unusual and brave. They rock with a healthy duality. They go, as John Marin once recommended, "to the elemental big forms and the relatively little things that grow on the mountain's back, which if you don't recognize, you don't recognize the mountain." Sinton now uses her sensibility to augment and connect, not to overwhelm or typecast, what's in front of her. There's the sensation of having taken a plunge into each view and reemerged with an order previously only half-suspected. The firmest connections are those made in low horizontal formats—in *Alta Plaza*, *Six Flights with Figures*, 1984, for instance, where a stretch of ebullient blue lawn throws two trees like scarves about its shoulders, and a white-shirted figure near the top appears to be taking final steps toward assumption into sempiternal fog. Sinton also manages to catch the tricky San Francisco light, its milky obdurateness—buttermilk in the "Alta Plaza" images, charred lactose in *Bay View, Storm*, 1986. In *Embarcadero, Four Columns*, 1985, distinctions of street and sky in haze are neatly scoured, a wet cobalt wraith of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge bisecting the whole. The interiors, with plays of dark wood furniture against blasts of picture-window daylight, are more large scale and moody, and a bit suspect in their felicities: do shadows actually mottle a room's walls and chairs into perfectly blended orange and blue fields, or is

that a decorator's fancy? On the other hand, the inside/outside arrangement of *Bay View*, 1986, is a honeycomb of succulence and precision. It is as if by casting a harder look at appearances Sinton has defined what her sensibility contains, which is something sharper than her previous glissando attacks allowed. The pleasures she takes in her hometown's nature are delectable, candid, and markedly unhedged.

Nell Sinton's Recent, Realistic Landscapes

GALLERIES

Kenneth Baker

San Francisco native Nell Sinton, who has been painting since the 1920s, is showing recent work at Braunstein/Quay Gallery, 250 Sutter Street, through December 2.

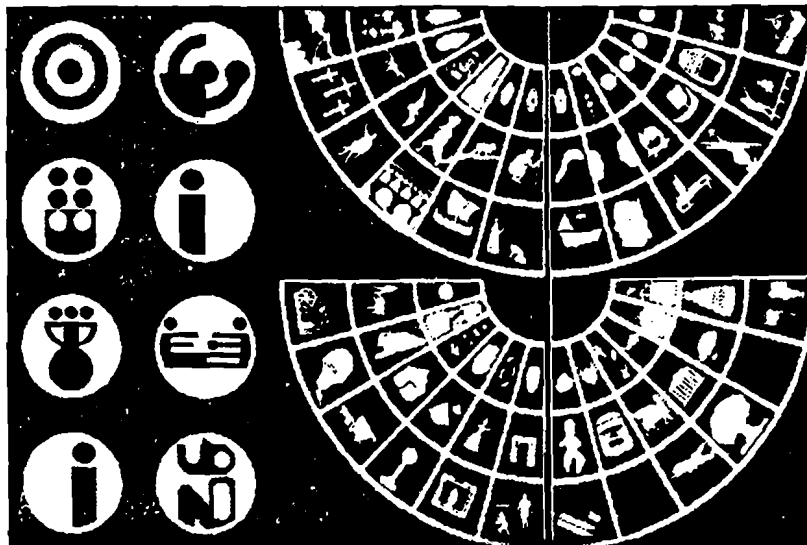
In Sinton's relaxed realism, vividness shifts like breezes from descriptive detail to paint matter and back again.

Amid workmanlike passages her hand will sometimes gambol with abrupt improvisational rhythms, as in the foreground of "The Listeners," a desert landscape dominated by a complex of huge satellite dishes.

A barren terrain of rocky ditches and parched grass is suggested here by slashes of violet and lavender and touches of pink, ocher and arid green. (Sinton's style is often feminiscent of the landscape painting of the late Gretna Campbell.)

Everything about the handling of paint — the color relations, variations in attack, rhythm and density — serves to evoke the way some features of landscape snag the eye, while others stay unfocused.

Sinton's treatment of the



Matt Mullican's 'Five Stones,' etched granite signs on five eight-by-four-foot slabs, at Fuller Gross Gallery

bright, turbulent sky in "The Listeners" is equally forceful. In many other pictures, she leans too often on white for control of light and temperature that she could get from color. But here she uses whites beautifully to detail the plumage of tints furled in what we think of as colorless clouds.

To my eye, "The Listeners" is the most accomplished piece in the show. It is more daring than "Crabapple" or "Skin Deep," which are fine painting performances, thanks to the dissonance in its subject. Sin-

ton's recent work is long on landscapes occluded by industrial sites or equipment, yet she does not make a point of their conflict. Instead, in the American Scene tradition, she appears to accept intrusions on the natural environment as challenges added to the difficulties of landscape painting. It is up to us to draw what conclusions we will from her observations of the world.

Surface energy slackens too often in Sinton's paintings, but where she sustains it, as in the paintings I cited, her work offers that sensa-

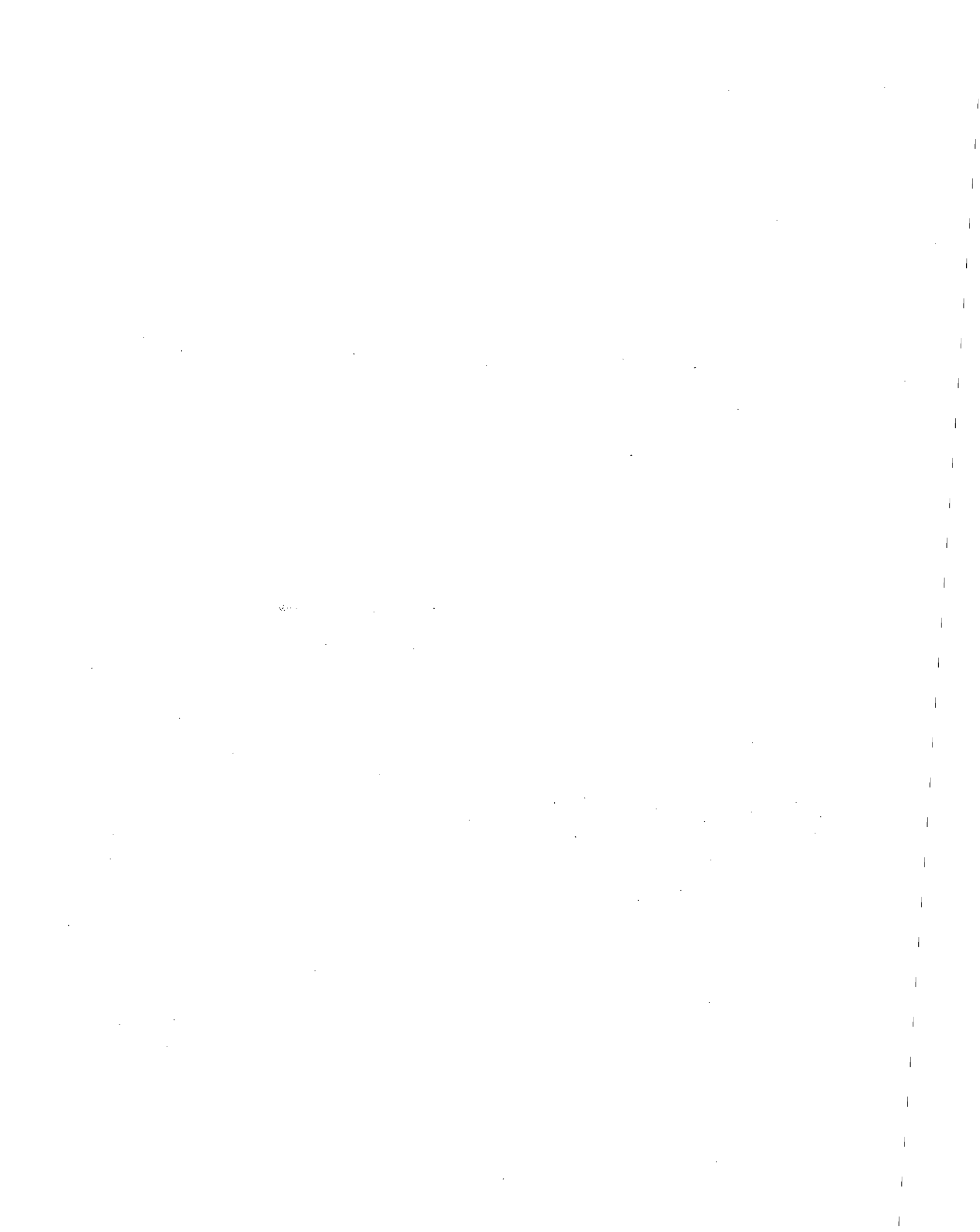
tion — unique to painting as an art — of seeing thought, observation and memory directly materialized.

Matt Mullican Show At Fuller Gross

Several years ago, New York artist Matt Mullican hit upon a pictorial possibility that now seems as inevitable as Roy Lichtenstein's adaptation of comic-strip Ben-Day dots. Mullican took the pictographic code used in airports and industrial safety signage and expanded it into a vocabulary for representational art. Using this vocabulary, he has made everything from paintings on canvas to ceramic plaques to banners and models of ideal cities. A selection of his work is on view at the Fuller Gross Gallery, 228 Grant Avenue, through December 2.

The stripped-down symbols Mullican uses look sometimes like relics of Art Deco, especially when he breaks them down into right angles and arcs, as in the metal millions of the windows at Fuller Gross. But more often his symbols evoke a world in which signs with generic meanings have replaced words and their nuances.

Yet, as stark as they are, Mullican's symbols are not self-explanatory. A silhouette of the Wright Brothers' first aircraft may be an



Chronology
 This updates chronology
 in the Mills College
 Exhibition Catalogue
 (following).

-5-

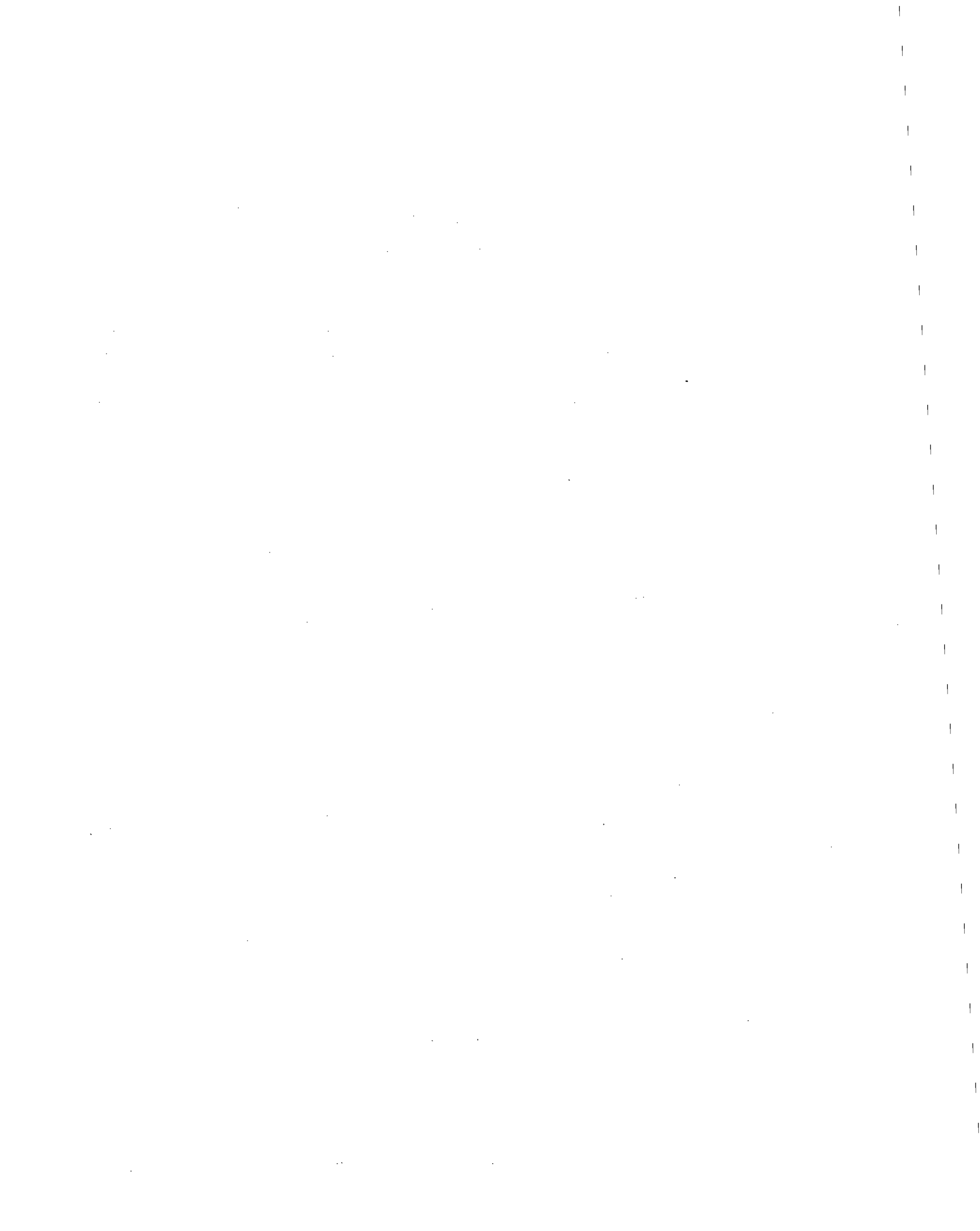
- 1980 Solo exhibition, "The Garden Party: A Theme with Variations," Braunstein Gallery, San Francisco.
- Group exhibition: "California Box Assemblage," fine Arts Museums of San Francisco Downtown Center.
- Workshops: University of California, Irvine; Louisiana State University; Portland State University; Portland Museum Art School.
- 1980 Drawing and painting. Instructor; Emeritus College of Marin
- Writing a book with Juanita Sagan about teaching art.
- 1981 30-year retrospective exhibition, Mills College art Gallery.
- Juror with Phil Linhares and Sam Richardson, Hayward Area Forum of the Arts, May.
- Drawing Instructor; Emeritus College of Marin.
- Braunstein Gallery 20th Anniversary Exhibition, July.
- 1982 Unit One, University of Illinois 10th Anniversary Exhibition, January.
- Workshop: Art and Good Teaching. Multnomah County Education District, Portland, OR, January.
- 1982 Six workshops in Oahu, Lanai, Maui, Hawaii. Auspices of Consortium of Visual Arts, Honolulu.
- Drawing Instructor; Emeritus College of Marin.
- 1983 Solo exhibition, Braunstein Gallery, October, "Secret Places."
- Katy Allen Memorial exhibition, Gallery Space, February.
- Drawing Instructor; Emeritus College of Marin.
- 1984 Workshop: Portland State University, April.
- Workshop: Stockton State College, Pomona, NJ.
- Drawing Instructor; Emeritus College of Marin.
- Juror with Joan Brown and Brian Wall, Small Art Work for Public Buildings, Marin Art & Cultural Education Center, Marin County.
- Guest Artist; University of Illinois, Urbana, IL, September-October, 1984

-6-

- 1984 Recipient of Award of Honor for Painting from the San Francisco Art Commission's 38th Annual Arts Festival-August, 1984.
- Group Exhibition: "Political Cartoons and Other Opinions," Braunstein Gallery-July, 1984.
- 1985 Group Exhibition: "Best of San Francisco," Morgan Gallery, Kansas City, MO-March-April, 1985.
- Group Exhibition of Paintings: Braunstein Gallery-April 1985.
- Participant: "A Round Table Reminiscence Celebrating Albert Bender," Mills College Library-October 23, 1985.
- Painting and Drawing Instructor, Emeritus College of Marin.
- 1986 History of California Women Artists, Fresno Art Center, Fresno, CA-November 1986.
- One Person Exhibition: "Landmarks--Points of View," Braunstein Gallery, San Francisco, CA-November 1986.
- Bay Area Contemporary Art -- A Jewish Perspective, Jewish Community Museum, San Francisco, CA, December 1986.
- Fresno Art Center and Museum Exhibition: "In The Advent of Change 1945-1969" - Survey of Work of California Women Artists Made in the Past Forty Years, November-December.
- Painting and Drawing Instructor, Emeritus College of Marin.
- Participant at Mills College Annual Campus One-Day Seminar, November.
- 1987 Painting and Drawing Instructor, Emeritus College of Marin.
- 1987 Group Exhibition: Braunstein Gallery-August.
- Solo Exhibition, Braunstein Gallery: "Work of The 60's and 70's." Constructions and Paintings-September.
- Workshop: Elaine Badgley Art School, San Francisco-November.
- 1988 Scroll #1, "Under the Table at the Donner Party" put on indefinite loan by Joan Dodd to Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA.
- Scroll #2, "The Social Development of An American Female" put on indefinite loan by John Sinton to the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C. This scroll was removed from Washington, D.C. in 1992 and placed in the Krannert Museum, University of Illinois, Urbana. Participant in Archives of American Art Symposium, "Earthquake to Albright: Modernism in Northern California, 1906-1945" at California Palace Legion of Honor, May 6 and 7.

-7-

- 1988 Gouache paintings and pencil drawings at 871 Folsom Gallery, S.F., in Group Exhibition.
- 1989 Group Exhibition of Gallery artists Braunstein-Quay Gallery, S.F., August.
- 1989 One person Exhibition Braunstein-Quay Gallery, S.F., November.
- 1989 4th Annual Art Auction, John Berggruen Gallery, S.F., June. Benefit for Hospitality House.
- 1990 5th Annual Art Auction, John Berggruen Gallery, S.F., June.
- 1990 Exhibition Scroll #1, "Under The Table At The Donner Party," Oakland Municipal Museum, August-September. "Life Styles."
- 1990 "Lines of Force." Sponsored by National Poetry Association, Group Show, Pier 2, Mort Mason Center, S.F., October-December.
- 1991 Group Show. Monterey Peninsula Museum of Art, 2/9/92-4/14/91, "For Better Or Worse," Artists' Views on Romance.



INDEX--Neill Sinton

- Aalto, Alvar, 48
 Ackerman, Mrs. Lloyd, 76
 Adams, Mark, 185
 Albright, Thomas, 60, 154-155, 187
 Allen, Florence, 62-63, 99
 Allen, Katie, 99
 Anderson, Jeremy, 184
 Archives of American Art, 170
 Armer, Ruth, 55, 57, 68, 71, 74,
 89, 99, 169, 188
 Arneson, Robert, 96
 Arnstein, Alice, 73
 Arnstein, Ruth, 12, 19

 Bacon, Francis, 81-82, 166
 Baker, Kenneth, 154
 Barletta, Joel, 99, 168
 Bauhaus, 107, 134, 136
 Beat poets, 170, 182, 185
 Bechtle, Nancy, 99
 Belz, Carl, 186
 Bender, Albert, 49-50
 Beresford Country Club, 70
 Berggruen, John, 92
 Biestman, Margot (Sinton), 1ff.
 Biestman, Perry, 19, 121, 153,
 157, 163
 Birich, Dima, 99, 158
 Bischoff, Elmer, 57, 59, 93
 Bolles, John, 91
 Brandenstein, Jane, 57
 Bransten, Ellen (Hart), 11-12, 55,
 57, 68, 69, 71, 172
 Bransten, Joe, 69
 Bransten, Rena and John, 174
 Braunstein, Ruth, 90-92, 130, 133
 Brown, Bill [Theophilus], 94, 96,
 99, 102, 130, 185
 Brown, Joan, 57, 59, 89, 93-94,
 99, 168, 185, 187
 Brown, Peggy [Mrs. Cabot Brown],
 76, 143-144
 Burke's School [see Katherine
 Delmar Burke School]
 Burlingame Country Club, 7, 10

 Callaghan, Louis, 64
 Campbell, Charles, 92, 99
 Carofanello, Annie (Biestman), 161
 Chadwick, Whitney, 85
 Christian Science, 36
 Church, Betsy, 48
 Church, Thomas D., 48
 College of Marin, 119
 Collins, Jess, 168
 Conner, Bruce, 170, 187, 189
 Cook, Gordon, 92, 185
 Coplans, John, 99
 Cornell, Joseph, 170
 Coué, Dr., 36
 Cravath, Ruth, 66
 Crocker, William H., 10
 Cunningham, Imogen, 67

 D.N. & E. Walter Co., 14-15,
 32-33, 46, 162
 Davis, Ron, 187
 Deamer, Elinor, 41-42
 DeFeo, Jay, 57, 62, 89, 93, 99,
 169, 184
 DeForest, Roy, 58, 89-90, 99, 187
 DeLap, Tony, 90, 92
 Depression, 47
 DeStaebler, Stephen, 167
 Diebenkorn, Richard, 59-60, 89,
 95, 103, 132, 167-168, 188
 Dixon, Maynard, 66
 Dodd, Bruce, 121, 153
 Dodd, Joan (Sinton), 38-39, 59,
 63, 100-101, 121-122, 161-163,
 174
 Dodd, Katie, 160
 Dohrmann, Mrs. A.B.C., 72
 Ducasse, Ralph, 89-90, 187
 Dunham, Katherine, 5

 Ederle, Gertrude, 30
 Eiseman, Gertrude, 36
 Elkus, Albert, 30
 Elman, Mischa, 2
 Emmanuel Walter Collection, 15
 Esherick, Joseph, 97

- Faiss, Fritz, 107
 Falkenstein, Clare, 85
 Federal Art Project, 86
 Forrester, Patricia, 185
 Frankenstein, Alfred, 91-92, 154, 187
- Gallery Beaux Arts, 54
The Garden Party, 157-158, 190
 Garland School of Homemaking, Boston, 44
 Garth, John, 97
 Gechtoff, Sonia, 89, 91
 Glover, Gerrie, 123-124
 Golden Gate International Exposition, Treasure Island, 53
 Goldyne, Joe, 113
 Goldstine, Stephen, 187
 Grabhorn Press, 21
 Greenebaum, Joseph (great-uncle), 2, 164
 Gunst, Aline, 28
 Gunst, Morgan, 28
 Gutmann, John, 67
- Haas family, 3-4, 13
 Haas, Elise [Mrs. Walter Haas], 36, 75-76
 Haas, Walter, 98
 Haas-Lilienthal House, 13, 27
 Hamilton, Leah, 55, 74, 89, 99
 Hamlin, Edith, 66
 Hansen, Armin, 50, 164-165
 Hart, James D., 11-12, 19, 57, 69
 Hart, Ruth (Arnstein), 12, 19
 Hartung, Hans, 52-53, 167
 Hedrick, Wally, 62, 169, 170, 184
 Heil, Walter, 69
 Hellman family, 3-4
 Hertz, Alfred, 31
 Hofmann, Hans, 54, 61
 Howard, Jane Berlandina, 88
 Howard, John Langley, 89
 Howard, Robert, 58, 88-89, 99, 173, 184
 Howe, Thomas Carr, 183
 Hoyem, Andrew, 111
 Hudson, Robert, 168, 187
- Institute for Creative and Artistic Development [ICAD], 109
- Jackson, J. Brinckerhof, 177
 Jensen, Pennfield, 111
 Johnson, Diane, 99
- Kahlo, Frida, 60, 61
 Karlstrom, Paul, 170
 Kasten, Karl, 90
 Katherine Delmar Burke School, 8, 24, 42-43, 106
 Kent, Adeline [Mrs. Robert Howard], 58
 Koshland, Bill, 53, 67, 97, 99
- Labaudt, Lucien, 54
 Lane, John R., 95, 102
 Lange, Dorothea, 66-67
Legend of Reckendorf, 3-4, 6, 138-140
 Liebes, Dorothy, 19, 72, 76
 Lilienthal, Alice (Haas) [Mrs. Samuel Lilienthal], 13
 Lilienthal, Cassie (Arnstein), 30, 43
 Lilienthal, Jessie, 66
 Lilienthal, Phillip and Ruth, 67
 Lilienthal, Sally, 19
 Linhares, Philip E., 99, 128
 Lloyd, Bonnie, 99
 Lobdell, Frank, 184
 Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, 148-148
 Lynch, Katherine, 20
- MacAgy, Douglas, 58, 183, 187
 MacAgy, Germaine, 183
 Macky, Constance, 88
 Macky, Spencer, 54, 88
 Magee, David, 12
 Martin, Fred, 90, 99, 184, 187-188
 McSweeney, Angus, 47-48
 Melchert, James, 99
 Merris, Liza (Dodd), 160
 Miró, Joan, 52-53, 167
 Moon, Delia, 99

- Morley, Grace McGann, 50, 74-76, 93, 102
 Mueller, Martin, 92
- National Museum of Women Artists, Washington, D.C., 73
 Naumann, Bruce, 167, 187
 Neri, Manuel, 99, 184, 187
 Newton, Fred, 124
- Oakland Museum, 41, 91, 95, 98
 Oldfield, Otis, 54, 66
 Olympic Club, 6
- Pacific-Panama International Exposition, 1915, 6, 20, 23-24; Palace of Fine Arts, 6
 Park, David, 57, 89, 99, 120, 186
 Perlman, Anne, 56
 Perls, Frank, 183
 Piazzoni, Gottardo, 88
 Picasso, Pablo, 53, 64-65, 78
 Pond Farm, 57
 Presidio Golf Club, 7
 psychoanalysis, 35; 37-38, 103-104
- Rampart, Lake Tahoe, 17-20, 25, 32, 67-68
 Randolph, Lee, 88
 Reckendorf, Germany, 3-4, 6
 Reichman, Fred, 90
 Remington, Deborah, 94, 96, 184, 187
 Reynal, Jeanne, 96, 173
 Rivera, Diego, 54, 61
 Roberts, "Shorty," 30
 Rosenshine, Annette, 37
 Rothko, Mark, 53, 76, 167, 184
 Russell, Helen (Crocker) [Mrs. Henry Potter Russell], 74
 Ryan, Beatrice Judd, 54, 57
- Sagan, Eugene, 100-101, 104-105, 113, 122-123, 136
 Sagan, Juanita, 43, 55, 58-59, 99-101, 104-109, 111, 113, 122-125, 134, 136, 140, 149, 188
 Salz, Helen (Arnstein), 56
- San Francisco Art Association, 72, 187
 San Francisco Art Commission, 97-98
 San Francisco Art Festivals, 84
 San Francisco Art Institute [formerly California School of Fine Arts], 6, 13, 15, 24, 54, 63, 70, 72, 75, 77, 86, 91, 107, 109, 162, 164, 186; Artists Council, 187-188
 San Francisco Museum of Art, 50, 74, 76-77, 95, 102, 163, 169, 183
 San Francisco Society of Women Artists, 55, 72-73, 145
 Schnier, Dorothy (Lilienthal), 66
 Schnier, Jacques, 66
 Sedge, Thompson, 99
 Seligman family, 4
 Seller, Marjorie (Walter) [Mrs. Robert Seller], 17, 27-28, 147, 163, 166
 Shaw, Alice, 157
 Shaw, Richard, 99, 157
 Shere, Charles, 125-127, 138, 140
 Simpson, David, 92-93
 Sinton, Carol (Walter) [Mrs. Henry Sinton], 12, 27, 145, 147, 163, 166
 Sinton, John (son), 3, 53, 56, 67, 76, 89, 92, 97, 99, 100, 102, 121, 139, 149, 153, 161-163, 167, 174, 187
 Sinton, Marian (Walter) (aunt), 31, 163
 Sinton, Nell (Eleanor Walter), lff.
 Sinton, Stanley, 20, 31-32, 35-38, 44-48, 51-53, 67-68, 72, 101, 104, 153-154, 158, 184
 Sinton, Wendy [Mrs. John Sinton], 163
 Sloss family, 4
 Smith, Hassel, 60, 99, 187
Social Development of an American Female, 41, 110, 138, 150, 155
 Somers, Melvin, 104
 Stackpole, Peter, 67

Staempfli, George, 93
 Stern, Marjorie (Gunst), 28
 Sterne, Maurice, 54, 60-61, 70,
 86-88, 148
 Still, Clyfford, 184
 Student League of San Francisco,
 109

Temple Emanu-El, 6, 40
 Thiebaud, Wayne, 99, 185, 188
 Tworokov, Jack, 53

Ulysses, 12

Under the Table at the Donner
 Party, 34-35, 68, 110-118, 139
 University of Illinois,
 Champaign-Urbana, 103, 110, 149

van Hoesen, Beth, 185
 Villa, Carlos, 93
 Voorhees, Charles, 86
 Voulkos, Peter, 168

Walter, D. N. (grand-uncle), 114
 Walter, Edgar (uncle), 2, 13-16,
 163
 Walter, Emanuel (grand-uncle),
 14, 164
 Walter, Mrs. Isaac (grandmother,
 Caroline Greenbaum), 50, 51,
 159, 174
 Walter, Florence (Schwartz)
 (mother), 8, 11, 13-15, 17,
 18-19, 24, 27-28, 32, 35, 43,
 45-47, 50, 54, 66, 67, 72, 87,
 128, 144, 145, 147, 153, 159,
 163, 165, 166, 175
 Walter, Isaac (grandfather), 13-15
 Walter, John I. (father), 2, 6, 8,
 10, 14, 16, 19, 22, 24-26, 32,
 33, 35, 40, 44-46, 63, 66, 72,
 112, 162-164
 Walter, John (brother), 9, 16-17,
 21
 Walter, Pearl (Schwartz) [Mrs.
 Edgar Walter], 13-16
 Warburg family, 4
 Warhol, Andy, 59
 Weeks, Anson, 42

Western Round Table on Modern Art,
 1949, 187
 Wildenhain, Margeurite, 57
 Wiley, William T., 187
 Wilkinson, Jack, 86, 148
 Williams, William Carlos, 185
 Wolf, Rosalie, 68
 Wonner, Paul, 94, 96, 99, 185
 Wurster, William W., 48

Young, Belle McMurtry, 72

Zeligs, Michael, 104
 Zellerbach, Harold, 97

Suzanne Bassett Riess

Grew up in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Graduated from Goucher College, B.A. in English, 1957.

Post-graduate work, University of London and the University of California, Berkeley, in English and history of art.

Feature writing and assistant woman's page editor, Globe-Times, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

Volunteer work on starting a new Berkeley newspaper.

Natural science docent at the Oakland Museum.

Free-lance Photographer.

Editor in the Regional Oral History Office since 1960, interviewing in the fields of art, environmental design, social and cultural history, horticulture, journalism, photography, Berkeley and University history.

