

# Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project

Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

*Susan Friebert Rossen, Class of 1963*

Interviewed by  
Ellice Amanna, AC, Class of 2014J

May 25, 2013

## **Abstract**

In this oral history, Susan Friebert Rossen credits her Smith education, particularly her art history professors and her junior year in Paris, with giving her the foundation for a successful professional career. She talks about the experience of helping to prepare her class reunion book and all she learned while researching in the College Archives during that process.

## **Restrictions**

None

## **Format**

Interview recorded on miniDV tapes using a Panasonic DVX-100A camera. One 30-minute tape.

## **Transcript**

Transcribed by Janet Harris with Harris Reporting.

## **Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms**

### *Video Recording*

**Bibliography:** Rossen, Susan Friebert. Interview by Ellice Amanna. Video recording, May 25, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Susan Friebert Rossen, interview by Ellice Amanna, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives.

### *Transcript*

**Bibliography:** Rossen, Susan Friebert. Interview by Ellice Amanna. Transcript of video recording, May 25, 2013. Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives. **Footnote:** Susan Friebert Rossen, interview by Ellice Amanna, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2013, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.

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Transcript of interview conducted May 25, 2013, with:

SUSAN FRIEBERT ROSSEN

by: ELLICE AMANNA

AMANNA: Okay. So this is Ellice Amanna and I'm conducting an interview with Susan Friebert Rossen, class of '63. It's May 25th, 2013, and this is the Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project. Thank you for participating.

ROSSEN: I'm happy to do that.

AMANNA: So you're here for reunion.

ROSSEN: Mm-hmm.

AMANNA: And you're part of the group that prepared your class for this. Do you come back often for reunion?

ROSSEN: I actually taught in the SIAMS program. Do you know what that is? It's the Summer Institute for Art Museum at Smith, so SIAMS.

AMANNA: Oh, great. Yeah.

ROSSEN: And it started seven years ago now. And the first year I didn't participate, the next four years I did. And then the last year I didn't participate. And so I came every summer and it was really a terrific experience. I was also in something called the Smith Management program which was something that I did in the early I'd say '90 – 1990, something like that. That was a program that I think has changed its name now, but it was to prepare middle management women for leadership jobs. And I was a museum publisher. I did books for an art museum, and a lot of that involvement management of finances because these book budgets were enormous and you had to really think about not only raising enough money to do them but also try to figure out whether you could profit from them in any way, shape or form, even though museums are nonprofit. And I thought – I really didn't think I had business skills. I mean Smith gave me a great deal of my background in art history and in art, and in writing, but it didn't give me any at that point. Who was thinking about anything like that?

So I applied and I was probably one of the only – at that point there were a couple of other nonprofits in this program, but mostly they were people from big

corporations who could afford to send these middle management women for accruing skills that would help them break the glass ceiling. And so that program has now ended, but there's a different one in the summer, and I don't know what it's called. SIAMS ended this past year. It's over.

AMANNA: Okay.

ROSSEN: And I think that's really sad, but I understand that Smith now has a museum concentration which I think is just fine, and so it really maybe isn't needed anymore.

AMANNA: Okay.

ROSSEN: So it brought me back to Smith – I've been back in all those ways – and made me even more attached to it than I was before.

AMANNA: Yeah.

ROSSEN: I credit the college for an education at a level that really prepared me to do what I did in my life. And I was overwhelmed when I came here. Our class was the first class to be half public and half private schools. Nonetheless, many of the public school kids went to schools like Latin in Boston and the Philadelphia School for Girls which is a public school but high-level academic achievers.

AMANNA: Right.

ROSSEN: And I was the first girl from my high school to go out East to college, so I came out here completely unprepared.

AMANNA: And where did --

ROSSEN: Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

AMANNA: Oh, okay.

ROSSEN: And I came here because I got the biggest scholarship. I mean I have no idea why I picked Smith, but I think it was because I was most honored to get more money from Smith than from the other schools that I applied to. And so I didn't know what I was walking into, and that first year was really hard. I took art history 1-1, as they called it then, and that was the only class I did well in, and the other classes I struggled, because I'd never written a blue book test. I really had never been taught how to write essays. I didn't know how to take notes. In a class I was just thrown in what I thought were very beautiful sharks, these women, you know, that I was suddenly colleagues with, and I was overwhelmed. And I write in the essay that I put in the reunion book that I was so overwhelmed that I studied all the time and I didn't realize it till I came back last summer to do some

research to be the editor of the reunion book for our class, and I went through *The Sophian*, every issue, as I told you, newspaper and saw the kinds of privilege that we had in those four years, what we were given by this school.

I mean did I know that Martin Luther spoke at chapel in the Fall of 1959? No. Did I know that Ella Fitzgerald sang? Did I know that the Cleveland Symphony came? Did I know that José Limón, a great dancer, came and taught master classes? No. I am not aware of ever having gone to a single one of those things. And it wasn't like I was culturally naïve. My father and mother are both artists and both interested in ballet and both interested in classical music, and so it's not like I didn't come from no experience of that at all, but I think that I was just so overwhelmed by just trying to stay above water that I just studied all the time. And I ended up becoming a workaholic in my entire life, so that I don't thank Smith for but – I don't blame Smith for that.

Anyway, art history was the one course. It was taught at that point by a number of different people who all were famous and outstanding art historians, and they used the Smith College Museum. They made us look at real works of art. They didn't just show us slides in black and white illustrations, although we had beautiful ones taken by a man named Kindy (phonetic) whose wife – they were both renaissance scholars, and he became a great photographer. And we would have this packet of black-and-white illustrations that we'd have to study and memorize, and I kept them for years because they were such beautiful photographs. And so we did study from black and white and we were disadvantaged that way, but we had a collection at this museum which was a terrific museum. For a school this size it was pretty fabulous. And that interested me a lot in the objects themselves, you know, and really becoming involved with the objects. And of course I came from artists, my parents both being artists, so I wasn't too afraid of the object and I was really interested in that.

So I ended up getting a master's degree and going into museum work, and my museum work was always educational. I really believed in communicating my own enthusiasms, and partly because I had such great teachers here. I mean they are the ones that – I had never known there was such a thing as art history, even with the family I lived in. Even with all the books my father had and my mother had to look at, I don't think I ever knew that there was a course of study that you could actually do. So between that and the fact that I went on my junior year to Paris where I studied at the Ecole du Louvre, and of course there I was just thrown into art and architecture and everything, those were just total defining things that Smith did for me and led me into the museums as a life.

And so I started an education, which I love doing, and then I took some time off to have a child, and then I got divorced and that was another big swerve in my life, and I had to start earning a living, so I went back to the museum. And this is in Detroit, Michigan where I was living because the man I married lived there. And the Detroit Institute of Arts is one of the great unsung museums in the United

States and now is under incredible siege because the city is bankrupt. And actually, yesterday it made headlines because the bankruptcy officer that the state assigned to run the city – the city can't run itself now – has decided that the Detroit Institute of Arts collection is worth so many millions of dollars that maybe in fact they could begin to sell some of it off in order to make –

AMANNA: Oh, what a heartbreak.

ROSSEN: Unbelievable. I mean it's unheard of. So I don't know how they're going to fight that back. But anyway, it's a great museum and I worked there first in education, then I worked as a curator, and these were days when you didn't have to have a Ph.D. to do that kind of work. Now you do. And then I ended up, because the museum director, I had been editing him – he couldn't write his way out of a paper bag, and he would give me essays to write – help him – well, then I would rewrite them, and he said, you have a gift, and I said, no, I don't really, and he said, yes you do. We need to start a department that publishes and you need to be in charge of it. And I said, I can't do that. I can't. And I don't even know what that means. And he said, you'll find out. So he threw me into the water and I swam and created this career, as many people in publishing do. You don't – in those days for sure, you didn't get trained to do publishing. You maybe majored in English and maybe you went to New York and started as a secretary in a publishing house, but for the most part people just fell into those jobs. They have more training now than they used to. And so I created a department there which edited labels, edited all materials having to do with art, and edited and produced books. And eventually I went to Chicago to the Art Institute of Chicago which is a much more wealthy museum and a more famous museum, although I won't under-salute DIA ever. It's just a great place. And I stayed there for --

END OF INTERVIEW Part 1

*Transcribed by Janet Harris, July 2013.*

Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project  
Smith College Archives  
Northampton, MA

Transcript of interview conducted May 24, 2013, with:

SUSAN ROSSEN

by: ELLICE AMANNA

AMANNA: So this is Ellice Amanna and this is the second half of our interview with Susan Friebert Rossen, the first half of which is recorded on the Smith camera. Okay. So we're back, Susan.

ROSSEN: Okay.

AMANNA: So we've been talking about your career after Smith.

ROSSEN: Yes.

AMANNA: And let's just reflect a little, if you will, on your Smith experience. It sounds like you feel like you were prepared here for a –

ROSSEN: I was, I was. I was prepared here for my career, no question about it. And I –

AMANNA: Does that include your writing? Because you got into publishing. Is this where you picked up your writing skills?

ROSSEN: Well, I was writing in high school, but it was much more rigorous here. It was much more of a – there was much more good critical thinking going on in class, and one was carefully – one's work was carefully looked at. In high school, I signed my name and I got an A. All I had to do was sign my name, which was not a good thing for me. So when I came to Smith and I signed my name and I didn't get A's, I was really stunned and, of course, really shaken, deeply shaken. And that's what I want to mention. So I came on scholarship. My father was an art professor, where he earned practically nothing at a state university in Wisconsin. So I got this really nice scholarship.

I came here and I found myself living in Northrop House on the fifth floor. I don't know if you even know that there's a fifth floor in Northrop House. That's the attic. And there were five of us up there. I had been corrected. I thought it was the fourth floor and there were four of us up there, but I found out yesterday that it was the fifth floor and there were five of us there. And they were little, tiny rooms, no bigger than like this. Okay. And no bathroom up there at all. Under the eaves, it was stifling hot, in the summers and the spring and the fall, and it was freezing in the winter. And no one came to visit us up there, because it was so far

up. And I discovered that we were all scholarship students. And I didn't discover that until I read a book by a woman who graduated, I think, in class of '60 or '61, named Susan Allen Toth, T-O-T-H. And she wrote a book about life at Smith in her years, a memoir. And I read that book, and I realized that she was talking about me, when she said that, as a scholarship student, she was given a lesser room. And also they didn't want to mix you with non-scholarship people. Okay. And it turns out there was one woman on our floor, who I'd forgotten about, and she wasn't a scholarship. She was the fifth one. She had gotten into Smith so late and had said yes so late, that she didn't have another choice but to be up there. So we loved each other. It wasn't like we didn't have a great time, and we bonded, but there was a division between the privileged and the less privileged in 1959, '60. And that's the only time I really ever felt it, you know. And I did feel there was something, but I couldn't say what it was.

The other thing that happened is, at one point, I was so miserable up there, because of the heat, that I asked to be switched. And I hadn't formed the friendships that I eventually did. So what they did is they introduced me to a woman, and I would have to share a room. It was a double. And she was Jewish, as was I, and she was a scholarship student. So they weren't going to even mix us with Christians. I mean, it was – there were some Christian scholarships on the fifth floor of Northrop, but that was okay, because we were over there. These kinds of things were operating, and I was stunned to learn about them later. I mean, I –

AMANNA: Was there a Hillel then?

ROSSEN: Yes, there was, there was.

AMANNA: So there was a sense of Jewish life?

ROSSEN: There was a sense of Jewish life, which I had never – and I was more aware of being Jewish when I came to Smith than I ever was at a high school that wasn't very Jewish, I mean, but I still felt – and it wasn't a practice – I was a very secular Jew. And there were many, many young Jewish women in my class who were brilliant who came from really good schools in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, public schools as well as private schools. So they didn't, I don't think, feel what I felt as a kind of double whammy.

AMANNA: Class.

ROSSEN: Right. And, of course, in our class, there were only four women of color. And I have to tell you, I didn't know one. I never got to know one of them. One of them is with us at this reunion. She is from India. The other two or three didn't even respond to any of our requests to go into our reunion book. That's how distanced, I imagine, they felt. I can't even imagine how they felt, in 1959, to be in this school. One of them was the daughter of an ambassador to the UN. So,



you know, I mean, one of them came from Switzerland, one of them came from New York. I mean, I've learned this since about them, because I've been so curious. But it's wonderful to see how Smith has changed. I mean, it is a really great thing to hear about the diversity and to see it, actually, as I have been seeing it since I've been visiting.

AMANNA: And it was an interesting political time, just thinking about civil rights and –

ROSSEN: Well, yes. I mean, there were sit-ins at the Woolworth's, which I didn't, of course, being that I only studied all the time. I was completely – although my politics are leftist, they weren't that – and I was always a leftist, and I came out of a socialist city, a socialist family, a union, you know, family. And I knew that my politics were, at that point in time, shared by other Jewish liberals who were around, but I wasn't very political. But my friends were in those Woolworth sit-ins and –

AMANNA: So you were aware, in real time, that –

ROSSEN: I must have been, but you know how I became aware again, when I read the **\*\*Suffiance** this last summer, for this book. We did the reunion book. And I was here last summer for almost five days, four days, reading in there. And that's when I saw the letters and learned about the sit-ins, and some of my friends did that, because their names are mentioned or they wrote letters, you know. Also interesting, if you read in our reunion book, there's a really interesting survey that was done anonymously. We all fed answers to anonymous questions. And one of our classmates is very good at this, and she put it together and did a report, which is printed in this book. And it will tell you that, when we were at Smith, we were, I don't know, 60, 65 percent Republican. I wasn't, but, you know. Right. And Kennedy/Nixon, we did a straw vote, and I think actually Nixon almost won. I mean, sort of shocking when you think about it. And today, the class, at least the ones that answered that survey, it's over 90 percent either Democrat or left of Democrat, which is really an interesting shift, isn't it?

AMANNA: It is.

ROSSEN: And I just think it has to do with the level of education they got. One woman writes about how she had never met a Democrat until she had a roommate, and her parents were furious that she was given this roommate who came from a different political background. And she said she'd never met one until she got – and, of course, she became an active liberal and Democrat. So, you know, those are nice things to read and to think about.

AMANNA: Yeah, yeah.

ROSSEN: So that's – are we at the end of our 15 minutes, probably?

AMANNA: We're getting there.

ROSSEN: Okay. We're getting there. Do you have other things you want me to mention? Let's see.

AMANNA: Well, if you have memories that are –

ROSSEN: Yeah.

AMANNA: Is it part of your identity or is it a growing part of your identity that you are a Smithie? How do you think about that?

ROSSEN: Well, I am so grateful for the things that it gave me. Even though, in the end of my freshman year, I had done not well enough, so I lost my scholarship, which was again, a great – you know, which made me study even harder. And I had to take out loans and that kind of thing in order to get through. But it gave me this great education. It gave me the career that I really am proud of. It gave me a junior year Europe which I wouldn't have had easily on my own. And it gave me extraordinary friendships, which I have until this day, and some of them are here with me at this event. And then I had this experience teaching in this museum program that they had in the summer, which also I felt was giving back a bit, you know, as well as getting. And I'm giving a work by my father, who was a major artist, and a big fish in a small pond, the small pond being Wisconsin.

AMANNA: Was he a painter?

ROSSEN: He was a painter.

AMANNA: What was his name?

ROSSEN: His name was Joseph Frieber. He was a painter, teacher at the University until his retirement. And he painted 'til the day he died, and he was 94 when he died. And I've just have promised a gift to the museum, because they don't have a lot of good social realist material that's from the 20s and 30s and 40s and in that era. So they're going to take a painting, I think.

AMANNA: You're hoping?

ROSSEN: I'm hoping. I think they will. And so I met yesterday with Linda Muehlig who is the curator there, and I've been talking to her about this for four years, but we're going to do it now. And the other thing I'm going to do, Martin Antonetti, whom you know, was the Mortimer Rare Book Library. I have a collection that I built, again, inspired by Leonard Baskin, who was an artist in the art department, whom I never really knew, but it was his art that interests me, and by Elliot Offner, who was the mentor I mentioned to you. And I began to collect illustrated books from that social realist period, books and wood cuts and wood engravings, black and white, for adults. And I now have a collection of almost a thousand of these books, and they are coming here.

AMANNA: Oh, wonderful.

ROSSEN: And I'm doing that because it just seems to sum up what I got, you know.

AMANNA: Yeah.

ROSSEN: And it will clear out my apartment. So my daughter won't have to worry about that, too. So, you know, I guess I'm more and more identified. And doing the editing of the reunion book was also a way for me to really get into what this class – who they are now. And that was very moving.

AMANNA: Yeah.

ROSSEN: So, yeah, I feel very privileged.

AMANNA: Well, thank you. Thank you for giving back in the way you have, and thank you for sitting with us.

ROSSEN: You're welcome.

AMANNA: It was a pleasure.

ROSSEN: You're welcome. I wanted to do that.

AMANNA: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

*Transcribed by Janet Harris, August 2013.*