Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Fred Meyer, 1982 May

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.

Contact Information
Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington. D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Fred Meyer on May 8, 1982. The interview took place in Rochester, New York, by Robert F. 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

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is our first interview with Fred Meyer, in Rochester. Bob Brown, the interviewer. Maybe you can tell me somewhat of how you eventually got into your career in design and art. You were born in Wisconsin, 1922. Was there anything in childhood that, as you look back, may have led you toward what you eventually did?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Um, well, we had a little—my parents had a little grocery store and I began by lettering the prices of potatoes and tomatoes on the glass window out in front, and one day in the summer we had strawberries, fresh strawberries, for sale, and I embellished the price with some little paintings of strawberries. And I got such rave notices that I decided to continue from there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Really? It was that simple, huh?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT F. BROWN: About how old were you when that happened?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Ten, eleven. I've never gotten such notices since, it's a little disturbing. I'll have to go back to strawberries, I guess. [They laugh.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: What kind of a town was Oshkosh when you grew up?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, it was a nice little town of 40,000 people and I notice it's still 40,000. The only difference now is that the lake is polluted and one can't swim in it, and that the town has been coarsened by the addition of a university [laughs], which has introduced lusty life bookstores I noticed. [00:02:03] No, I shouldn't malign education, since I'm part of it, but it's a charming little town, yes, and very picturesque.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you have a lot of family around there, are most of the Meyers from that area?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, my father died when I was quite young, and so I never found out much about my background, I regret that. I never spoke to it much with my mother, I know very little about my progenitors. My father ran a bar in the local hotel until prohibition, and then he took the profits that he made from this rather fashionable bar and bought a grocery store, and then lost all the money by being too soft-hearted with people who couldn't pay for their groceries that they were taking.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was schooling an important thing for you as a child?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, I went to Catholic school, Catholic high school and grade school, and I learned a lot about heaven and hell and divine retribution, but I didn't learn too much mathematics nor the rest. I did have the good fortune of having a good teacher too though, a debating teacher who did a great deal for me. I remember her saying, "One must never be namby-pamby or wishy-washy," and I try not to be. [00:04:00] It's been said, I don't know by whom, that one is fortunate if one finds one good teacher in one's lifetime, and I think I had to wait until I got to Cranbrook, before I found someone that was a truly formative influence on my life.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Until then, no. You went then, from the Catholic high school in Oshkosh, to a state teacher's college.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. A state teacher's college in Oshkosh, which at that time was quite small, and only later did it become a branch of the University of Wisconsin and much larger. But yes, I was there for two years, studying pre-business I think it was, and then I went to University of Wisconsin, where I studied in their business school, which led to my enlistment in the navy V-7 program with—in the Supply Corps.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were primarily, at that point, aiming toward a business career.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Oh yes, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And were you doing anything in art on the side? Had you been in high school, for example?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well I was. I was painting signs for the local theater, and that was something in those days. I can remember the theater, it was the Strand, and within it there were Spanish waterfalls, goldfish, impressive chandeliers, carpeting, very elegant. There were turrets, I remember, in the theater, and then up above, starlit nights, and when the lights, when the stars were twinkling and the organist was playing, and the fountains were gushing, and the usherettes were parading, it was heaven, I guess, is my interpretation of it. [00:06:08] I worked backstage, painting posters for the coming films and at that time, they spread the entire marquis and the façade with a poster of the current attraction, and it was no small matter; embellishments of the stars and a lot of tinsel and so on. And in the evenings, when the marquis was lit and people were coming to the theater, it was very exciting to me to see something that I had done at that scale when I was only 14, 15 years old. I remember I was working for $2 a week to do that, at which they took two cents out for Social Security tax. [They laugh.] So, I was—my net profit was $1.98 a week, but I loved it all and I thought I was overpaid because of the privilege of doing this.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you think you were probably pretty good at doing the figure and facial features?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: I did a very nice Claudette Colbert I remember, and a Clark Gable, in tones of pink and green. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer would send out full color posters, 40-by-60, done in the silkscreen method, in which the tones in the face were built up by way of what looked like contour maps, each with a slightly different gradation of the pink and the green. [00:08:00] Remarkable things. And I should think they would be great collector's items today if any of them could ever be found. They had that soft matte surface and I expect I must have copied from them at that point. But it was all very impressive, the whole panoply of presentation at that time. Well, and then, but that was all.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In school itself, were there art courses in high school?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: There was an art course, yes, I took an art course, which consisted of sitting lined up in front of a screen, upon which the teacher would project slides which she had drawn—and very badly I must admit—of horses, cows, dogs, buildings, and our task was to copy from that slide, her bad drawings, onto our paper and submit them for grading.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Very limited then wasn't it?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Oh, that was something, yes. She also, I remember, sat at the desk up in front while we were doing this and she had inserted a piece of cardboard in the underside of the desk, so that we wouldn't be tempted to look at her knees while we were working. They weren't very attractive knees either, from the one glimpse I managed to get.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And was it similarly at the state teachers college and at the university, was there—did you take any art courses at them?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: At the university, I took a course in commercial design and was never very interested in painting per se, or the fine arts, even. I must confess, when I went to Cranbrook after the navy, because I met a girl in a bar who told me that Cranbrook was a rather nice place. [00:10:27] And I had veterans benefits to splurge at that time and so I decided I'd "check the place out" as they say. And so I went and I was of course startled by my first touch with what was culture, the Milles fountains and the Saarinen architecture, so—and decided that I would apply. And so I took an ice cream carton of Mount Fujiyama that I had done for a commercial art company in Menasha where I had gone after the navy, to do packaging, and I did mostly bread end—stickers for the ends of bread, and then I was given this ice cream carton to design, with snowflakes. One was snowflakes on it and one with Mount Fujiyama on it. I did the Mount Fujiyama successfully enough and it was printed, but I failed with the snowflakes, because I couldn't make them precise enough to satisfy the director. I couldn't get the complexities of each of those little snowflakes complex enough for him, and so I had to—I was eased out, I suspect. [00:12:07] But at any rate—

ROBERT F. BROWN: But this was after the war, after you went.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: After the war, but to take to Cranbrook as a portfolio, an unfolded carton of Mount Fujiyama was certainly arrogant and naïve of me, yet the man that I interviewed, for some reason or other, took a fancy to me. I think it was partly because Cranbrook was having trouble with its enrollment then, since the war was still going on, but I was accepted and so that changed my life quite a bit. It's interesting really, that I could have been quite so insulated from any touch with the finer things in life, so to speak, for such a long while, I

was. I managed to resist any attempts anyone ever made up to that point to put me in contact with it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why do you think you have?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Hmm?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why do you think you have resisted any attempts?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, it wasn't stylish for a young man at that time, I didn't think, to indicate any interest in regards to the fine arts. It was a feat and impractical.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Through World War II, you went on with business education, you were in the navy. What was your role in the navy?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, I went to get—I was studying as a midshipman at Wellesley College, as part of the '71 program, and there was a branch of the Harvard School of Business administration, by the way which, because of the overflow of midshipmen, the overflow was sent to Wellesley, but it really was Harvard Graduate School of Business administration. [00:14:21] I was injured then in a football skirmish, and sufficiently so, so that I was given a medical discharge.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But in the navy, did you think it would—was there something you were going to study there, that was of interest to you? You mentioned you planned to go into supplies or logistics.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well no, this was the Supply Corps of the United States Navy, and we were all studying to become ensigns. I must con—I was about two weeks from graduation. We had already received our assignments and I was to go to Fort Bradford, which was a school for landing barge operations, which I was told, rather joshingly about, although I didn't think it was so funny, by my instructor, that there was a 90 percent ensign casualty in that operation, and so they needed quite a few replacements. So I probably was lucky in enough in ways, not to have been sent there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Instead, you had the injury, which washed you out.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So then you were, however still with your veterans benefits, and after a short stint of doing commercial artwork, which you've just described, you were admitted to Cranbrook. [00:16:04]

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you'd simply heard of that by chance, by talking with a girl?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yes, I have to admit it, yes, I met her in a bar and she had been a student at Cranbrook, and she told me how pleasant it was there and indeed it was and is, from what I can understand.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you've just said that you were struck by the Milles fountain and by Eliel Saarinen's architecture. Who was the person then, who, on the strength—

FREDERICK R. MEYER: That was Wallace Mitchell, and he later became director of the gallery there and from there he went to the president's—he became president of Cranbrook.

ROBERT F. BROWN: At that time what was he?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, at that time he was a registrar and he also taught painting, he and Zoltan Sepeshy.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you become close to both of those men?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: I became very close to Wallace Mitchell. He would invite me into his home and it was there that I sensed for the first time how one could lead a civilized, gracious life. His children were precocious and mannerly, and witty, his wife was beautiful and charming, and he was, I thought, suave and debonair and easygoing, and that influence was very formative.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Think you saw, suddenly, a world that you would like to be a part of? [00:18:00]

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, I found—what is called—a model, a role model, to follow. We all need that. I arrived at it rather late in life I suppose, I must have been 23 when I arrived there, but fortunately, I guess I matured slowly and it was still possible to learn from it, I was still able to learn from it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What about his own work? Had you been exposed directly before, to an artist's work?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: No, I never had and his work was delicate and lovely, although I never took what he was doing as a guide to how I would develop. I confess, I didn't learn anything much at Cranbrook, either from him as a teacher of painting, nor from Zoltan Sepeshy, who was my teacher later. Mr. Sepeshy would drop in occasionally to my studio and chat for a bit, but he never gave me any direction to speak of. I remember, about the only time I was given direction was one night when Wallace Mitchell took me to the library and showed me a book of Ben Shahn's paintings and he pointed out one particular painting of children swirling around a merry-go-round in a war-torn environment, and he said, "Now that's pretty nice isn't it?" And of course I agreed, well I did agree, and so then I began to paint like Ben Shahn, and I did a painting of nuns dancing around a table, which I had seen them do, as their convent was right across the street from our home in Oshkosh. And that was the first painting I ever sold, and so I did a lot more just like it [laughs]. [00:20:19]

ROBERT F. BROWN: That must have been a stunning thing, that a painting would sell.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Oh, it was.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was this out of—would they have an annual student exhibition?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yeah, it was exhibited in a student exhibition. So, I painted a lot more just like it and took them all down to New York, and started to go around to galleries, and said, "Look what I can do," and the galleries said, "Well, that looks too much like Ben Shahn," which seemed reasonable enough.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.] In other words, they really wouldn't take them on.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well no, but surprisingly, Midtown did, they saw something in them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, they did. And who was there at that time?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, that was Alan Ruskin, the director. His wife, Mary Ruskin, is still the director of Midtown now after Alan's death about 15 years ago. The gallery celebrated his 50th anniversary just last month. It's one of the oldest galleries for dealing in contemporary American art in New York now.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you've been with them steadily since the '40s.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Since 1949, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So you probably developed pretty quickly in your painting did you, I mean apart from the pastiches, the fact that you did pastiches of Ben Shahn, you must have shown promise of being able to—

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well yeah, see for some reason or other, I stumbled across Paul Klee about that time too, so I began to blend Paul Klee and Ben Shahn, and so then it was a little more difficult to define what I was doing but not too difficult if you were at all perspicacious, but it worked for a while too. [00:22:20]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you aware that that's what you were doing?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: No, not really. I was more interested in other things I guess, at the time. I was—no, I don't think I was aware of it. There was too much else that was fascinating in the world to me that I hadn't experienced before, which I was experiencing, to waste too much time fretting about the painting style. But fortunately, I think another style of my own tended to emerge out of it. I had always, somehow or another, had a style. A friend of mine from high school wrote to me suddenly out of the blue, I hadn't heard from him for 30 years recently, and he said he had seen one of my paintings somewhere, reproduced somewhere I believe, and he said he was so startled because he knew that was mine even before he had read the article or the caption, because he remembered what I had been drawing on my desk in grade school. Wasn't that bizarre? But I swear that was true, which is interesting to me in that there was that germ of style present from the very beginning.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm. Can you describe that germ do you think?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well no, it's just the way I am you see, and uh, fortunately, if I'd had any success it's due to that and one shouldn't question it, I don't think—

ROBERT F. BROWN: No, no.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: —too much, because I think that probably is that quality that is referred to loosely as talent. It's mysteriously present in something, and I understand not in everybody.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [00:24:25] Does it take possibly, the form in your case in a certain way, of patterning things or putting a line down, or?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, it's ingrained in the musculature and the finger movement—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Right.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: —and the mind. I don't know how it got there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No, no, I don't mean how it got there but what do you suppose your friend saw was that signature of yours, that he saw in grade school and he saw again, popped up 30 years later. What's that uh—

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, he didn't say.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He didn't say.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: He didn't say. I don't suppose he even could have defined it too precisely.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Cranbrook was a pretty small place then?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yeah, there were only, oh, 60 students I guess, at the most.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And what was the tone of the place?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, it was very self-indulgent. It was like an ocean voyage, I thought. Every evening was cocktails and then there were walks in the woods and relaxing in the sun, in the Grecian theater in the daytime, and being sick in the woods on weekends after parties. Ping-pong and the rec room, and billiards. Uh, very civilized and it could well be destructive but surprisingly, a number of important artists have come out of that milieu and continue to do so. Lowell Nesbitt was one of my peers at that time. And of course that golden age, which preceded the one in which I was a part of, when Eames and uh—[00:26:20]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And Bertoia?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yeah, Bertoia and others, were there. It was very important.

ROBERT F. BROWN: There had been a bit of a break during the war hadn't there? Yeah, so that it ended the—

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yeah, well so much collapsed at that time, the deterioration in so many fields. When you look at the motion picture, the remarkable American films of the '30s and the tedious worthlessness of all the films made in the '40s, certainly gives evidence of the collapse, I think.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were the Saarinens, Mr. and Mr. Saarinen, still formidable presences?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Oh yes, indeed.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was in their last years of course.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yes, they certainly were. And Carl Milles, of course, was still there, and he would gather us into his home now and again, and delight in shining a flashlight through the milky beauty of his marbles that he had collected, Grecian marbles. His studio was busy at that time building his heroic works. I remember Greta Garbo driving up to his home to see him one day, and Frank Lloyd Wright another. [00:28:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you have any direct working with Milles?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: No, no, no. I didn't start doing sculpture until considerably later. I remember once though, I heard that he had mentioned he liked a painting I had done in a student show, which thrilled me, but I never had any contact with him. He didn't teach very much there, he was more an artist- in-residence. There was another one of his minions who did the teaching, as I recall.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was the quality of teaching pretty good?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well no, as I said, I thought it was very bad, as far as I was concerned. I—at the time—I was too arrogant to think I needed help but oh, I desperately did, and I didn't get it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Neither Mitchell or Sepeshy really came forward.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: No. No, no, they were much too indulgent. Sepeshy was a remarkable man, I admired his suavity enormously, his dash, but he was consumed with other matters. He was drinking quite a bit at that time too.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were there then, several years, before you—

FREDERICK R. MEYER: I was there for two and then I got my undergraduate degree there and went and taught in Kansas City for a year, and then I came back to Cranbrook for my masters, not so much because I wanted my masters, but because I just had to get out of Kansas City.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Really?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: At that time, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was the problem there as far as you were concerned?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, it was—there was such a Midwestern acuity I thought. That's, I'm sure changed by now, but at the time, I felt lost down there. [00:30:01] Well, it was my first year of teaching and I didn't like it, I didn't like the tasks which were confronting me. I didn't realize how formidable teaching can be, I wasn't prepared for it. I was making $2,500 a year, that was my salary.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Huh. What was the—in what way, the formidableness of the teaching do you think, at least that first year?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, goodness, you have 25 or 30 people sitting in front of you and you're supposed to imbue them with artistic brilliance, and they're farm boys from the surrounds of Kansas City. When I was trying to teach them design, modern design, and well, there was no modern design in Kansas City at the time. There was the Country Club Plaza, which was imitation Spanish baroque, which I found fascinating—[laughs]—I drove into the city, it was on Easter weekend, for my interview, in an old Ford car, and I remember backing up in the Country Club Plaza, knocking over a six-foot tall plaster Easter bunny. [They laugh.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: An auspicious guest.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: That was, yes. I found it hard.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did it flow pretty well though in fact, have you since then have not learned that you did fairly well?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, I don't suppose I did well there, no.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you ran for cover, so to speak, and came back to Cranbrook.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: That's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you just completely on your own that year you went for your masters at Cranbrook?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yes, that's right. [00:32:00] And then I taught at Cranbrook that summer, I taught painting, and I had been teaching a bit at Wayne University at that time too. And then I—the gentleman who was attempting to set up the School for American Craftsmen, Harold Brennan, came to Cranbrook in search of a design teacher and hired me. So I went to Alfred that fall.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now, could I ask for a moment? How come were you teaching design as well as simply painting? Is design something you were all schooled in to a degree?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: I had taken a few design courses at Cranbrook as a minor.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And what did design, what did it consist of, what did you—do you have a thumbnail way to describe what design equaled then, its breadth?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, my courses at Cranbrook were theoretical and in no particular direction other than theoretical problems. I can't remember what I did there. And still, it's a bit puzzling isn't it, that I should have been hired for that position. Perhaps Harold Brennan was naïve at that time, perhaps he too was blinded by the Milles fountains and didn't realize that the man he was hiring to teach design was a neophyte at it. But I taught design at the craft school for perhaps 15 years, and I think I did a good job. [00:34:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you suppose though Brennan may not have been blinded and in fact that indulgence that they—or the indulging that was done with the students at Cranbrook allowed a good deal of expressiveness to come out, or at least potential to be sensed, and someone like Brennan could see that?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mentioned that none of your contemporaries—

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yes, well no, again, I'm being a bit facetious, no I think Brennan was a man of high perspicacity. I've always admired him and I still do. I think it's unfortunate that he had to retire at 65, when he was really still at the height of his powers, and he could have skillfully run the college, I mean he could still do it. He's a very vigorous man in his early 70s. But uh—and an intelligent man. Too often you find intelligence and sensitivity mixed. But he, of course, did an enormous amount for the craft movement in this country by working with Mrs. Vanderbilt Webb and building this school from very basic foundations at Alfred, into what it is now. We started in a little carriage house behind the president's house in Alfred and it was a tiny little place. Pottery was on the first floor, the woodworking, and then on the second floor, up a rickety staircase was the design room, the weaving. Ceramics was down below too, but the whole place was no larger than a carriage house for perhaps seven or eight carriages at one time. [00:36:01]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Huh. It was really pretty compact.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you were right together with not only all the students but your fellow faculty in a very small town. How did all that work, was it a pretty harmonious place then?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Oh very, it was very bucolic. You see, then Brennan, perhaps being a bit more resourceful with his other hirings, got the deans, John Prip and Tage Frid to teach, respectively, metalsmithing and woodworking, and then he hired Leif Elswick a Norwegian, to teach weaving, and so it were a cosmopolitan faculty and Alfred was just right for them. It was a little bit like Norway and Denmark, with its rolling hills and simple little wood frame homes up on the hills. It was very pleasant.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did it go for you there? Are you there for—at Alfred for just about a year, before they moved to Rochester?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Two years.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Two. We were not very welcome at Alfred, according to Mr. Brennan. The uh—I can remember in faculty convocation, in convocation, when the faculty paraded to the event, the craft school were always the tail end during the two years we were there, with our dusty ceramic shoes and dusty woodworking shoes beneath our robes, and we deserved to be at the end, but Harold Brennan felt that wasn't quite the way it should be. [00:38:07] And then of course there were more serious problems with financing and so on. So, Mark Ellingson, who was president or RIT, or perhaps by way of his acquaintance with Mrs. Webb, became interested in the school, came down and looked us over, and I can still hear him and see him climbing up those rickety stairs, going through the design room into the weaving, to look it over. He was only there for a few moment it seems, but on the basis of what he saw and what he felt was the potential of the school, he brought it to the Institute of Technology in Rochester.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did you feel about being in a craft school, as opposed to a university or a conventional art school?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, I liked it, I uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Or perhaps there weren't great differences in your mind.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Oh no, I've always felt the crafts are marvelously suited to those people who have artistic pretentions but not quite the imagination to succeed in the fine arts. I know that's heresy and the craftsmen don't like to feel that they might not be fine artists, and certainly the great craftsmen are fine artists. We have some good examples of it in this area, with Wendell Castle and Albert, what's his name?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Paley.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Paley. But I felt comfortable knowing that some of these ex-marines who were coming to the school under the auspices of the GI, at that time the Korean War veterans and so on, decent men who wanted a simple life and who would devote all their energies to the crafts but perhaps didn't have quite the flare that they needed, were still able to do it and get along, and do good work, and succeed as craftsmen. [00:40:30] Of course today, the craftsman doesn't like to think of himself, for example, as a production potter, he likes to be more creative, so that wouldn't work as well I don't think, any more.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But they were perfectly willing to think of that as their future, for them.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well you see there was something humble about Alfred and it brought out the humility in the students—they didn't wish to be artists, they wanted merely to make pots and sell them in their shop. You

can still find, around Alfred, examples of potters that hew to that philosophy, and I think it's very nice.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you mean sort of low profile and sell regionally for the most part?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you found that generally, it was a pretty congenial atmosphere in which to teach.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: It was very nice, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But it did not have the height of imaginative creativity in the beginning, in your students.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: No, no, they were more modest.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you did—

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well then too, the faculty, you see, Hans Christensen, a very—or John Prip in the metal, not so conservative in design, but Tage Frid in wood, was extremely conservative, and I know—I still remember some of the works, the designs turned out in my shop, which I thought were exciting, to use a trite word, he felt was beyond the pale, just too far out. [00:42:13] A very conservative woodworker but an extremely splendid craftsman, and so the notion of doing honest, straightforward, simple design wasn't quite that hard to teach.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you began to teach that?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Mm-hmm [affirmative], yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was it an atmosphere where, let's say, you took exception to Frid's criticism but still, you could work together, so to speak.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Oh yes, sure, sure. No, no, he was not beyond—as you know, he's still teaching at Rhode Island School of Design. A very witty, jolly, good-humored man, and I like that. I think that faculty that's on the conservative side and teaches a strong technique is perhaps a better sort of faculty to have than one who encourages you to go to be too experimental so that you lose your sense of tradition and the fundamental technical requirements needed to move with the tide, you see. There are so many modernity—teachers in the crafts now that who are espousing a certain direction. Let's say the Jean Tinguely notion of metal sculpture that's witty. Is that how you pronounce it?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Tinguely.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Tinguely. That might be all very well for the moment, but these students that learn to do this and nothing else are going to be in a bad way when styles change in another 10 years or five years or whatever it is. [00:44:11]

ROBERT F. BROWN: They get trapped by that.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yeah. It's interesting, our faculty now, which is almost 35 or 40 people, it's perhaps heresy to say so or not quite playing the game, but you can almost, when you go into a faculty show, tell the ages of the faculty by the sort of work they do, because they're all pretty much a product of a particular educational tendency, and that's of course in a way unfortunate.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Which seems to be for the most part, one that stresses one's style over another or another.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yeah. You know the men that are now 50 years old, because they're painting Abstract Expressionism.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sure.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: And you can tell the men who are 40 because they're doing Pop, and you can tell the men in their 30s because they're doing stuffed velvet or something, I don't know. And you can tell the young faculty because they're neo-realists.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But this did not set in at the school in the first 10 years or so of your teaching.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Less so. Well, as I say, it was more traditional at that point.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The people got a broader base, traditional training.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well I don't know whether they did or not. I think some of them probably weren't

enthused enough or ignited enough by the quietude of the faculty as far as avant-gardism is concerned. You need both. [00:46:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[END OF TRACK meyer82_1of2_cass_SideA_r.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: —side two, Fred Mayer interview, cassette one. You've mentioned two things about the school in Alfred, first the quarters were pretty small, I suppose that you soon outgrew them, and second, at least according to Mr. Brennan, the school wasn't particularly welcome in the university. Did you sense those things as a young faculty member?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: No I didn't. I wasn't privy to much of that. I was too busy with just being married and settling into domesticity. But we weren't overcrowded. As a matter of fact, when we came to Rochester, we were having a devil of a time finding enough students to keep us going for the first five or six years.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you think probably the school simply wasn't that well known?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: No, yeah, that's probably the trouble, I don't know, but it took quite a while to build up an enrollment. Now of course it's quite strong and we have a waiting list in most departments.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did the need—was there really a need to come to Rochester? I know you've mentioned how RIT's president came down and looked it over.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, it did offer us much more space. As you say, we—you said—it could have been crowded. Well we were in a way; the building was unsanitary. We couldn't take the precautions necessary to keep clay dusts from invading the weaving studios and the metal shop and so on, and the metalworkers, I suppose got a little tired hammering ceramic clay particles into their silver vessels and so on. [00:02:02] It was a pretty crude situation. We were offered much better quarters in Rochester, a fine old building, I understand owned by Reynolds, the tobacco man at one time. Now I can't imagine why he'd be in Rochester, but that's the rumor.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Really?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yeah. And an old stone building with splendid empire mantels and many floors, and it was a lovely place to have a school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It had been a home or a—

FREDERICK R. MEYER: It had been this mansion, yes. See that part of Rochester which RIT found itself in, begins with a very fashionable part of Rochester. It was called at one point, the ruffled shirt district, and it later became known as the rumpled shirt district. [They laugh.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: It was about that time that—

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —RIT was there.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: But the splendid buildings continued to stand, and there are still people in Rochester that have a grudge against RIT because at that time, RIT tore down any number, well, seven perhaps, splendid examples of early American architecture for the sake of putting in a gymnasium and parking lot, and so on. It was very callous of us, but at that time people weren't as—that was the '50s when no one thought much about the fact that progress wasn't permanently advancing at all fronts. [00:04:00] But the stone steps, with their cast iron dogs and lions and all of this splendid egg and dart doorways and various elaborate fenestrations, fell with the demolition ball, and it was in retrospect far from an admirable period in RIT's history.

ROBERT F. BROWN: As a faculty though, the school did in fact stay in one such old mansion.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yes we did, mm-hmm [affirmative] after disfiguring the façade of it a bit with a poorly modern door and a few other injuries to it. We managed to maintain the building pretty much as it was.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Coming to Rochester to be part of a much larger institution, was that something that troubled any of you as teachers?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Oh sure, I'm sure it did. There is something about craftsmen that still maintains the uh—likes to maintain the belief that Vermont atmosphere is the one that craftsmen should find themselves in. Yes,

there was resentment. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT F. BROWN: What about the European faculty, such as you mentioned, did they?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: They didn't mind. Europeans like progress, they like—the Scandinavians do, they aren't particularly sentimental about ruralism, but we did have one of our teachers, Lynn Fallon [ph] who came from Alfred, went back there and settled in Almond, and he felt Rochester was too much of a metropolis for him. He quit. [00:06:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm. You say in the beginning, it was a little tough getting students. What kind of student were you taking in?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Anybody that could walk.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you mentioned the veterans, and I think earlier, you told me there were also, there were housewives that would come in for certain coursework.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Oh yes, of course. Well, we still have housewives. They can be marvelous students, having set aside their responsibilities of motherhood to a degree. Finally being freed of the more basic requirements of motherhood, they come and take up a career in the crafts, and many of them have been very successful.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you had no complaints on that score.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: No. Well, I might have one or two complaints, but there were so many successes that it overshadows them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I'd like to get really, just at what was the nature of what you taught, design, and how it fit in with the larger curriculum in a crafts school.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, my task was simply to teach the craftsman good design, so that when he worked in the shops, he would be able to produce what he designed in my studios and to thereby become famous I suppose, and wealthy, or successful at least. It was a terrible position to find myself in, in some ways, because that of course is the crux of a craftsman's being. He has to be able to design well, as well as make it, and in a way we were the whipping boy if they took their work to America House in New York, where we had an outlet at that time, and if it didn't sell, the studios would not like to admit that it didn't sell because it was poorly made, but it was so easy to say it didn't sell because it was badly designed you see, and so there was my responsibility. [00:08:20] And of course many of these people just weren't able to design well even though I tried to help them as much as I could, because they didn't have the flare and one has to have talent. You could not get anywhere with anyone who doesn't have it and most people don't [laughs]. You do as well as you can. You can teach people to design skillfully, eclectically. You can teach them to take good designs of the past or the present, modify them sufficiently so that they don't seem to be imitative, but you see most people aren't content to do that. There's that terrible notion afoot in this country that we have to—everyone has to express themselves and it's damaging, so damaging, because the students come to you saying they want to express themselves, not knowing that the self they want to express doesn't exist unless they develop it by way of seeing what was good in the past, building from that. One has—they have to prime the pump you see, and they don't want to do that because they think somehow or another they were born with some divine ability to express themselves without all of that hard preparatory work. [00:10:09] It still exists, I get it in every class I teach these days. They want to express themselves. Who are you, where did this tabula rasa I asked them, is our fate to be born with, where did you embellish it, and how did you embellish it to the point that it makes you any different than anyone else, and especially sufficiently different to cause people to want to buy what you make? You know, a terrible responsibility which requires enormous preparation and not something that's been given as a birthright, but that takes hard work, and it takes time away from television, and it takes hours in the library, and visiting museums, and so on, and surprisingly few people make that investment. They're too anxious to get on with the making of it and not patient enough in the preparatory of it. They want results. Get famous quick.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And here you're speaking of the talented ones, right?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Both, both, both. With the talented ones, they might have some excuse for acting why they do, but certainly not the rest, and what they do is end up imitating that which they saw in the latest edition of *Craft Horizons* and thinking, "Well, if that won a prize, I can win a prize with something that's like it," which of course is dreadfully wrong. [00:12:02] It's the opposite way to go about being successful, because America gets very impatient with styles and once it gets into a book, for example, it gets printed in a book and you look at it out in [Lake] Winnipesauke, Minnesota, or wherever you are, then Minneapolis, I mean, is that in Michigan. Once they get the book and see the photograph and imitate it, they're at least three years out of date, because it's taken that long for the book to get published and get distributed and sorted into the library, into their hands,

and so already they're making a mistake by using it as a model. But uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: In practical terms, how would you seek to stop that process of imitativeness?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, I try to stop it by just telling them, trying to say no, that one should look at the entire gamut of art from the beginning of recorded time, and absorb it all and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: But was the time—

FREDERICK R. MEYER: —allow it all to gestate. No, there isn't, well, there's this saying, "Art is long, life is short." There isn't time, no, but that's what you should do.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And your problem also was that they were moving into their craft, with its own demands, at the same time. They didn't have you in design for a year or so, before they even began their craft.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: No, they were doing it all at the same time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you think it should have been that way though, or did it—

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, it was the best we could do. We couldn't insist that they take two years of design before they start their craft, because no one would have put up with it. We tried to give them a little bit more design the first year and they resented it because they felt that they were in a crafts school, and they weren't being allowed to make crafts. [00:14:12] But it did work out quite well, the record of our graduates of those early years is quite remarkable, I think, surprisingly so, when I see what they've accomplished, Paul Evans for example, in furniture at that time, very distinguished furniture designer now. Burr Sebring, I believe it is, works for—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Gorham Silver.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Gorham now, was one of our first people.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were those both men who, in your opinion, balanced the learning mastery of a craft with being receptive to design quality—

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, I don't know, I never was impressed much with either of them when they were in school, they seemed like sort of ordinary students, but something must have happened along the way.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you suppose it often happens after they're out of school?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Sure. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But I'm sure it also depends upon what they got when they were in, for it to happen when they get out.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Looking back to the '50s, were people more or less or equal, were students equal in terms of their interest in being creative, as opposed to becoming successful in a craft?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, there was less emphasis upon the sort of craft success than there is today. There wasn't magazines like *People* and so on, constantly shouting that you have to be successful at all costs.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And also, did the crafts look to be much of a route to success then, because they weren't nearly as—[00:16:04]

FREDERICK R. MEYER: No. No, no, most of these people, I think entered the crafts originally, because they were disenchanted with the more traditional outlets for their enthusiasms. Well after all, after the Second World War, Korean War and so on, I expect a lot of men felt that basing their careers in areas that were, how should I say, more oriented to the sort of careers that civilization is founded on might not be too profitable, because civilization didn't seem to be all that substantial. And the arts being transcending in a way, the rise and fall of civilization, might have suggested a bit more reason to. I know they did to me. I left business administration and advertising exactly for that reason, I think I did the day I read in the Oshkosh daily *Northwestern*, that we had dropped a bomb on Hiroshima. I was home at that time, just having gotten out of the navy, and not yet having decided where I should go or what I should do, and when I realized that all of the efforts of men in the traditional, accepted sense can be destroyed in a few seconds, I thought perhaps one shouldn't bank on some sort of long-term pleasure, that is I decided I wouldn't want to work in advertising for most of my life, so that I could enjoy a wealthy retirement, because that was gambling against odds. [00:18:16] I thought I'd rather have my pleasure day-by-day, which I assumed at that time, I would get by being a painter. I lived for the moment and it's contradictory to a degree isn't it, because as we said before, it takes a lifetime to learn an art, to master it, more than a lifetime, and yet there is that day-to-day pleasure too, to be found in it, for those fortunate ones whose discernment doesn't run too far ahead of their abilities. Some of my best students in the past, I remember

one, he was a Hungarian count, a white—equivalent of the white Russians, and he was chased out of his aristocratic niche in Hungary in the Second World War, came to this country and he decided to be a woodworker, a charming man, very suave, and he failed as a woodworker because his tastes were so much better than his ability to satisfy them in the shop. What's interesting to me is that so many artists are quite content with what they do through every stage of their development, that is after they finish it they think, "Well that's pretty good," and then only later do they realize it isn't. But with Les LeFevre [ph] which was his name, he was critical of it just before he finished it you see, because he could see that it wasn't up to his standards, and people like that never can become artists.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [00:20:12] And of course those who have the ability to match their taste or design their talent with their manual, can succeed can't they?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yes, work in tandem, these two.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now had that person, for example, LeFevre, done very well in design, apart from his downfall in the crafts?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well no, design was mixed inextricably in it, you could see it wasn't designed very well, you could see it wasn't made very well.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I see. He had problems with design as well.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Oh, sure. Well, he was older then too, and married, and he—I suppose missed the luxurious life he was accustomed to and wanted to achieve something before it was too late in his new life, and that of course prevented him from developing as slow as he would have needed to. The last I heard, he had opened a woodshop in New York, and I haven't heard from him since.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How about your courses, could you describe them a bit, the way you set them up? Did you set them up in close consultation with colleagues in other schools?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: When, was this in the craft school?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes, in the craft school, back in the '50s.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: No, I always had carte blanche, I was allowed to do anything I wanted to do.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How specific did you want them to relate to the crafts that these people were going to carry on in?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, I wanted them to be very closely related. I, of course, tried a number of—part of the course was obviously about practical application, the state of getting practical application from it. [00:22:08] But I—most of their work was actual designing of the objects that they wished to make, as woodworkers were designing furniture and metalworkers were largely designing hollowware or flatware, with some assignments that were less applicable directly. But I found they wouldn't accept my course otherwise. [00:22:44] I had to be fairly direct in my assignments.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You couldn't be too general, or much less theoretical.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: I couldn't be too theoretical, no, although of course, I introduced as much theory as I felt I could.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What about the effect in your memory, of the fact that students' designs were sent, for a number of years, to America House, so-called I believe, the journeymen students in thesis.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yes. Well, what do you mean?

ROBERT F. BROWN: What would be the effect on their—you know, whether they were accepted or rejected down there.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Oh well, they were all accepted because what we did is the faculty chose from their work, what we felt would sell. I can remember putting it in a station wagon and driving it down, we had to do that ourselves, and unload it and bring it in. I guess we alternated taking trips down.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I guess what I meant was whether it sold or not in New York, what effect would that have?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: I don't know, I suppose the usual effect. [00:24:02] Not selling was probably depressing and selling was probably overly elating.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you think at that time though, it then affected what styles they would pursue thenceforth?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Oh it sure did, yes I'm sure.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Or were people less self-conscious about that than they are today?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: No, I think they were, human nature doesn't change that much. I know when I sell a painting or a piece of sculpture, it's hard to resist doing one just like it right after.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I could imagine.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: No, look at Utrillo or Modigliani, Chagall, it seems to me they have not been able to divorce themselves from that tendency.

ROBERT F. BROWN: They are three pretty well-known examples of that.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Bernard Buffet, a marvelous example of it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You continued teaching design until about when? When did you switch into the more—and also when did you move away from the school into, as I guess you are now?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yeah, well, I got moved, I got shifted into the School of Art and Design when philosophically, the crafts school decided that they wanted to teach design in the shops and not as a separate course, partly for the reasons I give I guess, that there was a belief that they weren't getting enough design, I guess, is the phrase because that, as I said, was always the whipping boy. [00:26:10] If for some reason or other there was discontent with the student shows, it was usually because the design wasn't right, but that would be another way of saying often, that the student was just not inspired you see. But at any rate, the onus fell upon design and not the shops, and so they decided to try teaching design in another way, and to teach it along with the craftwork by the craft instructors, which is the way it has been done ever since and still, the college now teaches its design in each department and not as a separate unit, with the exception that they do take some courses in design fundamentals.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were the teachers the same as the crafts teachers then?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Oh yes, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: For example, Hobart Cowles or Frans Wildenhain—

FREDERICK R. MEYER: —would teach the design, the advanced design, in each shop.

ROBERT F. BROWN: About when did this change occur?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: That was about 19—it was when I got back from Europe, after a Ford Foundation grant, which was 1956. The year that I had been away, these decisions had been made. It's like coming back after a two-week vacation and finding that someone else is sitting at your desk. It's uh—[laughs]—no it wasn't really. I was happy, by that time, to move on to something else.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It was the same administration, Harold Brennan was still dean.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Oh yes, yes indeed.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He'd come to that decision during that year apparently.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yeah. Well, it was just at that point that Brennan became dean of the School of Art and Design also. [00:28:01]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, I see.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: And so he was the director of the School for American Craftsmen and dean of the College of Fine and Applied Arts, and Stan Witmeyer was the director of the School of Art and Design. And then I started to teach life drawing and painting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Things which you had not taught at all.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: No. Of course, there was justice to that, because I wasn't a designer, I was a painter, and so I suppose it was more appropriate that I should be teaching what I did. The irony of it was, that once I started teaching painting, I no longer wanted to paint very much for the reasons I gave earlier, because I found that

after teaching painting all day, one—at least I—got a little tired of looking at paint, especially because it was used so badly, for the most part, when I was teaching, and so I turned more and more to sculpture and especially ceramic sculpture, in the School for American Craftsmen, because my studio was still in that building. And so that was nice, I taught painting across the street and I've come back to the crafts school with no responsibilities there, and the ability to work in the ceramic shop was very nice. See, I became quite anonymous there, the students wouldn't know who I was, and that's beautifully refreshing too. [00:30:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.] After you're painting and design students had been so much inseparable from you. [Laughs.] So after around 15 or 10 or so years, you were able to settle things down to proportions that were good for you.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Those were nice years at the crafts school. There was an old Italian gardener that would keep the lovely orchards right outside of my window in perfect trim. He spent two or three years building a stone wall, laboriously, hand by hand, that looked very much like a Tuscan wall. It was very pleasant indeed. Then of course, they moved to—the school moved to the new campus and they tore down that building, not having—again, RIT not having quite lost its believe that to destroy a building is a progressive act.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm. And that sure would change the complexion of things for you as well wouldn't it?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: But the new campus has many virtues, it's a very spiffy place and designed by good architects. The studios are commodious and the library is much better now than it was, and there's much to be said for it. I only taught out there for about two years and then the graduate painting, which I was teaching by then, moved downtown, back to pretty much where we were, and just two blocks away, and so I've been here ever since.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well until his retirement, was Brennan both the director of the school and dean of the College of Art and Design?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yes he was.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And Stanley Witmeyer was director of the College of Art and Design.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: [00:32:05] Yes, that's right.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: This a continuity—a continuation of our tape, this is May 8, 1982. We were last speaking of the move from downtown Rochester or the School for American Craftsmen, to the new campus, that was some time in the 1960s, wasn't it? And you felt it's a bit serviceable, with better quarters, larger, more capacious quarters for the school?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: No question it was larger and more efficient. Something was lost, something was gained. Students had been complaining a bit about—do complain about the sterility of it. I know that when—is his name Goldberger?

ROBERT F. BROWN: The architectural critic?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: The architectural critic for the *New York Times*, yeah Richard?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Paul.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Paul, yeah, he was up here and uh—to speak at a colloquium that we had with five other members, four other members of the *Times* staff. It was very interesting but when his—on the "State of the Arts," I think, the title of the seminar, and he announced on stage that he thought the RIT campus was pretty old-fashioned, but what he liked, that he saw in that vicinity, was a place called the Nordic Inn down the highway a bit, which is a building with fake snow and icicles on the roof. [They laugh.] [00:34:10]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now he was partially reflecting the taste of architecture at that time, which was different from when your new campus went up.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well no, this is just recently done, it was an old building, but at least I suspected, it had whimsy and wit, and charm and originality to a degree, it wasn't as inhuman as—well of course, Thomas Wolfe, others, had been attacking modern architecture mercilessly lately and they have something to be said for their point of view.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now you were teaching painting mainly, during those last years you were connected with the school—you were connected to the school until about—when did you then change to the College of Art and

Design?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, with the School for American Craftsmen I was a design teacher until I guess the early '60s.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you feel you wanted to get out of that—well you mentioned there was a change too. They decided that the craftsmen themselves would do design.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yes that's right, yes, I suppose some would say I was eased out. I don't like to use that word, but the transition was painless enough and I really, I suppose know more about painting than I do the design of [inaudible].

ROBERT F. BROWN: So when you went to the College of Art and Design, you could teach without design rather, without having to think how it might apply to this or that craft.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, I always did teach it as if there was a purity which transcended each of the crafts to a point, as I think there is, but I didn't teach too much design after that, it was drawing, painting. [00:36:05] I'm again now teaching a course in design for photographers, photo design, but it isn't my major.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Could you describe how you would go about teaching drawing? We've discussed your teaching of design to an extent but what about drawing?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, it depends, I suppose. It's mostly been life drawing, I've never taught anything else. Well, that's not true exactly, but mainly, life drawing and of course there, I simply emphasized the systematic reproach to the body and learning to draw it accurately and without too much flare or individuality, but to learn what it's like, to memorize its contours and skeleton and so on, fundamentally important for anyone who wants to be a painter or a sculptor. One of the tragedies of course is there are a great many artists who, in their training in the '50s and '60s, were allowed to overlook the necessity of drawing well, and I think they're paying a price now, and I think will continue to pay an even heavier price if the current trends continue in the direction they're going.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What forms is that price taking?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, frustration, lack of sales, lack of recognition, the usual crosses that artists bear if they aren't popular or successful.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So this is my roundabout way of asking what is it that in the study for life and for basic anatomy that benefits the sculptor or the painter in your opinion, or from your observations, I should say. [00:38:12]

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Nobody wants to put a figure in his painting or turn it into sculpture he gets it right and—with sculpture, as Rodin said, you have to be able to tell how much the figure weighs, if it's not its weight in bronze, but the weight in flesh and blood, by looking at the bronze, and if you look at a bad piece of sculpture, you can't tell how much that figure weighs, you can't tell its bodily weight. It doesn't have its weight on the right foot, if the weight isn't distributed properly, without anatomy, careful study of it you can't do that, but you can also not improvise abstractly particularly well if you can't draw the body well. In my painting, I'm not exactly a realist, although I use the body and other recognizable elements, but I think that when I draw a figure, I draw it as carefully and realistically as I can, as humbly, I guess, as I can. And then when I'm alone in my studio, I have no hesitation to distort as much as I feel is necessary or desirable, but in order to distort, you have to distort logically and convincingly, and not arbitrarily, in order to get a good painting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And the same applies to sculpture as well.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Oh it certainly does. [00:40:01]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Have you been teaching sculpture right along as well?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Never taught it, no, and I hope I don't ever have to because I think it would be too complex, and then very few schools are equipped to—physically to get into the higher reaches of sculpture.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Painting though, you have been teaching.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yes that's right. I teach graduate painting for the last 10 or 12 years.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative] So you previously taught more elementary painting? Or more—

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, at one point I was teaching senior and junior painting, but now it's entirely graduate.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What's your approach in teaching painting?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: No one approach. I try to, at this level, elicit the best work that each student can offer or could, and so I teach a little differently with each student I have, trying carefully to develop their style and not a communal style. It's essential that painters have style and originality of means, much more so than formerly, and I'm not so sure that's all for the good but it certainly is necessary today, given the temper of the art world. [00:42:00] Then too, I can't possibly take an undergraduate, one who had under-graduated from another college and bringing him up through all of the undergraduate disciplines that I think might be desirable. I have to take what he comes with and see what I can do with it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Are the coming with about as much as they had say 10 or 15 years ago?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Oh no, I would say probably coming with—well, yeah more than 10 or 15 years ago, but I suspect considerably less than 30 or 40 years.

ROBERT F. BROWN: When you get them, you say you let them go on and hunt for their style, because you feel it's essential to them today. Do most of them in fact, is that particularly what they want to do, they want to find their form of expression?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yeah, except for the foreign students. We get quite a few—we've been getting a lot of nationalist Chinese and this year, I understand one from Mandolin, China, and India, and Spain. I had a student from Ethiopia last year, and I find foreign students often are not—find it difficult to be convinced that they should cultivate a style. They come expecting a more ordered and formal education, which I try to give them in that case but not completely.

ROBERT F. BROWN: At the graduate level—

FREDERICK R. MEYER: They have trouble with freedom, the Chinese, perhaps that's not so bad. [00:44:05] They're humble, which I like, which certainly isn't true of American graduate students in most cases.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well now, where you have a case where a student is humble, how do you go about it at the graduate level, where they've had several years experiencing painting? What would you possibly try to stress with those people, those who are a little more malleable?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well if they're humble, I like to stress the virtues of humanity, I think it's an essential part of painting well. Goodness, to get airy and sensitive invocations from—in the Oriental style, from a painter who does not wish to set the world on fire with the same sort of bombast that most young American men especially think they need to do. I think that's fine, don't you?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Are they with you a couple of years?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Two years, two years.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Is that long enough, do you suppose?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: No, in some cases it certainly isn't. I have one girl now that I think could turn into a good painter if she gave herself more time, but she's married and she runs around the world with her husband, who is a geologist, and so she doesn't wish to spend more time in school. But she has a certain flair, I don't find too many with the right kind of flair, one that hasn't been learned but is innate, and rises from her enthusiasms for life rather than her enthusiasms for art. [00:46:16] You see that's the trouble with most students, they—who was it that said that the first class artist is interested in life and the second class artist is interested in art.

[END OF TRACK_1of2_cass_SideB_r.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: I think maybe you're touching on what seems to be a problem in many quarters these days, of extreme self-consciousness on the part of people in art, because there's just so much written isn't there, so much to look at, and so much publicity.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right. Well, that's certainly true. I don't know what can be done about it. I suppose you could outlaw all the art books and magazines, and slideshows, and films, and so we'd probably be better off. It was Carl Milles that said that a Swedish sculptor who was at Cranbrook, said if you wanted to be a sculptor, you should never look at an art book and never go into a gallery while you're working. I suppose he was exaggerating but there's truth to it. With all that you see, it's terribly difficult to be your own man. Chagall, who was at Yale a number of years ago, giving a lecture of all things, I find that hard to believe but he was.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why is that? I mean, as a painter?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: I don't know, but he was there talking to the Yale art students, Marc Chagall, and he said he wouldn't want to be a painter, that he wouldn't want to start as a painter today, because he wouldn't know where to go or what direction to take, because of all the confusion and plethora of styles, and I suppose the great amount of stimulation from all sides, he would be lost.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [00:02:00] Do you find, again to generalize possibly, that your students with a real flair are those who are being stimulated by broader things than simply what's going on in art?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Oh yeah. This girl I speak about, she's in love with her husband and she likes to eat in European restaurants, and so she paints her husband, and champagne glasses and tables with grapes, and a waiter standing in the background, and it's absolutely captivating, but she's not thinking too much about art. And it's nice.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Has this been characteristic in general, of your own work?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, I try to make it so, yeah. I'm very impatient with art talk, I don't really much like this, to tell you the truth. I would much rather talk about something else. It's been said that if a man who talks too much about sex, that's a sign he doesn't do very much of it. I think that's true in the arts too.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well perhaps I could ask you, just fairly prac—matter of fact things like in your work, when did you begin doing work with ceramics, or when did you actually start working in the sculpture more or less, and why?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, it was in the mid-'60s I think. Well, I gave an assignment to my design class, I remember one day, to do something in terracotta, and one of the students was having trouble with a head, and so I worked on it a little bit with him, which is something I don't do very often, and I liked the feel of the stuff, and so it started from there. [00:04:21] It smelled good. I didn't realize how toxic it was. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: What, terracotta?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: I had no idea.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And it went on from there to complicated castings.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: That's right. Well, I got a commission on the basis of the terracotta, to do some bronzes for a mall in Columbus, Ohio. The Lazarus Mall. It was a big job, about eight full size figures in two groups, with a 20-by-20-foot base region, and so never having done bronze before and accepting the commission, I went over to Europe with my little maquettes and tucked them into a 2-CV and began putting around Europe looking for a foundry to help me out, and well, I then began to feel it was a terrible responsibility. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: It dawned on you then.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yeah. And I can remember parking in front of a particular foundry that happens to be the one that I used for the job after going to several others, and I told them that I had—well let's see I—how did it work? Well, I explained the sizes that this had to be and I said, "The model is out in the car, I can bring it in if you wanted to look at it." [00:06:06] So he [laughs] began calling workmen together and he had seven or eight of them marching out to the car to carry in this maquette, which turned out to be about 10-by-10 inches, [they laugh] when he saw that tiny thing [they laugh]. And then I had the hope that this would grow into a 20-by-20-foot job.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And eight foot tall.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yeah it was, oh it was higher, it was 10 feet, 10 to 12. There was one figure eventually, as far as the size, the side must have been at least 11 feet high. There were flowers standing around, I remember, on the base and my God, those flowers had to be, I think 17 or 18 inches high. It got to be gigantic. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was your model adequate or did he patiently—

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Oh well, no it certainly wasn't, and they had over there, someone called an ingranditore, and the ingranditore is the man who takes these little—he takes maquettes, they're not as small as that, and with a very large—calipers, or whatever it's called, it's like a pantograph, but that itself is beautiful, mahogany and bronze, and they wheeled that out and tried to get the pointers on the small end of the machine to touch my little figure, so that they could get the right size off the other end, and then ingranditore would build the metal armature for me to start working on it. And of course they got some terrible exaggerations, even though he tried hard, and he also started the clay, but when I saw what was coming, I was startled and I had to tear down most each of the figures that already had the—[00:08:12]—I worked awfully hard there and I've never come close to a nervous breakdown, because I had to get it done within the four months.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And this was your first big thing.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yes. I lived in Florence. My wife came over too, to complicate matters more, for a little while, and we lived—and so I moved from where I was, into Florence, to a hotel that didn't have bugs, and so I started to commute. It was 20 miles away from Florence and there was one day, when I got off of the train and I found I couldn't walk to the foundry, my legs wouldn't take me. It frightened me, but I had a couple cups of coffee and that passed and so I continued and managed to finish. It's not a good job, but it's passable. But that was my introduction to bronze and since then, I guess decided I'm going to try to accomplish something in it, and so I liked it after disliking it for quite a while.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you also a little frightened of what would happen to your model when it was translated into bronze? Were you worried that it might not be just what you had in mind, the bronze?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well certainly, constantly. This was all complicated considerably, by the fact that I spoke not one word of Italian and this, despite the fact that I lived in Rome for a year, 1955 to '56, but at that point I was trying to write plays, and I stayed in my apartment and wrote several bad plays and never learned the language. [00:10:22] But where I was, no one spoke English. In Rome, you could speak English to people to a degree, but it was damn hard to try to get a hammer, to try to get someone to shift a proportion a little bit or help you to move a piece of bronze if you couldn't say anything other than gesture. I tell you, I had some difficult times, and then when it came to the money side of it, when I couldn't speak a word of Italian, considering that even people who speak Italian have trouble with money with other Italians, I don't know how I ever got out of it with my pants. [They laugh.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: What kind of figures emerged, how would you characterize them?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, they were all right. I never did like the job too much. One was a modern American family and one was a primitive American family, or what do you call it?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Pioneer?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yeah, a pioneer family, puritan too I guess. I got a little tired with ploughshares and hoes, and lace, and bonnets, and things after a while.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It had to be fairly detailed.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm. So you could say in that first commission, you didn't quite hit your stride in terms of a style.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: No. I hope, somehow or another, that the mall went bankrupt and they melted it down, but I'm not so sure.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No, I think they're the chiefs of a very large retail chain across the country actually. [00:12:01]

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yes I know, I know that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes. [Laughs.]

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Usually, the things I put in places like that go bankrupt. I remember my first big commission for a mural was a restaurant on the corner of 57th Street and Park Avenue, and they wanted a mural that was I think 40 feet long and 10—eight feet high. And I painted it on canvas in Alfred, where I was teaching at the time, in an unheated barn, and then rolled it up and took it down to New York, where they put it up on the wall. A year or two later, I went to Rome, on this Ford Foundation grant, that was a pretty illustrious spot you see, and when I came back at the end of that year, my suit needed pressing and so I went down to Eighth Avenue and 42nd Street let's say, or Ninth Avenue and 42nd, in a rather dingy part of New York, where I found a tailor—a presser who would press my suit. While I was waiting, I went into a little diner next door for a cup of coffee and there was mural, on the wall of that little greasy spoon. [Laughs.] How is that for a coming home present?

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mean it had been—

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, the restaurant went bankrupt and they sold the mural and took it off the wall, and sold it to this other place.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What kind of paintings did the Midtown like? You began showing there.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Also, I did a big mural, a Sarah Coventry, in Newark and Sarah Coventry went bankrupt [laughs]. I guess people better beware, had better be beware of giving me commissions.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [00:14:03] Did you enjoy doing these large commissions, the murals or sculptures?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Yes, I do like to do big things.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you work quite differently in them, as opposed to the things that you show at your dealers?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well in a way yes, because I have to do somewhat what they would like to have me do, but I try not to compromise my integrity, as they say.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, you started showing at Midtown back in 1948. What kinds of paintings were you showing there at that time? Could you give a little description of them?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, it's sort of difficult. They were basically playful. I did a series on religious—I mentioned that—nuns and first communion, and so on. The first painting I sold out of Midtown was a little painting of first communion, which—children at their first communion, and this fellow, Donald Ogden Stewart bought it, as a matter of fact, the humorist playwright. It was almost naïve, the quality of naiveté in it, because I couldn't paint very well, I guess, at that time, but I couldn't do much else.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In what ways did your painting evolve since that time, and that's a long time ago admittedly.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well yeah it was, it was a long time ago. Well, I suppose it has gotten progressively worse and worse since that initial crescendo. [00:16:05] Well, I don't know, it hasn't changed particularly much, although I don't paint first communions any more, I've moved on past confirmations. I'm probably just about at extreme unction now. [They laugh.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And then there's illustrative and you're also approaching consummation as well, as for example in the—

FREDERICK R. MEYER: That's—oh, come now, they're not—well.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No,, but these very sophisticated people, café society, is this?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: That's right yes. Well I've been accused now, of being a Jazz Age painter. I just had a show in St. Paul and on the posters, which are quite nice, they list me as the Jazz Age artist, so that's all right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: An age you didn't even know [laughs].

FREDERICK R. MEYER: It's a nice poster.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh yes.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: See, the Jazz Age.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, I didn't know the age, I'll have you know. I was probably nursing at about the time Fitzgerald was kicking up his heels on the cape, or the coat, and we probably were both drinking too much [they laugh], because I was a very fat baby.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you show pretty much just with your dealer or do you try to show as often as you can?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: No, I have an exclusive contract with Midtown, I can't show anywhere else without, without being under the auspices of that gallery. [00:18:07]

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was Alan Ruskin like as a person to work with?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: He was a very quiet man. He was called affectionately a Gloomy Gus, and he did give the impression of being gloomy, very dour-looking, always frowning, but a very gentle and patient, and fine fellow. I liked him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now and this sculpture—these photographs I'm looking at here, by and large are recent sculpture, and it's really quite elegant, whether it be something that seems vaguely mythological as this, or other things which look to be painted figures. Are they terracotta also?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: No, those are the terracottas. Of course, terracotta, given the limitations of the material, you can't do what you can in bronze, and so I try to elicit the best qualities from each as well as I may, but there's a different problem with each one. For example, you can't make a terracotta figure stand on two legs particularly well, and generally, as you know, most terracottas, the figures are leaning against—standing against splints or floral forms. All the horses have a bush sticking up toward their belly. [00:20:00] You have to—in bronze, you don't need to do that. The Chinese manage to do it with their horses though, without the bushes didn't they, I mean their cortege?

ROBERT F. BROWN: You've done films too haven't you?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Fat horses too.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Very robust then. How did you get into the films?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Well, I don't know, it's such a tempting medium. I made several of them and wasted a lot of money, and some would say, my time at it, but I enjoyed it. The last one was *Christmas in Venice*, which I suppose is a travelogue, but I tried to make it a little more artful than most travelogues. Then I did something called *The Path to Rome*, which is based on a Hilaire Belloc book, about Belloc's walk, in a straight line to Rome, from Toul, in France. It's a marvelous book detailing that walk and the adventures he had as he tried to walk a straight line. It entailed going through some rather difficult country, over the Alps and rather difficult places. And I followed his path and filmed it as I went and he made drawings in his book, of doorways and little houses, and little bits of sculpture and so on, that he found interesting along the way, and it was like a treasure hunt, to find the same doorways in many cases and to film them, and set them next to his drawings. [00:22:01] I enjoyed it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You're your own writer, producer, everything.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Oh yeah, I did everything, I filmed it. I didn't narrate it, I had someone else do that, but I edited it and added the sound, and recorded all the sound in both cases. I suspect that they're not very good but I thought they were at the time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, the *Venice* got—was in a film festival.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: A couple of them were in festivals.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, mm-hmm [affirmative]. What do you concentrate on now primarily, your sculpture?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: I suppose so. Well, I have been—I've had three shows this year, and so I've been busy with sculpture and painting mostly.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And is that what you foresee doing, you have plans for?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Oh no, I'd like to do something else now for a while. Maybe I'll go back to Rome and write bad plays again for another year.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you still do some writing?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: I'm afraid I do. I got one back today again and it said, "We enjoyed your play very much. We unfortunately can't produce it but we do hope you will send us another as soon as possible." Well, you see this has been going on for a long while now and I get enough of these letters to snap at the bait and before long, I'm struggling with another three act play, and damned it be difficult. Sit alone in rooms for hour upon hour, which doesn't suit me. I fight my way to the end of it, and I type it up and send it to them, and then I get a letter that says, "We enjoyed your play very much, do you have another, we would be delighted to read it when you send it to us."

ROBERT F. BROWN: [00:24:08] If they're so delighted, I wonder they suggest they may be doing something with it.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Oh, it must—it's a very difficult profession I think. Some people think painting is difficult, but I think it's falling off a log compared to writing these days. You see, a gallery or a dealer, or a person, can glance at a painting and they do, it doesn't take them very long, but to try to get someone to read a manuscript today is almost impossible.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What do you—are there any general themes or notions?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: What they do, you see the publishers, they hire little girls out of Swarthmore, to read them. It gets a little annoying, to have to put your future in the hands of a 22-year-old girl, some of them, I'm sure must be perspicacious but I'm not sure all of them are, and that's the best you get, if it gets read at all.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you have a compulsion?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Oh, well I don't know. No, I don't. I suppose I like to think of it as a hobby. It's a relaxation. I write when I'm on trains, traveling to the foundry, and when I'm on vacation. I don't like vacations. When I travel to see my wife during the summers and so on, but I write for a few weeks, but I uh, I—the libraries are so full of things that it does seem a little silly doesn't it, to add to the pile.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm. Performance would be another thing.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: That's right, yes I know, that's I suppose, why I write plays rather than novels. [00:26:00] I did do this book on ceramic sculpture for Watson-Guptill, and I remember the editor saying, "You're better off writing a technical book than a novel," because he said, "At least a technical book doesn't last for a few years." He said, "With a novel it's like throwing a pebble in the ocean, it makes a little splash and it's gone forever." Of course that's not always true but I think that what he says has a lot of truth to it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Are there any particular themes you stress in your plays?

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Uh, yeah. The folly of most of our mad pursuit of pleasure in this country and the awkwardness with which we go about it, the clumsiness with which we try to be sybaritic and fail. The return, the new return to puritanism, I think is fascinating, as epitomized by some of the Reagan administration men, the recent movements in this country, the return to marriage and so on. We tried voluptuousness and we just didn't know how to do it, and so now we're back to our true forte which is puritanism. I mean, you can look at the '60s and see how clumsy we were about trying to be epicurean, we just messed it up totally, gave a lot of work to psychiatrists but that's about all. [00:28:02] Filled our hospitals with drug cases. Who was it that said Americans have the greatest potential to propensity of any country, for happiness, but they're the least able to accomplish it, they don't know how to do it. I mean, look at Las Vegas and Disney World and so on, you can see how clumsy it is. Myrtle Beach for God sakes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You've seen some of those places, at least you know them.

FREDERICK R. MEYER: Oh sure, sure. But that's what I write plays about pretty much, and I suppose they're funny incidentally, most of them, but I don't think Americans like to be told they don't know how to be happy.

[END OF TRACK meyer82_2of2_cass_SideA_r.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]