

## INTERVIEW I

DATE: November 3, 1973  
INTERVIEWEE: MADAME ELIZABETH SHOUMATOFF  
INTERVIEWER: JOE B. FRANTZ  
PLACE: Her home on Long Island, Locust Valley, New York

### Tape 1 of 1

F: Suppose you tell me at the beginning how you got to be a president's portrait painter. You go back to Roosevelt.

S: Well, of course, I painted Roosevelt twice. One in 1943, which was arranged through a friend, Mrs.[Lucy] Rutherford, but that portrait I gave as a gift to the President. He liked it very much.

F: When did you come to the States?

S: Oh, 1917! Quite a long time.

F: This has become home to you.

S: Oh, completely, completely.

Anyway, the portrait was very small, and they liked it. The President said, "Well, sometime would you do another one for the White House or Hyde Park?" Well, of course, for two years nothing happened. The war was going on. Then upon his return from Yalta, I had a message from Miss [Grace] Tully that the President was in Warm Springs and he was ready to have his portrait done. You see, he was on his way to San Francisco for the big conference, you know, the United Nations. And apparently he was rather in a hurry to have it done, so the portrait was planned for him, in his cape, holding a scroll which was supposed to be the Charter of the United Nations. Well, of course, as you know,

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it was never finished.

F: Right. Did you actually get down there before he died?

S: Oh, yes, I was there four days, and actually the portrait was an unfinished portrait which is now in Warm Springs. But on the basis of it, I did another one which I also gave to the Warm Springs Museum, and that was that.

Then nothing happened for years. Then Mr. Charles Palmer who was the president of the Warm Springs Foundation at the time--I don't know exactly when it was, I think it was in the late sixties, 1965 or something--was there at the unveiling of Mrs. Roosevelt's portrait by Douglas Chandor.

F: Incidentally, I came from the same town as Douglas Chandor.  
[Weatherford, Texas]

S: Oh, you did?

It was a portrait, you know, where there were mostly hands and a few faces, a very interesting portrait. At the time he [Charles Palmer] talked with Mrs. Johnson, and Mrs. Johnson said, "I really do wish we could have a portrait done of President Roosevelt." So Mr. Palmer suggested that I should do it. Well, Mrs. Johnson didn't want anything on the basis of the unfinished one. It was very different from the one done in 1943 and by the by, I always had in mind that the 1943 [one] could be done in oils, with his cape and the background of the ocean. It was at the time of the signing of the Atlantic Charter.

F: What material did you do the 1943 one in?

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S: Oh, that was a watercolor.

F: It wasn't oil?

S: No, watercolor and salt. I'll show you later. I have a whole album of all these portraits.

So I was contacted and, frankly, I wasn't too anxious. (Laughter)  
It was quite an undertaking. Well, anyway, we had a meeting with Mrs. Johnson about it.

F: Where was this? In Washington?

S: In Washington. The whole thing was discussed--how and what-- and she suggested making a little sketch. I had some snaps taken at the time, in 1943. So I made, in oils, a preliminary start, and I brought it to the White House, and Mrs. Johnson said, "Oh, it's very good, and I'm very anxious for the President to see it, but he's very, very busy this morning. I don't know when he'll be able to do it. But anyway, we'll put it on an easel in the Lincoln Sitting Room."

And there it was. And suddenly the President appeared. It was quite an interesting moment because, you know, when you see a person who is on television, whose voice you know, in person, it's really very interesting.

F: Right.

S: And I must tell you that I was very much impressed by him because he was very tall, much taller than I thought, and he had something I would say very impressive about him.

F: Yes

S: He came and, in a rather hurried way, sort of looked and looked, and then he said, "It's excellent. I like it very much." And that

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was great. So I went ahead and did a finished one, and when it was finished it was considered good, so they kept it for the White House.

That was the beginning. Then, shortly, well, anyway, the whole project regarding President and Mrs. Johnson's portrait started that fall. I was contacted by Mr. Clark Clifford and we had a meeting with him and Mrs. Johnson in the Lincoln Sitting Room. I brought a few photographs of some of my portraits of women, and she liked very much the portrait that I did of the wife of Governor [Carl] Sanders of Atlanta. It was in a very pretty dress, and the background was the mansion of the Governor. She [Mrs. Johnson] said, "That's just what I want. And we'll put the Jefferson Memorial in the back because I'm devoted to the memory of President Jefferson."

F: Incidentally, before we go ahead, who was Mr. Palmer?

S: Mr. Palmer? Well, he was really the man who was so devoted to Roosevelt and he was, I think, at the time president of the Warm Springs Foundation, among other things. But he was a great sort of friend of Roosevelt.

F: And, therefore, he knew the Johnsons.

S: Oh, yes, Oh, yes. He knew the Johnsons very well. Actually, he came with me the first time when we had to meet with the Johnsons.

Well, I painted Mrs. Johnson, and everything seemed satisfactory.

F: Was Mrs. Johnson fairly precise in what she wanted or did she pretty well leave it up to you?

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S: No, no, no. We went to her dressing room, and there was a whole array of dresses, and I saw one that was very, I think, appropriate for the portrait--something in white chiffon. But I said, "I'd like to do it in yellow." So it was the same dress, only done in yellow.

F: Was the dress itself white, and you supplied the yellow?

S: Yes, I made it yellow. Yes, I made it yellow.

F: I was looking at that Thursday again, at a color portrait of it.

S: Yes, it was in yellow. And then after the portrait was finished, she said, "I think we should have President Johnson done." Well, that was another surprise!

F: Incidentally, how much time did she give you?

S: Well, I started. . . it's generally four or five sittings. We always painted in the Lincoln Sitting Room.

F: Did you do it in sort of consecutive days?

S: Yes, yes, oh yes. I went back and forth. I drove to Washington with that portrait. And then President Johnson was to be painted. Well, it had to be an exact pair. I would like to have done it a little bigger, possibly with hands, but she wanted it exactly the way her portrait was done. You remember the two.

F: Yes, yes.

S: And so the Capitol was in the back. So the portrait was done. He was again very pleased. He was very cooperative.

F: Where did you actually paint it?

S: Again in the Lincoln Sitting Room.

F: How long did he stay at a time? I mean, could you get him long

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enough to . . . ?

S: Oh, yes! I think we had four or five sittings.

F: He was a good subject then from that standpoint?

S: Very. Very cooperative.

F: Sat still?

S: Well, not exactly. You know, he had always so many friends coming in and out, and then once in a while he had to go. Then I'd paint in the afternoon for a few minutes, but it wasn't difficult.

F: But there were no great difficulties then?

S: No, no. And he had very little criticism. I'd think something was wrong with the tie or something was wrong with something in his hair. I think that was the only suggestions that he made. And after the portrait was finished, he wanted another one. He hadn't yet mentioned that he was not going to run again.

F: Must have been in late 1967 then.

S: No. Anyway, Mrs. Johnson said, "That portrait will be for the LBJ Library." Of course, I had very little idea what it was all about. It had to be done in the setting of Texas, of the LBJ Ranch, so I went to Texas, and we posed him.

F: You went to the Ranch?

S: Oh yes.

F: Did you stay out there?

S: I stayed out there, and it was a very delightful visit. There you really appreciated the hospitality and the kindness of the Johnsons.

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Of course, in between I saw quite a lot of them, I would say, socially, because I attended at least three dinners at the White House. One was for Mr. [Harold] Wilson, the prime minister. Another one was with Mr. [William] Tubman, with whom I stayed in Liberia a few years ago. And the other was on some other occasion. I don't exactly remember. But, of course, the unveiling of the big portrait of FDR was quite a big affair. So that was very, very glamorous, and there must have been at least two hundred people. Well, after I started the portrait of President Johnson at the Ranch, I couldn't continue. So we came back to Washington, and Mrs. Johnson said, "I would like to have it finished while he is still president." And he was painted, as you know, in the, how do you call it, cowboy jacket or whatever?

F: Yes, in the browns that he liked, or tans.

S: Leaning on that wall with the Pedernales in the back. And I said, "I think it was a pretty good start." He was a little worried that I put too many wrinkles. (Laughter)

F: A little bit of vanity there.

S: I thought there was a little vanity, and I was a little, how do you say, disturbed, because I thought it was a stronger likeness in the beginning. Well, anyway, it was finished, and that was that.

In the meantime I painted the girls, and it was lately the grandchildren. So that is the story.

F: You really have become part of the family, haven't you?

S: Oh! And, of course, the final touch of the whole story is that wonderful visit I had when the stamp was, how do you call it,

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unveiled, or what?

F: Yes.

S: I don't know how to say it. (Laughter)

F: I don't know. What do you do with [stamps]?

S: Because that is a great honor and really an extraordinary privilege.

F: Now how was that chosen? Was that independent, done independently of you? That that portrait should [be selected].

S: Actually, it was even in the papers. I hadn't read it, and some friends called me, and they told me, "Do you know your portrait is being used for a stamp?" I was quite surprised.

F: You'll have one of the greatest circulations of any painter.

S: I never knew.

F: Right. That means, I guess, all over the world and in every home. No telling how many million.

S: Exactly.

F: What did you do when you weren't painting down at the Ranch?

S: Well, I painted most of the day, and in the evening we had the most delighted visit.

F: Did the President--I was going to ask you--

S: He drove us all over. Juanita Roberts was there, and she was visiting at the same time, and there were quite a few friends. At the dining room table there were at least, I don't know, ten or twelve people at a time.



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F: What season of the year was this?

S: It was--now let me see. I started in the late fall.

F: So you were down there when the weather is kind of nice.

S: Yes, then I finished, more or less, in Washington, and then I came back to the Ranch for the final. . .

F: Now when he's sitting out there on the fence posing does he have a kind of coterie of friends around?

S: No, no, no.

F: Just you and him.

S: I would say Mr. Johnson left it all to me. I would like very much that you should see the collection of my photographs of the portrait and everything.

F: Do you do a certain amount of photographing?

S: Well, I tell you, I like to study a subject before I start. So I generally have several snaps taken before I start. Which is what would be the best position; of course, with the details, it saves a lot of steps.

F: Did the President consider that he had a good side or a bad side, or did he pretty well just let you pose him?

S: Now, let me see. I had to pose him definitely whatever side it was, because it was a paired portrait with Mrs. Johnson. So they had to be posed, you know, looking at each other. I had no choice.

F: To that extent Mrs. Johnson sort of set the tone for the second one.

S: That's right; that's right.

F: What do you do when you paint a president? Do you just set a price for a commission, or do they offer something, or what?

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- S: No, I just set my own price which is for any portrait, and then they think it over, and--
- F: And say, "Let's do it."
- S: And then they do it.
- F: Did you develop any sort of a change in your attitude toward the President from the time you started?
- S: I liked him from beginning to end. He was a very warm and very easy person. Of course, President Roosevelt was one of the easiest persons to paint, because he talked all the time. You never felt even that you were in the presence of the president.
- F: Did Johnson not talk when he was posing?
- S: Oh, yes. He talked, but there were so many people around that he mostly talked to other people. That went on, and "Mr. Johnson, you have to look at me." He would look, and then we would talk.
- F: When you were painting in the Lincoln Sitting Room, there's just sort of a constant file of people in and out?
- S: Oh, not exactly. Because the Lincoln Sitting Room, you know, is at the corner.
- F: Right.
- S: And people were coming in just to see the President.
- F: It was in that study.
- S: Well, there was only one light; that had to be the north light, so there was plenty of light, and it was always on the same . . .
- F: Did he sit in a chair or on that divan?
- S: On a very comfortable armchair. And Mrs. Johnson generally was

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present. They were discussing plans about this and that, and in the last portrait they were discussing everything about the moving and the arrangements in Texas. She was a great help being there, because, frankly, I couldn't talk all the time. Even though I do talk, this was the President. It was a little different.

F: Did he ever mention the Peter Hurd portrait to you?

S: Never.

F: It was a closed subject as far as he was [concerned]?

S: However, I was a little conscious of it.

F: He could be enormously sort of chivalry-contender, it seems to me, toward women sometimes.

S: Oh, he was delightful. He was delightful, and he once even asked me if I wanted a little more time. I knew he was busy, but I was still painting and I said, "Well, Mr. President, I think we are through for the day." "Well, I can give you another half hour if you want."

F: He never rushed you?

S: No, he never rushed me.

F: You're one of the few people he didn't. (Laughter)

S: Only one time. He apparently was anxious to get out. So he looked behind the easel, and he said, "Are we through, sister?" (Laughter) I thought that was very friendly.

F: Right. How about the little children? Are they fairly easy to paint? Or were they kind of wriggly like children?

S: The children were very easy to paint. And the girls are delightful:

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Luci and Lynda Bird. I painted both girls. Again, it was Mr. Johnson's wish to have them done in the setting of the White House. So they were small watercolors, but there was some indication that they were done in the White House.

F: Were they actually painted there?

S: Yes. Lynda Bird was painted in the background of the yellow Oval Room with the chandelier showing in the back, and Luci was painted with the background of the Queen's Bedroom.

F: The President's a large man, as we noted. Did you have any difficulty in that case, in getting him kind of enveloped?

S: Well, you can judge by the portrait. It looked all right apparently. He looked all right.

F: Well, I didn't know whether you had to do much arranging of him or whether he sat rather naturally?

S: Yes, yes. Well, generally, the moment that I pose a person I make a sketch first. I follow the general idea right away.

F: Did he show any technical interest in what you were doing? How do you do this? Why do you do that?

S: I don't believe so. He just looked if he liked it or not.

F: Now, when you were painting him there in the White House, did you come in every day, or would you miss several days, or what?

S: Oh no. I would come sometimes for two days and then again for two days.

F: Come back up here to Locust Valley and then back down there?

S: That's right. I left my portrait generally in one of the closets.

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F: Well, what would he do then? Contact you and say that, "You can come back? I can give you . . .?"

S: Oh, no. We made dates ahead of time.

F: I see.

S: Which we never postponed.

F: And he kept his dates?

S: Oh, yes.

F: Mrs. Johnson kind of acted as the agent for both of you.

S: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Oh, she called me several times.

F: Has she been here?

S: No.

F: She'd like this.

S: Well, do you want to see portraits better than we started to [look at]?

F: Yes, yes.

S: I made a little sketch, more a watercolor portrait, of President Roosevelt on the basis of the one in the White House that I gave him [President Johnson]. I know he said he was so happy to have it. He had it always in his room there. He certainly [spoke of him] very much, you know, to say how much he owed him, in everything that he ever did. Because, after all, it was President Roosevelt who started so many projects that at the time seemed impossible in many ways to be realized. And I think President Johnson certainly made a great contribution to this country by realizing everything that had been started. Of course, he had his own projects.

But he loved his Ranch. Oh, it was so delightful to be there.

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I remember this drive. He was showing all these hundreds of deer and all. It was so funny. We were sitting with Mrs. Roberts in the back and Mrs. Johnson with Johnson in front [driving], on this little dirt road, and he finally got lost and said, "Where are we now? Where do we go?" And, of course, Mrs. Johnson knew. (Laughter)

F: I think he really had sort of an artist's feeling for that country, that he saw beauties in it that other people didn't.

S: One thing that impressed me very much--during all this time I was talking to the girls: "How can he bear all those incredible difficulties that he had to go through these years?" And I remember Luci and both girls said well, he was very, very religious, and particularly since he became president. He relied on prayer, he was very, very . . . how do you say? Well, he talked about it himself because when we were talking, I remember he was always very interested in what was happening in Russia with the religion and so on.

F: Did he ever ask you anything about Franklin Roosevelt's last moments?

S: No, that was one thing I didn't want.

F: Right.

S: No, no.

F: Well, that's good.

S: Actually, I was a little conscious of my last portrait.

F: Right. Did you do any preliminary sort of line drawings or anything like that for him when you were doing his own portrait?

S: Yes, I did a sketch. I think I gave them to the White House, last year actually. And Mrs. Nixon sent me a very kind letter thanking

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for them. Actually, she thanked me personally for those sketches when I was, last year, at a party at the White House of the unveiling of the Blue Room. When I was in the receiving line, she talked to me and said: "We appreciate those sketches." I think they were displayed, they were loaned at the time of the unveiling of the stamp.

But that's what I do. I start a portrait, and then I do a sketch in color so that you will know more or less what it's going to look like.

F: At the stamp ceremony, did you stay at the Ranch?

S: No, it was in Austin.

F: You stayed in town?

S: We stayed in town.

F: So you haven't been back to the Ranch since he's gone.

S: No. No, I haven't.

F: I'm sure that his presence would be pretty much missed out there.

S: Oh, I wouldn't like it. But I'm sure you can feel very much his spirit and his devotion to that place. He really was happy there.

F: Right.

S: Actually, I think that why you might like the second portrait better is because he had an entirely different expression. He was relaxed, he was happy, and I really think Mrs. Johnson was such a wonderful presence that it helped me so much. I think she's such a warm personality and I don't know when I've met anybody who was in that position so . . .

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F: She must have had an enormously soothing effect on him.

S: Oh, no question, no question.

F: Once in a while, a disciplining effect, too, you know. But I think she is quite remarkable. I have interviewed so many people, I've seen a lot of people who weren't friendly to Johnson--

S: Oh, did you really?

F: Yes, but invariably they always say nice things about Lady Bird Johnson. I haven't found a real critic yet, and that in itself is quite a performance.

S: Well, but there was a warmth about President Johnson. You couldn't miss that. In fact, I think everybody in Texas is so friendly and so hospitable.

F: Thank you.

S: I really love Texas. I've done a lot and lots of portraits in San Antonio.

F: Incidentally, how did Clark Clifford happen to come to you? Was he sort of chosen by the President or by Mrs. Johnson? You didn't know him particularly, did you?

S: No, in regard to the portrait of Mrs. Johnson, he seemed to be in charge of everything. And even when I stayed at the Mayflower [Hotel], he came to see how the portrait was getting along.

F: He's a delightful man.

S: Oh! He was a great statesman.

F: One of the most beautifully mannered people.

S: Oh, very, very gracious, and so delightful to talk with. But he



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was the one who was in charge of Mrs. Johnson's portrait from the beginning.

[End of Tape 1 of 1 and Interview I]

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