



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with John Louis
Laurent, 1973 Apr. 6

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with John Louis Laurent on April 6, 1973. The interview took place in York, Maine, and was conducted by Robert Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The Archives of American Art has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: —what did you say? The white part is neutral?

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: This is an April 6, 1973, interview with John Laurent. And the first thing is, perhaps you could talk about something of your childhood, sort of from the beginning.

JOHN LAURENT: Well, I was born in Brooklyn, New York, and we spent our winters there. I went to school in New York, Brooklyn Friends School. And always our summers, we had a summer home not too many miles from here in Ogunquit, my father's farm. We always looked forward and we couldn't wait for the time when we would come to Ogunquit. I remember it was a very, very exciting time. I can remember as far back as we used to take the Boston boat from New York, which was an overnight trip. We would arrive in Boston the next morning and there would be a car waiting for us, and it would be almost a full-day drive from Boston up to Ogunquit. That goes back a good many years. But the anticipation of spring and coming to Maine was always—everybody in the family just couldn't wait for the time. We loved it. And I suppose—I know that's why I always thought that I would want to settle in this part of the United States.

ROBERT BROWN: Brooklyn wasn't home, really?

JOHN LAURENT: Well, it was winter home. We had a large four-story brownstone house on Brooklyn Heights that my father inherited from Hamilton Easter Field, and that was converted into studio apartments. Each floor had a studio apartment, and for the most part, they were rented to practicing artists. I know that Yas[uo] Kuniyoshi spent many years, many years in the downstairs apartment, and many other artists came and went. [00:02:22]

ROBERT BROWN: They were around you, then.

JOHN LAURENT: Oh, yes. I imagine Brooklyn Heights was sort of a center of—practically every artist of any note would come to the house. I know that my father had sketch classes and they would congregate in the studio, and they would bowl on Saturday afternoons, Kuniyoshi, Emil Ganso. Jules Pascin had a studio in the house next to ours, which my father owned also. He lived there for many years. Stefan Hirsch, Marsden Hartley, I think, spent some time in one of the studios, all kinds of artists that congregated there. They had bull-session discussions. And they even had sketch classes when I was a kid, every once a week, I think, and they would auction off their drawings after they sketched. Walt Kuhn, of course, was there.

ROBERT BROWN: They would auction them off among themselves, or the public would be invited in?

JOHN LAURENT: Oh, no, no, no. This was strictly an artist thing. Well, the families might come once in a while, the wives.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you know Hamilton Easter Field at all?

JOHN LAURENT: No. He died, you see, when I was, I guess, about two years old, so I never knew him. [00:04:00]

ROBERT BROWN: What was he like? Did you ever—you must have heard from your father.

JOHN LAURENT: Well, I guess he was a very knowledgeable man. He had a very—very keen eye. He was a fine historian. I don't think he was a great artist. He was a very competent artist. He was a very good teacher, I'm told. And of course, he was an ardent collector. When he died, my father was left with all kinds of paintings, sculpture, prints, and a great deal of property. Fields was in great debt when he died, and my father had to have, oh, several auctions, I guess, to pay the estate taxes. But all of the land—all of the land in Ogunquit was left to my father. Field bought that when actually Ogunquit was really—or rather, Perkins Cove, which is part of Ogunquit, was nothing more than a real fishing village. Field was responsible for bringing artists to Perkins Cove,

which in the '20s, '30s and even early '40s was a great, great artists' colony. Then it got to be very commercial and is still commercial. What few artists are left there, I understand, are pulling out. A guy like Ed Betts, who spent all of his summers in Ogunquit, finally can't stand it any longer and he wants to go farther Down East where it's quieter. So Ogunquit has changed a great deal. Perkins Cove, rather, has changed tremendously, nothing but shops now.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, Field was a close friend of a lot of these artists, wasn't he? [00:06:00]

JOHN LAURENT: Oh, my God, yes. He helped many, many artists—Max Weber. I know that he helped Kuniyoshi a great deal. He felt that Kuniyoshi had a great deal of talent. He met him in New York and lured him, as he did many of the other artists, to Perkins Cove and Ogunquit. He had some fishing shacks there and he would rent them out for very little to these artists. If they couldn't pay the rent, he would take paintings in exchange, as my father did after Field died, and that's one reason for a good deal of the collection. Marsden Hartley spent several summers in Perkins Cove. He was lured there by Field too. And that's where he did the very rare and unique glass paintings that very few people know about, Marsden Hartley. The only time he did those were those two summers that he spent in Ogunquit.

ROBERT BROWN: How did your father get so involved with Field?

JOHN LAURENT: Well, he was more or less adopted. You see, a guy called John Recknagel, who was a friend of Field, influenced Field to come to Concarneau, in France, which was my father's birthplace. Field, I think, rented a place, and my father's father was the caretaker. That's how Field met my father—my father was just a kid then—and he got very attached to my father and, I guess, noticed some talent; and finally convinced the family that Robert, my father, should come to America and that he would educate him, educate him in art and in academic schooling.

So that was the way it all began. My father came over here, went to school here. He never finished high school, but he would have had a chance, I know, to go to Harvard. I know Field—my father told me that Field was very anxious that my father go to Harvard, but he didn't. Finally, I guess my father was not the greatest student in the world, and I imagine that's probably why he didn't finish high school, and Field figured, well, all right, I'll take this guy to Rome and Florence and Paris and educate him that way. He gained a lot of information, knowledge and education through Field through these travels. My father knew a great deal about opera and, you know, read quite a bit. So that was the kind of education he really had, a very great involvement in seeing, seeing art, at least, being done in Europe. [00:09:11]

ROBERT BROWN: He never studied it, but rather he was exposed to it—

JOHN LAURENT: Oh, yes, he studied. He studied in Rome with various people, and he studied with Maurice Sterne and he studied—he first started out by making frames before he went into sculpture.

ROBERT BROWN: In New York?

JOHN LAURENT: No, no, in Rome. He studied with a frame maker there. Then gradually from that he went into sculpture. But he was, I would say, basically self-taught. I think that he learned some of the rudiments; you know, how to—well, he would have learned how to use the carving tools in the frame apprenticeship, the frame-making apprenticeship that he studied. But I know that he told me often he was the first sculptor to build directly in plaster in this country. [00:10:14]

ROBERT BROWN: Would that have gone back, maybe, to some of his frame work, building up—

JOHN LAURENT: No, that had nothing to do with the carving, but I suppose the carving was the most important thing he got from—

ROBERT BROWN: The building in plaster, how would he have—would he have learned that from someone there?

JOHN LAURENT: No, I don't think that was learned at all in France, although maybe it was. I think Henri Laurens did some of that. I think quite a few of the European sculptors did build directly in plaster. But he maintained he was the first American to do that.

ROBERT BROWN: Did he keep much in touch through the years with his family then, back in France when he was—

JOHN LAURENT: Well, not a great deal. I can remember as kids we would go to France almost every other summer, I guess, and of course we would visit the grandparents. I mean, he never talked very much, and it was very difficult to get any information from him about the other relatives. He never really wanted to talk about them very much. I don't know whether he was ashamed of them or what the story was. But I know that he had, I

think, some brothers and sisters that died very young. He was the only remaining Laurent, actually. And I know it was very sad. His mother passed away. We heard about that here in this country. Then his father passed away, and he sent a lot of money over there to have them buried properly, for a tombstone, a rather elaborate tombstone. [00:12:08] I know that a photograph was sent back of the tombstone, and he was quite happy about that. I remember on one trip to France he went back to Concarneau and he could never find the grave. This bothered him a great deal. He didn't know what actually happened. He figured that some of the relatives he had sent money to probably used the money themselves and not really indeed had purchased a tombstone. But I remember the last time that he went to Concarneau was, I think, the year that I was over there on that government grant. We got together and we decided to drive down to Concarneau, and he was just like a little kid. He took us all around to places that he had remembered in his childhood, and located the house where he was born, right near the old part of Concarneau, took a photograph of that. And we had a fantastic meal at a little dockside café. And he was in very high spirits that day. We had a lot of fun, both my wife and I. And Brett and Brehon, my two sons, were with us, and I remember that forever, that day. He was kidding the waitress, telling her that he was an American but he had been born in Concarneau, and she couldn't get over that. You know, she was a simple fisherman's daughter, probably, and he said, "I want to take you away." He says, "Would you like to go to America? I'll take you over there and pay you more money than they pay you here in this restaurant, to come over there and act as a maid." And she didn't know what to make of it. He kept kidding her, while ordering a meal, about that. She didn't know whether to take him seriously, whether this was a dirty old man, you know, or what was going on. [00:14:03]

ROBERT BROWN: [Laughs.]

JOHN LAURENT: We had a great time that day.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, your mother, was she from—

JOHN LAURENT: Well, she came from Brittany too, but from another town which was some distance from Concarneau, because my father met her during World War I when he was in the American naval aviation and he happened to be stationed on a little island fairly close to where my mother lived. He was a carpenter's mate in the Navy, and he was requisitioned to purchase some lumber in order to build some barracks. My mother was working in the office of the lumber business, my grandfather's lumber business, and that's how he met my mother. Matter of fact, they became engaged shortly after that. He was discharged in France, and in order to get married, he had to make some—he had to raise some money. So he joined the American Red Cross and worked on a train from Paris to Nice selling candy and cigarettes and things like that. And he made enough money—he used to say that he sold most of his stock about an hour out of Paris, so he could sleep the rest of the time. Then they got married and then, of course, came to this country. And then after they were married, they went back and forth rather frequently. [00:15:54]

ROBERT BROWN: By the time your father, when he was discharged now, he was fully back into his sculpture?

JOHN LAURENT: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: So your mother knew she was marrying an artist, primarily.

JOHN LAURENT: Oh, yes. And of course, that was quite a shock, you see, to my mother's family because people in Brittany, of course, are—a whole lot of artists had gone to Brittany, and in that particular part of Brittany, an artist was classified, I suppose, as a Bohemian.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JOHN LAURENT: And one from America, you know, where they still believed that the Indians were running wild, and cowboys.

ROBERT BROWN: [Laughs.]

JOHN LAURENT: I know that there must have been great turmoil about it. She was the only daughter, you see—and there were six sons, I guess—the only daughter to come to this wild and woolly country of America with an artist. But it happened. And they came over. The grandparents, both my father's parents and my mother's parents, did come over to America on a trip, and they liked it very much. I remember my father's father—my mother's father, he wished he had been much younger because he would have liked to have started—he said, "The waste of lumber and the amount of lumber in this country is fantastic; if I were younger, I would love to start here." He was quite a guy. I can remember him quite well. He lost his business, I don't know, two or three times due to fire, complete losses, and always built it up. We were back in France some years ago, and some of the relatives my age still remember Grandpère Caraes, as they talked about him. Now his wife, my grandmother, was a real bitch. [00:18:00] I never could get along with her. I don't know, she seemed to hate me. But she was real peasant stock and never really changed very much. I guess she was a dedicated wife, but she

was very difficult to get along with when she came to this country. She wore the old peasant costume, you know, was born in Brittany. She used to—I can remember so vividly she was saying, "That John, that John Laurent, he'll never be any good. He's no good, that one. He's no good." I remember my grandfather used to have some straight-edge razors up in the attic of his barn, all brand new ones that he kept. I guess he got them on sale. And I discovered them one time—I was just a kid, probably wasn't more than eight or nine—one summer when we were over there. And there were the two village tramps and drunks that were in and out of jail, and I got so that I liked one of them and would talk to him. Well, I decided I would do a good deed, and I went up there and gave them five or six of these brand-new razors. Well, they finally found out what I had done, and my grandmother hit the roof. Oh, she just couldn't get over that. But my grandfather, I remember him saying, "Well, he did a very nice thing." He said, "I can get some more razors." I remember that.

ROBERT BROWN: Did some of these traits carry over into your mother?

JOHN LAURENT: No. My mother was—she was pretty liberal. She adapted very well to this country. Of course, she always retained her French accent, and my father did to a certain degree, I guess, although I never noticed it very much. [00:20:05] But she adapted very well to this country. She was a highly intelligent woman and she helped my father a great deal. My father was the sort of a man that was not very pushy, was rather easy-going, and she would, you know, snap him to attention, telling him there were things that he had to do. So she kind of—I won't say that she ruled the household, by any means, but she kept it in line, in line.

ROBERT BROWN: Did she manage these artist studios?

JOHN LAURENT: Oh, no. She had nothing to do with that.

ROBERT BROWN: That was all your father's—

JOHN LAURENT: Yeah, right. She had nothing to do with that. She just, you know, took care of the home.

ROBERT BROWN: Did your schooling in the arts begin formally or just by being around your father? How did that sort of start?

JOHN LAURENT: I guess I picked it up by being around. I remember as a very young kid I, you know, was doodling, drawing constantly, and I never thought that I was going to go into art. As a matter of fact, when I was in my teens, when I went away to school, prep school, I still drew, but I did this as sort of a little, kind of a hobby. I really wanted to go into something that would take me outdoors. I was very interested in ornithology. I was very interested in forestry. And I even had thoughts of going into—becoming a vet. But I didn't do very well in chemistry, so I knew that if I would pursue the business of becoming a vet, why, I'd have plenty of—you know, a lot of chemistry in college, so I knew that I couldn't get through that. [00:22:10] So, I don't know, at that time, I guess the summer before I went away to college, or the spring, I happened to get a catalogue of Syracuse University and saw that they were offering a program that was called Public School Art Education. I thought that would be pretty good. I would have my summers off, and I looked at it that way. I really didn't think of becoming an artist. I knew that I could, you know, get through it. So I went to Syracuse and had two years of that. Thank God, World War II happened at that time and that forced me into—I enlisted, got out of college—in the navy. During the three and a half, four years I was in the navy, I did a lot of sketching, and I really made up my mind during that period that I would go back to Syracuse, but not in the Public School Art Education—

ROBERT BROWN: What had that been like for you?

JOHN LAURENT: Huh?

ROBERT BROWN: What had that been like?

JOHN LAURENT: Well, that was, you know, methods and—you know, I was getting very disillusioned. We would make papier-mâché little animals and things like that, and I couldn't take that stuff. So I decided that I would go back to Syracuse and go right into straight painting for a bachelor of fine arts degree.

ROBERT BROWN: Had you done any painting before that?

JOHN LAURENT: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: During your summers here in Ogunquit, or in Brooklyn?

JOHN LAURENT: Yeah, I had studied with Bill von Schlegell. He was really my first teacher. He was a very good friend of my father's, and he and my father and some other artist friends ran the Ogunquit School of Painting and Sculpture for many years in Ogunquit. [00:24:05] I always took lessons, informal lessons, with Bill von Schlegell. While I was in the navy sending sketches back home, Walt Kuhn, who also had a place in Ogunquit, a summer place in Ogunquit, would visit my father frequently and saw some of these sketches and asked my

father who had done them. My father told him, and he said, "Well, is he serious about going into this?" My father said, "I think so." He said, "Well, when he gets back, send him to me because I think I can help him." And that was the—well, when I was discharged, that was the beginning of my three and a half, four years with Walt Kuhn. It was kind of touchy because I had studied with Bill von Schlegell and we were very close, and Bill von Schlegell was a totally different painter than Walt Kuhn and they didn't get along at all, really. This hurt Bill von Schlegell quite a bit when I went with Kuhn, but, you know, we managed to—

ROBERT BROWN: What were their methods like? Could you compare them?

JOHN LAURENT: Well, Bill von Schlegell was strictly a French School devotee. He was a great colorist and was a great admirer of Bonnard and Matisse and strictly, strictly, very charming type of color. It was about all he would talk about, was color. This was very helpful to me. Of course, Kuhn was just the opposite. [00:26:00] He said, "You don't have to worry about color at all, because it's in your blood. You're a Frenchman, you're Latin, and that comes naturally." He said, "But you stink—you stink as far as structure or composition is concerned." So when I was at Syracuse, every second week I would take the train and go down to New York City to his 18th Street studio and bring the stuff that I had been doing down there. Then he would give me hell. He would really—then, of course, when the summer came, I would have one or two meetings with him a week at the place in Ogunquit.

ROBERT BROWN: Was he a pretty good teacher?

JOHN LAURENT: He was an excellent teacher. He was a very dogmatic teacher. He took very, very few students and he never took any money. He said, "The only thing I want you to do is go out and make it in the field, become an artist." He said, "I believe in you." I think he had maybe two or three other students when I was with him. I found—and I know, talking to some of the other people who had studied with him—that he was such a dogmatic sort of guy and had such fixed ideas about what painting should be like, that you invariably tried to paint like Walt Kuhn, see. It took me a hell of a long time to break away from that. But everything that he told me makes sense today, always makes sense, in even the type of painting that I'm doing now.

ROBERT BROWN: Like what?

JOHN LAURENT: Well, he never talked color. He would talk tone. He said, "The tones have got to be right and you've got to get that information from nature, whether it's landscape or whether it's from a model or an animal or a still life, and the tones have got to work. [00:28:06] The tones have got to work." Now, I don't know, I probably couldn't tell you very much about this in words; it's just something that you have to kind of experience by seeing it. It's a visual kind of thing. It's a felt, visual kind of thing. And this was his thing. And even when I went into what I guess you would call Abstract Expressionism, I still was conscious, still was conscious about tone to tone, that kind of relationship that has to be right, has to be placed right, you see. And this is something in painting, I think, that a lot of—I know a lot of students think they understand, but don't. And I still harp on that a great deal. For example, a year ago I had a beginning painting class, a very small group, and I spent probably half a semester with them on one small painting that was done in the studio and was a kind of a still-life setup. They were to incorporate that and also part of the interior of that studio. And this sounds very simple to you, but it's a very difficult thing to get. And they could not see—they could not get the tones of the interior to the still life, you see, the still life tonality. They just couldn't see that. I remember that in that particular studio, one of the walls was painted a kind of drab yellow. And they knew it was painted yellow, so they had to paint it yellow. [00:30:00] But they did not see—it took them the greatest time to see what kind of yellow tone that was in relationship to the still life. And this is vitally important. A lot of artists talk about positive and negative areas, and I think that's a lot of bullshit. I never use the word "negative," because a background has got to be just as positive as the foreground or middle ground. Otherwise, it doesn't work. I use the word "open," or "an open area," something like that. But negative, there's nothing negative in painting, for God's sakes. If it's negative, you kick a hole in it and destroy it.

ROBERT BROWN: The whole thing is working or it's not—

JOHN LAURENT: The whole thing has got to work, sure. Every piece has got to mesh completely.

ROBERT BROWN: When you use the word "open," what do you mean?

JOHN LAURENT: Well, let's say a background, some big, open area.

ROBERT BROWN: Something that's secondary importance?

JOHN LAURENT: I guess you'd call it secondary importance to the figure; a figure-ground kind of relationship.

ROBERT BROWN: At Syracuse, were there teachers there that—

JOHN LAURENT: We had one guy that I liked very much. Now, this is interesting you're mentioning, that you've

asked that, because—his name was Dick Witherspoon. I don't know what's happened to him. I suspect he has probably passed away by now. But he was a very nice guy, and I remember the first day in class with him, he said, "Are you related to that young genius sculptor, Robert Laurent?" And I—[laughs]—I said, "Yes." And he said, "Well, when I was in my teens," he said, "I spent a summer in Perkins Cove, Ogunquit. And I met him there, and I knew Mr. Field." Well, he helped me a great deal. [00:32:00] He knew that I was going to see Walt Kuhn, you know, during the weekends, so he didn't interfere too much—[laughs]—because, he said, "I figure Kuhn is giving you all you need, and probably a hell of a lot more than I can give you." So he let me go pretty much on my own. But he was very kind, very considerate. We became, I suppose, as friendly as teachers and students could become in those days in that kind of a situation. And I know that in my senior year they had an exhibition, a show of all senior painters, and there was this great prize that was offered. I think it was called the Augusta Hazard Traveling Fellowship. It was \$500, which, of course, in those days was like \$10,000, I suppose. And I got it. And he called me up—he had heard the results, and he called me up at my place and said, "You know, guess what, you got that prize." And he was as happy as hell. I remember years afterwards when I was first teaching, down in Virginia, I think he was retired then from teaching, but he still kept his home in Syracuse. But he had a summer place down in Florida, and on his way down and back, he would always stop to see me in Virginia. And I was almost, you know, in love—I liked him very much. He was a very nice, very nice gentleman. A pretty lousy painter, and I think he knew it.

ROBERT BROWN: But did he somehow supplement what you were getting from Kuhn?

JOHN LAURENT: Oh, I guess so, in a way. You asked me that. I can't remember—I really can't remember any very positive or informative kind of things that he told me. [00:34:02] I'm sure there must have been, but I'm sure that I was so involved with Kuhn that anything that anybody else would tell me, I probably would have just said, "Oh, okay," you know.

ROBERT BROWN: What of your father? How does he fit into this, your being a painter?

JOHN LAURENT: Well, he liked that. I knew that he was happy when I decided I wanted to go into painting, but he would never really criticize my work. I don't believe I ever had any kind of what I would consider a criticism from him. He would say, "That's all right, that's pretty nice," something like that, but he would never get involved with the stuff. He left me very much alone. And I would try sometimes to get more out of him, but he never really would get involved with it. He just, you know, let me go.

ROBERT BROWN: Was your father still in Brooklyn and Ogunquit in summers?

JOHN LAURENT: Yeah. In I guess it must have been 1941 or 1942, he was lured away from the New York scene by Henry Hope, and he was taken out to Indiana. They lured him out there, gave him more money and a private studio and not too much teaching contact hours. Of course, he stayed there until he retired. And before that, he had taught for many years at the Art Students League in New York and he had taught at Vassar College. And during the tough years, he was seldom home. He was on a train most of the time because he was teaching at Vassar, the Art Students League, down at Goucher College in Washington, and he was on the go all the time to make money. I believe he was making some sales, but those were pretty lean years. [00:36:08]

ROBERT BROWN: The Depression.

JOHN LAURENT: Yeah. Well, he went out to Indiana and he loved it out there and did some very good work out there. Well, about the time that he went out to Indiana, the city, Brooklyn, took over the houses there for a big throughway, so we broke completely from Brooklyn. And then, of course, summers back to Ogunquit. And when he retired, then he lived in Ogunquit all year round. I know that talking to him in later years, that he kind of felt that if he had to do it all over again, he wouldn't have stayed at Indiana as long as he did, because he missed the New York scene. And who's to know, he might have done some much better stuff. I felt that some of the things he did while in Indiana—I think he probably got a little too comfortable out there. You know, it got to where it was a little too easy. He didn't really have much competition. It was kind of sad. I think he knew that it was happening, but he was fairly well along then. Then, of course, when he retired, he went back to doing the alabaster and wood carving. Of course, I always think that the alabaster was really his thing, you know. And he was doing those and did some handsome pieces. As a matter of fact, when he died, he was working on a piece of alabaster. That's the piece over there, you see, an unfinished piece there, the little white piece on the—

ROBERT BROWN: [00:38:04] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN LAURENT: There are still some pencil marks on it where he was going to carve, where he was going to cut into it.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, you were even further removed when you got this traveling scholarship, then, from Syracuse. Did you then go to Europe?

JOHN LAURENT: Yeah. I told Kuhn—well, I had always toyed with the idea of going to Paris, you know, that romantic notion and all that kind of thing. Of course, when I got this 500 bucks and—of course, I had the GI Bill of Rights. I had still some time on that. And Kuhn had said, "Oh, you don't have to go over there." He said, "You're a Frenchman. You've got all that stuff. You don't have to bother with that." He says, "Paint here in America." He says, "You've got the French stuff in you, and combine that with what you've got right here."

ROBERT BROWN: Did he get a bit defensive there?

JOHN LAURENT: Oh, I don't know. No, I don't think so. I have an idea that he wanted to maybe hold me, you know, hold me. So I told him finally I had made a decision and I was going to Paris for a year. He stopped for a while, and he says, "Good." He says, "I think that will do you a lot of good." It was kind of a sad moment, I know. Usually he was a very blunt sort of guy, you know. Of course, his bark was a lot worse than his bite. And that was the last time I saw him. He died, I guess it was—I came back in June, I think, for a wedding, and he had died in May.

ROBERT BROWN: This was in '47 or something?

JOHN LAURENT: This was '49, 1949. I was over there '48 and '49, went to school over there.

But you see, it was then that I realized how much like Kuhn I was painting, and I was trying to break away from it in France and I couldn't. [00:40:01] I had an awfully tough time over there. I did a lot of drawings. I drew and drew, and the painting became very—I did very few paintings over there that I kept. I've got a few, I guess, but not many. And then, of course, when I came back, I got a job teaching in Virginia. Of course, I stayed there for about three years, I guess, and there I started breaking away from Kuhn. It took me three or four years, I think, to get away from that.

ROBERT BROWN: Who did you work with in Paris? Anybody particular? What was the arrangement you had there?

JOHN LAURENT: Well, I was supposed to have had Othon Friesz as a teacher, but he was old, a very sick man, and I think I only saw him once that entire winter. And they had, you know, a lot of monitors, young monitors there. And it was funny, there were a lot of GIs there at that school, Academie de la Grande Chaumiere, and they all stayed away from the French students. They had a big studio and all the Americans were in there. So I went there automatically, and I finally broke away from them. They were a bunch of jerks, most of them up there. They were just having one hell of a time on \$75 a month, which in those days you could live almost like a king in Paris. So I finally got away from that painting studio and then went down to—they had continuous sketch classes there, and that's where I did my drawings, and I mingled with the French students.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you make some lasting acquaintances or friendships there? Were there some important teachers or influences?

JOHN LAURENT: No. No. I really didn't make friends with any of the students. [00:42:02] There were a couple of guys. One guy, as a matter of fact, I met in New York some years later who tried to make it in this country as an artist. He was a nice guy. But he was about the only guy that I—the friends that I had were mostly some of the friends that I had met on the boat coming over, some Americans. I kept in touch with them. And the other friends I had were lady friends over there.

ROBERT BROWN: Was the school itself pretty much just—not a very formal place at all?

JOHN LAURENT: No. Most of the art schools in France, in Paris, you were pretty much on your own. It was a monitor-type kind of thing. If you needed help, you go up to the monitor. If there is an instructor, you don't see him very often. He might come in once a week at the most.

ROBERT BROWN: You were ready for that after the Kuhn—

JOHN LAURENT: Oh, yeah. I had all that Kuhn stuff in me.

ROBERT BROWN: So you had a bit of momentum.

JOHN LAURENT: Yeah. Then when I came back, as I say, I taught in Virginia for three years, and then I felt that I wanted to get out of there. I was applying every year to jobs in the East. I wanted to get out of Virginia. I hated the place where I was working. I liked the country pretty much, the southwestern part of Virginia, but I wanted to get back to New England. Then I just couldn't land any kind of jobs, even with teaching experience. And I was exhibiting some. I had some kind of small record. [00:44:05]

ROBERT BROWN: Did you like to teach?

JOHN LAURENT: Yeah, it was all right. I'd rather paint, you know, but what the hell. Teaching, I suppose, is the most practical thing for an artist to do if he's got to make—he can't make it by painting. He has, you know, quite a bit of time to paint, though not as much as one would think. But teaching is all right. It can drain the hell out of you. I know Kuhn was totally against anybody going into the teaching. He said, "Do anything, anything else, but don't teach," he says, "because they'll kill you. They'll drain you of blood. You won't have any of the energy." He said, "Even digging ditches, you may be tired, but at least you come in fresh, you come in the studio fresh."

ROBERT BROWN: You found this to be true somewhat?

JOHN LAURENT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I think so. I think so. You've got to make some kind of a compromise, which is wrong, you see. If you're going to be a good teacher, if you are going to do it honestly, you've got to give everything that you've got. Well, I don't consider myself a good teacher, because I am thinking of what I want to do when I get to the studio. I have to reserve—you see, I have to divide myself degree-wise, and I just won't let teaching dominate me. I've seen too many artists—I've seen too many artists get trapped in the teaching profession and that's the end of it. The painting goes to hell. The painting goes to hell. It's very true, very true. Well, it sounds lovely to people, you know, who don't know very much about it, the laymen. "Oh, you've got it made. You're only teaching 15 hours a week. You've got your summers all off." But there's a lot more to it than that. [00:46:04]

ROBERT BROWN: So, you were saying about trying to come East.

JOHN LAURENT: Yeah. Well, I decided that I ought to go and get my master's, and I was offered a pretty good setup at Indiana. Henry Hope said, "Sure, we'll give you a master's there. You can get it in a year," which sounded great, and also I got a graduate assistantship. So I got my master's there. And while I was there I met Arthur Deshaies, who helped me a great deal in painting. He was a printmaker. He helped me in printmaking a great deal. And George Rickey, who was my —was the graduate helper, he took me under his wing. But I learned a lot from George Rickey. He was very much like my father in many ways. He would come in to look at the paintings that I had been doing, maybe once a month, and for God's sakes, he would never, never talk about my paintings. He'd talk about anything else but my paintings, you know. [Laughs.] He left me alone. But I learned a lot from George about a lot of other things and about the kinetic sculpture that he was doing. He was a great man. Both Arthur Deshaies and George Rickey helped me a great deal over there. I was really, really ready for that. There were really a hot bunch of graduate students at that time there at Indiana. A lot of them were about my age or a little bit younger. I was somewhat older. We had a good time. Of course, that's where I met Nancy, my wife. She was a sculpture student of my father's. [00:48:00] I met her there and we got married. Then I was still going back, after I got my master's, I still couldn't get a job. I had been offered a few jobs that I didn't want to go where the offers were. Then I knew there was an opening at the University of New Hampshire, and a friend of mine applied there, too. He was a potter. And I applied, and it was between the two of us, and he was offered the job. Well, I was just broken up, you know, because I really wanted that place. I had never been to the University of New Hampshire, didn't know a damn thing about it, but I knew that it was close enough to Ogunquit and it was—

ROBERT BROWN: Where your father was.

JOHN LAURENT: Yeah, where I wanted to set up shop. Well, it so happened that this guy, David Black, finally turned the job down and took a job at Ohio State. Well, I thought then that I would be in the running. I didn't hear any more. I wrote to New Hampshire and didn't hear from them. I thought that they had just gotten somebody else. I remember one—I guess it was in June sometime that Ed and Mary Scheier, who were the potters then at the University of New Hampshire, came by and said, "Are you still interested?" Now, this was not the boss. This was not the chairman. He had sent them, I guess, to look me over. And they said, "Are you still interested in that job at the University of New Hampshire?" I said, "I certainly am." So I got it. I finally got it. I got an interview and—but I took it as an instructor. I went in there as an instructor. I had been an assistant professor down at VPI. So I took a great cut in salary because I wanted to be up here. [00:50:04] [Laughs.] Well, I guess this is another story, but the guy that was the head of the department then kept me as if I had been a green instructor who had never taught and I had to come up, you know, the regular way. Well, we never really hit it off too well.

ROBERT BROWN: It was sort of an autocratic regime, you found?

JOHN LAURENT: In my case, with him, it was, yes, indeed. You might call it something else, but we won't get into that right now. So I've been there ever since, and that was in 1954.

Then after I got the job, we—as I mentioned, I got married. We lived the first two years—on my instructor's salary, I was still paying back a debt that I owed to Virginia Polytechnic Institute because I took a leave of absence there to get my master's, and they had given me some money to further my education, see. So I was still paying them X number of dollars a month on my instructor's salary. So it was pretty tight. Fortunately, my

father and mother let us live in their house in the wintertime there in Ogunquit, so I commuted.

ROBERT BROWN: Could you compare the schools, VPI—Virginia Polytechnic—and then Indiana and New Hampshire?

JOHN LAURENT: Oh, well, totally, totally, totally different. Of course, I've seen so many changes here at the University of New Hampshire, it's fantastic, because I've been there now almost 20 years, I guess. But when I came to New Hampshire, I liked it very much. There were, you know, some good people teaching there. [00:52:00] VPI was—I was teaching in a department of architecture. It was a very archaic type of school. But I understand that that has changed, of course, tremendously now. They have a very good department there. But I was in with a bunch of old gaffers there at VPI and you couldn't do very much. It was old Beaux Arts-type stuff. Indiana, of course, was great. As so many Midwestern universities in the '40s, they had the money and they lured all the stars, the artist stars, from the West coast and the East coast, from New York, out there, and they were really swimming, you know, in those years. There were great art departments out there.

ROBERT BROWN: And that was enough? You didn't have to be near the city?

JOHN LAURENT: No. I got into the city. Antoinette Kraushaar, who runs the Kraushaar Galleries, was handling my father's work. She knew that I was painting and she had seen some of my stuff, and she became quite interested in the work. I don't know how it came about, but I think she asked me whether I would be interested in sending some stuff down to her gallery. Of course, I was elated, I was delighted, thought this was a great thing. I remember she came up and she looked at the stuff, and she said, "No," she says, "you're not ready yet." So I waited another year or two, I guess, and then she came and then she picked out—she said, "I'll take this one, I'll take that one, take that one." And that began my business in New York. I stayed there for 14 years with her.

ROBERT BROWN: A good gallery?

JOHN LAURENT: [00:53:53] Very good gallery. Let me say she is a marvelous person, very honest, which is, you know, a pretty great thing to say about a dealer these days. She's as honest as they come, I think, and she's a delightful person. I broke with her because, well, I was selling more—I had a verbal contract with her. Anything that I sold, whether it went to New York or not, or even if she hadn't seen it, if I sold it I had to give her 33 1/3 percent. I was selling a lot of stuff myself, and I just, you know, couldn't see that. She wasn't selling that much. She sold, you know, some. She was responsible for that Kennedy grant, the Arts and Humanities grant that sent me to Europe for a year. She got me that.

ROBERT BROWN: When was that? Later?

JOHN LAURENT: It was '66, '67. So that helped me a great deal. I think I did some fine paintings those two years that I went over there to France, to Brittany. So we broke under—we split under friendly—she understood. And, I don't know, I look back on it now, and if you're in on the New York scene, I think you have to be around quite a bit. You've got to show your face, and you can't live out in the country and hope that things are going to jump down there. You've got to make yourself known, and of course, I seldom went into New York. I don't know, it just didn't work. I find that I don't need New York. No, I paint here when I feel like painting, and I sell well here. I sell in New England. And what the hell, I made the *New York Times*. I thought that was just the greatest thing in the world. I got a write-up in the *New York Times*, I got a write-up in *TIME* magazine, all that stuff. [00:56:04] So what? You know, I've had all that crap, and it doesn't mean a damn thing. It all depends on what you want. I mean, everybody thinks of New York as the—well, many painters think that New York is the—you know, that's the thing. But what the hell. No, I don't do it. And I think that's changing. I think they're in trouble in New York now. I think the dealers and the painters—I think there's a lot of trouble there in New York now. And I think what's happening—like so many people, the artists are moving out to the country. And the buyers, the collectors—what's nicer than to take a weekend or a week off in New England, take a ride instead of burning your soles off your feet walking down Madison Avenue? Come see the artist in his studio. You don't have to pay a dealer's fee, commission. You see a guy. You talk with him. That's what's happening. That's what's happening now.

ROBERT BROWN: So you have—a good deal of that's happening now?

JOHN LAURENT: Oh, I'd like to have more of it, you know—[they laugh]—but I'm doing all right. I'm doing all right.

ROBERT BROWN: And you developed some pretty close friendships with some of the collectors? Are they pretty important people to you, or have some of them been?

JOHN LAURENT: Yeah. The people who I'm trying to think of now that have bought a lot of my paintings are not—you know, are not the Mellons, by any means, but they're people that happen to like my work, that aren't the wealthiest people—wealthiest collectors, by any means. I've sold to all kinds of people. I've sold to some wealthy collectors. The majority of people that have my paintings, I would say, are people right here in New England.

[00:58:00]

ROBERT BROWN: And you like that.

JOHN LAURENT: Sure. I like that.

ROBERT BROWN: You feel you're a New Englander.

JOHN LAURENT: Oh, absolutely. No, I think environment is extremely important. I couldn't paint in New York City. I've got to paint where I live and when I like. I'm very, very attached to the soil, very attached to the soil, and I think this is vitally important for me. And I paint things around me. I paint things around me, have always done that. I've always done that. That's why, if you knew my old painting, you would see animal paintings, chickens and geese paintings. If you see the thing on the easel here, there's my farm down—the garden is under the snow there, you see. I do a lot of gardening, vegetable gardening. That's what I like. I think, you know, this kind of environmental sort of idea stuff is—I think this is happening in art now. You know, the tape-and-band painters in New York City, that's going out. That was kind of a flair there for a while. Everything works in cycles. And you're getting some of this sort of what they call—I guess they call it Magic Realism now, you know, that's popping up in New York. Well, you've got to come back. I come back with sort of organic—you know, organic stuff.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, here you can be more in control of your own cycle? You're not so subject to other influences? Or do you think you would be if you were down there?

JOHN LAURENT: I don't know. I haven't been back to New York for—oh, Jesus, I don't know how long it's been. I don't feel the need to go. If I go to Boston, I figure that's a big trip. And, you know, all the galleries in Boston are pretty good, and I think there's just as good stuff, probably, there as there is on Madison Avenue, if not better. [01:00:08] I really shouldn't make that—I shouldn't say that, because I don't know what's going on in New York except what I read, and nothing really excites me very much down there. As I say, I think they're in trouble. I talk to, you know, artists that go back there frequently, and they come back and they say, "Jesus, it's nice to get out here in the fresh air." If I want to see good permanent sources of art, the Boston Museum has got a great collection, a great collection of stuff. They have good shows.

ROBERT BROWN: The older artists you grew up with, do you think they felt the same way, people like Kuniyoshi, who spent part of the year in New York?

JOHN LAURENT: Oh, no. No, no. No, New York—New York was jumping then, you see. There was a lot of excitement, a great deal of excitement in the—well, when you go back to the '20s, the '30s and the '40s, New York was jumping. You know, it was really the big center. There were all kinds of painting going on, very exciting kind of times. You know, I think what's happened in art, what happened along the way there, that—I don't know, maybe it's just a way of life—that people, painters began to talk painting and not paint. They had maybe great so-called intellectual statements about their paintings. I find it very difficult to take a band-type painting and read page after page of intellectual garbage about it, you know?

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN LAURENT: And that's what's been happening. I think that they have been snowballing people. You know, it's easy. You get dealers to go along with the artists. It's like—it's a business. It's a business. And, I don't know, I think it's become kind of a dishonest sort of business. I feel that. I feel that. [01:02:15]

ROBERT BROWN: These men you knew when you were a young man around your—in your father's place and all, they mainly worked, did they, rather than talk about it?

JOHN LAURENT: Oh, they would talk about it plenty, you know, but it would be pretty down-to-earth kind of stuff. I don't remember any of them really getting terribly involved, like talking for an hour about a painting, you know. They would more or less take things for granted among themselves. They figured they were doing the best they could, they were good artists, and when they got together, they got together to relax, not to talk art too much. They would play golf or go fishing or picnicking. I don't remember any real, terribly heated or great, profound conversations, period, in which guys would get involved.

ROBERT BROWN: Up here, you have been able to balance out your own work, your teaching, your family life? Has it been all pretty much—you've worked out a way of life that's pretty comfortable.

JOHN LAURENT: Yeah. Yeah. I still hope some way that I'll be able to get out of teaching before I'm too damn old, and just do nothing but paint and make some prints. If there was some way, you know, that I could do that without teaching, that's my secret goal, let's say. I suspect I'll have to wait until I'm retirement age for that, and then, of course—well, we won't say it will be too late, but—[01:04:14]

ROBERT BROWN: [Inaudible.] Well, the—over the years, have you worked out—can you think of an approach to teaching at all that you worked out as something that you're aware of consciously, a method of working with students?

JOHN LAURENT: Well, I think, of course, in teaching you've to get as close as you possibly can to your students, which is pretty difficult. I'm terrible on names. It takes me a long time to learn a kid's name. But I try to my best advantage, I think, or best ability, let's say, to get as close as I can to the students. And my method of teaching is—I like to handle the beginning students. I get a lot of satisfaction, I think, of getting a green kid come in and see what the hell I can do with that kid in, say, one semester. That gives me—let's say if there is fun in teaching, that's the kind of fun that I like. And it's a lot of work. It's a lot of work, you know. Jesus, it's a killing kind of thing, really. I have a class in the morning now, particularly this semester, and I come back home at noon. And everybody says, "Jesus, have you been working today? Have you been working today?" You're going through, you know, 25 to 30 students in three hours. You're not going through all of them, but you try to. [01:06:02]

ROBERT BROWN: You prefer the unsophisticated student, then, the one that comes, as you say, green.

JOHN LAURENT: Oh, God. The freshmen today are pretty damn sophisticated, don't kid yourself. I've seen this. We were talking about it the other day. "What do you think of the freshmen this year as compared to last year?" "Well," I say, "I compare them to five years ago, and every year they come in and, boy, they know. They've got pretty good—you know, they've been around a little bit." Their attitude is different than it was when we had all that turmoil not so many years ago. I think a lot of students that come to college today, a lot of them are there to get something. We still get, you know, the dumbbells, the ones that are just taking it for a ride, but you get a lot of sincere students today at the University of New Hampshire. I can talk about that.

And my method of teaching is simply, boy, it's a nuts-and-bolts kind of thing. You've got to learn the rules. It used to be, oh, you come in, you attack a drawing, do what you feel like doing, put your guts into it, without—what the hell, if they don't know how to—if they can't see relationships, how the hell are they going to do anything? So they've got to go—have to get the rules. And all of us there in our department feel the same way, so it's a good-working department, very good-working department. I think we've probably got as good an art department as any school in the country.

ROBERT BROWN: There was a time when this "express yourself as you please" prevailed among a lot of teachers?

JOHN LAURENT: Oh, sure. Sure. That went along with the times. [01:08:00]

ROBERT BROWN: But you've never espoused this, have you?

JOHN LAURENT: Well, you know, I still believe in letting a kid that's got something—I still try to kind of help that kid develop his own style. And once in a while, you catch—you catch a cat like that, and then I change the tune a little bit, see, and let him go pretty much. I'm pretty damn liberal, I think, in that respect. So there are exceptions. There are exceptions to everything. And after all, in teaching, that's the whole idea, trying, to your ability, to develop what you feel a kid has got, direct him in the right direction.

ROBERT BROWN: What effect has it had on your own work?

JOHN LAURENT: Tired as hell when I get back to the studio. Tired as hell. I'll come back here sometimes and I got an idea I want to paint, and I sit in this damn chair, and I'll just sit here and just look at the painting to figure out what I'll do another day when I'm not so tired.

ROBERT BROWN: Has it affected the way you painted, do you think?

JOHN LAURENT: No.

ROBERT BROWN: I mean being around students.

JOHN LAURENT: No. No. No.

ROBERT BROWN: Has that been sort of an ongoing thing? You described your work with Kuhn, and then you said you were going to—this flirtation with Abstract Expressionism. You mentioned animals then, more suggestive of landscape now.

JOHN LAURENT: Well, I've always been—always been terribly—terribly involved with landscape one way or another, not so much figuration. The only time that I—well, in the not too distant past—have gotten involved with figures was those two years I was in Brittany, France, when I did a series of paintings in the oyster area of Brittany and I had a studio right over an oyster factory that belonged to a cousin of mine. [01:10:14] So I did a lot of the oyster workers, not portraits, but mostly the colors of their oilskins and things like that on the tidal flats

where the oysters were. I've done a few portraits, but that doesn't interest me right now. I'm interested in the land, you see. I mentioned before, I love to garden. I like getting my hands in the dirt. I like to cut wood, and you see I've got a nice wood fire going in back of you there.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN LAURENT: It's stuff that I cut. And I'm very involved with that.

ROBERT BROWN: That comes out in the painting. The painting is not simply a composition at all. I mean, it's the qualities of the—the snow in this one we're looking at, and the distant hills, and the house, what it's made of, where it's placed.

JOHN LAURENT: Well, of course, the arrangement is vitally important, is vitally important. I'm terribly—terribly involved now with the subtleties of color, tones in the snow, as you can see—

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

JOHN LAURENT: —you can see many, many colors in there, subtle colors, and also in the range of trees in the background, and sky. Now from the studio here, I get some fantastic sunsets, which I never thought would exist in this area. I see some oranges and brilliant oranges, and cadmium yellow right over there to the west, you see, when the sun sets. Well, you don't see it now, but—so that sky that you see up there in that painting is even much more brilliant than I have portrayed it there, at times, fantastic. [01:12:14]

ROBERT BROWN: Do you like the most brilliant—effects in nature?

JOHN LAURENT: Well, I'm sort of interested in capturing something that years ago I would have called very corny, almost postcard kind of stuff, you know. And I'm trying to capture that kind of stuff you see in nature that so often looks corny in painting, and I hope it doesn't look corny in my painting. I try to work it with, you know, the knowledge that I have, the past knowledge of painting. And I think it works pretty good, looks pretty good.

ROBERT BROWN: But your feeling for nature, your love to get into it comes through here—

JOHN LAURENT: Yeah, I think so.

ROBERT BROWN: —despite the more formal qualities, as well.

JOHN LAURENT: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: The mural at the art center at the University of New Hampshire, in that, what did you have in mind? It has almost a map-like quality; at the same time, you see it as a landscape, certainly.

JOHN LAURENT: Well, that was done—what—in 1958, I guess, when I was in Abstract Expressionism, I guess. And that was done—I would take a lot of drives around Dover Point in the Great Bay area. I don't know if you've ever been there.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JOHN LAURENT: Well, that's a very interesting part of New Hampshire. It's a tidal area. And I made some sketches out there. This thing was painted, I guess, in the very early spring, probably in March, March-April, when the snow was beginning to melt and some of the stuff coming through the ground. I think if you ever get back there—well, if you went back this afternoon, if you look at it, you begin to see that melting ice in the iced bay area, some of the landscape in the back there, but done in a very moving, kind of sweeping follow-through kind of way, [01:14:14] not as tight as this painting that you see on the easel. See, I'm going back to—well, you see the painting up there behind you. That was done about that same time, which, again, is Mount Agamenticus. And the painting that I hope to finish for my show, which is on the floor over there, that's again from Mount Agamenticus. I've done quite a few paintings from Mount Agamenticus, which is a mountain which is about five or six miles from here, in Cape Nettick. It's a beautiful—it's not a very high mountain, but it's the highest one in this area, along the coast. Of course, you can see the most expanse of land from it, as well as the sea.

ROBERT BROWN: In the earlier painting, there are divisions between areas, and there are, within the field cover, there seems—and tones, there seem to be—it's much looser than in these later ones. But at the same time, there are divisions and there are areas set off from one another. So there was always this kind of a—

JOHN LAURENT: A jump, a kind of jump. Now there's a much more subtle jump, I guess you call it.

ROBERT BROWN: Why do you reckon you have tightened up on these later ones?

JOHN LAURENT: I don't know. You know, I'm really trying to figure that out. It's a funny thing. I will start, I will start my painting very much in that loose kind of manner that you see, and I will become more and more concerned, as I paint into it, into precision of tone, precision of tone. [1:16:05] I guess I'm getting—in my old age, I'm getting more perceptive, I guess, in a way. Maybe not. Maybe not. But I want to work it out more, let's put it that way, you know, without being quite as flamboyant as I was before.

ROBERT BROWN: So that here in the snow, in this painting we're looking at, there is innumerable—within short spaces, innumerable changes in color, introductions—

JOHN LAURENT: Right. Yeah. Oh, yeah. I've taken some pictures, you know, of a painting in progress, which is sort of interesting to see, because the first day, first week that I'm in the thing, the thing is, Jesus, loose as hell, you know. And my wife says, "Why don't you leave it that way? Why do you always come home and work the damn thing?" [Laughs.] [0:1:16:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Why don't you?

JOHN LAURENT: I was talking about this thing to Bill Majors. He's a black guy, a very good artist, who is teaching—he's new—over at the University of New Hampshire. We were talking about this, and I said, "You know, I'm doing things now that I would never have done before. I would have slid over, slid over a lot of these things. I said, let it go, let it go." But now I'm pounding away, pounding away at these things. I'm not sliding over, I'm trying to get right into the stuff—which, I don't know, you might say is being more realistic, whatever that may mean. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: A larger brush, a larger, more generalized effect was sufficient in the past.

JOHN LAURENT: Yeah. You know, I wanted it like, I don't know, you're talking about shit, I suppose. You know, let it out, let it go.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, sort of like sketches, with paint. [01:18:00]

JOHN LAURENT: Well, no, even in those loose things, I would—it was a constant, constant re-attacking, re-attacking, re-attacking. In other words, I would paint the whole thing one day, see, about, about, and I would go back in it and I would re-attack that another day, and I would do that until finally the day would come, hopefully, when [snaps] there it was. Now, this is more of a plodding kind of thing, you see, plodding with changes. I find that I'm more perceptive of nature, too, now, looking at the variance in color, tonality, then I used to be.

ROBERT BROWN: I suppose you used to look at, say, the larger divisions between the field and the underbrush and then the distant?

JOHN LAURENT: Yeah. Yeah. That's right. I would take, you know, big areas, big areas. Well, I still do that, in a way, but then within the big areas I have become much more concerned with the subtleties within those big areas now.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you used to have a sense of having completed the work when it was still loose, like now you do?

JOHN LAURENT: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Sure. You know when a painting is finished. You know, you may have reservations about it, but after looking at it for weeks, and touching it now and then and all that, then you finally say, well, all right, that's it, that's it, we've got it. And if you haven't got it, you say to hell with it, paint over it, burn it or whatever. You know. You know when a thing is done. It's interesting to see paintings which one has sold and you figured they were finished, and you see them again maybe a year later. And it's good, too, when you can see one that you haven't seen for a year and say, "Well, Jesus, that wasn't that bad, you know. If I had it in my studio, what would I do with it now?" And when you can't think of very much that you would do to it, then I guess you hit it pretty well. [01:20:05]

ROBERT BROWN: Hmm. Of course, if you're looking back, say, 10 years, would you take one of those and say, well—

JOHN LAURENT: No. No, because I know that—

ROBERT BROWN: You knew what it was like for you then—

JOHN LAURENT: That's right. That's right.

ROBERT BROWN: —so it was a record.

JOHN LAURENT: It's like that painting up there, which was done in the late '50s. I look at it today and say, Jesus,

that's all right for then, you know? It's okay. Why would I want to take that down and do anything to it? I did it then, and that's the record. I'm more concerned with what is happening here now. See, that was yesterday. I'm more concerned about today. And I think most artists are, obviously.

ROBERT BROWN: What do you think about letting them go, then? Are you perfectly happy to have them go?

JOHN LAURENT: Well, I can't—I think an artist—there are some that—no, I don't mind letting anything go, really. My wife feels a little differently about them. There are some that she wants to keep, and that's okay. That's fine. I think once I have tried to solve what I wanted to say to a certain degree, then that's it. I'm ready to go and do another one. I'm not that attached to any kind of painting. I have a pretty good memory. I remember the painting pretty well. I like to go back and see it, I'd like to see it sometime again, you know, if it sold. But I don't like to have too many of my things in the house, actually. I'd rather have other things around. And if I do have something of mine in the house, it doesn't stay there terribly long. We move them around.

ROBERT BROWN: Is a painting something you've gotten out of yourself and then you're ready to get something else out, or perhaps it's time to reflect? [01:21:54]

JOHN LAURENT: Right. I can reflect and then get going with something else. I'm always anxious to finish a painting and get started on another one. That's why these two here now, you see, I know I've got kind of a deadline on them, and I've got ideas about things I want to do. I get sort of impatient. I get sort of impatient. Like I want to do some—I want to make some more silkscreens. I haven't done any silkscreens for 20 years, until last winter. took a course last summer at the Barn Gallery with two nuns who had studied with Sister Corita. That was a lot of fun, so I decided I would go back into that again.

ROBERT BROWN: Now as you work to finish these paintings now, of course, you're working in finer and finer areas. So in the end, you've kind of locked it up, have you, because in the end there's no release, but you've completed your task. You said earlier there was something—

JOHN LAURENT: You never completed your task. That's why you are ready to go to another painting.

ROBERT BROWN: But you complete this one, I mean.

JOHN LAURENT: Well, I've completed it for this period, let's say.

ROBERT BROWN: What do you figure you'll be—in looking to the future—

JOHN LAURENT: Well, I'm very concerned with this immediate area, like the York River. I want to do—I've done a few little things around the York River. For example, that big painting behind this one there, the *Green Fields* there. I've got a kind of a little boat, and we even go up and down the river frequently, and I fish. I do a great deal of fishing in the summers, striped bass fishing. And I want to get these things out of the way here. The show's on down at Andover and I got some time to start painting. School is over and all that. I want to take the boat and make some sketches, little sketches, and do some more of the York River stuff. I think it's fascinating to see the York River from the eye level in a canoe, see it low. There's some fantastic views. So I'm—call me the York River painter. [Laughs.] [01:24:14]

ROBERT BROWN: [Laughs.] You'll also be more intimate with certain things than, say, in that mural at the university, where you have sort of an overview of the bay.

JOHN LAURENT: Well, not really. You may see it that way, but I don't. It's still a flat kind of thing with a lot of melting turbulence, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JOHN LAURENT: You look at it again when you go there this afternoon. But you see, we lived, we lived, we lived in that area for a couple of years. We lived in Lee, New Hampshire. So that, again, I was pretty close to, pretty close to. And I think I want to do some—I told you when you first came in here I think I want to do some more chicken paintings, guinea hen paintings, and maybe some more goose paintings, animal paintings. I don't know, we'll see what happens. That's the way I feel now, but—

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