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Oral history interview with Gordon Franklin Peers, 1981 February 17-1982 February 23

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Gordon Franklin Peers on February 17, 1981, and February 23, 1982. The interview took place in Providence, Rhode Island, and was conducted by Robert Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. The Archives of American Art has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: —say anything and—

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: We'll begin this interview, on February 17, 1981, Providence, Rhode Island. It's Gordon Peers, and I'm Robert Brown, the interviewer. You were born in Easton, Pennsylvania, in 19[0]9. Did you live there long?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: No, about two years.

ROBERT BROWN: And your family—what was your father's business, or was he a—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: He was a toolmaker.

ROBERT BROWN: A toolmaker. And is that what brought him to Rhode Island?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Brought him to Rhode Island, I think. I'm not sure of this. Probably to go to work at Brown & Sharpe's, which was one of the major toolmaking—

ROBERT BROWN: What are some of your earliest memories up here? Did you live here in Providence, or?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I guess when I was too early to remember I lived close by here up on Camp Street, somewhere in Providence. But then, the time that I can remember best was—started probably, out in Cranston, out in—near where the Hilton Hotel is now, up on the hill, looking out over Narraganset Bay. Beautiful view. It's now all different. The Cherry estate was down below us, so you looked out over big lawns and everything like that. We just lived in a tenement.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Was Cranston sort of a suburb, plus tenements? Or was it really a little factory village?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: No, Cranston was just a suburb. No change of scene as you went on out there.

ROBERT BROWN: So your father, then, would come into Providence to work?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah, which isn't far. Four miles about. [00:01:59] Then we, at a later date, moved a little closer, but still in Cranston, maybe three or four blocks or something like that. Then when my brother started going to Classical High School, which was in Providence, and we lived in Cranston, we moved over the line into Providence, because the high school would have cost tuition. Then I followed my brother into Classical High School later on.

ROBERT BROWN: Most of these were tenement houses? There would be several families living in a house?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Most—they weren't tenement houses. Two-family, two-family affairs, usually.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you quite outgoing as a child, very—did you have lots of—it was fairly congested areas weren't they, so there'd be lots of children?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I guess so, but always near the bay. In those days, you could swim in the bay down there. As a youngster, I was in the water all the time. Built a canoe out of canvas, which is what we used to do—barrel staves and canvas—and be out on the bay all summer long, down the water.

ROBERT BROWN: You developed quite an interest in swimming, didn't you?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Is this something—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Had to.

ROBERT BROWN: —you pursued, then?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Pursued everything. As I went into the YMCA, I would have either have been swimming or in gymnastics, or played a lot of football. Anything. Fencing. Whatever was available. But the YMCA was a very important thing in my life.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: By that time, we had moved just into Providence from the Cranston line, and very little traffic in those days, and so I'd ride a bicycle from the house down into middle of Providence to the YMCA and back. [00:04:09]

ROBERT BROWN: You spent an awful lot of time there?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: After school?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah, and the time that I should have [laughs] been home studying most of the time. I wasn't a good student. But Classical High School was one of the outstanding schools in the country, but they had very few athletic teams, and all my swimming, which was pretty extensive, was done in AAU competition—that's not collegiate or high school—and would have to be on YMCA teams, because the high school didn't have swimming or gymnastics, so on. But I did play football for the high school.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you very competitive in sports? Must have been.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Oh, yeah, I guess so. Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: You really enjoyed them? Physical exercise and—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah, until—well, actually, my last year in Classical High School, I had been in swimming all the time, and practicing at Brown University, and the coach there was in the mood to give me a swimming scholarship to come into Brown. But not being a very good student at Classical High School, I lacked a few credits in Greek, which I probably shouldn't have been taking in the first place, and went back to Classical to pick up what I needed. And only studying a few things in Classical, I had time to go into the art class and I spent all my time there, and I got a full scholarship to the Rhode Island School of Design during that time, which changed my entire life. Nineteen twenty-eight. Going into the School of Design in 1929. [00:06:02]

ROBERT BROWN: Had you not theretofore done much drawing or things of that sort?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Just the usual that most kids do. I drew a lot, I guess, but not aware of it.

ROBERT BROWN: Who was the teacher at Classical?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Asa Randall.

ROBERT BROWN: Asa Randall. And how do you—did you—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I thought he was an excellent teacher.

ROBERT BROWN: How did he draw you out, as you recall?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Well, I guess he—no, I don't recall how he drew me out, except that he was a classic teacher of discipline, such as perspective. We could do anything with perspective. The usual, well-disciplined instruction, not, in those days, express-yourself sort of thing. I won the scholarship into the School of Design, and then talked to my folks, and we decided—I did—that I'd probably be better off going into something that I could apparently do reasonably well than trying to go through Brown, which was merely following my brother, who had been a scholar at Brown. So we ended up deciding, sure, go to School of Design. From then on, my whole life changed from a preoccupation with athletics into complete absorption with what art was, and how to study it. To this day, that's what it is.

ROBERT BROWN: You were very studious about it?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah, once I got into that, read everything I could find, studied everything, constantly do, and—the approach to art has never changed. [00:08:00] It's always been as a student, and never arriving at some point at which I'd want to develop what I had at that time and then make it salable. The byproduct of this interest as a student in the overall art situation would be salable if it could be and if it weren't salable, it didn't make any difference to me. And should I have found a fairly successful mode of operation, I didn't figure to stick with that. I simply figured that if my interest took me on a divergent track that looked very clumsy or didn't seem to be successful, I'd have to give up the thing that was and [laughs] pursue this next step.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, did Asa Randall encourage this? Did he discuss these things with you?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: No, because—

ROBERT BROWN: Whether you'd be—of course, that was pretty early stage in your education.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah. The thing that happened there was I went to Maine, to study in the A.K. Cross School at Boothbay Harbor, Maine, in which Asa Randall was assistant. Coming down out of that first summer of study in Maine, found the next summer, when I was a sophomore at the School of Design—the next summer was the year John Frazier started a summer school at Provincetown, and I was advised by Steve Macomber, who was an excellent teacher at school, to go down to the Cape with Frazier, as something much more profound, much more important, to an artist who was serious about it, than going up to Maine. [00:10:02] So I went down the Cape to Provincetown with Frazier his first year when he started that school, and became his monitor, and then, for 10 years, worked with him in Provincetown, both studying and becoming his assistant.

ROBERT BROWN: And as you look back, was the Cross School, in fact, much more superficial than what you'd gained from Frazier?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah, and as with most summer schools, in order to be financially viable, it had a lot of schoolteachers who would come up for a session, and people who were amateurs, and that's what you had to do to get tuition to carry the serious students. Now, when Frazier ran the summer school down there, all the first-class students I know of, from the School of Design mostly, didn't have to pay. He didn't charge them. Most of us didn't have any money anyway. In order for that to happen, you had to have the various people who either were amateurs, or who had some money, or were schoolteachers who were doing it for credit.

ROBERT BROWN: But that didn't matter as much with Frazier—when you were in Frazier's class as it had in Maine? I mean, the fact that these amateurs were there.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: You mean in terms of the level of experience and education?

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: No, except that Frazier was a far greater—of course, he's a great, great artist, in my estimation. Also, you had the environment. Provincetown was well-known, from Hawthorne and Ed Dickinson. All kinds of people were there.

ROBERT BROWN: What did it do for you, that environment, those first years? [00:12:00]

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Well, completely turned me around, and—

ROBERT BROWN: What was it like? Would you have discussions with them? Could you recreate it a bit?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: In Provincetown?

ROBERT BROWN: The way it was. Could you recreate the people, the setting, the way you felt about it at that time?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah, it was—when I went down there, I was absolutely alone, except for living in Frazier's beach school studio and helping to build lockers in it and so on. I didn't know anybody in Provincetown, and I'd just sit there, evenings, alone. But it was a Portuguese fishing village at that time. The mackerel fishing fleet was in there, and they've all gone now. The United States Navy, the whole Atlantic fleet, would anchor in Provincetown every summer. Gradually, I got to know all the fishermen, and a few of the artists, and the painting—attention to the painting was very serious, and the people I got to know were serious painters. It was a delightful place to be. You worked seven days a week.

ROBERT BROWN: What did you—who were some of the painters you got to know early on?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Well, Dickinson was a very good friend of Frazier's. They were together all the time. And [R.H.] Ives Gammell, as you mentioned. But being younger, I didn't know any of those people too well. I

knew Bruce McCain very well, and Eddie—

ROBERT BROWN: What was he like at that time?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Uh, I thought he was an outstanding painter. I don't know, as the years go by, how these estimates would hold up. [00:14:03]

ROBERT BROWN: And you would have intense discussions of various—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Not very much with them. Later on, as the students came in, the discussions would be primarily with the outstanding students, who would have been of my own age, and probably my colleagues in school, all of whom, that group anyway, were very serious. Gil Franklin, Bob Hamilton. My wife, Florence Leif, with whom I wasn't married at that time.

ROBERT BROWN: What sort of things do you recall were your particular concerns that you talked about?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: That I don't know, except they were very basic and quite simple. Perhaps you know that Hawthorne taught by having a little model sit out on the beach, which you painted day in and day out, just to find out that there was color in the shadow of something. The model was set up back to the light. Frazier carried over this lesson. That's just an example of how simple the basic attack is. You did it day in and day out. We'd talk no end about why this was done, and how important the change from thinking light and dark, for instance, where the darks could be brown, Barbizon-like things, to the discovery of color everywhere you looked, and that's what the purpose of the thing was. [00:16:00]

ROBERT BROWN: This was pretty exciting to you, wasn't it?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Oh, yeah. Anything that had to do with some little piece of knowledge about the business, you were becoming very serious about. I mean, we were all philosophically serious and looking toward the future.

ROBERT BROWN: How did the future look? Because this was just about the Depression, wasn't it?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah, middle of the Depression. I don't know that the future that we had in mind was real beyond the day we were living. The picture of what you were going to do if you got through the next day, day after day after day, was simply to continue with worthwhile ambitions and the improvement of your art, not the successful salability. You didn't think of yourself as becoming a successful artist, in other words. You just thought, I'll know more tomorrow, and I'll know more the next day.

ROBERT BROWN: Could you maybe describe a bit how Frazier went about teaching?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Frazier was a very down-to-earth teacher, what might be called a pretty tough one, especially with us who were serious students from the School of Design, and headed toward graduating from the school. The teaching was carried on, to a far greater extent than it is now, with a demonstration of what the objectives were that you were after. [00:18:08] The demonstration came at the end of the week, on a Saturday, usually, or the last day that you were working. You would be shown just what it was that you were expected to look for and discover. Then the whole week, the course of instruction would be trying to find out and get done, on your canvas, by yourself, some of the principles that were being discussed.

ROBERT BROWN: In the following—the week following? You would attempt to—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Constantly, and this was, of course, cumulative. The first things were probably pretty simple.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you remember what they would have been? The simple things.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Except as you see that model out on the beach, backed up against the sun, where it was a silhouette against—and usually the water was in back of us. Just a constant penetration into that shadow. And what the outdoor light was. The outdoor light was very important. I can't, for the life of me, figure out just what it is, lesson to lesson, was being taught. The thing was such a consuming experience. You were in the middle of that Provincetown light, air, art, thinking situation that seemed to go on 24 hours a day. At the end of each week, each student was required to put up on a stand his whole week's work, which would usually amount to, oh, maybe 15 things. [00:20:15]

ROBERT BROWN: You'd made quick studies, then, had you?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah, you did a different study on the beach every morning, and you probably went out into the landscape or along the waterfront in the afternoon. There were two different things done. And

perhaps you went out before breakfast, or usually you did. Three things a day. You were never encouraged to carry anything on. You were encouraged to start over and over and over again, so that you didn't get bogged down in rationalizing what you thought the artwork was going to be. You were supposed to react perceptually and instinctively to what you were seeing and put it together somehow, as, as I say, a cumulative experience, until gradually you saw more, and it got onto the canvas more readily, in a more complicated way, as you continued to work. You gathered together more and more instantaneous information. It's not exactly skill. It's much more a matter of loading the statement you made, in a more mature way.

ROBERT BROWN: Whereas if—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: And this was why you did it over and over again, instead of starting something and then elaborating that thing and bringing in all kinds of intellectual ramifications as to how, where, and what to do as you developed a canvas further. [00:22:11] Because you were trying to be as responsive to what was outside yourself, and to develop habits of discovery and awareness, rather than habits of how to do, habits of learning it from other people, or other pictures, or whatever the case may be.

ROBERT BROWN: That, if it were to come at all, was to come much later, is that correct?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Either much later or be built into the process. I think much more a matter of being built into the process. As you went through this every day, you of course looked at other pictures, you studied, and then that somehow was supposed to be put in one end and come out the other end of the tunnel, as direct experience in front of the nature, which sounds a little bit like Cézanne, who said you had to do it in front of the nature.

ROBERT BROWN: Would Frazier be around you students while you were doing these, say, 15 studies a week?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Would he be coming around? Would he make comments to any extent?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Sure, and sometimes—which was highly permissible in those days—he'd pick up a brush and not say very much, but knock in a few notes to readjust your grouping on a canvas, or to draw your attention, probably, to where you should have looked in the first place to find out what the relationships were. [00:24:08] Constantly walking around the class. Frazier was a tremendously hard worker, and he'd be out before daylight with his gear, going out into the dunes or wherever he was painting, so that he'd be there when the light came up. He'd have a piece of work done before he came back to go—to take care of the school in the morning. Raymond Eastwood was also out there. Eastwood was from Kansas, and Eastwood would come from Kansas and paint sand dunes, take them back to the Middle West, and sell them. His habit was strictly a matter of getting up in the morning, getting out there, and doing the dunes as the light came up over them. That was part of it also, that this enriched the sand dune situation, if you got it with the light coming up over it instead of high noon. So the people who painted on the beaches and out in the dunes usually did it either in the early morning or in the afternoon.

ROBERT BROWN: Was Eastwood someone you knew?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah. Eastwood, Ives Gammell, and Frazier were together all the time.

ROBERT BROWN: What's your opinion of Eastwood as an artist?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: At the time, I thought he was very good. As my own involvement became more mature, it seemed to me that he had done just what I was talking about earlier: found something that was fairly successful. I didn't see anything change very much in all the years I knew him. [00:26:00] These sand dune things would come out the same way. He did not risk any kind of clumsiness, as I pointed out, by trying anything new. They were pretty much under his control. Frazier, on the contrary, was constantly probing and discovering. As you can see from his late work, there's a big change from when he was working as Hawthorne's assistant, or, as all of us do, under the influence of your early instructors or your early training. He just continued to study and break out from anything as his discoveries were made, even though what he did next didn't look anything like what had been going on before, which would cause people to be puzzled by what became of the successful thing, when they didn't know quite how to look at or accept the new thing.

ROBERT BROWN: By people, you mean collectors or other artists?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Both. Everybody would be anxious to look at what the next exhibition held in the way of a Frazier. They might just find the thing very unexpected. For that reason, Frazier, in his later life, gave up trying to enter exhibitions, or trying to make sure that each new exhibition had one of his representative things in it. For the last 10 years of his life, you didn't see anything that he was doing at all.

ROBERT BROWN: Back when you first knew him, was he exhibiting in Provincetown? [00:28:05] New York?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Oh, yeah. Always exhibited in the summer exhibitions of the Provincetown Art Association, and exhibited at the Providence Art Club regularly. I don't know how much exhibiting he was doing in New York at that time. I don't know.

ROBERT BROWN: Even in Provincetown, there were—say, at the annual exhibition, were there collectors and people like that that you remember coming down? Of course, as a young artist—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: There always were, but I never paid much attention to them. As I say, most of us who were studying with Frazier immediately got the notion in our heads, philosophically, that you didn't even look for these people. You didn't make something and then go find out how to sell it.

ROBERT BROWN: But you would go to the exhibits of the Art Association?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: I suppose, there, you'd see—say, in the early '30s, was there a very broad range of types of painting?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Absolutely. From Richard Miller, who would usually be—

ROBERT BROWN: What sort of things?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Well, they'd be kind of studio things. They'd have figures in them, and it would be a constructed thing, not something done out in the open.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you not think much of such things?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: No, I thought very much of them, but I was well aware that, as students, we were working out in the open, and presumed that someday we would do it all indoors when we knew enough, which didn't become the case. [00:30:00] Of course, the big Hawthornes of the fishermen and so forth were in-studio operations, and sometimes put together. But in those days—that was early on, and just studying outdoors was the main thing. See, we studied all winter indoors in the school in Providence, so this was a burst out into the open.

ROBERT BROWN: Frazier didn't close the door on studio, working in the studio, eventually, rather than outdoors?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: No, every afternoon—

ROBERT BROWN: He held out to you that, sometime when you got to be a mature artist, you needn't make these constant outdoor studies? Rather, you could work things up in the studio?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: No. No, he never had that idea.

ROBERT BROWN: He always—he preferred—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: That you'd work up—

ROBERT BROWN: —outdoors work.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: The work you did in the studio was portrait work, because in the '30s, up to the '40s, you didn't get a degree, but you graduated in portraiture from the School of Design, so that your major effort was to become a portrait painter was—which was the only way you could hope to make a living in those days. Then, maybe by, oh, the early '40s, the end of the '30s, portraiture uh—

ROBERT BROWN: Well then, there was a bit of a disparity between what you were training to do at the school, preparing to be a portraitist to make a living, and what you were saying earlier, you worked from day to day, and you were studying from nature. Where you care about [inaudible]—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: The nature that you studied—

ROBERT BROWN: —didn't care about sales, necessarily.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: No.

ROBERT BROWN: So there was a bit of a disparity there, wasn't there, between your group—what you've characterized as your very serious work in the summer, under Frazier, and the work you did at the school, where

it was portraiture and other studio work? [00:32:08]

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Well, portraiture is just a generic term for something that gets done, and it can either be, as everything else can be, done strictly for money, or you can try to make your portraiture like Rembrandt tried to make his portraiture. It's a thing of quality. In the summer school, the afternoon sessions had a model inside the studio, so that there wasn't a different value attitude toward whether you were doing a portrait or you were working outdoors. But very few people were painting landscapes or other sorts of things and making a living from them. Nearly everybody, Dickinson or whoever it might be, had a portrait capability in the background that would be executed as commissions. You never made portraits without a commission and then figured you'd sell the portraits at large. They weren't that kind of salable thing. But if somebody wanted their portrait done as a commission, you could approach that commission either as a very commercial man, or as just as dedicated an artist as you were doing the thing on the outside. You'll see Frazier portraits, or you'll see Hawthorne portraits, or Dickinson portraits, that are works of art, not just—there were a couple of portrait painters in Provincetown who were just taking run-of-the-mill, in one door and out the other. [00:34:12] These were similar to what you see in the *Art Digest*, advertised in New York. Go down and get your portrait done for so much money.

ROBERT BROWN: But they were an exception in those days, in Provincetown?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: There were one or two of them always around there. But that's life, that no matter what some people are doing, they're going to find out how to make it salable, and that's all they seem to be after.

ROBERT BROWN: Now we've talked for a bit about Provincetown. What about Providence? Could you reconstruct some of the highlights of your four years at the school? You would start out in a very structured program, or was the whole program very determined?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: The whole program, in those days, was very structured. You started—when I went to school, you started in cast drawing. The school had a marvelous collection of casts, full-size, and it was standard operating procedure to draw from the cast before you drew from the living model. The second year would have been drawing from the living model. Drawing was the most fundamental and constant element that was taught in the school. You drew all the way through, and it was a very solid and outstanding drawing program, I think. [00:36:00]

ROBERT BROWN: What was the reason you had so much drawing?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: It just seemed to be basic to painting. As you moved into the situation of putting color down with a brush on the canvas, you were still, as far as that kind of education was concerned, involved with putting that color in the right place, which meant drawing with color. So if you couldn't draw, it was assumed that you wouldn't know how to just do the constructions you were trying to make with paint and color. To be sure, later on, if you come to Pollock, where the paint is probably just dumped on there, or swung on, as those abstract things were made, perhaps drawing wasn't that necessary. But all the years that I studied, drawing was a solid foundation for anything you were going to do.

ROBERT BROWN: It had a—it was admired for itself, I suppose. Drawing was.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Now, this is a curious thing; it wasn't.

ROBERT BROWN: It was considered a tool, sort of an—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: A tool.

ROBERT BROWN: —instructional tool.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Now, I happened to be looking through a portfolio of Frazier's drawings. I didn't know even such a thing existed. But I don't believe that I can find a Frazier drawing that stands on its own. The drawings were usually tools for something. All the life drawing, all the figure drawing, done in school, so extensively, and volumes of drawings were never—never even exhibited. [00:38:00] They were drawings of the model. Not until, oh, maybe the 1940s—I'm not good at dates. You'll have to forgive me for that. But there came a time when drawing moved right over into the aesthetics of a drawing itself on the page, and then the whole thing changed. The drawing spread itself all over the page and occurred according to what the art object, as drawing, might require here, there, or everywhere on the page of the drawing, whereas before the—you drew at the object. The drawing was very objective. The drawing stuck with the model. Later, the drawing could become a free agent and be expressive of a total aesthetic sensitivity, as a drawing, not as a study for something else.

ROBERT BROWN: And you swung over, or adjusted to that, yourself? Did you find—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Everybody did, yeah. But Frazier didn't seem to draw very much, but this isn't about Frazier.

ROBERT BROWN: Hmm. This was probably in the '40s that many of you willingly gave a new stature to drawing?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yes. It was nothing new, of course. All you've got to do is look at the great Rembrandt drawings.

ROBERT BROWN: Well sure, there was that—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Magnificent. Or the manner in which fragments of figures, done by Michelangelo, or —

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But in your time, this was—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: —da Vinci.

ROBERT BROWN: For your time, this was new.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah. Not for my time. For my—

ROBERT BROWN: —circle?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: —local environment.

ROBERT BROWN: Was the local environment, speaking of that, in the '30s, to you, quite a stimulating one? [00:40:00]

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Oh, sure. Sure. You can't be—you can't do everything. You can't be all things to all people. The intensity with which the drawing program had a purpose in the School of Design was very admirable as far as I'm concerned. It didn't limit your horizons as to how you saw drawing in the long run, or how you studied the Old Masters, which might have been a da Vinci drawing on a beautiful page, but it knew it had certain purposes to accomplish at that time, and it took care of them.

ROBERT BROWN: What about other aspects of your education at the School of Design? You've mentioned painting, how Frazier encouraged an open-ended, exploratory approach to painting. What other aspects of—what other items were there in your curriculum?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Well, that's an interesting thing, because as I say, there were no degrees given when I went to school. Graduated in 1933. I don't know when—I think maybe 1940—that could be looked up easily enough—the school became a degree-granting institution, and then it took on certain programs, academic programs, that it had never had. It took on English and psychology. Various things were incorporated into the program to justify the degree requirements. Before that, it had been pretty much an art school.

ROBERT BROWN: And your other course—all your coursework would have been in drawing or painting?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Drawing, painting, sculpture. [00:42:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Did you do much with sculpture?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I did—not much, I wouldn't say, but I did it on the side, or incorporated with everything else I did.

ROBERT BROWN: What was the curriculum like in sculpture? What—or the teaching like?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: It followed the same track that the painting did. The sculpture would have studied cast drawing and figure drawing, and then, at that time, anyway, nearly all the work was done in clay, and then cast. This would, of course, been cast in plaster, not in bronze. It was assumed that it would be years, when you became sophisticated artist, before you cast something in bronze.

ROBERT BROWN: Were these mainly objective studies from a model?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah. I don't recall, in those days, anything being an imaginary project of some sort. It usually involved a model, or a head. And done in the clay, direct.

ROBERT BROWN: Was the teacher an academic sculptor himself, or?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Who was that?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Remember what I said about my memory. A minute ago, I would have had it on the end of my tongue. Mrs. Atkins. Well, pretty good to come up with that. I'm pretty sure it was Atkins. It was a woman sculptor.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But the prime experience, your years at the Rhode Island School of Design, was to study with Frazier? [00:44:06] Was that the highlight?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah, absolutely.

ROBERT BROWN: Both in Providence as well as Provincetown?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: You had more and more courses with him here?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yes, until it became a total absorption. That is, I didn't really study with him that seriously till I got out of school. And then it was constant study with him. That is to say, privately, personally, not as a private student, but I would be in his studio once in a while, and he'd be in mine. And my study of him has never ended. All that stuff up on my wall, which I own, is a never-ending source of surprise to me as to how sophisticated the explorations of those canvases may be, when I thought, years ago, I knew just what was in there. Now I know that I didn't. But the association between him and me enlarged over the years. I got a job teaching at the school the year I graduated and have been connected with the school ever since.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, you taught there from 1933 to '37, straight through, with one brief interruption. But what were you, an instructor in painting? Is that—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Everything under the sun. Yeah, I started out—

ROBERT BROWN: [Inaudible.]

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: No, I started out as an instructor in drawing. Started with freshman drawing. I don't remember how long I was at that before I began to teach sophomore painting. [00:46:01]

ROBERT BROWN: Would that have been the first course in painting?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: That's the first course in painting, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you find you had a knack for teaching right away?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I don't know about a knack. It was just an intense preoccupation, not only because it was teaching, but because I always seemed to learn more from the students than they learned from me, which I picked up, of course, from Frazier. The attitude, the drive, of the people I admired as teachers, or what I did myself, seemed to be just an involvement with the art and the individual you could discuss it with, and less a matter of a student being way off in another world that you taught as somebody not your equal. Somehow or other, all along the line, the students seemed to be just people that you were working with.

ROBERT BROWN: And that's the way it had been for Frazier, too? He said that he really learned more from his students than they perhaps got out from him?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I wouldn't say that I could quote that from him, but it seemed to me that that was his feeling. I know that he'd go along and look at a student's piece of work and bore into it in a way that was—that indicated surprise on his part as to what was occurring in certain parts of that student's work, and perhaps open his eyes somewhat. [00:48:02] This would be an awareness of what was going on in the student's work, that the student himself wouldn't have been aware of. But as it is with everybody seriously at work, student or otherwise, talent and native instinct will pop up at all sorts of times. It's a matter of maturity as to how much of that you can put together, total up. The mature work of art is a matter of totaling up a great many odds and ends of experience. Very often, the quality of an isolated experience is not so much different, no matter how young you are, or how much you are a beginner, as it is later on. That is, an isolated flash of some sort. It's just that the teacher, the mature teacher, as he goes through a class of 50 people, will see all sorts of magnificent little bits and pieces coming up. The student doesn't know it, doesn't get it put together, but the teacher is always learning in that way. A good teacher, I think.

ROBERT BROWN: Is part of the role of the good teacher to point out to the student that they've got a bit or a piece here, a flash of—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: They try to.

ROBERT BROWN: —something important?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: They try to, but it's, it's very difficult to do, because the objectives that you're laying out for that student are probably below the level of that sophistication that made you see the usefulness of that little piece. So it wouldn't do you any good to try to explain to the student, who's at that level, the place that this kind of an instinct should take in a much more mature work. [00:50:13] Maybe in your own work. You see, many of these things you pick up and you find them in your own works in the—

ROBERT BROWN: So you just sort of let the student go along with his or her problem, the problem [inaudible] and hope that—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah, except that—

ROBERT BROWN: —eventually—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: —the problems are not that rigidly set. The problem is of the nature to lead you into situations where you will make your own discoveries—the problems—if the good ones don't set limitations way beyond what you're doing. They feed you excitement and involvement, and are directed toward making you so interested in the pursuit of this thing that nobody knows where the limitations are at the other end. So any of these little things that seem to be marvels that any student would come up with, sure, you'd try to identify them, bring them out, but immediately you're into the difficulty of trying to explain what an involved, mature, profound piece of work is, and you can't always do it.

ROBERT BROWN: I suppose there would be the danger, if you called such-and-such to a student's attention, that they would erect it into kind of a formula at their—before, when they were very immature as painters?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I think either that, or they would fail to see what surrounded it. That the thing surrounding it really needed the attention more than [laughs] more than the little piece of perfection. [00:52:02] You're not going to perfect something that's already that good. But you've got to get the other things adjusted to impinge on that in such a way as to give it a setting.

ROBERT BROWN: So the art of being an effective teacher is partly being a restrained person, isn't it?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I would think so. At least a very attentive person as to what's going on. You don't walk into a room with a preconception of what the day's work is to be, and you don't assume, when you walk into the room, that nobody has already surpassed what it was you set out in general terms for the lesson. So a good teacher seems to be a slower one, one who goes around and studies very carefully what it is that's in front of him before he starts making judgments that might trod under foot these delicate little things that the students are coming up with.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, were most of these students aiming to be full-time artists on their own? This was the Depression.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: See, you're talking about a school that has—what did I say?—a few dozen departments in it. The fine arts division—well, it wasn't a division in the beginning. The fine arts area was basic to maybe 60 percent of what was going on in the school. Whether you were going to become an illustrator, a sculptor, whatever the case may be, the fine arts department, as it was then, was probably basic to your first two years, and you didn't know whether you were going to branch off into one thing or another. [00:54:00] Even the apparel designers took their drawing in that area. It was assumed that at least two years were common to just about everybody. And then the school was larger than fine arts, so everybody didn't foresee that they would be a successful painter. You might be a sculptor, when you started out to study painting. And ceramics, and glass, and things that came into the school later on.

ROBERT BROWN: I guess what I was trying to ask was, among those who went on in painting, say, or sculpture, in the fine arts, this being the Depression—we're talking about, now, when you first started—were there very many who wanted simply to go on with that as a career, with no prospect of a job? Whereas—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: —someone in apparel design, or illustration, would figure to get a—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: They'd figure to get a job.

ROBERT BROWN: But these others, were there very many in the '30s who, nevertheless, wanted to continue with painting or—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I would think—

ROBERT BROWN: —sculpture?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: —in my immediate surroundings, there might have been a dozen. It's hard to describe, but people didn't have this job thing in their minds all the time. My own thinking, and as it was, I believe, with a good many other friends of mine, was that you just get in there and do something, and do it well, and that's the first thing to attend to. Don't worry about a job, because if you do something well enough, somebody's going to want it. That's the first thing you've got to take care of. Nearly everybody I know wound up pretty well. [00:56:00] I would still advocate that. Do what's right in front of you. Do it very, very well, and somebody will be looking over your shoulder. They need people who do things well, in any field.

ROBERT BROWN: You, in addition to studying summers, and during the year, informally meeting with Frazier, or seeing—you, in 1934—was that the summer you went to the Art Students League in New York?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yes. I had a short time in between when I graduated and when I went to work. I don't remember just what that sequence was, but I went down to New York, studied with Thomas Hart Benton, and with a man named [Eugene] Steinhof in sculpture, down at the Beaux-Arts in New York.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you go deliberately to study with them?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I went to study with Benton, because at that time, I thought I was also going to be a mural painter.

ROBERT BROWN: You did? How had that interest arisen in you?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Well, mural painting was being done all over the place in those days. It's just one of those things. It was big, and we seemed to be equipped to do it, and I thought if I were going to do it, I'd try to get down and study with the man who was outstanding in the country at that time as a mural painter. However, the only thing I did there was life drawing, and his attitude toward drawing was entirely different that I'd had in the School of Design, and I didn't get very far. [00:58:09]

ROBERT BROWN: What was his attitude, do you recall?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah, it was very structural, in that sort of kinky way that his figures are in his murals. The components of a figure broke up into almost a kinetic, rhythmic thing through the whole mural. I don't know. It just seemed that what he was doing had all his mannerisms at the time, and what I had been brought up through was just study of the knowledge of putting a drawing together, to be sure that drawing was focused on the figure. But I didn't stay down there—as soon as I knew I had a job at the School of Design, I came out of New York. The sculpture with Steinhof—who I went down to study with simply because Steinhof had come over from Germany or Austria, I don't know, and had been imported into the School of Design as a sort of da Vinci-esque man of all kinds of knowledge, from film to sculpture to silverware, anything. He'd been working at the School of Design. We had a few extraordinary people come into the School of Design to do a seminar-type thing. He had gotten me excited about what was actually sculpture, but could have gone in any direction. [01:00:08] The time I spent with him down at the Beaux-Arts school on, what, 44th Street or something, was hacking synthetic stone. We'd make the stone out of a bunch of cement and granite chips or something like that. Your tape going to run out?

ROBERT BROWN: It wasn't really very useful time, your time with him?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I didn't ever sluff off the time I had with anybody. It's just that— whenever I was there, I did it intensely, and I believe, because I was carving directly in this stone, whereas at the School of Design I had been modeling in clay, it was useful. But the painting just took over. I was going to be a painter.

ROBERT BROWN: So without the benefit of Benton's ideas on murals or approach to it, you did some murals on your own during the '30s?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Some commissions here in Providence?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: They were all in paint. In New York, studying with Benton, he was working with egg tempera, in a way which, I believe, later on, was found to not be too permanent, because he'd work with the powder dry, and dip his brush into the egg medium the way you would into oil, and mix it right up on a palette the way you used oil paint, whereas, say, the classic school of tempera painting out of Yale, all these colors would be mixed up in liquid before you started to use them, and they would bond better. [01:02:04] Some of Benton's murals, as you know, the stuff cracked up and began to fall off. That's just an aside. I didn't stay with

that any length of time.

[END OF TRACK peers81_1of2_reel_SideA_r.]

ROBERT BROWN: Side two.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: You wanted to go back a little bit to describe a trip you took, I think, just after your first year at the Rhode Island School of Design, or just before you entered.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: You had met an artist in Maine, I believe.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I went up to Maine to study that summer at Boothbay Harbor, and this Dutchman—who was, at that time, anyway, in my estimation, a marvelous painter—was in the habit of going to places like Alaska, and being out of communication with civilization for the whole winter, and painting the mountains and so on. Then he'd come back into a place like Boothbay Harbor, for instance, and paint there during the summer. He'd accumulate a large stock of these things, and before that time, what he did was very salable. Every time he was gone for a winter session, out of sight, and then would come back in, he'd have a stock that he could sell. He was going to go down to Mexico, and he had driven into Boothbay Harbor in an old Model T Ford.

ROBERT BROWN: What was his name?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Uh, van Empel.

ROBERT BROWN: E-M-P-E-L?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: E-M-P-E-L. I don't remember—Jan. Yeah, Jan van Empel. But I worked with him up there, out trying to paint landscapes, more than I did with the school. I guess he thought I had some talent or something. Anyway, got talking about this trip to Mexico, and agreed that if I would do the driving, he'd take me along. [00:02:00] Because he was, he was a lot older than—I don't know how old. Maybe 55, 60. So we cleaned out the whole body of that old Model T and loaded it with our equipment, tent, and started out for Mexico, and camped all the way. Got only down as far as Houston, Texas. This was in 1929. The crash had ruined him. The usual route that he would take and sell these things along the way—he sold nothing. We got into Houston, and things were looking very bad, and—between the two of us getting a little hard to live with. He got me a ticket on a boat back from Houston, and then he disappeared one night. He had taken the car. I never heard from him after that. But I was left there. I had a ticket. That's all I had, on the boat back all the way to Providence, and nothing to eat for about a week. I had some bread and some ketchup left over. Carried my junk wrapped up in newspapers and so forth. Came back on the *Castle Morro* that later burned. Got into Providence by way of the Colonial Line, the old boat system that used to run between Providence and New York, and Fall River and New York.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you eat once you got onboard? Did they—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Oh, your ticket—

ROBERT BROWN: The ticket included that?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah, absolutely. I didn't have a good time. [00:04:00] I was alone. I had no clothes to look equipped for any kind of social event. The *Castle Morro* was, I think, a tour ship at that time. I was very out of place. [Laughs.] But all I wanted to do was get back. When I did get back into Providence, I had no money. My father paid the taxi fare when I woke him up in the morning. Then I went down to school, and the scholarship I had won was a four-year scholarship, which disappeared when I left. But the—

ROBERT BROWN: You mean because you weren't there to take—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I forfeited it, yeah. But the then-registrar of the school, a marvelous lady, said she'd see what she could do, and I paid a year's tuition to get back in, and then she found some money and she gave it back to me. From then on, I got a scholarship each year, which she was able to find. The second time I went to Mexico was in 1937, when I had gone—well, I got a year's leave of absence in 1937 to work at Rockford College, because the president of Rockford College had been studying with Frazier in Provincetown, and I was Frazier's assistant at the time, and he got to know me. Invited me out there to take over his painting department while his man went on leave for a year, and the School of Design gave me a leave. I came back in and started out again for Mexico that summer, in another Ford, with a fellow who was a student at the School of Design. [00:06:07] This time, we made it all the way down. Lived in Taxco for four months after we got there.

ROBERT BROWN: Why did you want to go to Mexico?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Well, I had studied mural painting, as mentioned before, and wanted to see the great murals of Orozco and Rivera and so forth. And, romantically, any young person would like to get into Mexico. The work I tried to do there, except for a few drawings, never worked out. The environment was so completely different from what I'd been used to out on the Cape, really, that I couldn't get hold of it and manage it.

ROBERT BROWN: Is environment quite important to you?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Well, I mean, visually it is. Mexico, with all the greenery and the orange tile roofs, I just didn't know—I couldn't see it as form. Didn't lock in in any way with anything I'd been brought up through. I did make a few drawings that weren't too bad. But otherwise, thoroughly enjoyed just the marvelous place. At that time, Taxco had very few tourists, and of course it's a town that's a national monument in Mexico. The old silver capital of Mexico. Building is not allowed to change in it. It was very inexpensive at that time, and I don't think there were more than a half a dozen American in the town when we were living there. The Pan-American Highway wasn't all the way through yet. When we went across the Mexican border, we hit into an unfinished area from the lowland going into Mexico up to the Mexican Plateau. [00:08:08] Very rugged country. That hadn't been—a road hadn't been put through there. We'd cross rivers on rafts and stuff like that. Very interesting. And then back to school.

ROBERT BROWN: By this time, it was 1937 or so.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: You were still an instructor, or was your—would your rank pick up or change fairly quickly?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I don't know. I can't read off the dates of when the ranks changed.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, it wasn't until the '40s, you said, that—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah, there was no rank until it became a college. Then I started off as an instructor, so that would have been 1940, '41. However, I was in the army for four years, about that time, and since I hadn't earned a degree, because degrees weren't given in the first 15 years of my teaching there, I took a few courses when I came out of the army in 1946, in order to get a degree.

ROBERT BROWN: Was that—a degree was important?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Well, I don't know. There was some little threat to teaching unless you had a degree, and I thought it was just a matter of security. I didn't care about it one way or the other, except I didn't want to lose a job. I kept teaching all the time I was getting the—picking up the extra courses.

ROBERT BROWN: Before you went into the army, was there pressure gathering for the School of Design to become accredited, become a degree-granting institution? [00:10:03]

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I don't know where the pressure came from, or whether it was internal interest that came along simultaneously with some outside pressure.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you discuss this sort of thing with Frazier? Was he involved?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: No, I don't recall discussing it with him at all. I don't think that he was involved in the—

ROBERT BROWN: Who was?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: He was head of the painting department at that time. He wasn't division chairman, and hadn't become president of the school. I don't think he was that much involved.

ROBERT BROWN: In the late '30s, who were the powers that be at the—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I think, as I recall—and I'm not good at recalling—Royal Bailey Farnum was the man who switched this over to a degree-granting institution. I think he was interested in that kind of thing.

ROBERT BROWN: What was he like, if you remember?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Fine, even-going man, but he was a teacher education kind of administrator, whereas Frazier, who later became president, was an artist, thoroughly an artist, all the way down the line, and

a teacher second. Whereas Farnum was education. That was his profession.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you remember ways in which that affected the school?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Well, just those that I mentioned, with regard to courses like psychology and mathematics and English. Certain number of academic courses were then required to complete a—[00:12:01]

ROBERT BROWN: What's your opinion of their—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: —curriculum.

ROBERT BROWN: —usefulness or otherwise in the curriculum?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I never could see that they were that useful. I don't think that the courses, let's say, in psychology or—what other things were there?—I took one in English and something else—had all that caliber to be that useful. In my estimation, it would be—to have quality in areas like that, you should be going to a university, or a liberal arts college. The people who would be available to teach these courses in that school usually were those who might not be too secure in their university jobs. Kind of leftover things.

ROBERT BROWN: Clearly, in these academic courses, was, I suppose, art history.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Did that—you had not had that when you were a student?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I was trying to think back. I don't remember. It seems to me that there was always some kind of art history. Perhaps not in a structured course, but certainly we knew about the history of art. However, that would have been restricted. We would know about the history of art of painting, whereas art history as taught in a curriculum later on was everything. Architecture, sculpture, the whole broad spectrum, from a historical point of view. [00:14:00]

ROBERT BROWN: What was your opinion of art history in the curriculum? I mean, as it later came.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Later came—

ROBERT BROWN: Say, in the 1940s.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I didn't—I never had a high opinion of it at all. I wrote a paper, which you may have a copy of. I don't know. But when I was taking art history, I'd have to go into the museum, along with the freshmen. [Laughs.] That was—I didn't care too much for that. What I would do, sitting down in front of some of those paintings, was, far and away, a more deeply studied and more deeply understood reference to that painting than the art history teacher himself had. So it always seemed to me that the art history that was going on, for an art school, anyway, was too—had too broad a spectrum, and covered things too superficially. It would be all right in a college, or in some other context where art as a profession was not going to be that important. But I was never happy in the art history environment, as taught.

ROBERT BROWN: Back in the '30s, you finally did marry a fellow student, right? Florence Leif?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Forty-one, I think.

ROBERT BROWN: Forty-one. You'd known her since you were students?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Together.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: She was a year behind me. Graduated in 1934. But we had been going together for perhaps 10 years before this was possible. [00:16:00]

ROBERT BROWN: By that time, was she embarked on a career as a painter?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah. Graduated in painting. Always a very serious painter. Just painted. On the other hand, she worked at various things, anything from selling sewing machines in a department store. She was a draftsman during the war in armament factories. Did any kind of work along with it. But an outstanding artist in anybody's estimation.

ROBERT BROWN: The two of you, would you discuss art? You really just respected each other's seriousness?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Well, each time you mention discussing art, it's hard for me to separate it out. Our life would involve that kind of conversation all the time. The way you bring it up sounds as though it would be—it would happen too self-consciously.

ROBERT BROWN: No, I didn't mean that.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: It's just part of your—

ROBERT BROWN: I didn't mean that.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: —everyday—yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: It was?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: It was just the way you live as an artist. You can't walk through the house without seeing paintings. The mention that something might have been painted too cold or too warm, or the trouble was that your whole register and thing was too dark to get going with and should have been lightened up, might have come at any time during the day while you were—it wasn't part of an artistic discussion.

ROBERT BROWN: Sure. [00:18:00] She worked full-time at it, except that she had odd jobs?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: You'd been a teacher.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you ever find that, being a teacher, you begrudged that? You have told how much you learned from your students. Or would you rather have been able to—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I thoroughly—well, I would, of course, rather be able—I think I would. But I enjoyed teaching painting students. Now, I didn't enjoy teaching, let's say, the apparel design students, who could barely tolerate the time they put in a drawing class, for instance. But teaching the serious artists was very exciting, and very informative both ways. But as a teacher in the School of Design, I had to teach everybody. The classes that you'd have in basic painting or basic drawing would include half a dozen departments, many of whom—even teacher education or something like that.

ROBERT BROWN: You were, by the late '30s, painting, I think, some of these things we're seeing here now.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: During the '30s, up into the late '30s and up until '40, until I went in the Army in 1941, I guess it was, Surrealism was a top concern on the part of all the people I knew. Dalí had had big exhibition in New York at the time. All the friends that I knew had a slightly Surrealistic trend running in the art. Things were done with a high degree of technical skill, and they were much more tonal and local color than what happened later. [00:20:09] Then, in four years in the army, I didn't have a chance to paint at all, but went into museums wherever I could, and looked all the time, and got tremendously interested in Cézanne, basically. When I came out of the army, that had changed everything for me. I hadn't been familiar with Cézanne, as a result of school, before I went in the army. Don't recall he'd ever been talked about. When I came out, painting down the Cape, started to try to paint as much of a Cézanne as I could, in order not to copy him—that wouldn't make any sense—but to find out what it was he was discovering in things, and my work changed from tonal and local color to full color structures. Form was made out of color instead of light and dark.

ROBERT BROWN: But you'd had some of that during your summers with Frazier and Hawthorne, or rather—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Never Cézanne. There would have been much more reference to—oh, I don't know, people like Robert Henri, Bellows. Of course, Velázquez.

ROBERT BROWN: And yet it was color you were mainly concerned with—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: It was color.

ROBERT BROWN: —you said earlier, not brown and gray and black shadows, but color, say, in shadows.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Well, in the sense that Henri or Bellows or those people—

ROBERT BROWN: So rather timid, not quite full Impressionist, or full [inaudible].

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Not full Impressionist. [00:22:02] But it might have been leaning in that direction,

compared to the classical, formal aspects of a Cézanne later on, where the Impressionism was driven back into a solid, substantial, formal state.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, that takes more pre-calculation on your part, doesn't it? Or is it something that's intuitive once you—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: It's intuitive once you've made the shift in mind as to what it is you're—

ROBERT BROWN: So in other words, that was in line with your earliest teaching that you'd had? I mean, not your earliest, but with Frazier. These intuitive—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I would think so. His work changed also.

ROBERT BROWN: What about this Surrealistic interlude? Because here, it looks extremely structured, very carefully planned out.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: It's structured objectively. That is, your composition is made out of objects. Later painting, the composition is not so much objects as it is anything that might occur in between the objects, in the way of a piece of color. This has been the case from the beginning of time, as far as I can see it. You get an early Rembrandt, and it's—all the work is laid onto the form objectively, close as the skin of that form. In the late Rembrandts, the color begins to loosen up and float free, and be a free agent. Or from Turner or—there are plenty of previous references. I don't think any of these things are that much of a structured, programmatic kind of procedure. [00:24:04] You do this, that, according to what you're able to do. It usually turns out that anybody whatsoever works, in his beginning years, with the education he had, and he usually has had an education that is heavily loaded with learning how to do things, and doing them skillfully, well. His first years are exploitations of these skills that he's enamored of, and things are beautifully done, and apparently, skillfully laid in. Then, when you get more and more mature, it breaks loose somehow, and a good many things, like, oh—well, the late Rembrandts, but bringing it up-to-date, in Monets, out on the river with a few boats. The beginning student can look at the surface of that stuff and think he could do it himself. It no longer looks all that skillful, as far as the application of paint, being driven into the representation of a skin surface or an exact position in space. The painting gets totally involved with the picture surface. But that isn't a program that you look forward to. It's just something that seems to be a—

ROBERT BROWN: What was it in Surrealism that attracted you, do you suppose? You said it was just sort of in the air among you and your friends and acquaintances?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Oh, yeah. The peers [laughs] that's not my name, but our peers at that time would have been, pretty much, Surrealists. A lot of it going on. I suppose just a matter of luck who you happen to fall in with. [00:26:03] Local people like Waldo Kaufer. Older than I, a little older. Albert Gold and so forth. These people were a little older. Got involved with it, and it came out of New York some way, and you just went in that direction for a while. Most of us who were working that way were the influences in this local community at that time. I'm sure that, not too far away, things were probably going totally different.

ROBERT BROWN: But you found it quite appealing—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: —for a few years?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yes, it led to a chance to use that skill. Then there was a kind of romantic belief in the reality of your dream objects, just as—with just as much validity as the solid objects you saw when you were awake.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you attempt to record things from your dreams?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I didn't. The real Surrealist was supposed to do that, but these are just not dreams, but some of them are constructed worlds, like that moon coming down to the earth. I never really leaned in that direction, but once in a while, I'd get an idea, and it would just come through. Other than that, it was plain painting of a landscape or a still life. Those very small, very highly detailed still lifes are just an interest in—what?—the Dutch exactness. [00:28:08] Some of the flower paintings of the Dutch that have little ants crawling around on them. Almost nobody, at some time during their life, miss getting interested in what they can do technically. Almost nobody.

ROBERT BROWN: Was the war—or your army service, 1942 to '45, was that quite a big interruption?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: It was a complete interruption.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you able to do anything appropriate to your training or your interest?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Practically nothing. I wound up in the corps of engineers, straight in, as a private, combat engineer training, which directed me—or rather, I made it into officer candidate school. Then, because the officers wind up in various areas of their capability, like engineering or whatnot, I wound up in camouflage, because I was a painter, an artist. There was just a little interest of that sort, but it never went in the direction of painting beyond flat shapes [laughs] which I never found to be very exciting or successful. But, like everything else, once I got into it—well, one thing it did was make me a builder. I had built all kinds of things in that four years of experience. Models of—life-size models of airplanes for camouflage, bridges. [00:30:00] Gone through the whole works. So that when I came out, and my wife and I managed to get a piece of land out on the Cape, in North Truro, I built that house myself, mostly. My wife and I, working at it.

ROBERT BROWN: Was she with you part of the time during the war?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: No, not at all.

ROBERT BROWN: Did she continue painting and—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: No, she didn't paint. She was working, as a draftsman, mostly, and lived in my home with my mother and father, who were getting pretty well along in those days. In general, had a hard time, because she'd work all day, come home after dark. Lots of food was very hard to get, as you know. Butter, food—anything was hard to get. She'd have to scramble around for some of that in between times. No, she wasn't being an artist during that period.

ROBERT BROWN: When you came back, then you began, as you said, build the house in—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: —North Truro.

ROBERT BROWN: —North Truro. Because you wanted to spend more and more of your time there, or you wanted to have a place—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Well, up to that time, we had been in Provincetown for 20 years, and I had rented one of the studios in the famous lumberyard down there, in the same group of studios that Edwin Dickinson had been in, and that long history of all sorts of famous people. Had one of these 10 or a dozen studios in a lumberyard, and just—I had that year-round, and would always go back to it, and then to various studios within the town, because we went back to Provincetown to paint, year in and year out. [00:32:12] But after the war, with this chance to buy the piece of property, and the way Provincetown was beginning to be not very attractive to me—tourists and so forth loading it up—we moved out to that spot, which is only three miles out of Provincetown, and overlooks Provincetown, and built there, and then worked another 20 years out in North Truro. Always very happy to be out on the Cape, but in a total of about 40 years, worked over just about every place that you could [laughs] you could get a look at. And being strictly outdoor painters, and working from visual contact with something, we weren't happy just to have a studio, where you went in and manufactured your things from mental constructions without—

ROBERT BROWN: You both—the Cape, you liked very much as something to paint directly from?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Total living. Paint, fish. Did a lot of fishing, swimming. Of course, swimming comes from way back. Just the whole thing was wonderful. In the old days, when it was a real fishing village, before the fishing fleet moved out and disappeared, the Portuguese were wonderful people, and I'd go fishing with them. Knew most of them. There was a lot of real, honest-to-goodness fishing village activity going on. And that gradually just totally disappeared. [00:34:00]

ROBERT BROWN: What made it disappear, do you think?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Well, I don't know. I had an idea that it was probably the way the fish was moved. The big cold storages that were required out in Provincetown to take this in directly, then were over in Boston, I guess, and it became more economical to deliver their fish directly into the big places in Boston. It may have been that the fishing disappeared. That can happen. These were mackerel fishermen, the big fleet. But they were all one-man operations, and it may also be that—

ROBERT BROWN: Big operators—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah, more organized operators might have done that. And I don't know why the navy—the navy used to be spectacular. All the big ships would come into Provincetown, which was a deep water harbor. And they'd have a shorely [ph], even, in Provincetown. I don't remember just when that stopped. But then it just became kind of a tourist place.

ROBERT BROWN: Then that became a little too expensive for many artists.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Expensive, and didn't care for the life that it so—all sorts of hangers-on. People who frequented the art atmosphere, but had nothing to do with it. All the places that used to be fishing houses, or—what do I want to say? [00:36:00] Sail loft buildings. All kinds of places that would have been natural to the environment were remodeled into haberdasheries. You know, all kinds of odds and ends. Sell postcards or whatnot. And into motels and all kinds of junks.

ROBERT BROWN: By that time, Frazier was no longer going there either, was he?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Frazier had moved down to Wellfleet, just before the war, I believe. The school was over by that time. I don't remember just when that ended. But Frazier built a studio of his own down in Wellfleet, and I don't think he came back into Provincetown at all.

ROBERT BROWN: So more and more of you were dispersing. You were staying on the Cape.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah. Frazier's studio was about 50 yards away from Edwin Dickinson's studio in Wellfleet.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you find that this time was very productive of those summers? I mean, during the '50s into the '60s, when you were going to North Truro.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: It was productive right out until the time that we sold the house. And fortunately, sold the house just before Florence got sick. Because if she had gotten sick and had died and I still had the house alone, I probably would have sold it for nothing, and unhappily at that, you know. So that was about the right time to get out of there.

ROBERT BROWN: At the school, you were advanced by, I think, about 1955, and became associate professor and head of the painting department. [00:38:07] In the mid-'50s.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah, I don't know just what that—

ROBERT BROWN: Is that about the time that Frazier himself became president? So when you took on—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: No, that was about the time he became—see, when the school became a college, it then had an entirely different structure. It had divisions, and the divisions had departments, and he had become chairman of the fine arts division, so that people like Howard Benson, who was then head of sculpture, would have been working under Frazier.

ROBERT BROWN: And you were head—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I became head of the painting department.

ROBERT BROWN: Within the division.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: What did that involve for you as the department head? Did that change, to any degree, your job?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah, it changed my responsibilities somewhat, because I wasn't down there on a full schedule of just handling classes. I taught one or two classes, but also had one or two days that I maybe didn't teach any classes, when I was handling the administrative work of the department.

ROBERT BROWN: Was there—were you reportable directly to Frazier?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Was there very much to this administrative work, say, in the '50s?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Not so much, except what I made of it myself. You were talking about this a little while ago, that you see Frazier redoing things and restructuring, analyzing. Well, before I took over the painting department, as I may have said, the emphasis was on portrait painting. [00:40:04] When I graduated, I graduated—it says on my diploma, not my degree—in portraiture. So that up to the time that I became head of the painting department, a painting major started painting portraits, five days a week, in the junior year, and they painted portraits in the senior year, same kind of a class. Right through for the last two years of their school, they were painting portraits. Then, not simply because of the school, but because of the whole art world,

portraiture became less important. The big national exhibitions no longer had portrait painters in them, like [Alfred] Seifert and so on, who would have always had a portrait. But they had the individual art object. Could have been a landscape or anything else. The school could see that portraiture was being replaced by a general attitude toward what a painting might be. Could be anything: still life, portrait—figure piece, landscapes. And I set up a senior painting workshop, which took the painters out of the portrait class, and put them into a separate workshop situation, where they'd work on anything that they set up as an art form for themselves, with occasional individual attention. [00:42:04] Instead of working in a class of 50 people, each one had his separate, small place. And the instruction would be by periodic visitation of that studio space, and talking over the work that was being done. And the work gradually moved away from portraits to—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, until the mid-'50s, the emphasis for the advanced painting students was on portraits, huh?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Not the mid-'50s.

ROBERT BROWN: Not much earlier.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: This—now, I'm not just sure what was going on during the four years that I was away from the school, which, by the way, was on a leave of absence. When you were in the army, you kept your connection with the school.

ROBERT BROWN: This change occurred right after World War II?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: When I came out, I set up the first workshop that broke the senior painters out of the lockstep of working right along for two years in a portrait class.

ROBERT BROWN: You hadn't minded it when you'd been a student yourself, the portrait?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: No, no, never minded.

ROBERT BROWN: It was expected?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: It was expected. And I'm thankful for it, because I know how to paint a figure, and everybody who worked in those days—if you wanted to paint a composition that had figures in it, you'd better know how to paint a figure. I never regret any part of that.

ROBERT BROWN: At the time that you broke the school—the paint out of the portraiture, were most other art schools changing over at that time, too? This, you've indicated, was—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah, I would—

ROBERT BROWN: —a prevailing trend.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I would imagine so.

ROBERT BROWN: Was there much resistance here to your setting up the workshop?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: No, it just sort of worked in that direction. Of course, at that stage of the development, the people who wound up in the painting workshops were painting majors by that time. [00:44:11] In the old days, you could have still had illustrators—a variety of what are now called departmental interests, all doing the same thing in that class. Now, the senior painting workshops were strictly those people who had made their decision and were going to be painters.

ROBERT BROWN: Was that better, from your perspective, as a teacher?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Well, actually, I was part of it, because I lacked some credits, some kind of painting credits, for this degree that I was going to try to pick up. I was teaching it, and painting along in it at the same time.

ROBERT BROWN: But I mean, was it better not to have the would-be illustrators and the designers in with the advanced painters? They were in their separate—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I think so, as far as that unit of educational experience went. As a teacher, I still had classes. I still was teaching a junior class, and I don't know, at one time I was teaching a junior and a sophomore class at the same time, so that I was always teaching the whole group of students.

ROBERT BROWN: Were more faculty being added on in the late '40s, early '50s? Was it getting—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: No, I don't think they were picking up very many. I think the student body remained somewhere around 900 for a good many years. Close to it. Never broke over the thousand mark. What did happen, which I've thought about a lot since then, is that the space requirement changed considerably, because up to that time, you could have a class doing the same problem. [00:46:12] It might be a figure—a portrait on a model stand, and 50 people could be in that room, standing fairly close together, as you see pictures of old-time studios, even in Paris, with the one thing to be done. When you set up this workshop situation, gradually you had to find ever more space. In my estimation, that may have proliferated a little too far. I think they, at this time, have dipped down into some of the earlier classes, and kind of separated them out a little bit.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean the students were too isolated from each other?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: You could put it that way, because I thought a great deal was gained by 50 people working at the same problem, in close enough proximity to actually see what was going on in one another's canvases. I know for a fact that you learned a great deal, possibly as much, from watching what's going on, and then the group criticism, where all these things concerned with one objective were put up and criticized on the basis of objectives common to that kind of a problem.

ROBERT BROWN: Once you replaced that system, what form could your critiques take?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: It became much more a personalized art criticism than it was a fundamental criticism. [00:48:00] You might get more involved in aesthetics, and whether this thing was a good thing to do, regardless of how well it was done. You might even get into the possibility that the way you were doing that has already gone by, and you'd better take a look at what's going on in New York. Things of that kind would creep in and uh—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, it carried the seeds of lack of control, then, didn't it, this—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I think so. I think so.

ROBERT BROWN: Even though you were in on the restructuring of these things, it was pretty [laughs] difficult to manage.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Pretty difficult to see where it might go. But the problems and the upheavals are—in the school—were no different than were in environment—the world at-large. In other words, you could go into New York and see 50 different attitudes of painting going on all the time, from one gallery to another. Everything from Abstract Expressionism, to Surrealism, to various kinds of objective—straight-out, objective painting, were going on simultaneously. And this, in turn, broke down the respect that somebody had for some one attitude that might have dominated everything, until gradually, you didn't know what direction to go, and certainly you had trouble finding fundamentals that could be applied to an abstract canvas, where the paint is just washed on or blown on, or dripped on. [00:50:06] It's hard to find the fundamentals that apply to the light and dark construction of an anatomical form applicable to a piece of painting that is dripped and washed into being.

ROBERT BROWN: You and your fellow teachers here, and probably country-wide, have opened up this Pandora's box, I guess.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Sure, and you struggled with it.

ROBERT BROWN: And you were excited by it, in the beginning at least? You were very hopeful?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I don't know whether excited by it, or whether it's just you sort of live one day to the next, and you find yourself in the middle of it the next day. You're not aware that you invented it. You're not aware that you changed anything from yesterday. It just sort of—the wave floods over everything, and you can't be unaffected by it. Now, I don't know what to make out of this gradual swing to realism now. All the big galleries carrying very realistic things, and a good many of them apparently done from photographs blown up onto sensitized canvases. I mean, the canvas is sensitized. The photograph is blown up onto that canvas. And some kind of emotion, apparently intensified by this blow-up situation, and a little management of the design that it gives. It's not my world, exactly, so I don't know what to think of it. [00:52:00] But it just seems that, in general, things are swinging back to a situation where knowledge of drawing a figure, knowledge of what used to be called some fundamentals of how to paint the form, since the form was going to be in there, might again become useful.

ROBERT BROWN: In the '50s and '60s, you rode with this whirlwind of a multiplicity of—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: No, I was blown around by it. [Laughs.] I didn't ride it too well.

ROBERT BROWN: But you had students. You had them—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Oh, yeah, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Were there a good many that you were quite pleased with, even though—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: —you couldn't predict what they might become or what they might do?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yes. It seems to me that there are always qualities of—I need the word "quality." There is always quality in any kind of an art form, in anything any individual does. If you have decently catholic taste, you'll be as impressed by the quality in one thing as you are on another. The problem with it seemed to me to be that educational institutions, especially universities, who only recently have taken art departments that seriously, thought that you could start to make these things as freshmen. Whenever their classes started, you started to make Abstract Expressionism, and who knew whether it was good or bad or what? Pollock—there isn't anything I can think of in the way of an art form that I can't respond to enthusiastically if some kind of quality, which I can't define verbally, but which I have a feeling about, is in it. [00:54:04] And once that's there, I don't care what mode it's in. And for me, this is open-ended. That is, my drive, in that sense, might go all the way back to cave paintings, or it might go off into the future somewhere. Now, some of the people growing up in the system have less breadth of understanding. They only see this fairly small area of operation called abstraction or expressionism, and for one reason or another, they wouldn't think of looking at Gaddo. They wouldn't think of looking at Rembrandt. It's almost taboo, in some social exhibition openings, to suggest that you know something beyond such-and-such a century.

ROBERT BROWN: You began to get this attitude in the '50s or so? People like that?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Oh, yeah, a lot of them.

ROBERT BROWN: Who rejected, let's say, Gaddo.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Didn't even know about him.

ROBERT BROWN: Didn't know about him.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Had no—weren't conversant with it. Had never bothered to look at it.

ROBERT BROWN: Were your colleagues through the '50s, were they mainly a group more or less your age, who had had the fundamental training?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Most of mine were, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Who were some of the—could we—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Oh, Franklin and Hamilton. Of course, Frazier was teaching most of the time. Frazier, Franklin, Hamilton were the people I can think of that you're always talking with, whether you're in class. [00:56:04] You were just around there.

ROBERT BROWN: What was Robert Hamilton's attitude toward these changes and all?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: He moved with them beautifully. He's an outstanding artist. He made strange-looking things. I wouldn't exactly call them abstractions, although he became abstract, perhaps, sooner than some of the rest of us. But he had little figures that he would do, imaginary figures, and all kinds of things that could—all these headings are arbitrary. Surrealism, abstract. But he'd be somewhere in the middle that might be abstract, or it might have imaginary figures roaming around in it. But a very good painter, and that's all there is to it. He—I never knew Hamilton to have any interest in the basic training that the rest of us had in the landscape outside. He did go to Provincetown, but he never seemed to go out and paint them, and his art after that never seemed to carry that kind of a connotation. I don't know. This is not a weak position. It's just that he went in a different direction.

ROBERT BROWN: What about Franklin, in your opinion?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Franklin painted. He went out there and painted on the Cape, but he became a first-class sculptor. A good deal of that was due to the experience he had with Waldemar Raemisch, who was a great sculptor, and became head of the sculpture department at the School of Design, and had a huge commission for Philadelphia, with 20 or so life-size figures in it. [00:58:07] When he was working on casting these in Rome, in bronze, he died over in Rome. Franklin, who had been working with him a lot at the School of Design, and over

there, I think, had to work at finishing off some of these things, in the casting, not in the making of the object. But Raemisch was a great man, and his influence, intellectually and as—his belief in what sculpture was was carried into Franklin—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you know—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: —more so than John Howard Benson. I knew Raemisch very well, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: What was he like, as far as—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Wonderful guy. We used to go bowling all the time, Franklin and Hamilton and I and Raemisch. Raemisch liked to bowl. Fine man.

ROBERT BROWN: What was Benson like? He was there for many years.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah, Benson was head of the sculpture department. He was, of course, a great scholar, and a first-class human being, and exotic to see. He was a big, energetic guy, and a world authority on letter carving. Much more impressive in that direction than he was as a sculptor. I don't know that I know anything about him as a sculptor. But Franklin is an outstanding letter-carver, too, which he got from working with Howard Benson.

ROBERT BROWN: Were there further changes? [01:00:02] You were, in the 1960s, at the school. Were there any sort of milestones? Of course, Frazier, I guess, retired and then died in the early '60s.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Frazier died in 1966.

ROBERT BROWN: Mid-'60s. You were—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: He was president of the school for, what, about seven years, something like that.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Were there a lot of new people coming in in the '60s?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yes. I'm trying to think. The school set up a European honors program in 1960 I think it was, in Rome, with a headquarters in Rome. Franklin, meantime, had a [inaudible] Rome and had studied in Rome, and so he knew where to locate the building that we used, and set up a school in which 20 outstanding students, the School of Design, would go to Rome for their senior year, not their junior year. And I went to Rome in 1961, I guess, the second year of the operation of that Rome program. My wife and I went. So we're missing from the school in the early part of the '60s. Now, Frazier was president at that time, because I know there was some trouble in the school in Rome the first year, and he went over there to straighten it out. [01:02:03] He was president then.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it problems with how to teach, or what the students were getting out of—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: No, with one of the people operating in it. He had to relieve him. That's why my wife and I went over the second year, to get that thing back on its feet. While we were there that summer, instead of just renting rooms, I leased—I got permission from the school to lease two apartment buildings long-term, and we bought furniture for them and set them up so that the faculty, then going and coming, would have their own place to go into, instead of having to spend a month [laughs] roaming around Rome, trying to find a room or something to live temporarily in. One of those apartments, we still have, I'm sure. As a matter of fact, the telephone in that apartment—because telephones are very hard to get and get put in—is still in my name.

ROBERT BROWN: That was worth doing, do you think, that move to Rome?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: There's the end of mine.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: That program abroad—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I haven't talked for 10 minutes like this in a long time. Kind of gets to my—

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: What's your estimation of the Rome program?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: The Rome program was, to a great extent, painters when it first started out, because—not just painters—painters/sculptors—because the fine arts people seemed to be the only people who

were willing to release their students and get them over there, and give them credit for spending a senior year in the middle of that kind of art. [01:04:02] Apparel design, illustration, architecture, various things of that kind, couldn't see the benefit that would accrue to their students being under the same environment. So that—I thought it was a marvelous program in the earlier years. I haven't had that much to do with it lately, but other areas of the school have wanted to take advantage of it, and I don't know what use they do make of it. My estimate was that when you sent students over there, you didn't make them do in-studio work. That wasn't what they were in Europe for. They ought to get out and get into the richness that was Rome, and the environs, and Europe in general. I'm afraid some—in some cases, they've been over there and been expected to do work while they were there, just as though they were back here in the studio, and this didn't seem to me to be making real good use out of what the program was designed for.

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ROBERT BROWN: This is an interview, February 23, 1982, with Gordon Peers—continuing interview—in Providence, Rhode Island. Bob Brown, the interviewer.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: Continuing the interview, February 23, 1982. Do you want to say anything?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: What, to see how my voice sounds?

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: Well, we—I want to pick up that in our interviews.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: See, that's not on my tape now. Start again.

ROBERT BROWN: I want to pick up today in our interviews with—perhaps you could say something about the program for, I believe, senior students at the Rhode Island School of Design, in Rome. In what way were you involved in the planning for it, and what came of that program?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I wasn't involved in the planning of it at all. Frank Degnan [ph] conceived the program.

ROBERT BROWN: Who was he?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: He was dean of students, or dean of the college, I guess.

ROBERT BROWN: This would have been in the late '50s or early '60s, something like that?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Well, you know what I am with dates. You must have it somewhere.

ROBERT BROWN: It was about that time.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah, around that time. But he did all the groundwork on getting grants and whatever was required to get such a program started. He went over to Rome as director of the program. Sam Hershey accompanied him as chief critic. In other words, the program was set up so that there would be two officials of the school there: one, the administrative head called the director, and the other, the chief critic who ran the educational program. [00:02:00] It got started all right. The quarters were found by Gil Franklin, close to the academy in Rome, because Gil was an academician at that time and knew that general area up around the Janiculum. He located the school, fairly small and delightful place to be. They went over and ran it the first year, and ran into all kinds of trouble almost immediately. Frank Degnan was a very difficult man. He didn't understand art students at all, apparently. Sam Hershey, on the other hand, was an artist, and perhaps too easy man to get along with. The students may have overrun him a little bit. This got him and Frank Degnan into some sort of trouble, so that they didn't get along. Before the year was over, the program was in considerable difficulty.

ROBERT BROWN: Why, in the first place, did the school think they needed to have an administrator there?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Because there's a lot of administrative work connected with the Italian government, connected with Rome, connected with passports, all kinds of things.

ROBERT BROWN: Were there many students? Maybe 20 students at most?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: There were 20 students to begin with. I think, now, the number is up to 30. At that time, most of the students were painting students, because the painting department seemed to be the most

interested in sending their students over there. Departments like architecture and apparel design, various areas of the school, didn't see as much value to their students, especially architecture, which, because of the nature of their degree, their credentials, were required to complete work here in the college, locally. [00:04:17] So for the first few years, it was predominantly painters. Maybe more than 50 percent of them would be painting students.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you go along with the idea? Did you favor it?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I favored it very much, provided it was a broadening experience for the students who went over there, and not a working session primarily. For that reason, I strongly approved of it being done in the senior year, rather than the junior year, because the juniors didn't seem to be sophisticated enough, or mature enough, to get full benefit out of being over there during that year and then coming back to Providence. The only problem with giving it to seniors was a rather selfish one, that we wouldn't then get them coming back into the school. However, the school was big enough in its thinking to say, okay. So it was a senior program. A good many others were junior programs from other colleges.

ROBERT BROWN: The school, then, at that time, didn't wish to reap the benefit of the students coming back and being reabsorbed in the student body in the senior year?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: They very much wished to, but they considered the two possibilities—the benefit to the student himself, and the benefit to the college—and went in favor of the long-range benefit to the student. [00:06:00]

ROBERT BROWN: What—you said it was to be a broadening, rather than a working, experience.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: That was my philosophy. It hasn't always been the philosophy.

ROBERT BROWN: What did you mean by broadening experience, with respect to their potential careers?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: They wouldn't go over there and set up studios, the same as they had back here in Providence, and bury themselves in their own studio and try to produce work, which would decide whether or not they had completed a successful senior year. They'd be released to get out into Rome, into Europe generally, if they wanted to travel, and work on the basis of new discoveries they may have absorbed from the greatest museums in the world, which they hadn't had a chance to see in this country. And release them, pretty much, to find their way into the museums, into the historic cities, and work when they felt like it.

ROBERT BROWN: After this first year, there was, at least at the top of the program, some difficulty.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: In the middle of the first year, so that John Frazier, then president of the school, had to go over there and resolve the situation, and flew over there, and he fired Frank Degnan on the spot, before the first year was over. My wife and I were then sent over there, before the first year was over, to assist in getting the students cleared away for the end of that year, and all the problems of shipping them back, completed, along with Sam Hershey.

ROBERT BROWN: What did you find had happened when you got there? [00:08:00] What was the result of that first year?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: It was a shambles.

ROBERT BROWN: Really?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: The students were confused or unhappy or—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Students were unhappy, and very much aware of the internal problems, and pretty widely separated, lacking direction. Sam Hershey had a difficult time. He had his hands full with the problems that were already in place in the school. So about the most we could do was try to get it all cleared up, all the loose ends tied together, and get the students back. Then my wife and I stayed over there for the summer, and decided that the faculty—because we had landed in a little bit of a room when we got over there, maybe 10 feet wide and 20 feet long. Hardly room for beds. We decided the faculty ought to have better places to go into, and we leased two substantial apartments. Bought all the furniture for them during that summer, so that the next fall, the faculty who came over had housing. During the following year, we found new quarters for the school, which was getting a little tight in the quarters it had.

ROBERT BROWN: What went on in those quarters that they didn't have studios? Or were there studio space for the—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: They had studio space, or space enough to set up an individual easel. Not individual spaces for each individual student, but groups. [00:10:00] Groups could paint. Small study spaces could be for people who were doing most of their designing on a sheet of paper and not—so—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you find, that next fall, then, that things began to coalesce?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Things began to come to better—to come together much better. The new quarters that were found—they still have the Chinchi [ph] Palace, which was an historic place. The Chinchi family, and a lot of history. And moved over there. I came back at the end of that year. I haven't had anything more to do with the school since then. During the time I was there, for the year that I worked as chief critic, we located a half dozen students up in Venice, for instance, and students could find where they wanted to work. Venice, Verona, wherever it might be. If they could find a proper quarters, we'd establish them there, and then the chief critic would go out and visit them occasionally and see what was going on.

ROBERT BROWN: Did that chief critic system work pretty well?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yes, and it still works.

ROBERT BROWN: You would, fairly often, or not very often, go call on each student?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Not very often. As far as Venice goes, I would think three or four times. Florence, the same way.

ROBERT BROWN: What would you expect to do or want to see when you visited them?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Want to see a batch of work, not an excessive amount. Want to get a feel for whether they'd spent enough time in the museums, or among the architecture, or whatever value the particular city might be. [00:12:04]

ROBERT BROWN: Were the students, by that second year, pretty quite responsive? Were you very pleased with —

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Very pleased, very much. Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Knowing some of those students in that second year, as you look at their later development, can you see a perceptible effect on them, possibly, of that program?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yes. They were much more sophisticated people. One of them has gone back to Florence, still lives there. [Swietlan] Nick Kraczyna is an established artist, who, because of his experiences in Florence at that time, now has his life centered in Florence. Another one, Mike Ashcraft, came back to work for the school. I don't know where all the others are, but it seemed to be a very successful year.

ROBERT BROWN: Could you compare it with what might have happened had they not had that European trip, that European year? Perhaps you can actually compare it with students who did not leave Providence.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I can't compare it in long-range terms, because whatever effect a year as loosely put together as that might have accrued to the student five, six, 10 years later. Originally—or, rather, immediately—the students who were back here in school give the appearance of having a more compact body of work, more effectively done, because of close surveillance over a senior year, and go right out into the local community as apparently better prepared. [00:14:07] I just accept the fact that the value of an educational component abroad is long-range. There was never any question in my mind but what those students seemed to be more mature, have a broader vision of what the whole world of art and their life was going to be, than the people who stayed here locally. They were honor students. This wasn't a random choice.

ROBERT BROWN: So you, on balance, felt it was a good thing to do, once that first hump was surmounted?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I think that concept that I've described was, and is, a good thing to do. There have been other people in charge of the program who have thought differently, and who enlarged studio accommodations and the real estate of the school, and have let the students get over there and go to work immediately in studios. This I don't approve of. I didn't figure, ever, it was of real value to take a student out of his studio on Benefit Street, put him over there, blindfold him to another studio in Rome that he'd hardly ever left, in an effort to produce the work that he thought they were going to be looking for at the end of the senior year. That work, once the student has been approved as an honors student, with the ability to do self-study, shouldn't be the issue as they arrive at graduation, in my estimation. [00:16:13]

ROBERT BROWN: Here's the point, then, for me to ask you. Your outlook on the effect of education at the School of Design, by that—you wish to turn out people who are at the point, even before they leave the school, of being

able to self-educate with a decreasing amount of supervision, and able to be somewhat self-sustaining in their exploration?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Oh, absolutely. In the fast-moving world of art, artifacts, everything they learn to make, specifically, in school, in four years, can do a complete turnaround in the New York galleries or wherever the art product is salable.

ROBERT BROWN: You felt this even toward the early parts of your teaching, 1938? You wrote about—to do with drawing. I think you were perhaps getting ready for a lecture. But at any rate, "You must learn the elements of drawing," you say, "but when and how to use them will come naturally and intuitively." I think—isn't it true from the beginning, as a teacher, you will lead them so much, show them the basic tools, and then hope that these students will begin, increasingly, to improvise, to explore on their own?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yes, exactly right. I never thought that basic knowledge, skills, taught material would get in any student's way of becoming a completely individualized artist. [00:18:04] I know there are educational attitudes that are afraid that if you teach them the so-called fundamentals, these things will make them academic. They will simply have to rely on taught experience. This has never been the case in the world of art. There are people who still believe that, and therefore try to turn elementary classes—by elementary, I mean first two years of college, perhaps—into the junior year as expressionist, creative classes. "Do your thing." As I see it now, right now, as I look at the college, there are too many places where, if the individual student fails to come through with a lively, exciting product of his own, there's no evidence that he's had any education, because it turns out to be a series of failures, lacking creative ability. Which, I think, comes later, or can come later.

ROBERT BROWN: They don't have these fundamental skills.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I don't see a solid core of fundamentals underlying not only one class, but a four-year, progressive accumulation of agreed-upon essentials. Any—there seems to be a fear of anything programmatic. Therefore, individual teachers who come into the place, one from New York, one from somewhere else, seem to be running little private classes of their own, and there isn't sufficient effort on the part of the college, as I see it right this minute, 1982, to try to get everybody to see through their individual attitudes toward it, toward a common ground, a mutual effort to produce a program. [00:20:29] I could be wrong.

ROBERT BROWN: When you became—rather, you became head of the painting department in 1963. Now—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: If you say so. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Well, at that time, were you able to maintain this sort of mutual sharing of educational assumptions and goals?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: It was already in place, because John Frazier was a great teacher and leader.

ROBERT BROWN: And he had been the predominant person in the painting—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: In the lives of most of us.

ROBERT BROWN: But that continued the two or three years while you were head of the department, and then went on to become chairman of the division of fine arts?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Through that time, with new presidents and so forth, did this continue, this ability to—teachers to have shared assumptions? I mean, to a point, shared assumptions.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah, it would seem so to me.

ROBERT BROWN: In your experience, is that what happened?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: In my experience, that's what happened, up to a point. Then there are factors that enter into it, such as a visiting critic program, which deeds [ph] financing and the school hadn't had up to a certain point. When the visiting critic program was full-strength, there would be a new artist from New York, or somewhere outside—usually New York—come in and go through the classes, injecting, sometimes usefully and sometimes not, differing opinions. [00:22:12] In my estimation, that's all fine, provided there's sufficiently strong undercurrent of programmatic education to put the varying points of view in place. If the undercurrent of solid education given by the school doesn't exist, the school doesn't end up having educated the student. The various individual visiting critics will have to be given credit for having educated the student, if the student survives the

cross-fire of varying opinions that come out of that kind of a program.

ROBERT BROWN: In general, did it work pretty well while you were head of the department?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Worked pretty well. I didn't ever see that it added a noticeable dimension to it.

ROBERT BROWN: Can you give an example of how well or how poorly such a visiting critic worked?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I don't remember people by name, and possibly I wouldn't say so if I did. There were, on a number of occasions, successful, at the moment, artists out of the New York gallery situation who would come in and spend a relatively small amount of time in the class, doing, what seemed to me, rather trivial things. A little conversation, a few jokes, a little of this and that. [00:24:00] And even before the day was over, would disappear to some cocktail party, at which only the faculty would gather around to kind of make themselves acquainted with the New York scene, and get the New York scene maybe to notice them, at which time the students were left far behind. These visiting critics who came in for a day—very seldom, once in a while, a very good one would really get into the studios, and that was his interest anyway. Like anything else, if the man is a good one, you've had—it's made. If there were any way to identify what one of these people was going to do in the way of education before he came in there, other than self-enhancement, it would be a better program.

ROBERT BROWN: The program, then, was very limited, if they were only in there for a day or so.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Most of the visiting critics, at that time, came in for a day. Later on, there were individual awards given that put a particular critic on the school premises for a month or so, with a studio in the school. The only ones that I'm aware of that I saw operating in that way were not effective with the students.

ROBERT BROWN: Even though they were there a month?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: They were there a month, but they got a nice studio, and went to work, and did their work. If their work couldn't be assimilated into the educational program or the vision of the student in terms of what he was trying to do, it remained as foreign to the student as though the person were working in New York. [00:26:05] I keep repeating New York.

ROBERT BROWN: But it's a symbol of the—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Symbol of—

ROBERT BROWN: —celebrity—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: —outside celebrities.

ROBERT BROWN: —status. What effect do you think it had on your faculty here? Not much more—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Slightly divisive. I think some of the faculty felt the same as I did, and I think some other elements of the faculty were highly in favor of it. In fact, they initiated it, and they sought out these individuals. It's still going on that way.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you suppose certain faculty—you're a native of this area, but do you think a lot of faculty, over the years, felt they're a little isolated here in Providence, and this was possibly a chance to bring in the outside world?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I think that's a general philosophy, right up to the president of the school, perhaps, who was very much outside.

ROBERT BROWN: You're talking about now?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Now.

ROBERT BROWN: President Lee Hall.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: President Lee Hall.

ROBERT BROWN: Did that, say, exist under Bush-Brown, who came in after—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: It existed.

ROBERT BROWN: —Frazier?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: It existed, but—

ROBERT BROWN: In fact, you—Bush-Brown came in about the same time you became head of the painting department, I believe, around that time, and there was a great change, or considerable change, in faculty at that time. Wasn't there quite a turnover? Was that a—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah, as I understand it.

ROBERT BROWN: A lot of turmoil as a result?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: A lot of turmoil. It was a very hard time for a lot of people. I can't honestly say that I didn't think a good number of those were justified releases.

ROBERT BROWN: And they were deadwood?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I think there was deadwood. I think that there was a sense of some people having found a home, and that they'd put in a minimum of effort, and make it a kind of a country club. [00:28:14] Come in and hang around and go home. Not entirely the case, but in my estimation, if I had been there, I would have let a number of them go.

ROBERT BROWN: In your opinion, Bush-Brown didn't let people go simply because he disagreed with their approach to teaching?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I don't think so.

ROBERT BROWN: Was he quite a fair-minded person, in your recollection?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: A lot of people don't think so, but I do. My own relationship with him was first-rate. It was stormy. I had plenty of knock-down drag-out arguments with him, but they seemed to be fair.

ROBERT BROWN: What sort of things would you lock horns with him about?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Well, just superficially, whether he, considering himself some sort of an artist, and wandering around the studios, would give an individual criticism to a student, in which case I'd tell him he'd better leave that to the faculty, who knew their business. Which he received well enough.

ROBERT BROWN: Bruised his ego temporarily, I suppose, but then—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I didn't see that it did. He's a hard-shelled man, Bush-Brown. But a very intelligent man.

ROBERT BROWN: As an administrator, did he institute some innovations? [00:30:00] I know tenure came about, didn't it, while he was here?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I don't remember when that came about. I don't think he would have been the man who instituted it. I think he would have caused it to come into full application, maybe, but that was in the mill for a long time.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, had it—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I think. There were various things that had to be ironed out. Attitudes toward long-range turnover, and complications of whether somebody would be frozen in or not. I think tenure is gone now.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you, at the time, think tenure might be a good thing?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yes, possibly, because those of us who were teachers felt exposed to the winds of some of these administrators, who we were never sure had any intention of staying around the school very long themselves. The school, in some cases, was a stepping-stone for where they were going to go next, whereas the faculty had to—well, as I say, long-term education. If you're trying to plan a four-year program in a college, you like to be there for four years to see what happens at the end of the effort. I don't know. I was in favor of it at the time. I also saw too many people who got into that kind of a position—that is, one that made them untouchable—and I regretted that. [00:32:02] I'm not much of an administrator. I'm a painter, and these things [laughs]—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, on the other hand, you were chairman of the division of fine arts for some time.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: What did you have to do in that, as chairman, rather?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Well, I don't remember how many departments the division had at that time. Maybe 10, something like that. But the college had certain fundamental educational things that crossed through departmental lines, so that two years of the college was always general for every student who went through there back in those days, so that there was a constant diplomatic effort to get departmental differences ironed out, and a cohesive attack on the generalizations that every student had to go through, because the division agreed to and approved of student changeovers up through the sophomore year very freely. That is, a student who came to the school thinking they wanted to be an illustrator, which was a very popular thing, might very quickly get into a situation where they'd rather be a painter than an illustrator, or they might find things out about architecture they never knew, and want to switch into that, or throughout the entire departmental system. [00:34:00] Easily—easy switchovers should be available up through the sophomore year. So there was an administrative necessity there. I guess I did some things pretty well, because the division of design—there were two divisions there, division of fine arts, division of design—got all out of hand, and before I was through with the stint as chairman of the fine arts division, they unloaded that on me, too, so I was, at one time, chairman of the division of design and the division of fine arts. That was just pulling loose ends together, and seeing that the values of the first two years of fundamental education did continue to filter up into the ongoing years. If this were not the case, then a four-year education at the college would be somewhat wasted. You did get new teachers at the upper levels, who sometimes didn't know very much about the college, and would take off immediately, as though a student had never been taught anything, with the unintentional, nevertheless long-range, effect of teaching them a totally individual position toward their profession, without knowing what the student already came into their classes equipped with.

ROBERT BROWN: In general, what—if you could generalize, what did the student, after those first two years, go into the more specialized work with? [00:36:03] What was the nature of that?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: The most solid one was drawing, and that would be freehand drawing. Although the first year, at least as long as I know of, had mechanical [inaudible] where the science of mechanical drawing was understood, projection drawing, and so on and so forth. They had anatomy, things that were done in a scholarly fashion rather than an aesthetic one. But right along that was a very strong, two-year drawing program that emphasized making any kind of a drawing as aesthetically viable as it could possibly be, so that if it didn't work at a utilitarian level, it might be useful in some other way. Which is what art is all about, you know. At least from my point of view, it's not utilitarian.

ROBERT BROWN: And drawing gave them a very broad base?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Drawing is the broadest base you can get for anything. Drawing is fundamental to every other act you're going to make the rest of your life, if you have anything to do with the arts. Drawing is a slightly more complicated form of expression than most people understand. [00:38:03] It isn't just simply drawing things with lines on paper. Drawing is all kinds of structural manifestations, in the way you put a line down, or the way you put a big smudge down, or the way you lump something up in a piece of sculpture. It's two-dimensional and it's three-dimensional at the same time. It's not a technical thing. It's not lead pencil on paper. It's an intelligent approach to the construction of any form you're going to make, in color or in solid material.

ROBERT BROWN: Having said that, on the other hand, there are certain fundamental tools that the critic or the teacher can look at, and if not mastered, the person can't project what he or she wishes to project, can they, in drawing?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: No.

ROBERT BROWN: It's not merely—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: But mastering tools can be done with an intense attack on skill alone. Usually, it will dovetail in with a slower awareness of aesthetic possibilities at the end of that tool. But in my estimation, any kind of skill can usually be taught vigorously, and with an intensity that the awareness of aesthetic end results cannot be. [00:40:06] That has to come slowly, through a process. Of course, if you've got people who have no talent with a tool, you may not make a carpenter out of somebody that can't sense a straight line or handle a straight line, or a smooth edge, or a joint.

ROBERT BROWN: What [inaudible] that process of the aesthetic impulse? That process that someone you hope will come to, how do they get to it? You can't really teach it.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: No, you can't teach it, but you can lead a sensitive person into all sorts of areas that are fruitful, and the kinds of things that will eventually get into his work, that he never knew existed. Already being sensitive, this will be as joyful to him as going out in a flower garden. Things occur all around you, usually, in ordinary life, that have all the aesthetic possibilities that you could wish for. You get a Vuillard painting the interior of his own dingy living room or something like that. It doesn't matter. Or van Gogh painting an old pair of

shoes. It depends on how you see, and this can be opened up. You can't lead them to it, but if you open a door wide and let them look through it, you can be pretty sure that they're going to see something. [00:42:03]

ROBERT BROWN: And you open up that door by saying—making comments here and there, or saying, "Look at this also"?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Well, that's my teaching process.

ROBERT BROWN: That's the way you would do it?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: That's the way I would do it.

ROBERT BROWN: Have you considered this—things of that sort—those are the kinds of—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: "Have you seen that doorknob in reference to the whole room?" Or when I say, "What do you see over there? Do you only see a doorknob?" In terms of seeing, everybody can enrich their life somewhat by knowing that the look of the outdoors, every time they go out the door, is totally different. Rainy, snowy, or foggy, or sunny. Brilliant cold, visually, day. A lot of people rush to work back and forth, and they don't—they're totally unaware, except if they get wet, or they get cold, that the visual world that they step out into every time is subtly different, and excitingly different. Yeah, you can lead them into it by getting them to be more perceptive, visually. The more they see, the more they may want to reject. On the other hand, it gives them a wider totality of possibilities to select from. The more narrow and specifically objective their interest, visually, is, the fewer things are available to them. [00:44:04] My philosophy has always been, get them to see, totally and more broadly, and then the specific necessities of their profession will have that to work on. That kind of environment.

ROBERT BROWN: This would not preclude pure abstraction, would it?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Oh, no.

ROBERT BROWN: As part of the selection, reaction, and awareness.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Sure. As a matter of fact, the relation of things to each other, once they no longer become isolated specifics, is usually abstract. Only when you're a store clerk does each thing isolate itself and become a chair, or a table, or an apple, or something that you have to go immediately to and pick up in your hand to be sure you've seen it. Total vision can turn the whole world into, essentially, abstraction. Maybe you don't want it that way, but if you want it to come up that way on a flat surface, it can. All you have to do is look out a window sometime that's got frosted over, and it will bring the whole outdoors up onto the window surface. Instead of looking through the window, you see at it, and all that stuff outside, once that is steamed over or frosted over, becomes abstract up on the flat surface. It's always that way. Well, instead of steam, you can make your vision capable of seeing in abstract terms. [00:46:04]

ROBERT BROWN: This certainly applies as much to painting as drawing, and equally well to sculpture.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Anything.

ROBERT BROWN: Or architecture.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Automobiles, the shapes of automobiles, except there are aerodynamics, of course. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: I know you studied long with, worked long with, and greatly admired John Frazier, but one point, you had disagreement on subject matter, particularly as it applies to painting. You felt that Frazier was always very object-oriented, whereas you felt one must move, if you can, move beyond to painting as having a being of its own.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: That relationship between us would have been very early on, because he never ceased to surprise me in how much he knew, in a sophisticated way that my own early mental state wasn't up to understanding. However objective he may have been, oh, let's say, up through the '30s, because—and this is the most important rationale, I think. Everybody was educated as a portrait painter, you remember, back in those days, because this is what they were going to have to make their living at. So there was an intense objective attitude toward what you were going to see and what you were going to put on the canvas, but certainly, later years, all you have to do is look at the later Fraziers.

ROBERT BROWN: So this was simply an early divergence period? It was a momentary—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: It was an early—

ROBERT BROWN: —and rather short-lived.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Proper relationship to the total attitude of artists before the '30s. [00:48:01] Great many of them were educated as capable of making portraits. Maybe they didn't make them. Some of them didn't break out into the European awareness of abstraction and expressionism as early as others did, but it came to this country a little later, maybe 1913 or something like that.

ROBERT BROWN: But you're disagreeing, or your divergence from Frazier, was momentary?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah, and periodic, maybe. [They laugh.]

ROBERT BROWN: Did you and he discuss these things quite a lot throughout his life? You'd periodically chew the fat?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: He was a wonderful educator, and a man who would trade opinions back and forth. When I became head of the painting department—and he made me head of the painting department—and I had painting department meetings, he would come to them. There would be a total discussion—general discussion. I'm overusing this word "total." General discussion among my faculty about all these sorts of things, and he would be sitting in on that. I'm quite certain that an attitude he had concerning Cézanne as possibly an inept draftsman changed radically from some time in the late '40s to the end of his life, when he became an admirer of Cézanne. I'm pretty sure of this. I don't have evidence of it, but somewhere along the line, I was running a tape in one of those faculty meetings I had, and I know that there was, on that tape, a statement by him, just an offhand statement in the conversation that was going along, that Cézanne couldn't draw. [00:50:14] That might have been a momentary reference to what some particular teacher was trying to push down the throats of some students, and trying to haul him up a little short, may have overstated, because certainly, he didn't hold that all his life.

ROBERT BROWN: For him, too, eventually, drawing and painting took on a life of their own.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Without objective reference. Or it didn't—not necessarily with—that was merely the point of departure.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Oh, yes. And color. Color gradually crept into—it would be wrong to say to take the place of modeling, because you can model with color. But in the earlier things that were modeled, essentially, tonality, in terms of tone, gradually became modeled and made vital in terms of color, until color just was the total source of energy within a canvas. This is so in the late Fraziers, you can see.

ROBERT BROWN: Also in your record—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: He was a great colorist. However tonal the earlier things might have been, he was one of the greatest colorists that I know of. Didn't mean to interrupt you.

ROBERT BROWN: This was dormant within his earlier work. Then it came out, mainly, in his later work. [00:52:00]

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: It would appear to be dormant and yet, if you know how Hawthorne taught, out on the beach, it was deeply embedded in his knowledge and his education. I think what happened was that it would occur in certain kinds of landscape, or things where it was easy to depart in any direction you could see a way to depart in, in terms of color out in a landscape. He was still painting portraits at that time. Much more difficult to let yourself loose when you're painting a commissioned portrait than when you're out painting a landscape.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. But he still stayed within the realm of tones—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yes, he inherited Hawthorne's concentration on the outdoor sense of color.

ROBERT BROWN: In your papers, also, there's an exchange of memos, letters, with a colleague named George Sullivan, who I believe taught English, didn't he?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah. Poet and an English teacher.

ROBERT BROWN: The gist of those, a good deal of it, you'd try and find parallels in various art forms, as I recall. Could you comment a bit on that? Was this possibly concern that arose in the '60s as the school got bigger, as so-called academic requirements, I believe, became more stiffer?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Well, let me try to think back. There was—a crisis came in that relationship with

George Sullivan, because somewhere along the line, he had been trying to teach his English students that if they could—that if they thought they could see their way clear in paint and through color, they ought to be able to write it down in words, which I do not think possible at all. [00:54:28] If I had any memory at all, I'd be able to give you any number of references, from Churchill on down, that indicated that what is in great paintings will never get into words. Can't be done. But a very short, rather vigorous session between George and myself cleared that all up, and from that day on, there was never any problem.

ROBERT BROWN: He backed off from his position?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Oh, I wouldn't say he backed off. He just learned a new dimension to his position. [They laugh.]

ROBERT BROWN: You mean, he learned to accept yours?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Could be. Could be. But he was a marvelous man. Of course, you know, he died suddenly.

ROBERT BROWN: The addition of—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: And a very good friend, which made that kind of argument amenable and acceptable, and resolvable.

ROBERT BROWN: The addition of these various academics—art historians, for example—did that change the quality of the school in important ways?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I think it had tremendous growing pains when those things first came in, because the liberal arts teachers, at first anyway, made no effort to have a look at the quality of person they were teaching, and the quality of world that the artist lives in, and see that this could enhance their ability to make their own professions richer and more exciting to learn about. [00:56:26] So that you had philosophers, and mathematics teachers, and English teachers who taught the way they would teach at Brown University or a liberal arts college, where they could run through verbal situations very, very rapidly, give an assignment of three or four books to be read, and they didn't understand that most of the visual artists would not read that fast, and that the educational process, or the creative process on the part of the artist, is much more stop-and-go. That is, that they try to do something, and they immediately test it to see whether it's going to work or not. This they would do with reading as well, whereas you give a college student an assignment of four or five books to read, he doesn't test that way, stop-and-go, all the way through. He covers the assignment, and probably reads them much more rapidly, and knows what he can get away with. This isn't for the scholar, of course, but I mean in general liberal arts education. It's instinct with the artist that, if he's reading along and something puzzles him, he's going to stop. His reading capacity is slower.

ROBERT BROWN: Just as in his work, if he doesn't stop, he's going to have a pretty awful result? [00:58:01]

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Oh, no question.

ROBERT BROWN: So he applies—and some of these academics didn't realize these qualities in your students at the School of Design?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: No, they taught it just the same as they would in the liberal arts college.

ROBERT BROWN: So the result was confusion and dismay on the part of many students?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: A little. Not seriously. The two forces rubbing together gradually made an accommodation on both sides.

ROBERT BROWN: I would think some of the people from the academic world might have enhanced their own creativity in their fields—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I'm sure they did.

ROBERT BROWN: —by the contact.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I'm sure they did. I'm sure George Sullivan did. Most of the academic teachers that I came to know of later—don't ask me their names—I can't think now—all accomplished that. They gradually discovered that was quite a field of unnoticed excitement underneath them that they were dealing with.

ROBERT BROWN: What about the art historians? Because some people will say, well, surely, they must be sensitive to the creative act, when they were brought onboard.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Some art historians were the worst people I ever bumped into. There again, they knew all the facts. They were inadequately informed as to their own sensitivity to those things they were dealing with in names of painting, and a name—whole eras of aesthetic attitudes spanning a hundred years at a time or something like that were dates and names to them. [01:00:07] Not all people. We had some of them, art historians. I had to go back and take art history because when I graduated from the School of Design, I didn't get a degree, I only got a diploma. In order to get a degree after I came out of the army, quite late, 1942 or something like that, I went back for a degree and had to take art history, when I'd been teaching 10 years. I may have repeated that somewhere.

ROBERT BROWN: But you needed that degree to stay on the faculty, or you just thought it would be—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Needed it to teach, to stay on the faculty, to hold a job.

ROBERT BROWN: So art historians began first coming into the school in the '40s? Would that be safe to say?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: I think earlier.

ROBERT BROWN: Earlier, even. Did you know—I don't know that we've gone over—I've talked about this, some of the people that have come out in our conversations. You may have mentioned earlier the man who came to run the museum during the war, Alexander Dorner. Did you get to know him at all?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah, very much. Alexander Dorner, in my estimation, was the greatest museum director that the school has ever had. Started to rebuild the school, structurally—I mean, the museum, structurally—in its use of the art objects.

ROBERT BROWN: We've talked—and you did some of the transparencies.

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: But then he was let go fairly soon, wasn't he? [01:02:03]

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: He was let go, according to my understanding, because some of the board of trustees, or the people interested in the school, thought he was a Nazi, and—

ROBERT BROWN: You were away in the service at that time?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: No, that was earlier. I think that was—

ROBERT BROWN: —before you went in?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Did things like that—maybe it's the point to ask you—ever give you pause about staying at the School of Design—

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: No, because that—

ROBERT BROWN: —when you saw how the trustees could pounce like that if they chose?

GORDON FRANKLIN PEERS: No, because this traumatic break came later. The war came, and I landed in the Army for four years. You got your entire psyche pretty well shook up during that time. When I came back to work, most of those things had disappeared.

ROBERT BROWN: There was no longer that quite so overt trustee pressure, as there had been?

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]