

Dr. Robert Bishop  
The Museum of American Folk Art  
New York

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Dear Dr. Bishop,

please allow me to present some of my slides. I would be most grateful for any suggestion you might have for my enterprise in painting.

I was born and educated in Germany. My life in Magdeburg (East G.) was tumultuous. My father, on whose knees I first drew, produced all manner of pictures, was soon at odds with the political regime. He was imprisoned when I was five years old. The artists and writers of Magdeburg came to my mother's assistance. I benefited from their tutelage. F. Haupt, a Bauhaus architect and next door neighbor included me into his family. Modern art became familiar to me. Inge Haupt v. Haesinger, his wife, worked as a graphic artist of some renown. Käthe Kollwitz did not live far away. Ernst Boetiger, archivist with lots of treasures in the old town showed me his collections of famous artists. There too I saw sculptures of many parts of the world. On his side I explored much of the city of Magdeburg which had been an important medieval town at the time of the reformation. Secret passages led to romanesque churches and the Magdeburger Dom is in itself a famous monument of early French gothic art.

However, the outbreak of the war intensified the surveillance of our activities. The state tried to assume authority over my two sisters and myself leaving my mother in terrible anxiety over our future. Access to secondary schooling became questionable for us. Membership in the Hitler youth was by now obligatory and a serious issue. My parents were divorced to safeguard us. Upon promising to hold himself ready as an officer in the reserve my father was released to live in Berlin where he had many likeminded friends but banned from the political district of Magdeburg. We corresponded daily. He met with us secretly in our summerhouse on a lake near Berlin. Sometimes in Magdeburg I saw a hand reaching out from behind an unfolded newspaper beckoning to come close. Behind the paper was my father. He handed out funds to me to secure freedom to go anywhere and recommended an attitude of stoicism. Strange men approached me after school and at various other location and asked me about my father whose addresses in Berlin were always different postoffices. I learned to appease inquisitive teachers with presents of my paintings, many of which were sent out on travelling exhibitions. My Lafcadio-like lifestyle ended with my mother's marriage to the editor in chief of the feuilleton of the large regional newspaper. Oskar Tribius was a painter poet and pianist and had lived eight years in Rome pursuing his private interest. He was now drafted to this newspaper position as all other men available became soldiers. His own literary magazine had been forbidden. With great enthusiasm I became his assistant. My articles on theater performances, cultural films and poetry readings appeared in the paper. I was paid the customary fees. My stepfather was a member of the most prominent family in town. My status in the Lyceum changed from highly suspect to that of becoming an object of great curiosity. In the newspaper offices I learned of many amazing things that were normally not known to children, some of them horrible in regard to the easy dispatch of errant citizens.

The war escalated and schools closed. My agegroup was collected and sent to a rural part in the east. My stepfather spirited my sisters and myself away into a small hotel in the Harz Mountains, to Schierke, just underneath the Brocken, the highest peak in northern Germany. A mountain train brought me to a gymnasium in Wernigerode. This little resort was filled with wounded Germ. officers. The hotel guests became an endless source of news from all over Germany. I made friends with the laboring lady in the basement of the hotel. At night she developed the most sickening photos I have ever seen from the eastern front. I was sworn to silence and allowed to help print them. I never found out to whom they went. I became interested in photography and absent from school which brought me the hatred of my older sisters for they had to cover for me in the absence of parents. Life on the outside was full of strange sights and happenings. Eventually the school in Wernigerode received a full hit and some of my classmates were killed. I had been 'observing' the dogfights at that moment outside the school. My paintings were regularly sent to Berlin. My father buried them along with other possessions in the Tiergarten (Zoo) and made elaborate drawings of the locations. Soon airplanes turned this area into a waste land. The magic mountain turned into a battlefield in due course. We fled from the Russians to Goslar, just inside the British Zone.

In Goslar I made Abitur and lived in abject poverty. I was thirteen and worked all the time while going to school. A windfall of watercolor paper and paints from Holland allowed me to sell and barter until the supply was gone. An invitation to be apprenticed to a painter in Holland came. But I did not want to forgo an academic education. I was entirely dependent on my own support. My stepfather had been declared dead in an air attack on my native city, my father in Berlin was 'missing'. At the university of Goettingen I studied philosophy, Anglistik, Germanistik and arthistory. I worked in factories, on the cemetery in Hannover during semester breaks and for the Hannoversche Presse. Paper and paint were articles of unimaginable luxuries.

In 1954 I received a scholarship for Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University. It soon occurred to me that when I had given up a career in art for lack of material at the university in Goettingen I was not better off in America as an aspiring journalist having left my language behind and faced a total blank in regard to culture and history of this country. After an MA and studies for my doctorate in Germ. lit as well as teaching at Northwestern I received an offer to go to North Dakota. I never got there but married instead a theoretical physicist from the university of Chicago, had three daughters and...

Eventually I borrowed crayons from my children. My husband's career in aerodynamics was very demanding, his health precarious. Through him I learned to love America and saw it several times over, including Canada and Mexico. Later many trips to Europe under my husband's guidance with the children informed me in matters of art. He had been a scholar at the Max Planck Institute in Europe previously and had explored Europe on his own. After eleven nearly fatal incidents resulting from his frail health (rheum. fever, diabetes) my husband Richard spent the last seven years of his life blind - and handicapped. His intellectual superiority (proposed to receive the Congr. medal of honor), his love of life coupled with an immense personal courage leaves us bereft but in deep gratitude.

Since my husband's death eighteen months ago I have tried to follow Proust's formula - that time lost can only be gained through the senses - in my case that attempt is made by way of painting.

02/14/89

Thank You,