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Oral history interview with Edward B.
Thomas, 1983 April 28-May 10

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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 tape-recorded interview with Edward B. Thomas on April 28 & May 10, 1983. The interview took place in Seattle, Washington, and was conducted by John Olbrantz for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

DATE: APRIL 28, 1983

[Tape 1]

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Ed, can you tell me a little bit about your background, where you were born, your early childhood experiences, your parents, who your father was, who your mother was, how they came to live in this part of the country?

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, I was born in Cosmopolis, Washington, and many times when I've come through customs, when I was much younger and especially at the Mexican border, they would say, "Where were you born?" and I'd say, "Cosmopolis, Washington," they'd say, "Look, bud! Don't get funny with us." (laughter) But there actually is such a place as Cosmopolis, Washington. Nobody had any particular influence upon me, I would say, in my younger years as far as becoming interested in art, and particularly teaching art. I had a very severe illness when I was four and five years old and was confined to bed a lot, and so people brought me tablets and color crayons and pencils and stuff like that.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Hmm, interesting.

EDWARD THOMAS: And, I became turned on by drawing pictures. In those days during the Depression years, people didn't hire babysitters and you went along with your parents. I was very acceptable because I was so easy to entertain while they played cards or whatever. They'd just give me a tablet and some crayons and a drawing pencil or any kind of pencil, and I would occupy myself very happily for the entire evening. But as I grew older, I realized that there were two very strong interests that I was interested in pursuing. One was being a teacher, and the other was art. So the natural thing of course, was to combine the two, and my B.A. was [earned-Ed.] at the University of Washington back in the thirties when there was a five-year course known as Public School Art.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: (laughs)

EDWARD THOMAS: And the idea was that when you completed these five years, you were prepared to be an art teacher in any of the state high schools. So that was basically my undergraduate training.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Who, if we could digress for just a second, I'm curious here, did your father or your mother have any background whatsoever?

EDWARD THOMAS: None whatsoever, nobody.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: What did your dad do?

EDWARD THOMAS: He was superintendent of a lumber mill.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Really.

EDWARD THOMAS: No, no one in my family had any particular art history interests at all.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: And your mom wasn't a Sunday painter or...?

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh no. I remember one time as I was getting along in studying art and I said something about modern art and my father said, "Oh you mean those crazy impressionists and all those things they did?"

JOHN OLBRANTZ: This is in the thirties.

EDWARD THOMAS: And that was the extent of it. The last he had heard, the newest thing was impressionism. Couldn't have been more objective realistic art than impressionism. (chuckles)

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Was your dad brought out here to work in the mill, or was he a native Washingtonian?

EDWARD THOMAS: No. He was a native of Oregon.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: So he came up to Cosmopolis.

EDWARD THOMAS: Right. And my mother basically was raised in Oregon. But there was no connection whatsoever with anything to do with art.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: In Cosmopolis, when you were growing up in the-- I mean in the late twenties and early thirties-- were there any kind of private art lessons being taught? Or did you have access to art books that you could look at?

EDWARD THOMAS: No, not really. The first art class I ever took was during the WPA days, and a man who stoked furnaces at one of the local lumber mills knew a little bit about cartooning, and so at night he taught a course in cartooning. We all got the newsheet pads, you know, and bought a piece of plywood and a clip to attach it to and got some pieces of charcoal, and pencils, and we cartooned one night a week. And I suppose that was the first thing that had anything to do with any kind of training. During junior high and high school I went through the stage where I'd sit up for hours, into the night, drawing movie stars, copying the covers from magazines, or doing Mickey Mouse and Minnie Mouse and all those people and just sort of the typical kind of thing that you go through.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Did you do any illustration for the high school yearbook, or...

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh yes. I was the art editor of the annual and all those usual things. I did all the posters and decorations for the proms, and all that kind of stuff.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Fantastic.

EDWARD THOMAS: To me, it seems like a perfectly normal childhood.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Um hmm. Were you-- and this will relate to, ultimately your choice of careers-- but were you aware of the Seattle Art Museum at that time?

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, you see, the Seattle Art Museum didn't exist really in my early days. It was right after the museum opened, which was in 1933, 50 years ago, I had a junior high school teacher, he was a science teacher, and he became interested in me just as an individual. He had a sister who was a commercial artist and she did the newspaper ads for the Bon Marche. And he happened to live just a few blocks from the new Seattle Art Museum. So at the end of a school year, or maybe it was a vacation or something, anyway he offered to take me to Seattle to give me a chance to meet his sister and see their art department and go to the museum and so on. And so my dad drove us from Aberdeen to Seattle and I think it was in an old Model-A; I can't remember. It might have been one of the first V-8's. At least it wasn't a Model-T which we had earlier. And so I was terribly impressed by the museum. It was brand new, and most of the galleries were filled with Medici reproductions.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Huh!

EDWARD THOMAS: And there was one painting that especially impressed me. It was by Ambrose Patterson of the volcano on the big island in Hawaii while it was erupting. And that was a huge painting, the biggest painting I'd ever seen in my life, and it impressed me, and Patterson had been teaching over there at the time the volcano erupted. I remember, it must have been roughly around the time of the First World War, because I remember my father talking about the big eruption of the volcano too. So that was really my first exposure.

There was a marvelous gal, lived in Seattle, who painted and one time she had an exhibition in Aberdeen in a vacant store building. Now I'm trying... Myra, what was her last name? She was marvelous and she lived to a ripe old age. I interviewed her on television a couple of times later on. She also was an early pioneer in photography. She painted mostly marigolds in copper pots.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: (laughs)

EDWARD THOMAS: And I was terribly impressed by her copper pots and her marigolds. Myra Wiggins was her name. And of course after I came to Seattle in 1939, I eventually got to know her and like her very much. She became kind of a character, a little old lady who would come to museum previews wearing her galoshes because they gave her a better grip on the wax floors-- she was afraid of falling down, breaking a hip or something. Her husband-- in his eighties, as I remember-- was still a traveling salesman for a seed company.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh boy! (laughs)

EDWARD THOMAS: They lived in the old Lovelace Building up on Roy and Broadway. And it was a great pleasure to know her, and she, I suppose in a funny way, had a [noble-like] kind of influence upon me.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Um hmm. So your science teacher, this woman, and just a natural inclination toward art were probably the three factors that led you to the field of art education.

EDWARD THOMAS: Yeah. I was especially interested in education and... A young person today who is working on a degree or terribly involved in the Northwest art scene has no concept of the changes that have taken place. Gosh, there were no galleries, till long after I had been in Seattle. I came here in 1939, the day after I graduated from high school. And I was lucky enough to get a job in a very well known place known as Harry Hartman, Bookseller. And it had a gallery connected to it.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Huh!

EDWARD THOMAS: Harry Hartman was a blind man, and was very famous throughout the country with, oh, Alexander Woolcott and Catherine Cornell, and all those people, and those were the days when the stage people, the theater people, traveled by train.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Umm, um hmm.

EDWARD THOMAS: And it was a long hop. Usually the last performance was Chicago, then there were a couple of days on the train, till Seattle, and then from Seattle to San Francisco. So they would all come in and stock up on books, usually murder mysteries.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: To read on the train.

EDWARD THOMAS: To read on the train, either coming or going. But there was some exhibition space available, and Mark Tobey's first exhibition in Seattle was held there, and I believe Morris Graves' first exhibit.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Hmm! Really! Huh.

EDWARD THOMAS: And this went back, oh Lord, into the early thirties, or maybe even in the twenties. Anyway, I was lucky, just out of high school, to get a job as a stockboy at Hartman's. And, oh, they had Tobey's first show; in 1930, he had one at Cornish School, and then in '31 he had one at Hartman's bookstore. And the same was true of some of the other leading Northwest artists. I started out as stockboy and then I became kind of an assistant manager, and then the war came along and, and I went into the army. Harry Hartman and I, he had taught me to write Braille, so we corresponded in Braille.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Really!

EDWARD THOMAS: The shop was on Fifth Avenue across from the Fifth Avenue Theater, the Rainier Tower is there now.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure. Right.

EDWARD THOMAS: And we doubled the size of the shop all by correspondence in Braille. It was his intention that when I got out of the army and came back that we would expand the gallery-- at that point there was no commercial gallery in Seattle-- and put in a line of art supplies. Loman Hanfords had art supplies; they were down on Second Avenue. And there was a place called Miller Paint, and it was a regular paint store, but they had a man who worked for them who liked to paint, and so he managed to convince them to put in a line of art supplies. And most of your people like Tobey and [Kenneth--Ed.] Callahan, the name people, and all the people who were not name, would go to this paint store and get their art supplies.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Fantastic.

EDWARD THOMAS: But then after the war, Harry Hartman died very suddenly of a heart attack, and I had to take over the business. I became the manager and vice president. So all our plans for expanding and developing a gallery had to go down the drain, because it was difficult for me, at a very young age, to keep the business going.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh yeah. When did you enter the university? Did you enter the university and work there [at Hartman's--Ed.] or...?

EDWARD THOMAS: Before the Second World War. My university career was so spotted between going to war, then suddenly having to run a business, and I was in school and out of school, so it's a very checkered kind of career.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Well, you were at the university when people like Walter Isaacs and Ambrose Patterson were there.

EDWARD THOMAS: Walter Isaacs was the high priest of the university art department. And, in the days when I first worked at the art museum, we would receive all the paintings that the Northwest artists brought in. And you could spot every student who'd gone to the University of Washington because their paintings all looked like Walter Isaacs, whose great god was Cezanne and 19th century, sort of the late 19th-, early 20th-century French painters. And there wasn't anything in the art world except that. Well, going back to the bookstore, there are a lot of things that come to my mind that people have forgotten about, or some didn't even know about. In the thirties, in the late twenties, there was a very strong school of printmaking in the Northwest. You had people who were nationally and even internationally famous who lived here in the Northwest. There was Samuel Chamberlain, who especially did architecture, French and English cathedrals, and wonderful etchings. And then Helen Loggie up in the San Juans...

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That's right.

EDWARD THOMAS: ...who was all part of that same group. And she was to trees what Sam Chamberlain was to cathedrals. And all those wonderful drawings and prints that she did of the various trees of our forests. And Roi Partridge, who was a very important printmaker. He was the husband of Imogen Cunningham.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Ahh.

EDWARD THOMAS: And Thomas Hanford, who was a lithographer and lived in Tacoma, published many children's books, illustrated by his lithographs, and he had exhibitions all over the world. He was very strong on China subject matter. And so he was another of the printmakers we had at the bookstore, we had exhibits and sold all these prints. Richard Bennett was another one who wrote many books and illustrated them with his own drawings and woodcuts. He was known as a printmaker in the woodcutting technique. He was from Ireland and as Irish as they come.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: (laughs)

EDWARD THOMAS: Lived out of a suitcase. He was the one in that group of early printmakers that I personally knew the best. I first met him in New York city. He lived in a one-room-- well, it wasn't even an apartment-- on East 52nd, in which he lived every winter. In the summers he would go to Europe, especially to County Cork in Ireland. I visited him in Ireland, and also in the days when I was a student in New York. Why, I saw him quite frequently. That was a very, very strong school of printmakers that came out of the Northwest. Sam Chamberlain was born in Aberdeen, Washington.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Huh.

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh, another was John Taylor Arms. All of these were big, big names in the twenties and thirties. And there were color reproductions, say, of... The Medici prints were the first. And they were very expensive; even at 1939 prices, they'd be \$15 or something like that, for a reproduction, and you would normally get some renaissance master and these prints were made in Italy. And, so because reproductions were available, most people were too timid to go out and, say, buy a painting by a local artist.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: And there were no shows of artists from outside of the region. The prints were safe. They were black and white and they were small-scale. And they were very commonly bought as wedding presents or anniversary presents, things that were for something special.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: And so we sold an awful lot of prints by those particular people. That was a very important part of the development of the Northwest art world, although it's something you never hear mentioned anymore. And now people think of, well, on a national/international basis, Tobey and Graves and Callahan and so on. But yet there had been this other preceding, strong movement. Printmaking in those days was primarily just a matter of reproduction, of reproducing what normally would have been a drawing.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: Making a lot of copies, and making them inexpensive enough for the average person to buy.

[Break in taping]

JOHN OLBRANTZ: I'm aware of Helen Loggie because she lived up in Bellingham. I remember seeing her work in Bellingham-- And John Taylor Arms too. He had some kind of affiliation with Western [Washington University-- Ed.] and he may have been Loggie's teacher. There was some connection there.

EDWARD THOMAS: I think he was.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Yeah.

EDWARD THOMAS: And they were all a kind of little group, just as later on Tobey, Graves, Callahan, were all a little group, all friends with each other. Excited about what each other were all doing. In those days, before the Second World War, and afterwards... You know, anybody who put paint on a brush and put it on a piece of canvas knew everybody else who did the same thing. It was a small group of people.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: Small enough that you sort of knew what everybody was doing. And now that is such a different scene that I've lost all contact with all of the young artists. There're just too damn many of them.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Yeah, there are, there are.

EDWARD THOMAS: And the gallery situation, there's so many galleries I physically couldn't possibly go to see all of the shows that are at all of them. And on the gallery situation in Seattle-- shortly after the war, Betty Willis, who was another one of the people who had a lot to do with the development of art in the Northwest and was an influence on a lot of people, opened the gallery under the sponsorship of Loman and Hanford in the 1400 block of Fifth Avenue. It was very short-lived. I would say the first really professionally operated gallery in Seattle was Zoe Dusanne's, and she did it out of her private home, which was designed by Bob Shields on the hillside overlooking Lake Union. And Morris Graves was the first artist to achieve national recognition of our Northwest later group of painters, in about 1942. He had a show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and he suddenly was getting a lot of attention. Betty Parsons, of the Parsons Gallery in New York, showed his work and the work of Mark Tobey and sort of introduced them to the national art world. To the point where collectors and celebrities, when they came to Seattle, wanted to pick up a Tobey or a Graves or a Callahan on their home grounds, hoping they would get one real cheap.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: (laughs)

EDWARD THOMAS: Why then they would go to Zoe Dusanne's gallery. But, unfortunately, the freeway was built and it came right through Zoe Dusanne's house, so that wiped out the gallery. And then subsequently there were a lot of galleries that were opened that were on a professional basis.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: You were, late thirties and early forties, you were sort of in school, and then you were in the army, Europe, came back to Seattle, worked in the bookstore, and continued going to school. When did you finally get your art education or your degree in public school art?

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh, well I got that along with a master's degree. And that was in 1950, I think it was. And I had bicycled all over Europe; I had been in some seminars and book publishing and distribution in New York and a lot of different things. I had quite a bit of experience under my belt. And I had some jobs offered to me in the publishing business in New York.

[Tape 2]

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, I wasn't at all comfortable with New York city as a place to spend the rest of my life.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: So you had gone back there and...?

EDWARD THOMAS: Yes. And I decided I didn't want to be in the book business; I wanted to go back to my original intention, art and teaching. So I hauled myself back to Seattle and I found that I had so many credits from Columbia and NYU and through all my scattered ins and outs of schools that I could get two degrees at once with no trouble and still be able to take a lot of other things that I was interested in. At that time, the University of Washington did not have an art history department, nothing that even vaguely resembled one, let alone having a major or something like that. Walter Isaacs, as we mentioned before, taught a course in the history of modern painting for modern art for two or three quarters, and you never got past, you know, Cezanne or maybe you might get up to Braque. (laughter) So that was our history of modern art, and the other limited number of courses there. I think there was a two-credit class on the history of sculpture. When I took it, I showed the slides for the lectures and Dudley Pratt, who was an early influence around the Northwest in the field of sculpture, and he did all those pieces-- some people refer to them as wads of chewing gum-- that are scattered around the University of Washington campus as gargoyles. And so he lectured on sculpture, and now that I look back, my God it was so limited. And then somebody from the School of Architecture gave a two-credit class on the history of architecture.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: So basically what you had was the history of modern painting, the history of sculpture, and the

history of architecture, and those were the only...

EDWARD THOMAS: And then there was one other, a five-credit class that was a history of art basically from the ancient Egyptians through the Baroque or something like that. (laughter) You know. Taught by a person who I don't think had ever been to Europe, and certainly had an extremely limited knowledge of art history. And then the great white knight appeared on the scene. Sherman Lee was hired by the Seattle Art Museum and he came as an assistant director.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Under Dr. Fuller?

EDWARD THOMAS: Right. And part time he taught out at the University of Washington. He taught a series of classes on Asian art and he conducted some senior and graduate seminars. Well, he just opened my eyes to so many things that really turned me on. Fortunately I had had the background through traveling in Europe, through books, all kinds of things that I was much more aware of than say the average kid from the Northwest.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: I remember, while I was a student there, one time Walter Isaacs came in-- I was in the library looking at some stuff-- and he said, "You spend too much time in the library. You should be in the studio."

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Painting. (laughter)

EDWARD THOMAS: So anyway, I continued to be kind of fascinated by libraries and what had gone on and was going on, in the world of art. When I graduated, I didn't know what I was going to do because the teaching situation was tight. There were no high school art teaching jobs available and I didn't know what the hell I was going to do. But Sherman Lee had advised me to go on and do graduate work at Oberlin College.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Hmm!

EDWARD THOMAS: And they would only take five graduate students, and they had an outstanding faculty. They did not give a doctoral degree, but I could have a second masters. And he said, "Oberlin is Oberlin, Ohio, which was convenient to Chicago and a lot of the art centers, which is terribly important."

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: And then I applied to Harvard for the doctorate. Well, I just didn't know what I was going to do, and suddenly, all in one day, I got two airmail special deliveries. One was from Oberlin accepting me and-- I needed some financial help-- and they had a fellowship or something where I'd get a small salary and my room and board and tuition free. The other one was from Harvard accepting me to come there, but I'd have to teach a beginning class or two in drawing and be, I don't know what they called them, the master, the father confessor, something of Lowell House, which is at Harvard campus. I had just opened these letters when the phone rang and it was Dr. Fuller who said, "Would you like to come and work for the Seattle Art Museum?"

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Ahhh.

EDWARD THOMAS: So, I thought, "Well, I've been going to school now for so many years..." You know, I'd had about seven academic years under my belt and it was spread out over a period of about ten calendar years. And I thought, I'd learn a lot more working with the actual stuff than to just keep going to school and getting everything out of books and slides and so on.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure. This was what, 1950?

EDWARD THOMAS: '50, right. So the next day, after I graduated, I went to work at the museum. I told them the thing that I was really interested in was museum education. But they didn't have anything except what was called a museum assistantship, which was the most lowly thing you could have. You did all the dirty work out in the stacks and pounded nails to hang pictures on the walls and things like that. The museum was so poor that we bent over backwards to save every paper clip, and sometimes we even straightened out the nails so we could use them again.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: What was the total operating budget of the Seattle Art Museum in, say, 1950?

EDWARD THOMAS: I don't remember.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: But, probably under...

EDWARD THOMAS: There was a handful of people who made the whole thing go.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: How large a staff was there at that time?

EDWARD THOMAS: I think there were seven or eight of us.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Seven or eight. Dr. Fuller, yourself...

EDWARD THOMAS: Dotty Malone.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Dotty Malone was still there?

EDWARD THOMAS: Kenneth Callahan.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Kenneth Callahan, Sherman Lee.

EDWARD THOMAS: Sherman Lee, yes. He had a brand new position, assistant director. A lot of the artists around the Northwest had the experience of working at the museum, especially Morris Graves, Guy Anderson... Kenneth Callahan was there the longest.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: When did Callahan start there, in the thirties?

EDWARD THOMAS: He was there, I think, from the time it opened 50 years ago. And Dotty Malone also came at that time. Of the old people, the only ones that are still living are Kenneth Callahan, Dotty Malone and I. There was a lot of discussion. Graves got his national attention, I'd say, around 1942. And Tobey followed a little bit later; it was probably a couple of years later before he became nationally recognized. Graves got it first.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That's interesting, because wasn't Graves in effect sort of Tobey's student, follower?

EDWARD THOMAS: That's right. Of course everybody knew each other and we all went to parties and had bull sessions and everything else. It always seemed a little strange that the younger guy should get the attention, the acclaim before the older.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Yeah.

EDWARD THOMAS: Of course as time went on, Tobey became much more famous, internationally famous. He won the Grand, international prize at the Venice Biennale, had a retrospective show at the Louvre, and all these international honors. Morris Graves, as fine an artist as he is, never achieved that kind of recognition.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Yeah.

EDWARD THOMAS: But that is when it happened, and so a lot of people were writing articles about Northwest art and I was asked to do a chapter for a book on the Northwest art scene. There are certain conclusions that everyone made. One, that Northwest paintings were small-scale, which was absolutely true. One of the reasons, of course, was that they couldn't afford to buy materials that would provide for a big surface. An awful lot of the well-known early paintings by the big names of Northwest art were done on cardboard. And were on masonite, which was a building material. I don't know whether it's still around or not.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Yeah.

EDWARD THOMAS: Anyway, masonite became quite popular. You'd make your own gesso and slap it on. The artists primarily preferred tempera, as a medium.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Why do you think that is?

EDWARD THOMAS: I don't know. Of course masonite with gesso was an ideal surface.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Um hmm.

EDWARD THOMAS: The tempera seemed to be a more popular medium for artists to use at that time. The other thing that people always commented on was that Northwest paintings were inclined to be very gray. There were no colorists in the Northwest. This was really true, looking around, the nearest thing that came to a colorist was Walter Isaacs, with all of his French [Bonnard] interests and leanings.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Right.

EDWARD THOMAS: But the people who were looked upon as being native Northwest artists and who expressed the Northwest were primarily gray and rather drab in color. Naturally, our environment, whether it was the Cascade Mountains or the Pike Place Market, became the subject matter of their works, except in one case. Tobey, when he was a Dartington Hall in England, got exposed to cubism and a lot of other things and he played

around with that.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Right.

EDWARD THOMAS: The other generalization that was made about Northwest art was the Asian influence. Well, that certainly was very true, and there were good reasons for it. As I mentioned, a number of the artists worked at the art museum and they were handling some very outstanding examples of historical Asian art.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Philosophically, did Dr. Fuller start out to collect Asian art? Was it in the back of his mind when he and his mother started the museum in 1933, that they would become a center for Asian art? Or did it just sort of happen? Was it the fact that the material was available?

EDWARD THOMAS: Let me answer that in just a minute and finish up on the Asian influence.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Okay.

EDWARD THOMAS: Certainly one reason was the museum and its collection. And then Tobey and Graves both traveled in Asia, had personal friends who were Asian, and became exposed to Zen and a lot of the ideas of the Orient. So it was perfectly logical that much of the Northwest art was heavily influenced by Asian art.

As far as the museum was concerned in the origins of it, in some ways it was a kind of fluke. Dr. Fuller, Richard E. Fuller, set out to be a geologist. He became president of the volcano society and he put on asbestos clothing and he made some very early 16-millimeter films of eruptions of volcanos in Mexico and God knows where. That was his primary interest, geology. So it's understandable how eventually jade became of great interest in the early stages of building his...

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh yeah.

EDWARD THOMAS: His father was a very successful New York surgeon, and his mother had an independent income. So the mother maintained the house and sent the kids to school and all that, and he took all of his income from the medical profession and invested it in the stock market. That is why the main collection is called the Eugene Fuller Collection, and that was the doctor who invested in the stock market and financially made it all possible. During the First World War, the children were all young adults.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Now there was Richard...

EDWARD THOMAS: ...Eugenia, and Duncan.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Eugenia and Duncan.

EDWARD THOMAS: Eugenia was a nurse in France during the First World War. Dick Fuller was an ambulance driver in France. And Duncan was a medical student.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Interesting.

EDWARD THOMAS: After the war was over and everybody came home, the parents decided it would be nice if the whole family had a kind of reunion and took a trip-- they were going to go around the world. In those days you went by boat and it became about a year's project. They started out in Japan, and they got up to Nikko, and there'd been some storms and the bridges were washed out and Dick Fuller suddenly had an attack of appendicitis, and it had to be removed. There was a big cleanly scrubbed wooden table in the kitchen of the hotel-- I've forgotten the name of the hotel; I've stayed there, and I've seen this table. (laughter) They still have it, and last time I was there they were still using it. And so an operation was performed and Duncan, the younger brother, took out Dick's appendix with the supervision of his father, and his sister serving as nurse. But somehow they got hold of some bad ether and Dick became very ill and couldn't travel for a little while. In the meantime Duncan, poking around a little town in Nikko, had discovered netsukes. So he started buying some and the rest of the family became interested, and from netsukes it was logical to become interested in the intro that were usually attached to the netsukes. From there it went to snuff bottles once they got to China and then the jade and so on. But the initial interest was in netsukes, and there's an immensely important collection of netsukes at the Seattle Art Museum that never sees the light of day.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: I was not aware of that.

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh, there're cases and cases of them! That collection is named the Duncan Fuller Collection, because he was the one who started it all. And that was the start of, the beginning of the collecting bug and eventually the beginning of an art museum for Seattle.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Well, they lived in New York. I take it that from there they went...

EDWARD THOMAS: Then they came out to Victoria. And then they came to Seattle.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: I see.

EDWARD THOMAS: Duncan became a practicing doctor in Seattle and it was the days of house calls and he went to a home where a child was sick and the child had to go to the hospital and he carried her out in his arms, and so the story goes he contacted whatever she had and he died from it.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh boy.

EDWARD THOMAS: So he died at a very young age.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: This would have been in the twenties?

EDWARD THOMAS: Right. I never knew Duncan. He died before I ever came to Seattle. Eugenia is still living.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: In Seattle?

EDWARD THOMAS: In Philadelphia, where she's lived for many years.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Ah, okay. So Richard Fuller's father practiced medicine here?

EDWARD THOMAS: No. Never in Seattle.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: He was back in New York?

EDWARD THOMAS: Um hmm. Until he retired.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Okay. So they decided to retire out here? That was probably in the twenties.

EDWARD THOMAS: Yes. Then Duncan got a practice in Seattle.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Um hmm. So it was logical...

EDWARD THOMAS: I'm not exactly sure what the real motivation was in moving from Victoria to Seattle, but it happened. Fortunately for Seattle. (laughs)

JOHN OLBRANTZ: What I'm trying to do is sort of pull together kind of a historical sequence up to the point when you sort of emerged onto the scene in 1950. So in the late twenties, in the early thirties, Richard Fuller and his mother got to a point where they decided that Seattle needed an art museum.

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, there was a museum, a private gallery connected with the Henry House, which is long, long gone. That property remained vacant for a long time, and probably to name the people who lived there wouldn't mean anything to people nowadays. It was a little south of Saint Mark's Cathedral on Capitol Hill. And they'd had an exhibition space downtown, and there was an organization of people interested in art. In the end, the Fullers came to the fore and put up the money to build the building.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Was it Charles Gould?

EDWARD THOMAS: He was the architect, Carl Gould.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Carl Gould.

EDWARD THOMAS: One time I interviewed his widow on TV and of course he did a lot of the buildings out at the University of Washington. He did Saint James Cathedral, which originally had a tremendous dome on it, sort of a Baroque Italian cathedral. Very shortly after it was built there was a big snowstorm, which nobody ever counted on for Seattle, and of course the weight of the snow made the dome come crashing down. So there's no dome there, but every time I go by there and look at it I try to visualize what it would have been like. There are lots of photographs and lots of drawings of this magnificent dome sort of a' la Michelangelo rising up there on First Hill.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: I can't imagine him getting too many commissions after that for...

EDWARD THOMAS: He did many buildings at the University of Washington. Actually a great deal of his work, if you just look at it squarely, was quite eclectic. I think that the art museum was one of the most original of the designs that he did.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: It cost \$250,000 when it was built.

EDWARD THOMAS: I don't remember what the original cost was.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That figure seems to...

EDWARD THOMAS: I know it's ridiculously low.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Having just been through a capital campaign myself I know what the...

EDWARD THOMAS: There was also the feeling that building this museum would provide jobs, some jobs. This was the height of the Depression, and the building was made deliberately of Wilkinson sandstone, which was mined out near Black Diamond.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Ah.

EDWARD THOMAS: They needed employment badly. There was no big building going on. Other building techniques, I guess, were being developed. Part of the reason for the sandstone facing of the museum was to help make jobs for the miners (chuckles) of the stone. The museum sat on what had been a rose garden, that was very popular with the people of Seattle. They would come up there to see the rose garden and go down to the Conservatory, which is still there, and look at all the orchids and all of the plants. The Conservatory was very popular, whereas the idea of an art museum wasn't that much welcomed by the majority of the citizens in Seattle. They particularly objected to losing their beautiful rose garden. So very deliberately the facade of the museum was made to look like a conservatory, and that's why the entrance of the museum has those aluminum grills that are little platforms. They look like vines.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: I always wondered.

EDWARD THOMAS: And the first big hallway as you come in is still called the Garden Court. So the idea was to lure people into thinking they were going into another conservatory.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Ah hah.

EDWARD THOMAS: They'd go in through what looked like a greenhouse entrance and then there were all kinds of potted palms and stuff in the garden court and a little fountain with water spewing out. And it wasn't until after they entered that they suddenly realized that there were other rooms going off on each side and there was art in there. (chuckles) Those were the galleries, and as I said the first time that I went to the museum, I'd say at least half of the space was occupied by reproductions.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Whenever one reads about the history of the Metropolitan or, you know, any of the great museums in this country, it seems like inevitably they always had plaster casts of Greek and Roman sculpture. Did the Seattle Art Museum have those?

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh yes. They had plaster casts. As a matter of fact I have one right back here in my terrace. (laughter) It was a plaster cast of a Greek relief. I put on layers and layers of gray paint and it's reposed for 25years...

[Tape 3]

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, as I said, the people were lured in under the pretense that they were going to go to another conservatory and suddenly they were confronted with art. At that time, the collection was so small that they had to fill up the rest of the building with reproductions.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: What did the collection consist of at that time? Was it the netsukes and the jade and...

EDWARD THOMAS: The jade, of course, is one of the oldest [collections--Ed.] and [was--Ed.] always the most popular. For years and years there was one room called the Jade Room where jade was always exhibited because there were windows along that gallery, on the east side of the building, and the morning sun would shine through those windows and through the jade and it was really quite a beautiful experience to go through that gallery with all this morning sunlight shining through the pieces of jade. That was there, of course, and I don't remember some of the other specific things. I do remember that volcano painting by Ambrose Patterson. Many years later I used it in a retrospective show that I did of his work. As I remember, that show took up the entire museum. (laughter) But that painting was one of the things that was one of the highlights of my life to see.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Is it in the Seattle Art Museum collection now?

EDWARD THOMAS: No.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: I wonder where it is.

EDWARD THOMAS: I'm not sure. I imagine his widow-- she's still living-- I imagine she has it. Anyway, since those days, of course, the museum's collection has expanded enormously. And hence all of the problems of desperately trying to get more space. We were able to double our space by taking advantage of the old British Pavilion of the Seattle World's Fair.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Right.

EDWARD THOMAS: Converting it into a gallery. The intention right from the beginning was to have that [space-- Ed.] devoted to contemporary art. The ceilings were high and there was a special lighting system done. I was very much involved, and one point we were even going to have the ceiling suspended so that it could be raised or lowered depending upon the type of material that was being exhibited.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Fantastic.

EDWARD THOMAS: But just the cost of the mechanism that was needed to raise these chains and the... In other words, the ceiling would be like a giant chandelier that you could raise and lower depending upon the scale of the material.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: 1962. That was a very revolutionary idea, creating spaces.

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh and how! It was after the fair that the Pavilion was remodeled and I had hung so many hundreds and hundreds of exhibitions in my time that I was terribly aware of that problem, especially in dealing for years with these little small postage-stamp paintings that Northwest artists turned out. Then suddenly the international scene began to develop and you were confronted with these immense paintings. I remember a Frank Stella exhibition which we had down at the Pavilion-- and this is a good example of what an ideal space it was for contemporary art-- and all the interior walls were moveable, except some supporting walls, so that you could make any kind of exhibition spaces; they were on wheels. The Gould gallery, which John Hauberg added to the museum in Volunteer Park, also had moveable walls. At the moment that gallery is housing the great African collection.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Right, the Katherine White Collection.

EDWARD THOMAS: Right. But through the years, the museum collection grew tremendously, and I remember at one point I made a survey-- and this would have to be at least 20 years ago-- and I found that-- using every inch of space in the museum, not for traveling shows or anything like that-- we could only show about ten percent of the whole collection of the museum. Well, of course, the collection has gone on to grow and grow and grow, and it is not by any means just due to the Fuller family but to all kinds of people in the Northwest.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Now is probably a good time [to talk about this--Ed.]. I have been really amazed and surprised at the quality of the collection of the Seattle Art Museum. I know in doing research for Five Thousand Years of Faces [exhibition of Bellevue Art Museum, 1983, organized by JO--Ed.], we wanted to borrow a number of pieces from local collections and we chose Seattle and Portland. There are really some magnificent pieces. A good friend of mine, Jim Romano, who's a curator of Egyptian art at the Brooklyn Museum, said Seattle has a first-rate, although small, collection of Egyptian art.

EDWARD THOMAS: Um hmm.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: What I'd like to do, is to go through, very generally, the history of art, and kind of find out how Seattle acquired some of those pieces. How did they develop such a strong collection of Egyptian art?

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, it's pretty hard to give you an answer to that. I've never even thought about it. And I don't think of it as being an especially strong collection. It's an interesting one, and the quality is very good. Dr. Fuller's first consideration in adding anything to the collection was the artistic quality and not as a historical document or something like that.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: He felt that the museum collection should span the whole history of world art, except where there were other cases where an object, say someone came in with a gift, or there was a bequest or something like that, where there would be other places that it could be used to better advantage. As an example, wonderful Northwest Coast Indian things would be brought in. He'd immediately send them out to Erna Gunther at the University of Washington because he felt that a very strong collection like that should be built on that core. Actually the two strengths that the museum was built on after they went through the jade, snuff bottles, and netsukes, was Northwest art and Asian art. One of the reasons there's such outstanding things of quality is

because he had become interested, and a few other people in the city of Seattle had become interested in Asian art before it had become fashionable to collect it.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: This would have been back in the thirties?

EDWARD THOMAS: Way back. Other museums were not buying Asian art, and private collectors were not collecting it. So he had a clean sweep of what was available on the market.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: He could probably get it at very good prices.

EDWARD THOMAS: That's right, he got them at very reasonable prices. All those marvelous Chinese tomb sculptures out in front of the museum.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Yeah.

EDWARD THOMAS: They got those-- they were building the museum-- they were down at Gump's, and Gump had them in storage crates. They'd been sitting there; he couldn't possibly sell them, and after all, you know, who can put up a camel in their front livingroom?

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That's right. (laughter)

EDWARD THOMAS: So they not could be used in every place. So they got those very cheaply, and they were shipped in the same crates they'd come from China in.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Is that right?

EDWARD THOMAS: To Seattle, and much to the joy of generations of kids riding on them.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Including yours truly.

EDWARD THOMAS: Yeah. They've been there ever since. But there were many people. Mrs. Thomas D. Stimson, and Mrs. [Donald E.--Ed.] Frederick [of Frederick & Nelson department store--Ed.]. A lot of people added very important pieces.

The Japanese collection is extremely strong. Many of those pieces were added after the Second World War, when many of the wealthy Japanese people and collectors had to dispose, raise money, start their industries and so forth again. Many very important works of art, things that are classified as national treasures, would never have come on the market if it hadn't been for those circumstances. One key thing, too, not published anywhere, was that Sherman Lee was a navy officer sent to MacArthur's headquarters in Japan to look after the fine arts, that tried to look after and protect the important things that were in cathedrals and museums and so forth. In the case of Germany, where a lot of these things were stolen and hauled away, they tried to get them all back to their proper owners, and just to protect the stuff from souvenir-collecting GIs and that kind of thing. Anyway, Sherman Lee was in Japan at this time, and of course he had been a very active young scholar of Japanese art. So he met all of the key people: the dealers and the collectors and so forth, and he knew what was available, and knew their importance. Then people like Mrs. Stimson and Mrs. Frederick would come through with some money so they could buy something like the Sotatsu deer scroll and so on that Dick Fuller couldn't swing along with all the other things.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Yeah.

EDWARD THOMAS: Sometimes when there was just something that he had to have, that would suddenly become available, why he'd get his sister to crash through. And I remember at one of the board meetings we had years ago, he said, well, his sister put up the money, and of course it's listed on the label, "Gift of Mrs. Atwood," Eugenia Fuller's married name. And he said, "Probably future generations will go through the museum collection and they'll see these labels and they say, will say, 'Gee, his sister had so much better taste than he did, it's too bad she wasn't the director of the museum.'" (laughter) So those are the flukes that happen in developing a collection.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: What kind of impact-- now certainly, Richard Fuller had just exquisite taste-- what kind of influence do you think Sherman Lee, although he was only here for four years, had on that collection?

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh he had tremendous influence, just what I've said, in those years immediately after the Second World War when Japan was occupied by this country and a great many things came on the market. Sometimes world circumstances work out to the point that it's to the advantage of an institution.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure. Another question I wanted to ask you. We were talking about collections and we talked very briefly about the Egyptian and certainly we want to talk about some nice pieces in the Near Eastern

collection. There are some really fine pieces of medieval art and, of course, the Kress collection. Who was collecting back in the forties and fifties?

EDWARD THOMAS: Mrs. Donald E. Frederick was particularly interested in medieval art. And so when Dick went east to the galleries or when Sherman had a say in what went into the collection, they'd approach some of these people who were interested and had the money to come through and add them to the collection. If there was a gem that was at a reasonable price and if it was something in the medieval field and Mrs. Frederick was interested-- she also gave that famous Sotatsu deer scroll and collected some wonderful early Morris Graves paintings, and her tastes were broad-- but medieval things were very much of interest to her.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Primarily to her...

EDWARD THOMAS: Yeah.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: I know in the Five Thousand Years of Faces exhibit there's a magnificent little mirror back.

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh, the ivory one.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: The ivory mirror back of the siege of the Castle of Love.

EDWARD THOMAS: Right.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Magnificent piece, and in doing the research for the exhibit, in going through catalogues of medieval art and exhibitions that have been organized, I kept coming across that piece. There are other pieces in the Seattle Art Museum collection which are considered by most medieval scholars to be great masterpieces of medieval art in American collections, and here they are in Seattle. I always wondered why Seattle? Because when you think of Seattle you think of a lot of Asian art. But, you're telling me that Mrs. Frederick-- who was she?

EDWARD THOMAS: Her husband, that's Frederick & Nelson. He owned the land. And she was actually a schoolteacher in, I believe, Springfield, Oregon. We used to talk about it quite a bit years ago when I went out to her house, and she lived in a great castle, so to speak, in the Highlands. Except where many times in Europe buildings such as this were made of plaster, hers [was made--Ed.] out of real marble. (laughter)

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Really?

EDWARD THOMAS: The garden was his thing, and the house was her thing. They had wonderful paneled rooms, where whole rooms were brought over from great old European houses and castles and installed. The house was offered to the University of Washington as place for visiting VIPs and [people] like that to use. But the Highlands Association thought it would bring a lot of traffic and I think even at one point there was some talk about undesirable people. (laughter) Anyway, the dumbest thing that ever happened is they turned it down and the building was sold and the owner chopped the building in half and some of the rooms are now in San Francisco in the Legion of Honor and scattered around at different museums. There was no place the Seattle Art Museum could put it. She had wanted to give the house and grounds to the Seattle Art Museum, but there was absolutely no money for maintenance. There was just no way that the museum could swing a branch like that. It was, I think, one of the great disappointments that happened, because I could visualize it like the Cloisters in the Metropolitan. It would have been just a super thing, and I think eventually it would have been supported, but it just didn't go through at that time. Well, of course there's a story to almost every single item in that collection. One story that I kind of like is one that involved me very directly. The museum has a Jackson Pollock painting.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh.

EDWARD THOMAS: And it's a very interesting painting-- with reservations I say, because of the experience of how it was added to the museum's collection. Zoe Dusanne, whom I mentioned earlier, was an art dealer who knew Peggy Guggenheim and she mentioned, "Why don't you give something to the Seattle Art Museum?" She was giving things away for tax credits and stuff. So she allowed how she might. I was going off to Egypt and Greece, I guess, and was to be in Venice. So when I arrived in Venice I called Peggy Guggenheim and said I was in town, and she said, "Well, why don't you come for cocktails tomorrow night?" So I did, and there was some art critic from Paris and another guy who-- I've forgotten his name now, hyphenated name-- who taught at Smith College and was director of the Smith College Art Museum. Anyway, he was there kind of blowharding away and going through stuff, and somehow Peggy Guggenheim and I hit it off and she had a protegee then, a young Italian boy. [The man from Smith--Ed.] was going through all these things trying to decide and asking her to set this one aside and so forth, and [telling--Ed.] how he would buy it for Smith College. And she turned to me in a stage whisper and said, "Stick around, honey, and I'll give you one." (Uproarious laughter) She was that kind of direct person. She was getting kind of fed up with his pomposity. Finally they left and she said, "Okay, let's go down to the basement; I have five Jackson Pollocks set up and you can have your pick of any one of them."

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Wow.

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, I went down and somewhere out of the walls her business manager or whatever he was also appeared. I walked into the room and without any hesitation I said, "That one." She looked at him, and he looked at her and he shook his head, "No. Don't give it to him." And I'll never know to this day whether they were testing me to see if I really knew what I was doing, or [perhaps] because I was so positive that that was the one of the five, they thought they'd better hang on to it. And she said, "Well, I'm sorry. I can't let you have that one." And she said, "But since it's not your first choice and I promised you a first choice, maybe I have some other things you might be interested in."

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Wow.

EDWARD THOMAS: So out came-- I think I came away with five important paintings. And my second choice is the Jackson Pollock. I thought it was a typical example. It has aluminum paint in it, the gravel and you know, everything. Aesthetically I didn't think it was anywhere near up to the quality of the other one. But, and again, how lucky can you be? So she had all of the paintings crated and they were on the seas headed for Seattle and in a couple of days Jackson Pollock was killed. So there would be no more. And she was left with four, as his primary dealer.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That's amazing. What a story.

EDWARD THOMAS: So, just by the fluke of time, the fact that I was there at that particular time and she was in the mood at that particular time, and the painting was on its way before he died.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Well, and that you two struck it up, too.

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, that happens a great deal in the art museum world. If say a director or curator has a good relationship with a collector why then they can work together and sometimes just the opposite happens. There are lots of wonderful private collections in Seattle now. And, of course, no one wants to give an important collection to an institution where it's going to be in storage.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That's right.

EDWARD THOMAS: So we desperately need more exhibition space.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: As long as we're talking about collections, some of the other great collections, you know, I think Seattle has generally a very strong collection of modern art. What about the Renaissance collection, Kress collection. How did that come to be at the Seattle Art Museum?

EDWARD THOMAS: Sherman Lee primarily was the one that worked with the Kress Foundation and selected the paintings. They arrived and we took the smaller of the two galleries that are devoted to the Kress Collection; that was all the space that was given to the original Kress Collection. Sherman Lee was still at the museum. Among the things that he had selected was the Tiepolo ceiling plus the original oil sketch for the ceiling, which had been done for a palazzo in Vicenza. When we received these paintings, I was traveling, and they sent me a photograph of the painting and the sketch. I went to Vicenza and tracked down the building where it had been located and met the man-- he's now dead; he was in an automobile accident-- whose family who had owned the palazzo since Renaissance time.

[Tape 4]

EDWARD THOMAS: It was the Porto family, who from generations and generations had had this textile manufacturing business in Tiepolo, and a number of prominent artists had decorated a lot of these palazzos. They were not isolated in the great country estate, but were in the city, commercial city. So I tracked down the building, and they still operated a textile company, and the ceiling was in what is the reception room for the business. If somebody comes and wants to sell them a bunch of wool or cotton or something, why they go through this reception ground. And that's the way it would have been used originally. There was a carriage entrance that came in off the street and into the building, and there were two doors into the room: one from the carriage entrance and one from an interior courtyard. And, oh, there was another door also, into a kind of inner sanctum. And the windows were on the third wall. If you look at the ceiling in the Kress Gallery now, you'll notice that at a certain position it seems upside down; this is because it was designed specifically to be seen primarily from two views as you came into the room.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Ahh.

EDWARD THOMAS: So it's only from those two places that the painting looks right side up. They had since restored the ceiling. The same man who had restored Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper had recently restored the

ceiling. As fresco, of course, is done on plaster and the paint soaks through so that there is [a] little residue of the painting left on the ceiling what we have was the original surface of the painting. The whole thing was glued to paper, heavy strong paper, and then about a quarter of an inch of the plaster was sliced off the ceiling.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: And that's how they transported it.

EDWARD THOMAS: And then it was mounted on a piece of canvas and put into a frame of the same shape as the molding in the palazzo.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: I see.

EDWARD THOMAS: And naturally, being about a quarter-inch thick plaster, it's a very heavy painting.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Um hmm.

EDWARD THOMAS: This was a common practice for people in Vicenza when Tiepolo became extremely popular and people bought these paintings very cheaply. The one that's in Seattle was bought by a Dr. Simon, who lived in Germany, and he had it in his dining room. Then when he died his heirs weren't especially interested and so it came onto the New York art market, just about the same time as the sketch for it. The sketch had been [with] an artist, so the two had never been together since the time that they were painted.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Interesting.

EDWARD THOMAS: In different countries, everything else, and suddenly here in Seattle the two were united.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That's fantastic.

EDWARD THOMAS: Another story you won't find published anywhere is when the ceiling arrived in Seattle. The back doors had been designed extra large so they could be opened up to bring in large crates and things like that. But, we had another problem when it came to how in the hell we were going to get them up into the gallery. Sometimes we took off the windows, the frams, some of the molding, the grill work on the entrance, and we would bring big things in that way. But somehow, the Tiepolo would not go in. Heavy as can be. We were finally able to work it into the elevator shaft, and then gradually as we went along, turning it up on end. Dr. Lee, Dr. Fuller and I were primarily moving this thing, plus a lot of other guys to just give us manpower.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: And we couldn't use the elevator because the painting was too tall. Up in the gallery level, the doors were open and Dr. Fuller, who was very bald then, had the Tiepolo ceiling balanced on the top of his bald head. (laughter) And we struggled, trying to squeeze it at angles and everything else to get it out of that elevator shaft and in, so we could get it down. The gallery walls hadn't been closed up until we got the painting in, and then they closed up the doorways and stuff there. It took an awful lot of struggle, believe me. It was just, you know, sometimes a half inch is all the space you had.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh boy.

EDWARD THOMAS: And it was just a miracle that we were able-- because you couldn't collapse it or roll it up because of the plaster. But the story of getting that Tiepolo ceiling up there was something. Well, because there was stuff crowded into this little gallery. It radiates...

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Mostly renaissance?

EDWARD THOMAS: Yes. All renaissance and all Italian at that point. And so, in order to isolate the paintings and give a little more feeling of spaciousness, we kept the room dark and just had frames with spotlights on them so that each painting was illuminated separately. We felt that gave it a little more feeling of space.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Well, a very dramatic way of lighting it.

EDWARD THOMAS: Right. And there was a Della Robbia rosetta piece in terra cotta. We were all terribly proud of ourselves, and especially for having gotten the ceiling in there.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That's amazing.

EDWARD THOMAS: Samuel H. Kress arrived for the opening, and he blew his top. He didn't like anything about it. (laughs)

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Is that right?

EDWARD THOMAS: Yes! And we just had to completely change the whole thing. Well, we were able to raise the money and to build another wing and so out went the... I notice they're keeping it a lot darker now.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Um hmm.

EDWARD THOMAS: I've been on the board of the museum for 10years, but I don't have any say or anything on the operations of the museum. I noticed they have those galleries a lot darker than they used to be. Samuel Kress, if he came back, would be raising hell, I think, if he saw them.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: He probably wasn't aware of light levels and the damage that...

EDWARD THOMAS: Well anyway, we rounded up the money to build another room, so that things wouldn't be so crowded, then they kicked through with some sculpture and some northern paintings like the Rubens sketch, which is really the...

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh, it's lovely.

EDWARD THOMAS: ...most important piece in that part of the collection. But again, there are always funny flukes. There's a story behind every single piece, right from the day it was created. Why it was created. How did the guy do it.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Do you know anything about a Hagod Kervorkian? Does that name sound familiar?

EDWARD THOMAS: Yes.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: I know he assisted Dr. Fuller in purchasing a number of the antiquities.

EDWARD THOMAS: He was a dealer in New York-- especially dealt in art of India. And he often partially donated. In other words, he'd pick up, or sell it at a reduced rate from the market value, for one reason or another. And that's why you see his name a lot on...

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Yeah; partially donated by Kervorkian.

EDWARD THOMAS: Yeah. That's right.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Norman Davis. Big collector of Greek, Etruscan, and Roman art, primarily Greek art.

EDWARD THOMAS: Primarily Greek.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Tell me about him...

EDWARD THOMAS: He's very much alive, lives here in Seattle very quietly. He's done several books and has accumulated a great collection of Greek coins. And his first book, which is published by Spink and Sons in London-- all of his books have been published by them-- was on Greek coins. Then he did another one on Hellenistic cities and their coins. And he more recently has done a smaller book of Greek art. He decided to take a trip and follow in the steps of Alexander the Great. So he went to where he was born, and followed him all the way through his exploits until his unfortunately young death. And then he wrote a book, In the Steps of Alexander.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Fantastic. How did he get interested in antiquities?

EDWARD THOMAS: I don't really know. He's interested in a lot of other things besides just Greek art. One of the things-- I know him very well, of course-- and one of the things that he did was that he took lessons from Mark Tobey, not painting lessons or anything, but he hired Tobey and he would go and sit with him for an hour or two hours or something, and they'd just talk.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Really!?! That's interesting.

EDWARD THOMAS: Um hmm, about art and philosophy and things like that. So he's a very interesting man with a lot of different facets.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: What was he trained initially to do?

EDWARD THOMAS: He was a brewer. He owned Heidelberg here, Columbia Ale, and he sold those businesses, retired, and so he collects an amazing number of things. He writes and his wife recently died, so he's a widower and he keeps busy, very active on the board of the art museum, he comes to meetings and so on.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Great. I'd like to find out about some of those people who were early collectors in Seattle. [Is

there--Ed.] anybody that you can think of that I missed? We've talked about Dr. Fuller and his collecting of Asian art. We've talked about Mrs. Donald Frederick, and her passion for medieval art, certainly Norman Davis, in the field of classical art.

EDWARD THOMAS: Yes. Mrs. Thomas B. Stimson.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Stimson, now, what can you tell me...?

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, she had an outstanding collection of Tobey Market sketches, and she was the one who bought and eventually gave to the museum EPluribus Unum.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Ahh!

EDWARD THOMAS: Which is the Tobey painting of the Seattle Public Market.

[Break in taping]

EDWARD THOMAS: There have been many, many people who have contributed to the growth of the Seattle Art Museum's collection. Most of those that we talked about already were extremely wealthy. But then there are other people, lots of people, who were of very modest circumstances who had the foresight and the wisdom and the taste and so forth to acquire important things and then the generosity to leave or give them to the museum. I think of people like Berthe Poncy Jacobsen, who was a great friend of Mark Tobey's. She taught music, piano, out at the University of Washington, and she certainly wasn't a wealthy person. But when Mark Tobey needed to sell a painting and things like that, she bought a great many of them-- some of the most important ones, like Gothic, that one of the cathedral.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: And there's one-- we have a little regional art exhibit-- White Night, is a Berthe Poncy Jacobsen gift.

EDWARD THOMAS: And Betty Bowen, who was a newspaper reporter, a publicist, and a working gal, and just piles of others. One fellow, Charles Clark, he died very young, and he became interested primarily through the influence of Sherman Lee in collecting drawings, particularly Renaissance and Baroque and 18th-century drawings. So there's a collection of his work. We've talked about Sherman Lee so much, I suppose I should point out that for a good many years he has been one of the most distinguished Orientalists in the world, and became the director of the Cleveland Art Museum. He's done many, many shows, and he's retiring this year. There are many special international events and exhibitions and so forth that are being held in his honor. And on top of that, he's also coming to Seattle for the 50th anniversary of our museum.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: For the purposes of the Archives, I would like to go back nine years to when I first enrolled at the University of Washington. I recall sitting in Millard Rogers' office and we got to talking about people we knew and I said, well yes, I had studied with Ed Thomas. We got talking and Millard had mentioned that Ed was one of Sherman Lee's students, and Sherman Lee made the comment that Ed Thomas was his best student.

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh. Well, he used to say, "It's always nice to have a protege." (laughter)

JOHN OLBRANTZ: I thought that was quite nice of him.

EDWARD THOMAS: Millard Rogers, after Sherman left, became assistant director of the museum, and then eventually associate director. And then when he went to the university, I became assistant director and associate director of the museum.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: You began as-- well, let me refer to your resume. We talked about you as a museum assistant.

EDWARD THOMAS: That's the very bottom rung of the ladder.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: (laughs) So there was Dr. Fuller, yourself, Ken Callahan, Dotty [Dorothy--Ed.] Malone, Sherman Lee, and there was the woman who was the long-time registrar there...

EDWARD THOMAS: Emily Tupper.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Emily Tupper. I met her sister.

EDWARD THOMAS: Her son was a geologist at Western [Washington--Ed.] University in Bellingham and he was killed on an expedition on Mount Rainier.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Bressler.

EDWARD THOMAS: Bressler. Right. But then there was Earl Fields, who was the photographer and very importantly Edith Young, who was the educational director, right from the beginning, and I eventually replaced her.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: So she was there from '33 to, well, let's see, '51, '52.

EDWARD THOMAS: Yeah. And when they talked to me about going to the museum, I said, "Well, the thing that really interests me is museum education, I think." They said, "Well, there just isn't a place for you in that field because Mrs. Young has been here for years and years. She's very beloved in the community and all that kind of thing." And then shortly after I arrived, why her health was bad, and she resigned and I [took--Ed.] her place, to become curator of education. I think I was educational director for ten or so years.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Right. Tell me, during the fifties, we talked about what you did as the museum assistant, which I think many of us have done, as museum assistants you change light globes...

EDWARD THOMAS: Exactly.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: You do whatever is really needed.

EDWARD THOMAS: Sweep up the globes you've dropped on the floor. (laughs)

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That's right. Clean the display cases, Windex the vitrines, put up labels when needed, and dump the garbage. What I'm interested in is, from '51 to '54 you were curator of education, from '54 to '61 you were education director. During the period of the fifties, how did education manifest itself in the museum, because I know they've got a very active education program, and I think all of us who are in the museum field are very sensitive about education, about our role as educators.

EDWARD THOMAS: Um hmm.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: What kinds of programs did you do? Tell me a little bit about the kinds of work you did in the fifties.

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh, it was very diversified, and there were lots of exciting things happening. Edith Young had established a precedent and we would go out-- for free-- to any organization that would listen to us. [We would-- Ed.] go in, talk about the museum and all the services the museum provided and things that were in it, or, you know, at Christmastime, every church in town wanted Madonnas in Art or something like that and we'd go tromping off to do it. And realize that when I started out as curator of education, there was no art history department at the University of Washington. That meant that all of the schoolteachers who were graduated from the University of Washington knew absolutely nothing about art history.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: At that time there was-- now correct me if I'm wrong-- that was '51, '52, there was Sherman Lee, when he left for Cleveland, there was Millard Rogers, so really there was an Asian art historian, there was yourself, and probably Gervais Reed at the University, and that pretty much constituted the art historians available in Seattle.

EDWARD THOMAS: There had been other people come and go. But I remember one night, my wife and I were having dinner at the President of the University of Washington's house. I leapt into him about the absolute disgrace that they didn't have an art history department at the University of Washington, as major a school as it was, let alone a degree or anything else. But it wasn't too long after that that things began to happen. So I spent an awful lot of time working with the schools and with teachers. Many of them were terribly interested and they wanted to take advantage of the temporary exhibitions and stuff like that that came through. But they just didn't have the background to cope with it.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: And so there was a lot of that. Television appeared on the scene.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That was the golden age of television when it first began...

EDWARD THOMAS: ...started in '51, and for about eleven years, I did a half-hour program once a week on KING-TV, about art, and I had all kinds of guests, and interviewed people. They couldn't possibly have done it... It's just unbelievable to think of the differences because KING-TV's first station was at the foot of Queen Anne hill, over on West Queen Anne. It was an old garage. And I drove a run-down Buick convertible, and I could drive right into the studio and take the art objects that I was going to talk about out of the trunk of my car and put them out on tables in the studio. (chuckles)

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Priceless works of art.

EDWARD THOMAS: Right there. (laughter) So things were very primitive. Of course, everything was just black-and-white. Tapes didn't exist, but a little later we had kinescope. I interviewed many celebrities on that program, who happened to come through town. Everybody did it for free.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Who, who were some of the people that you interviewed?

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh, Sir Herbert Read, as an example.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Ahh.

EDWARD THOMAS: We did I think three programs together, and a lot of local people that were of great interest, like Myra Wiggins, with her galoshes, and Mrs. Carl Gould, with all of her stories of her life with this important architect of the city of Seattle.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Yes. Did you ever interview Dick Fuller?

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh yeah.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Mark Tobey?

EDWARD THOMAS: And Kenneth Callahan. I don't think I ever did one with Tobey-- I can't remember, but I did lots of different artists. We did whatever was going on; sometimes it had nothing to do with the museum, but it was an important art event. And the head of the art department...

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Walter Isaacs?

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, after Walter Isaacs. (laughter) The president of the University of Washington talked about research and education and things like art education. Just whatever seemed to be appropriate for that particular time.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: At the time, in the period of the 1950s, did the Seattle Art Museum do much in the way, let's say, of lectures, film? Did you, for example, actually bring in speakers to talk about recent excavations in...?

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh yeah, but we didn't have the money to do a lot of that. You had to catch somebody who was going to be in the Northwest anyway, and everybody shared the cost of the travel expenses and the speaker's fee and so on.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure. So for example...

EDWARD THOMAS: It was far less structured as it is now. Also, I remember something in my annual reports: sometimes I did 250 or 300 lectures around the state for all kinds of community clubs and teacher organizations and things like that. You're just out trying to sell art and the Seattle Art Museum.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: So you were on the road quite a bit.

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh yeah, I did a lot of that too. I've had more chicken salads than you could ever imagine, at these ladies' luncheons. But then television was very suspect among educators. There were a good many University of Washington professors, some of whom I'd studied with, who thought it was the invention of the devil, and no one would ever read again, and so on. And I felt it was another great communication medium, like radio, or like the telephone. But it had the additional advantage of being visual.

[Tape 5]

EDWARD THOMAS: Television provided a means of reaching a vast number of people, and instead of going to Yakima and, you know, "Little Creek" somewhere, to give all these lectures, I could appear on television and meet and be heard by thousands of people, and introduce art and the museum to them.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh.

EDWARD THOMAS: And then Channel9, KCTS, was started. I was on the original board. And Mrs. Bullitt at KING-TV donated some of their old cameras. Everything was still black-and-white.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Wow.

EDWARD THOMAS: And I started doing programs that were broadcast in the classroom, which were the first in Seattle. I worked closely with the Seattle Public Schools and did programs that tied in with their curriculum. I did a series of courses for third graders, and so forth. There was something in those days known as the Ohio awards,

which were given by Ohio University, and they had a showing where people came and judged all of the educational television and radio programs that were being offered in the country. And I and Dorothy Lahr were doing a program called "Man's Story." The title came directly from the textbook that was used by junior and senior high school, especially senior high school students. Basically it was a world history classbook. So I went sort of chapter by chapter and would bring examples, things that were created by people at that time, that they were studying and reading about. I showed them pictures of what kind of houses people lived in, what kind of clothes they wore. In other words it was an extension of the illustrations they would have in the textbook.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: And then, I had to write a teacher's manual that gave them some clue as to what to expect and how to prepare their class. What were some activities they could do before or after the program and so on. I was very pleased that received the [Ohio award--Ed.], first national award for educational television.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Fantastic.

EDWARD THOMAS: And that was for classroom television. So that was very important, but there were some other very innovative things that I think were done. I'm sure we were the first one to have a senior citizen's program. And it's still going, and once a month senior citizens would be brought in by bus or whatever, from senior homes, and anybody who's ambulatory came. They brought bag lunches with them, and they spent the day. In the morning, I or somebody would give them a tour of the exhibit. Then in the afternoon there would be speakers, or sometimes they provided their own program. I remember several times there was a senior citizen's orchestra, and they taught violin, and they'd sit up there on the stage and play and just have a marvelous time entertaining each other.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Fantastic.

EDWARD THOMAS: That was a real pioneer in the museum education world. Another one was an exceptional students' program. It's sort of interesting because we're seeing a little of this happening in our official thinking again about the quality of education. Sputnik suddenly appeared and the Russians had spaceships going, and immediately they came, the [comment] in the nation was that, "Well, what's happening to all the dummies in our schools?" you know, "Why aren't these really brilliant people, why isn't something being done for them?" And really bright students who have outgrown their teachers are just kind of floating around wasting their time until they go to college. So I started what was the first exceptional children's education program. I did it with the Seattle Public Schools, and it was done at first with graduating seniors in Seattle high schools. It was later expanded to junior high. Art teachers of each high school in the city of Seattle would select a student that they felt was very outstanding. And usually the student-- and this was kind of surprising-- who was very outstanding in art was also outstanding in all of the academic areas of his or her studies.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Uh huh.

EDWARD THOMAS: So they came and they spent an afternoon at the museum. And this was once a week. I, or Dorothy, or somebody would give them a tour of whatever was on exhibit at the museum, and maybe they could interpret that or draw upon that in some way. Then we had outstanding teachers, recognized teachers-- or artists, not necessarily teachers-- teach them in a studio-type class. And Mark Tobey had promised me he would teach one, but one thing or another happened and he never did. But Guy Anderson and Ambrose Patterson, who had taught forever and a day at the University of Washington, and who did that volcano painting. (laughs)

JOHN OLBRANTZ: The one you love.

EDWARD THOMAS: Right. He was a very good teacher, and several generations, I guess, of people in the Northwest who happened to take art had worked with him. And so he came and he worked with these outstanding high school students.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That's great.

EDWARD THOMAS: That was just a super program, that I was very proud of, and later on there were lots of programs for outstanding students who weren't being challenged. And in the art world it was very easy for them. The high school art teachers just didn't know how to cope with this student who had so many ideas and so much ability. They needed the competition of other students, so you got, instead of an outstanding student sitting and competing and working with a bunch of average students, he was with 25 hotshots, who were on their toes. And then he had to keep on his toes.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Were these offered as Saturday morning classes?

EDWARD THOMAS: No, they were excused from their afternoon classes once a week.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: And they would come...

EDWARD THOMAS: And eventually, of course, when you get into interdisciplinary programs... It happened at Western with their humanities program, which was an outstanding program-- the main reason why I went there. In this case, you know, the science teacher objected because Mary Jones was not in class the day he was going to give his four-star demonstration or something. (laughter) She was off working with one of the well-known professional artists. So that primarily was [the reason for the demise of the program--Ed.]. We paid the salary of the teacher, provided them [the students--Ed.] with the atmosphere, it got them to the museum once a week.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Where were these courses offered, in the museum?

EDWARD THOMAS: Down in the basement in a funny little room. We had to put a sink in, I remember. It was an existing room that was used for primarily teaching purposes-- just a little hole in the wall. But it had some windows and it was light. If they painted, got down on their hands and knees and painted on the floor, it didn't make any difference because the floor wasn't anything that we had to worry about or the public ever saw.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That's right. Well, it was a quote-unquote "wet space."

EDWARD THOMAS: Right.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: It sounds to me as if you were working a lot with schoolkids, gifted kids, a lot with senior citizens. You did a lot with public television, an awful lot.

EDWARD THOMAS: Right. And then groups of all kinds came to the museum for tours. I tried to, instead of going out to the people, to get them to come to us.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: One program, I think, that was unique in the country was the PTA day. And that was once a month-- at that time we changed exhibits once a month, so there'd be a whole new show. And there would be a committee of mothers from the PTAs of all the Seattle schools, high school, junior high, and grade school. They would come to the museum on PTA day, and I'd give them a tour of the museum and talk to them about all kinds of things. Then they had their own program in the afternoon, like the senior citizen. The idea was that they would go back and meet with their teachers and tell them what was going on, suggest how maybe that experience could be incorporated into other things that they were studying, and especially to arouse the interest of the students and the teachers to the point where they might come and see the exhibit for themselves.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Um hmm.

EDWARD THOMAS: Of course transportation and the expense of getting them there was always a problem.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Was that something that the school district bore or the Seattle Art Museum bore?

EDWARD THOMAS: No, the schools had to [do it]. There was no way that the art museum could possibly hire buses or anything like that. Sometimes when they put their mind to it, and somebody up in the bureaucracy was convinced that this was important, why then they could produce more kids than we could hardly handle. When we had the Van Gogh show, the whole museum was devoted to original Van Gogh paintings. The buses were arranged by the Seattle and the King County public schools, and they would shuttle a bus full of kids for tours of the exhibits and take back the group they'd brought the previous time. And every hour there was just hundreds of buses lined up in Volunteer Park all bringing these kids to look at Van Gogh paintings.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Fantastic.

EDWARD THOMAS: When I was at the museum, we had a King Tut exhibition. I think we charged 25cents. Over half of the things that were in this Tut show were in that [recent--Ed.] exhibit; they'd already been in Seattle. And somehow there was no magic. We used all the publicity gimmicks in the world. Nobody was interested in coming to see a King Tut show.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: (laughs)

EDWARD THOMAS: Granted, in the interim, the Egyptian government had scrubbed up some of the alabaster vases and replaced some of the inlays, and made it a lot prettier than when we had the show.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: A lot flashier.

EDWARD THOMAS: When we had the show the first time, and we had a very tiny exhibition space for it, and...

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Where was it installed in the museum.

EDWARD THOMAS: It [was--Ed.] in what is now known as the activities room.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Really! The exhibit was down there.

EDWARD THOMAS: Right, the whole exhibit was down there, [in a room that--Ed.] was not even designed as a gallery but more as a lunchroom for senior citizens, PTA people, guild, all those other organized groups that came. And I felt very strongly that if you wanted to have a program [you should--Ed.] not try and go out and start it from scratch, but work through an existing organization.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: So that you had their help and support, like PTA, the schools, and their various senior citizen groups and senior citizen residences, and the exceptional student through the schools, always trying to use other organizations.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: I remember seeing that King Tut exhibit in-- it was about 1962, wasn't it? '61, '62, that it was here in Seattle.

EDWARD THOMAS: I don't remember when it first came.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: I remember there was a big plea in conjunction with it. It seems to me that the exhibit was brought here in part to help finance the salvaging of the monuments in Nubia, and I remember I was...

EDWARD THOMAS: Abu Simbel, they wanted to get money for that.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Right, I remember I was 11, 12, 13 years old. I remember coming up to the Seattle Art Museum, and seeing that. I remember taking the money out of my piggy bank, and donating it to help salvage the monuments of Nubia, Abu Simbel, and the other [monuments] that were being submerged because of the construction of the high Aswan Dam. In part, that exhibit, along with a lot of other factors, motivated me to go into the field of archaeology. It's interesting because the Seattle Art Museum really did touch a lot of people's lives. It certainly touched my life.

EDWARD THOMAS: Um hmm.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: I think, from my own perspective, one of the reasons I went into the field I did was because of very positive experiences I had as a young child coming up from Tacoma to the Seattle Art Museum.

[Break in taping]

EDWARD THOMAS: I can't remember...

JOHN OLBRANTZ: (laughs) It's the gin tonics. (laughter) Okay, you were education director from 1954 to 1961, and then at that point you became assistant director from '61 to '63. Basically what did you do as assistant director? Did you become more involved in exhibitions, and fund raising?

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, I had gradually been more and more involved in the administration of the museum in my educational role. And then you just rise to different needs and interests and responsibilities. The '61-'63 years were very busy ones, and landmarks. Not only can the museum be a great influence upon the development of a young person's life, but individuals and events. Some of them [were--Ed.] just real cornball, just knocked me for a loop and propelled me more and more in the funny direction I eventually took. But '61 to '63 were the years of the Seattle World's Fair and the formation of it.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: What kind of impact did the World's Fair have on Seattle Art Museum and the regional art scene? Again, I have to go back to my childhood recollections-- but I can remember as a child of twelve, standing in this modern art pavillion seeing all this abstract art and this piece of sculpture that was called, I think, Perpetual Motion Machine [by Jean Tinguely--Ed.]

EDWARD THOMAS: [You take] away the rattles and clangs and everybody ran to watch.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: It just blew me away, because I had grown up with Mark Tobey and Morris Graves and those people as being the quote-unquote "modern artists," and suddenly I'm seeing work that's coming out of New York. I'd never seen anything like it before in my life. What kind of impact did the World's Fair have on the Seattle Art Museum and on regional art?

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, maybe it was the other way around: What kind of impact did the museum have on the

development of the fair? Dr. Fuller and I were on the original boards and many committees planning the fair. I remember I was sitting in a meeting in what is now the Science Center, down there in the board room, and this committee was trying to decide what would be the best use of this building after the fair was over. While we were sitting there talking, they were pouring the concrete outside those terraces, you know, where the arches are.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Yeah.

EDWARD THOMAS: Here they were building it and we were already trying to figure out... And of course we had lots of ideas, and this was a great opportunity for people of Seattle to dream and use their imaginations and so forth, and so a tremendous amount of things came out of the fair, not only culturally but also restaurants. Up to that point there had been at the most three restaurants. If you had a really distinguished person coming from out of town and you wanted to take them to a restaurant, there'd be about three. Well, now there are dozens, and there are other reasons too, but suddenly people decided, "Gee, I might make money having a restaurant during the fair." So suddenly there were restaurants all over town. The art pavilion, which you just mentioned, was divided into different sections. The director was Norman Davis, the collector of Greek art and a Seattle businessman. And he was appointed to put that together. There was a committee and we would meet and talk about ideas and so forth, and we had some meetings with museum director's of the major West Coast museums: Los Angeles, the San Francisco museums, and Portland. We'd talk about what could be done. In the end, it was decided that first of all there'd be an exhibition at the Seattle Art Museum. Neil Meitzler and I did that. And the people coming at that point would be primarily interested in seeing Tobeys and Graves. So we had an exhibition featuring Northwest artists, in that pavilion, not the present art pavilion, but what is now known as the Exhibition Center.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh! Okay.

EDWARD THOMAS: That building is right there between the Opera House and the Repertory Theater. Part of the building was devoted to a gallery from the Seattle Art Museum and Northwest art. Another part was devoted to masterpieces from the museums of the world. There might be a Goya from one, and the Seattle Art Museum's masterpiece was a fairly newly acquired Haniwa Warrior, which is argued whether it's better, just slightly better, or as good the most famous Haniwa national treasure in Japan.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Ah hah.

EDWARD THOMAS: Anyway, that was ours, and there was a Goya and there were all kinds of paintings that were selected by the directors of museums.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sort of key pieces.

EDWARD THOMAS: This was their most outstanding treasure. And so you had a great variety, a little bit of everything for a kind of general public that attends a world's fair.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: Then you had the modern art exhibit and the director of the DeYoung-- I'm forgetting names-- anyway, he put together the masterpiece show. He was a European with a long distinguished background and many good connections with museum personnel and people who would cooperate with him and realize this was a legitimate operation and not going to be just an exhibit on easels and under a tent somewhere.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That's right, yeah.

EDWARD THOMAS: And then there was the modern art exhibit-- what was going on in the world at the beginning of this new century, or this new decade. It really was trying to suggest what would happen in the next century. And everything that was done there, you know, has been outshot so far that it seems like an awfully dated little thing.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: But it had a tremendous influence on Seattle and cultural life. I know in my teaching I often would have occasion to refer to Tinguely; and [for--Ed.] those students who were old enough to have had the experience of going to the fair and seeing that thing shake and vibrate and make all those funny noises, it had an impact on everybody. I used that in my teaching very often as an example of certain types of stuff-- until I suddenly realized that nobody'd ever heard of the World's Fair, let alone seeing it. (laughs) Before that I used to use as examples key dates in talking about art. This was done at the time of or just before the First World War, and this was done just after the Second World War, and finally one young girl came up to me, and said, "You know, Mr. Thomas, you talk about all these wars, but I don't know when they happened. I wasn't even born

then." (laughter) I find the older you get, you hang onto certain landmarks and...

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That's right.

EDWARD THOMAS: I haven't mentioned John Hauberg or the Bagley Wrights, who have been very...

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Now when did they emerge?

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, they've always had a great interest in the museum and are excellent collectors in areas that Dick Fuller was not particularly involved with. So they have been a strong influence and both of them have been presidents and chairmen of the board of the museum, and they have done a great deal to shape its course. They're also very outstanding collectors, as were the Dick Langs; he died recently.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Um hmm.

EDWARD THOMAS: I've been talking about the really early days of the museum, but it's a continuing thing and needs to be a dynamic thing, and there is always new blood, so to speak, who has injected a lot of that into the Seattle Art Museum scene.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Of course, the Haubergs with their great collection of Northwest Coast Indian art, and Annie's [Gould Hauberg--Ed.] interest in crafts, the Wright's collection of modern art, and the Lang's collection of modern American art are three really major collections.

EDWARD THOMAS: Right.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: I wanted to digress for just a sec. What kind of impact do you think the World's Fair had on regional art? Because, you know, before, the forties and fifties...

[Tape 6]

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, the World's Fair sort of put Seattle on the map in many ways. People in this country suddenly stopped asking, when they said, "Where do you come from?"-- "Seattle, Washington." "Oh, Washington, D.C., on the East Coast," and then you'd try to explain, "No, on the Pacific Coast in the West." People began to slowly know where in the hell Seattle was. And suddenly a lot of things seemed to happen. There was good theater and dance coming and outstanding performances of things that without the impetus and the financing of the fair never would have come here. Of course all the Northwest people had the benefit of exposure to those things. And now, Seattle is looked upon by foundations and people throughout the country as being a very vital art center. I would say all of that came following the World's Fair.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Do you think the exhibition of modern art changed the way that Northwest artists approached their art?

EDWARD THOMAS: Seemed to me I saw some reflection. Naturally there were a lot of rusty parts and machinery that were made to wiggle (laughter) and suddenly were being produced by Northwest sculptors. The key to what was influencing young artists was usually the Northwest Annual. In the days of the annual, of Northwest painters and sculptors, the whole museum was devoted to that show. And after the Van Gogh exhibit, you...

JOHN OLBRANTZ: When was that? Was that sixty...

EDWARD THOMAS: Just off the top of my head, I don't remember. Anyway, all the entries coming in, or so many of the entries were just so obviously Van Gogh-ish. Then after we had the big Japanese show in '52, I think it was, many paintings were done on gold leaf, including people like Morris Graves, and so on.

It's unfortunate that the Northwest Annual doesn't exist anymore, because that was the showplace for the painters and the sculptors of the Northwest, so that we, the public, could become acquainted with what they were doing, so that you could see the general trends and influences. And that to me, like the demise of the international print show, are two of the tragic losses that happened at the museum. I feel that for at least the last five or more years, the museum has not paid the attention to Northwest artists that it really should be doing. But there isn't the space, and it is important to bring in other things and not just be totally provincial in the things that are displayed.

Another thing that kind of bothers me that I hate to see, and yet I realize it's necessary for conservation and so on, is that in the early days, when artists were poor, they framed their own paintings. Some of them were quite bizarre and most were very poorly made, and often I picked up an entry, you know, at the back door of the museum for the annual, and [if it was--Ed.] picked up by the top of the frame, the whole frame would fall apart. (laughter) Tobey and Graves, everybody made their own frames, and a lot of paintings were done in the frame because there was a strong feeling among many artists that the frame was very important to the painting. And

very often the painting might extend out into the frame.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Huh!

EDWARD THOMAS: In maybe the last ten or more years, many of those early frames that were done by the artists have been replaced by modern frames. I realize it's for conservation purposes, to protect and preserve the work, which the old frames certainly did not do.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Yet in a sense it's...

EDWARD THOMAS: But I get a little twinge every now and then when I look at a well-known painting and I see it in that modern streamlined corset, instead of the marvelous old costume that it was originally dressed in.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure. We've talked about collectors, about permanent collections, some of the intrigues of getting certain pieces to Seattle. We've talked about your role as education director at the Seattle Art Museum. We've sort of hit on some major facets of the museum. What was the exhibition policy like, in the fifties and sixties? You know, historically, museums have been repositories of permanent collections and going way back to say the turn of the century and the teens, they were places where really nothing ever changed. I think the whole notion of temporary changing exhibits is a relatively recent phenomenon, within the last 30 or so years. I'm wondering if you could explain...?

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh, I think they go back earlier than that, but you had two distinct types of institutions: the museum or gallery. A museum was one that collected, acquired a collection. That was its number one role. Number two [was--Ed.] to conserve, to protect it, preserve it for future generations. Number three [was--Ed.] to interpret it or use it in connection with education. Though that third function of a museum is a much more recent one. A gallery had temporary exhibitions and did not have a collection. In Seattle, we had the Seattle Art Museum and the Henry Gallery, neither of which were true to their names. The Henry Gallery had a collection, and the [Seattle] Art Museum had a collection, and we both were changing shows, and there were lots and lots of times when every inch of the museum space was devoted to a traveling show. There was no, I'd say, policy or anything that was written down. Very often, you got what you had the opportunity to get, or privilege to get. If somebody put together a show, you just can't say, "Oh hey, I'd like to show that." No matter how much money you've got. Because the length of time that things can be lent and a lot of other considerations mean that a traveling schedule for a show has to be extremely limited in time. And then the time of travel and packing and unpacking and installation and... On really big major shows, the international shows, or sometimes they were called "Treasures" shows-- and we had a lot of them-- usually about five showings, or seven at the most were all that could be accommodated.

And then [there was--Ed.] the government. These were things that involved a lot of protocol, like the Korean show, and the Japanese show, and the Thailand show, and the Egyptian shows, the Art of Iran, a lot of these major national exhibitions. You had to go through government protocol and any exhibition of that nature, number one, had to be opened and shown at the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. Then, normally, the next logical thing would be the Metropolitan in New York, merely because of the size of the population, and the reputation of the institution.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: Then, from there, it was up for grabs, sometimes. But usually it was pretty much determined by what kind of reputation, say, the museum had of its collection, and maybe by its previous showings of similar exhibitions. Now, for any Asian show, the Seattle Art Museum was very high on the list. As would be Cleveland or Kansas City or Boston. So that was a consideration. What kind of track record did they have? What was the quality of their own collection, and how committed were they to this kind of art? Then what about the population centers and the geographical distribution? Well, if they wanted to have a West Coast showing, or two West Coast showings, it meant Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, or Los Angeles. San Francisco was very tough competition because, number one, it had three major museums.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Um hmm.

EDWARD THOMAS: And then all kinds of things like how much yipping and yelling you could do if you really wanted that show. As an example, Dr. Fuller was away on an extended trip somewhere and I went through all the hassle. There was an important exhibition of work from China, and we wanted that very badly. So I was contacting the Smithsonian and trying to pull every string I could, talking with the State Department and so on. And it wound up being between Seattle and San Francisco. San Francisco got it and we were left out. And their explanation for that decision was that, "Well, San Francisco had a bigger Chinatown, and a larger Chinese population, than Seattle did, so it should go to San Francisco."

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh boy.

EDWARD THOMAS: After you went through all the other reasons, it sometimes would get down to something like that, which after all, they had to have some basis for deciding who do we cut out and who do we include?

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure. So they primarily looked at geographical location, strength of collection, and certainly the expertise of the staff in carrying out the project...

EDWARD THOMAS: And the reputation on how you had handled previous exhibits. The first big Japanese exhibit to come to this country-- and I'm sorry I don't remember off the top of my head when that was; it was very early in the fifties-- and there was still a lot of anti-Japanese feeling as a result of the Second World War-- Pearl Harbor. Our government and the Japanese government decided if they sent a large exhibition of the very most outstanding works of Japanese art it would help people understand their culture and their history, and maybe help narrow down the brink or division that had occurred. This was all planned very carefully. There were distinguished staffs of curators that accompanied the show, there was an educational director who came with the show and who gave lectures every week, and I don't know how many things that he and I did together. We put on more damn tea ceremonies on television and around the city of Seattle. (laughter) [We did--Ed.] just everything that you could do to try and promote the show and use it as an educational tool. And they had a research foundation follow that exhibit, and it went to Washington, D.C., New York, Boston, Chicago, Seattle, and maybe Cleveland or Kansas City, I don't remember. Anyway, the research produced [showed that--Ed.] even though our population was much smaller than New York and Boston we had more people attend the exhibit. And there were more educational activities done. They had all kinds of measures. There was a publication put out about all of the measureable statistics that could be done. And we hired a professional publicist to help promote the show. Norman Davis was active in the brewery business then, and through his influence he got Foster and Kleiser to donate billboards around town.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Fantastic.

EDWARD THOMAS: And all the plugs were pulled out. We did a very, very good job on that exhibit. As a result, whenever an Asian show would come up, Seattle's past experience and reputation would count for a lot of brownie points in getting certain exhibitions where there was a lot of competition for them.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure. Was that really the first major exhibit that Seattle brought?

EDWARD THOMAS: International. It was a coup. Dr. Fuller's own reputation in Japan and in collecting art-- all those entered into it. You just can't go out and say, "Oh I want to be part of that circuit."

JOHN OLBRANTZ: You gotta earn the right to be a part of that circuit.

EDWARD THOMAS: Right.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: So, looking back on the fifties and sixties, what would you say would be your six or seven major exhibits, international exhibits, that you presented during that time.

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh, there was a Korean one, the Thailand one, Iran...

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Um hmm. Van Gogh?

EDWARD THOMAS: Japan, Van Gogh. Because of the size of the Scandinavian population, we've had a number of exhibits of Scandinavian art, from Scandinavian museums-- tapestries and furniture and things like that. None of those were very popular in the way of attendance. I don't know whether Ballard [Seattle community where Scandinavians concentrate--Ed.] residents think Capitol Hill is too far away or what? (laughter) But in spite of [this], the governments would want these exhibits to come to Seattle because of our large Scandinavian population.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: Yet I always felt that there was a disappointing turnout from the public for them.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: I think, every museum director planning their exhibition schedule wants to have one, maybe two major exhibitions per year, if possible one big international exhibit and one major national exhibit. But at the same time there are all those other slots to fill.

EDWARD THOMAS: Yeah.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: How did the Seattle Art Museum fill those in the fifties and sixties?

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, we not only had one museum but we had two! The Pavilion and... I did the exhibit scheduling. I had huge calendars mounted on plywood boards that I could write on with marking pencil, which

could also be wiped out. Sometimes a show gets canceled for one reason or another and you have to fill in with a quickie substitute or something like that. They had to be scheduled very carefully and very tightly, because we changed shows once a month, and in three days. Monday was closing day, and Wednesday night was the preview, and that meant that over the weekend and on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, we had to take down the show and put up a whole new show. And everybody worked on it. Everybody.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Around the clock.

EDWARD THOMAS: Dr. Fuller and his mother even came up till she got too ill. The display cases we had at that time were made by Remington-Rand, and they were very secure display cases. You had to have a special crank, and you cranked and the whole upper part, the glass part, of the case was on a metal frame. It would rise up into the air from the base of the thing, and they were extremely heavy cases, and we had a little dolly that we would set the legs on in order to move them around. So that meant the case had to be lifted up on the dollies.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: And Mrs. Fuller, at the ripe old age of whatever, would come up there and she'd lift up one of those cases and have it on the dollies in nothing flat. (laughter) But everybody worked on changing the exhibits. And Dotty Malone would be typing labels like mad. And more than once, practically before the doors opened, we were all there finishing the show.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: And then everybody rushed home to get changed.

EDWARD THOMAS: And everybody arrived in black tie, because all the previews then were black tie.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Boy. Then you filled in some of those other spots with the Northwest Annual, and you were doing the Northwest Watercolor Society.

EDWARD THOMAS: Yeah.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: You were certainly doing a lot of exhibitions for contemporary regional artists. You know, we've done a lot over the last five, six years with regional art. And inevitably, everybody we've done, had one, or in some cases two, shows at the Seattle Art Museum.

EDWARD THOMAS: We tried, basically, to have, in addition to the annuals, a one-man show practically every exhibition period. There [were] two small galleries: one at the north end, and [one at--Ed.] the south end. One of them now is the Kress gallery. And the other for a while was the Colonial Dames room.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Yes.

EDWARD THOMAS: And at one point it was an established policy that every month there would be an exhibition of a local artist in either one of those small galleries. And then the artists who [were] sort of bigtime might have a retrospective that took over half the museum, or in some cases all of the museum. Like Tobey and Patterson and people who'd had a long career of professional work here in the Northwest.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Another question I wanted to ask you... But before I ask you that question, would you generally devote most of your exhibition space to changing exhibitions or was a portion of it devoted to the Asian collection? How did you break up that gallery space?

EDWARD THOMAS: There was no set formula. I would say a good majority of the exhibits were traveling exhibits that were circulated by the Smithsonian Institution or other agencies, or exhibits that were organized by a museum and then there was some reason for us to participate. Sometimes we would organize exhibitions from the collection. The problem was that there wasn't enough space to show the whole collection and for a while at least-- I tried to encourage this-- I tried to show the museum collection from different facets. As an example, there was a big international wood conference of people involved in lumber and wood industries who came from all over the world to Seattle. So, in conjunction with that, I organized an exhibit-- I think I called it Art in Wood. I went through the whole museum's collection and brought out all the things that were made of wood, from all over the world, like wooden sculpture from ancient Egypt, and of course all the Asian sculpture. I found there were far more things. The German Baroque relief sculpture and things like... I couldn't show all the things that were made out of wood, using the whole museum.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Wow.

EDWARD THOMAS: Or, there was a big Audubon meeting in Seattle and so I filled the whole museum with things of birds. You know, decorations on porcelain, porcelain birds, and all kinds of seagulls and hawks and things that had been done by our Northwest artists.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Fantastic.

EDWARD THOMAS: And paintings... There was just no problem at all filling the whole museum with nothing but birds.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: It sounds like you had a lot of fun. It sounds to me as if you approached organizing and planning your exhibitions in a very positive, entertaining way. Some of the ideas that you were talking about are very appealing to, I think, a broad base of people. Maybe that has something to do with your background and training as an educator. Rather than doing an exhibition on, for example, the iconography of thus and so on early Carolingian manuscript illuminations, you were really interested in getting more people...

[Tape 7]

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, going back to your question, if we had an exhibition of some aspect of Carolingian (giggles) manuscripts, there probably would be six people in town who would be interested and maybe 25 people who had ever heard of them.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That's right.

EDWARD THOMAS: So certainly the museum role was not to be just popular and accepted and show accepted art on a big broad basis, but to expand people's visual experiences and so on.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure, sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: And to keep trying to make the museum a vital part of the community. We didn't charge admission. Nobody was trying to make any money on it or anything, except indirectly we hoped that we would get supporters, people who would take out memberships in the museum and so on. Or maybe when they died would remember us in their will or something.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Today museums are so involved in fundraising. It seems like every time I turn around I'm preparing a grant proposal for this agency or that agency or this foundation or that foundation. I'm almost not doing an exhibition if I'm not getting some kind of major corporate, foundation, private or government underwriting for it. I'm just wondering, in the 1950s and '60s, was fundraising, was the whole notion of development part of the museum thinking? What kinds of fundraising activities did you do?

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, so many of grants that are used so commonly [today--Ed.] didn't exist [then]. The National Endowment for the Arts was nonexistent, and there was no art commission. The Ford Foundation and some private foundations sometimes would come cracking through, mainly because somebody of influence, or maybe the person who gave the money for the foundation, had come through Seattle and liked what they saw or something, and suddenly would give us a gift. You never know about those things. I know down in the Los Angeles museum, County Museum, a man suddenly died nobody'd ever heard of who left the museum a great deal of money when he died. And his reason for doing it was because a guard was nice to him one day.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: (laughs)

EDWARD THOMAS: Little things like that pay off, so naturally in a museum you feel you are always courting wealthy people in hopes that they could help you out. But then there are very often volunteers and people who become involved and they sometimes surprisingly come crashing through with financial help because they understand better the importance of what is going on and the need for [funds].

JOHN OLBRANTZ: So most of the revenue that the museum brought in was through memberships and through private gifts, contributions?

EDWARD THOMAS: Yeah. Bequests and so on. As I said earlier, lots of the things that are in the museum were not given by wealthy collectors. Lots of people collected or by one circumstance or another had an object or a painting or what have you, maybe historical, or a painting by Tobey or something like that. Then we also had as a source memorial funds, and when a person died it was becoming very common to, rather than send flowers or something, make a contribution to some charity. So we always had a certain number of memorial funds, where a lot of people had contributed. And maybe the family itself was going to do something major, and we always had these funds that were held back. Then when Dick would go back to New York or wherever the dealers were, he always had in mind finding some kind of suitable memorial for that individual. There are a lot of pieces in the museum, and some of them very important ones, that are in memory of so-and-so.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: So he was really a major collector. I mean, he not only collected himself for the museum, but he also assisted other people in collecting for the museum.

EDWARD THOMAS: Guided them. And as I said (chuckles), his sister will be remembered as having far better

taste.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: What was the relationship with the of Henry Art Gallery like in the fifties and sixties?

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh, certainly very cooperative and we would lend them things for exhibits, and the Henry Gallery was treated as a-- well something they've preferred not to recognize... There was no organization, that is, from the community as there now is, where it functioned under the chairmanship of whoever was the head of the art department, with one staff member running the show, as the curator. Such as Gervais Reed for many years.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: I think Gervais was there from '52 to '68.

EDWARD THOMAS: A long time.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: So his career just about paralleled yours at the Seattle Art Museum.

EDWARD THOMAS: Right, right. They had a hit-and-miss time of trying to keep the Henry Gallery going, and they didn't get a lot of encouragement or support from the university. And my wife and I, there was an exhibit that we went out to the Henry Gallery to see, and there were lots of people there; it was a good crowd. I haven't the foggiest idea what the show was. We were horrified by the state of the museum. All of the paint was peeling off the walls; it was in just terrible condition. And it just so happened that we were having dinner that night with the president of the University of Washington, so we absolutely tore into him because of how they weren't helping the museum, they weren't supporting it in any way. The building, which was a gift to the university, was just rotting away in front of your eyes. And his answer was, "Well, nobody really goes there, anyway." And we said, "Well, we were there this afternoon, and so were a great many other people from the community." We didn't see that many students, but people from the community were there. At one point, one philosophy of course was that the gallery was to be used as a teaching tool for the use of the students and its faculty. That meant they had shows of the work of faculty members, and occasionally work of students. And once in while a special educational exhibit might be sponsored by a commercial company or something like that. It wouldn't be called necessarily an art exhibit, but an educational exhibit with lots of labels and lots of photographs and stuff like that.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: And not a lot of art.

EDWARD THOMAS: But, that was a teaching tool.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: And all those were strong arguments, but there was never any problem of conflict or anything like that between the two institutions. In fact it was quite the other way around. Everybody wanted to bend over backwards to help each other.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That's interesting because I know, probably in the fifties, I think it was, maybe the late sixties and early seventies, the Henry Gallery began to change. When LaMar [Harrington--Ed.] was director, I think, the whole national funding situation was different and she was able to get some government grants.

EDWARD THOMAS: Right.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: To bring in some exhibitions and she began to upgrade [the gallery--Ed.].

EDWARD THOMAS: You brought up the name of LaMar Harrington. That brings to mind another art activity that I think had quite an impact, especially on younger artists in the Northwest, and that was the Bellevue Arts and Crafts Fair, which has been going for a long time. I remember I was on some committees helping get them started. LaMar Harrington and Barbara Rauscher and some other gals who were housewives over in Bellevue were the sparkplugs behind that. They got a really good professional show going. The first painting I ever sold was purchased at the Bellevue Arts and Crafts Fair. (laughter) And the first print I sold was purchased at the Henry Gallery by Mark Tobey.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Ah, great.

EDWARD THOMAS: So the Henry Gallery had an exhibition of, sort of Northwest Printmakers. And of course, printmaking had many things in its favor as far as exhibitions go. The prints in general were small in scale and so you could get quite a few of them into galleries. They were easily packed and shipped from place to place. And the artist had multiple copies of it, so that the same print might be shown in San Francisco and New York and Seattle and a lot of other places.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: But through the years the Bellevue Arts and Crafts Fair had an impact.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Well, it's interesting because our sponsoring organization-- the Pacific Northwest Arts and Crafts Association who sponsors the Bellevue Art Museum-- started the Arts and Crafts Fair, and our permanent collection is, I'd say, maybe a quarter of our permanent collection, are award winners from the Arts and Crafts Fair. You began to see these names popping up: Walter Isaacs, Ambrose Patterson-- Patterson, I don't know when Pat died but it was toward the end-- Glen Alps, Alden Mason, Dale Chihuly, Bob Sperry. All these people were in the Arts and Crafts Fair. And we've got pieces in our permanent collection that were award winners there, that...

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, lots of people would go and buy things for themselves, and I don't know, if you saw the same object I suppose in a more formalized exhibition, you'd be hesitant about buying it, but when it's right there out of doors on a table and... Sometimes I was a juror for the show. I remember a marvelous butter dish that I bought and I can't even remember who she was. So I bought that for myself to keep my butter in. (laughter)

JOHN OLBRANTZ: A lot of people have talked about the art exhibition at the Puyallup Fair [Western Washington State Fair--Ed.]. What kind of impact did that have?

EDWARD THOMAS: Not very much, although an awful lot of people participated. I quit painting years ago, but I had paintings in the Puyallup Fair. For years and years I've never taken myself seriously as either a painter or printmaker, although I was in a lot of national shows and stuff. Things were brought into the Henry Gallery and accumulated there, and I don't know, there was a problem of logistics in connection with the art. Then of course, at a state fair, there are just so many things to look at. I remember-- the funny things that stick out in your mind-- but I remember somebody's collection of tennis shoes, and these were tennis shoes worn by all kinds of famous basketball players. There was one pair of tennis shoes I'd swear were two feet long. It belonged to some famous basketball center. And just the darndest collection of things, not to mention all the animals and the canned goods, and then the beautiful displays of vegetables and fruit, where they arrange them in patterns and everything. And the flower arrangement exhibits. There was just so much, you couldn't take it all in.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: And the vegetable arrangements may have been better than the art show. (laughs)

EDWARD THOMAS: You sometimes came away feeling that way. Most of the artists that you saw in these shows, you saw their work a great deal. There were many opportunities to see it. But only once a year could you see those wonderful displays of grains and vegetables and fruit.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Yeah. We touched earlier on, on the gallery scene. And you mentioned Harry Hartman, Bookseller, as having a gallery space and really in effect being the first sort of commercial gallery in Seattle. And then you mentioned Zoe Dusanne. When did her gallery start?

EDWARD THOMAS: I don't remember what the exact dates were. Things all began to happen. Gordy [Gordon--Ed.] Woodside opened his gallery. And there were lots of smaller galleries that came and went. Francine Seders, and so on. Now there are so many galleries, which I suppose is a marvelous thing, except it's impossible to get around and see all of their shows.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: There's almost too many.

EDWARD THOMAS: Frankly, I feel that a lot of those shows just aren't worth bothering taking the time and energy to see. Because the gallery's going to, by one technique or another, want to fill their exhibition space, and sell some work. And then the artist, of course, wants to have a prestigious gallery to show his work. And so I would say that the number has fluctuated in recent years and I'm not that up anymore with the local gallery scene. But there are five or so galleries that I would look upon as being prestigious today.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: During that fifties and sixties period, the Dusanne gallery and Woodside really, and then Francine, when she was out at the U[University--Ed.] District were sort of the major galleries.

EDWARD THOMAS: And then the Foster/White.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Foster/White.

EDWARD THOMAS: There have been a lot of good things happen, and the commercial galleries have played an incredible role and, as I said, where there were none, now there are many. And where the artists were just a handful and everybody knew each other, now they're legion.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Yeah.

EDWARD THOMAS: And the public exposure to art: you have color television, you have color reproductions in

magazines, and practically the minute somebody's done something new in painting and sculpture in New York or Tokyo, you know about it almost instantly.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: It's possible with modern technology and communication.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Philosophically, how has the Seattle Art Museum changed from when you were there?

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh, it has limited the number of exhibitions by far, and it has increased the size of its staff infinitely...

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Do you think that's good?

EDWARD THOMAS: But it handles fewer exhibits. A lot of aspects of the museum operation I feel are much more professionally done now than when a handful of us were there who all basically were amateurs.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Well, you had to fill so many hats, you know.

EDWARD THOMAS: Exactly.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: You had to be a curator, you had to be an administrator, you had to be an installer, an educator.

EDWARD THOMAS: And a nailpuller. Everybody did an awful lot. But now it's much more professionally done. There's more money. You can do such things as organizing a show and publishing a catalog, and we did that, but it had to be on a fairly modest basis. And that certainly would be a difference.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Do you think the approach is different? Do you think the approach to exhibitions are different intellectually?

EDWARD THOMAS: Yes. I suppose that's what I was talking about by a more professional approach. That is in the curatorial side of things. Kenneth Callahan was our curator and he had to look after sort of everything and Dick Fuller, you know, was not only buying things, but hanging shows. And everything like that. And now there's a person to do each little specialized activity, and in most cases they have an assistant. (chuckles)

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That's right.

EDWARD THOMAS: So that is probably the most conspicuous change that I've seen.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: What about the art scene in general? I mean, we had talked earlier about the forties and fifties being a period where there was a handful of artists: Mark Tobey, Morris Graves, Guy Anderson, Kenneth Callahan, Richard Gilkey, Bill Cumming.

EDWARD THOMAS: Yeah.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: And everybody kind of hung around together and then there were the younger people coming in: Jim FitzGerald and Margaret Tomkins.

EDWARD THOMAS: Of course, I looked upon them as the older crowd, but...

JOHN OLBRANTZ: It's all relative, right.

EDWARD THOMAS: That was one thing about all these parties and gatherings we'd have at one place or another. And there was no age distinction; there would be very young people, like Leo Kenney at the time, and Mark Tobey. Age didn't matter at all; everybody shared this interest in art, creating art. And of course everybody was awed when somebody got a little success or had an exhibition or won a prize. And it was an occasion for mutual rejoicing, so to speak. (laughs)

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Well, Tobey was sort of the guru. Morris Graves, Kenneth Callahan, Guy Anderson, was sort of... Weren't they pretty much Tobey's friends and colleagues, but he was also their mentor, in a way, wouldn't you say?

EDWARD THOMAS: I'd say so, but then there became lots of rivalries and all kinds of little personal disagreements. But it was lots of fun to be part of that era.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh yeah. Bill Cumming was doing sort of WPA-inspired scenes...

EDWARD THOMAS: Yeah.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: ...of loggers and fishermen. And Leo Kenney with his surrealism. What about Jim FitzGerald and Margaret Tomkins? How did they sort of fit into the whole scene?

EDWARD THOMAS: Well they worked more independently. You know, they were married and raising a family; they couldn't be quite as, I guess you'd say, bohemian as the people who were single.

There was a place called Robe Ranch, and it was up in the Cascade Mountains, and Kenneth Callahan had a farm there, and there was another place where Mark Tobey and Guy Anderson had a studio near Kenneth Callahan. I went to Robe Ranch many times and here you had a community of artists that were all very seriously involved. Like that Callahan painting, that early Callahan that I showed you in my library, that was Robe Ranch. In the days of being inspired by our regional landscape, a place like that played an important role.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: What kind of impact do you think the University of Washington and their art faculty-- because you were there both as an undergraduate and as a graduate student-- what kind of impact did they have on the total regional art scene?

[Tape 8]

JOHN OLBRANTZ: The gin tonics are flowing. Ed, what kind of impact did the University of Washington and the School of Art at the University of Washington have on the regional art scene? Because the art history books have really sort of emphasized the importance of Mark Tobey and Morris Graves and the quote-unquote, "Northwest mystics" on the development of contemporary regional art. What kind of impact do you feel that the University of Washington had on, shall we say, modernism, in Seattle?

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, any institution that is that large is bound to have an impact on the whole, in this case, Northwest region, Northwestern part of the United States. Of course, when I started there, the art department was located up on the top floor of Education Hall, and so all the art students had to have strong legs and strong lungs, because there wasn't such a thing as an elevator. And the art department was extremely small, only a handful of faculty members, and not a lot of students. The reason the department was located up on the top floor was because of the skylights. It had marvelous skylights in all the studios, which normally would have been ideal, but at that time they had the garbage dump down where all the parking lots and tennis courts and things are now, and then it was just a city garbage dump. All of the seagulls would go and feast at the dump and then come and perch on top of our skylights and do the inevitable. And patter around so the light became a little filtered after a while, up in the art department. (laughter) Of course, the growth of school art has been immense. I mentioned size of faculty. I don't remember any of the exact figures, but I remember interviewing Boyer Gonzales, who at one time was the director of the School of Art. I interviewed him on television and I was amazed because they had more graduating seniors than the whole School of Art consisted of when I was a student there.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh boy.

EDWARD THOMAS: And, of course, certainly their offerings in the field of art history-- starting from nothing now to a very credible department.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Right, I think they offer a Ph.D. in art history now.

EDWARD THOMAS: Yeah. And you couldn't even major in art history, let alone get a degree. All of that influences, especially the people who go into education, teachers and so forth. And then they in turn influence every student, and it's just a snowball, growing, growing all of the time.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure. When you were at the University of Washington, Walter Isaacs and Ambrose Patterson were there, Dudley Pratt, Everett DuPen, and then after you came back from World War II, Glen Alps, Alden Mason, Bill Hixson, Fred Anderson. There was a whole group hired in '47, I think.

EDWARD THOMAS: Yeah.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: We've discussed the influence of Sherman Lee on your life. As a practicing artist, which of those people really affected you the greatest? Who was really the greatest influence?

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh, that would be awfully hard to say. (chuckles) There was a lot of, and I think legitimate, criticism of the art department in that so often the faculty consisted of their own graduates. It was stifling and new ideas, personalities didn't come in, not only to round out the curriculum but also to enrich the community.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Um hmm.

EDWARD THOMAS: However, they had a Walker-Ames visiting lecturer, teacher arrangement. These special visiting lectures brought people like Archipenko to come and teach sculpture, and Emilio Amero, the lithographer. A number of big names, internationally, came to teach for a year. And that enriched the department a great deal. But the thing that so impresses me is the tremendous growth in its size. I sometimes felt when I was at the museum that the faculty in general were not as active in the community as they might be. They were busy being artists themselves, and also teaching a full load.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Um hmm.

EDWARD THOMAS: But usually if they were approached they'd be cooperative and especially the head of a department or something like that. Or if somebody was having a show, and you wanted to get some publicity on it, why they'd be happy to appear on TV or whatever.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: Another thing that has always concerned me a little about the University of Washington art department is that I can't think of any painter or sculptor who graduated from there who has become a major figure-- that is, nationally. There isn't a single soul that I can think of. On the other hand, there were people in the interior design department, young men and women who worked with Hope Foote. She was a terrific teacher and she produced a number of people who became internationally known in their fields. Jack [Lenor--Ed.] Larsen, the textile designer, is a good example. I remember interviewing him one time on TV when he was in town, and he said, "Well, she didn't teach you interior design; she taught you taste."

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Ah hah!

EDWARD THOMAS: Several other people who became well known all said the same thing: that she just taught them taste. That's quite a compliment.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: You know, it's interesting, we were working on a Dale Chihuly retrospective for 1984, and in researching Dale, I discovered that he was an interior design major from the University of Washington.

EDWARD THOMAS: Yeah.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That he apparently had studied with Hope Foote, and that he went on to Wisconsin and to the Rhode Island School of Design and did his work in glass. Of course, now he's probably the pre-eminent glass artist in the United States. He came out of that design school.

EDWARD THOMAS: And it's ironic, now, with all of the financial cutbacks, that it's the interior design department that's being eliminated.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That's very true.

EDWARD THOMAS: It was just cut out of the whole art program. And that has been their strongest department, aesthetically.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: What are your feelings about-- as long as we're talking about budget cutbacks-- we had talked in the previous interview about the fact that the University of Washington, literally for decades, had trained generation upon generation of art educators. I remember reading recently-- well, maybe six, seven, eight months ago-- when they were determining which departments they were going to eliminate, that in the art department they eliminated the art education program. What are your feelings about that?

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, I really am not enough informed on it. I think if that's the case, it's a big mistake.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Yeah.

EDWARD THOMAS: But, of course, at one point, for someone who was interested in art, about the only way you could make a living was to teach in public school or something. And now the baby boom has reached its crest and those jobs, like many professions, do dry up, but there's still going to be a constant need for good teachers.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: I think historically, if you were to talk to any placement director... Louis Lawes, up in Bellingham, at Western [Washington University--Ed.], is my wife's uncle, so I get a lot of feedback from him in terms of trends and so on and so forth. And he said, "Well, you know, it's very fashionable now to be a business major. But by mid eighties, we're going to see a real need for teachers, and by the late eighties, early nineties, there's going to be a swing back toward your liberal arts majors. There's going to be a need for art historians, there's going to be a need for writers, there's going to be a need for historians, there's going to be a need for philosophy teachers." History seems to happen that way; there seems to be these crests and valleys.

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, and then too many people, students go into the field and then it's overcrowded. It's just sort of the law of supply and demand.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That's right, that's right. There are a number of items that I think we should probably talk about, that we didn't have an opportunity to last time. And one of those is-- just in kind of going over the outline-- areas that we might want to explore just a little bit further. We had talked about some of those collectors, and of course one was Anne Gerber.

EDWARD THOMAS: Yes. And, in something like this where you're just talking off the top of your head, why undoubtedly you're going miss mentioning individuals and institutions and events, annual events, such as the Bellevue fair, that have all played an important role in the development of art in the Northwest. I don't think I ever talked about the Cornish School, as an example.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That would be interesting to talk about.

EDWARD THOMAS: It had a tremendous influence and had people: Martha Graham, Mark Tobey, a great many young people. They came in from the outside, but there were-- oh, I can't remember his name; the dancer [Merce Cunningham--Ed.]. Wonderful dancer. He came from Centralia or Chehalis and is very well known, danced in New York with Martha Graham. Anyway, there were lots of people who were students there. I taught briefly. Sherman Lee taught at Cornish School, part time.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Ah. I didn't know that.

EDWARD THOMAS: When he left I took his place. And I remember one of my students happened to be in Joffrey Ballet.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Hah.

EDWARD THOMAS: So that was a very interesting experience. It certainly has played a tremendous role in the history of art in the Northwest.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: It's interesting. I don't think all those various factions-- certainly the School of Art at the University of Washington, I don't think that the impact of that institution has ever really been fully explored. What kind of impact did they really have on the development of contemporary Seattle art. By the same token, I don't think Cornish's influence has been fully addressed. And you mentioned the Bellevue Fair. [Are there--Ed.] any other collectors that you can think of off the top of your head?

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh, once you start naming names, you get into an endless thing. But, it's everybody and everything working together. And there's been this fantastic growth in the Northwest. Certainly, the [World's--Ed.] Fair in Seattle was a great impetus to the development of all the arts.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: What have you seen or observed over past, what, dare I say, the past three decades? (chuckles)

EDWARD THOMAS: Yeah.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Have you noticed some major changes in people collecting? I would imagine in the early fifties that there were probably a handful of collectors. Is that growing, is that changing?

EDWARD THOMAS: I think it has grown. One of the impacts too, I think, was right after the Second World War, when those of us who were veterans came back. We had the advantage of the GI Bill of Rights that would pay our tuition and books, and for an art student, art supplies, which are very expensive. So there were an awful lot of young men and some women who probably never would have had the experience of going, say to the University of Washington, if it were not for that government assistance. I know that a lot of the younger students who who were normal college age sometimes objected to the competition of the returning GIs, because they got all the As and the Bs and so forth. And it was inevitable that we were all just a little bit older than the rest of them, a little more mature. And instead of having as your entire background someplace like Cosmopolis, Washington, you suddenly had been to Paris and London and had seen Notre Dame in Paris, things of that nature, where they probably never would have been exposed to it.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: This is something I wanted to touch on that I don't believe we touched on in the previous interview. You were in the army from 1943 to 1945. What kind of impact did that have on you as an artist, as an art educator?

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, when I first got back, I sort of painted the war out of my system. Somehow they trained you very carefully, in my case, to be a soldier, to kill people and so on, and they trained you very carefully for that. As it turned out, I went through five campaigns in Europe. I landed on Utah Beach, in Normandy, and

wound up the last day of the war in Czechoslovakia. And naturally I saw an awful lot of stuff.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: And when the war was over, the guys were just suddenly dumped. There was no letdown training program or anything, or training in how to be a civilian again. And so there were lots of problems with disturbed veterans-- nervous breakdowns and things of that nature...

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Similar to what...

EDWARD THOMAS: ...just because the change was so abrupt. And people had different ways of kind of working it out of their system. Mine was, I painted a lot of the stuff that I saw and kind of got it out that way. Then you get busy anyway. Especially if you were at school and all of that kind of thing. The job situation was very different then.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: It seems to me that an awful lot of the students from that period, when they graduated, became commercial artists. And before the war, especially in Japan, but even after as Boeing kept growing and growing, why an awful lot of graduating art students became employees of Boeing. There were all kinds of art jobs: cruising manuals and films and all kinds of things.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: So many of the graduating students went into commercial art in one form or another. Having had my university career sort of scattered over a longer than [normal--Ed.] period of time, I saw lots of different graduating classes. And I was always struck by how certain years there'd be a bumper crop of really outstanding people who went on to do outstanding things. And then other years, they'd be just a bunch of normal dullards. (laughs) And I always felt that that probably was due to what the students were learning from each other, the excitement and the competition of really motivated students.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: I would imagine that when you came back and you were in that group of World WarII Veterans that-- my God, the energy level must have been really high, because, I mean, here you guys had been in World WarII and, like you say, France, Czechoslovakia, and you must have been exposed to the full range of the horrors of war. You were just thankful to be back in the United States, alive and pursuing a career. The energy level must have been real high. And just, I think, probably the sharing of experiences must have contributed to that feeling.

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, that was a government program [GI Bill--Ed.] that really was worthwhile and worked.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Yeah.

EDWARD THOMAS: Another government program-- I mentioned that during the Depression I did take a WPA class in cartooning. But there were a lot of serious things done under the WPA sponsorship. It kept a lot of people going. As a local example, Mark Tobey taught a class in sculpture, under the WPA. In his early work at that time, there was a strong feeling of sculptural form in his painting. I was only able to locate one piece of sculpture that he did. He did lots of them. [There was--Ed.] a group of five gals who were his students-- and he'd carved this little-- it was a female torso-- he'd carved it in soapstone.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Interesting.

EDWARD THOMAS: And so they had it cast in bronze, and he did a great many things in plaster of Paris, while teaching these classes. Unfortunately, the administrator [Robert Bruce Inveriaty--Ed.] that came along to carry on the program-- so I was told-- loaded up all of the sculpture and took it to the dump.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: On no!

EDWARD THOMAS: Yeah. And I know of a couple of Morris Graves murals in town that were painted over with remodeling programs, or redecorating, I should say.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: As long as we're talking about Tobey and Graves, I know we've talked about them or touched upon them in the previous interview. What are your recollections of Mark Tobey, very briefly?

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh, he was very complex and extremely sophisticated. Excellent musician. And he did some writing. It was a joy to hear him lecture because the words would sort of flow out like poetry, almost like all of this interweaving that you see in his later paintings, expressing movement and growth and development, that kind of thing. To hear him give a lecture was that same kind of experience. He was...

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Great.

EDWARD THOMAS: I knew him very well, and my wife and I visited him in Basel, shortly before he died. And of course I did his retrospective show.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Right.

EDWARD THOMAS: Then good people from the Louvre and the Museum of Modern Art came and worked with me to get background on his early development. And actually it was my original intention to do two shows. One that stressed his earlier work-- up to the Market [Pike Place Market--Ed.] scenes and of the Electric Night type, the paintings of cities with night light. He told me that the thing that got him-- Portland Art Museum has a very good one, Seattle Art Museum, the Metropolitan, all have paintings in that series. At the beginning of the war, Seattle had a blackout. They were afraid that the Japanese might try to come and bomb Seattle. And so there was a blackout. And, as things developed, it wasn't necessary any more, so the lights came back on. And suddenly, after having these dark nights, there street signs and so forth on, and it excited him very much and that started the whole series of paintings.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Really! That's very interesting.

EDWARD THOMAS: And his first white writing. He showed me a painting that he had done. He had come back from the Orient and was staying in San Francisco in a hotel, and he took a piece of the hotel stationary and did a kind of watercolor thing on it. And he said that was when he discovered white writing.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Really!

EDWARD THOMAS: That was the first example.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Fascinating.

EDWARD THOMAS: However, looking at his work that he was doing before, I could see a lot of white writing before then really. (chuckles) Sometimes I'd find three different dates on a painting. Maybe one on the back and one in the corner.

[Tape 9]

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, after he'd become famous, why a lot of the people who had paintings of his wanted him to sign them and date them, and of course off the top of his head he couldn't remember when he painted a picture. For some of them I was able to get at least a reasonable date when they were exhibited in the Northwest Annual. And so I knew the painting had to be done before then.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure. (laughter)

EDWARD THOMAS: Because sometimes, for one reason or another, he might date a painting a little earlier or a little later than it was really done.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Right.

EDWARD THOMAS: When I did that show in 1959, I just scoured the Northwest for all of the paintings I could find. And there were his dentist and his doctor and his druggist, all of whom he paid for their services with paintings. And his landlady, all that kind of thing, and some of them had some darn good collections of paintings that they had all acquired that way. And these things were all hidden away. Things like that little piece of sculpture. So you just go digging around. Fortunately a couple of the original groups of women who were his students-- in the Cornish School days-- were still living, so they were a great help to me in tracking down a lot of his works.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Yeah.

EDWARD THOMAS: And then, that was 1959, and the show circulated in the West and then my intention was to do a show of his later work. In that case, most of it was in big, important collections in the east in eastern museums. So that show was going to be based on his later work.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: I see.

EDWARD THOMAS: Of course, he lived a long time after '59.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh yeah.

EDWARD THOMAS: But his newer things that he was doing, most of the important ones, were sold by a dealer in New York, Marian Willard, rather than being sold here locally in the Northwest. So, I'm sorry that show never came about, but then when the Metropolitan, when the Museum of Modern Art and the Louvre both decided to do shows, and bring them up right to at the time that they did their shows, later, why it seemed redundant to do another exhibition of Tobey's works in a retrospective manner.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: So that show especially stressed things that were in the Northwest and done in his earlier unknown days. We went in his studio and went through stacks of things that he hadn't even thought of or seen in years. And a number of things that had been just sitting in racks and in folders in his studio were pulled out and he had them framed and put into the show.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That must have been a real joy to work on the exhibit.

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh, it was wonderful, and he was a very sensitive kind of guy and very cooperative. I remember one day, after we'd finished-- I'd gone over to show him all the pictures; everything was photographed. I showed him all of the pictures that I had accumulated and, of course, many of the paintings he'd forgotten all about. And he'd recollect, you know, what the circumstances were, when he did them. And he also guided, steered me to paintings that I might not have otherwise found. He often did things in series and I remember I showed him a painting of two men, workmen, sitting on a bus going home from work. And he said, "Oh! That was the first version I did." He'd done a couple, three versions of this theme of the two men, back in the thirties, early forties sitting on a bus, wearing their union buttons on their coveralls... (laughter)

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Great.

EDWARD THOMAS: ...and riding home. And the same theme but through time he'd go back to these but in a very different kind of way. I remember one afternoon, after we'd spent a long day of it, why we went over to what then was the old Meany Hotel, University District, and he got a cup of coffee. After we'd finished talking and drank our coffee, he insisted that he pay for the coffee, and he insisted that the cashier give him a receipt for the two cups of coffee. Because he said, "I can take you as an income tax deduction." (laughter) He said he's "just sick and tired of paying so much income tax." Here's the guy who didn't have a dime to his name for so many years.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: He wasn't exactly a businessman by any means, and he said of Marian Willard, who was his dealer in New York, "I have instructed her not to sell any more paintings this year, because my taxes were going to be so high, and I just found out that she sold another painting to some eastern collector." And he said, "So I'm going to fix her. I'm going to double her commission." (laughter)

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh, he sounds like a wonderful, wonderful man. He was probably, I think probably still is, the Northwest premier artist.

EDWARD THOMAS: I don't think anybody would quibble with that.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Right. One of his followers, pupils, disciples, in the thirties, was Morris Graves. Your recollections of Morris Graves.

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, Morris was a great showman and, oh, I remember in the Japanese show-- It was the first museum preview that was ever televised [Exhibition of Japanese Painting and Sculpture, organized by National Cultural Exchange of Japan, 1953--Ed.]. They wanted to make a really good show, and we had Kleig lights and TV cameras and everything. And I gave, on TV, a tour of some of the Japanese art that was in the Garden Court because you could only have [cables], and [because of--Ed.] the mobs of people and so you couldn't get back into the other gallery. They wanted to make a really classy show out of it. It was at night-- prime time-- and they rounded up a bunch of old limousines and guests would pull up in front of the museum, get out of the limousines, and then while they walked into the museum, there was a gal who, she used to be on KING-TV, and she did fashion shows and ran a charm school and stuff, and so she commented on what kind of dresses the women were wearing. In the early days most of the coverage that you had of an art exhibit in the press was what kind of dresses some of the women were wearing (laughter) at the preview, and thank heavens all of that kind of crap has disappeared.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Yeah.

EDWARD THOMAS: But that was where the big interest and big emphasis was for early day previews. But going back to Morris Graves, he arrived wearing black tie and white tennis shoes. Because of course he knew that

would attract a lot of attention.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: (laughs) Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: And I remember, when I was at Hartman's, one time, it was Christmastime, and he came into the store and he had an old, beat up overcoat that was practically green with mildew. He had large nuggets that looked like gold as buttons going down the front. And since it was Christmas he also showed up with gold glitter in his beard. Naturally that made Time Magazine.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: All that kind of thing. So he was very adept at getting publicity.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sounds like he was almost one of the original beatniks.

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, no. I wouldn't say that at all. He just liked to do things differently. He had a period when he was living in Chartres, France. I saw a lot of him in Paris and then went out to Chartres to his studio, and for some reason most of the work that he did there was destroyed. But, he certainly livened up the art scene a great deal.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: What do you think about him as a painter?

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh, I think he was a very good painter and I loved all those bird things he did, and then he played around with sculpture for a while. I don't know, a lot of people think that he really should have been an architect.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Really.

EDWARD THOMAS: Because he loved to do grandiose projects. You know, he built a big house out north of town, and then went down to California and he's always involved in some kind of project. And then there was the old Rock [home on Fidalgo Island, Washington--Ed.] in the early days. But there are lots of memories and funny things that happened.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Of course you knew Kenneth Callahan; you both worked at the Seattle Art Museum.

EDWARD THOMAS: Yes, we worked together for a long time. And he was a good friend.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Some recollections about him.

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, Edith Young, who was the original educational director, and Kenneth Callahan did art columns in the papers. Every Sunday there'd be an article by one of them, about what was going on at the museum, current exhibits or things, things of that nature. And his wife then, Margaret-- later [she--Ed.] died of cancer-- was a writer and I have a feeling that she did a good deal of ghost writing for Kenneth.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Ahh!

EDWARD THOMAS: But he's a very genuine, nice guy. They had a son, who is named Toby. And later we both were on the board of the art museum. I've done retrospective shows of his work. So you get to know people that way.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: What about Guy Anderson? He sort of rounds out the big four.

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, I never, just by circumstances, seemed to see very much of Guy. So I don't have any vivid memories of incidents or anything like that.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: We had talked earlier about those reproductions which originally hung in the Seattle Art Museum and the role that they played in the education department, and it's kind of ironic that I, who live in Bellevue, am interviewing you. It's interesting what became of those reproductions, and I know you'd like to share that story with the Archives.

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, of course, we had all these colored reproductions that were nicely framed, and they were at first mostly Renaissance, Baroque, Medici prints. And then later on, when color printing got improved and there was more interest in your 19th-century people, like Renoir and-- the very safe ones-- Degas, were extremely popular, Van Gogh. So they would be added to the collection. And then when the museum's own collection was so large there was no way of ever having any use for the reproductions. Why we had half the stacks, the storage racks, devoted to these reproductions, and as educational director I bought a certain number of new ones every year. We had them framed, and we had them out in the stacks and any school or

nonprofit institution, like the public library, or some of the retirement homes, places like that, could borrow these reproductions for a month.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: I see.

EDWARD THOMAS: And of course the only restriction was that they had to be in a public place. They couldn't be used to decorate somebody's office. The schools were the big users, and teachers would sometimes incorporate the pictures into other, like in a grade school, studies. They might write a composition about the painting or something of that sort. And some teachers really used them in a very effective way. That was a very popular educational service of the museum. But our stack space became so limited, and we just couldn't have that many storage racks, you know, devoted to reproductions.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: And they were too good to just junk. The problem was then how could they best be utilized. The biggest borrowers were primarily from the Bellevue school system. And so I talked with their administration and people. Fortunately, the superintendent of the schools had been one of my junior high school teachers, in Aberdeen.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: (laughs) Great.

EDWARD THOMAS: And they said they'd love to inherit the reproduction collection and that they had a warehouse that was just being built or something that had plenty of space where they could display. They had to be on display so the teachers could make their selection. There were-- I don't remember how many, but a couple hundred at least. They had to be spread out so people could see them to pick the ones [they wanted--Ed.]. Then they'd sign out just with a library card. I imagine those are still kicking in Bellevue schools.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Well, I think they are, because we had a program before the museum even started that was called the Picture Lady program. One of the projects of one of our fundraising groups, the Roundtable Guilds, was to take a selection of reproductions, which had originally been in the collection of the Seattle Art Museum, around to different schools and to different classrooms. They would talk about, say a Renoir or a Degas or a Seurat or whatever, talk about that to the class, and have the reproduction there. So it's kind of interesting and ironic that those reproductions are still being used today as part of our educational program.

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, at the museum, there's a Treasure Box program which had objects from different countries. There'd be a Treasure Chest, and in it would be various things that were from that country, especially things that were used by the children, like toys and things. And pictures of the kinds of houses they lived in, all kinds of things like that.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: And a volunteer would take them out to classrooms and they could be played with or used, and you could lay down on a Japanese mat and all that kind of thing and really get involved in the objects. The Museum of History and Industry also has a program of boxes that go out to the schools.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: You know I don't think the role of education within a museum can be overemphasized. It would be really interesting to look back to the fifties and sixties and some of the children's lives that the Seattle Art Museum touched. It would be interesting to see how many of those people are either actively involved in their respective museums or in the Seattle Art Museum. Or it would be interesting to see, if those children have maintained, in their adult life, an active interest in museums. I would bet you dollars to doughnuts, that they have continued to maintain an active interest.

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh yes. You get two and now three generations of families coming around.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That's right.

EDWARD THOMAS: I remember when I was at Western, I had a student-- once in a while if I had an appropriate class, like a class in Japanese art or Chinese art or something, I would take the class to the museum and take them through the stacks to see whatever was appropriate. Norman Davis was at one time in a class, and took the students through his collection of classical art. A student of mine asked if she could bring her aunt. Her aunt was very interested in art, and she taught art in one of the Seattle Public Schools. And so I took them through, and afterwards she came up to me and she said, "You know, you were the one that turned me on to art. It's all your fault." (laughter) She said, "When I was in the third grade, we watched your television show." Dorothy Lahr and I did a series called Art Neighbors, and these shows were always coordinated with what the public schools were doing. The "Japanese Are Our Neighbors," Mexicans, and so on, so forth.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Fantastic.

EDWARD THOMAS: And then we would show things that came from [those countries--Ed.].

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Are they still available on tape?

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh, there was no tape in those days. It was before tape, but they were kinescoped.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Ah.

EDWARD THOMAS: The kinescope was just a film, made of a television broadcast from a set somewhere. It was very poor quality. The kinescopes of the "Man's Story" series, which was the one that won the national award, were shown in Spokane and some other school districts around the country. I doubt that they're any of them left that aren't so brittle that they've fallen apart by now.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: It would be fun to go through though and see if any of those could be restored.

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, the museum had some. I don't know whether they still have them or not. I imagine the schools used them so much that they just plain wore out.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That's interesting. There's something else that I wanted to just touch on briefly. When did the Seattle Art Museum start their bookstore? Has that always been a component part of the...

EDWARD THOMAS: The bookstore started as a coat closet, literally a coat closet. There was a little reception desk, and it was just a hole in the wall where on preview nights and things, people came and checked their coats. And Libby Molitor, who worked on the museum staff for a long time, [was there--Ed.].

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Good old Libby.

EDWARD THOMAS: And she loved to sell. She a postcard line and Christmas cards and it kept growing. It brought some money into the museum, and she was just bursting her seams in this old coat closet, as well as answering the telephones, because that was the main telephone operator for the whole museum. Eventually they expanded bit by bit and then went over to the other side of the lobby, where there had just been some telephone booths before. Then eventually they built a larger coat closet there, and some more space for books and things like that in the lobby. And during some special shows-- especially the Van Gogh show-- we did the whole Garden Court as a sales area, sort of on a street cafe idea, like some of the early Van Gogh paintings.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh, marvelous.

EDWARD THOMAS: And we had red and white striped awnings that came out from the wall. And we mounted on boards all of the various reproductions of Van Gogh paintings that were in the show that we had for sale. We had a big rectangular sales counter in the center. And everything-- that show was so popular-- just sold like hotcakes. On the final day of the show, all of these sales desks were operated by volunteers and Joanna Eckstein, who'd been on the board of the museum for years and years, was a prize saleswoman. She would get people to buy like crazy and take out memberships; she was a real ambassador. We stayed open, as I remember, longer than usual that last night. People were just buying like mad anything that was left.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Fantastic.

EDWARD THOMAS: And one of the volunteers said-- most of them slipped out of their shoes because their feet got so tired on that stone floor-- one of the volunteers said, "I put my shoes back on because I was afraid Joanna was going to sell them." (loud laughter)

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That's great.

[Tape 10]

EDWARD THOMAS: The museum remodeled the British Pavilion in the Seattle Center and turned it into what was intended primarily to be a showplace for contemporary art, both from the Northwest and other places. Neil Meitzler and I were very much involved in the planning of that building, and we worked very closely with Ed Burke, who was primary architect on that job. He was with Paul Thiry's office. Dr. Fuller was away on an extended trip somewhere for quite a while, and so I was in charge of overseeing the remodeling and had to make some important decisions. I didn't feel that as an employee I should have all that responsibility, so I had, I think, three members from the board help advise me. One of them was Joe Gandy and another was Al Kerry. There were several requisites that we had to accommodate. One, to have storage space immediately available to the gallery, because [at the Seattle Art Museum in Volunteer Park--Ed.] it was dangerous to the objects and everything else to haul everything from the basement, all the display cases, all the sculpture stands, everything

had to come up from the basement in a freight elevator, and the freight elevator would break and one thing or another. So in the Pavilion, behind the north wall, there's a storage area, the full of length of it. Those big doors lead into storage areas where sculpture stands and all that kind of thing could be stored adjacent to the gallery. When we'd have the Northwest Annual or other juried shows, the entries would all be stowed back there and anywhere else we could find to put them in the building. We [also--Ed.] needed an area for receptions-- that is, kitchen facilities, that kind of thing, for catering. Another thing that we wanted was a sales desk. And the logical place, of course, [was--Ed.] at the entrance of the building.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: So they figured it out that for-- I've forgotten how many thousand dollars; it wasn't much-- they could make the sales desk area with a low ceiling-- there was no need to have those great high ceilings-- and put a room upstairs.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Right.

EDWARD THOMAS: That gave us an extra room, which we carpeted. It had sink and a hot plate and [was a--Ed.] place where committees could meet or things like that.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: And you could take schoolkids in there, and [because it had--Ed.] a carpet kids could sit on the floor.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Great.

EDWARD THOMAS: And you could talk to them, or you could show films or slides or something like that up there to small groups. And so I said to Joe Gandy and Al Kerry, the committee, that this [was] something we ought to do, even though it [was] going to cost more money. They all agreed with me. Well, it turned out to be an awfully good investment, because the sales desk brings in a good deal of money every year, and [is] a big, proper sales area.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Right, right.

EDWARD THOMAS: And now the rental loft is upstairs.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: And that always does very well.

EDWARD THOMAS: That space [has] been of great use.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: So the store really began in the fifties?

EDWARD THOMAS: Yeah.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: As this small operation which just expanded and really came into bloom in the early sixties.

EDWARD THOMAS: Yeah. I think with the Van Gogh show [1959--Ed.], we suddenly realized the potential there was... (chuckles)

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh yeah.

EDWARD THOMAS: ...as a source of income.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Looking back, in retrospect, to the countless exhibits that you have been involved with, which one do you think-- this is a two-edged question. Which exhibit do you think was the most popular during your tenure at the Seattle Art Museum? And then, the second question, which exhibit, looking back, did you get the most satisfaction from personally?

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, the most popular shows were definitely the Van Gogh show and the Rockwell Kent [probably meant Norman Rockwell--Ed.] show.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Ahhh! (laughter)

EDWARD THOMAS: You'd come on Monday when the museum was closed [to do--Ed.] all the housework, you know. You knew what kind of Sunday it had been just by the path that went around, and you could tell which paintings were the favorite, where more people walked up close, congregated in front of a particular picture.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: And this path would be outlined all along, especially on a rainy day. That was a gauge of, certainly the popularity, and we kept attendance figures.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Quick question. Where did the Van Gogh show come from? Was that organized on the west coast?

EDWARD THOMAS: Vincent Van Gogh's nephew made the exhibition. His name was also Vincent Van Gogh, and he lived in Laren, Holland. These were the paintings that Theo, his father, had received or bought from Vincent Van Gogh. When this young boy was born, Van Gogh was living in Auvers; he began to feel that he was a burden on his brother and now that he had this new child coming, there would be an even further burden. And so he decided to commit suicide. After Theo died, why this baby, now grown up, inherited the collection, plus his letters and memorabilia.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Wow.

EDWARD THOMAS: So he and Mrs. Van Gogh brought the exhibit to Seattle. They had two airplanes. She went in one and he went in the other, and the paintings were all strapped into the seats of the airplane.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Great.

EDWARD THOMAS: They were all wrapped in plastic and protected and so forth. For safety's sake, they were divided between two planes and they were transported in the seats just like passengers.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh boy.

EDWARD THOMAS: That was a tremendously popular exhibit and the Van Gogh's were here during the full duration. I did lots of educational work with him; we made appearances in town, on TV, radio, and everywhere. And he told lots of anecdotes.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Did that exhibit travel anywhere else in the United States?

EDWARD THOMAS: Yes. I've forgotten the cities it went to now. About five. And we became very good friends. So the next time I was in Europe, I went to the Van Gogh's house and we did a lot of stuff around the Netherlands, and I was very interested in the house. He'd told me about this painting. There was a painting of branches of a tree in bloom. And Van Gogh, when it was announced that this baby had arrived, painted a picture as a present for the baby.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh wonderful.

EDWARD THOMAS: And he did this lovely painting of spring flowers on a branch with a nice blue background, and that painting hung in his home in the place of honor over the fireplace. Most of the paintings were in the Stredelijik Museum in Amsterdam, but he kept some favorite ones that he had around the house. It was very interesting. He was getting along in his seventies or early eighties at the time, and he had grandchildren who were artistically inclined. So stuck into the frames of these Van Gogh paintings were, you know, this kind of pulpy paper that they use in grade school with the lines on it? There were these pictures that the kids had drawn in color crayon on the pulp paper stuck into the corners of all the frames of the Van Gogh paintings.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Boy, that's great. Which exhibit brought you the most personal satisfaction?

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh, I think the big Japanese exhibition was, probably as far as quality goes and the impact it had on Seattle... I established a very good friendship with Dr. Jiro Harada, who wrote many books on Japan. He spoke fluent English; he'd studied at Stanford and various other places, and he'd written a number of books on Japanese art, Japanese gardens, in English. And so he was appointed by the Japanese government as the educational curator to go along with the exhibit. He gave a lecture at the museum every day. And of course we did television shows on everything under the sun and just worked together hand in hand, the education work of trying to explain Japanese art.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: And customs. We had tea ceremonies and flower arranging and you name it.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: This was the exhibit that was done in the early fifties?

EDWARD THOMAS: Umm, yeah. When I was in junior high school, somehow I discovered a book, and I usually looked at it instead of doing my studying. The Encyclopedia Britannica put out little books on certain specialized subject matter.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Ah hah.

EDWARD THOMAS: And there was a book on bonsai dwarf trees and sand gardens and that kind of thing. This book was just my great passion and whenever I'd be in the library during study hour I'd, nine times out of ten, be over there grabbing that book off the shelf, looking at it.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Great.

EDWARD THOMAS: And here I suddenly was, working with the man who wrote it!

JOHN OLBRANTZ: What a thrilling experience.

EDWARD THOMAS: And so, when I went to Japan why we did a lot of things together; we went to bonsai farms. He was a great collector of bonsai trees and had done books on it of course. And he was a great help in guiding me around to the places and the people that I should know in Japan.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: He was on the Imperial Household Agency. And it was through him that I got an invitation from the Emperor to attend the airing of the Shoso-in.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh boy.

EDWARD THOMAS: And, I also got permission to go and photograph when they unsealed the doors. They did that in a ceremony several days before the actual airing, as they call it, when they go in and check the condition of everything in this old building that resembled, more than anything, a log cabin. When the air was dry, the logs would contract and let the air in to circulate. When it was damp, the logs would swell and seal the building. I thought I was the first Westerner ever to witness this ceremony, but shortly later I ran into Bob Paine, who was the Asian curator at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and he had been... As far as we knew we were the only two people that ever have done it. And that all came through the influence of Dr. Harada.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Boy, that's fantastic.

EDWARD THOMAS: That I think was an extremely rewarding exhibit. It also set off-- you're too young to remember, but about this time, Asian things became very chic as interior decorator items...

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Ahh.

EDWARD THOMAS: ...and lots of screens, folding screens, were being used. And Asian, or Japanese ceramics. Also, there was a big thing on Thai bronze heads and hands. (laughter) Heads and hands! And so everywhere, [there was--Ed.] a chic little object, you know, coffee table or something.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Here was a hand, huh?

EDWARD THOMAS: Yeah. (laughter) But, certainly, I think that show had a lot of influence on interior design in the Northwest. And certainly after the Van Gogh show, the next Northwest Annual, you should have seen the little Van Gogh entries that came in. (laughter)

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Everybody was doing painting a la Van Gogh.

EDWARD THOMAS: Actually, when you look at early Morris Graves and early Callahan, both of them were terribly influenced by Van Gogh, even to doing a chair with a pipe in it. (laughs)

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Well, it's interesting because, oh, three years ago, we did a Richard Gilkey selected review.

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh, he's terribly influenced.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: And son of a gun if in the exhibit we didn't have a couple of Gilkey's chairs done in a very Van Gogh-like perspective, and bouquets of flowers. So I can really see the impact.

EDWARD THOMAS: You were talking about the exhibit spaces.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Uh huh.

EDWARD THOMAS: We were talking about designing the Pavilion.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Yeah.

EDWARD THOMAS: And one of the decisions that had to be made was the height of the ceiling. At that time, contemporary painting was getting very large scale. So I opted for as high ceilings as we could [manage--Ed.]. Originally, the architect had worked out a very complicated device where you could raise and lower the ceilings of all the galleries to make very intimate spaces or big open spaces. All the walls, except the supporting walls, are all moveable. Another one of the serious thoughts about it, was there's an awful lot of glass; one whole side of the building is glass...

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Right.

EDWARD THOMAS: ...which is valuable space where you couldn't hang paintings. But, we looked upon it as being a kind of showcase with hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people who came to the Coliseum, for Beatle concerts and large events and you name it.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh yeah. Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: The circus. Everything. And a great many of them went past the museum. So we treated that like a showcase. There were two different lighting systems: one for back, throughout the general building, and then the lighting system along the front. And that system was controlled by an electronic timing or sensitive device so that when it started getting dark, the lights went on, whether anybody was there or not. And when it started getting daylight the lights went off.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: And they would at least see some art on their way to these other events.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Great.

EDWARD THOMAS: And then, one of the more amusing things. We had a Stella exhibit and he was working in very large abstract canvases at that time, hard-edged stuff, except... He got ahold of some bad masking tape and the paint bled under it and he liked the effect so he started buying bad masking tape so he'd get it. (laughter) Anyway, the show had previously been shown. It opened in Pasadena. And [they were--Ed.] of course fairly abstract, so on the back of the paintings they had arrows to indicate which way was up and what was down. But one painting had no arrow lines, and Neil Meitzler, who did the installation, called me and he said, "There's no arrows. I don't know how to hang it." And so I went over and studied the painting, all four sides, and I finally said, "Well, I think the way it's supposed to be is horizontally, this way, this part on top." So we hung it that way. And Stella came to the preview-- he arrived earlier that day-- and came up to see how the show looked, and he says, "Oh no, that painting is hung wrong. It's supposed to be a vertical. So I said, "Okay, we'll change it, hang it the other way." I said, "There was no indication and so all I could do was just look at it and use my own judgment and I'm sorry I hung it the wrong way." And he said, "Well you know, Ed, in a way you were right," he said, "because the ceiling in my studio wasn't high enough for me to turn it on end so I painted it sidewise, just the way you hung it." (laughter)

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Interesting.

EDWARD THOMAS: And the Pasadena museum hadn't shown it because they didn't have ceilings that were high enough. So that was an example of how the high ceilings began to pay off, especially in the art of the sixties.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: The late fifties and the sixties, and abstract expressionists who started working in big scale.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: What kind of role did publications play when you were at the Seattle Art Museum in the fifties and sixties? Were you able to issue a publication in conjunction with every exhibit that you did, or did you issue publications in conjunction with just the major exhibits? What kind of funding was available for publications?

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, there was no funding. That was the whole key to the problem. It would have been nice to have been able to do more catalogs. Of course, if you originated the show, why you did a catalog.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: But that was a very expensive process, and we just couldn't afford to do too much of that kind of thing, and instead we'd beat heaven to find shows, traveling shows that we could borrow.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: And those would be accompanied by a catalog. And when we had an exhibit of local artists' work, we would publish a [small piece--Ed.]. The cover [would] usually [be] one of the paintings or something,

[to] give some idea of his work and a little biography of the artist and a list of the paintings in the show and so forth.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: So that there was some kind of record of the exhibit and recognition, and then of course we exhibited a lot of our own material and we would put them together. And we didn't do catalogs on those, because it was all our own material.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: We began to try to do catalogs of a collection. The Japanese catalog was the first book to be done. But of course it was not a static collection; the collection was always changing and growing. And no sooner [would you--Ed.] get the thing off the presses and out, and it'd be out of date because something terribly important had been added in that realm. (laughter) So, publications were not an active part at all. Not because there wasn't the desire. But [because--Ed.] there wasn't the money and there wasn't the time. After all, you had a very limited staff.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure. Before we talk briefly about your tenure at Western, I can remember as an undergraduate in Bellingham listening to some wonderful stories about some of the marvelous trips that you took, both on behalf of the Seattle Art Museum and as a private individual. A couple of trips I remember, and I really do think they need to be documented in the Archives. You mentioned that you bicycled through Europe.

EDWARD THOMAS: That was in the late 1940s. I bicycled something like 3,000 miles or so. Stayed in youth hostels or on sleeping bags, rolled up on my bike, and I'd sleep on the beach or in a haystack or somewhere like that.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: What countries did you go to on that trip?

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, I went all over the British Isles first. I was geared for the climate and for the time of the year, and then I took-- I don't know; I think maybe it was \$1,500 or something like that. I bought my plane ticket, I was going to Columbia, and the minute my last exam was over, I was on an airplane for London.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Great.

EDWARD THOMAS: The first thing I did when I got to England was buy a [Bush] bike. I went all over the British Isles, and then I bicycled across Denmark and then to Sweden and Norway. I'd spent the summer in the British Isles, and by then it was getting fall and once in a while I had a few drops of snow fall, up in the mountains in Norway, and I was just racing ahead of the coming snow all the time.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: (laughs) Uh huh.

EDWARD THOMAS: And then back to Denmark, and cycled around there a lot, and went to the Danish border. At that time, the army of occupation was in Germany and they wouldn't let me travel through Germany. I usually preferred to travel alone.

[Tape 11]

JOHN OLBRANTZ: So, as the weather went so went Ed Thomas.

EDWARD THOMAS: Right. Well, then I got to the German border, couldn't travel across the country, so there was nothing to do but take the train, but the train that came through, going to Holland, came in the middle of the night or early morning some time. So I decided that, well, I'd just go to the railroad station and sleep on the platform in my sleeping bag and then when the train came in, it'd wake me up. I'd grab my bike and my sleeping bag and jump aboard. And lo and behold when I arrived at the railroad platform, here was a guy I'd encountered various other times in my travels and he was doing the same thing. We started talking and found that we were both absolutely starved, and for the last two or three days we'd been stealing apples out of Danish farms, to eat! And we didn't want to cash a traveler's check, because Danish money was no good anywhere else in Europe, at that time.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Yeah.

EDWARD THOMAS: And the smallest denomination traveler's check you had was ten bucks. We were just starved, and we had a lot of time on our hands, so we flipped a coin and I lost so I had to cash a \$10 traveler's check. Then the two of us went off to a restaurant and we just stuffed ourselves with the most glorious food. (laughter)

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh great.

EDWARD THOMAS: Then got to Holland, bicycled all around the canals, went to all kinds of things and...

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Museums and...

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh yeah, and then down through Belgium, France, going south, south, south. By November, I was down in the French Riviera. And while in southern France, I had as a kind of project to track down a lot of the sights that Van Gogh had painted. And so with the bicycle-- gasoline was still rationed in Europe, and so there wasn't a lot of traffic, and all those gas fumes in your face, and bicycle lanes were very common in Europe. It was a wonderful way to see the country. You could take off on bridle trails or towpaths and things like that. Go a lot of places where you couldn't otherwise go.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: And of course all the museums were starting to [get--Ed.] their things back, installed, and so it was a terribly exciting time for me.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh yeah.

EDWARD THOMAS: That was my first real experience with big museum collections. During the war, places like the Louvre and the British National Gallery were bombed, but they still made some attempt at showing work. I remember one time in London they had Henry Moore sketches and drawings that he did based on the figures who slept in the subways wrapped up in blankets at night. It was sort of eerie to see this exhibit, and then when I'd go home at night on the last subway or underground, as they call them, I'd go stepping over all these bodies, whole families sleeping on the platforms of the subway stations. That was the basis of that art. But in southern France, I was looking at all these Van Gogh sites, and naturally one key one was Saint Remy, where the asylum was located, where he lived and created so many paintings. I found the asylum and went to the room where he'd been locked up part of the time, and he did many paintings out of [that] window. There was a little old caretaker, and he was very proud to show me this room. He had collected postcards and cuttings out of magazines and stuff of every picture that was painted in that room.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh boy.

EDWARD THOMAS: And he was very interested that I was an American. He had a little, like a school notebook that he kept as a kind of guest book. And he said, "Oh yes, there was another American who came here one time." And he started thumbing through the book and there were, from the Second World War days, German soldiers and that kind of thing. Then he found, "Ah! Here it is." And it was Irving Stone, author of *Lust for Life*. (laughter)

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Right, right. I love it.

EDWARD THOMAS: "Another American who came here."

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Yeah.

EDWARD THOMAS: Then I went down to Italy and sold my bike there in Milan, and then headed, at Christmastime, up into Switzerland, and it was beautiful sunny weather so I just traveled around on the little electric trains, until the clouds moved in.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh. What a magnificent trip.

EDWARD THOMAS: And then eventually my \$1,500 ran out and I had to come home. (laughs)

JOHN OLBRANTZ: You must have been gone for what, about six months?

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh yeah, well, my gosh, in a youth hostel they charge you 35cents a night. But you had to do part of the chores, and you slept in sleeping bags. You had to sweep floors, peel potatoes, and stuff like that. And the meals, I think they'd pack a lunch for you for ten cents. Dinner was 25 or 35cents. It was very, very cheap to travel that way.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: How many trips to Europe have you made? I know just lots of them.

EDWARD THOMAS: I really don't have any... You know, my wife and I used to go to the Venice Biennale-- that's every other year-- until the Biennale began to be awfully political. We lost interest in it. On one of the trips, my wife and I bought a Mercedes in Germany and we went down through southern France, and so I decided to take her to the same asylum where Van Gogh was. She was as interested in art as I. [But] this time, you had to pay to get in, and a woman tried to shut the gate on me, because she wanted to collect for parking also. I scraped some of the green paint off of my Mercedes and I thought what a difference from the time on the bicycle,

(laughter) [when] nobody else [was] around.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh boy.

EDWARD THOMAS: But it was still in use, operated by an order of nuns. Both times that I was there, you could hear patients back in one of the other buildings. Most of the part where Van Gogh was living isn't used anymore.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: You went to Egypt too, didn't you?

EDWARD THOMAS: Yes.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Recollections of that trip?

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh, nothing in particular, just all kinds of strange, funny experiences. I had an introduction to [an] Italian doctor, who had an Egyptian wife, and he was a radiologist who worked in Cairo. And his son was studying Egyptology. So we went around in Cairo-- the son and I. He was a university student. And we saw a lot of things that probably I never would have seen, like going out to the caves on the cliffs of the Nile, where the stone was quarried for the pyramids that were built on the other side of the river.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh yeah.

EDWARD THOMAS: Then later on the early Egyptian Christians, the Coptic people, built monasteries and churches inside these gigantic caves where the stone had come from. That was very interesting.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh yeah.

EDWARD THOMAS: And they had just had the elections; Nasser had just been elected, and all of the election posters were around everywhere at that time.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That must have been 1956.

EDWARD THOMAS: Probably, yeah. And I remember there were just too many machine guns around in the wrong places, things like that. You can sense when there's trouble brewing, mostly by machine guns in the wrong places. And too many flags out, you know.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That's right. When did you make your first trip to the Orient?

EDWARD THOMAS: That would have been in the fifties.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Great. Okay, you left the Seattle Art Museum in 1967. You started to work at Western [Washington University; at that time still Western Washington State College--Ed.] as a teacher. How did you wind up at Western? Was the position advertised? Did you hear about it through friends?

EDWARD THOMAS: No, when it was announced that I had resigned from the museum, I had no other job to go to. I hadn't been planning that far ahead. I just resigned.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Um hmm.

EDWARD THOMAS: I gave them six months notice, but I had no specific job in mind. However, I had lots of offers coming in on the telephone, from around the country. One of the calls was from David Marsh, the chairman of the art department up at Western. [He] said, "Would you like to consider coming and being on our faculty?" So I went, and for the first three years, I [was] a visiting lecturer. I wasn't sure whether I'd like it or not. The thing that lured me the most was that they had a very vital humanities program. And I thought it was just a super idea. They were also in the planning stage of Fairhaven College, a new experimental-type college, the first out here. And so it seemed like there were a lot of exciting things and they were starting to commission important sculptors to do work around campus, and so it seemed to me like a good place to be.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: The humanities program eventually folded, primarily from its own success. Because it got so big it was not manageable. Generally you started out with prehistoric and worked up, right up to the sixties. The head of the history department would give a lecture on Monday that introduced the period, and then usually on Tuesday I talked about the art that was created by the people: what kind of houses they lived in, the architecture, what kind of clothes they wore.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: All that kind of thing, with all the visual things. Then, when it was appropriate, [teachers--Ed.] from other departments would talk about the music or the literature, or the religion, and it was a very, very good program. All entering freshmen and all transfer students were required to take it.

And the lectures, you had to repeat them because the auditorium wasn't big enough-- there was something like 2,000 students-- and it wasn't large enough to accommodate them all so we gave the lecture twice. It was also broadcast in closed-circuit television in the student union building and different places on campus. And then they broke down into quiz sections and, as with any interdepartmental program, that can get sticky, you know. It took many faculty members from all the different disciplines to conduct the quiz sections. Eventually, [from--Ed.] the sheer size of it, it folded. I thought it was an extremely exciting concept and [it] was one of the main reasons I went there.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: So you taught in the humanities program. You also taught art history. What art history courses did you teach at Western?

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, I started the Asian classes. They'd never had such things there before. So I did one quarter on Indian Southeast Asia, a second quarter on China and Korea, and a third on Japanese. The college had no slides to speak of at all for any of these courses. So I [used--Ed.] my own slides that I'd taken and collected, and then I could borrow from the museum, here in Seattle. That's another important educational service of the Seattle Art Museum, and many people don't realize that through all the years professors out at the University of Washington would borrow slides for their classes, and then eventually the university had a very adequate slide library of their own. I had slides reproduced for Western's library, and when I went to Asia, they gave me some money to buy slides in the museums and temples and stuff like that. So eventually that became a very successful part of Western's art history program.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: You mention the slide library at the Seattle Art Museum, and I think something else that should be mentioned is the very fine reference library that they have at the Seattle Art Museum. I think Elizabeth DeFato has done an outstanding job of building that up. That's a hidden resource that not many people in Seattle are aware of, that one is able to go there and utilize the books, really an extensive collection of catalogues and handbooks of the permanent collections, Monday through Friday.

EDWARD THOMAS: It's a research library. Nothing is lent, and it's primarily for the use of the staff at the museum. You probably, as a graduate student, and I certainly used that library a great deal, when I was writing papers and stuff like that.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Oh sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: Another important resource is the Seattle Public Library, the art department there. There was a woman who had gone to the Art Institute of Chicago, and her name was Eugenia Raymond. And she knew a great deal about art, and they have a very extensive-- both libraries-- have very extensive clipping files, so that you could go back and take any of the major artists of the Northwest, and you'd see everything that had been written about them and published in the local papers. Or anything of importance in the Northwest art community.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure, sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: And then collections of catalogs, many of them, you know, are irreplaceable.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: I think between the Seattle Public Library, the Seattle Art Museum, and the art library at the University of Washington, one has at hand major holdings.

EDWARD THOMAS: When I first went to the University of Washington, their art department library didn't amount to two hoots. But there were lots of important books in the main library. And as time went on, when they got more space and moved into a new building, the department's own library expanded greatly, and [so did--Ed.] their slide collection.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure. Okay, you were at Western from 1967 on; you taught humanities, you taught the Asian art history courses. Who were some of your colleagues in the art history department at Western?

EDWARD THOMAS: It basically was a three-man, or three-person department. The person who has been there the longest, consistently, is Schlotterback. And he's chairman of the department as well.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Right. Tom [specializes in American art--Ed.] and he also teaches courses in tribal art.

EDWARD THOMAS: And Larry Hansen does the latest contemporary stuff, sculpture and painting.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Right. Tom Vaeaaal was there for a number of years.

EDWARD THOMAS: For a while.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: He did renaissance, some modern, and I think he did medieval as well. And then yourself.

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, I seem to get stuck with the ancient. I guess it was because I was the only person on the faculty who'd been to these places. (laughter) Anyway, somehow I got pegged with the Egyptians and ancient Mesopotamia and the Greeks and the Romans.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: I know I was one of your students.

EDWARD THOMAS: I would have loved to have taught 19th-century French painting, or 20th-century art. And, of course, through my various experiences at the museum, I knew so many of these artists personally! And had been in their studios, and so forth, and had arranged exhibits of their work. All kinds of things, and I would have loved to have taught those courses, but other people seemed to like to teach those, so I never got to get into those fields at all.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That's right. You know, we talked briefly on what happened to some of those art history majors. And, we had talked about Bob Stark, and Mary May, and myself. Do you have any other clues as to where some of Western's art history grads have gone?

EDWARD THOMAS: No. I've seen Mary Duff. I'm not sure what her married name is now. And she went on to get her masters-- I don't know whether she has her doctorate yet or not. She and her husband are working on African sculpture. I had a letter from one of my students, and she was studying in China. She'd taken my Chinese art class, and she was an art history major, and she sort of got turned on by China. So she learned to read and write and speak Chinese. And the next thing, why she was in China, studying at a Chinese university.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Hmm.

EDWARD THOMAS: So these kids scatter, and you lose track of them.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure. Bob Stark is down at the Oregon Historical Society, been there for many years. I don't know what Mary is doing. I'm over in Bellevue [director of the Bellevue Art Museum--Ed.]. Do you remember Rob Rideout? Rob is a very good student.

EDWARD THOMAS: Excellent! The last I heard he was playing in a jazz band somewhere.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Well, it's interesting. Actually, he'd gone up to Canada to homestead, back in the early seventies when people were either becoming really involved politically, or they were getting away from it all and going back to the earth. But apparently that didn't work out. And then he played in the jazz band for a while. And now he's back up in Bellingham. There's a big estate that they rent out up there for receptions and different types of functions, and he's doing that. I saw him about three years ago and I asked him, "Are you doing anything in art history?" And he said, "No, it was real sad, but about four years ago [he] sold all his art history books, and that was that."

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh, lots of people go off in different directions, but I can tell you a story about him that is a little more to the point. We've talked about where influences come and how students of all ages can get turned on by art. And he was in part of this humanities program, he and his buddy. And, in that course I was able to talk about 19th-century French art and 20th-century art. I did the whole thing from prehistoric up. And these two guys got very turned on by it. So, after taking this course, they went to Europe, and they bought a Volkswagen van, and then they started to go to all the places I'd talked about. They were down in ancient Greece, to Olympia, Delphi, and all these places that I'd shown and discussed. And they went to Saint Remy and the Van Gogh country and the whole thing. In Paris they'd park the van outside the Louvre and sleep in it and then go in and spend the day there, you know, then come back and sleep in it. (laughter) And they'd cook their meals in the van. It was a traveling art gallery; they had postcards and a picture, wherever they could find one, of every place that they had visited, all these art sites, or paintings that had been done at these places, and so forth. And when they and the van got back to Western, why they gave me a showing of their card collection and all the places they'd seen.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Fantastic. Ah, that's great. What do you remember about me, when I was at Western? God, it was sixteen years ago! (laughs)

[Tape 12]

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, you were a very bright student, but you asked an awful lot of questions. And I remember that you sat up in the front row, and I could observe everything from the back of the room. And then across the aisle on the other side, in the front row, there was a girl. And she seemed absolutely disgusted with

you. Every time you asked questions, I could practically read her lips. She said, "Oh, that smart-ass." (laughter) And in the end, why then you became more and more interested in her and you wound up getting married.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: (laughs)

EDWARD THOMAS: It was fun watching that develop from the start. (laughs)

JOHN OLBRANTZ: As an undergraduate student at Western, I enjoyed your courses thoroughly.

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, one of my strongest memories is that you especially liked to ask questions, so I guess you're in an appropriate job right now.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That's right. Well, it's been a very long interview session. I'd like to sort of wind up the interview by asking you a couple of questions. The first question is, you were at the Seattle Art Museum during the fifties and sixties, and you've had an opportunity to know Richard Fuller and the history of the Seattle Art Museum; you were at the Seattle Art Museum during a sort of transitional period. Looking back in retrospect, how do you see the museum changing over the past few years? What kinds of major changes have been made? Do you think those changes have been beneficial?

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh sure. One dramatic change is the size of the staff, the nature of the staff. The exhibition schedule is much smaller than it used to be. The emphasis is still quite heavy in Asian art and contemporary art, in the Pavilion especially, which is what it was designed for in the first place. The big problem, [which] prevents the museum from being what it should be, is space. Somehow, more exhibition space has to be provided.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Do you think that's going to happen in the next few years?

EDWARD THOMAS: Yes, quite a bit of the money has been raised for it. Ideally, the place where they'd like to see the museum expand is Volunteer Park, but the Capitol Hill Community Club fights it. They don't want a lot of traffic up there, crowds of people, and the environmental people don't want to cut down any trees or lose any lawn. And we've played with ideas about an underground museum, which easily could be done. And it wouldn't take away any of the park.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Similar to what they've done in Washington, D.C.

EDWARD THOMAS: Exactly. And, now we have the J.C. Penney Building, and whether that building could be remodeled into a museum is one of the things that has been under consideration. There are tremendous things being planned for that whole First Avenue section; it's being so upgraded, and there are tremendous condos and buildings going up. We've been shown models and all of the plans for the future of that area. My only objection about that neighborhood as a place for a museum is there won't be any children. The people who will choose to live and work down there are, usually, working couples who are both professional people. Lord knows that would be the worst place in the world to raise a family. And I think geographically [if] you cut out the children and the young people, you're missing a lot. Because after all, the three primary purposes of a museum are to collect, to preserve, and to interpret-- to display and interpret. So in interpretation, we've talked about how young people's experiences, say, in just a museum visit or taking a class in any kind of educational institution, can completely change their whole lives or determine their career. So I feel that kids are a very important consideration to the future of the museum.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: You've had an opportunity to see where the Seattle Art Museum is going both in terms of their exhibition philosophy, their collection philosophy, and their educational programming, during the decade of the seventies and into the 1980s. Do you think they're on the right track?

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, to a certain extent... Do you mean as far as the collection goes or...?

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Um hmm.

EDWARD THOMAS: ...its exhibition program or what? The collection, you can have a general philosophy about where you're going, but you can't control it that much. When Dr. Fuller was in charge, he used to refer to himself as the benevolent dictator. And you got a lot of things done that way, by not having to horse around with committees and so forth, and especially when it came to building a collection. But there is an accession committee from members of the Board. Sometimes, you know, with a committee, you've got a consensus instead of any strong, definite direction. It's like juried shows. You get a jury of five and you wind up with five reasonably accepted choices, whereas a one-man jury, he comes in and says, "No," and it puts it more into what a juried process is like; it's one person's taste. And he or she has full responsibility for that decision. And, if you pull boo-boos, you can't hide behind the skirts of the other four people on the jury. (chuckles) Space is so important. There are a lot of major collections and individual items kicking around this town that people would

like to give to the museum, but why give it if it's just going to be put in the basement in storage? When I did a survey years ago, 90percent of the collection was in storage. And the figure would be much, much larger than that now.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Sure.

EDWARD THOMAS: But I know personally of some people, you know, who say, "Well, I don't want to give my Morris Graves collection to the museum. That's where it belongs, but not if they're not going to be seen by anybody."

JOHN OLBRANTZ: I have an alternative site for it in Bellevue. (laughter) We've talked earlier on, about some very strong feelings that you have in terms of the Seattle Art Museum and their lack of attention to regional art and local artists.

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, you're putting it a little more strongly than I feel. I think that there should be more attention given to promoting Northwest art, but the Northwest Annual just has to be a thing of the past. The logistics are just too impossible. And then there was a handful of people and you could show several paintings by each artist, there were so few. But then it reached the point where we had to limit the entries to one. A lot of the better artists, the artists who had become known, there was no reason for them to display their work or have their name known, to enter the Annual. Although a lot of top artists did consistently do it. Some of the top people went away. Morris Graves went to California. Mark Tobey to Switzerland, and so on. They were all consistent exhibitors in the Annuals [Annual Exhibitions of Northwest Artists--Ed.] for years and years and years. That's where they got their first attention and when they made their first sales. But, again, we've run up to the problem of space.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Yeah.

EDWARD THOMAS: There are so many other obligations that the museum has to people of the Northwest. How do you divide them all up fairly or adequately? It's an impossible task.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Do you think they're, in effect, pretty much on the right track?

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh sure! Everything is done much more professionally now than it was before. But realize when the museum started everyone was an out-and-out amateur. And Kenneth Callahan and Morris Graves were not professional museum people or curators, let's face it. Great artists, and I don't know whether they have an artist, other than designers and the installation people, on the staff anymore. In the past, it was policy to always have artists on the staff in order to provide them with a job.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: How do you see-- say the Seattle Art Museum, the Henry Art Gallery, and the Bellevue Art Museum, which today are the three major institutions in the Seattle/King County area-- how do you see the three working together?

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh, I think there are lots of ways that they can work together. And one example comes to mind very quickly. On the King Tut show, I was on a Board committee and I went to New Orleans where the show was being exhibited, and, in conjunction with the exhibit there, there was an awfully good educational phase, which, granted, was mostly photographs and things like that, and I wanted the museum to have that exhibit as an important educational adjunct to the Tut show itself. The museum powers that be decided that it wasn't important enough, and so you very smartly picked the show up and had it in Bellevue.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Yeah, the Eye for Eye exhibit.

EDWARD THOMAS: And that was a good show and it provided a lot of background for understanding what Tut was all about.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Do you see it working in reverse? I'm just curious because I know Arnold [Jolles--Ed.] and I have met on a number of occasions, and we've talked about areas in which the Seattle Art Museum is really strong. The Henry Gallery has their strengths. We have our strengths in terms of resources and staff. Do you see, in some cases, the Seattle Art Museum, say, taking a lead in a certain type of exhibit, with the Henry and Bellevue providing more educational companion types of exhibits? Conversely, could you see Bellevue, say, taking a lead in a certain type of exhibit with Seattle providing, and the Henry providing, some companion...?

EDWARD THOMAS: As a matter of fact, when I was the associate director, on several occasions I tried to get together a show at the Seattle Art Museum and a show at the Henry Gallery, and sometimes when appropriate, the [Museum of--Ed.] History and Industry and the Burke Museum [ethnographic museum of the University of Washington--Ed.], where we would all have related exhibits, different aspects of the same material. And even have buses that would take you from one museum to the other, make a day thing of it. But what happens is that

museum schedules have to be made up long in advance and there are just too many complications to ever get every museum to have space available at one particular time. It's more a problem with logistics rather than desire.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Right.

EDWARD THOMAS: I think it's an ideal thing to do.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: I think ultimately that's probably what will evolve [during--Ed/] the eighties. Each museum defines its territory and then becomes the best it can possibly be at presenting that type of art or that type of exhibit, and working, you know, cooperatively among the three of us.

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, in the old days, take Northwest Coast Indian art. Dr. Fuller felt-- these were the days of Erna Gunther and the old Washington State Museum [predecessor of the Burke Museum--Ed.], and they had acquired a fantastic collection of Northwest Indian art-- and so when people brought a basket or a mask or something, and wanted to give it to the museum, he would send them to the University of Washington. He said, "They have an outstanding collection and that's where it belongs." And so we deliberately did not acquire Northwest coast materials. But because we felt it should be divided between the two institutions. Well, now it's scattered all over the place, and we find ourselves (chuckles) acquiring a great deal of tribal art of all kinds.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: That's right. We need more people like Richard Fuller, with that kind of vision. I'd like to conclude the interview with the question, "Where is Ed Thomas going?"

EDWARD THOMAS: Well, mostly (chuckles) in the last few years it's been Harborview Hospital. (chuckles)

JOHN OLBRANTZ: (laugh) And you were in Maui the first couple weeks of April.

EDWARD THOMAS: I'm quietly retiring and sitting back and enjoying watching the whole thing. I think I've done enough.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: In six hours of interviews, I think we've only touched on a fraction of your experiences, but I really do think that Ed Thomas needs to sit down and write his memoirs because you have incredible stories, and I don't think there's a better observer of the whole regional art scene over the last few decades than yourself.

EDWARD THOMAS: Oh, I've been asked many times to write, and also do a story of Dick Fuller, and different things, but if I wrote a book like that, I'd have to be absolutely honest and say the things I feel. And I probably would have more libel suits than I would care to have.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: You'd be like John Walker at the National Gallery in his Self-portrait with Donors, but then you move to Los Angeles, right? (laughter)

EDWARD THOMAS: Right. So I don't think that's in my game.

JOHN OLBRANTZ: Well, Ed, it's been a pleasure doing this interview. Thank you very much.

EDWARD THOMAS: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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