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AHM exclusive interview

# A One-on-One with Edward Goldman

by Laura Bleiberg

Whether as educator, critic or art expert, his brilliance and insights shine through

**I**t's Edward Goldman with Art Talk on KCRW. From 1988 to 2019, that was the sign-on for the weekly art musings of Edward Goldman, art expert, educator and critic.

Goldman visited exhibitions and attended performances throughout Southern California for his deeply informed, homespun reviews, delivered in his trademark thick Russian accent. (His sign-off could sound like, "Iz bin Edvard Goldman with KCRW"...). He would directly address his listeners as "my friends." He spoke knowledgeably about artworks of any era, from ancient Greek and Roman to cutting edge contemporary, and explained how to look at art, how to appreciate it.

Born in St. Petersburg, Goldman spent weekends as a youth roving the corridors of the famous Hermitage Museum and after getting his university degree, he worked in the museum's education department from 1969 to 1977. When, the following year, he arrived in Los Angeles with his parents and sister, he told himself he would never stay in what he presumed was an artistic backwater. Instead, he found an explosion of institutional and individual artistic growth in Southern California and he became a noted chronicler of its significant developments. He taught at ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena and Otis College of Art and Design; became an art advisor to international accounting firms, such as Price Waterhouse; and curated exhibitions in the offices of several prominent architects, including Tim Walker.

He made close friendships within the arts community: artists Lita Albuquerque, Enrique Martinez Celaya and Manfred Müller; gallery owner Rose Shoshana; and architects Thom Mayne and Kulapat Yantrasast. And, of course, there was KCRW, which led to other



A portrait of Goldman as commentator for KCRW. Photo by Theo Jemison

opportunities. Los Angeles was the "wild west," he says, and because of that, there was a willingness to accept a Russian refugee who had to work to make himself understood.

Alas, Goldman no longer has his regular platform on 89.9 FM. He continues to send out his newsletter, *Art Matters with Edward Goldman*, and teaches The Fine Art of Art Collecting, a popular class for the general public. Goldman recently met *Art Highlights* contributing writer Laura Bleiberg at Bergamot Station to converse about a range of topics. This is an edited

transcript of their discussion.

LB: Let's start by talking a little about KCRW and how you came to do your *Art Talk* commentaries. I understand that you were appointed by public radio pioneer Ruth Seymour, who was then the station's general manager. How did you meet her?

EG: *I met with Ruth at the exhibition opening of an artist whom she was friends with. Someone introduced us. And she said, 'Oh, I'm planning next week to interview [on the radio] a group of the Soviet refugees and emigrants and talk about what's happening right now in the Soviet Union culturally. I'd love you to join us.' So, here I am, coming to KCRW and being interviewed. After that, Ruth invited me and a few others to have a drink and coffee at her place and we continued to talk, (for) many years. And it's interesting that now I finished doing my weekly art talks for KCRW, I realized that I've done it for 31 years and actually when I left the Soviet Union, I was 31 years old. So [the number] 31 means something very special. I'm just turning the page and making new challenges in my life.*

LB: What did the current KCRW management tell you about ending *Art Talk*?



Goldman's critiques often include shows from important Los Angeles galleries, such as this one, L.A. Louver. Photo Edward Goldman

EG: *They told me that we have a new kind of ideas about how to approach audiences, new format of the program. They want to have new voices. I said, 'I'm surprised I have a chance to do it for 31 years.' Nothing lasts forever, so to speak, yes? It's OK – a new chapter, a new adventure. Los Angeles cultural life is so huge, so challenging.*

*You know the proverbial expression if you want to peel the onion to get to the center, so I'm peeling the Los Angeles art onion and it's getting bigger and bigger. The more I peel, the more I learn. My God, it's amazing!*

LB: When was your last *Art Talk*?

EG: *In late July 2019. It's amazing because through the 31 years (of doing Art Talk), Los Angeles art scene dramatically enlarged in scale. And it became not only an important American cultural center of art, but it became internationally renowned*

*art center. Just along the line with, I would say, Berlin and London.*

LB: What was your professional training and work experiences prior to the move to the United States?

EG: *I studied art and history at university in the Soviet Union, at State Leningrad University. I'd been an educator at the Hermitage Museum, doing lectures and tours of museum collections. That was my experience before I came here. In the United States, I was forced to learn to drive a car, to write in a foreign language, and to develop another way of connecting, of learning, another way of sharing with people my love and passion for art.*

LB: It's so beautiful you say that because no matter what specific exhibition you were reviewing, you always communicated your passion for art.

EG: *In St. Petersburg, it was funny, by accident I was introduced to the Hermitage (when I was a child). One Sunday afternoon, my parents took me for a walk and it started to rain and we run into the nearest building, which happened to be*

*the Winter Palace of Russian czars, the entrance to the Hermitage Museum. My family was not the kind of family to take a 4- or 5-year-old boy (to an art museum), but it was raining. And it kept raining for the next couple of hours, so we stayed in the museum all day. Later, my mom told me that on another Sunday, we were planning where to go for a walk, and my mom said to me: 'Hmm, you've been a good boy the last couple of days' – which was, I guess, a surprise. 'Would you like to choose where to go?' And I said, 'Yes, let's go to the place where naked men and women are standing.' When you are four or five years old, how can you describe Greek and Roman statues of gods and goddesses?*

LB: Talk a little bit about how you began your public classes about art and art collecting.

EG: *About 15 years ago, I was approached by the Otis College of Art and Design,*



A teenage Edward Goldman in the city of his birth, Leningrad, now St. Petersburg. Photo courtesy Edward Goldman

asking if I would be interested to do seminars for the students about the art scene in Los Angeles. And I said 'Yes. But I hate to be in a dark room showing slides. I will be the first person to fall asleep. It would nice to take people to see studios of artists, galleries, museums.' They said, 'How can you do that?' I said, 'Let's everyone just get on the bus.' They said, 'Edward, legal issues, security!' Anyway, I figure it out.... [That led to me] doing my seminars on fine art collecting [for the public], which is not about making these people build their collections. It's about making them understand that collecting is not just about buying art. It's about opening your mind and getting outside your comfort zone and looking at something that might amuse, amaze, annoy, inspire.

LB: When you talk to people who maybe feel that they don't understand art, what advice do you give them so they can find their way into the art and engage with it?

EG: First, read my weekly sermon, my art sermon. [He laughs.] Go to a museum which has a variety of things, the way you would go to different parts of the world and look at a sunset and sunrise. You know, every sunset and every sunrise are different from what you see the day before and the day after, especially in different parts of the world. Are you affected – by (the artworks') look and color, and by abstractions, by realism? Just see! Just see what color makes you happy, what color makes you nervous, what color just makes you very peaceful? And wonder why. And again, be aware that art and culture are the way that dozens of ancient and contemporary gods...are sending messages, universal messages to us. We might hear their noise; we might even hear the words and meaning of these messages through art.

LB: We, as critics, view so much more art than the average person and it changes us. How do you think you've been changed by what you've seen in Los Angeles?

EG: I believe that I became wiser, smarter. And I try to follow

the examples of some artist who I know and respect – always challenging themselves, pushing their buttons. And not just looking for commercial success, but for climbing yet another mountain and yet another mountain. Going up and down, up and down.

LB: What were your thoughts about the greater LA art scene back in the '80s? Did you go all around the city to see and meet contemporary artists?

EG: Absolutely. A number of the students who attended my seminars at ArtCenter College

of Design, they invited me to their studios and I started to discover [young artists]. I went to, like LA Institute of Contemporary Art, LICA – we're talking about ancient times – and I went to their library and looked at the 35 mm (artist) slides. I called a couple of these people, like Lita Albuquerque,



Edward talking with American painter and filmmaker Julian Schnabel. Photo courtesy Edward Goldman



The Visitation, 1528-1529 by Jacopo da Pontormo at The Getty Museum. Photo by Edward Goldman

a wonderful artist, and she said, 'Sure, come on over to my studio.' When I met her for lunch, she was pregnant with her first child. Those kinds of things. I went from one thing to another: galleries, openings.

LB: Tell us a little about your family and upbringing.

EG: I was born in Leningrad, now St. Petersburg. My mom was Jewish and my father was Jewish. My father was born in Poland my mother in Russia. My father, infamously, after Poland was taken by the Germans in 1939, he ran away – because he knew there is a danger – to the Soviet part of the occupation. He was only 19 years old. In a few weeks, he was arrested as a Polish spy, and sent to gulag for year. And, miraculously, he survived. It was freezing temperatures, and 12 hours a day, they were cutting the forest.

One of the prison guards found out my father is women's tailor. In Siberia, to meet a women's tailor from Europe, it's like meeting someone who lives on the moon. The guard said, 'I want you to make a winter coat for my wife.' My father said, 'I can't move my fingers.' The guard said, 'I'll keep you inside.' My father made a winter coat – do you know this wonderful German word *zajtig* [full, rounded woman]? And the coat made this solid woman

look a little bit thinner and a little bit taller. So what do you think a woman wouldn't do for the man who can do this? Every wife of every other guard demanded that my father would do the same for her. My father set up the tailor shop inside the gulag. People ask me, 'Was he paid?' And I said, 'Royally, with his life.'

And when he eventually was released, he met my mom who was a medical nurse. They married. My mom brought him to Leningrad, where the little prince was born.

LB: When did your family leave St. Petersburg and how did that end up happening?

EG: We lived there until 1977. We were in the second wave of emigration of Soviet Jews. Wanting to emigrate doesn't mean you can. You applied for emigration and you waited for the government to say yes or no. Sometimes it would be months or years.

LB: As a student, you knew you wanted to pursue some profession having to do with art?

EG: When I was still student in high school, I was 15 years old, I joined this special club at the Hermitage for schoolchildren. I was going on my own on Sundays to the Hermitage and I



Edward discussing a sculpture at the Getty Villa. Photo courtesy Edward Goldman

would join some kind of tour. One of the women who was conducting this tour noticed. 'Oh, let me bring you to this club. Maybe they will allow you to join.' I started to go on the weekends and that's where curators take us on special tours, such as, to the storage facilities. It's one thing when you look at a sarcophagus, it's another when you touch the surface, when you are allowed to touch bronzes and other sculptures.

My education of art was not the best, but it was very unique. Some people learn about art through books, which is very effective, or through the slides on the screen. I looked at the actual art in the Hermitage to learn about the history of art. I literally got to touch and smell it.

And when I was 16, I was allowed to join the architectural excavation by the Hermitage scholars in the south of Russia, in the Crimean Peninsula [which was controversially annexed by Vladimir Putin.] In Soviet time, it was part of the Ukraine and at the same time, part of the history of ancient Greek settlement. And I dig for one month, a schoolboy digging for artwork of sixth-century BC settlements. And this way I would study. And after that...I went to university, department of history, and my specialty was Greek and Roman history and archeology. And after university when I became member of the education department of the Hermitage I had definitely to deal with the whole history (of art). They have a fabulous collection of Greek art but also a wonderful collection of Impressionism and post-Impressionism. One of the best collections of Picasso and Matisse.

LB: Did you want to leave Russia?

EG: You know, by Russian standards, we lived kind of middle-class family life, comfortable. But as a historian, learning more and more about all the shameful chapters of Soviet life, learning what government did to people like my father... And I remember I was just ashamed of the government and policies, but I didn't have a choice. You are a part of it. You have to say some false statements trying to protect yourself. All of a sudden, there was the chance to emigrate on the first wave (Soviet Jewish) emigration in the early 1970s. People would wait for the government to give you permission or not to give you permission for a year or two, and meanwhile you have to resign from your job. But when some of our friends started to apply to leave and then started to leave - my mother's cousin left - and we started to think about this.

LB: Did you experience any anti-Semitism in Russia?

EG: Not directly. I remember when I was kind of politely told that when one of the museum curators wanted to hire me, transfer me from the education department to be his assistant. He and I were told that, no, it's not going to happen. 'He [Edward] is an educator, lecturer, tour guide, yes, but as a museum curator, no.' I understand that I hit the glass ceiling. To a certain extent, I have to be grateful; otherwise I would still be in the Hermitage. It's an amazing thing to work there.

LB: Talk a little bit about some of the recent exhibitions that you've seen

recently that you enjoyed.

EG: In the last couple of months, there has been an absolutely amazing combination of shows; they're closing very soon. An amazing exhibition at the Norton Simon Museum, 'By Day & by Night: Paris in the Belle Epoque.' [Editor: Closed March 2.] The artwork is from the permanent collection. It's full of scenes of cabarets, bordellos, Toulouse-Lautrec, Degas. It's just absolutely delicious experience. And it's just pure coincidence that across the city, at the Getty (Center) Museum, there is an exhibition of Edward Manet. [Editor: Closed in January.] I did a program about that. I took my class to see the curator. I'm taking my friends every weekend to see it. And after being there six times, on Sunday I'm going there one more time. And every time when I look at the pieces, which I already look at so carefully, I notice something else. And I think, How the hell I didn't see that? But it's like with your best old friends: you continue with the same conversation and it goes to another depth, another direction.

A year ago, at the (Los Angeles) County Museum, there was the installation of Robert Rauschenberg's 'The ¼ Mile,' his series of paintings. It is absolutely fabulous - again, the way it was presented. As you know, it's not only what you're showing, but how you're showing. In the same building, on the ground level, was an exhibition devoted to Merce Cunningham. The glory of American art in the 1950s and '60s, collaborations between Merce Cunningham and John Cage.

The exhibition was not just informative. When there is a good informative exhibition, I thank you for that. But when it just allows you to step into this fourth dimension, it's like you hear, you dream, you smell, you fantasize about that.

LB: What do you think about the proposed new building for the L.A. County Museum of Art?

EG: I did several (Art Talk) programs about that. I think he's

(Peter Zumthor) one of the most renowned European architects with very appealing projects. His work has exceptional details and sophistication. But he never had experience working on the scale of the project here. And in the several years working on this project, he has made some modification, from a dark palette of the buildings switched to the light palette.

But I feel like aesthetically it's not connected, either to the neighborhood or to the spirit of Los Angeles. And we are learning these days that this building's exhibition space will be 10 percent smaller than exists previously. As I said in one of my Art Matters (newsletters), it's like inviting architects to build a new house for your growing family - a new house with fewer rooms than the previous house. And not only is (the new building) smaller, the old museum is growing up and the (new building's) structure will not allow for expansion. So the official budget is \$600-plus million which was agreed upon, just accepted (by the county). Everyone knows when a project of this scale is finished it takes extra years and extra a few hundred million dollars.

And, last year, the museum stalled in their (fundraising) attempts and on one of my last programs, I said, it's interesting that there are so many museums in Los Angeles announcing that they are either already free... or recently Museum of Contemporary Art announced that the president of the board of trustees gave \$10 million so MOCA is going to be free of charge. Hammer is free of charge. The Broad Museum is free of charge. And Getty free of charge.



Edward with his friend, the artist Enrique Martinez Celaya. Photo courtesy Edward Goldman

And the public museum (LACMA)? The city of Los Angeles contributed \$170 million in taxpayer money and LACMA is still charging \$25 (admission) for adults - with some exceptions, but still. And I said, what if one of the trustees will be as generous and as wise to give millions so the museum can be free? And maybe it will change the whole spirit of the fundraising (for the new building). I don't want to criticize, but just say there is a way to make it so people in Los Angeles say, yes, let's do it.

LB: After decades of talking to us about art, you have become something of a celebrity in Los Angeles and Orange County.

EG: I became a Los Angeles art priest. People tell me, 'Stop saying that you are an atheist. The way you are talking about art is like you're delivering a sermon.' I said, 'OK, I can take it.'

