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Oral history interview with Van Day Truex, 1971 November 15

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Van Day Truex on November 15, 1971. The interview was conducted by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's the 15th of November, 1971, Paul Cummings talking to Van Day Truex. Well, let's kind of start from the beginning. When were you born?

VAN DAY TRUEX: I was born in Kansas, western Kansas in a high wind there was a cyclone outside and a month too soon or something.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What town?

VAN DAY TRUEX: It was in western Kansas in a little town called Delfis, D-E-L-P-H-O-S, they didn't know how to spell the Greek name correctly. My parents on both sides come from Virginia into that portion after the Civil War to Missouri and then finally into Kansas, on both sides.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What year were you born?

VAN DAY TRUEX: 1904. And then about three or four years later my father joined a tiny organization of stores called the Golden Rule stores. There were only four or five at the moment and the owner was somebody called J.C. Penny, and he lived in Camera Wyoming which was the first store. My father joined the company and my mother and father and the three of us, my oldest sister Phyllis and myself and my younger sister Mary who was two, departed for this mining town in Wyoming called Cumberland where there was a little store to be opened and we lived there for about two years. Not a green thing in town, just surrounded by the hogbacks and the mines. I saw as a child the far west unadulterated. I remember pushing through the swinging doors you know, fascinated by what was going on in these boisterous saloons. And we lived in rooms behind the store, water was brought in barrels. This was a town that was really in the far west. And then from there my father was moved to a little town called Saint Anthony, Idaho, which was on the Snake River about thirty miles I think from Yellowstone Station, at the foot of the Tetons. We were on one side of the Tetons and Jackson Hole and all that region on the side of the Tetons. Well, can you imagine any more glorious childhood than Wyoming there on the Snake River, you know near the Jackson Hole Country, when there was still remnants of gold hunger, you know Jesse James bandit groups, some of the old Mormons still had more than one wife living on separate farms, they hadn't officially given up. And that sort of far west and everything that it meant, the forest fires in Yellowstone Park, and the bear and moose and animals being driven out and finding them in our backyard, you know, on waking in the morning. All that sort of openness, absolutely glorious. And so then when I was in my early teens there was a short session in Wisconsin, my father having been transferred there. Which I hated.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where was that, what part of Wisconsin?

VAN DAY TRUEX: A little near Au Clair, beautiful, beautiful countryside but my childhood had been in the far west, I couldn't – I hated that Germanic Scandinavian –

PAUL CUMMINGS: Constriction.

VAN DAY TRUEX: You know, temperament.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what did you do as a child, did you have school out there?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Of course ordinary public schools, you see. I remember I was terribly embarrassed in public school one day. My grandmother came to call on the school, a rather imposing creature and she fought actively on the Southern side during the Civil War, even going to the lines to carry food and that sort of thing. And she came to visit the school and we were all merrily singing "John Brown's Body." She just rose in her taffeta dress and we were escorted out by my grandfather, she wouldn't allow us to be singing "John Brown's Body."

PAUL CUMMINGS: What year was that in school?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Oh, I suppose about third grade or something like that. Then I finished high school in Wisconsin and I didn't quite know what I wanted to. I went for a year to what was then the branch of the University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh where I had an aunt and uncle and I really was sort of marking time. I didn't know what to

do and I was so-called artistic. I don't know why I couldn't really draw and paint. I used to cover dried milk pods with silver and gold paint, you know to give to my mother. And I copied drawings out of *Photoplay* magazine maybe in red ink of Pola Negri or something like that. I mean the lowest form but I was considered artistic.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did you start making drawing and things like that, when you were very young?

VAN DAY TRUEX: I suppose so but that sort of unbelievable stuff.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, did you have, for example any pictures or art at home?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Oh my no. *The Book of Knowledge*, I devoured *The Book of Knowledge* and I think there was another set of books in the family, historical novels, I mean they were historical books almost in novel form of Elizabeth II of Russia or something like that so I had this absolute cache, you see of – and then the thing that changed the whole picture was that my cousin was at that time the President of the J.C. Penny Company and of course it had grown into an important organization. The offices were here in New York and he'd always taken a certain interest in me always.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was his name?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Sams, E. C. Sams. He came from Kansas he was one of the first people to go in with J.C. Penny and he grew, matured, an extraordinary man, and he became the President. The offices had been moved to New York and shall we say there were five or six hundred stores at that time. And he'd always said if you ever want to try an art school you let me know and I'll have our educational department send you material from New York because I think that's probably where you should come. If you want and if your father can't afford to help you at the moment I'll see to it that you can come. Now heavens know why he did this for me. So, the educational department of the J.C. Penny company sent me various catalogues, I suppose they were catalogues of well, I wouldn't remember now what the schools would be, art schools in or around New York but there was only one catalogue that I thought was attractive and that I could in any way understand and that was a catalogue for the New York School of Fine and Applied Arts. I was 19 so this is 1923, one catalogue, attractive, I could understand it, it interested me so I applied, was accepted and came to New York. My cousin was on the board of the YMCA, one of the top members here, and I was put to live where all proper young men were supposed to live with not much money, in the West Side branch of the YMCA which was then on 57th Street West over near Sixth Avenue somewhere. It's no longer there, so we won't go into that. So, you probably know, the New York School of Fine and Applied Arts grew out of the Chase School. Somebody called Frank Alvah Parsons who was then an assistant professor of art history or something, I don't remember exactly what he was, from Columbia and came into it with Chase, and of course Parsons was I suppose the pioneer and the dynamic, volcanic force in the whole government of the applied design school. And so obviously the school's name was later changed to the Parson's School of Design because it was that for years, nobody ever called it the New York School of Fine and Applied Arts.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He was the school.

VAN DAY TRUEX: He was the school. And he inaugurated these courses. Finally of course Chase withdrew completely and the school was incorporated, I don't know when. But anyway, there I was and I was enrolled in the advertising course.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have a particular sense of direction?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Ah, no. Advertising I thought because I was sort of interested maybe in journalism, I thought well, the journalistic approach would fit in with advertising, it was called the Department of Advertising Design.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you interested in writing or anything at that point?

VAN DAY TRUEX: No, it was just what I thought maybe was a sensible arrangement, and along with the advertising course you know there were the life classes and painting, all of that. I thought well, this is perfectly practicable. I never thought of myself for a moment as a fine artist, you see. I just went right into shall we say the world of design. Now, is there anything more?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I'm curious about when you came to New York.

VAN DAY TRUEX: I mean there was no urge, there was no urge or no drive pushing me on, it was just that my cousin made it possible –

PAUL CUMMINGS: For you to experiment, look around.

VAN DAY TRUEX: To come and try. He said well, come for a year and try, then you can go back to your college work, you will know more then what you wish to do. Well, I came for one year, I liked it and I came back for the

second year and at the end of the second year I won one of the scholarships to the Paris branch, which had been opened in 1921. I won it because I think the two or three others who were ahead of me couldn't take it, so finally it was offered to me. Well, so in 1935 I went off to the Paris branch still being backed by my cousin.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what was it like coming to New York because you had lived in very small towns prior to this. All of a sudden this was a new kind of world.

VAN DAY TRUEX: I don't want this to go into the record but I was petrified, and as you can imagine, you know what the world of the YMCA was, even then it was, you quickly understood maybe certain things that you never understood before about others or yourself. Good for me I suppose.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well did you have lots of outside activities out of school?

VAN DAY TRUEX: None, not even a one. Simply my life was the school. Later after I left the YMCA I lived in a little boarding house somewhere there off Columbus Avenue. The school you see was at the corner of Broadway, and had been there for years and years and years, Broadway and 80th Street, I've forgotten almost. So we all lived around up there somewhere. Then my second year I went down to live in the Village, I lived on Waverly Place. I climbed up four flights of stairs where I had a little bedroom with a fireplace. I was then indulging you see in the right atmosphere. The house was owned by a sister-in-law of Frederick Remington. She wore black satin dresses and red bandanas around her head and her cats were psychic and it was quite a household. That was in the days, you see, of the Village, when the Village was the real place.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you remember her name?

VAN DAY TRUEX: She was a sister-in-law of Frederick Remington but I don't remember her name.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's marvelous. Well, by that time you must have gotten to know some people.

VAN DAY TRUEX: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Nothing? You must have known students.

VAN DAY TRUEX: Oh, students yes, students. But I mean no one had counted in New York except my cousin, and if I heard some music I heard it from the top balcony. I'd go to the Met and swoon over Gallicurcci or something like that, you know from top balconies scarcely able to see what was on the stage. But absolutely, you know that average life of the student at that time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what about getting the scholarship to go off to Paris? This was another new adventure was it not?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Yes, yes and my cousin never hesitated. He said of course, sure, apparently this is your life. I'll always remember when I was called into Mr. Parsons' office to be told that I'd won the scholarship. He was a devil, a devil! And he congratulated me on winning it and hoped that I'd have enough intelligence to take proper advantage of being there and enough balance not to lose my head, and very sort of caustic advice. "And, incidentally Truex where were you born?" "Mr. Parsons I was born in Kansas." "Well, keep that quiet." Well, anyway, you see off I go to Paris and of course I went off and I stayed for fifteen years. They offered me a job teaching because I had finished my last year there, and I would have done anything to stay.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what did you go to Paris to do?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Finish the last year of my so-called advertising course.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, you were pursuing that all the way through?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Oh yes, yes. And of course you see what Paris did for me, as I suppose it did for a whole group who came on later until the school was closed in autumn of '39, whether we were in advertising design or fashion design or interior design (those were the three big departments) we all as a result of that Paris experience became away of the other departments, you see. I became more and more aware of interior design and more and more interested in interior design. And of course, I'm certain that was probably the greatest benefit this Paris school gave any of us, and heaven knows it influenced quite a lot of us.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, before we really get into the whole Paris thing, let's just talk about the New York school for a couple more seconds. Was there any instructor there that you remember as being particularly interesting or knowledgeable?

VAN DAY TRUEX: You must remember that for better or for worse it was a very, very personal school, dominated first by Parsons who if he's been in Wall Street would have been the financial genius, you know there were many

aspects to his character and his personality. He dominated the school absolutely this dynamic devil and highly intelligent. There were various personalities around him, there was Zerelda Rains who was tall and ugly and wore pince nez, she was right there under him, and her great friend with whom she lived with for years and years and years was called Miss Fuller. Zerelda Rains was tall and masculine, Mill Fuller was plump and feminine; Zerelda Rains was the head of the advertising set up, Miss Fuller was the head of the costume design set up. There were others. Wonderful life teachers, I liked my teacher but I don't suppose they were extraordinary as I look back. All that we did you see was, was based upon supposedly based upon something called dynamic symmetry, did you ever hear of it?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, of course.

VAN DAY TRUEX: Well, we were thoroughly imbued with the principles of dynamic symmetry and whatever we did was supposed to be a certain extent dominated by the use of dynamic symmetry, or a lot of it. We would eventually find some sort of diagram that would suit what we were doing, we didn't start out with a diagram. But that was the motivating influence, other than of course this strange young man who had come in under Parsons called William Odom from the deep south and Odom was an eccentric in his own right and from earliest years intensely interested in the 18th century. He came from Columbus, Georgia or someplace like that and he came to the school. Parsons took him under his wing, he became Parsons' protégé. He was the one mainly responsible for the whole emphasis on the department of interior design and developing the department of interior design with the emphasis on the 18th century, the French, the English and the Italian. He was responsible for creating the Paris school, mainly so that the students in interior design and it was called Interior and Architectural Design, I believe, could go abroad and have time abroad, traveling, working in the museums, doing documentary work and that sort of thing. He didn't think so much about the costume and the advertising people. But once the school was open, of course, Paris, then as you remember was the center of the design world, the art world, and the fashion, everything was in Paris.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, he was running the Paris school when you went there then?

VAN DAY TRUEX: He was. He had been responsible for opening the Paris school and he was the director of the Paris school when I was over there as a student, and he was vice-president of the whole school. And he took and interest in me and it was he who requested that I remain on to teach. I was not in the interior design school, or his particular section but he –

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, was this a large school New York at that time? Were there many students there or not? I mean you said it was a personal school so I wonder how large it was.

VAN DAY TRUEX: Well, I suppose it was one of the largest at that time because it was one of the first. Whether one might say six or eight hundred or even more with summer school, or a thousand, I really don't remember. The Paris school was always small, the Paris school was always limited to about a hundred students. But I imagine the New York school could fluctuate, I suppose including summer school students and that sort of thing, from eight hundred to a thousand. Of course Pratt was being established and Cooper Union was functioning but they hadn't – I really believe that Parsons was responsible for the crystallization and organization and developing of the so-called professional courses in design.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well was this Parsons' particular own interest? I mean I don't know much about his background.

VAN DAY TRUEX: Well, all that's recorded somewhere, that's thoroughly documented somewhere, his background, Boston, what his entire education was I don't know. I know that, I'm quite certain that when he came to work with Chase he was associate professor of art history or something at Columbia University. But anyways all that data exists somewhere.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were there any fellow students in New York or Paris that became good friends of yours that you kept up with over the years or for a period of time? Any kind of outstanding names that you can think of?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Well, Adrian was there, he came for a summer school just as I began. Joe Platt had been there a little before, Joseph Platt who had quite a career. I'm thinking of Eleanor MacMillan, still head of MacMillan Incorporated but I don't think she went to the Paris school, she was ahead of me. I don't think she did. Well, a lot of them I suppose are dead. I had contact more in a sense as a teacher or as finally the director of the Paris school. There's quite a few of them who have done pretty well in years since in the fields of design profession, but if you begin to ask me to name them, ah—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, sometimes they just pop up in the course of the—

VAN DAY TRUEX: I mean there's Claire McCardle. The interior design world even then and eventually went into the allied fields of fabric design, furniture design, and greatly influenced by talented graduates of that school.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what was the idea of the Paris school? What that for the top group of students to go?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Odom's idea was that it would be for advanced training, preferably the last year of well, preferably the students of interior and architectural design. Because of his passion for the 18th century, he never saw anything much before or beyond that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really, he had no interest in anything else?

VAN DAY TRUEX: No, he was interested in style and fashion to a degree, and in a way you might say it gave all the students of that department wonderful grounding you know because I suppose there never had been a century so related in proportion to the human body with such grace and etc., etc., etc. But it was limiting at the same time. But there you come to a highly controversial question in education. And it was in a way the idea of the Parsons school that if we could give the students during three years or so that they were with us some idea of style and quality, that's about all you could achieve. Even then with the technological developments beginning and all these new techniques and new materials, etc., etc. that you become of course more and more pronounced as the years went on and of course it's a mad house almost. We never pretended to be giving more than or to a little degree what most school would call a practical course.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it seems it has produced much more?

VAN DAY TRUEX: So it was the visual experience, it was the visual experience of being in Paris during those days that I think gave a lot of those people their added dimension, something they never forgot.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, were there things like homes opened to the students?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Well, there was a very marked degree of snobbery involved and I think all to the good, always thought so. In other words, when the Paris school was opened, there was a committee formed, naturally under the approval of the official American government and the American Embassy and the Beaux Arts, and the important heads of the French museums. They'd never head of anything like this they were intrigued you know that this was happening. Then through certain contacts of Odom and Parsons and others, Odom was a friend of Edith Wharton for example who was still alive, this committee was formed of patrons and patronesses of the Paris school. Some of the grandest names in France, you know were on it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who were they for example?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Well, it would be the Marquis de Ganey, there would be the Countesse de Alve, his aunt, there would be oh, the duduViels, the Minister of the Beaux Arts would be another you see. It was a mixture of the official world and the social world. Elsie de Wolfe was one of the original members of the list of patrons you see, she was about the only professional in a sense on that list of patrons and patronesses. Then the critics, you see. Jean Michel-France and Rene Whig as a young man lectured to the students on the history of art and they not only visited all the official museums and places of historic and artistic interest, often they visited private houses. There was a time when Etienne de Beaumont was giving his great balls. Well, I was a young American and in this rather privileged position as a head of the school, it was all very smart indeed you know, and they took a great interest in this school and damn attractive school it was too in the building in the Place des Vosges that we restored and copied Versailles and Odom had a great sense of style in the way the school was done up, in a way. But, I mean they would visit the home of Etienne de Beaumont, they would see Scaparelli's house, and of course we were the first school who asked to go to the collections, so we all went to the collections; advertising, fashion and interior design, you know, we were received at all the collections. We began with Poiret and Viononet, you see and some of the great ones that were still on hand, and right down through the years. So it was not only the work in the museums sketching or working in Paris. Then the Italian school was opened, never any permanent headquarters, but they would go down, the students would, for two and a half months every year to Italy, all organized under the Italian government. We were let into museums and palaces and that sort of thing. No other school had ever done this thing before.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was Odom the kind of spirit behind all of this?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Yes, and Parsons, you know, he was never at a loss for all the publicity you see and anything that could happen, and Parsons was always the motivating force. Then there was the English school, I used to go over to England for a month or so.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it was very interesting. So a student who went through all of this—

VAN DAY TRUEX: He was exposed to tremendous amount of extra-curricular activity too, you see. But in any other school he never should have had this. It was even typical in a sense of the school in New York. I mean long before it ever happened elsewhere fashionable people were involved in the school in New York, you know. That was Odom's influence more than Parsons. He was very much liked by a quite a few ladies of taste controlling the

New York scene. I never knew anything about the New York scene in its social sense till I came back during the war to live here, because I lived in Paris. I grew up in Paris, you see for fifteen years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because you were only what, 20?

VAN DAY TRUEX: I went in 1925 and I left in 1939, I grew up in Paris, from the time I was 21 until I was 35 or 6 and I knew the whole time I was there that it was bliss, I walked in beauty.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You can do it in that city.

VAN DAY TRUEX: And at the time when it was the center of everything. As an American we were very special folks in Paris, we were the gilded group.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how was it that these people were willing to open the doors and lend patronage and names?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Well, in the first place Americans, you see, we were the promised land still you know and we were the curious sort of, well, they sort of thought we were all out of the far west, you know, and we were permitted anything and added to the fact that the school was unique and the French museum world and design world were very intrigued by this set-up. In fact we influenced quite a bit of what happened later in some of the French schools that were set up afterwards, sort of after ours, even the Arts Decoratifs was somewhat influenced by our courses. The French students didn't work in museums as we did, they didn't go out to Compaigne and work and measure the rooms and measure furniture and all that sort of thing, we sort of began that. The conservator of the Museum d'Arts Decoratif in those years was a remarkable man called Louis Metmare. Well, he was so excited about the school and the students coming in to work, especially some of our young attractive young ladies, you know working away, it was unique, no one had done this.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, did you have French or English students there, or was it all American students.

VAN DAY TRUEX: No, it was probably, oh, I would think about three fourths American. But we were a sort of a potpourri I remember during the years when I was there and I think I'd become almost head of the school, no I wasn't head of the school but I was on my way up, we had quite a diplomatic incident. The Prince and Princess Nicholas of Greece brought their daughter Marina and her cousin Margareta who was the daughter of Prince Andrew of Greece—to the school and entered them as students, which was typical of what happened from the European end. Chapiapin's youngest daughter was also a member of the interior design class at that time, and I think it might have been through Marina that the other Marina, later Duchess of Kent, came and her cousin Princess Margaret. They discovered that another Russian in the school was not enrolled under her proper name, this was the daughter of one of the top Commissars of Moscow of that time. She got enrolled under another name and they marched into the head office and said either she left or they left. Well, luckily the girl withdrew.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who was she?

VAN DAY TRUEX: As I say, she was the daughter of one of the very important members of the Communist Moscow government at that time. But I'm only recalling those sort of entertaining details. The school had also this shall we say a fourth of the school was made up of very interesting foreign students. In fact we took always I think three or four French students a year from our similar areas on scholarship, wholly for propaganda and public relations reasons, other French students entered, and other foreign students.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you were there as a student for two years or a year?

VAN DAY TRUEX: One year.

PAUL CUMMINGS: A year. And then you stayed on becoming a teacher.

VAN DAY TRUEX: And I taught everything from second year fashion design, life class—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Everything.

VAN DAY TRUEX: Everything. But I never taught interior design.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh really!

VAN DAY TRUEX: Never.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how many instructors were there in Paris, or did you use specialists?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Oh, no. The faculty mainly came from the New York school by way of the New York school I

think our Secretary General was a Frenchwoman. She was the widow of an admiral. That was for all the logical reasons of protocol and all of that, which is very important in France. Our librarian was a retired gentle lady who lived over there, with proper background. But all the professional teachers were trained through the New York school coming over for a while.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well did you have any—

VAN DAY TRUEX: About critics, and including important fashion artists at the moment, Georgia Lepapp, Marie, Peirre Bauseau, even Cocteau came to criticize, Jean Michel Franc came quite a lot with the interior department and then our lectures were men like Rene League and others from the museums. But actual teaching staff itself —

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you think it was such a great success, what was the quality?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Paris was the mecca of every artist and every designer whether it was in interior fashion or name it, there the whole world of posters for advertising design was far ahead of everyplace else in the world. All you had to do was to open the doors of the school and step back—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well did you have any intention to teach or was it just the next logical step?

VAN DAY TRUEX: I would have done anything but go home, nothing you know—

PAUL CUMMINGS: And you stayed and stayed and stayed.

VAN DAY TRUEX: I didn't move.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well you didn't have any desire to set up your own type of business or anything?

VAN DAY TRUEX: I was very happy in my tower of ivory. And I had a leave every two years. I came back to New York in the winter to put on the Paris exhibitions in New York, exhibition of the Paris students in a New York gallery. They were given in a downtown gallery and they were very social with a top committee of artistic and social names here including the Chairman of the Board of the Metropolitan Museum to Mrs. Harrison Williams you see sponsoring the Paris exhibition. I would come about every two years for a month or six weeks and I'd lecture a bit in the New York school as the golden boy from Paris you know. I was very happy and content with my life.

PAUL CUMMINGS: With the life and the world and everything.

VAN DAY TRUEX: I never thought of participating professionally other than my life in the schools.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One thing that's interesting because you went there in the mid-twenties which is really when it was boiling over and everything was happening, but how did the 1930's affect the school, and the Depression in this country?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Not so much in a way, it did effect us and of course the devaluation affected us, but yes, I can realize that times were not as happy as other times but it was Paris, everything was more bearable. The students, the number of students didn't fluctuate too much because you the school was so small, it didn't fluctuate too much. And I suppose the chief reason was that it was Paris.

PAUL CUMMINGS: People did anything to get there, to survive.

VAN DAY TRUEX: And you could put up with conditions and you could put up with having no money much easier in Paris than you could in New York.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Somehow you can live on charm in Paris, but not New York.

VAN DAY TRUEX: Exactly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well say during the mid or late 1930's how did French life affect the school or was that again pretty even not necessarily too changed by economics—

VAN DAY TRUEX: It didn't affect the school, it never affected the school very much. Lots of the students through the program of the school didn't have so much contact with the French, they were too busy amongst themselves.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

VAN DAY TRUEX: Of course on the Left Bank there was this you know active mixture of the Americans of every sort, oh Paris was full of foreigners of course, the whole South American contingent too was very active—all the rich South Americans were there and all the entertaining that went on you know—we had I think a few at the school even. But you know most of the students' contact was through the work and the museums and fashion shows, the lectures, the critics. And some of them lived I suppose with French families, I suppose some the younger, some of the young ladies. But time was too short—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well they were there only a year, weren't they?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Most of them only a year you see.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Not very long.

VAN DAY TRUEX: No. No and the part of that time was in Italy and all of the interior people went off for two or two and a half months and they'd go to England for a month.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know your drawings—when did you start doing them and exhibiting them?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Toward the end of my last student year in Paris we used to be taken on sketch classes to Fontainbleau, and two or three of us had enough money so we'd come out on a Friday shall we say and paint in the gardens, and we'd get rooms in a little hotel and spend the weekend and we rented bicycles. I sort of did little watercolors like they all did, and I just had a bottle of ink and I sat out in the garden of this little Hotel Lenoire right across from the palace it was and I did a little drawing with brush and wash and my bottle of Chinese ink of a bit of the courtyard. I still have it. And that was the first time I ever sort of worked in value. I remember when I took it back to Paris and showed it to my teacher he said well listen Van why don't you do more of those in that sort of free black and white when you've got time do more of them. So I began all this on my own. It was the easiest medium in a sense, physically all you needed was a little water and a bottle of ink, you didn't have to go around and set up an easel and open up an umbrella and shape the canvas and so I just have never done anything else. Oh I painted a bit from time to time, experimented a bit with oil and always thought someday when I'm free and maybe don't have to earn my living I'll begin to work with oil or that sort of thing. Oh I don't think I ever will—too late now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Has the style changed much over the years?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Not consciously, but—

PAUL CUMMINGS: There are all these little…do these ones on the walls cover a long period of time?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Now for instance that must be about 1950; that's 1965 maybe, I think there's a difference but I don't know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I noticed the ones in the recent show seem to have sort of an Italianate—

VAN DAY TRUEX: In the recent show?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

VAN DAY TRUEX: I don't know, they haven't changed consciously ever, I've never thought of style, never. And I think unless one is a Picasso or something like that, you never do, you just work to say maybe what you have to say. When I do have any merit at all it is because it is perfectly sincere.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you select your subject matter, just whatever interests you?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Both what interests me and maybe what I can do. I haven't done any architectural work for quite a long time. For quite a few of my shows they might be dominated entirely by Rome or Venice or Florence and they were mainly architectural shows. Two or three of my shows were almost entirely Rome. During all those years after the war when I spent a lot of time abroad, even before I left the school, my home was with Lawrence and Isabel Roberts in Rome at the American Academy and I lived there. My summers were there. I hadn't done architecture drawings for ten years or so and I went back last year and spent a week in Rome with friends who live in the Palazzo by the Academy and I found myself wandering out with my sketchbook as I did you know sixteen years ago—and also in Venice. I haven't done that sort of thing for years, haven't wanted to. I've done more of other sorts of things you see, or more sort of the landscape type of thing. Why they went like automatic drawings. I mean I just didn't even have to look and I think look that way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They are very easy in their depthness. Well I wonder if we could talk some more about the school in Paris and the kinds of things that you were interested in doing as an instructor in the school with the students.

VAN DAY TRUEX: I'm perfectly aware now as I look back how narrow in a sense the world was that we made to live there to the students…let me examine this—of their exposure when you think and when I think back about the days of the beginning of the brilliant Paris school of painting, you know, Picasso and Vuillard and Bonnard and Braque and all of this, we as students weren't very aware of it. I mean we were aware but we were not particularly made aware of it by the school. We did more later and certainly toward the end of my influence there because Odom never looked much at the contemporary world. I did, but as I said to you beguiling Coleman the other day, I went out with the first money I was saving and bough a pair of bastard wrought iron candelabra and with purple drops hanging off them, I mean completely ersatz, I mean ghastly with my few pennies. Had I known about Vuillard I might could have bought a little Vuillard maybe for the same amount of money in 1927 shall we say. So one must admit that we were never directed too much into the contemporary scene. Of course the big expositions—I mean when I first went to Paris the first exhibition was Decorative Arts, the big one of '25 or '26, or it was soon after, but launching the names of Vumand and all the great cabinet makers, all the modern style sort of thing. Naturally as students we went to that and all of that sort of thing, but the only interesting point to make here was there was not emphasis on the contemporary scene.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was really very traditional and 18th century.

VAN DAY TRUEX: Maybe just as well you know. It gave you the grounding at the time. It trained our eyes to a certain extent, you see.

[End of Tape 1 – Side 1]

PAUL CUMMINGS: But the students really, most of them, came with the idea that they were going to go after school and set up a shop, a career, go into business, be involved with some quite specific activity, weren't they?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And I think it's interesting you keep referring to the term "professional attitudes" that Parson's had been giving these people. Professional training as opposed to –

VAN DAY TRUEX: That also was to be questioned. By other schools of design, we were not considered too professional.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

VAN DAY TRUEX: No, we were rather accused of turning out dilettantes as opposed to Pratt, or Cooper Union later; Pratt became a wonderful school, the Rhode Island School of Design, all those schools were coming up and they were placing much great emphasis on technical training.

PAUL CUMMINGS: For example how do you define technical training?

VAN DAY TRUEX: What is technical would depend of course on the department. I mean you could say that our students in design have technical training and I think compared to the logical sense too much emphasis is put on rendering and measured
drawings and elevations and all that sort of thing. You see of course in the Paris class there was not atelier work in costume design, they went over there to see and travel. Of course in the costume design department in the New York school then and always the ateliers are very expert. But the Parsons School was always placing less emphasis on the so-called commercial technical training that a student should have so that he could go out and get a job right away. Enough awareness and enough training in sort of the latest thing that was going on or how good was his lettering or how good was his layout or how much did he know about photography et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And of course there are demands now in the present set up are more and more pronounced and of course the studio work in photography and even in materials, in plastics and all of that I think is of course important or more important.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh they're so important now.

VAN DAY TRUEX: We didn't bother too much, that was not the Parson approach. I got George Nelson in there as head of the school you see. I became head of the school after the war. When the war broke out I was the director of the Paris School and I was vice-president. Parsons was dead and Odom was the head, and then Odom died in 1942 and I was made the head of the school. The Paris School closed and I was made the head of the school and I remained the head until '52 when I resigned. I was the one to relate the school much more to the contemporary scene in a sense by getting George Nelson and the people just beginning in to talk to the students in interior design. We were becoming more technical in that sense, recognizing more of the various avenues that the design students could go into. But basically our approach was always motivated and controlled by, let's give them as much as we can in the sense of eye, in the sense of quality and the sense of style.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's very difficult to breed those things into people isn't it?

VAN DAY TRUEX: No, there was a certain atmosphere of a kind and some of them got it. It may be hard on the others who didn't have too much technical training. If I were asked in any way to sum up the importance however limited that importance is of the Parsons School as it was established by Parsons who was very much of a personality, Odom who was a strong personality in quite a different way, and as carried on by me, it was that there was an atmosphere of it was a very personal atmosphere. It was an atmosphere where there was a certain aloofness, looking on the fashionable scene but aloof. The students would have contact with George Nelson and people like that but….I think really it would make more sense for you to pinpoint me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well let me start in the thirties in Paris, who were some of your more successful students, whether or not they became famous names.

VAN DAY TRUEX: Well this is not so bad. I'm always surprised to read a list of the alumni and when I get it (I don't even receive the *Alumni Bulletin* anymore). I'm always amazed at the people maybe doing important work in California, or Chicago or here. Often hear of people high in even publishing, in art direction, in design and business, like the Brunswicks and people of that type. I'm always surprised how many came from Parsons.

PAUL CUMMINGS: People like Baldwin?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Billy no, no. Billy became a very active critic in the school during the years I was the head of it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He was never a student there?

VAN DAY TRUEX: No. And well, you know the interior design profession is pretty well dominated by them going back as far as Eleanor Brown who is now 81 and still active. And the world of fashion too, the Clare Cardelli and the Norells and people like that are Parsons.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I didn't know he was there –

VAN DAY TRUEX: Yes, he worked steadily over the years. He was extraordinary the way he worked with the students. Harry too. You know all those people what went out.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Many of them continued an association as a critic or –

VAN DAY TRUEX: Oh yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's what gives tradition to the whole thing.

VAN DAY TRUEX: Quite, continues that very personal thing with the school. We always tried to make them aware of what was happening in the design world.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well I get that and I also get the feeling that there was a great deal of a kind of social awareness developed in these people.

VAN DAY TRUEX: There was. In other words for a great many it proved to be a perfectly productive background whatever we gave them. I mean a lot of them went out as outrageous snobs.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh really.

VAN DAY TRUEX: I've always said about my own career for what it is that the thing that saved me was at the age of 19 I went to Paris and I grew up in Paris. Where would I be if I came back here? Who would I have known? I'd be up and down Second and Third Avenue. I never knew it, and never have known it. I grew up in Paris and by the time I came back to New York (and I suppose I'm typical in a way of a Parsons graduate) to live I knew a pretty good sampling of the most attractive people in New York through Paris. I knew my attractive New York friends through Paris and when I came back I not only was in contact with the fashionable design world but the fashionable world itself you see, so I brought, I continued to bring that into the school.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well who were some of the people you met in Paris that you became close to or friendly with and were involved with?

VAN DAY TRUEX: I meant now a whole segment of a certain type of New York society. Everything from the Edith and Maude Wetmores you know of Newport and they were related to the Cooper Hewitts you see, to Mrs. Vanderbilt. I went to those big dinners when the house was still there at 52nd and Fifth. Mrs. Sheldon Whitehouse, Mrs.Arnold Whittridge. The students knew those places, the students used to go to those houses and paint the rooms. We did one or two shows of portraits of rooms done by students you know and that sort of thing. And you know the top people of the Conde Nast publication. From the beginning Conde Nast was a friend

so always the periodicals of fashion were very interested in the school and were close to the school through personal contact.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's always personal contact that makes all these things operate ultimately.

VAN DAY TRUEX: What happened to me you see was when I left the school and I really didn't know what I was going to do, I left the school very unhappy (we didn't have to go into that) because I didn't want to be president anymore but somebody had to go in who could try to put that school on the proper financial basis that it never had. And I said to the board that I wished to be relieved of the presidency, I wished to be only responsible for the design segment, in other words, the art director. They finally accepted my demands and I was appointed a member of the committee to find my successor. There was only one person that said to me, listen Van, if you don't wish any longer to be the head of the school, you cannot accept a lesser position, it never works. I didn't listen. It was as simple as that. Somebody was put in who immediately moved to make my life impossible and took over.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well people don't want competition on that level.

VAN DAY TRUEX: I at the age of fifty found myself on the... I resigned. I couldn't take it. And I didn't know what I was going to do to earn my living. I had no practical experience of any kind. Well, first was the offer from Yale and Towne as a consultant to supervise and to do something about architectural hardware, I couldn't have been more amazed in my life when Joseph Chapman who was the head of it called me in not knowing I was going to Europe. I was running away for a year or so, I just wanted to paint and see what happened because I knew that couldn't be the ultimate end, that I couldn't live on that. He called me in when I was prepared to leave New York and asked me if I would consider such a consultantship.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What exactly did you do with them?

VAN DAY TRUEX: I listened politely (I knew him as I knew a lot of people) and when he finished I said, "Well listen Gilbert Chapman, this is a compliment but it is absolutely impossible." I call everything a whose-it, I don't know how anything works – I don't know how anything works. I've never been able to use a scaled ruler even as head of the Parsons School of Design. I said it's ridiculous, I couldn't possibly consider it. He said "At Valley Forge we have our patent group of industrial designers and engineers and all of that, they know the answers to everything, we want a different point of view. What's happened to hardware? Look at it, there's no quality." I said "You mean I could call everything a whose-it? I don't have to know how anything works?" "Of course you don't, they know how it works. I want a look, we want ideas." I couldn't refuse. Two years later we put on that show at Rubenstein (those are my connections with Rubenstein). I went and asked them when we were getting ready if we could put on a show of architectural hardware at Rubenstein. I was given carte blanche to do anything I wished or to commission. I went to Noguchi and Philip Johnson and Lipchitz and you know everybody and got what I could.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you think that project worked out?

VAN DAY TRUEX: It worked well. I mean it worked beautifully and the show was remarkable and of great interest and then it all petered out like it always does in this country. We are far behind Europe now and Japan as you know in designing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh Japan is incredible.

VAN DAY TRUEX: We're behind Europe too.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why is that you think?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Expertise. And who decides what's good design?

PAUL CUMMINGS: The accountant.

VAN DAY TRUEX: The accountant, or the buyers decide what's good design in china, what does the bride want. That's the way it's done. Leaders of fashion and society and the designers account for the quality of all the great fashion homes. Scaparelli and Mallicent Rogers and the Cocteaus that worked. I mean it was the mixture of the cultural and the intellectual and society, dominating fashionable design.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, it doesn't happen.

VAN DAY TRUEX: Doesn't exist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think are the reasons that caused this decline? It's not money, there's certainly lots of money.

VAN DAY TRUEX: No, the reasons are the changes in the world in every sense.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Could you go into it?

VAN DAY TRUEX: The wars and the destruction. I mean heavens knows I'm not the one to talk about that, but it has to do with world conditions. I mean the personal world is going, there's no place for it any more. There is still a different Europe, but there's room for it here, look at this city. Paris is still fairly personal, but less so, London is still less so, Rome is less so. But they're much more personal that this thing that we live in here, don't you agree?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh yes, very much so in fact.

VAN DAY TRUEX: I don't think it can change, I'm very pessimistic.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mean, more and more distant and….?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Oh, I just think, and I'm not decrying that we'll end up in purely maybe functional plastic furniture or something that you buy this week and throw out the next and the place becomes something that goes down, you know out of the refuse, I suppose more and more it's going to happen. But I'm probably like you, I'm not very interested in that world. Any designer is interested in seeing that people can live a little better or live more with greater ease, but one would like to see that word quality never forgotten. And I don't know, when somebody says to me sometimes, you're doing some beautiful things in silver, but who can care for it anymore? I just always say, do you know anything worthwhile in life that doesn't require care? Name it. That's where you want to live.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, they don't want to be involved in anything, you know, antiseptic life.

VAN DAY TRUEX: Exactly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, when did you go to Tiffany's?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Oh well, it was the next year after Yale and Towne. Anyway as that got underway Hoving asked me to come and see him and you see we had these relations that existed through my position in the Parsons School but I'd never thought of them in any way as personal, it was the school. And so I went down to see Walter Hoving, went up to the fifth floor and to his office and we chatted for a moment. He said of course I don't have to tell you about Tiffany's, I've been wanting for years to get control of it, I have got control of it. Of course you know Tiffany well. And I said, "No, Walter, I don't know Tiffany well. This is the first time I've ever been in Tiffany's."" Well," he said, "that's what we want to talk about. Here's this great name, here's this great firm. Its quality is unique but there's no sense of design or charm or anything else left, it's all gone and something has to be done about it, it's got to be brought back. Would you take an interest? I know you've taken this consultantship with Yale and Towne, but would you give a day or so a week to the second and third floors here?" I didn't know what was on the second and third floors! He explained it: this is silver, this is china and glass. Again I said, "I don't know anything about silver and china and glass," and again the answer was you don't have to know, you're supposed to have taste. Well, we've had long discussions over the years, Walter Hoving and I have about that word taste, and I've been able to influence him a little. He's a remarkable man, he's a mixture of course of the toughest merchandising force, but at the same time absolutely genuine in his desire to make the best design statement possible, and so much so that he got Schlumberger there. Of course I had a certain amount to do with that because he asked me who were the best designers and I said de Sur de Dura and Schlumberger. Johnny was an old friend, I'd known him for years in Paris before the war. So it was Johnny in the end. Jean Moore was brought in for the windows and I was brought in to influence the second and third floors. And so in a way it was thirty years practically, from a student until I was finished as head of the school, of living in a tower of ivory and then coming out and having the gauntlet thrown down; now what is your design judgment? I suppose I got away with a great deal because I even then didn't have to sell myself. Apparently I had a reputation, but nobody knew what it was, I mean it'd never been proved you see at the Parsons School and I had been the head of the Parsons School so I must be pretty good.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what kinds of things do you do for Tiffany?

VAN DAY TRUEX: It was a question and he asked me: "Alright, will you give a certain amount of time during the months you're here in New York and then will you travel for six weeks each year with the buyers?" I mean can you imagine what I mean! Never having worked in the laboratory sense in my life with anything to go into the world of silver, china, all the ceramics and crystal, go to the factories, go abroad you see. It's always bored me, the laboratory side, you know having to go through the factories and see how the porcelain was made and the paste was made and baked and that sort of thing. It doesn't interest me. I'm interested in getting a look, but that's already been painted for me and I never learned anything really. Somebody has to know I won't deny in the world of design that you must know your materials, supposed to know your materials. Well, some of that's

poppycock. Somebody's got to have ideas too, of what to do with that material you know. Anyway because of my whole training and what I'd learned visually and through my contacts with other people of taste and in every field of design, which is terribly important, haven't I been influenced by private individuals of taste, you see, where they lived and all of that. I believe very strongly you see that there's a great deal of bad design done because designers are trying to be original. Of course, when new techniques are developed and new materials are developed that permit certain constructions and all of that, of course then new ideas can come forth. But in the world of design, aside from the influence that new techniques and new materials can have in liberating construction, or take the whole plastic world, where is the original design? It's all been done somewhere or somehow.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The egg is still the egg.

VAN DAY TRUEX: Yes, and I've always believed and I always taught it in the school, you look at what's happened, look at nature's designs in the first place and then be aware of the African sculpture long before Modigliani it's all there and it repeats something. What do you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Look at the world, yeah.

VAN DAY TRUEX: You see, I mean one of my strongest beliefs is that visual training and awareness.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So the more you see and are aware of.

VAN DAY TRUEX: What greater example than Picasso, taking his materials from elsewhere and making his own statement, sure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah he's the greatest art historian today, let's say.

VAN DAY TRUEX: Yes, he is.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what do you do when you go to the factories for the Tiffany business? Do you select things, you say no or yes?

VAN DAY TRUEX: I have tried to do two things. Certainly in a certain sense revive good things of the past that should have never been allowed to be forgotten. Well, when for instance when I began my first challenge in going abroad with Tiffany (of course with Yale and Towne it was different, I had perfect freedom to do what ever I wanted and go to Philip Johnson or Nogchi or people like that who I knew and believed in to ask them to do things) but arriving for the first time for Tiffany, you know five towns and the potters--this would be what, 1954, I guess it was about then. I'd go to outside towns with the buyers and all that still atmosphere was grey and cold. Here were these great names like Worcester and Minton and Spode, Spode less, concentrating on looking for the American market, which is a big market you see because of the high taxes in England and the luxury taxes and that sort of thing, to please the American bride, and here was a faceless world of design of chicken scratch you know and a bit of faded blue and a faded pink and a faded something, in other words no color, no vitality, no nothing. It was almost difficult even to get the pure white bone china, which of course is all perfect. And Wedgewood for instance have all of their design books from the late eighteenth century, they've got them all there, all these designs, all you have to do is go through them and they're full of timeless designs, even the influence of the arabesque, these abstract arabesques, that sort of thing. So we were the one to fight for the return of the vigorous patterns, and they did them and it's been successful to a certain extent, and then we also gave out ideas of out own everywhere. I think we certainly exerted a double influence in this abroad, not here. We have no influence here, we have practically no American at Tiffany's.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really.

VAN DAY TRUEX: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, there are no crafts here or anything.

VAN DAY TRUEX: We went to Lenox and tried to work with them in those beginning years, and Tiffany was a name. We made two or three visits, we had two or three meetings with the top people. With the designers I sensed immediately a rapport with the direction and they were perfectly content. We said we don't want this bland, negative, faceless type of design. The quality is beautiful, the product, but there's no distinction. But we've never succeeded. And I suppose that in silver – I mean Hoving has always said that I've had more influence in what happened to the silver department than any of the others in the sense that I did work to revive the whole romantic approach to silver. I said I didn't think silver should look like stainless steel, you know. Well, it has been a wonderful experience for me. Now it's finishing. I'm withdrawing this year.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

VAN DAY TRUEX: They've no need for me anymore. I didn't want to do it full time and somebody had to come in full time, I got George O'Briens, he was the one I selected, I'd been watching and I have the greatest respect for him and his whole critical point of view. And George has been very, very successful. There's no need for me to be there anymore. Hoving has always said he wants me there and I'm here I go in twice a week as long as I wish to be there but –

PAUL CUMMINGS: Times change and one's interests are different and so on.

VAN DAY TRUEX: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, why do you think the whole crafts industry in this country is so bland and tasteless and anonymous?

VAN DAY TRUEX: This is a very treacherous subject to discuss because I can easily sound with my point of view negative against contemporary design. I'm not. I live this way, this room is a scrapbook of odds and ends simply because in one way even if I wanted to I've never been able to afford to be fashionable. If I have contemporary furniture here I have the Spelecky group which I consider an absolutely distilled timeless contemporary chair, you know and I have it wrought in steel, I can't afford the Barcelona chair, that sort of thing. I have the Parson table, this is a distilled functional thing, I mean how can you beat it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

VAN DAY TRUEX: I'm entertained by the whole plastic blowup now, but you see almost when they hit the market they're finished. They become out of fashion, it's gone.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But there are people who have made classic designs.

VAN DAY TRUEX: So, as I say, I can easily sound negative when I make the statement, there is practically nothing original in design unless a new material releases it, it's all been done by the primitives sometime or other if you begin to go back in the world of design. I'm for the distilled contemporary things, I've been interested in fashion all my life, but fashion to me is not very important, it's interesting because it indicates what's going on but also has nothing to do with quality. So I'm interested in quality before I'm interested in fashion. I'm entertained by fashion and very much so.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how do you define –

VAN DAY TRUEX: Well, and influenced too, and I think certain fashions, certain tendencies are exciting. I think this whole transparent look now and the steel and the plastic, I think there's a great deal of excitement in it, you know. Well, I feel looking on that as I do, as a whole scene of painting in New York.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But how do you find the style in something that's very fashionable and how do you find the quality in it?

VAN DAY TRUEX: That's what I mean when I say you need a certain objective training of the eye. Listen, most of our designers lose even along the way whatever original objective perception the have. They have become distorted, worn out, consumed by production demands. By: I've got to have something new for the autumn market. Why heavens, there's nothing more destructive you know that that sort of pressure and they lose all perspective themselves, you know that as well as I do. They get absolutely submerged and destroyed and they lose their objective and subjective eye. It has to be both, doesn't it. And even a man like George Nelson as I'd admired so much, when I look at what he did for Rosenthal, or look at Rosenthal design, I mean it's so contrived that it's all made out of skim milk, it's got no guts. And you look at that shop designed be George Nelson. Well, you don't know where to walk half the time, you know there's a step down or a step up and there's a dark shape there and you see something in that hole. Then we saw that beautiful showroom of Jensen before they failed, where was it, on Third Avenue wasn't it?

PAUL CUMMINGS: On Fifth they were.

VAN DAY TRUEX: No, it was after the Fifth Avenue thing was closing. They opened a big special showroom over on Third Avenue. It failed of course. But it was beautiful, it was beautiful, it was clarity, it was a wonderful open effective light and you saw the object. Oh, they got so contrived and involved, and it's all contrived. Do you prefer it or do you prefer to walk into Bonniers even now or the way George Jensen looked, an openness, a clarity,

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it's interesting that some design ideas seem to fare very well in particular kinds of markets and in other markets they're totally lost and they don't succeed.

VAN DAY TRUEX: No, I'm not so certain I follow you.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what I'm saying is that the more expensive you become in the objects you're dealing with the more sophisticated your presentation.

VAN DAY TRUEX: And yet that needn't be. I think for me the most encouraging, the one encouraging aspect are places like Bonniers. I'm not speaking of the Tiffany point of view now because that is aloof, that is indicating that one knows what's going on in the world of fashion. When we put on our shows there can be the most beautiful steel or plastic table. If you've seen the show now there's the most beautiful brown plastic table there, it's like a piece of sculpture as part of the show. And on the floor you can find as contemporary a bit of glass as you'd find at New Directions, but it's mixed in with a whole survey of the past and the romantic and the floral. We try to have it a general objective representation. But then you take Bonniers and New Directions and some of those shops are opening up there in the East Fifties and Sixties, I think they're the hope. It's brash, it's unpretentious, I mean the wicker and then the simple shapes and glass and the simple casts and things like that, yet expensive.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what about a place like Genori's which has a tremendous tradition and look at some of the strange things they're producing.

VAN DAY TRUEX: Oh, it's the bottom, it's the bottom, because they've just remained in the past with no judgment. Well, some of it's good, yes, but most of it's bad, it's just elaborate and bad.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Unbelievable some of it.

VAN DAY TRUEX: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what about the business of taste that you say you've discussed with Mr. Hoving frequently.

VAN DAY TRUEX: You see, I consider it a dirty word. From the beginning I've tried to tell him how completely and profoundly humble I am about maybe the very little taste that I may have. I consider that unless one is born with the flair (and then you have the great painter or the great sculptor or the great designer, it is there, you see) for most of us, whatever we achieve toward that quality level, it is to the degree that we are sensitive and intelligent and train ourselves.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Making decisions, looking at –

VAN DAY TRUEX: And looking and not losing our heads. What little degree of design judgment I have – and I use that word "design judgment" not "taste," because it's been so bastardized the word taste. What is good taste? Of course Webster has an absolutely overpowering definition, I've forgotten now, I used to repeat it always to the students. It's something like: the power of discernment of whatsoever constitutes fitness, beauty, but the power of discernment, you know. So we've had long, long discussions because Hoving is the man who has to get right out in front and he used to go into long editorials about good taste and bad taste. I would listen, you can't do it, you're talking now like the promoter, you can't talk about things like this properly. I said, now listen, I have a little degree of design judgment because of my luck over the years of the way I lived, and I said I'm very, very humble about it. He's always said, "Van you're much too humble." But I'm perfectly aware of the fact too that whatever influence I've had there and which I've had there is because of his confidence in me. Because he understands.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you have trouble with the buyers and various other people?

VAN DAY TRUEX: No, because he gave the orders and obviously I was much more interested in it from their point of view too. I was never supposed to be and I always have been interested in finding something that one could buy for them dollars as well as a thousand, I couldn't help it. But that was not supposed to be my province.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You would just select one of ten or a thousand or a hundred things and say this.

VAN DAY TRUEX: Or say this is what we want done. Or I sat and made drawings, and would get out eight books of Chinese patterns or that sort of thing and say look at this wonderful abstract design, don't fish around with all this chicken scratch, take this abstract design, it's timeless, use it, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, let's talk about you own drawings again. Let's sort of talk about the exhibitions. Where did you have your first show?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Wildenstein gave me my first show, imagine! The first, the whole top floor of Wildenstein, I cringe now to think of it. That almost shows you too how the New York world has changed since I had my first exhibition. I was given the top floor at Wildenstein for these drawings!

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's hundreds of drawings to fill that place.

VAN DAY TRUEX: Well, I don't know, I've saved the reviews, you know the critics then were Royal Cortissoz and etc., etc., etc., I had front page reviews in the *New York Times* with photographs and that sort of thing. As I say, now my shows go on absolutely ignored by the critics for the last fifteen years. And yet discerning collectors like Lehman and even our friend down on Gramercy Park –

PAUL CUMMINGS: Sonnenberg.

VAN DAY TRUEX: Sonnenberg. They come to our show, admired my drawings, Walter Baker, part of his collection. These people quietly come and buy my drawings as well as friends or people who just like this sort of thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you showed with Carroll Carstairs for a long time.

VAN DAY TRUEX: I showed twice with Wildenstein and then I left of my own accord. I knew I didn't want to be there, it was too big, I wanted to be in a more intimate gallery. That was no place for me a Wildenstein and they couldn't have understood more. So I went to Carroll Carstairs and I was there until he died. Then Maynard Walker asked me to go to him and then the Maynard Walker closed. I had just decided I wouldn't show anymore and I was in the Graham Gallery looking at a show and ran into Bob, Robert Graham and he said what are you going to do now that Maynard has closed? I said I won't do anything, I'm not going to show anymore because I have nothing to do with what's going on now, there's too many exhibitions, there's too many galleries, I'm not going to show anymore. Oh, yes you are he said.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, he can be persuasive when he wants to be.

VAN DAY TRUEX: But I think this is the last, I'm not going to show anymore. I'll continue to draw a bit, you know, I like to.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you live most of the time in France now?

VAN DAY TRUEX: Seven months. And I think now this will be my withdrawal. I think I'll just live there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because the apartment and the galleries and everything has changed –

VAN DAY TRUEX: No, it isn't that. I find for everybody, I find there's only one reason for anyone who's been in New York as we have been and are now in New York, you must be really active. You cannot be here and not be active. You might say I could be active by getting interested in outside activities or that sort of thing. No, as long as I'm withdrawing more and more from what I call the competitive scene, because that's New York, then what has New York got to offer me. I don't like to go to the theatre here, I don't go even to music very much, one doesn't have to. I can go to London when I want to and go to Paris when I want to, I'd rather go to the theatre in London.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's a more joyous experience than here.

VAN DAY TRUEX: I'd like to come back every so often. But no, this is very private now, what I'm saying to you, but I really feel that I'm toeholing here, and it's from the purely dollars and cents point of view. What they pay me pays for my New York five months, so, you know, what's the point.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, sure. Where do you live in France now? You've moved from where you were before, right?

VAN DAY TRUEX: I've never left the same region. I've always remained in the same region and now I've settled in to my last chapter, the third house. You know it's an interesting thing, I think I'm very fortunate in a way, this questions of retirement which of course is all the wrong word, unless you've gone on for so long in a certain job that you can't face life without it. And old and dear friend of mine committed suicide this August for that very reason. Couldn't face life without her job, so she jumped out of the window, had enough money, couldn't face life, it was too late, she was eighty.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's incredible.

VAN DAY TRUEX: She couldn't face any life. I think I'm doing it in the most intelligent way there is, I'm withdrawing gradually, I have other riches. I'm quite content you know. I've been doing houses, I've been creating, I've put that energy into making houses from first saving and restoring a wonderful Louis XIII house that belonged to Andre L'hôte, which was too much for me and too big and too costly and then I found that I was caught in the village, I didn't have the freedom I wanted. I went to Yaxexpris and bought a lonely hilltop with a deserted farmhouse where I could walk out naked if I wanted and I did that over. Then I realized that was not practical, a little too lonely. So not I built a house on the edge of Menerbes. The village is classified so that the house had to absolutely conform to the general look of the village. It wasn't a question of designing a

contemporary house and I just designed a functional kind of house. Well, all that you see has kept me just as busy as competing in the New York scene, and I think without knowing it it's the ideal way to withdraw and to develop other interests and other activities that you cannot do remaining part of this scene in New York. You could in London, you could in Paris where still a personal life is more possible. But not here. I think the only reason to be here for our point of view is –

PAUL CUMMINGS: Is activity.

VAN DAY TRUEX: Is to be active.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Is there anything we haven't talked about that you'd like to discuss?

VAN DAY TRUEX: If I could sum up what has helped me to get on as well as I have it's that I think I have been both objective and subjective, and I've had the fortunate experience of having contacts over the years with people of design, judgment, and taste, both privately and professionally and lived the number of years that I have as much a part of the European scene as a part of the New York Scene. So I've been able to be absolutely aloof in a sense, as I've looked on, above all the New York scene – which of course is the most killing, concentrated, promotional scene of its kind.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's true.

VAN DAY TRUEX: And I think often the whole promotional force can be more destructive than constructive, design wise.

END OF INTERVIEW

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