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Oral history interview with Perkins Harnly, 1981 Oct. 15

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Perkins Harnly on October 15, 1981. The interview took place at At National Museum of American Art in Washington D.C., and was conducted by Estill Pennington & Lynda Hartigan for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Funding for the transcription of this interview provided by the Smithsoinian Institution's Women's Committee.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ESTILL PENNINGTON: - 1981, at the National Museum of American Art, doing an interview with Mr. Perkins Harnly, whose show is just about to open here, in the gallery. So, we will begin now.

LYNDA HARTIGAN: Perkins, I thought maybe we could start by you telling us a little bit about your farm life in Nebraska, where you were born in 1901.

PERKINS HARNLY: Yes. I was born in a pauper's farmhouse. And there were three children, two girls and a boy. And there was no incubator, nothing to take care of these children. So they put them in cotton, in a shoe box, and put them in the oven.

MS. HARTIGAN: How many months premature were you?

MR. HARNLY: Months?

MS. HARTIGAN: How many months premature?

MR. HARNLY: Seven months, yes.

MS. HARTIGAN: Well, it looks like you survived pretty well.

MR. HARNLY: Yes. So I was soaked up with farm life. It was a tobacco road farm. Although my paternal grandfather was a wealthy man. He built 16 Queen Anne mansions in Lincoln, Nebraska, including William Jennings Bryan's home.

MR. PENNINGTON: Oh.

MR. HARNLY: Which was a red brick. The others are all frame. And all his frame mansions had a brick outhouse, privy. And these privies were lined with textiles with big red roses in it. And on the door, on the inside door, was a comb case and a mirror, so you could comb your hair when you left. So, I was taken from the farm to Lincoln, Nebraska. We lived - my mother ran a rooming house. My father drove a horse cart, in spite of the fact that his father was a millionaire - well, no, a rich man. But they were not on speaking terms, so my -

MR. PENNINGTON: Oh -

MR. HARNLY: No, no, no, because my pappy was an atheist. And my grandpappy was a fanatic, a Baptist fanatic. And he had been baptized about 40 times. So, we lived next to the Lyric Theater in Lincoln, Nebraska. And I was four or five years old then. And I used to look at the drop curtains. And in the Lyric Theater, back in the 1900s to the first world war, if the vaudeville act was very dull and people were bored to death, the stage hands would let down a drop curtain, a background curtain. And now, these were painted by local sign painters, but they were done in the spirit of Paranaisi [phonetic]. They were done with great Italian Renaissance grandeur, great terraces, you know, and peacocks, and all that architecture which is so associated with ballet and opera. So, I saw these things, I adored them. I fell in love with them. They became part of my subconscious mind. So, in my work today, upstairs, you will see these drop curtains, the influence of these drop curtains, the derivative of these drop curtains, and this childlike love for the extravagance and grandeur of sort of a bastard Renaissance point of view.

MS. HARTIGAN: And also, the idea of a stage setting, in terms of a kind of perspective that you use, and the fact that you have made these rooms and the designs.

MR. HARNLY: Yes. I used an atmospheric perspective and linear perspective. I used the perspective - some of the pictures are perspectives within perspective, and that is quite a trick. And -

MR. PENNINGTON: When did you start drawing?

MR. HARNLY: I started drawing at the age of seven. A pencil drawing, I did pictures of turkeys and the pilgrims going to church with a gun over their shoulder, stuff like that. Of course it was very crude. I still have some of those things. But I did not develop into an artist of any note until I got on the WPA. They really - because they gave me the reason and the encouragement, the research, the material, and I really went to town. And I did 81 of those interiors. Only 30 - you've got 31 or 21? But some of them are allocated to other places. Some of them, I don't know where they are, because when the WPA broke up - when the war was declared, you see - we were put on defense projects. I was put in aluminum.

MS. HARTIGAN: And you taught camouflage design?

MR. HARNLY: Yes. I was an - the instructor of officers. Yes, I certainly was. One of my officers in camouflage was William Pullman [phonetic], who was the famous interior decorator. Gene Davis [phonetic], who was the art editor of Housekeeping Magazine. I had big shots.

MR. PENNINGTON: Leslie Chief [phonetic], did you work with him?

MR. HARNLY: I know the name, I know the name. I know the - I can't place him at the moment. But they gave me the project of the people who had much experience, much background, and all that. And we went to Fort Belvoir, Virginia, the place where Homer San Gordan [phonetic], was a relative - son of the great sculptor, I think.

MR. PENNINGTON: Yes.

MR. HARNLY: Well, anyhow, he was the head of this thing, of camouflage, until the air bombing of Cologne. It took 22,000 planes to mow the city down. All but the cathedral, they left the cathedral. And after that, camouflage, as we knew it, was not of any use. They used tactical camouflage after that. So, I was out. And I went to California, I had this exhibit of interiors in the WPA because that all happened by accident. A friend of mine, Lou Block [phonetic] and Lincoln Rothschild had other projects, easel projects.

MS. HARTIGAN: And you worked for the easel projects?

MR. HARNLY: Yes, I was on the easel project. I did a lot of paintings, all kinds of things. Scenery, a lot of Sarah Bernhardt, with long trains and theater backgrounds. So, I got the - the supervisor saw what I was doing, and they said, "Uh-huh [affirmative], we can get a new project within this project." So, they asked me to do interiors, and I did that kitchen. And they went wild over it. It's very primitive. That's the way it's supposed to be. That's the way it was.

MS. HARTIGAN: And that's how you came to the Index of American Design?

MR. HARNLY: Yes, yes. I was on the easel project, and I saw the - I did this kitchen, rural kitchen, and I did the living room of Lillian Russell.

MR. PENNINGTON: Oh.

MR. HARNLY: Lillian Russell was the most beautiful woman on the American stage. And she was rather stout at the age that I knew her, knew of her. She had a big bust and a large fanny, and she lived in Pittsburgh. She married a rich man, an old man, and she died in Pittsburgh about 1922 or 1923, somewhere in there. And I dedicated all of my female things to that woman and Sarah Bernhardt. Some of them, I put them together, I put the Sarah and - in one person, each one a little bit of this and this.

MR. PENNINGTON: Well, let's back up for one second, and talk about what you were doing in the 1920s. You said that after the first world war your father died, and your grandfather had died, and you inherited a farm, and you went to Europe. Is this right?

MR. HARNLY: Yes, yes.

MR. PENNINGTON: And where were you? You said all over Europe?

MR. HARNLY: I went all over Europe. I went to all the major cities and out through the countryside. I made sketches and watercolor drawings of the castles, things that are unusual, you know. And when I came back, I went to Mexico. And I painted - I was the first person to bring the santos to the United States, the saints. I made water color renderings of the characteristic saints, the Virgin Mary and the Christ, the archangels and all that, that you find in mostly the country churches, because I like the primitive point of view, rather than the more sophisticated. And I did 200 of those. In fact, I did a comprehensive coverage of the church images of Mexico. And I brought them back, and they were shown in the Duffy [phonetic] Studio. Duffy Studio was the place where Diego Rivera was shown, and Siquieros and Jose Hirosco [phonetic]. They were all in that place. And then, from there, they went to the World's Fair in Chicago, the World's Fair in New York, things that were there. Then they came back to me, and I gave them to the Dance Studio of New York City. There was Martha Graham, and I gave

it to the school, and they auctioned them off. There was quite a shindig that night. They didn't bring much money, but it was the first time that a lot of people had ever seen these things. And I did them as the Indians did them, I did them crude, very crude. So, I had the - on the WPA, they put me on the index, and I did 81 renderings. I made a career of the WPA. And should she have all this? I mean -

MR. PENNINGTON: Yes, I think so.

MS. HARTIGAN: It's here.

MR. HARNLY: Do you want it?

MR. PENNINGTON: Sure, please tell me.

MR. HARNLY: Are you getting it now?

MR. PENNINGTON: Yes, sir, it's going right now.

MR. HARNLY: Okay, that's fine. Because a lot of this is very pertinent, you know.

MR. PENNINGTON: Yes, indeed.

MR. HARNLY: As it evolves, up to the present time, and the present show here, which is in -

MR. PENNINGTON: When did you first go to work for the WPA? When did you first start working for the WPA?

MR. HARNLY: Oh, about - whenever it started. I was one of the first ones there in the early 1930s.

MR. PENNINGTON: 1934?

MR. HARNLY: Yes, it was -

MR. PENNINGTON: And were you already living in New York at this time?

MR. HARNLY: Yes, yes, I was in - no. I was a caretaker of an estate in New Jersey, a theatrical manager's estate. And then I went to New York. And the reason I got in the WPA was because my cousin was on it, and all his friends. All the people that I've been raving over today were on the WPA, so I got in, I followed suit, you know. I wasn't particularly interested in painting at the time, or anything like that, and I wasn't interested in ever doing anything of any significance. But I - my friends were on it, so I got on it. And I did the Lillian Russell living room, and I did the rural kitchen. And from there on they gave me free - they gave me the paper, the paint, the inspiration, the everything. Just - they never criticized me. They didn't ask for any particular point of view expressed. So, I went on there, and then I had these on exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City. They were one block long on the mezzanine of the great hall of the entrance, all along. Each picture had a [inaudible] in front of it to look at it, a little stool, and then there was a spotlight on it. And Albert Loan [phonetic], of this MGM outfit, saw them, because he was there looking for a painter to do the portrait of Dorian Gray. They had to go to Chicago for that, the Art Institute. And that was done by Albright, which is now in the Museum of Chicago, the Art Institute. So, I did the - I went out to California. I was in the - they gave me a two-year contract to be the sketch artist for the picture of the Dorian Gray, by Oscar Wilde. And I had the bedroom of Greer Garson coming on the Super Chief to New York - planes were not common in those days - and I came out here, and I worked night and day. They said, "You're not going to work nights, we don't work nights in California." But I did. I worked every night until 1:00 in the studio. Because there was no place for me to go. I didn't know anybody, and I just - I didn't want to go to - I couldn't go to movies, I had no way to get out there during the - there was no taxies. However, I worked nights, and I did 225 sketches -

MS. HARTIGAN: And they are all in pen and ink?

MR. HARNLY: They were in - not all of them. Most of them were pen and ink, but some of them were in graphite crayon, where you could smudge it and get very delicate tones and tints - tones. So -

MS. HARTIGAN: And do any of those still exist, Perkins?

MR. HARNLY: No. There is a few of them in the possession of one of my friends, who is a photographer. And I don't know how many. Very few, maybe half a dozen of the best ones. In fact, the original interior that I - this octagon, I have the columns, that is there. The original one, before even they had an art director, and he adapted that thing and built it up. Oh, he built up a lot of - what's her name? Well, anyhow, her dining room was very plush, all kinds of crap all over it. Well, I did that. And I did a barn scene, where they put the body of a man Dorian Gray had killed, I think. However, I worked there for all that time. And then I had impressed Albert Loan by my point of view of the Victoriana and my technique. So he gave me several hundred dollars to make a group

of these interiors and add them to the group in the Smithsonian in his name, as a gift of his family. And he died, and I think that he had a lot of my work. And I think it belongs to his sister.

MS. HARTIGAN: And in doing those -

MR. HARNLY: Angie Enthers [phonetic] has - have you ever heard of her? Angie Enthers is a ballerina, and a very famous - what were you going to ask me?

MS. HARTIGAN: Well, when you got the commission from Mr. Loan, that's when you started doing a lot of the more modern interiors.

MR. HARNLY: Yes.

MS. HARTIGAN: And more California-oriented, also.

MR. HARNLY: That's right, that's right.

MS. HARTIGAN: So you get this survey of the interiors.

MR. HARNLY: Because I didn't have the patience - or, actually, the time - to put into a thing of an index plate, which you put your heart and soul into. And the rendering alone, it's called inch painting. You paint an inch a day, an inch a day. And a lot of it is spit painting, the saliva on the brush.

MS. HARTIGAN: Now, Perkins, when you worked for the index, they didn't give you a studio. So where did you work?

MR. HARNLY: No, primarily I worked in a room that did not have a table or a chair. So I worked on a bed. You work very well on a bed, by the way. It's very comfortable. And I did a lot of that work on the bed. Oh, yes, I would -

MS. HARTIGAN: But they paid for your materials?

MR. HARNLY: They gave me my - the finest paper in the world. Yes, it's Darzan [phonetic]. It's made in France with rags, under water. And I used a Windsor Newton and the Grumbacher paint, and it has not faded at all. I looked at those carefully today, and there - not one inch faded. So those watercolors are alright.

MS. HARTIGAN: And did you get a weekly or monthly salary?

MR. HARNLY: I got a weekly salary of $22.60, $22.60 a week. And in those days, you could live pretty good on that, in the 1930s.

MS. HARTIGAN: And then, while you were with the Index, you also did some teaching, did you not?

MR. HARNLY: Yes, I did. I had evening and some afternoon classes at the Young Men's Hebrew Association on 87th and Lexington. And that is a wonderful school, a beautiful building, a wonderful school, and enthusiastic scholars. Those people are really - they mean business. There is always a piano going, always somebody dancing, always somebody doing something. They are very busy people, very productive and very scholastic, and when it comes to the academic, they're the tops. So, I taught there, I had some good students. A lot of them were kids, and they were -

MS. HARTIGAN: And you tried to teach them your technique.

MR. HARNLY: I had a system worked out of blocks and I used the color chart, the wheel.

MS. HARTIGAN: Color wheel.

MR. HARNLY: And I told them how to get the primary, secondary, and tertiary. And especially the tertiary, more interesting in my work, rather than the primary, which is too bright.

MS. HARTIGAN: Because you -

MR. HARNLY: The tertiary is softer.

MS. HARTIGAN: You would add grays to your colors, right?

MR. HARNLY: Yes, yes. Oh, yes, because nature is that way. Nature is gray, it isn't as bright as technicolor. It's quite gray. And if you want realism and atmospheric perspective, I always put gray in the color, yes.

MR. PENNINGTON: So you were early aware of color and light in your pictures, and real -

MR. HARNLY: Oh, I am extremely aware of color, especially that horrible color of television. Television has the most ghastly color in the world. It makes you sick at your stomach. It looks like acid, it looks like medicine. Oh, it's awful. However -

MR. PENNINGTON: Especially those Pepto-Bismol commercials.

MS. HARTIGAN: Commercials, yes.

[They Laugh.]

MS. HARTIGAN: Perkins, do you want to talk about some of your earlier experiences, when you first came to New York, the people that you lived with, and some of the artists that you knew?

MR. HARNLY: Yes.

MS. HARTIGAN: Or, talk about some of the artists that you knew on the Index, like -

MR. HARNLY: Yes, yes, yes. Yes, I made some very close friends on the WPA. The artists were mostly in the graphic division, and some sculpture. I met a young man, his name was Baschi [phonetic], Hugo Baschi. And they had a cinematic department, and he was in the cinema. I saw him first projected on the screen, and later on I met him, and we taught in the same school in Brooklyn, became very close friends. And he was Italian, rather short in stature, and very self-conscious of being an Italian in an American country. So, we met - I met him and introduced him to my friends, Fred Becker, the great line artist, the very, very great line artist who pushed the chisel through the wood block. He did wood block - wood engraving.

MS. HARTIGAN: And he worked for the WPA?

MR. HARNLY: Oh, yes. And Tom Funk [phonetic] was with us. Tom Funk does the illustration for -

MS. HARTIGAN: New Yorker?

MR. HARNLY: New Yorker, every week. And Alexander King [phonetic] was in lithography. I'm sorry we didn't find any of his work today here. Alexander King did his work on stone.

MS. HARTIGAN: Now, can we talk about Alexander a little bit? Because he was the one who got you the exhibition at Julian Levy's [phonetic] gallery, wasn't he?

MR. HARNLY: That's right.

MS. HARTIGAN: In 1933.

MR. HARNLY: That's right, that's right. When I came back from Mexico, I had a lot of pictures of the churches in interior. One of them was Christ in jail, with bars, and he's standing up in jail, because it was Good Friday. And they had abused Christ in the bible, you see? So he was in jail. So, I saw the musician - Lehman Engle was playing the piano when I went into the studio. And he says, "Well, has Alexander King seen that?" I said, "I don't know Alexander King. I know his work, his sketches. I know his magazine, Americana, which I get every week." He says, "Well, let's go over there right now." So, he took me over to west 22nd Street, and I met Alexander King. A sweet little studio, a sweet little wife, and two sweet little children. And he saw my picture of a house in a corset. A corset was crushing a great, big mansion. And he said -

MS. HARTIGAN: Bursting at the seams -

MR. HARNLY: Yes, yes. "That I must have in the next issue of the magazine. I want that." So he gave me $10 for that picture. And that was the beginning. And then, he said, "I want you to illustrate for the magazine every week, now, for the next year." Something about down memory lane, Victorian. So I did Lillian Russell in a stage box, and she had big breasts, and the breasts were - the stage box is where the audience sat, you know.

[They Laugh.]

MR. HARNLY: And it was called, "Mae West Influences Theatrical Architecture." And I did a miniature of the store fronts down in the Bowery, down in the drunken section of town of - the facades of the buildings are very elaborate, and they are in cast iron. And I paid a lot - I was crazy about the thing. I really immortalized them. So, Alexander King encouraged me to work, and I worked, and I had a lot of work done. So he knew Julian Levy [phonetic] who, at that time, had the most fashionable gallery in town. It was on Madison Avenue, before Madison Avenue became Madison Avenue. And Alex took me up to Levy, and Levy saw my work. He says, "That

will sell like hotcakes." So he gave me a show in - 1 month in 1933, Christmastime.

MS. HARTIGAN: With a few other artists, and we should name them.

MR. HARNLY: Yes, sir. I was with the famous Joseph Cornell. I was with -

MS. HARTIGAN: Toulouse Lautrec.

MR. HARNLY: Moulin Rouge.

MS. HARTIGAN: And there was another artist that -

MR. HARNLY: Brown, some -

MS. HARTIGAN: Yes, Harry Brown.

MR. HARNLY: I don't know who that was, I never met him. He was never there when I was. But, anyhow, Whitney [phonetic] saw them there, and he invited me in their group shows ever after - until I came out in California, and then I was too busy on other items. And -

MS. HARTIGAN: Now, Perkins, do you want to give us a little bit of your impressions of Joseph Cornell, because you met him, and you were able -

MR. HARNLY: Oh, I knew him rather well.

MS. HARTIGAN: - some of his work -

MR. HARNLY: Yes, we hung around Levy's gallery together, and day after day. And I was rather startled by his work. I didn't see what it had to do with painting or art, or anything like that. Because the first thing I saw was a row of Mason jars that they can fruit in. And in the Mason jars there were squares of plastic film in different colors. And these sticks, these matches that you light fireplaces with, long matches like you light for a fireplace, and that's all there was there. The original stuff, he drew a bunch of other junk, little boxes, cute little boxes.

[They laugh.]

MS. HARTIGAN: Tread lightly, Perkins.

MR. PENNINGTON: So, what was he like?

MR. HARNLY: That's what I called it, right in front of him.

MR. PENNINGTON: What was he like, as a person? Did you -

MR. HARNLY: It was, it was just a bunch of trash, a bunch of junk. And he would take a little angel out, or a plastic ball, or a broken glass, and put them all together in a little box, you know. Well, I was - I didn't understand it, you see. It was a form of surrealism. In fact, I never even heard of surrealism, so -

MS. HARTIGAN: Did you like surrealism, though?

MR. HARNLY: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, indeed. Oh, you should see some of my surrealism. My God, that - the house being eaten up by the false teeth, you know?

MS. HARTIGAN: Yes.

MR. HARNLY: And there were several things like that. A lot of surrealist stuff.

MR. PENNINGTON: So you did talk to Cornell from time to time?

MR. HARNLY: Oh, yes. I got used to him. I got used to him, because - and I used to copy him, because in the background he would use a valentine, things I liked, and quaint little things that had been out of style for 50 years, you know.

MR. PENNINGTON: Very Victorian.

MR. HARNLY: Post cards, odd little things. I used them. I put them back in my pictures. And I went to all his exhibitions, and oh, I was wild about him, my God. But -

MS. HARTIGAN: How did you find him to talk to, though. Was he easy to draw out?

MR. HARNLY: Well -

MS. HARTIGAN: - in conversation?

MR. HARNLY: No, he was a problem there, to me. He was a quiet person, and very unpretentious, very unassuming. And he looked a lot to me like he was ill, a little wan, haggard-like. He would warm up, he would warm up, and we would all get together and have a little chat about - mostly about Salvador Dali. At that time, [inaudible] brought Dali to [inaudible]. And Eugene Dermon, he brought him.

MR. PENNINGTON: Yes.

MR. HARNLY: He really had the big shots. And he has contributed so much to the museums of America. So, Joseph Cornell, yes. To me, he was an oddball. He was a quiet, little unassuming, very plain person doing these funny little childish things. And I, frankly, didn't understand it. I didn't get it. I didn't get the point. Although, later on, when I went to the Museum of Modern Art and saw, oh, a lot of them, you know, then I can see the quality and the reason for it.

MS. HARTIGAN: Well, he was maturing, also.

MR. HARNLY: Oh, yes.

MS. HARTIGAN: Now, Perkins, I think in one letter you told me that you had a Perkins Harnly Day at the New York World's Fair.

MR. HARNLY: I did.

MS. HARTIGAN: In 1939?

MR. HARNLY: That was a Perkins Harnly Day in the art pavilion.

MS. HARTIGAN: And that was related to -

MR. HARNLY: In the general art pavilion. Oh, yes. I did. In other words, I had to meet people, I had to give a lecture on interiors, by the way. And I made - I worked several weeks getting the charts made, the charts, black and white, with a Speedball pen, to illustrate my principles, you know. And well, it was like - it was more or less casual. People asked me questions, you know, on, "Why do you do this," and, "How long you been doing that," and, "Why do you do it," and all that. Some people say, "Are you nuts? Are you insane?" "Well, no, I'm perfectly rationale."

MR. PENNINGTON: Well, what -

MR. HARNLY: I did that -

MS. HARTIGAN: But you displayed with Index renderings, in other words, and then you gave lectures about them with your diagrams. That's how it worked, in other words?

MR. HARNLY: Oh, yes, yes. Well, actually, a lecture deal, yes. Visitors come through, you know, and start gawking, and I would hold up these cards and point out, on my paintings, the various things that I do, and the reason.

MR. PENNINGTON: What is it about interiors that fascinates you the most? Why do you like to draw interiors and put objects together?

MR. HARNLY: I think that my paternal grandmother, who was a cemetery captain, I think that she caused that, because she purchased the - in those days, peddlers, you know, would go through the countryside, taking orders for enlargements of portraits, men with whiskers hanging down, you know. And my family was all done in enlargements, in gold frames. Awful, awful, awful stuff, you know. And my grandmother had vases, these lovely, lovely things, big Victorian vases with flowers painted on them, and she liked a lot of painted velvet. She had banners with gold fringe all over the house. I think that's where it came from, because she lived on a farm. And out of the corn field into this Victorian parlor, and it was crammed with everything you could think of, a regular museum. In fact, I gave part of it to the Brooklyn Museum. She had John Henry build her furniture, a settee and six chairs. I gave that to the museum in Brooklyn. That was in my original painting of the Lillian Russell parlor. And where is that, do you know? That red room?

MS. HARTIGAN: I don't know.

MR. HARNLY: Oh, dear. There is one copy of it, a beautiful copy, in Kansas City, a Lawrence copy.

MS. HARTIGAN: Now, would your grandfather, though, when he designed the houses, the mansions, did he also design the interiors? And then you lived in some of those interiors.

MR. HARNLY: No - yes, it was - the exterior and interior was this - it was the same thing. There were just as many knobs and spindles and junk all over on the outside as there was on the inside. In other words, you just turn the inside out, and it was the same thing. Yes.

MS. HARTIGAN: Because I think you described things like windows that had etched reindeer on them.

MR. HARNLY: Oh, yes. A red glass - that was on the front house. And most of the houses that he did had the reindeer etched in white on a red glass, yes.

MS. HARTIGAN: And, Perkins, have you talked about the influence of the catalogs from Sears Roebuck, and Montgomery Ward?

MR. HARNLY: Yes. The only bible that we had, the only literature that we had, were the mail order catalogs out on the farm, there. And we had a Sears Roebuck and a Montgomery Ward. And we loved the - all the neighbors loved them. We loved, especially, the women's underwear, and the corsets and the brassieres and the girdles. And that part of the magazine was always the dirtiest, from being folded up so much. And yes, well, we got everything from there. We got our food, a lot of our food, barrels of crackers, barrels of peanut butter, all kinds of junk, you know. And then we - I - when I was drawing, I would copy a coffee grinder, for example, or a hack saw, things that fascinated me in the catalog. There was wood block steel engraving. I think that's about all, a lot of steel engraving.

MS. HARTIGAN: And this was when you were a young boy.

MR. HARNLY: Oh, yes, yes, yes. Oh, this was - I was very young. My goodness, between 4 and 10, somewhere in there. So I did that, I copied a lot of that. And I was influenced probably by the hats. Those hats were wonderful in those days, you know, flowers and plumes and junk, you know. Oh, it was wonderful. So, I suppose that answers your question. I just simply loved the catalogs, and the illustrations in the catalogs, because it was the only source of inspiration I had.

MS. HARTIGAN: And did you talk about living in Lillian Russell's house?

MR. HARNLY: Oh. Well, I - she had been - I forget when she died; 1922, I think. She had become very stout. Still, that wonderful face. Her house was - she had the whole house, which was five stories, and very narrow. Some streets in New York are that way, the whole street is like that. And she had the center house, a very fancy house, with an elegant door and a kind of carving around, and bas-relief. Well, then she had that - the part I was - the entrance had a very fancy vestibule. And the parlor was on the left-hand side, and that had a door of glass, but not reindeers, it was fruit cast in the glass. And the light coming through, with the chandelier, was quite elegant. All right. The floor was green carpet, all over carpet. And it had a polar bear skin. That skin was big as that bear we saw upstairs here, great big - which was very smart, and clean in those days. It wasn't full of moths. And the walls were red flock wallpaper, moire watermark. The ceiling had a medallion in the center, from which a rock crystal chandelier, which I had purchased from the auction sale at the Vanderbilt house in Long Island - it was called The Breakers - and the Vanderbilt sold it for $62, this rock crystal chandelier, a big one. And I had real candles in it. And the windows were very tall, very tall, and they had lace curtains, genuine Victorian -

[END CD 1]

MR. HARNLY: The lace curtains were not [inaudible] panels, and they had [inaudible] roses. The free scroll design was very common in decoration. And on either side were golden [inaudible]. And imagine, this was all in the house when I went there, because -

MS. HARTIGAN: And it was used as a boarding house.

MR. HARNLY: Yes, [inaudible] had used the room before. [Inaudible] part of the architecture there. But the gewgaws were taken out, the little things that were personal. And what was I - on the ceiling? Where was I? There were these folding doors set back into the wall. They were there, between the dining room - the dining room at that time was a sleeping room. And the [inaudible] gold damask. Jabots, very fancy, and so fancy you couldn't get all of it into a painting, you know.

MS. HARTIGAN: But you drew upon those kinds of elements over the years.

MR. HARNLY: Oh, yes, yes. I used that extensively.

MS. HARTIGAN: And then, Perkins, the other great love of your life was Sarah Bernhardt. You want to tell us how you met her, and then -

MR. HARNLY: Yes, I - Sarah Bernhardt. I knew her interiors, too, because I had all the books published on the subject of Sarah Bernhardt, because in those days, [inaudible] were absolutely horrible. No junk shop could outdo one of her rooms. However, she, at the age of almost 80 - she was past 80, almost 90 - she came to Lincoln, Nebraska with an attendant, a man and a woman. She was - she had one leg cut off about here, in the middle, and she was in the [inaudible] circuit for one week. And she did a monologue in French, a poem written by a French soldier who had died. Well, she was dressed like a French soldier. She had a lap robe across her, and she had a [inaudible] silk shirt, open at the collar. Her hair was dyed red, and she looked young. And I sat in the balcony, and I enjoyed her. Now, I was the elevator boy. The night elevator boy - I was 17 years old at the Lincoln Hotel, where she stayed. One night, [inaudible] at eleven o'clock, and she was in a chair, the chair was made of wicker, wicker, and they were pulling [inaudible]. Well, they brought her up to the elevator, the elevator was not running. A circuit breaker [inaudible], and I didn't know how to fix it. So, the man that was with her and the nurse said, "Would you help us carry this lady upstairs, on the fourth floor?" So, I grabbed a hold of one side of the chair, you know? [Inaudible.] She had a [inaudible] on, you know, [inaudible]. She had a [inaudible] around her head. I don't remember the jacket. And it was [inaudible] steps into the balcony. And on either side of the steps was [inaudible] lights. Then there was a mirror, a big gigantic mirror, surrounded by [inaudible], you know? She preened herself in that mirror [inaudible]. Ornery, mean old woman. And after she got through with - satisfied herself, we proceeded to the fourth floor. And the next day, I went [inaudible] matinee hour, and there was a gorgeous box of chocolates in there. And I opened it up, and I removed the first layer - no, I removed the underlayer and I put them in my pocket. [Inaudible] put the lid back on. And then, I think she went to Omaha. I followed her. I followed her. And I [inaudible] screaming and yelling [inaudible]. You know? I was no judge [inaudible]. I only know that on the stage, her voice was trembling, trembling. It was a very small voice, although I suppose in some places [inaudible]. So, at the Orkin [phonetic] Theater I didn't expect to see her, really. [Inaudible.] And at the end, why, they held her up while she bowed, about two times. And then she said, "God bless America." And then all the clapping and the [inaudible]. It was a big night, oh. And then the [inaudible] again. In Beverly Hills was an old man, a very old man from London. And he told a story of Sarah Bernhardt a great deal, and [inaudible]. He called her Miss [inaudible]. I never met him. He was alive when I was there, he was 60-some years old. He had a disease. I went to her grave. The minute I got off the boat then I go to her grave in Paris. Oscar Wilde is right next to her. [Inaudible.] And then the day I left France, I would go to her grave again. And I was there many times. And every time I was there, there were visitors, 50 years after her death. And they brought flowers. And, in fact, there was a man [inaudible] her grave [inaudible]. And she was the mother of [inaudible]. Her acting, it's said that it was overrated. But in those days, what was acting? We [inaudible].

MS. HARTIGAN: You're talking about visiting her grave. You were also very active in following [inaudible]. You've gone to cemeteries all over -

MR. HARNLY: Yes. I have been to all of the major cemeteries of the Western world.

MS. HARTIGAN: [Inaudible.]

MR. HARNLY: [Inaudible] Lenin in his tomb, which was the most impressive of all of them. The tomb itself is red granite, a large building. And there is [inaudible]. You enter - you wait in line, I waited in line about an hour-and-a-half. The back of the line was three [inaudible] long, waiting to get in. It was that way every day.

MS. HARTIGAN: But the Russians knew you were coming -

MR. HARNLY: I had made arrangements leaving, what do you call it, New York City -

MS. HARTIGAN: Consulate? Embassy?

MR. HARNLY: Yes, yes. [Inaudible.] And I said, "I'm not going to [inaudible]," [inaudible] hold up the line. But they had soldiers standing there, watching me - young kids, real young. So, I went to Moscow especially to -

MS. HARTIGAN: And when did you go, Perkins?

MR. HARNLY: [Inaudible?]

MS. HARTIGAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MR. HARNLY: [Inaudible.] About two years ago. [Inaudible.] However, I did get up early and stand in line about an hour. And you get flowers and [inaudible] flowers all around the front. And you go downstairs, two flights, and it's very dark in there. And [inaudible] a glass coffin. It's a big box, fancy, very elegant design, [inaudible] and all that. And this thing rests on a block of black marble, deep black. And around that is a balustrade, where you stand to view this body. And around the balustrade [inaudible], black, and a [inaudible]. His hands were crossed, like that. His hands were shiny, because it's waxed. They put powder on it. [Inaudible] Madame Tussauds.

MS. HARTIGAN: It's a dummy, in other words.

MR. HARNLY: It's a dummy. It's a dummy. It wasn't a dummy for 50 years. When I was there, it took four months [inaudible]. And it's an effigy -

MR. PENNINGTON: Did they tell you that? They told you this?

MR. HARNLY: No, read that later in literature. I ran across these books and magazine articles, people who have been there and discussed it with the embalmers. I have the recipe. I have a formula for embalming [inaudible]. It's very expensive, all the chemicals, you know, and the way they inject it and all that. So, [inaudible] long wall, and there are graves of the celebrities along the wall. [Inaudible] was there, [inaudible].

MS. HARTIGAN: [Inaudible.]

MR. HARNLY: Other than that, I went to see the ballet in the original [inaudible] theater, which is where [inaudible]. A small theater, by the way. And then I went to another theater, [inaudible] and crystal and gold. Oh, I loved it. And then I saw this [inaudible]. And the ballet I saw was the [inaudible] of all ballets. [Inaudible.]

MR. PENNINGTON: [Inaudible.]

MR. HARNLY: And then the graveyard, and the bodies coming out of there, and that's where the - that's the most beautiful music, [inaudible]. I went to see that in this wonderful theater. The curtain was hand embroidered with metallic gold and silver. It was designed - oh, it was marvelous. And you sat there for three hours, very uncomfortable, [inaudible]. So, that's about all I got [inaudible]. I saw the countryside. Lots of people. They are wonderful people. They're like Americans. And I saw [inaudible] all over. And [inaudible] flowers. I don't know why.

MR. PENNINGTON: Let's back up just one minute and cover a little bit more of the chronology of your life. After you finished the Dorian Gray, and had [inaudible] the indexing of the [inaudible] project, by now it's the late 1940s. You're still living in California, and you're beginning to slow down in some of your artwork.

MR. HARNLY: You're right, you're right. I worked first - I left MGM [inaudible] as a gardener for my lungs. That cleared that up. Then I went to work where I work today, in a cafeteria. I was a little bit of everything, you know, a dishwasher, everything.

MS. HARTIGAN: [Inaudible.] What do you do as a hot supply man?

MR. HARNLY: A hot supply man is a man who carries the hot food from the stove to the serving counter. That's the hot supplier, he's supplying hot food. And I did that for years. And there used to be 11 of us [inaudible] cafeteria, [inaudible]. Now there is only one left. [Inaudible] very handsome place. Beautiful dining room. Well, I went there for - on these trips, too, [inaudible], getting a salary of $90-some dollars a week at that time, plus [inaudible]. I had a lot of money. [Inaudible.] The money piles up, so I had to splurge now and then. This was a big splurge to me, the airplane - it was $600-some, plus incidentals, you know. So -

MS. HARTIGAN: You went for many years, almost 20 years, of not painting. What -

MR. HARNLY: No, I did not [inaudible] over 20 years. After I left MGM, that was the end of my [inaudible]. Then Alexander King started painting again in New York, because - you know, I was in California [inaudible] gallery, a King gallery [inaudible].

MS. HARTIGAN: Now, did Alexander King give you materials, or money for materials?

MR. HARNLY: He gave me a lot of money, about $6,000 [phonetic]. He was very rich, he had a [inaudible] of his own, [inaudible]. And I took my time, and I painted - where I worked, I painted the kitchen and I painted the [inaudible] chamber, I painted all [inaudible].

MS. HARTIGAN: [Inaudible] your buxom women.

MR. HARNLY: I did. I did, yes, [inaudible]. Alexander, he died and left [inaudible]. They had television, [inaudible]. They were all done by Henry Warsaw [phonetic]. He had that kind of influence, you know. So -

MS. HARTIGAN: And then, when you started painting again, you - how did you decide? Did you want to have the same style, [inaudible]?

MR. HARNLY: I tell you, I painted [inaudible] entirely. I painted [inaudible]. Sometimes I would use [inaudible]. In fact, [inaudible] my paintings have women in them.

MS. HARTIGAN: But when you [inaudible] style, were you aware of pop art, or anything that was going on in the current underworld at that time?

MR. HARNLY: No, no. I have never gone to art galleries [inaudible]. And I'm not aware of what other artists are doing. No, [inaudible] at that time. I don't know. But I [inaudible], just like that. I like grocery stores, hardware stores, [inaudible]. I like all that kind of stuff. [Inaudible?]

MS. HARTIGAN: No.

MR. HARNLY: [Inaudible?]

MS. HARTIGAN: No, no. Just [inaudible].

MR. HARNLY: [Inaudible.]

MS. HARTIGAN: But now, do you - you've painted every day now, for a long time.

MR. HARNLY: Oh, I [inaudible], like that kid I told you about. And [inaudible] my work. They think something is a big part of their life. And we are very close now, [inaudible].

MS. HARTIGAN: [Inaudible.]

MR. HARNLY: But I paint for these kids, these youngsters. Well, they're young, 19, 20, 21, 22, and some [inaudible]. One of them is [inaudible].

MS. HARTIGAN: And Ramon [phonetic] [inaudible] made a film about your life.

MR. HARNLY: A long film, a big film, everything in it, the farming and the - my [inaudible], and then how I [inaudible]. I did a paper [inaudible].

MS. HARTIGAN: [Inaudible.]

MR. HARNLY: A lot of people don't understand how that is done.

MS. HARTIGAN: You want to describe the technique a little -

MR. HARNLY: Yes, yes, yes. An index - I make a rough sketch, and I follow that. They always come out very similar -

MS. HARTIGAN: [Inaudible.]

MR. HARNLY: Yes, similar in spirit. Well, I make a drawing of the main subject [inaudible]. And then I work around that. After I establish it, I work around it with a pencil. Now, [inaudible] in graphite, I go over it with pen and ink [inaudible]. And so, I put the yellow coat on first. Green, orange - I follow the color wheel around, and then orange, green, yellow, and so on, going up. And [inaudible] very carefully, sometimes several days, and I [inaudible].

MS. HARTIGAN: And then what do you do to that pen and ink line? Because the line doesn't show.

MR. HARNLY: Well, yes. Not all of the [inaudible]. Some of my [inaudible] technique. [Inaudible.] And that's done by [inaudible]. You take a very fine brush, and each color [inaudible] over the lines with a fine brush. And, therefore, you have a painting, rather than a colored drawing. I did some of that. Not all of them. Sometimes, if [inaudible] hanging up on the wall. Oh, and a lot of them, a friend of mine, a very close friend - she's a millionairess, by the way, and a very pretty girl - she was going along [inaudible], and she saw my work in the window. So she went in and bought seven of them. [Inaudible.] Anne Morgan [phonetic] was a friend of [inaudible] Lady Mendel [phonetic].

MR. PENNINGTON: Oh, yes.

MR. HARNLY: And Marlborough [phonetic] was [inaudible] four of them, they called them the four horsemen of the apocalypse. These old lesbians, you know, and a bunch of fairies hanging around them, you know. And these old women loved [inaudible]. So that was a very -

MR. PENNINGTON: [Inaudible.]

MR. HARNLY: - in a canyon up in Hollywood, you know. And [inaudible]. Well -

MR. PENNINGTON: So you're still exhibiting quite a bit.

MR. HARNLY: No, no, no -

MS. HARTIGAN: During the early 1970s you did [inaudible]. So this is the first exhibition you have had in a while.

MR. HARNLY: Yes, this is [inaudible].

MS. HARTIGAN: Yes. There is one [inaudible] that I would like to get, and that is the business of the dining room stockings, the lace stockings -

MR. HARNLY: Oh, that is very interesting. I tell you what that is. This is true, every word of it. And, in fact, you can actually see it some time. All right. I have a friend, a Madame [inaudible] who did the costumes for all the ballets and various extravaganzas, a lot of [inaudible] stuff. And she was [inaudible] costumes. And I hung out all the time, we were very good friends, [inaudible] friends. And a very gentle soul, and very sympathetic to the young people. All right. [Inaudible] ordered for Gypsy Rose Lee - who ordered it, I don't remember - stockings, hose, up to here.

MS. HARTIGAN: Up to [inaudible].

MR. HARNLY: Yes. And they wanted them done in lace. In those days, there was no machine to make the lace, it didn't exist yet. Although in the Lillian Russell period [inaudible] common, [inaudible] out for many years. So, I designed [inaudible] hanging over the [inaudible] living room of Alexander King today. I designed the hose [inaudible] a flame, like they're on fire, [inaudible]. And they were constructed by hand, by girls. It took months to make them. They were [inaudible] by hand, because there was no such machine in those days. [Inaudible] hose became a fashion, not only for [inaudible], but for everybody.

MS. HARTIGAN: [Inaudible], Perkins, [inaudible] underwear that makes them look more naked than they really are. You have talked about them being [inaudible].

MR. HARNLY: My - that's right, that's true. One of my women dressed in my style looked more naked dressed than raw. They do. I don't know why. But they cover those costumes in all kinds of junk, you know, but they look naked, they look more [inaudible]. And yet, it wasn't really intentional. But I'm still [inaudible]. I don't [inaudible] putting dirty things in my paintings. I don't have to.

MS. HARTIGAN: Yes. Perkins, we don't have much time on the tape. [Inaudible.]

MR. HARNLY: Why, certainly. In those days, America was starving. We had no jobs, and President Roosevelt had hired some of the big brains in America to work out the situation. One of them was to get all these poor people a job, something they could do to get bread and butter. So, they started out at $7 a week, called [inaudible]. And they had to eat and sleep on $7. Then, [inaudible] got into it, and she got the Treasury Department to raise it up to $22.60 a week. I made a career out of it. I was on it for eight years. I didn't - I wasn't going without anything, I had everything I needed. So, the WPA [inaudible] the time and the materials to work on our sculpture, our paintings, our theater, our ballet, our [inaudible]. Adolf -

MR. PENNINGTON: [Inaudible?]

MR. HARNLY: Yes, everybody was on it. Well, we started to wean off of that, gradually. Alexander King was on it, until he got his magazine. We all started getting back to -

MS. HARTIGAN: What is the word that you really felt epitomized the WPA?

MR. HARNLY: Well, we've used the words, "[inaudible] America," which is very expressive. But I will say it was [inaudible] and rebirth, a Renaissance. And we did not only artwork, we did everything in America, you know. And it was the rebirth of living, life, you know. It was recapturing a lost situation, a national lost situation. It recaptured and restored it to [inaudible]. Now, they did [inaudible], they did everything that needed repair. And pretty soon, the economy, it started to stabilize. But it was done through the WPA. They were the father and mother of the restoration of life.

MR. PENNINGTON: Finally, do you think of yourself as an artist?

MR. HARNLY: Never. I am not an artist. I am a food handler since the age of 17. I have never been an artist professionally, really, although I have dabbled in art, [inaudible], all my life, as a side issue. And so, in other words, I am a doodler, a doodler that doodles in the various [inaudible] with an idea and a purpose.

MR. PENNINGTON: Thank you.

MR. HARNLY: It's a pleasure.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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