

TRANSCRIPT OF SAM SHAW'S TAPED INTERVIEW  
WITH VINCENT CAPRARO

Side 1

**SAM:**

We were talking about Hans Hoffman. And abstract expressionism.

Your two themes I've seen lately: one is landscape, and a new vision of the American Indian. One thing I noticed about your landscapes. Seen from a distance, they are beautiful visions -- to me a very familiar thing as I go up the Hudson River -- Hook Mountain, Bear Mountain. But when I get close to your canvas, I could crop a little section off, visually, and the brushstroke is very free, like an abstract painting. So you bridge a gap with that. The past, with the present, and back to the past.

**VINCE:**

I see it in a different light, like looking over -- whenever you climb over a wall to look into the future, there's always the past in the back. That's exactly what I try to do, and I do that in the paintings. You can see the brushstrokes. What I actually do, of course, I use the brushstrokes in the drawing and I don't try to apply the paint like a plasterer would do, like the abstract expressionists do. I actually try to draw with it. I think we were talking in the studio before how Rubens painted. He used to get a brush and just squish it on in, say, the eyesocket, and squish it around with the medium that he used. There was a certain texture to it, it grabbed in a certain way, and he was able to use the brush either pushing it or letting it up with all these. It's like an eye would be formed without even drawing it. Pictorially. Pictorial drawing, which I am really interested in, that's what I do. In all my paintings they look, of course people are not trained to see that, they think it is classical, but it really

isn't. It's very contemporary and I wish I was like the Old Masters, but I'm afraid I haven't got that ability. People don't have the knowledge -- they think I'm part of the Old Masters. And I'm far from it. I struggle a lot. I handle it in a contemporary way, my outlook is contemporary. I have no choice. It's in the air. You do it in your photography. When a person wants to do things with the human thing and I have no patience with people any more who can do designing and can sit down and make one form, only appreciate one form next to another component...That's very simple.

**SAM:**

Talking about your current visual theme that I have noticed. In the past you did a series of portraits that looked like Titian.

**VINCE:**

I was very much interested in that in the 60's, with the hippies, and I loved it - I liked them for what they did and thought it was wonderful that the young people at that time were becoming aware socially and having influence and not too interested in the monetary. I loved them and wanted to paint them.

**SAM:**

Were you a part of them?

**VINCE:**

I was too old to be a hippie but I was a hippie from 30 years ago. That way of living. I thought I had something in common. Maybe it was wishful thinking. But I liked their attitude socially, and I was very part of it, and of course with the Vietnam War, which I was decidedly against. And I liked them and I tried to use that in my paintings. I went through a whole period where I did paintings of hippies, I loved the way they dressed, and it was a good excuse to use costumes and things like that. It was

just wonderful.

**SAM:**

It was like going back to the old days, flowery capes ...

**VINCE:**

Yeah, I'm a romantic painter ...I'm romantic ... I'm picturesque ... I'm conservative ... I'm revolutionary. I'm everything and I still don't know what the hell I am. Anyway, they were wonderful. They came to my studio and posed for me. And it was a wonderful experience. They would come and I gave them lessons. A lot of them wanted to learn art in college and I'd give it to them for nothing. And I did many paintings, and I sold most of them. And people even come back and want some of those that I did. They were good paintings. Important. Somebody did a film on them once. I don't know where the hell it is. Any way. I thought I was accomplishing something. That was after I did the book on the Holocaust, which was a great influence on me.

**SAM:**

The themes I see you work in. For example, your landscapes. We talked about landscapes.

**VINCE:**

Right.

**SAM:**

The influences - I can see - tell me if I am wrong. I have studied the Old Masters, Ruysdall, and I see touches culminating in the American Hudson River School.

**VINCE:**

Yes.

**SAM:**

I see parts of Claude Lorrain .. and I see ...

**VINCE:**

That's what fascinated me about this Hudson ...

**SAM:**

Cezanne.

**VINCE:**

Absolutely ... I have a great love for Lorrain... a great influence in my work. I studied and copied Cezanne at the Met for a year. Let me tell you, I would not have been able to do any of the painting if it wasn't for Tatiana, for we both have the same outlook in art. But without her, I would not have been able to do a damn thing. I was lucky enough, there was a guy I knew 30 years ago and he happened to sell some art material -- I knew him for a long, long time -- my friend David Davis -- and he happened to rent a place upstairs. I am a very fortunate artist - I have the art supply man right above me. And every time I want material David gets it for me. Of course, he gives me a discount.

**SAM:**

We talked about landscapes and the theme of the American Indian. How did you come to that? Was it a chance for you to do a costume?

**VINCE:**

No, no.

**SAM:**

Not street clothes?

**VINCE:**

No, no - that would be a little superficial on my part. I think it became secondary. I started to get interested in the Indians, I was reading about Wounded Knee and about what they did to the Indians. It reminded me. Also, the hippies sort of introduced it to me. The way they dressed. Also, living in this area. The Indians actually lived in this area, in this landscape. And looking at the landscape, of course I look at it from a romantic point of view and I thought of the Indians that way. But then Tatiana happened to see an ad and we went to a pow wow in Port Jervis, and it was very interesting. It was sad in a way. I looked at the Indians doing all the dancing, and it was just ... Selling trinkets out of cars. It was just unbelievable. People - what a great race with a relationship with nature and what they were reduced to doing. And also what the white man did to them. It was also part of the recurring theme I try to do in the Holocaust - man's inhumanity to man - what they were doing to the Indians and a lot of the minority groups. I'm not a WASP -- I guess you gather that by now. And that is part of the current theme. And doing that in that social thing. Of course, a painter always is inspired by costume and color and that really had an influence on me also. It was an excuse...

**SAM:**

I see other little mysterious symbols within the shadows [in your paintings]. Are they part of a mystic theme, or part of the composition?

VINCE:

Both. What I try to do is, I do a lot of reading on the Indians, and I know what they wore -- they wore almost anything they picked up, and put it on. But then, it all had a meaning, which I am not really aware of -- why they did certain things that had a function and a meaning. Of course, I use it as part of my paintings as part of the composition, decoratively. Or it may say something, it also identifies what I'm doing -- giving the spectator identification, so that they empathize with the subject -- it would key them off into something. But I use all those symbols decoratively, I use all those symbols. They have the connotations of many different myths, also religion. I try to even put some of the Christian iconography in it, even though it's Indians. It's interesting, it sort of evokes something subconsciously within me. But I use all those images, and people seem to like it. It gives me a lot of freedom in the work.

That reminds me of something very important. I come from 116th Street, and when we were talking about the Holocaust, in the church on 116th street they had catacombs, where you go down there, and there were strange things, it was dark, it was like a dungeon. That had a lot of influence on the images that I used in the Holocaust [drawings]. That's what I mean -- it's strange how the Christian thing influences me. Also, there was a Church in Rome, the church of the Capuccini near Via Veneto -- you go down there and the guys are buried there, there are skeletons and bones all over place. It was the wierdest thing in the world. I was never religious, but at that stage I was talking about death, then later on you become more sophisticated. But basically, it psychologically had something to do with death -- with all the images.

**SAM:**

Well, life is a holocaust right through.

**VINCE:**

Yes. Of course, I was never there and I never saw it. I can only go by people who have been there, and friends of mine who were interned in the camps. Dr. Ores was in the camps -- I met him later on. It's strange how a painter works -- how a subject comes. I'm always doing something with a social content. It has to have a social content. I don't care what painters do, or what they try to do aesthetically, it has to have a social content for me, or I can't work. Even the landscapes have a social content. They may be romantic -- and people call them a lot of things, but I don't pay attention any more.

**SAM:**

We've been discussing the arts along, but I've heard that in college you were quite an athlete, and that in New York you had experiences as a handball and basketball player.

**VINCE:**

If you permit me to brag a little bit, I really was a good handball player. The reason I was good is that I used to hustle in handball and make some money. We used to travel around, there was a fantastic handball player at that time, and we used to travel around and play for \$100 a game. We used to play around Coney Island. I played on the team in high school. I played every day really. I wasn't thinking of Michaelangelo in those days.

**SAM:**

What school did you go to?

**VINCE:**

CCNY. City University of New York was a great school in those days. The great philosopher, Cohen, and Bertrand Russell was there when I was just a freshman, and I was scared stiff. You had to be an honor student to get in. I sort of squeezed in some way. I used to go the library, and see all these guys studying -- they were all brains. And I figured I was a kid from the Bronx, not too bright, but I was very much influenced. I told you that I really grew up with a lot of Jewish people.

**SAM:**

Did you play basketball?

**VINCE:**

Yeah, I played basketball on the City College team under Nat Holman. It was very good training for me. Nat was wonderful...I didn't like him...he was alright. There's a lot of people I don't like, I think something's wrong with me. I didn't like him because he was very conservative, and at that time I used to argue with him politically. But he was a great athlete, and I learned a great deal. He was like the Babe Ruth of basketball. In fact, David Davis, my art material man, used to work in the 92nd Street Y, and he remembers Nat when he was there. I used to work out with the pros. I used to play ball for \$15-20 a game under an assumed name, with all the top stars. I used to travel, and I made extra money. I didn't have money in school, but I made out. I was on the championship team.

**SAM:**

Did you play on the Borscht circuit?



**VINCE:**

I loved that. It gave me an opportunity to get away for the summer. And we ate good -- the best food in the world. I met a lot of people in Grossinger's, a lot of famous people. We used to have wonderful steaks. We used to play basketball for one night, and stay for two, three weeks.

**SAM:**

You were an entertainer?

**VINCE:**

Yeah, why not. I was a good looking kid in those days.

**VINCE:**

....Some of the Old Masters were illustrators in the highest sense of the word. They came out with these marvelous compositions, which told the meaning of what they were illustrating. I don't see that today.

**SAM:**

They had a religious theme.

**VINCE:**

They had a myth, and they believed it. Michaelangelo, when he did the "last judgment", believed in it. Today, he'd be a little more nihilistic and a skeptic -- it's very difficult. I consider myself a Humanist, I actually believe in the human being. But I believe an artist should have a wide, wide range. If they're lyrical and doing landscapes and doing figures, and even doing things with a social content -- that's very important to me, even though a lot of painters aren't interested in that today. It influences you whether you like it or not.

**SAM:**

Your social content is not obvious.

**VINCE:**

No, but it influences me. The propaganda does influence me. Not the propaganda that I am fooled by, but what goes on in the world, and different ideas about the artist's place in the world, and different philosophies and economics, and socialism, and different forms of government. Of course, I lived in Europe for a number of years, and I have lived in this country, and I think that living in this country I was freer to do what I want, and experiment in what I want.

....

I never had the money to actually afford a studio. I never had a studio. We worked in cold water flats, and I never had money to have a model. A lot of other people at that time, had money. They were out on their own, but their parents used to help them. We were a poor family and I did everything on my own, but that forced me to develop a fantastic memory of the human form. Just drawing from nature all the time, and studying anatomy. I have a good memory from that, but I had to do that.

**SAM:**

How did you live when you were in Rome studying the Old Masters?

**VINCE:**

I lived thanks to my wife. We lived in one room, a very small barber room, and in fact it was the smallest room and I think I did the largest paintings I've ever done. When you're young and you're ambitious and you see all these great paintings around you and its very inspiring. I never let it intimidate me. But there were a lot of American painters who were there. They came to Italy and they saw what was around and they gave up and became photographers, which is amazing. I had the opposite. It used to inspire me more to do it. Everytime I needed inspiration, I used to go and visit the paintings in the Vatican.

**SAM:**

Did you work in the Vatican?

**VINCE:**

Well I used to look at the paintings. But I worked around with the craftsmen, and I met a lot of old, old restorers. There was a well-known restorer and forger at that time there, and I learned a great deal of technique from him, I used to watch him paint. As

a matter of fact, I met De Chirico when I was there. My wife and I always used to sit on the Spanish Steps, and he used to walk by. Of course I knew of him, and then one day we had the opportunity through someone to go to his studio. As soon as we opened the door he remembered my wife and I sitting there on the steps. I was beginning to learn a little bit about technique from my friend Latini who is a great, great craftsman painter. He couldn't have original ideas, but the craft was unbelievable. He was able to imitate different techniques. He was trying to get me to be his assistant, but I couldn't do it because my hand was too nervous and too contemporary, too individual. And I couldn't do the forgery work with him.

**SAM:**

Was that in your abstract expression period?

**VINCE:**

No, that was in Italy. But I always had that nervous line, even when I was first starting. That's something that you have, that no one can teach. I love that. By nervous line, I mean that having just a blank piece of paper and putting a mark on it and having the paper become alive, almost like the Chinese do. The abstract painter approaches the piece of paper in a different way, as if its a three dimensional space. And then when I put something on the paper it sort of fires...I don't know what it is...it presses the right button, and I seem to... things flow out of me easily and I was able to paint.

**SAM:**

You had many influences in Italy. Who were your influences?

**VINCE:**

I'm sorry to say, very few contemporary painters. It was strange. I'm an American going over there and a lot of the Italian painters were interested in the abstract expressionists -- Bill de Kooning, Franz Kline, and everything going on. I was doing just the opposite, and I couldn't understand, with all those things before, with everything under their noses, what the hell they were looking for over there. But I guess that's from being all those years under Fascism, and not seeing what's going on, they sort of exploded in a strange way. But the influences that I had were mostly the Old Masters. There's a sculptor named Pericle Fazzini. He's passed on. He was a very wonderful sculptor. He worked with wood, he was magnificent. We used to go to his studio every day and I'd watch him work and a lot of other painters would go there, and I'd participate in the discussion. And I learned how from him. He used to go everyday and work as if it was a job. One of the greatest lessons I learned, outside of the painting, is to approach art as work that you do everyday, as part of your life, instead of "you're an artist" and you have to be inspired...This guy just sat down and worked and all these beautiful things flowed out. And I remember Manzus worked also. But that's one of the great things I remember. That's what I do today, I work every day. I'm still struggling with it.

**SAM:**

Were you influenced by Tintoretto?

**VINCE:**

Very much so. We went to Venice and I did many copies of him. Being an American and coming out of the Hans Hoffman thing, I approached him in a different way. Tintoretto's a great master, dramatic space and creative. I used to make copies of him, and I

went to Venice and a friend of mine was there and was kind enough to let us stay with him while we were there. I used to go the Scuola di San Rocco all the time. My wife and I used to get up on ladders and study the thing closely. It was fantastic. But then I found out that I loved the Baroque, and I was actually a baroque painter and I loved those forms and movement, and everything in flux and becoming, and I love that. That's what I started doing, and I still try to do it today.

**SAM:**

As an Italian-American, brought up in the Bronx, when you went to Italy, was there more than just painting? Was there an emotional tug?

**VINCE:**

Absolutely. Being the first generation in America -- I remember that ever since I was a kid -- even when I was younger and I was an altar boy -- I think my very first exposure to painting was Rubens because he illustrated the catechism and I used to study and I used to love it. I often wonder why, being an altar boy, because I'm not that very religious. I was fascinated with the ritual, it was like theater, the greatest theater in the world. The incense used to turn me on, I smelled that when I was a kid and I used to see all these beautiful colors and forms while I was serving. I used to love that. Then I used to meet these guys that travelled all over the world -- these monks and priests. My parents were here -- of course they were born in Italy, then came here. My mother came here when she was young. My grandfather was here before that, at the turn of the century, then he went back and all my family was always talking about was always Italy. There was a contact with Italy, and had always that yen. Even when I was a kid, I used to tell my mother that I'd bring her to Italy. In fact, she still is alive today. She's 97 years old. I've always

had the Italian in my mind, and I loved it emotionally, outside of just the art. But it was an emotional contact. It was strange that when I went to Rome for the first time, and I got off the bus and was going to rent a little room from this Falci -- it must have been no more than three or four feet -- and I stayed with his family. When I got off the bus and I took a step in Rome, I felt like I'd been there before. It was just unbelievable. I'm not a mystic and I don't believe in those things, and I try to be very objective, but it's amazing the feeling you get. I don't know what it was -- that everyone was talking Italian, or I built it up subjectively in mind, but I felt like I'd been there all the time and also I felt such an affinity with it, even with the great draughtsman of the time like Tinteretto, Rafaelo. I thought I had an affinity with them, which is good. You have to psych yourself up some way, I guess.

**SAM:**

We've known each other many years...

**VINCE:**

You've been an influence on me also, in your approach to photography. I like your work because there is a sense of humanity in the way you take a photograph, and the way you put your the together is very interesting to me. But everyone influences me. You've been an influence in the work we're discussing, even though I don't agree with you on some approaches to modern art.

**SAM:**

We're both New Yorkers who live in the country, but we still carry the city with us. I am a Jewish American brought up in an Italian section, and you are an Italian brought up in a Jewish section.

You know more Yiddish than I do. You mentioned something about social content before. Outside of the fantastic photographs that have been taken of the Holocaust, I saw your book of sketches on the Holocaust, and I think your vision has not only the black horrors of Goya, but you have a running theme of poetry that is very sensitive, and the Jewish lifestyle ambience probably had a great influence.

**VINCE:**

Yes, it was a great influence on me. It was very pretentious on my part even to attempt to do it, and I don't know if I was capable artistically of doing it --- to describe in graphic means such a thing is very difficult. No artist has done that. The only other artist that did that is Goya, maybe in his Disasters of War, and maybe Daumier could have done it. I felt that I had something in common with them, but it was very difficult. I 'm not a writer, and I was very much moved, and I had to express myself in a certain way. That's why I did these books. I did these books, also, in book form and not drawings on pieces of paper because I wanted somebody who looked at it to actually hold it in their hand and actually look at it like a book and have a personal experience with it and to know exactly how I felt. You're right that there is a sense of poetry that I always try to give, and the theme of what they did in the Holocaust, man to man. The theme is man's inhumanity to man. It's a terrible thing, but I always try to give dignity under those situations, I always try to give dignity to the people and draw them with a sense of grandness, in a way, even if they were suffering. That comes from the art I learned from the Renaissance, the great painters. To this day I depend on them. I've been criticized for it. One of the critics, I remember, had a show in the Times... I don't think much of American critics. I don't think they're very knowledgeable, by the way. And I think that they're not very knowledgeable in figurative drawing,



absolutely. The older I get and the more I try to learn something, I am sure that they know nothing about good figurative drawing. Some of the critics today know nothing about the real technique of painting. Now when I talk about technique of painting, I'm talking about the great masters like Rubens -- one of the greatest technicians in the world. Of course, I prefer that -- not to actually copy them -- but I think through the beauty of how they painted -- the technique, and the quality of the paint -- adds to the image, also, which is very important. I feel that I couldn't say what I wanted in the human figure, even having social things enter into it -- which is very important. In doing it in the other way, I got lost in the paint on the canvas, in the muck of all that, the oil -- back and forth. They painted with such clarity, and their sense of form, and interpreting everything in their experience in either a pictorial or a graphic way, which is a great gift that they had. I try to learn from them. I try to do that, and always with a sense of poetry in that. I'm glad that you were able to see that. I was very impressed when you saw the book, really Sam.

**SAM:**

I also thought I saw -- being brought up in New York ghettos -- rooftops, New York rooftops from the Lower East Side.

**VINCE:**

I'm glad you mentioned that. We have similar backgrounds. When I did the Holocaust...somebody wanted to give me a show, and I felt that I had to do something. We lived in a cold water flat on Seventh Street, between First and Second, on the fifth floor. We spent a lot of time on the roofs, and all those roofs -- their shapes were black, and in fact, in a lot of those in the ghetto area at that time... I didn't consider it a ghetto area, but other people did. I thought it was alive and wonderful. I thought the

people were marvelous. You'd walk in the street and everybody was friendly to you. You'd walk around at two or three in the morning and nothing happened. It was just marvelous. I even remember going on Avenue D, way on the East Side, and going to this little church in the basement and watching Joe Papp. At that time he gave a little thing, and they used to pass a hat and I used to drop a nickel or a dime in it. It was marvelous. And also the other painters, we had a group of painters that studied with Hofmann. They were interested in the human figure, contrary to the Abstract Expressionists. We became good friends. They had a group, and we sort of stuck together. They were friends of mine and they liked what I was doing, they knew I knew a lot about the figure and about the approach they had learned in Italy. Even Rafael Soyer, before he went to Italy, wanted to see me, and we were talking about different techniques, and he was asking what he would find. It was interesting. It was nice, really.

**SAM:**

You talk about technique

**VINCE:**

I'm very much interested in technique, because without it I can't say anything.

**SAM:**

I notice that in your studio, you are usually over a little stove, cooking oil.

**VINCE:**

Yes, I learned that in Rome. What I try to do is, some of the paints that I make, I do myself because I can make them to the consistency that I want, and not just the way they come out of a

tube. The way I want to paint, I can't get the effects from using color out of the tube. I use \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_. I met also, a man whose name is Maroger, who is anathema in the art world. Everybody doesn't like his mediums. I met him once, and he saw my work and he said "Oh, you're really Italian, but you really have to learn a lot about anatomy." When I heard that, I went all out. It was wonderful to have a man of his experience telling you what you need. I need that. Which is very rare today. You can't go anywhere. There are so little people who know how to draw figure today, although they may know anatomy academically. But, I learned from restorers in Italy. I learned a lot of techniques about cooking oils. I try to make my own paints as much I can, unless I'm absolutely forced to... but if I do use the commercial paints, I make it to the consistency that I want to. I work fast and fluid, and ideas come to me quick and I have to take advantage of the opportunity. Some things come quickly when I work, and other times I work a lot on a painting, like Rembrandt did, but I like to change and work. I learned that from the Abstract Expressionists. They changed and moved, and moved things around. It's wonderful. A friend I made, his name is Taubes. He was a very well-known painter in the Thirties. I'm not a big fan of his work, but he was a very knowledgeable man. He lived in Haverstraw and he was very much interested in my work. He came here, and he was amazed, and he was mentioning Goya and all these wonderful names to me. And now when you mention them, they think it's awful. In the old days, when they said you paint like a Rembrandt or a Goya, it was the greatest compliment in the world. Now, they think you must be original, and all that stuff. But I learned a lot from him, and he was a hell of a nice guy. He didn't like Picasso. I'm sorry to say he didn't like Picasso at all. But, he was very knowledgeable, and in his studio he had a little chemistry place downstairs. We talked about techniques, and of course I always loved it. But I don't let it get in the way of what I want to say.

You have to know technique. The thing is, you have to know it so it's second nature to you. When you want to talk, you let the picture talk for you. It has to come out free, and I use the modern freeform.

**SAM:**

You told me some time ago that you spent a year at the Metropolitan Museum studying Cezanne.

**VINCE:**

Yeah, I did copies of it. I love Cezanne. Of course, I got to know Cezanne through Hans Hofmann. His theories were very, very interesting, very formalistic -- about planes and axis, and tensions between planes, the picture plane, and all this different language, that after a while, I think is a lot of horseshit. But when I see these old paintings, and the way these guys did things, it was just remarkable. I don't think they even thought about planes. I think that's just a way of doing things. It was second nature.

**SAM:**

I see there are two running themes in your work at this period. Of course, the great Holocaust sequence was done right after the war...

**VINCE:**

I'm sorry I don't mean to interrupt you, but what I really wanted to do one day, but I probably never will, is do big murals from that book, and I never had the ability to really do. But I feel, as I get older, I'm learning more and I think I can handle it. It's wishful thinking, because nobody's interested in those things today.