



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Charles Parkhurst,
1982 October 27

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Charles Parlhurst on October 27, 1982. The interview took place in Washington, DC, and was conducted by Buck Pennington for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

BUCK PENNINGTON: This is Buck Pennington interviewing Mr. Charles Parkhurst at the Archives of American Art, October 27, 1982.

BUCK PENNINGTON: You were born in Columbus, Ohio, you told me, later you moved to California, still later moved back to Ohio.

CHARLES PARKHURST: That's correct.

BUCK PENNINGTON: You were going to tell me something about your parents.

CHARLES PARKHURST: All right. My mother, who was a Chicago lady, very beautiful and very bright, went to Northwestern University for a while, before she married my father, and did not finish college. My father is a Vermonter, born way up in the north, in Irisberg [phon.sp.] and went to the University of Nebraska and then transferred for some reason to Williams College. Actually he got to Nebraska by way of a prairie schooner in the early 1870s when he was two or three years old. So he had a career like that.

In any event, I was born in 1913 not long after they were married, maybe a short number of years. My mother was very ill with asthma after I was born and finally died of heart strain, really, from serious asthma which couldn't be dealt with. Then my father married a few years later a schoolteacher in Toledo who was a very lovely woman. My mother was a linguist and taught French at Oberlin College as a substitute teacher when her health allowed her to do so; since we lived in Oberlin, she was a very welcome standby teacher for professors.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Was your father teaching at Oberlin?

CHARLES PARKHURST: No. My father's profession was in book publishing, college and high school textbooks, with a firm called Ginn & Co., an international firm which is still very much in business. There are several Parkhursts in the firm but none of them interrelated as far as we know; at least we all deny it. That's about the prime history of my parents. My mother died when I was 13, my father died when I was in graduate school.

BUCK PENNINGTON: In terms of your schooling, you went to Oberlin to the high school there.

CHARLES PARKHURST: Yes. I went to grammar school and high school in Oberlin, then went for one year at Oberlin College. Then I transferred to Williams since I loved the place -- I'd been there with my father to reunions of his class, Class of '98 -- and went there, since what I wanted to do at Oberlin had been rather frustrated and became, much to my surprise, an art history and a science major; a double major. I'd always wanted to be a scientist, it was easy for me. I'd been frustrated in this at Oberlin because I wanted to do certain experiments, my professor said, "No, you're only a freshman, you can't do experiments." I noticed the other day that this experiment has finally been done by somebody and published in the Scientific American! (he laughs) So it was a good experiment.

BUCK PENNINGTON: What did the experiment involve?

CHARLES PARKHURST: It had to do with the effect of different wavelengths of light which were passing through different filters onto a fast-growing plant, duckweed actually, and what effects the different wavelengths had on the growth of this plant and the speed of its regeneration and that sort of thing. Basic, I thought; nifty.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Now, you say you sort of drifted into the history of art, in a way.

CHARLES PARKHURST: Well, I didn't "drift." As you know, when you go to college, you have to be shuffled around by your advisor and take certain courses that spread you out over the humanities and the sciences in the distribution that they approve of at that particular college. In this case, I took an art course with Professor Carl Weston [phon.sp]. I think I knew the very first day I was in that course with him that that was what I wanted to do. It had all of the charms, for me, of human endeavor; I'd been headed towards paleontology and the study of man's origins and that sort of thing, the development of homo erectus and homo sapiens.

Then I found this man who was the artist and I was absolutely charmed off my seat and I think from that very

first day I knew what I wanted to do. But I carried on with my double major and managed to do that, and I never lost that sense of charm from Carl Weston. Then I had other great teachers, and I think teachers are what do it -- Panofsky and Mory [phon.sp.] and Friend at Princeton, and Ward at Oberlin: you couldn't beat that after Weston at Williams.

I got a B.A. after three years at Williams. Then I worked for two years in Alaska, building roads and bridges and teaching music and coaching basketball for a living, (laughter) and went back to Oberlin because I read, during those long winter nights -- I had a couple of months off in winter and did learn a great deal about art from that and thought I'd better get back into it, so I applied there and was accepted.

BUCK PENNINGTON: This would have been in the depths of the Depression, wouldn't it.

CHARLES PARKHURST: Well, it was '36, when the Depression was waning; it had hit while I was in college, actually, which I tried to offset a little bit by playing in a dance band and that was always fun.

BUCK PENNINGTON: You were interested in music quite early, weren't you, because you'd played right along.

CHARLES PARKHURST: Well, that's why I went to Oberlin in the first place. I wanted to be a music major, and I took one course with a professor who killed the whole love of music for me (laughing) in one semester -- a course in theory, with a man I won't name. God rest his soul, he really screwed up my sense of what I wanted to do. So music went down the drain except for the actual instrumental playing.

BUCK PENNINGTON: You had had music lessons as a child, I suppose.

CHARLES PARKHURST: Yes, I'd played piano as a child and I had picked up a trumpet in junior high school and was first trumpet in the marching band and was praised once by John Philip Sousa for brilliant trumpet work on the radio with the band, and so on. So I had a great time with my music, which I've dropped now except for easy things to play like recorders.

BUCK PENNINGTON: So you went back to Oberlin and worked on your M.A.

CHARLES PARKHURST: Yes. Got it in a couple of years -- worked in the library for a year and then decided I needed something more, so I went to Princeton and was there until '41 when I got an M.F.A., which was all they would give on the basis of course work and a pretty hefty exam -- it took three days -- but they didn't give a Ph.D. then. They felt that there were too many people that got Ph.D.'s and once they had been stamped "Full," as it were, they sat back and did nothing more. They wanted somebody who would go out and keep on being creative and scholarly, and then they would give him a Ph.D. later on. Well, you had to go back for that, I've never gone back for the Ph.D., so I have an M.F.A. from Princeton, which is fine with me, I've never needed a Ph.D. as such.

BUCK PENNINGTON: In those days at Princeton, and I suppose now, it was Art and Archeology Department, right?

CHARLES PARKHURST: That's what it was called; still is.

BUCK PENNINGTON: You had the best where you had Panofsky.

CHARLES PARKHURST: Yes. He was in the Institute for Advanced Study and we benefited from that -- and others too, like Sworzinsky [phon.sp.] and Herzfeld [phon.sp.] and oh, some wonderful scholars who were visitors there would sometimes give courses for us.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Do you feel there was a particular legacy from starting with Panofsky?

CHARLES PARKHURST: Ye-e-es. Just knowing the man was a legacy of incalculable value, not only for his wit and for his perceptions but the way he grasped things and the way he presented them -- in such a way that you always felt that you were one of the greatest people there was when he got through talking to you. "As you know," he would say, and of course you didn't know beans! (they laugh) But he would always start out, "As you know," so-and-so, thus-and-such happened and this is the way it worked. You said, "Yes, Professor Panofsky," and there you were, sitting at the feet of the master and hitting his knee with the rubber hammer and getting kicked in your preconceptions a little bit.

BUCK PENNINGTON: So then when you were through with the formal aspect of your education, you came to Washington in 1941 and worked at the recently opened National Gallery.

CHARLES PARKHURST: Well, I was offered a fellowship at Dumbarton Oaks, actually, because I was working on some early Byzantine things with Craig Smythe [phon.sp.] who was a fellow student at Princeton. I was going to work on the early history of sculpture in Constantinople from the time it took that name in the 4th century until

it developed into the Justinian empire and so on and so on. There were some wonderful pieces of sculpture that can be identified with that period; at least I thought so then and still think it's correct.

But I have certain limitations and I finally had to realize that I am a poor linguist. I'm a terrible linguist, and I couldn't handle the way I would have to Greek and Latin, let alone more out-of-the-way languages or even more common ones like Italian, French, German and let's say Swedish; had enough trouble with my own language. And as a result, I backed out, much to the consternation of Paul Sachs, who had made the appointment at Harvard -- it was Harvard's baby -- and took a job with Craig Smythe -- we both came together and took jobs as fellow researchers at the National Gallery.

Then the Navy caught us and we both went into the Navy. I had wanted to do something else in the War but we did our Navy stint and that turned out to be very interesting for a lot of different reasons. What I wanted to do, since I knew the Arctic somewhat from Alaska, I had wanted to go with the Arctic troops in any guise whatsoever and they had them in Quartermaster Corps. They were testing equipment, there were ski troops, desert troops, there were all these people who go for extremes, and going to extremes is something I like -- I mean, going to Alaska (laughing) is going to extremes, so to speak, as one writer puts it.

So I applied through people that I knew -- Terry Moore [phon.sp.] the mountaineer, I knew slightly; Jim Breasted, son of the famous historian, a desert man from his Egyptian days; Sir Hubert Wilkins, the Arctic submarine man; and Paul Siple, the Boy Scout who went to the South Pole with Admiral Byrd -- I had competed for that post but had lost out, I was too young and he was older and a better man than I was when we were both in our teens. He went down there, and I thought I could catch up with him this way, so I went to see Paul Siple, and tried to get into the Quartermaster Corps and I could not.

The reason I couldn't is ironic, believe me, it's unbelievable. The National Gallery is listed as one of the bureaus of the Smithsonian Institution, which is both correct and incorrect. The Manpower chief, General Hershey, got my application to enter the Quartermaster Corps with the Arctic troops at the request of Wilkins and Siple and all the others, and he denied it. He denied it on the grounds that I was part of the Smithsonian and the Smithsonian was "essential to the war effort." (laughter) Here I was in the National Gallery of Art. Well, I don't mind being "essential," but good God, that seems kind of ironic to me. Craig and I just got in the Navy and that's what we did.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Let's back up a bit and get some impressions of the National Gallery itself as it had just opened. What was going on here, with the collections coming in, cataloguing was necessary --

CHARLES PARKHURST: Yes. There were two genius men running it, David Finley the Director and John Walker the Chief Curator. They ran it out of their pockets; that is, they ran the whole thing. They had a very small staff. The largest staff was guards and cleaning people. It was absolutely incredible to watch them go out and charm art out of the homes and apartments and palaces of people in this country who had it, the Wideners -- Mr. Mellon of course started it himself, he initiated it and David Finley had worked for him.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Was Mr. Mellon involved with the Gallery at that point?

CHARLES PARKHURST: He was very involved until 1937 when they'd just started building, and then he died, unfortunately. So Paul Mellon, his son, took over.

BUCK PENNINGTON: At that early stage?

CHARLES PARKHURST: Yes, right then. As a young man -- how old was Paul then? He must have been born around 1910, so he was in his late 20s.

BUCK PENNINGTON: That is amazing. Tell me just a little bit about of your impressions of what Washington was like in the War years -- bustle and hustle, no place to live --

CHARLES PARKHURST: Well, there was bustle and hustle and there were blackouts and checkpoints even under the bridge going to Alexandria where I lived. There was no gasoline: we used to get stickers A, B, and C just for essential travel depending on how much you needed. Fortunately I had a light car and I used to pick people up at bus stops and get them to sign a notebook, then I'd submit the notebook to the ration board. They thought that was so ingenious, they could count the people -- I had some good signatures in there. The most delightful thing was that when I picked up a WAC, she invariably put her telephone number down! (hearty laughter) But the only person who wouldn't accept a ride from me -- and I picked up a lot of illustrious people at bus stops, believe me, in those days -- was John L. Lewis, the head of the United Mine Workers, who lived in Alexandria. He wouldn't take a ride from me --

BUCK PENNINGTON: He lived in the Lee Kendal [phon.sp.] House.

CHARLES PARKHURST: That's right. He was a gruff old son-of-a-gun but he was a very good person, obviously. So that's how I got back and forth in my car because I picked people up and gave them rides.

BUCK PENNINGTON: During the War years you were a gunnery officer in the Navy --

CHARLES PARKHURST: That's right.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Did you see combat?

CHARLES PARKHURST: Not in the sense that one usually uses the word. We got shot at and we got torpedoed at but never got hit. We were bombed off Sicily but ineffectively; we were torpedoed in the Indian Ocean, it sailed past our stern; we saw submarines which were alien submarines down in that area. It was a travel ticket, I got to Australia -- since it was south Australia, called "Australya" -- and I was in Italy and the Mediterranean and the Panama area, and was on my way to the Pacific war zone -- by that time the European theater was almost winding up -- when I was transferred to work with Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives, which was recuperation of "looted art," that is, what the Nazis had looted. There were 30, 32 maybe, of us who were tagged for this --

BUCK PENNINGTON: And they tagged you because of your already vast experience in the history of art.

CHARLES PARKHURST: We-e-ell, it wasn't vast by any means but I was available. I stopped in on one furlough to see John Walker, my former boss, and he said, "Well, would you like to do this? We've been looking around, we got to the bottom of the barrel and there you were --" (laughter) a very flattering man, John. So I said, sure, I would, and he arranged for papers. Sure enough, papers came through. They had been processed by a Navy lieutenant over at the Bureau of Personnel named Perry Rathbone, who later became a museum director himself, in Boston and St. Louis.

So this tight little group of 30-some people went over and tried to find where all the loot was stored, and then safeguard it was the second thing and the third thing was to get it back where it came from.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Tell me something about the methodology. How did you go about finding it? Had the German regime kept records of where they put things?

CHARLES PARKHURST: Germans are very methodical in general and by training and habit and they kept very good records -- even the looters kept good records and they'd loot stuff from Italy, France, wherever, pack it in cases very well, and then make complete and thorough lists of the contents of each package and mark the boxes. So we just would spot-check crates sometimes --

BUCK PENNINGTON: Where did those records turn up?

CHARLES PARKHURST: They were usually in the storage places with the larger storage repositories. Then we would check museums. "Where is your art?" We would get tales from all kinds of German sources as to where these things were. The French knew a good deal about the locations, who had done what to whom, and the Dutch were there and the Belgians were there. So among these international people assembled we were able to get a great deal of information and pinpoint on the map some 1,036 -- I remember the number -- repositories --

BUCK PENNINGTON: Golly! That many?

CHARLES PARKHURST: -- some of it German art that had to be protected; some of it looted art which had generally been sequestered in salt mines and castles in certain locations. The greatest treasures were in ancient salt mines near Aussee near Salzburg -- that's where the Van Eyck altarpiece was, the Bruges Madonna of Michelangelo was there, and so on and so on. Neuschwanstein Castle down in southern Schwabia, in the Alps, a picturesque late 19th century castle up on a rock, had in it everything that had been looted from the Rothschilds in Paris, for example. Neuschwanstein was a huge repository -- we shipped back 49 train carloads of art from there. It was quite a long operation.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Let me ask you this as we go along: Was this something very unusual in the history of military occupations that a victorious army would seek to put things back aright, or had something like this happened? Did the English, for example, see to the returning of treasures that Napoleon had looted?

CHARLES PARKHURST: Well, I really can't tell you historically about that, I'd have to bone up on it, I can't answer that, but all the nations, particularly the British and the Americans, were anxious to protect what they could as heritage -- it's all our heritage, we're all Europeans in our roots; not all of us, but I mean our culture is. So we have that to preserve and we felt that strongly, and this was a major part of the Army. And the Navy even though they were on water they were concerned to some degree, particularly in the Far East and the Pacific.

But this operation was endorsed by the President. It got a little out of hand at some point, as everybody knows. We protested, some 30 of us signed a letter protesting the transport of art from Germany to the United States, I

guess almost totally from the Berlin museums, of very carefully selected works of art, because we believed first of all that the language was the same the Nazis had used when they looted, which was "protective custody," we thought that was a bad omen, and secondly we didn't think it was right and we protested.

Then it hit the fan, the *Times* ran a full page on it and all the news magazines and all the rest. They tried to court martial us, couldn't because we had an escape clause in a letter we'd written and signed, they threatened, and one of the chief officers, a colonel, was sent over. Since he knew me personally he summoned me to his room in Frankfurt and told me I couldn't afford to take this position. I said, "Why not?" He said, "You have a wife and two children." I turned on my heel and walked out. I don't sit still for treatment like that. Then we wrote a letter, 30 of us signed it, one person wouldn't, a real fence-straddler from way back; and nobody would pack the stuff, we just flatly refused --

BUCK PENNINGTON: Were they masterpieces or were they --

CHARLES PARKHURST: Oh, they were masterpieces -- Filipino Lippi's and Signorelli's and that calibre of Italian Renaissance and Baroque painting; fabulous stuff. So, I don't have the list now, but we called this "Westward Ho What-Ho [Watteau?]." That was what we dubbed it, at least.

BUCK PENNINGTON: So, did you prevent the objects from being --

CHARLES PARKHURST: Then they changed their song because this was an awful brou-ha-ha, and Mrs. Roosevelt was in Berlin about that time and she queried General Clay. Now, General Lucius Clay was a real right guy, and she asked, "What is this all about?" So he asked us, and we told him, and he told her. Then the song changed back here, because they said, "Well, we just brought these pictures over to have an exhibition for the benefit of German war orphans." So they circulated around the country for a while and then went back to Berlin, where it is now, thank God.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Is it officialburg?

CHARLES PARKHURST: It's mostly in what is now West Berlin art museum, not in the National Gallery, in the Old Master Gallery in Dahlem [he spells it] out in the western part of Berlin. So you can see those things there now.

BUCK PENNINGTON: That's amazing, a really fascinating story. What did you specifically work with in terms of items? Was there anything that really struck you that you helped retrieve?

CHARLES PARKHURST: Well, we tried to check every one of these one thousand or so repositories to make sure they were secure. We had a letter signed by Eisenhower which we'd post on the door saying it was off-limits, we would talk to the local government, that is the U.S. military government, because we stayed in our zone; and we tried to help local churches, local museums get their materials back ...

[Break in recording]

these repositories. We helped them with trucks sometimes. For example, the city of Urch [phon.sp.] got hold of me one time and said, "We've got a real problem. They're re-apportioning part of this state" -- Ulm is in Baden, is it not? (BUCK PENNINGTON confirms) -- and the lower part was going to become part of the French zone and they said "once the French get this stuff, it'll be very difficult to get it back over the border into the city of Urch."

So I went down with three trucks and brought back sculpture by George Sirlin [phon.sp.] and stained glass from the cathedral and the original drawings of the cathedral spire, about 15 feet high, and a lot of other stuff, and turned it back to the cathedral and the museum. There was very little vandalism -- I must say, I was very proud of the American troops. In one case I think a quartermaster unit was caught cutting up cassones or other chests in order to make packing boxes for some Chinese Ming porcelains which had been in the palace or the museum where they were quartered. That was the worst case that we know of, and in a repository where the drawing collection of the city of Ulm had been placed in the country, we found some drawings on the floor with footprints on them -- Rubens drawings and things of that sort. And there were a couple of instances of looting, they're rather famous: one, the crown jewels of Hessen [phon.sp.] stolen by a major and his WAC captain girl friend, ultimately prosecuted, and those were returned. Well, there are lots of tales of adventure that one could talk about but that goes on forever. To underscore, in general the record was good. The stuff was protected.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Before we leave this subject, give me some impressions of Munich. Did you spend much time there?

CHARLES PARKHURST: Well, I did because we had collecting points and Munich in the old Nazi headquarters was our collecting point, ironically. The Braun House was behind that, where Hitler lived, and that had been destroyed; bombed and burnt. And the Fuhrerbah, that is the chief administrative headquarters, was right next door all on the Koenigsplatz where all the ancient antiquities museums are. This collecting point and one at

Wiesbaden were our principal collecting points. So I spent a good deal of time there, taking stuff in or getting information, and Craig Smythe was in charge of the Munich one and a man named Farmer and then Kelleher were in charge of the Wiesbaden one, successively.

We had made every effort just to get the stuff into the collecting point if it was in jeopardy wherever we found it, and the collecting point was chiefly looted art about to be returned or "homeless art" we didn't know to whom it belonged and there was no way of knowing, or it was art that belonged, let's say, in a place that no longer had its identity. Like Danzig: lost its identity in the war and we had some things from there -- a silver collection, we had a Polish Leonardo da Vinci, "The Girl with the Mink," we had a Vermeer from Vienna, "The Artist in his Studio," and so on. So it was quite exciting even just to go into that place to see what was there. It all had to be photographed, documented, certified and then shipped back.

BUCK PENNINGTON: It sounds like a very exciting episode in your life. When that was over and you came back from the War to the U.S., you then took up in the next period of years a round of -- can we call them academic positions that involved both museum administration and teaching. I'm thinking here of Albright-Knox and Princeton and then back to Oberlin.

CHARLES PARKHURST: Yes, that's essentially correct. I went to the Albright Gallery -- it was not Knox at that time, it became Albright-Knox later after Seymour Knox contributed so much to it -- but one of my co-workers in the Monuments/Fine Arts business in Germany had been Andrew Ritchie/Ritchey, who was what they called a "simulated colonel," he was a civilian with rank equivalent to colonel. He's the one who took the Vermeer back to Vienna in a night coach, for example! Nursing it like a baby all night to make sure it didn't jiggle or anything happen to it. And he invited me to join his staff.

So, instead of coming back to the National Gallery, which I had become somewhat disillusioned with after this art movement from Germany and was very unhappy, which I explained in a letter to David Finley, who called me "a foolish young man "; but he couldn't stop me so I went to Ritchie when he was director at the Albright Gallery. I had two good years with him, and then was invited to come to Princeton to work in the museum and to teach. At Buffalo I'd taught a course in the State Teachers College but that was not very much, the students weren't terribly good.

But at Princeton I was assistant to the director of the museum, Ernest Dewald [phon.sp.] and then I was an instructor, or as they call them "preceptor," teaching sections of a lecture course which was conducted, the lectures given, by whoever happened to be the chief professor. So I did that for two years, then I got an offer to go to Oberlin, where they knew me of course from my student days, and succeed Clarence Ward. Well, this was an absolutelu wild, dreamlike job, I couldn't down a full professorship at 35 years old, which I didn't deserve but at least I was ambitious and had had good training; to run a museum, which was small but good; and to have some very nice colleagues, and a place that I knew, with some very good students. I liked the students at Oberlin better than the ones at Princeton, they were less blase, more serious, about what they were doing. Like John the Baptist, you know -- they knew what they needed to do.

So I went to Oberlin and was there for about 13 years, and then went back into the museum business. Running a museum and teaching a fulltime program and running the department, then trying to do scholarship in one's spare time, just finally got to me; there were a lot of complications in my life, marital, but it finally got to me, I was just tired all the time, even at that age whatever I was then, 48 or so. So I went back to the easy life of running a museum, and that was Baltimore.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Before we leave Oberlin, I did read through the materials you gave me on Oberlin and noticed that you devised course structures and that there was an evolving process there of creating a curriculum in the history of art. It struck me as being quite significant and very important; no doubt had a great influence on other colleges and universities throughout the country. Did this come about through committees, or was it largely your idea?

CHARLES PARKHURST: I'm not sure I can recall. The origin of ideas is one of the most elusive searches that one can take -- you think it's your idea, then you realize suddenly maybe that it probably came from somewhere else, and people apprehend ideas all the time: it's one of the ways of getting things done, is to let people apprehend your ideas. Anyway, I had wonderful colleagues -- people like Stecko [phon.sp.] and Arnold and Slive [phon.sp.] to name three of the top ones, and Bongiorno -- they all were clearthinking and brilliant people. We devised, first, a new introductory course which I had based upon one of my teacher's thinking at Princeton, George Roley [phon.sp.] one of the great, perhaps somewhat unheralded teachers at Princeton I should have mentioned earlier.

In George Roley's course we developed at Oberlin at a round table an introductory course in the language of art. We took up 15 different languages, in historical order so there was structure to it but we didn't make anything of the history part, only the visual language; and that was pretty exciting. Then we did develop the department in

integrating the practical side with the art historical side more closely -- printmaking with print history -- so there was some more understanding on the students' part of the techniques and the process that they were studying in other great masters.

BUCK PENNINGTON: You know, that remains a controversy to our very day. I've dealt with this with Lamar Dodd, an old friend of mine -- I went to the University of Georgia --

CHARLES PARKHURST: Oh, I didn't know that. I love Lamar, I'd love to talk about him some time.

BUCK PENNINGTON: -- and I'm very influenced by his idea and support wholly his idea, that art history and art should live side by side. Which is a very controversial issue in our profession, you know --

CHARLES PARKHURST: (laughing) They don't link easily.

BUCK PENNINGTON: -- because painters hate art historians, and art historians can be quite guilty of not having a sufficient understanding of the application of paint to canvas --

CHARLES PARKHURST: Indeed they can. Now, there's another aspect which we stressed at Oberlin, which was the structure and conservation of works of art, and we set up at Oberlin -- I was one of the founders of this -- the Inter-museum Laboratory, which served several regional museums not only as a conservation laboratory for their works of art but also it provided Oberlin, the center for this whole association, with a wonderful opportunity to train people and also to educate people in what conservation meant -- how pictures were structured, how many layers and why they had all these layers and what they use, and all the rest of it. So we established in 1952, quite early on in my career there, the Inter-museum Laboratory and it was the first regional laboratory in America and is now the model for about 30. It's still a viable operation, so we did well, "we did good" as they say.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Oh, splendidly.

CHARLES PARKHURST: Well anyway, that was one thing. Then we trained people and had a link so they could leave Oberlin after four or five, I think five, years and go to NYU to the advanced school in chemistry science and whatnot in conservation, at NYU Institute. And we did the same thing in architecture -- we gave them history of architecture, a broad liberal education and a general art education too, and then after five years they automatically got into MIT.

Now, I don't know what's happened to these programs, they were pretty rigorous, so we didn't have too many majors following these two very difficult five-year majors, but one of the best is here in Washington now, he was a conservator, Tom Chase at the Freer. He was a student of mine and went through this course, and now he's reaping the benefits. And so is the Freer, of course, and so is the profession. I can't recall the names of any of the architecture students who pursued the MIT course but there were some and they're presently architects or professors at Columbia and elsewhere.

So it was a pretty good idea whose time came at that moment in Oberlin and we pushed that. Then we had the art history major, and we had the studio major. One of my students, I remember her, a very charming lady, is the curator at Brooklyn now -- Joyce Hill, now Mrs. Williams, I believe, but these people turn up and I say, "My gosh, we did awfully well, to get some of these people who are deeply satisfying to a teacher, to know that your department, if not yourself at least your department, could train somebody who was able to be trained and carry on.

BUCK PENNINGTON: In looking through the list of courses that you taught, I was very intrigued by one -- it looked to me like it was essentially Italian Renaissance architecture and what followed right up to the modern era. I was very intrigued by that juxtaposition of teaching all architecture sort of in the shadow of the Italian Renaissance period.

CHARLES PARKHURST: Well, I did that because it had a long historical view, that is, it took Mannerism from Brunelleschi, who is generally regarded as almost early Renaissance, high Renaissance at best, Mannerism from that and he's very Manneristic in seed form, seminal Mannerism; through crazy Mannerist architecture in north Italy, and Palladio and on through the great Baroque architects from Giuvara [phon.sp.] to whoever you want to name. And the principles change as you go, and so we discussed the principles as well as the architects and the monuments. It was kind of fun; I had very good students in that course -- not many because it was kind of tough but it was worth while.

BUCK PENNINGTON: I wish I'd had that course. All right: I want at this point

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BEGINNING SIDE B, TAPE 1]

BUCK PENNINGTON: (continuing sentence above) to shift now to talk about your academic interests, and I particularly want to focus on your interest in color and color doctrines in art. I'm going to first ask you to tell me how your interest came about -- perhaps it grew out of your scientific interest -- and first ask you to comment on color as merely something that's derived from grinding substances and bonding them in various ways. Is that a good place to begin --

CHARLES PARKHURST: Well, let me take your first question first, which was how did I get started on this. That's very interesting and curious. I got started art-historically, and when I was at Princeton in the late 40s, '47-'48, I was a preceptor for E. Baldwin Smith, who was teaching Baroque painting at that time. "Baldy," as he was known, had three or four preceptors, we had about seven students each, we met with them once a week, he for two hours, and he lectured to them twice a week for one hour each. So they had a four-hour course, really, and we went over the material, using color reproductions and discussing what was to be covered.

When we got to Rubens, a northern Baroque artist, in teaching from color reproductions I simply observed one day with some students that so many of Rubens paintings have the three primary colors as we know them today in mixing primaries, which are not susceptible to being mixed out of any other colors -- red, yellow and blue, namely -- were used as the primary compositional colors in Rubens; and I said to myself, "Why did he do that?"

So, I said, well, I'll read the Rubens literature, which I'd never done. So I got out all the books on Rubens -- Evers [phon.sp.] and you name them, and it's a pretty big bibliography and I read the major works, and I've never read so much trash which made no sense at all. I have something of a scientific bent, so I could see what were the fallacious or silly talk they were engaged in, and I found nothing which even suggested that anybody had ever noticed this or asked this question.

So I said, well, how do we find out then why Rubens used red-yellow-blue? Well, I said, let's start with the 20th century. So I began a kind of private research project, and I started with the 20th century overt [?] regular group theories -- Monsell, Oswald [phon.sps.] and so on, then I'd read the people that they based their books on; then I'd read the people they'd based their books on. And that way I got back to the 18th century --

BUCK PENNINGTON: Had Albers and ----[proper name] entered in at all?

CHARLES PARKHURST: Not at that time, I didn't get into Albers, he's a little something else again; I was going back quickly historically, I was trying to get back to Rubens again, you see, so I was trying to find the track that had come from Rubens, so I could backtrack -- it's like tracking a wounded deer, you know --

BUCK PENNINGTON: Dripping red, yellow and blue. (laughter)

CHARLES PARKHURST: Dripping red, yellow and blue -- very good! (laughing) and I got them back to Priestly in the 18th century. Then there was some serendipity involved and finally you reach for every straw, anybody who's mentioned, you borrow the book from the library or you get it on inter-library loan or you go to New York to the New York Public or up to Harvard or wherever you can find the book and see what's in it. So I got so I could read color books or books that had color and scientific questions like that in them, and I could read a dozen books a day; "speedreading," so to speak, knowing what I was looking for, you see.

Well, I didn't know quite what I was looking for except red-yellow-blue at that point; a little more perspective came later -- much later, but I did find quite by chance that Felibien [phon.sp., French pronunciation], a great author in the late 17th century, had said, "There are three primary colors and they are red, yellow, blue." I got so excited by that! Then I found a copy of Kircher [phon.sp.], the great Jesuit scholar and scientist, who founded the Kircher Museum in Rome, who was at the Vatican, who wrote on the Egyptians and the hieroglyphics, a tremendously broad scientist -- he wrote on Chinese influences in the West at that time, mind you, that's pretty early -- so I got it back to 1646.

Then somehow or other I stumbled on a book, because by that time I realized I had to find this not in art books, I'd read all the handbooks for artists that I could find -- and I'm still finding a lot of them -- but I also got into the sciences, and I got into optics. I found one of the major optic books of the early 17th century had been published by a great press in Antwerp. "My God, that's Rubens's home town." So I got the book, it was by a Jesuit, who was head of a school in Antwerp and who was a very good friend of Rubens; this was known. I thought, "My golly." And I got the book, and sure enough, there was a chapter on color, and it had it all down pat. It even had a diagram of red-yellow-blue-orange-green-violet, you know, black-and-white, and how they mix -- the whole business. The last sentence in that chapter was, "If you want to know more about this, ask the painters."

Well, who were the painters in Antwerp in 1609 to 13? Rubens and his 40 assistants. So, I've never been able to prove that Rubens actually wrote that chapter but I'm sure he was the source for it. It's conjectural, to be sure, and my more strict scholars say "don't conjecture, don't make guesses, if you can't prove it don't say it." But in any case, we [tape glitch, sentence doesn't finish]

BUCK PENNINGTON: So I suppose that led you into your really intensive work, then, in 16th and 17th century scientific color theories, doesn't it -- that's how you sort of got lodged in that aspect of it.

CHARLES PARKHURST: Yes. Well, then I got a some fellowships -- a Fulbright and an American Council of Learning Societies fellowship, had grants from Princeton and some money from Oberlin, and I was able to go to England and work in the British Museum Library, which was an indispensable resource for that kind of plunging through centuries of books, and did come up with two other red-yellow-blue theories of the same date, all around 1609, 10, 11, 12, 13. Then I didn't do anything with it. I was too busy at Oberlin, and I couldn't take off, until finally just before I left Oberlin I had some time in the British Museum during the summer and I wrote it up and delivered it as a paper that year at the College Art Association. It was very well received. Then I delivered another one the next year, which was called "the best paper delivered," by one of my friends, obviously, at that conference in Los Angeles.

So from then on I was hooked on color. I'd found something. And then I said, well, all right, then, where does this come from? Here it is, full-blown, three people are using it around 1609, where did they get it? And this is the way history is, there's no beginning and no end and it was red-yellow-blue. So I've been searching ever since for the origins of the red-yellow-blue theory, or mixing principle, and I'm now convinced that it is not in writing anywhere -- if it is, I have yet to find it -- but that it came out of the pragmatic practices of 16th century artists and it does appear in paintings demonstrably as early as 1517 in Titian and about the same time, I think, in Raphael, although it's a little --

BUCK PENNINGTON: What about Botticelli?

CHARLES PARKHURST: I don't find it there but I do find it in Andrea del Sarto and Barrocci, who was a follower of Raphael, and the Carracci. My guess is that there's where Rubens picked it up -- he was in Rome and he worked with the Carracci and with Barrocci, who was kind of sour recluse but he was a beautiful painter; and they were all in Rome and I'm convinced in my own mind that this is where Rubens got it. He came back in 1609 and used it, he had it. And there are statements in books of the 17th century that say Rubens took Italian color north with him and I think this is what they're referring to. And the Carracci were probably the people who codified it, since they had founded the first academy, you see, in the last quarter of the century.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Do you find this in Poussin as well? In Nicolas --

CHARLES PARKHURST: Oh yes. From then on it's pervasive. You find it in the Strozzi (phon.sp.) and in Poussin; it runs throughout. Now, red-yellow-blue are also symbolic colors, they're a holy triad, they are the colors of the ancient synagogues, interchangeably: red-white-blue, red-yellow-blue. They are the colors of the Madonna and Child, of the halos, aureoles of light around God, who is dressed in red and surrounded by yellow and blue --

BUCK PENNINGTON: And set in a blue setting.

CHARLES PARKHURST: -- and so it's a holy triad. And when Simeon receives the Christ child in the temple, he's dressed in red-yellow-blue. Or when Christopher carries Christ over the river, he's dressed in red-yellow-blue.

BUCK PENNINGTON: And red-yellow-blue setting up optic fields, you could go from there in terms of your other colors --

CHARLES PARKHURST: Yes. Well, somebody -- and I think it must have been the artists discovered it, that's all you need to mix it with certain basic mixtures, and before that time there were four color primaries. There was green, and green is already a mixed color, and this began to bother Leonardo. In his notebooks he indicates a certain concern -- what the heck's that green doing in there? But the four-color theory was the 15th century theory and I think I know where that comes from. It's a neo-platonic theory mixed with a rainbow theory which evolved during the 13th-14th centuries, both. It's a late medieval theory, and before the late medieval, the early medieval was something else and was based on Aristotle perhaps and Aristotle's theories were prevalent for over a thousand years.

Color theory changes so slowly, and laboriously, one thing at a time. The periods of notable change in color, I calculated the other day, and some of them are as long as 1200 years and nothing is shorter than 200 years from one idea to the next new idea. And Aristotle wasn't finally "straightened out," if I may say that with a certain lack of respect, until 1853 by Helmholtz and Young. He confused prismatic color, that is, the color of light, with reflected light from pigments. So Helmholtz and Young, I think it was, finally got that straightened out only 125 years ago.

BUCK PENNINGTON: I had a question last night as I was reading through the resume and looking at your titles and just thinking on this subject -- and this may be extraneous, if it is, set me straight -- one question came to my mind, the only theoretical question I planned to ask you in this interview as a matter of fact, was do you suppose that the color in any epoch is directly the result of available palette, of what color could be ground and

made, or is it a trading-off with style and the theory techniques available from academic or teaching sources?

CHARLES PARKHURST: No. I like our word "tradeoff." That perhaps comes closest. In general, yes; what's available is what you use. For example, the Egyptians had basically earth colors and desert colors. They had no natural blues. They had close to blue, copper blues which are blue-greens and they invented -- perhaps by chance but they invented what we call now "Egyptian blue," which is a very intense blue frit, a very fine powder, which probably was an accidental side product of their blue glazes on pottery. If you overheat it or cook it too long, it crumbles into a blue powder. So they said gee, that's dandy, we'll paint it. (laughter)

So they had the first artificial color on any large scale, which was Egyptian blue, it's blue frit. The secret was lost some time in the early Middle Ages and was rediscovered in the 19th century and was lost again and rediscovered in the 20th century -- how to do it and how the Egyptians did it chemically and with heat firing. But they used desert material. They used sand for the glassy parts of it, the vehicle, and then then they used desert alkali and copper minerals and basically this was the mix. You heat it to 800 or 900 degrees Fahrenheit for one hour, let's say, and bingo you've got a nice blue powder, if you get your mixes right.

BUCK PENNINGTON: The reason I ask is that it occurs to me, one of the things that intrigues me is that in the mid-19th century we see the rise of very brilliant color, which however you fall on this side of the issue can account for a certain amount of what we refer to as "luminosity" or "luminism" in 19th century painting. But then the palettes towards the end of the 19th century start to get so muddy so that by the time you're up to Sloan and those people, palettes have gotten very muddy and the color register is really more in the ochre-brown-yellow range than it is --

CHARLES PARKHURST: Well, historically, you're always subject to fads and preferences, that's one thing. Historically also you're subject to what you can have. The Egyptians may have had seven or so and they may have done a little mixing but not much. The Greeks had a little more color, they had a larger empire. The Romans had a huge empire and they had lots of colors. They had colors from Spain, from Armenia, they had lapis lazuli now, a natural blue, an intense blue, which comes from way up in the mountains of Afghanistan and those mines are still there, still operating to some extent, I believe.

So this meant that the Romans no longer had seven but they had 30 or 40 natural colors. They also had mixing. There are two Roman texts that talk about color mixing. One is Aulus Gellius [phon.sp.], the other is Plutarch. Plutarch doesn't say much but he indicates that he knows what "binary mixing" is -- mixing red and blue you get purple. And Aulus Gellius has a whole chapter on mixing colors, which probably influenced the Renaissance. The Middle Ages began to develop recipes for making paint but not any color mixing to speak of, except flesh tones, or adding black or adding white.

When you get to the Renaissance, they take the white and black and realize they can make colors lighter or darker. That probably is a neo-platonic idea -- lightness up here and darkness down there, and goodness and badness, and hot and cold, and all these antithetical opposites. So by the time you get advancing technology linked with color and can make more colors, the next blue made -- and blue is the one color that doesn't appear commonly in nature among the basic colors that we use -- was small; which is a cobalt blue, and they learned how to do that chemically in the 16th century. And then in the 18th century they learned to make an iron oxide precipitate, which is a ferrous oxide precipitate called "Prussian blue." And then they invented artificial ultramarine blue in the 19th century. And then came the aniline colors in the late 19th century -- Perkins and so on; that's not quite the right name, what was his name: anyway, the coal tar derivatives which are brilliant; and so on and so on.

So as you get these new techniques, you develop an endless palette. And in the late 18th century there are catalogues of colors which have thousands of different colors and the recipes for achieving them by mixing or by chemistry and so on. Color palettes change for reasons of availability, therefore, for reasons of mixing theories that are prevalent at the time. Aristotle's theory prevailed for 1200 years, the late Medieval for 200, maybe 300 years. The red-yellow-blue has prevailed ever since the 16th century.

But now we have some two-color theories -- Edwin Lamb, the warm-cool theory, and many other new understandings about how we see colors and how they mix having affected our technology in everything from television to painters' palettes. In addition to that, we have endless numbers of new chemical mixtures that give us all kinds of permanent, or relatively permanent, or totally ephemeral colors, (he laughs) depending on what you want to do.

BUCK PENNINGTON: I just want to ask one more specific question -- do you think that it was in the late 17th century and early 18th century, I suppose (he mutters) even in mid-19th [?] century, I think of Poussin and Bourdon as being the great contributors of blue, because we see such brilliant blues begin to emerge in those works, and in [proper name] too certainly, but I'm thinking particularly of Bourdon and Poussin -- do you think that's the real rise of the greatness of blue in painting?

CHARLES PARKHURST: Well, it became very prominent. Lahire (phon.sp.) is another one with great emphasis on blue. I don't know what their blues are, they probably are small. Prussian blue didn't come in until 1711 or -12, so anything from then on might be Prussian blue, which is a very intense blue. But really I don't know. There is a chapter on blue written by Kurt Vatt [phon.sp.] in his book on Cezanne, actually, which is an interesting review which someone someday might really develop further because it was a nice start on studying blue -- Vatt I think is dead now but he did wonderful books on Constable's clouds and on Cezanne and on blue and that's where I would start if I were going into the question of blue.

Also, scientifically, it was then, late 17th century, that scientists realized why the sky was blue, and they knew about refraction, and how the scattering of blue waves, since they're short, get bent out of line, whereas the red rays shoot on through --

BUCK PENNINGTON: Oh that's amazing --

CHARLES PARKHURST: -- and so on. And why shadows are blue on the snow, because of the scattered daylight which is retained, bounced around, and the red light just goes right on past.

BUCK PENNINGTON: It's interesting in a way that scientific theories like that can begin and then become part of the culture and then we lose track of them. Because I think we regard Ruskin's obsessiveness with the blue of the sky or with anything he sees in nature as sentimentality. But in a way it really isn't, in a way it really is a scientific observation.

CHARLES PARKHURST: It's a scientific observation and he's a child of his time. And that's true of everyone. And you might say today, if you handed an artist, for example, the theory of Aristotle about color and say "use this as a premise for your painting," he'd say "it's ridiculous, I can't use it." But artists did use it for over a thousand years.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Oh I think it still could be used. Well, by the way, William Gass's [phon.sp.] little essay "On Being Blue" is intriguing, if you ever have a chance to look at that. That's a good little work. I'll ask you one last question on this -- I notice that you had raised it, so I'll raise it and you can comment on it -- who did invent the color wheel?

CHARLES PARKHURST: (laughs) The answer is, we don't know, but the color wheel -- the use of the word "wheel" of course is sometimes misunderstood as Maxwell's spinning wheel where you mix colors visually but it's common parlance and we're talking about color circle with colors on different parts of the periphery: the first color circle that we have in hand remaining today is 1611, a Finnish physicist working in Sweden. The next one is a printed one from 1629, Robert Flood, a medical scientific writer, and the next one is probably Isaac Newton's, which he got into as early as 1666 and probably first drew in the 90s and published in 1704.

And then in 1708 there is a full-fledged artist's color wheel and that's the first one we have where you handcolor in the colors that are written down on those two circles, one for the primaries, the other from the developed colors from them. And from then on it's common. So it goes back to a circle idea and the earliest one is 1611. However, the idea I think can be reconstructed first of all in the work of Alberti, which I've just tried, in 1435, and he based his work, I think I can show, on the neo-platonic scientists of Oxford University of about 1230.

So I say the first color circle probably developed with nations at least, was developing as early as 1230, -35, in Oxford, the great center for scientific studies -- Robert Grossetesta, Roger Bacon, to name the most important two among many scientists at Oxford. Science was in the hands of religious orders in those days, and the Franciscans and the Dominicans and others were very active in science; later on it was the Jesuits, and the last great Jesuit color scientist perhaps was in the late 18th century, Schippermuller [phon.sp.] in Vienna. However, that's a complicated issue.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Yes. To sort of wind up on this, do you feel that there is in our time the same sort of interest in color, or do you feel that we're making a departure from that, amongst our artists?

CHARLES PARKHURST: Well, through accident that Barnett Newman did a painting called, "Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow, Blue?" or that Jasper Johns did a poster with the color circle down in the lower left red yellow, and wrote the words in red, yellow, blue and put the colors in there. This was no accident: they're all susceptible. Ellsworth Kelly, prime example of playing with commonplace theories of prismatic colors, the red-yellow-blue colors, the primaries and secondaries and tertiaries. Watteau did it, he put it in one of those fetes champetres, dozens of things. Right down in the front right corner would be three figures, one red, one yellow and one blue. It's like saying, "Look! I developed all these other colors -- orange, greens, purples, citrines, russets and olives -- out of these three." It's a statement. So he'd learned to use primaries, secondaries and tertiaries; using them for different distances, you see.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Well, on to -- I wish we could stay at color -- but on to bureaucratic concerns. Now that

we've had this sidetrack on your great academic interest, I hope (he laughs) that you can be as animated about museum administration. You did go on to Baltimore and became the director of the Baltimore Museum there. Were you following on the heels of Mrs. Breeskin?

CHARLES PARKHURST: Yes. Quite by chance or by compassion or by some historical accident perhaps. I was in Europe and had just missed, because I'd left this country, going to the art museum directors' meetings; I think they were in Detroit. Some of them wrote to me and said that Adelyn Breeskin had fallen and broken something, her hip perhaps, and so I wrote her a letter saying "I'm sorry to hear that." She was just on the verge of retiring from Baltimore and that put me in her mind, and she wrote me saying, "Would you like to be a candidate for my job?" and I said, "Sure." I'd been at Oberlin 13 years, I was in the process of getting a divorce and that's a good time to clear out. So I said yes, and sure enough I got the job. That's how that happened. So I succeeded Adelyn; didn't replace her, she's irreplaceable, she's the queen of museum directors. And I stayed there about nine years.

BUCK PENNINGTON: And you saw a big growth in the Baltimore Museum while you were there.

CHARLES PARKHURST: Yes, in certain areas. We developed the American area -- furniture and the decorative arts and American painting to quite a degree, mostly in the decorative arts, with a wonderful curator named William Boss Elder, who had been at the White House with the Kennedys, and with the great chief curator, Dr. Gertrude Rosenthal, who was still, after being retired nearly 20 years, actively writing catalogues for the Museum and acting as though she were still youthful. I have great admiration for her brain, her wit and her endurance despite two open-heart surgeries.

That was a very good experience in Baltimore -- a little fattening: private eating in Baltimore is so good that I gained 25 or 30 pounds and it's taken me 20 years to lose it. But the Baltimore Museum was one of the great unknown museums I believed at the time. It had the Cone collection, which everybody knew about but it wasn't right downtown, it was out on the Johns Hopkins College campus of the University, so perhaps people didn't know it well enough. Then when I got there and went to look at the place, I realized, having always been a devotee of the Walters Art Gallery, that the Baltimore Museum had great Old Masters too, not just the Cone collection.

They had two Rembrandts, one of the great ones, the "Titus" portrait, they had the greatest Van Dyke in America, and other paintings by Gainsborough and Tintoretto and you name it -- English and French and Italian and German coming out their ears. And then decorative arts collections historically collected which were quite wonderful. And they had all been given by Baltimoreans to this museum thanks to a large extent to Adelyn Breeskin in the 30 years she was there as a curator and then as director. She had to fight the "stigma" of being a woman in those days and they finally allowed her to be the director and it was high time. It was quite late but she was responsible for the Cone collection being there.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Now, from Baltimore -- I want to get to some questions about museum organization but just let's wrap up with the procedural matters. From Baltimore then you did come to the National Gallery in --

CHARLES PARKHURST: Yes. I watched Carter Brown and had developed a great admiration for what he did. The Baltimore had a big board and they weren't very good. They had about five or six people who were outstanding and we had a few more while I was there added to that, maybe they had 10 outstanding trustees out of 50 and the rest were real deadwood, were on there for social kudos for themselves. But I would invite outstanding and interesting people in to have lunch with a selected group of trustees in one of the period rooms, it was kind of nice and we arranged it so it was safe for any of the works of art and all that, and we talked about some set subject.

I watched Carter, and one day I invited him to come talk to a group of five of my best trustees, which he did. And after that meeting I said to him, just kind of casually, "You know, Carter, I've done about all I can here in 10 years, approaching 10 years. If you ever want an old hand to back you up, let me know." And a week later I had my present job. So I reversed the fingerprints -- (laughing) I stepped down from being a director to being an assistant director. It took me a couple of years to learn how to be an alter ego to Carter, but it's been an exciting trip now for 12 years, and as I approach 70 it was perhaps the best 12 years of my life. So I've enjoyed -- this is of course an exciting museum to work in. Great collections and Carter is one of the great directors of America, no doubt about that. The pace is a little frenetic but when you can say, "I enjoy coming to work every day," you're saying more than just that.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Considering the mystique of the National Gallery, sort of keep that in your mind and tell me something about, well, a very basic question: the function of any national gallery. Is it different from the function of a municipal museum or a private museum? Does the National Gallery itself imply something that another museum doesn't?

CHARLES PARKHURST: Well -- that's a very perceptive question --yes, it's very difficult to be a national gallery.

It's much easier to be a local gallery. We do get people off the street, so to speak, we do have a local constituency, there's no question about that, but we have to deliberately go out to be a "national gallery." We have done that in several ways. Carter thought a great deal about it before I came and I've thought about it with him and talked with him about it.

Two or three things have developed to keep that "national" idea going. One is that we serve over 4,000 communities, maybe more now, in the United States and possessions and outlying states like Hawaii and Alaska as well, with art materials, to people who cannot get here. We had an audience last year -- and this audience has grown under one of the people I brought with me from Baltimore, actually, Ruth Kerlin [phon.sp.] -- that has grown from about two million to six million and now almost 30 million users a year outside the National Gallery. Now, that's a national job.

The other national thing is that we do international exhibitions, we bring them to the United States so that this nation may see them, and then we circulate them. It's a real chore circulating shows, it's a horrible ordeal sometimes, but we circulate shows that we bring from abroad, like the Alexander the Great show, and the Dresden show, and others since those. I think the first one we circulated was Lehmbruck's sculpture from the Lehmbruck Museum in Germany. So, yes, it is very difficult to be a national gallery. That's one way we do it. The other way, of course, is publishing.

The third way is by scholarship. We invite scholars from all over the country to be here in the Center for Advanced Study and to do their own thing and then to go out and teach or to indoctrinate other people in the principles of scholarship in art history, and art and archeology too, and architecture, and in geology -- I don't like the word -- but what are the principles and philosophy of running museums and collecting. You have to collect, you have to care for, you have to utilize -- that is to say, interpret --

BUCK PENNINGTON: And develop, I suppose.

CHARLES PARKHURST: Well, it's making use of for elucidation and delight, really, after you get the stuff and take care of it. And these charges all have philosophies behind them. Basically, collecting is quality and preservation is conservation, and then we go to pre-sentation, how you present things so the work of art speaks for itself. And you can have a person confronting a work of art: that's where your great rapport takes place, your great understanding -- without words, we're "people of the word," as Henry Allen Moe [phon.sp.] used to say, we're from the Hebraic book tradition and it's no accident that the first line of John is "In principio erat verbum," in the beginning was the word. We are a word people and we translate every picture in the world by what George Hamilton calls "the sound pollution of our galleries" by having docents tour people and spout at them. And he calls that "sound pollution" and not without good reason.

[END OF SIDE B, TAPE 1
BEGINNING SIDE A, TAPE 2]

BUCK PENNINGTON: I want to ask you: do you think in our time that we have seen a really radical shift of public interest in museums? It seems as though in the last 10 years there have been spectacular shows which have drawn the public in but it seems as though we are seeing a time in which a vast amount of the public seems to be interested in art museums. Museum attendance is up and there does seem to be a greater interest in QUOTE culture UNQUOTE.

CHARLES PARKHURST: Yes. Just the attendance figures speak to exactly what you pointed out. The National Gallery has gone from one and a half million when I was first here to, last year [1981], seven million. This year a little less because things are getting a little tougher nowadays, we're down to 6.1 or something million. But that's some different from 1.5. So there is this greater interest and people devour anything you give them that is sound.

We try, in presenting works of art, to allow the visitor to approach the work of art and make his own communion, as it were, and to avoid the lengthy labels and explanations converting into words the visual language. And exhibitions, likewise, should stand on their own feet and explain themselves without words by their structure, by their contextual arrangement, and by their colors and their choice of what picture you use and the groups you put them in. And we have a master of that here, "Gayl" Ravenel, who is in my opinion the world's best installationist-designer.

So people respond, and they are hungry for this direct, non-verbal contact. I can't say more than that, I don't know why that is. Taxi drivers, just to name one profession that is not normally highly educated, but even I know many examples, perhaps it's wrong to say that too, will talk about what's in the National Gallery with me sometimes.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Hmm... I was late once -- this is a small aside -- to give a walking tour, so I jumped in a cab, said to the cabdriver "take me such-and-such a place, I'm late on giving an architectural walking tour in this

part of Washington" and when we got there, he parked the cab and went on the walking tour because he wanted to know about architecture! (laughter) It really was a very enriching experience. And now he's come back to all the programs I've given for the Associates, he always shows up in a suit and a hat, wearing a tie.

CHARLES PARKHURST: I love that! That's a signal index, I think, to what we're talking about, that there is a thirst for more of this.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Oh, I think in the American public there is. I think for 20 years we've been soft-selling culture and trying to soft-feed people things and make everything "relevant" and easier and all that. And I've discovered consistently that what they want is difficulty, deep challenge, and furthermore I think that they want to believe that culture is deep and significant, that it's not just easy. I think it's almost got to the point of replacing religion; we've made a religion of culture, in a way.

CHARLES PARKHURST: Y-y-yes. Well, these are profound questions and (BUCK PENNINGTON laughs) we could discuss them at great length, but basically this is what we have, there's no question in my mind about that. And to be part of it is, of course, very exciting, as it is for you. I do think that it's extremely rewarding to have this kind of response. I've been asked to talk about this this next week or the week after down in Richmond to 600 art-educator-museum types in the state of Virginia. It's a little big as an order for a 45-minute talk. I've been trying to get my thoughts in order a little bit so I could have some meat to deliver to the table on the philosophy of why museums are run in the way they are, and what their objectives are. This is not easy to do.

BUCK PENNINGTON: Well, tell me what's ahead now. You're going off to Williams?

CHARLES PARKHURST: Yes. I retire at 70, in January, and start a career as (he laughs) running a museum and it's a museum that's closed right now because it's rebuilding and remodeling, adding to its plant. It's the college museum at Williams College and it's a great place to be. There are two museums in this little town, one the Clark Institute, which is a wonderful museum, and the College Museum, equally wonderful in a different way; it's an omnibus museum serving the courses from cave man to Picasso, or as Steckler (phon.sp.) used to say, from mud to Klee [he spells it]; he was a great joker, punster. But this will be very exciting. I may, if there's need, get to teach another course up there as I did a couple of years ago, on color or whatever. I don't want to talk about museums in a course any more, I've done that and somebody else can do that now. Things change anyway. They're going to remodel this place, I'm sure, as soon as I leave and they should, at least, it needs reorganization.

BUCK PENNINGTON: As you sort of worn out with museum organization at this point?

CHARLES PARKHURST: It's like being a parent, honest to God, with too many children. Not that they aren't adults, I just mean that the problems are the same. You're constantly -- it's care and feeding of temperaments and brilliant minds, many of them, and just keeping everybody on track and just keeping people out of each other's hair and keeping things going and straightening out messes. It wears you down, that part. On the other hand, it's a pleasure to work with Carter Brown and to work in this new East Building of Pei's design. I'm sure it gives me the effect that St. Denis gave Suger when he first walked in there in the morning light and said, "I have an anagogical feeling every time I come in the door," meaning he was uplifted and weightlessly soaring.

That's the way I feel when I come into this building: I have an anagogical feeling. So I will miss that, but on the other hand I have the Berkshire hills and the snow and I can ski out my backdoor and swim in the college pool and eat and sleep because I'll only be halftime and the other half I'll read and write and hope to get my color research done. That's the future for at least a year and a half and I'm looking forward immensely to getting away from the bureaucracy, at least.

Buck: Well, let's stop there and give some thought to future sessions.

END OF INTERVIEW

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