

Interview with Richard Szeitz

Interviewed by Bill Jones for the Heritage Education Commission

October 25, 1989

Richard Szeitz - RS

Bill Jones - BJ

BJ: [missing words]. . . October 25, 1989. I'm Bill Jones, and today I'm interviewing Richard Szeitz, long time professor of art at Moorhead State University and chairman of the Art Department for many years as well.

Richard, suppose we start off with just having a brief biographical sketch from you so that we get the overview of where you've been, what you've studied, where you've studied, and where you've worked in your profession.

RS: Well, I was born in Hungary, in Budapest, Hungary. I went to gymnasium, the secondary college or university [unclear] education in a school which was run by the Cistercian monks. And I finished high school, or gymnasium, at a time when the Communists just took over the country; and as a class alien because my father was an architect, I couldn't get into university.

BJ: You weren't from the worker class, is that it?

RS: Yes. And I also identified with the religious and political views of the Cistercians, so I joined the Cistercian order and I started to study philosophy and theology with the ultimate goal to go on and, according to the Hungarian Cistercian tradition, to take on another line of studies after I finished the basic philosophy and theology. In that process, the Communists further advanced, and resistance hardened and just before our abbot and Cardinal Mincente [phonetic] was arrested, I had the opportunity, due to the order of the abbot, to leave the country and escape through the Iron Curtain and ended up in Rome when I finished philosophy and theology and started to study some archeology. Also I was, in the process, very much interested in art and I went to art museums and exhibitions as much as I could and started to sketch and do watercolor, small paintings of various sights I found interesting. As a result, I get somewhat greater insight into art than I would have had otherwise, so in 1953, I had an opportunity to come to the United States to one of the Cistercian houses in Wisconsin and this was a priory which was taken over by the Hungarian Cistercians from the Dutch Cistercians. And our group then had connection with Marquette University and we had an opportunity to go to school there. I started to study pre-architecture in Marquette University. And for the summer '53, I decided that for relief, go to Layton School of Art since I didn't know any English in January yet and in September already went to school; and after a full year of studying in English, pre-engineering and pre-architecture, I was rather exhausted and it was a relief to go to do some art work. I enjoyed the art school so much that when an opportunity came up to join

my colleagues, fellow Cistercians who had been all trained as college professors, then I chose to continue in art and became a candidate to be a founder of an art department in University of Dallas in Dallas, Texas. At that time, the diocese of Dallas and several religious orders did establish that university and by the time I arrived, it was going for a few years so I had a chance to actually raise funds, start the first classes, and after six years, when I left, we had an MFA program running in the school and I was the division chairman of art, music, and theater. At that time I also, in the process, realized that teaching and art is more my major interest. I was drawn into the religious framework just because of political reasons, so I asked for release from the order, and I took the opportunity to take a Fulbright Lectureship in consult [unclear] University of Guadalajara--the independent university--as how to put together an art program and an art building and from Dallas I left to there. After almost a year working with them, I joined an advertising firm as a vice president and

BJ: Was this in Guadalajara, now?

RS: This was back in Texas, back in Dallas. I married and then I was again realizing it was best to go back to education and was looking for another appointment, and this is how I got to Moorhead. It was in 1966--in March, in a big snowstorm, I arrived. [Laughter]

BJ: Oh, what an introduction! And what was the size of the art department?

RS: When I came here--the first contact with Moorhead was in January, and I discovered at that point that already an art building is under construction and this was the old Center for the Arts with art, music, and theater equally sharing the building.

BJ: You moved into that in '67.

RS: '66 Fall. So I suggested it was probably best if I would take over as a chairman in the fall and that was the idea, then I better come here to learn the ropes a little bit in the spring, so I moved in that spring and started to teach in the spring quarter as a faculty member and Mark Stratton was a temporary chair at that time. And then I took over the chairmanship in the fall.

BJ: In the fall of '66.

RS: Now the department was up in the third floor of McLean Hall at that time in three rooms and we had, I think, altogether, probably four and I was the fifth faculty member. There was Mark Stratton, Jackie Onchrist [spelling], Lyle Laskey [spelling].

BJ: A historian, I suppose.

RS: No, Mark Stratton was originally art history, and then there was a young woman who was teaching art education at the campus school. That was the department. There were around 50 or so majors at that time.

BJ: And I assume a substantial proportion of those majors were preparing to be art teachers?

RS: Yes, as far as I know, all of them. And they received teaching certificates, either elementary or secondary level.

BJ: That was the pattern for an awful lot of the majors, wasn't it, at Moorhead State?

RS: At that time.

BJ: As you look at the department now, clearly it is much larger, both in terms of faculty and students. What size department do you have now?

RS: Right now we have over 200 majors, according to our perception at this time of the year. We have around 220 or so. We have 11 faculty members, full time, and we have 2 adjunct faculty members, and a shop master and secretary.

BJ: Shop master full time and secretary. As far as degree programs are concerned, there is quite a substantial change, too.

RS: One of my first tasks was to revamp the curriculum. As I heard the rumors that in Minneapolis the word was out that "Don't hire Moorhead people because they are not too terribly well trained." And the faculty was concerned also about the curriculum, so I right away in the first year revamped the curriculum and introduced foundation level courses and middle level introduction and technique type of courses, and then upper level courses and very much intensified the curriculum. The chairman preceding me was very much of a Lowenfeld [phonetic] follower, whose philosophy was to create an atmosphere and facilities and provide the materials and let the art students learn by themselves; and I felt that as I was taught both in Europe and in the States that it is important to actually teach and there is a lot to be taught in art, also, and not just to provide the facility.

BJ: The art major of today--of those 200, 20 or 30 might be preparing to teach?

RS: Not quite. Maybe 10 at the most. If you would consider the committed or those students who more or less jell the idea that they will be in art education are maybe about 10 or 15. But potentially there are more perhaps.

BJ: And the bulk, then, of the students are either in graphics, I presume, graphic design?

RS: I would think graphic design, illustration at least half, and then art education is the next major block, and then divided between photography, map making, drawing, painting, sculpture, ceramics, and art history--we have a few art history.

BJ: And, of course, we might as well make it a matter of record, you also have considerably different facilities now.

RS: Well, at the time when we had the dedication of the new building, when I just came-- that was during the winter, the dedication of the building--we had some interviews [laughter] similar to this, and I told them that this building is quite nice and we are grateful to have it but I hope sometime soon we will have another building which is really built for art. At that time President Neumaier wasn't too happy with my remark.

BJ: Actually that building was built to house three different programs--theater and speech, art, and music.

RS: It was very difficult to establish, for example, a foundry and we managed to set fire to the roof one time for their kilns in ceramics so we retrofitted as much as we could but it was clear that we were growing out of that space very soon and about 10 years ago we actually moved into the new building which was considered as an art factory and studio and not as a classroom building used for teaching art.

BJ: It's pretty hard for--the ideal, of course, is to have the arts all together, so to speak; but artists are so messy and musicians are so noisy [laughter], and it's pretty hard for them to be too close together anyway.

RS: Nevertheless, I think, if there is one department we are very close to, and very fond of each other, it is music. Often they play in our openings, and we are in the middle of the music department with our old gallery, which is still in operation and generally our mutual cooperation and assistance is alive.

BJ: Let's talk a little bit now--we've talked about the development of the department and obviously you've had a leadership role in this development. Let's talk about you as an artist because, clearly, you've been a producing artist during this period and I think it would be interesting for us to hear about that--the kind of media you've chosen to work in and some of the pieces that have become a part of the environment around here.

RS: Originally, I started off with a general foundation in Layton School of Art and been involved both in drawing, painting, print making, and sculpture, but as a major emphasis in print making and that was my main field. And I continued to do that at the University of Wisconsin at Madison and when I got my MFA it was also in print making.

BJ: Now you went there after you were here?

RS: No, no; it was right immediately after Layton; I continued on, so I went straight.

BJ: Now, Layton, however, is not part of the University of Wisconsin, is it?

RS: No, Layton School was an independent art school and it is now defunct, but the faculty reconstituted another art school, which is now Milwaukee School of Art and Design and it is a flourishing, wonderful institution. It is a very large art school.

BJ: So that was a little gap we didn't fill in there. You left Layton and you went right to the University of Wisconsin.

RS: I guess master of science in art education and master of fine arts, I got both of them at the University of Wisconsin.

BJ: Print making was your major medium at that time.

RS: But I did work in sculpture and also in painting practically all the time. When I got to Dallas, gradually a need developed that I do more sculpture work. I have done some pieces for the monastery there and not only for the Cistercians but for the Dominicans and Benedictines I have done statues like St. Albert and St. Bernard and Holy Family and a variety of smaller--these are larger pieces and then there are also some two-dimensional triptychs and illustration type of work and so on. Just before I left the monastery, I received some commissions, or at least challenges, to build some fountains and the fountain building; you know, the sculpture of fountain combination of water and three-dimensional forms, which somehow became my specialty and expertise. I still do, from time to time, other type of work; but this is somehow the main thread all the way through and I have done quite a number of commissions in Texas, Georgia, Missouri, and lately mainly in Minneapolis.

BJ: Certainly the one, as far as this region is concerned, that everyone is aware of, is the one in West Acres. That was your piece. And that was commissioned by the architect, was it?

RS: Well, both the developers and the architect participated in it. But previously to that I have done another piece which is in the TNI Building, The Neuropsychiatric Institute--now it is named something different.

BJ: I haven't kept track of its evolution, but I know where it is and I know the piece. Clearly, I would guess that the one in West Acres is a piece of art which has provided an art experience and an art environment to probably more people. Well, there are not many pieces of art that can compare in that respect.

RS: I'm sure that it contributed somewhat to the environment, but unfortunately I'm not too terribly happy with the state of that piece as it is now. Quite soon after it was installed, they decided to dismantle the piece and substitute it with a seasonal Christmas tree and then at Easter time with Easter bunnies. This was repeated quite a few times, and the constellation of various parts has been changed and ultimately somebody decided that the natural patina of copper, which was produced with acid and the chemical quality of the water, was not good enough and they painted it John Deere green which certainly doesn't add to the appearance of the piece. And, unfortunately, the management is not sensitive enough to be persuaded to keep it up in the proper way. The upper part was beautifully functioning as graduated streams of water which was shooting up and controlled by tiny valves and all that has been clogged up and shut down because they refuse to service the field terrace which was provided and it is very easy to change and clean. But they haven't

been willing to do that maintenance and tending what is necessary for any kind of fountain basically and except of his [unclear] in just the middle portion which is much easier accessible to them.

BJ: It is illustrative of something that's a basic problem for artists, isn't it? What kind of rights the artist has regarding his or her work once it has been conveyed to an owner.

RS: The American Uniform Commercial Code maintains that once you sell any kind of goods, then the owner can do with it whatever the owner wants. In contrast to that, there is another belief, in Europe in general, especially in France, artists enjoy the law of paternity of an artwork where the connection between the artist and the art work is retained and the artist has some say-so.

BJ: Can that kind of an agreement be entered into in a contractual arrangement?

RS: No, it is more common to use this kind of contractual arrangement and for a long time, I wouldn't do any or sell any art work without having that kind of arrangement. However, when this commission was done, all this was in its infancy and we just barely heard about it and I had a contract that was one of these initial [unclear] rather cumbersome and long contracts and the owners didn't want to even read that, much less sign it, and when they offered for me as subcontractor, a contract, I refused to sign it. I just did the work and they paid me, and that was it. [Laughter]

BJ: Now, you have some other works in this region. You have two in Fargo.

RS: I have another one in a public area. That is at the corner of the downtown store of Strauss, men's clothing store. That was the very first piece I have done. And then besides that I have, oh, at least three private that I can recall pieces in the immediate area.

BJ: And then you have some in the Twin Cities area, too.

RS: I have one at the Normandale Condominiums next to the golf course in a vestibule place. I have a three-story sculpture with six life-size figures in Robbinsdale First Bank, and I have the last one in a development in South St. Paul and I cannot recall the name-- Highland Ridge Apartments, again in a vestibule or entry in a major area.

BJ: Let's talk a little bit about art in this particular community. Actually, this oral history project is an attempt to explore people who have had important roles within the community and the possible impact on the community itself. Clearly, that number of art students that have graduated from Moorhead State--you'd expect that that might well have an impact on the community and clearly the community itself has moved in some direction at least as far as shows and private and public galleries. There's been a considerable amount of development there at least from my unpracticed eye, it seems that has occurred. I guess I would be interested in your review of how you see Moorhead State grads and maybe faculty members, too, as far as that is concerned, involved and whether you can see

more art consciousness, more development along this line within the community and particularly what role Moorhead State's department has played in this.

RS: Well, we just had last weekend the Minnesota Art Educators' Conference, hosted by the art teachers and Moorhead State University and Plains Art Museum jointly, and in connection with that conference, we had a workshop and the workshop continued with a workshop for the Moorhead art teachers, and I've only found one of the art teachers who are employed in Moorhead who wasn't a Moorhead State University graduate. If you look around in Fargo, probably a very major portion of those teachers get at least one degree here, if not their undergraduate, then their graduate degree from Moorhead State. I am glad to realize that Moorhead State graduates are most welcomed anyplace and they have a very good reputation. I assured them not only with the original revised curriculum but also with [unclear] the curriculum adding another extra year, which is the BFA year, and that strengthens the special expertise of art teachers, so that they are very valuable to stand any kind of competition in their art work or in their education in any respect. And similarly graphic design, there are other students who wish to go to graduate school. So, to begin with, you can see throughout the region that our influence is very much there and evident. In just talking about the region, there was a major graphic design conference at Bay Lake just about a week and a half ago and among the conference organizers are Moorhead State graduates. The national graphic designers' association president a year or so ago was a Moorhead State graduate. Some of the firms which are published most in the graphic design magazines are featuring our former students as top designers; and one of the most prestigious firms in Minneapolis, the Duffy Group, features a crew of designers that are all Moorhead State graduates and these are highly published and very prestigious firms. And there are a number of former students who own their own small firms, some of them not too small firms.

BJ: How about the gallery situation in Fargo-Moorhead? I would guess when you arrived it was pretty well just the Rourke Gallery, wasn't it?

RS: At that time, the Red River Art Center, which is now the Plains Art Museum, was in existence. That institution went through some very, very hard times and it was very fortunate it always happened to have around somebody who really made the last-ditch effort to keep them alive until finally, the North Dakota gambling laws permitted that they have these charitable gambling funds to support the institution and it really, at that time, took off. But I especially have to mention Jim Rourke, who was one of the links and not only his own gallery, which was for a period of time, sort of part of the Plains Art Museum complex, but his gallery plus what he has contributed to the art scene in Moorhead and Fargo is immeasurable. I think he's a historic figure, and his personal sacrifices and endurance are most admirable.

As for other galleries, we had a number of private attempts come and go throughout the years. One that seemed to survive or persist, which is a cooperative gallery, was called Gallery Four and was located in various places in the deLendrecies Building first and then moved over to downtown Fargo in the former Sears Building--the Elm Tree Square, and now they've moved to Moorhead Center Mall. This is a coalition of artists which evidently

started with four artists or something like that, very few, and now they feature many, many artists and are selling reasonably well, so they can keep their nose above the water. Their quality is quite reasonable, is not very high in experimental art most of the time, but something which is certainly an asset to any home and for any home or office you can find appropriate pieces in that place.

BJ: How about these regional art shows? Like there is a Fargo Regional Art Show, for example, which they had this fall. How does that relate to the art scene? Is this pretty much amateur craft sort of thing or?

RS: I consider art like a pyramid. It has to have a wide base, which might not have to grade that [unclear], or high. Then gradually, getting higher and higher is narrowed in the cross section. And I think the street fairs and art sales and sale opportunities in such places and a regional art show or an annual competition of some sort or another or invitational art show--they are all various levels of sophistication and all are very respectable efforts and very respectable contributions to the total scene and all very necessary. Unfortunately, our particular area doesn't have the population base to support a very wide art activity. It needs to have a much greater number of people who then constitute a sufficient enough of a art market and art interested public to support more art activity. I think in relation to the size of our population here, the support is respectable. I don't think it has completely reached all its potential, but it is certainly respectable. And it is strengthening and I think perhaps the weakest link in the whole art scene is the public schools because I don't think that with all this push and shove for improving education, the visual arts have either found their true mission and value and been able to communicate that value to the administrators to the degree that they would have dignity and be all that they should be in education. It is especially hard for me to see all the struggle on the basis of my own education and experience when I had the opportunity in gymnasium to already cover the servio estinade [phonetic] by the time I graduated from secondary school and had quite a bit of expertise in basic art skills and also Hungarian folk art, regional European folk art. It is anything not even near to this what high schools accomplish, and we start out basically from scratch in our classes when we encounter the first time the freshmen. We cannot have any kind of portfolio requirement for students to enter because no [unclear] from the immediate region or at large from Minnesota or anywhere in the country--the students who come here have very sketchy art preparation if they have any, and many high schools don't offer any kind of art. They start out from ground zero. In Europe not only those who went to art or art-related fields had that kind of art education as I had, but absolutely everybody who went to higher education had to have that. And consequently had a much better educated public and that public is what is missing because the public at large--the doctors, the lawyers, the engineers, and all sorts of other fields of professional people--they simply don't have the understanding, the sensitivity, and perception of what's necessary to plug into the visual culture and have a visual literacy to speak of.

BJ: This is not just characteristic of this region. This is a national problem.

RS: A national problem. And unfortunately it is not realized that other countries which, you know, we respect and deal with have an entirely different approach to the arts than the

United States and rely largely on voluntary private support for the arts. And, you know, very low national policy except an occasional negative reaction is what we are encountering recently with [2 names unclear] and Jesse Helms, of course.

BJ: Yes, Senator Jesse Helms has managed to make political capitalists over this.

Is it possible to characterize any significant trends as far as art itself is concerned as it has affected the art majors at Moorhead State? Is there something, and to even go one step further, is there something that serves to identify, something that is distinctive to Moorhead State graduates, as far as trends?

RS: I think we are providing a quite solid but relative conservative art education. What I can see as the greatest value that we are not imprinting on the students any particular style or trend or conviction.

BJ: There are no miniature Richard Szeitzes graduating here.

RS: No, no way. None of the other faculty is pushing actively their styles. Naturally, students learn what somebody is able to teach and they have some traces that you can certainly discover in the students' work, but we like to keep them thinking and creative individuals. They learn the basic principles, the techniques, how to develop concepts, and how to execute concepts and come up with an expression; but we don't push them in one direction.

BJ: How about the producing artists? You know, you hear various schools of art. Is there any common characteristic or are there characteristics that you might say a lot of artists share within this region?

RS: There is a certain flavor that you might be able to detect. One perhaps is what in this particular region is the lack of contour in the landscape which permits people to more concentrate either on detail or on the overall big structure of sky and land and some landscape features which are much more subtle and different than dramatic mountains or hills or water or such things. Major elements like [unclear] as green elevator and highway horizontals and fence lines and just bands of color. It is not so much literal as in abstract and conceptual terms, some of the characteristics come through. And the more mature artists who live in this region display this kind of characteristic. Those who are just starting to study or the younger people, they don't [unclear] art yet a very strong turn.

BJ: It takes a while for the environment and everything else to kind of get distilled and to have an impact eventually.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

BJ: . . . wanted to cover today, but in any of these interviews I always leave an open agenda item and if you think there are some other things that would be of interest that ought to be on tape, obviously this is the time to take advantage of the opportunity.

RS: I hope that the interest and support of visual arts will be a continuing one not only at Moorhead State but in the community, and I'll hope we don't miss future opportunities. We had a few which were unfortunately not followed up or continued. We had some quite good ideas which would have made Moorhead more successful in every way like the cultural bridge would have been built as a reality. I just recently visited Columbus, Indiana, where they have a couple of dozens of major architects who contributed not only to church buildings from Saraneen [phonetic] and Arpay [phonetic] with the public library and, you know, just countless major architects.

BJ: One very enlightened industrialist there.

RS: And they have two Fortune 500 companies. But the community as such is very enlightened and it wasn't to begin with. The industry is who started that trend, but people in the community brought in Saraneen as a pioneer and Columbus, Indiana, is very much benefiting financially and every which way from the investment and thoughtfulness in this direction. Architecture is very obviously a first point where you can perceive the aesthetic and visual sophistication of a community. I would like to certainly see that Fargo and Moorhead would move in that direction because these towns will be certainly growing in the next 50-100 years very substantially, and there is an opportunity to really build in quality and not just reap profit or utility in thinking.

Another major concern I have is in education, art education. I feel that our students, mainly at the elementary level, are very much shortchanged. Teaching art is a vehicle to teach lots of other things about other sciences and humanities and life and self-realization and establishing an identity and personal balance and self-respect. I don't think that art is utilized and taken advantage of. It's not so much that we want to see art being taught for its own sake or just appreciation of great old monuments or build a constituency to support artists who cannot pay for their ideas, but to add to the quality of life. And that starts certainly in the early ages, and again it shouldn't be forgotten in a curriculum that is leading to college-level experience and college-level studies, university studies. Most people need that cultural background in visual terms also, not only in mathematics and reading. Our entire culture is moving in communication from the linear reading to more acoustic and auditive and visual communication through computers and screens where the visuals have to be perceived and evaluated. I think our education should recognize this trend and move in that direction. There's a lot to be done.

BJ: Well, nothing like having something to look forward to do, then. [Laughter] Well, thank you very much.

RS: You are very welcome.