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Oral history interview with Harold James Brennan, 1979 Sept. 5 and 1982 Feb. 16

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Harold James Brennan on February 16, 1982. The interview took place in Sunderland, Massachusetts, and was conducted by Robert Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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

Please note: Dates for this interview had previously been noted as 1979-1982 and associated paperwork indicated three sessions: 1979 Sept. 5, 1982 Jan 14, and 1982 Feb. 16. Upon transcription in 2019, only two sessions were found: 1979 Sept. 5 (reel side a) and 1982 Feb 16 (cassette side a and b). Notes on the housings of the audio tape also indicate only two recorded sessions.

Interview

[1979 Sept. 5 - reel]

ROBERT BROWN: This is side two.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: You ask the questions, and I'll make the responses.

ROBERT BROWN: Sure.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: In our first—this interview, you talked mostly about your education at Carnegie Institute, and your early teaching career at Westminster College. Perhaps before we leave the '30s and talk about World War II and later, could you say maybe a bit more about Frederick Claytor, who was, I gather, the most influential instructor you had at Carnegie? What was he like?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Bob, he was a very remarkable fellow, with a very unusual technical background for an American working in the metal field at that particular period. I'm talking now about the late '20s and early '30s, say. And he had been born in Muskegon, Michigan, and in some fashion or other, had become interested in silversmithing, as opposed to jewelry-making and other forms of metal tinkering, a smaller scale. So he went to England to study at the Royal College of Art, and was in England for some four years. Now, this would have been after World War I.

ROBERT BROWN: In the '20s, he was there.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: In the '20s. This was at a time when probably the English were producing, technically speaking, as fine a work, or as fine works, in metal, hollowware, as was being done anywhere in Europe. [00:02:17] However, the British were more attuned to repetitions, or modifications, that were the good old classical traditions, as opposed to what was being done in Austria and Germany, and the Scandinavian countries in the field, where there was this surge to some—a search for modern form. But from the point of view of technical skills—forming, engraving, raising, chasing, all the processes—the English were doing very, very fine work. Fred was exposed to this, I think, for four or five years. Then he returned and took a job teaching at Carnegie in Pittsburgh, which is where I met him, where, and later—I think maybe four or five years later—Art Poulos [ph] was there to meet him. Well, Fred, at the time, was a director at the Tiffany Foundation in Long—at—

ROBERT BROWN: In Long Island.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: —in Long Island, at Oyster Bay. Did I mention this in the previous conversation?

ROBERT BROWN: I don't remember.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Anyhow, they gave fellowships at the Tiffany Foundation, and there were usually six to eight young artists, mostly painters, who lived on the Tiffany estate, in what had been the stables. [00:04:08] The stalls had been converted to little—to student rooms, and a workshop was provided for each young artist. Because Louis Comfort Tiffany, who was then alive when I was there, which was in 1931, had been tremendously interested in glass and enamels, so he'd fitted up this shop for making metalware. Chiefly enamel bowls, but silver bowls, or bronze bowls, or whatever. Brass bowls, boxes, and all that sort of thing. He had developed a system for producing a luster on glass and enamels that was quite celebrated—Tiffany glass, now a

collectible. So, I worked up there with Fred Claytor in attendance. He was a director of the foundation, and in the summer months, he would come up there and work, too. We had access to the library in the big house, that is Laurelton Hall, which was the Tiffany estate. And I remember quite vividly the beauty of this place, which had been designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany, and the Byzantine chapel that he'd built on the estate, with beautiful mosaics. I often wonder what has happened to those. Laurelton Hall burned down later. But what happened to that beautiful chapel, for example, those exquisite mosaics, and done in the real Byzantine mode, with a little tesserae and so on. [00:06:10] Tiffany, although then, I think, in his mid-80s, and senile, was nonetheless, at times, remarkably alert. At times, remarkably forgetful. He would come down, and we'd sit and talk about our work. Of course, I was interested in talking about what he had done, because he had been an architect, and a glass designer, and a jeweler. From what I gathered, Laurelton Hall, in its heyday, had been a tremendous place, with marvelous pools and fountains, and Isadora Duncan danced there, and pheasants on the lawns. To a boy like myself, from Indiana, this was unbelievable. Strictly out of a life utterly foreign.

ROBERT BROWN: What would he talk about? Did he—do you recall some things he said?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: He talked about—how he had visited the Near East and become tremendously impressed with early glass, ciporin [ph] and so forth, and by the exquisite surface on this glass, as luster—it gave a sort of spectrum coloration to the surface, which he tried to duplicate first by burying the glass in alkaline-rich soils, as I remember it. [00:08:10] But then he decided to try some other means, and he finally—he and his shop foreman, his glass foreman, worked out a system which had been known, I guess, in the Renaissance, but the actual technical processes had been lost. He was able to duplicate this luster. We now know it by a process of reduction, as denying the oxygen to the surface. I guess, in the late [18]'90s and early years of the 20th century, he produced a tremendous amount of this glass, and it had been eminently successful. He had made a lot of money. Tiffany glass was something that was found in the homes of the well-to-do, and a sparing the vases, the lamps, bowls, and so forth—glassware. He talked about this, but he always—his memory would slip at some critical point, and I never really learned much. But I did come to admire this magnificent little old man, and wonder when somebody would discover, really, what a tremendously-rounded, creative person he was. And I remember him coming down in a—although it was only maybe a quarter of a mile at the most from his house to the stables, he'd be driven down in a car, with his chauffeur, into the courtyard, paved courtyard, of what had been a carriage house, and a harness room, and then the stalls that we were inhabiting. [00:10:16] All of these had been designed to—the stalls—French doors, opening onto a terrace. Really quite elegant, you know, and nice. We took our meals in the great house. As I say, we had the use of the library, and could spend any time we wanted with Tiffany's personal collection of Japanese sword guards, which I guess must have been greatest in the world outside Japan. The museum was in Japan. Beautiful things. These were the, as you know, the decorative units that went over the samurai sword. They were marvelously chased and engraved, and inlaid. The designs for them were absolutely intriguing. They had a sort of common character as far as shape was concerned, but within this shape, unbelievable number of variants of style, and depending on the history of the warrior who'd commissioned the sword and that kind of thing. This Tiffany experience was a really remarkable one, all the more remarkable because I shared it with Claytor. At school, in Pittsburgh, I was one of maybe a dozen students, but there we worked shoulder-to-shoulder, so to speak. [00:12:06] You know, so any time I had a problem, I'd refer to him. I became tremendously impressed by his variety of skills, too. How resourceful he was. He became, Bob, something beyond a teacher in the simple sense. He became the kind of individual that I wanted to please by doing something that he felt worthwhile. His standards were very high.

ROBERT BROWN: What kind of work was he having you do?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Was he doing personally?

ROBERT BROWN: No, what kind of work was he having you do at this time?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Oh, whatever I wanted to do. I was making brooches and rings, and pins, and cufflinks, and boxes. Copper boxes, enameled or chased. I did my first chasing of metal up there.

ROBERT BROWN: Was there any talk of modern styles, or was it all really to try to master the techniques?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: No. He was tremendously interested, as a creative individual, in moving beyond, far beyond, the English influences that he'd seen and submitted to, more or less, as a student in England. But when he began to produce on his own—and if you ever get to Pittsburgh, you might find, in the University of Pittsburgh's collection somewhere, a football trophy which Claytor did, maybe—my memory of it is about 14 to 16 inches high. [00:14:01] A silver loving cup thing, but totally original in design, although it had, more or less, a suggestion of the conventional shape. You know, the drinking cup.

ROBERT BROWN: Stemmed cup, a large cup.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: On a base, enlarged tremendously. But he did this. He did a lot of work for individuals. If you ever got around to prying around in Pittsburgh to find out something about his background, a

lot of his stuff is owned by Pittsburghers. This single big piece is one that you could get to readily, because it was given as a trophy to the University of Pittsburgh, or Carnegie Mellon, the first one to win the cup three times, which the University of Pittsburgh did. He was really a marvelous person, tremendous influence, whose, I think, contribution has been largely lost.

ROBERT BROWN: Was he, in his own day, pretty well-known outside of Pittsburgh?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: I don't think he bothered much about that.

ROBERT BROWN: He didn't exhibit or—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: No. As I said, he was a director of the Tiffany Foundation, and on their selection committee, which is how I managed to get a Tiffany fellowship. I was the only metal student. All the rest, as I said, were painters.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you stay with metalworking, then, for a while after you left—you left Carnegie about—what year was that?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: I graduated in 1932, and was fortunate, as you know, to begin teaching right away. [00:16:06] But to tell the truth, I had so much catching up on—because I was teaching in other fields—art history in particular, that I decided I'd spend a lot of time traveling, going to museums. I went up to Harvard for some summer sessions, three or four years. Then I got a fellowship to the University of Paris.

ROBERT BROWN: Was that just before the war?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: What was that like? Did you study art history there?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Well, I studied at the Institute of Art and Archeology. I took two courses, one in 19th-century French painting, and one in medieval art. These were incredibly difficult for me, because although I thought I knew enough French to handle this, I didn't, and required an awful lot of coaching. The opportunity to become acquainted with the Gothic style, and through this course, the evolution of the Gothic style, from Norman, Romanesque, or pre-Gothic, you know, through the early Gothic at Saint-Denis and Chartres, or in Notre Dame and so forth. Seeing these things firsthand, and with the people who really knew the history of the building, and then becoming interested enough in it myself to delve pretty thoroughly into the cathedral structure, plan, various growth and expansion, and the decoration, sculpture, and so forth. [00:18:17]

ROBERT BROWN: Did you take this mainly with your teaching in mind?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Sort of a to squeeze in [ph] your—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: It was a means to an end. I just wanted to be able to—time to become a better teacher. I didn't know enough about these things, really, to honestly present them, I felt, to students. I had taken all, Bob, the art history at Carnegie, but it was—I began there as an architect, so all of these non-technical courses were considered pretty perfunctory things. The French and the history of art were things you lived through to get into the drafting room, to general studies and all the rest.

ROBERT BROWN: What was it like in Paris when you were there? What are some of the leading impressions you remember?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: My impression, I think, was one of delight beyond belief at seeing things that I'd only seen in the books [laughs] previously, like walking up the grand staircase and seeing the *Victory of Samothrace* there at that landing, and the marvelous collections in every field. Sculpture—well, I suppose, in these days, the Metropolitan might equal the Louvre in Paris, and the Boston museum, I guess, would be pretty close in a number of fields. [00:20:14] But in those days, before there was as much collecting and giving to museums in the United States, the Louvre, for a young, impressionable kid, was really something to see. Whenever I wasn't in class and preparing material that I had to present, I was in the Louvre, or walking around Paris, the other museums, and—

ROBERT BROWN: You were married by then, weren't you?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yes, but I was unfortunately given only enough money to go myself. So my wife had to stay home. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Was she an artist also? Was she—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yeah, she was a painter, and a very good one. Unfortunately, she didn't get around to painting very much before she got married. Then it was a question of raising a family.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, you came back, then, and continued at Westminster—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: That's right.

ROBERT BROWN: —through the—but in the '30s, you would say, late '20s, Frederick Claytor was probably your leading—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yes. I continued to work with him, Bob, and in some of the archive material that you have, you'll see some of the things that I did, some of the catalogs of those Pittsburgh shows. I won some prizes and so on. They're illustrated, and there may be some things of Claytor's in some of those catalogs, too. The Associated Artists of Pittsburgh—I think I—did I give you a bunch of those?

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, we've got some of them. Did you enjoy being around Pittsburgh? It was familiar to you by then.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yes. Yes. [00:22:00] Particularly the Carnegie Institute. I'm not referring, now, to the Carnegie Institute of Technology, which is now Carnegie Mellon University, but the Carnegie Institute, which was endowed by Carnegie, and which was—consisted of a department of fine arts and a department of anthropology, and archeology, as I recall it, and a library. This was a cultural institution to serve Pittsburgh. That had been Carnegie's notion of it. He felt indebted to the community that, you know, had supported his early efforts as an industrialist. I think one of the tremendous recollections that I have of that are the series of international exhibitions of painting, organized by Homer Saint-Gaudens.

ROBERT BROWN: Homer Saint-Gaudens, yes.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Are those still continued? I don't—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, they've reopened them as biennials, evidently.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: They have? There must have been a tremendous amount of money lavished on those in the '20s and '30s, and probably the amount of money required to put an exhibition together today like that is impossible to get together. These, for the student that wanted to see something, for a period of a month or six weeks or whatever it was that these shows existed, you saw the finest painting to be found in the world. [00:24:10] I mean, English, French, German, Austrian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Russian. Truly international, and very, very catholic as far as its character was concerned. I saw my first Picasso there, for example, and my first Braque. You saw this tremendous span of influence shaping the thought and aspirations of painters in the '20s and '30s, which, after World War I, was a very alive developmental period. Saint-Gaudens made no effort to condition the character of the thing. He had nominating committees, and there was—from each country. France, for example, there were the Braques and the Picassos, and the Bernards [ph], but there were also the more traditional painters. I've forgotten the names of those fellows, because I didn't find them very exciting. The muddy color, the classical subject matter, and so forth. But I remember how tremendously excited I was by the modern stuff, which was new to me.

ROBERT BROWN: What do you suppose excited you about them? Their difference or—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Well, the fact that the arts are really a living thing, and they're not readily amenable to any kind of doctrinaire encasement or formulation. [00:26:04] Art, if it's meaningful, is constantly searching for new ways to find expression.

ROBERT BROWN: Was this something that Claytor would have instilled in you?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yeah. The notion that the skills are only a means to an end. The end really is, you're saying something, and if you're just repeating what somebody else has already said, probably quite well, why bother? So he was—on a search for form. He did constantly suggest that in natural form, somewhere—leaves, flowers, animals, movement, or the manifestation of life in nature, water—you could get tremendous sense of inspiration. As for music, he was a great lover of music, for example, and I hadn't heard any of the great classical composers much, in my boyhood. Again, Carnegie, where they had a fine department of music with a lot of first-rate student recitals, and a very, very fine department of drama, you could get a sort of secondary education just by watching the student plays. Two or three Shakespeares a year. All the great composers, and the student orchestra, or the student chamber orchestra, or the very student string quartets, and so forth. They were constantly performing. I went to all of these. I didn't miss a thing.

ROBERT BROWN: Westminster wasn't very far away, is that right?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Sixty-five or seventy miles.

ROBERT BROWN: In those days, you didn't think much of—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: No driving.

ROBERT BROWN: —going there? [00:28:00]

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: No, no. It was—no. Being young, the way you are, you don't think much of driving over the mountains on a snowy January night.

ROBERT BROWN: Then came—when World War II came, how did that affect your position, your teaching? Did you—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Well, my friends [laughs] my friends, many of my younger friends, my age—although I was, at this time, Bob, really too old to be thinking of this. I didn't want to miss all that action, either. [They laugh.]

ROBERT BROWN: For patriotism, or what was the motive?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Well, it was—yes, I suppose. Underneath, I'm a kind of 24-hour revolving patriot of sorts, with a considerable amount of belief in something beautiful and free about this country, and some awareness of the sacrifices that so many have made to give us things that are now taken casually.

ROBERT BROWN: At that time, was it obvious that there was a real gruesome enemy?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yes. Yes, there was, I think. In spite of the exaggerations of propaganda, you knew that there was something pretty dark and forbidding being unloosed there. I don't see how, frankly, there could have been an alternative to someone providing an opposition to the character of Hitler or Mussolini, or what they represented in terms of their treatment of—or their notion of the human condition. [00:30:03] So, I had a chance to accept a commission, and went overseas.

ROBERT BROWN: You were training—what was this, in the army, or the—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Army. I was in information and education. My function was to serve in various ways. I did a number of things. I wrote speeches for generals [laughs] for one thing. I wangled my way into a role in setting up the army universities in England and France.

ROBERT BROWN: These went on during the war?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: No, these were set up right at the end of the war, in Europe. The war was continuing in the Pacific, and the anticipation was that this vast body of troops would be a lar—a considerable number of them moved to the Far East. The problem was finding something for the men to do, the brainier, more talented, who would be the troublemakers if they became restive, because they'd be the ones who have the ideas. So these universities were set up, and they were marvelous institutions. As a matter of fact, I finally got a job teaching at both of them. The first one, at Shrivenham, in England, I taught history of architecture there. [00:32:03] Did I tell you about this before?

ROBERT BROWN: No.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: What I was able to do—if you think about it, the Romans occupied Britain, and there were a number of Roman excavations, one of the best known ones being at Bath. You know, it's a—but these were scattered over England, and I could teach history of architecture, and begin with the Roman occupation, and show a Roman building in Britain, and then buildings—oh, from the early eighth and ninth centuries, the first Roman-English Romanesque, or Norman. But then after, of course, the 11th century, the Norman influence was overriding in Britain. Anything the Normans learned, they brought to Britain, and a lot of architects, or master builders, came over from France.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you take the classes around?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Went to them. Yeah. My wife was showing me some pictures the other day of—first place I took them was to Avebury, which is the prehistoric monument that antedates Stonehenge. Then I took them to Stonehenge, and from Stonehenge to the early round temples, or churches, that the Templars built in the early 11th century. Some of the—for instance, at Shrivenham, which is about 65 or 70 miles west of London, where the army post where I was stationed was located, the village church there was begun in 1069. [00:34:07]

Now, keep in mind that's only three years after the conquest. The building had been little changed in the intervening years. They had propped it up here and there, and they'd installed a heating system, and had grading down the center to try to warm the place, and so forth. The building, essentially, in its architectural character, was the building that had been built between 1069 and about, I think, around 1130 or 1140, when it was finished. Not a big thing. Maybe it accommodated 250 or 300.

ROBERT BROWN: About how many students would you have in such a course?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Oh, I must—the course was quite popular after they heard that they could get on a bus and ride around, you know. The culmination of it, more or less, was three days in London, when we could see the churches, at the Wren, and earlier churches, and Saint Paul's. Unfortunately, the museums weren't open. There was one, the Ashmolean at Oxford, and we went there and dusted off those masses of Greek and Roman sculpture that had been brought back by English merchants and gentlemen who'd made the grand tour and picked up their stuff, to bring it back to England.

ROBERT BROWN: Were the students pretty serious, or were they—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: The students were the best students I ever had as a teacher, and I can't imagine any superior to them. [00:36:00] They were dead earnest about everything. Actually, we had, due to the selection process, Bob, maybe about the upper one-tenth of the upper one-tenth on the army general intelligence scores. Magnificent bunch of people. A surprising number of them turned out exceptionally well. They became architects, or they came home and went to school and became teachers. For a while, I kept in touch with them. Then, over the years, I sort of—

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So you taught there, and then—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: —thinned out.

ROBERT BROWN: —where else did you teach? You said you taught at—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Biarritz, [laughs] in—

ROBERT BROWN: How was that? A resort. You didn't have the same—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Well, it was a great place. Again, I taught history of architecture.

ROBERT BROWN: With travels?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yeah. In this instance, I found ways to get them up to the Dordogne, and by special arrangement, into some of the caves, which were closed, but which, with a little prying around in the villages and unearthing the people who knew them, and who would go in—who knew about the caves, and knew them thoroughly, and had been perhaps laborers with the French archeological teams, and fine arts teams, that had gone in there, and knew—took me in. [00:38:00] I took the students in to see these.

ROBERT BROWN: The French were pretty good with the Americans? I mean, they got along pretty well?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Uh, yes. This was in that happy period, sort of honeymoon period, when we weren't —hadn't become offensive. The French are—have you traveled in France?

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Well, you know. French are peculiar people. I find them delightful, but they are pretty shrewd, and pretty self-centered, and pretty aggressive, too, but so are we, I guess. It was a very happy, happy period.

ROBERT BROWN: How long were you in this teaching?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Well, not long enough. Then I was taken to—or sent to Frankfurt, in Germany, our headquarters, and became kind of a speechwriter, really. When somebody needed some sort of speech or article or something, I did it.

ROBERT BROWN: Was that work that—was that very satisfying work, or—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: There wasn't enough of it, really.

ROBERT BROWN: Was that about the time of the trials in Nuremberg?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yeah. I got a—received permission to go down there and cover the trials. I spent about six weeks in Nuremberg, and saw Joachim von Ribbentrop and Field Marshal Von Keitel tried, and saw that tremendous assemblage of so-called war criminals in the box. [00:40:04] Goering and Speer, and [inaudible], Hess.

ROBERT BROWN: You were to report on them for the army newspapers?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: The general idea was that I, sooner or later, I would procure some kind of a story, which nobody ever bothered to ask for, and all I got out of it were the notes and a lot of impressions that finally just disappeared, too, over the years. But it was a remarkable experience that I wish, now, I had been a little more careful in documenting.

ROBERT BROWN: Then, after that, you were mustered out, or you were sent back?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: I came home in—

ROBERT BROWN: About 1946 or something?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: —forty-six. And then—see, the next year—I returned to teaching at Westminster. The next year, someone at Carnegie called me down and told me that they had arranged an appointment with a Mrs. Vanderbilt Webb in New York, who had a craft school that—and she had an acting director, Frances Wright Caroe, who was a daughter of Frank Lloyd Wright, but she wanted a permanent director, and someone with a background in education, and would I go up and talk to her? Well, I went up to talk to Mrs. Webb, and found her an engaging woman. [00:42:06] As a matter of fact, I think, Bob, one of the most impressive—to use a popular term for describing people, a really beautiful person in all respects. She seemed to like me, and I certainly liked her. This first meeting was in her office at America House, which was then on Madison Avenue somewhere. Forty-four Madison, or somewhere along there.

ROBERT BROWN: And America House was then a gallery and offices?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: And sales room, and so forth. And a pretty vital kind of a place. Due in large part, I think, to the energies of Frances Caroe, and a lady who might still be alive, and could tell you an awful lot about this, named Florence Eastmead. Have you ever run across this name?

ROBERT BROWN: No.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Well, I think she's still alive, and for years, she was Mrs. Webb's and Mrs. Caroe's right-hand person. She became director of America House after Mrs. Caroe died. Boy, I'll tell you, you should see her. Bill Wolfen [ph], who could set this up for you, he could locate her.

ROBERT BROWN: What was she like?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: She was a charming, knowledgeable woman, tremendously interested in the American craftsman, and getting its stuff out, and very effective at it, as was Frances Caroe. [00:44:00] Totally different in temperament from Mrs. Caroe, who was extreme—like her father, extremely active, opinionated. Mrs. Eastmead was, I think, possessed a great deal more sense of public relations, and skill in dealing on a personal level with people. As effective as Mrs. Caroe, but in different ways. Mrs. Caroe was the driving force, I felt. Mrs. Eastmead, certainly the support and the tempering influence on Mrs. Caroe's manner.

ROBERT BROWN: What did they have in mind for the school? They suddenly wanted to have—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: The school—this was an interesting concept that's been lost. This is something that I deeply regret. The idea, Bob, was that this wouldn't be a school in the usual sense. It would be a school where the training was professional, and professional in a sense that the students would prepare designs which would be reviewed by Mrs. Caroe and the America House jury. I think Mrs. Caroe and Mrs. Webb, and Mrs. Eastmead were largely this jury, but they called in other people, too. Then the students would send their things to America House on consignment, where they would be placed on sale. The presumption was that you found out directly and quickly the quality of marketability in an item, in terms of its design, its sense of usefulness to a person. [00:46:06] Because I think, in connection with the crafts, you tend to think of their being a useful form of art. We've strayed from that to the degree now that we think of the crafts as being extended to the point where you only have to look at them. [They laugh.] I admit that's part of the pleasure, but part of the pleasure I get out of looking at this thing of Nick Ridgett's [ph] is not only to see in it a kind of a sculptural form, but also to see that it's a branch vase. But anyhow—

ROBERT BROWN: That was—the school, didn't it also have a facility? Was it still at Dartmouth?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: We moved from Dartmouth to Alfred, and from Alfred to Rochester.

ROBERT BROWN: Did they ask you to take it on after this interview?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yeah. Well, not immediately. I still had a number of people to meet. [Laughs.] I went up to, and spent a weekend with—at Mrs. Webb's place at Garrison, New York, and there I met Mrs. Caroe and Mrs. Eastmead, and some other people who I don't remember, but upon whom Mrs. Webb leaned, I guess, for advice. Then I went to Alfred, where they were moving the school, and was interviewed by the president, and by the dean of women, with whom Mrs. Webb had established some rapport, and that woman named Elizabeth Geen, who, the last time I heard from her, she was dean at Goucher College, Baltimore. So I moved to Alfred. [00:48:00] The program was pretty loosely organized. Although, organizationally, it was a part of Alfred University, and considered so, it was financially autonomous, and academically so, too. So I hired everybody, and—

ROBERT BROWN: What did she want? She didn't think she had the teachers she needed?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: No.

ROBERT BROWN: Was there a shortage of—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: The teaching staff had more or less been employed as a consequence of their appearing in New York at America House and trying to sell stuff. I had the chance to begin, then, to build what I think finally emerged as really quite a distinguished group of practitioners, all of whom were real professionals.

ROBERT BROWN: But before that, you had the impression that Mrs. Webb and the others simply accepted—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: They just weren't very knowledgeable about education, and that's why they hired me, frankly.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm. What sort of things were they showing at America House when you first went there? These would have been Americans who weren't that aware of contemporary European work, for example?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Tremendous range of—I think probably pretty high-quality stuff, because Mrs. Webb had made the acquaintance of Dave Campbell, about whom I told you, later. Dave was a remarkable guy, too. Tremendous story be told about him, I think.

ROBERT BROWN: The League of New Hampshire Craftsmen?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: League of New Hampshire Arts and Crafts. Because Dave is—Bob, sooner or later, what you can do, I think, is tie together these various influences. [00:50:07] The Cravers, the Campbells, the Eastmeads, the Caroes, the Webbs, the Claytors, the Pooloses, and see how this thing really came together, so to speak, in the early—

ROBERT BROWN: But before you stepped in, you had the impression that they were showing sort of things almost at random, or rather whatever things—designs were sent in that they liked?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yes. You see, one of the problems was letting people—finding out where these people were producing this stuff. Allen Eaton knew a lot about the Appalachian stuff. That was well-known. Dave had located some people he knew in New Hampshire, some weavers and woodcarvers, and so forth.

ROBERT BROWN: But generally, they were pretty—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Potters.

ROBERT BROWN: —scattered and rather isolated?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: —scattered. There were some potters out in Cleveland and so forth. These people gradually—after the word spread that there was such a place, and people became interested and they'd come to New York, and see what was there, and want to submit stuff and so forth. Very often, it was done then by slides, if a person was a distance. Mrs. Caroe's emphasis was on—I think absolutely in the right direction. First, original stuff. No copying. Original stuff. High quality, technically. High quality in terms of design. And marketable. [00:52:00] To be done at a price that permitted its transfer from the maker to the user. This meant no $600 pots. It meant things like cookie jars and lamp bases, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Fairly homely forms. I mean, in terms of use.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Sense and—yeah. Useful. Not homely in—you know.

ROBERT BROWN: No, I didn't mean that.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: The sort of thing that would—the way—I think the approach might have been influenced by the concept of the Scandinavia. The weavings you hung on walls or in windows, and the bowls you put flowers in, and the—that notion that this was stuff that became a part of your intimate—your life.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, for the school, what did they ideally want you to eventually produce in students?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Whatever we could.

ROBERT BROWN: Still pretty unexplored terrain?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Unexplored. It was a question of our finding our way.

ROBERT BROWN: At Alfred, were you given much in the way of facilities? What was the setup there?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: In term—marvelous. In terms of what was then the state-of-the-art, so to speak—we didn't have an awful lot of space, but what we had was the best.

ROBERT BROWN: Weren't you in an old carriage house?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Old carriage house, yes. I think that—at this particular moment, Cranbrook was teaching metal and crafts, and textiles, and some really terrific people out there. [00:54:00] Maija Grotell in ceramics, and, oh that weaver. I've forgotten her name. It's right on the tip of my tongue.

ROBERT BROWN: Marianne—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: —Strengell. Yeah. And a fellow named Thomas.

ROBERT BROWN: Dick Thomas.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Dick Thomas.

ROBERT BROWN: Metalworking.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Metalworking. First-rate stuff. But their approach was less in terms of this emphasis on productivity. We were interested—our goal was not to turn out teachers, or perhaps even designers, in the sense that we'd feed them into Reed & Barton, or Towle, or Castleton china, but to set up people, as we've been able to do, that have a shop and produce, and sell their stuff. The concept was that America House would be the market—our trial marketing area. And it worked.

ROBERT BROWN: Cranbrook, in contrast, they were more precious, or they were more—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: More precious. Far more precious.

ROBERT BROWN: Doing things as almost an art?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: I hired a couple of people from Cranbrook, but I had to give up on them. Then I turned to the Scandinavians, to the Norwegians and Danes, and Finns.

ROBERT BROWN: Where that tradition of marketing and production was already in place.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: I'll tell you what—back in those days, when you looked at the Norwegian craft magazine *Bonyet* [ph], or the Danish *Dansk Kunst Haandvaerk*, you saw the things that these people were producing in the living rooms, in dining rooms, and hanging on the walls, curtains. [00:56:11] Marimekko prints. You know, stuff used. And Orrefors, unlike the Steuben people, aren't producing things for museums or the rich. I have some Referrers glass back there, little sherry glasses, like this. Unfortunately, the sherry pitcher, I broke.

ROBERT BROWN: Mrs. Webb, she went along with this?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: This was her entire notion. She said—as a matter of fact, what she said, Bob, was, "What I do not want is a school for American craftsmen to become an art school." That was something I thoroughly believed in, too. That if it just became another art school, why have it? But if it did serve this unique function, preparing people for professional lives in the field, that was quite another thing. I think Cranbrook was superb. Physically, of course, a tremendous establishment, designed by Saarinen. And with Carl Milles, and Strengell, and Maija Grotell, you couldn't dream of having better people. But what happened, finally, was they were in a precious little environment and became precious. Mrs. Webb's notion was that this be active and contributory. [00:58:03] Boy, I'll tell you, we're doing an awful lot of talking, and we're still way back in there.

ROBERT BROWN: How do you suppose she came about that? Because she, being a rich woman herself, do you

think she was protective of that?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Very interesting story here, too. This goes back to the early and middle-1930s, or maybe a little bit in advance of that, when Mrs. Webb, Mrs. Franklin Roosevelt, a neighbor of hers, and Anne Morgan got together to talk about setting up some sort of unit in the Hudson River Valley, Upper Hudson River Valley, around Dutchess County and Putnam County, where the skills of people that they knew could be employed so that these people could produce something that might be salable. So they set up a thing called Val-Kill Workshops—have you ever heard of this—where they made furniture and ceramics. And then I guess Mrs. Webb assumed responsibility for trying to find out how to market these, and at first I think they took them to bazaars, and that kind of thing, and got articles in the local papers, and at teas, and all that sort of stuff. [01:00:05] Then Mrs. Webb was caught up by the possibility of this. It was from her—if you know something about the early history of the New Deal and the Roosevelt administration, you also know of Mrs. Roosevelt's, and some of the brain trusters around Roosevelt, were interested in the sociological aspects of this, of setting up communities in Appalachia.

ROBERT BROWN: Resettlement programs.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yes, where the people would be encouraged to do the quilting and the woodcarving, and the ceramic, the jug-making, pottery-making, and so forth, that traditionally musical instruments, and extending over into things like folk dancing, or reexamination of their language, and the parts of it that really went back across overseas, and perhaps Elizabethan era and so on. Well, Mrs. Roosevelt was interested in this, but Mrs. Webb, I guess, assumed—or her part, the extension of this into this other area of developed—trying to find out, one, if there could be a craft tradition that could function in a more modern way, and if so, to set it up. And she provided funding.

ROBERT BROWN: So by the—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: I'm beginning to wear out here [laughs].

ROBERT BROWN: —the '40s, then, she was ready to set up a school, get this underway, wasn't she?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: She did, yeah. [01:02:00] Right after the war—I think the school was opened in 1946, in a kind of, you know—

ROBERT BROWN: Start at Dartmouth, I think.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Dartmouth, yes. Actually, it took off at Alfred, but then it matured and found a real home at Rochester, under Mark Ellingson. Uh, we through?

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[1982 Feb 16 - cassette side A]

ROBERT BROWN: We're continuing tapes with Harold Brennan, in Sunderland, Massachusetts, and this is February 16, 1982. We've said something already now about how you came to go to the School for American Craftsmen. When you went, it was in Alfred, wasn't it, Alfred, New York, still?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Alfred, New York.

ROBERT BROWN: You talked a little bit about the facilities you had. Rather small. But maybe we could say a bit more. What was the faculty when you came there? Was it a combination of some of the brand-new people brought in from Europe, plus some that had been carried over?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: The faculty, when I arrived, Bob, were largely, to use a phrase that I should attribute to Frances Wright Caroe, about whom I hope you'll one day learn more—the daughter of Frank Lloyd Wright, and the then-director of America House in New York, who said of the faculty, "We hired them because they just walked in off the street and asked for jobs." It wasn't a strong faculty. A bunch of very sincere and dedicated people, but neither inspired teachers nor highly competent professionals in their fields. At the risk of repeating myself, I'll say that the school was housed in a carriage house that had been refurbished, remodeled, with Mrs. Webb's financing the project, and Mrs. Caroe's direction of it. [00:02:11] Mrs. Caroe had made the acquaintance of a couple of ladies on the Alfred staff. One, Elizabeth Geen, who was dean of women, and another, Margaret Flowers, who was director of admissions. They'd helped her adjust to the community and get a lot of things done, because Mrs. Caroe would spend a couple of days a week there, coming from New York. Those days, you could get there easily on the Erie, the Weary Erie [laughs], which ran from New York through Alfred Station and on, finally winding up in Chicago.

ROBERT BROWN: About three days later. [Laughs.]

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: It wasn't bad getting from Alfred Station to New York. I'd get on the sleeper, and wake up in Hoboken, I think it was. [Laughs.] You know. You'd stay in the pullman.

ROBERT BROWN: Well Mrs. Caroe, then, was director at America House.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: She was director of America House, and really the lively spirit at Alfred. As a matter of fact, I think her contribution to the development of the crafts was rather significant. She was a good friend of Mrs. Webb's. Mrs. Webb liked her, and Mrs. Webb was a pretty selective person. She didn't like everybody [laughs] but she admired Mrs. Caroe's marketing sense, her taste, which was excellent, her commitment to the crafts and to America House. [00:04:11] Florence Eastmead was Mrs. Caroe's assistant. That's why it's so imperative, Bob, that you contact Florence Eastmead, who's elderly and may be chair-bound or whatever now. So, you're going to have to consider it your mission to—

ROBERT BROWN: Go get her?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: —get to her soon.

ROBERT BROWN: Maybe we can talk about the backgrounds of both of these, and how they operated.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Anyhow, I met Mrs. Caroe when I was interviewed in New York by Mrs. Webb, at America House, a little cubbyhole of an office up at 52nd and Madison, as I recall, or thereabouts. And I was impressed. I hadn't seen America House before. I'd heard about it and read about it, but hadn't seen it. It was really an extraordinary place, in view of the quality of the stuff, Bob, and the way in which it was displayed, and considering all the problems, remarkably well-organized.

ROBERT BROWN: What were the problems?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: But it was well-organized, but nothing in the arts is really well-organized, as you know. People, ordinarily, in the arts, aren't, by nature—don't think and act that way. All things considered, it was a remarkably coherent operation, and it was Mrs. Caroe's job—Mrs. Caroe was kind of a driven person. In this respect, she was a great deal like Dave, Dave Campbell. [00:06:03] She knew quite well what she wanted to do. Long hours, visits to craftsmen, painstaking hours spent not only talking with them and taking some of the things they would bring in, but also giving them suggestions, what she thought people came in there asking for, that they might make, given this battery of skills that they had. Well, as you can tell from what I'm saying, she is the sort of person who is capable of making things move. She would come to Alfred a couple of days a week. She was in charge of the remodeling of the house that was being fixed up for me there. I wrote and told her what we wanted, my wife did, so forth, and she did all of this. Person of extraordinary energy. Although I never met her father, she must have been a great deal like her father. Rather certain—rather confident of the wisdom of what she was doing.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have a chance to discuss things with her, though?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Oh, yes. Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: What did you see—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: After we locked horns initially once or twice, then we got into a very fine working relationship. She was, I thought, very, very understanding. I had—nearly everybody that I knew that knew Mrs. Caroe also always talked to me about how difficult she was. I never found her difficult. I found her competent, and not easily taken off track. [00:08:02] I could see how this might be viewed as, you know, ego or obstinacy by other people, but I never found her that way at all. We worked very harmoniously together for a number of years, and in a way that I think was of extraordinary benefit to our students and faculty, and to America House. That is, both ends of the equation were operating. We sent our stuff up there.

ROBERT BROWN: I see. I was going to ask what the connection with the house would be.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: We would sell $15[,000]-$20,000 worth of stuff a year. The students—

ROBERT BROWN: So that was the main outlet, in the students—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: That's right. The students found out what it was like to work not producing *objet d'art*, but something that was to go on a shelf with a price on it. Presumably a work of art in search of an understanding buyer. That's all disappeared now.

ROBERT BROWN: And Mrs. Caroe had an idea of what they needed? You said earlier—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yes. Oh, yes. She would come—after I was up there full-time, she would come once a

month for two days. We'd get the students together, and she'd tell them what people were buying. You know, there's a seasonal kind of buying, and you have to be in tune with this. Then there's not only the seasonal aspect of the thing that's bought. There's a fantastic amount of all kinds [laughs] of retail transactions that occur from late April through the wedding season in June, and stuff that moves between the first of November and the 20th of December. [00:10:00] If you've lost those two periods, you've lost a lot. Well, she was keen and perceptive.

ROBERT BROWN: Weren't you—or the teachers—worried that she was going to corrupt these young art students?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: No. The people that we had were committed to the notion that we were preparing professionals, not high-quality dilettantes with their own battery of skills, but people who were going to enrich the life of the society by producing stuff and getting it out there, Bob, which is a secret. This making stuff and hanging it around the walls this way, the way you find in a lot of artist studios, or potter studios, or printmakers, or whatever else—well, there are a lot of—there are too many art schools in this country, and too many college and university art departments where the faculty member feels that he's leading *the* creative life by showing in some little, dinky town show or regional show once a year. Well, our notion, at the time—Mrs. Caroe's, Mrs. Webb's, and Mrs. Eastmead's, and mine, and the rest of the people in this enterprise, Dave's—who you know, after all, he put the New Hampshire League of Arts and Crafts together, and this was a sales outfit. It was taking stuff from the craftsmen's home, at whatever level, from potholders to pots, right? And getting them out there where people could see them and buy them, and the [00:12:00] craftsmen were self-supporting. They weren't living on grants, or they weren't living on faculty salaries. They were producing professionals.

ROBERT BROWN: So you had pretty much the same idea?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: We had absolutely that philosophy.

ROBERT BROWN: And what did you—at Alfred, what did you see needed to be done? In terms of getting it started.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: What needed—first of all, to be totally frank, I needed a lot of education myself about this, and Mrs. Caroe furnished it, and Dave did, too. The notion, which I could comprehend readily enough, that art was a process of doing, and not a process of showing. Doing and disposing. Doing and disposing. It's nice. Doing and disposing, and not doing—just doing. We had a station wagon, and we'd load the station wagon, and occasionally a student would drive a van with larger items, furniture, for example. We had a constant gallery to show in New York, and the students had a chance to understand something about the marketing of art. I'm not talking in a crass sense, Bob, about this. There's a sense of marketing that you're, I'm sure, totally familiar with, that I think is pretty crass. Very visible in New York and lots of other communities. I'm not talking about that, the merchandising of art in this fashion, but rather the effort made to get the work of the artist within range, in price and availability, of the person who wanted to acquire something. [00:14:28] Now, it just so happened that we believed—I began to believe this in the '30s, because I was pretty familiar what had happened in Finland and Sweden, and so forth. That what was going to happen was, as industrialization and conformities forced by our mode of life gradually shrank individual's choices, that the only way that they could, in a sense, retain their identity is having some things near them that they understood and enjoyed, and then had a rapport with an individual that they might know, if not personally, then by reputation. I remember, one time, a very choice description by Jack Prip, of what happens between the producing artist and the, shall I say, creative buyer. We were at a meeting, a conference, in Philadelphia, and Jack and I were speakers. [00:16:08] Jack, of course, was, I think, one of their—along with Frans Wildenhain and a few other guys like that, folks out there, among the most truly—Wendell Castle, Al Paley—among the most truly creative people I've ever known. Bob, if you don't get close enough to these guys, the ones that are still living, to know this, you're going to be missing a lot, too. Wendell Castle does beautiful stuff. Look at Wendell's drawings sometime. I don't know whether you've ever seen any of Frans Wildenhain's drawings or not. Superb stuff. Well, Jack, at this meeting, was talking about the creative person, and what the individual who acquires the work of a creative person has. He said, "When I hold up a silver bowl that I've made," he said, "most of it is me. Part of it," he says, "is the silver. Part of it is the skills. But those are meaningless, the material and the skills, unless they're brought together in terms of an insight that we call design." I'm paraphrasing it freely, but this is the sense of what he said. He said, "The person who acquires this acquires a part of me, a part of my soul, and whatever understandings, whatever understandings I've managed to develop in my—a lifetime where I've been searching for things." [00:18:04] Isn't that great? Well, what I could see back then was that, as we became more institutionalized, more conformity in the things we had available to us, as fads and styles moved in, that what was happening was that there was a tremendous amount of opportunity for insecurities of all sorts to develop in people. But some people, by putting some things in their environment that they understood and appreciated, established a kind of a security, area of security, where, when they came through the door and into an environment that they understood and had shaped, they had something. Whenever I turn on that TV, Bob, what I do is surrender myself to this box, right? But I'm surrendering myself to that fabric, Leroy Wilsey's [ph].

ROBERT BROWN: Because you've shaped all this assembly?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yes. They have [inaudible]. You ever meet Hank Gernhardt, Syracuse?

ROBERT BROWN: Hmm. So, your point is, in a way, that's why you're saying the students—the school wasn't abdicating its artistic side by thinking of marketing?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: No. As a matter of fact, they were justifying their existence. [00:20:00] Now all of that's gone, to my intense regret. That notion—a lot of craftsmen now think of themselves as artists. Well—

ROBERT BROWN: The man you mentioned earlier, with one show a year.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: —yeah. In the Italian Renaissance, a guy—an artist thought of himself as a worker, satisfying something that the society required. When you go to Mexico and you see those artisans, and you see the work in that marvelous museum in Mexico City, you realize that that society couldn't have existed as medieval society could, and classic society could not, and Renaissance society could not, without that marvelous collaboration of the craftsman, the priest, the warrior. The craftsman, just as much as the priest and the warrior, or the governor, defined the society. As a matter of fact, everything has been washed away, except the daggers and the pots, and the cloaks and—right? It's all gone, the priests and the chants, and all the rest, but you can still see the pot.

ROBERT BROWN: See the crafted object.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yeah. There were a certain number of ceremonial and symbolic objects made, but when you go into that museum in Mexico City, to cite an example, what you see, Bob, are things essential to the society that have survived. Okay, this is what we had in mind. And not—we didn't fancy ourselves all that great, but this we conceived as our mission. [00:22:03]

ROBERT BROWN: Were you taking hold of something that was really fairly small? It had been briefly at Dartmouth. It had just—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: It was the most disorganized place you could possibly imagine.

ROBERT BROWN: Wasn't too much to the school when you came onboard.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: No, except idea. Mrs. Webb, Mrs. Caroe, and the idea. But the implementing end was a disorganized mess.

ROBERT BROWN: Huh. The teachers themselves weren't much of a factor in this at that time, the ones you found?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: No. As a matter of fact, I had a chance to hire nearly everybody.

ROBERT BROWN: There were a few who carried on they'd gotten off the street.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Who were some of the early ones you got?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Jack Prip, for example, and Tage Frid. We had an awful time keeping those people. As a matter of fact, we could almost spend an afternoon talking about all the machinations required to—they came, believe it or not, on student visas. Our job was to get them admitted, you know, because there was about a 10-year pileup of applications for visas in all the Scandinavian countries. I hired Fred Meyer [ph], for example. Do you know Fred?

ROBERT BROWN: Yes. How did you learn of him?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: I went out to Cranbrook, to see the place. I had always—well, I had a thing about Carl Milles at the time, the sculptor.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, you mean you—you liked his work?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: I liked his work. [00:24:00] At the time, the only fountain of Milles, for which he was celebrated, was at Cranbrook. It was a part of a fountain that he'd done in Stockholm, the Orpheus fountain, and not the central figure, just the ring of maidens around. I wanted to see this and photograph it. And I met a painter—name begins with Z.

ROBERT BROWN: Sepeshy?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Zoltan Sepeshy. In a casual conversation, I said, "You know, I might be interested in a designer, a person to teach design, if he's the right sort of a person. He's going to have to teach design to craftsmen in a very realistic fashion."

ROBERT BROWN: By that you meant what, very practical?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: First place, he would be dealing with people who were shapers of material, and who had to think of design only in such a term. I'm not sure that I'm making myself clear, but there's a difference between teaching design, where you subdivide space and you arrange patches of color—an approach that might be suitable, say, with textile designers. But how about potters and woodworkers, and metalsmiths, and so forth? This person is going to have to be very broad-gauged, the way they think. They're going to have to formulate a program like which doesn't now exist. [00:26:05] That's one of the things, by the way, that Bart Hayes [ph] had. Bart Hayes had one of the most marvelous three-dimensional design programs at Andover that I've ever seen, at that level certainly. I saw the same thing later a few other places. I think, for a while, we had one going, too. Anyhow, the—I'll tell you, a guy that could have done a wonderful job of teaching three-dimensional design, if he cared to, would have been Frans Wildenhain. Frans could do most anything. He was a marvelous painter, draftsman, potter.

ROBERT BROWN: This person would have to take people who perhaps had never thought so abstractly before? Is that not the right word—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: That's one end. That's one end of it. On the other hand, there's a guy who understands the role that design plays in pottery, as opposed to design in the poster, or—

ROBERT BROWN: And he'd have to be able to cover that whole frame?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yeah, and in surroundings that he would have to largely create. We had the money to set up the place, but there was no existing program that was worth a hoot.

ROBERT BROWN: So did Sepeshy then—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: These kids were being taught by some gal that I fired the next year over in the School of Art and Design. Miserable person. Miserable person. She had a big bosom. She had a big bosom, and a lot of personality, but no brains, and no ability. But anyhow, Sepeshy said, "I have, I think, a great guy." [00:28:00] I said, "Well, why don't I talk to him?" He said, "That would be easy enough." I stayed overnight. I hadn't intended to. I stayed overnight and talked to Fred Meyer the next day. Fred was interested. We brought Fred. He has been terrific. Have you interviewed Fred yet?

ROBERT BROWN: I talked with him.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Fred was a marvelous teacher of design. Fred and Olen Rossen [ph]. I think he's at Goucher College now, maybe, teaching. Fred, and Olen Rassen, and Frans Wildenhain, and Tage, Fred, and Wendell Castle. [Laughs.] And Jack Prip, and a guy named Alex Sands [ph], a Danish jeweler, and Anne Marie von Strokenstrom [ph], a Swedish weaver, and—oh, what's the weaver I brought from Norway? Well, the reason for bringing these people in, Bob, is that they were a generation and a half ahead of us. I felt that we could make a giant leap by capturing all that they knew [laughs] as fast as—you know. We'd make a quantum leap if we could shake them loose from what they knew. Because otherwise, we'd have to build it slowly and whatever. Find the best, bring them in. Well, most of them were happy and stayed. Hans Christensen, for example. [00:30:00] And then Al Paley.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Much later.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Then, through Margret Craver, we set up a summer workshop, and Handy and Harman put up the money to bring some really big people from Europe, like Baron Fleming and Reginald Hill and so on. So what we collected in Rochester there was a tiny little school of about 50 people, and about 10 faculty. One teacher for every five students. But really a surpassing—

ROBERT BROWN: It took you only a couple—two or three years to assemble many of these people? Because you were only in Alfred for a couple years.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Less than that.

ROBERT BROWN: You left Alfred fairly soon, with Rochester—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Two years.

ROBERT BROWN: —seemed a better place to be?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Well, yes, because we were, in a sense, intruders in Alfred. While, astonishingly, I managed to get along well with a lot of people, they liked me personally but disliked the presidents of the school there. I think a real, in a sense, compliment to me came when the news of the school came to be known, and move to Rochester. The acting dean a fellow named Burgett [ph] came over. I had made a couple of—given a couple of lectures to the faculty and to the student body, and I volunteered to teach some portions of a required course in history of art, particularly in a field where I had some special opportunity. [00:32:04] I don't know whether you know about it. I had a Carnegie fellowship to the University of Paris. Did I ever tell you this?

ROBERT BROWN: You've mentioned it, but only in passing. And there, you studied—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Well, yeah. So I knew some interesting things about architecture and l'oeil [ph] de France, and in particular, the development of structure in medieval building from late Romanesque through early Gothic. The development of the basic elements, of pointed arch, of flying buttress.

ROBERT BROWN: Which would have been an interesting aspect for those people at Alfred.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Engineering.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: It just so happened that I had been interested in a couple of trips to Italy, and pursued the work of an Italian architect named Alberti, who was a profound influence, because he was among the first to write. You know, publish.

ROBERT BROWN: A very seminal figure in the Renaissance.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yeah. So, when these things came up, why, I lectured.

ROBERT BROWN: So there was plenty of good liaison between you, personally, and the rest of the school.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yeah. The dismay came through the presence there of a really good going program in ceramics that—and the New York State College of Ceramics felt, in a sense properly, I guess, that this was their thing, and we were invading their turf. True enough. But I found it impossible to get on friendly terms with two or three of the key people in the College of Ceramics. [00:34:05] The dean, another Irishman named McMahon, and I got along famously. When the word came that we were going to move to Rochester, Dean Burgett came over to my house one evening. We were sitting on the front porch. He asked if he could speak to me privately. My wife went inside. He asked me if there was any chance of my changing my mind. He said he was acting dean, and he'd be happy to vacate the job if I would stay at Alfred. Well, this was sort of heartening, because I had tried with all the decency I could muster to bridge this unhappy situation where I recognized it, and since we were indeed intruders. They felt threatened, and they had a right to, because our people were beginning to win prizes and shows where their people weren't winning. One of their star students at the time was Bob Turner. I think Bob was getting his master's degree, maybe, about this time. And Bob was a terrific guy. I remember some of his earlier things. For some reason or other, I don't hear much about him now, nor—you don't hear much about the faculty there, or what they produce. They dropped back there. But you know—

ROBERT BROWN: He felt close to you at the time? Turner, for example, or you knew a good deal of him?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: No, I just knew and admired his work, and met him a few times and told him so, but we never became close at all. [00:36:06] I enjoyed that experience at Alfred. They were really extremely nice people, except it was a very parochial and provincial atmosphere. I felt that we would be doing something for the students if we got out of there. Also, we would be moving to an institution with a president who was a terrific money-raiser, who was interested in us, was going to build us a new building. He said, "I already have $500,000," and he said, "Mrs. Webb said she'd put up the other [$]500,000." So, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: What was his name?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Mark Ellingson.

ROBERT BROWN: At the University of Rochester?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Rochester Institute of Tech—

ROBERT BROWN: Rochester Institute of Technology, excuse me.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: I'll tell you, Mark Ellingson is a terrific guy. He's still alive, retired. When he became

president at Rochester Institute of Technology, it had an endowment of, I think, $270,000 or something like that, assets of maybe [$]800[,000] or [$]900,000. When he retired, he left an $85 or $90 million campus, on 1,300 acres, a student body of 8,000 or 10,000, 12,000, depending on how you count the drifters and so forth. The figures on the endowment were always given on book value. So whatever [$]80 million—anyhow, when he vacated the presidency, I think the Rochester Institute of Technology was 62nd among the some 2,200 institutions of higher learning in the United States in endowment. [00:38:19]

ROBERT BROWN: Hmm. How had you gotten to know him? When you were at Alfred?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: He came down to interview me when this thing was under review. He came down, and a guy named Leo Smith, who was director of educational administration. We sat out in the yard there, back of what was then the president's residence in Alfred, and they asked me if I thought that I'd like to come to Rochester. They wanted to talk about the school, and Mrs. Webb had met with them. The intermediary had been a fellow named Lou Wilson, who was then a commissioner of higher education, or commissioner of education, in New York. Wilson had once headed a department at the Rochester Institute of Technology, before moving on to Albany. So, Mrs. Webb knew Wilson. Wilson admired Mark. He brought them together in New York. Ellison came down and talked to me. Everybody liked everybody else. Mark said, "We will do something for you. You'll have a place to grow. We'd like to have you. Would you like to come?" [Laughs.] I said, "Well, I find this very attractive." [00:40:00] Because I had felt that our students, once they were finished with the school—[laughs] which was an indeterminate time, because in those days, our problem was not getting the kids to come to school, but to leave. They wanted to work all night. Can you believe that?

ROBERT BROWN: It was just part of that [inaudible]?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Our problem was to get them out and get the place locked, because unless you can do that, you can't clean it, you can't have a really accurate idea of what is going on, and what kind of materials and supplies you have, because somebody is using them. You thought you had it at six o'clock one night, but the following morning, at eight o'clock, it will be gone, because someone had chewed it up. Anyhow, this is a kind of vitality that we had. When we moved, I had a chance to—we moved into a building that had been remodeled for our purpose, and was nice. An old building, but nice. And Fred, by the way, was a sort of consultant on this project. He designed—we wanted to tie the thing together with color, so that there'd be identification of areas by color, and one would lead into another, and all this stuff. Fred was in charge of that. When we came up to Alfred, we had a chance to continue to build the faculty, because we left some of the faculty behind. They owned houses, or—

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, some chose to stay on?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Not many, but a couple did, which suited me fine, because I was gung-ho for getting a group of people together that I hadn't inherited from anyone, and for whom, if they were successes or failures, I could take either the credit or the blame as the case might be. [00:42:21]

ROBERT BROWN: You wanted it to be your thing, really, is what—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yes, but not in the way that sounds. You know, not as an ego affair, but in terms of getting a group of highly competent people who could work together harmoniously, and who believed in a single thing, which was the importance of giving professional training, on a basis not in practice then, which—not in going three times a week for three hours, but living in a place. The academic courses were considered really peripheral to the professional training. A very relevant part of it, but in a basic sense, peripheral.

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[1982 Feb 16 - cassette side B]

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: So, we came to Rochester, and within a year or so, we had a marvelous movement into the life of the school. People in the Rochester community who appreciated our presence.

ROBERT BROWN: Now the school was mainly a technical school, with some liberal arts?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yes, general studies, as they called them, or liberal studies.

ROBERT BROWN: The community, had it had much exposure to design before then? Of course there was an active—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Not of this sort.

ROBERT BROWN: —art museum.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Not that sort. An art museum that I think was uncommon to—as art museums go, in the sense—it was the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery. It, Bob, was an uncommon kind of museum, in the sense it was a department, really, of the university, but kind of an arm's length relationship, and a little quarreling about money and how much—and see, the University of Rochester includes the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery, but it has its own department of art history in the College of Arts and Sciences, and that was a kind of a—then they had the Eastman School of Music.

ROBERT BROWN: Which was similarly at arm's length.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: That was a question of who gets the money.

ROBERT BROWN: That was in place, but still, they hadn't had a broad effect on—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: They had an astonishingly broad effect operating within a gallery framework. Gertrude Moore and Isabel Herdle were remarkable people. Have you met them?

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [00:02:00]

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Well, they were good. It had a real community orientation, and I think that that—I think the idea and the motivation was Gertrude's, but the active—the do-it part of it was Isabel's.

ROBERT BROWN: Her sister, right.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Who was younger, among other things. They both—well, I think their father had been a professor at the university or something.

ROBERT BROWN: He was the first director of the art gallery. [Laughs] It was in the family for—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: They had a feeling for the community, and unlike most art museums that present programs to the community in kind of a patronizing way, they didn't do it that way. They really tried to draw in the community with great sincerity. Among the best friends that I made, right off the bat, were Gertrude and Isabel, who said, "We need you. These people are great. We'll work together. We can transform the community." Which we did, by gosh. I think we did. Anyhow, they have a big regional show every spring, the Finger Lakes Exhibition. You have the records in your archives now. I don't have them, but you have some old catalogs there. If you go back over them, you'll find that sometimes, of the 30 awards, people in the School for American Craftsmen won 15 of them, half of them.

ROBERT BROWN: They were pleased by this?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Oh, sure.

ROBERT BROWN: Because you brought in a new professional—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Well, look. There are two ways of looking at this when you have a rival. You can see what he's doing to help you, or you can think he's a threat and try to run him out of town. [00:04:02] That's what happened, in a sense, at Alfred, as opposed to what happened in Rochester.

ROBERT BROWN: There, one thrived on the other. Even though there was a rivalry, it was helpful tension.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yeah. The art department at the University of Rochester had some creative courses, but these were sort of condescending.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, do you mean more in the model, say, of—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: It was dominated by the art historians. It's no secret to you about how art historians feel, or the old school, at least, about creative practitioners. They're all right, but they're not very bright, and most of them aren't artists, which is true enough. [Laughs.] I've lived long enough to find out that the real artist is a rare bird, and that most people that wander around calling themselves artists should be embarrassed. A hundred years from now, how many people are you going to hear about that are in the papers now? But I'll tell you what. You just might hear from Wendell Castle, 100 or 150 years from now. You might just hear about Frans Wildenhain. You might just hear about Jack Prip, or Hans Christensen, because all that silver that they've done, and the pieces they've made, aren't going to melt away.

ROBERT BROWN: You had had a pretty—you were—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Al Paley's forged iron stuff, that's going to be around 100 years. [00:06:00] In other words, I've been privileged, Bob, to deal with some real people. Okay, we're in Rochester.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, let's talk about some of those—when you got there, you already had assembled some of them. A number of those people you mentioned—some of them. You had—Frans Wildenhain came on fairly soon, didn't he? You already had—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: I tried to get Marguerite, too, at the same time.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But you already had Hobart Cowles? Had you brought him on?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: How did he work out in the scheme of things?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: He was a marvelous complement to Frans. Hobart was the best teacher of ceramic techniques I've ever known, and I've known a lot of them. How he managed to teach some of the people who were almost indifferent to the precision that you have to finally practice in glaze development, I can't understand, but he did it, largely as a consequence of remarkable patience and remarkable teaching skills. He was given, a few years before his retirement, a distinguished teaching award at the institute.

ROBERT BROWN: He complemented Frans, who was more on the design and creative—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Oh, yeah. Frans was the teacher of form and design, and Hobart the teacher of techniques, and glaze theory, and that kind of thing.

ROBERT BROWN: So there was a nice tension between them. Through the '50s, at least, the students still kept an eye on this marketing?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: I mean, they sent regularly to America House?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: That gradually, gradually died away.

ROBERT BROWN: How? By your impression, or it just happened that way?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: No. Part of it was through the exercise of social forces that I simply couldn't control, and which began with the change in America House with the opening of the museum, really. [00:08:08]

ROBERT BROWN: And that was in the late '50s, something like that?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: You know, when you get around to the notion that the big thing is to show rather than do, something has happened to you. And so, America House—Mrs. Webb finally moved on from—to the world scene, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: World Crafts Council—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: World Crafts Council. To me, there was just too much remaining to be done in Rochester and in America House, and a few little operations like that. Also, the character of the student that we got changed. A number of the early students were guys who were there on the GI Bill, young veterans. I'll tell you, they were terrific. Had an extraordinary sense of realism.

ROBERT BROWN: Realism? You mean—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Well, when you've lived through a war, you know, you've seen things and done things. I'll tell you, all at once, you find that when this kind of person leaves, a person who is born in a log cabin or fought a war, or something, and you're surrounded by people, all of whom have gone to good prep schools, and eaten three meals a day, and think that the only place to buy something is Bloomingdale's, something has happened to you. That's one of the things happening to this society, you know? [00:10:00]

ROBERT BROWN: But you saw it happening by even the 1950s? You began to see—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Oh, yeah. We were struggling desperately, and we still got a lot of people who found our philosophy sensible. But there was a drift. Guys like Wendell and Al contributed to this, in a way, and Jack, because although they were eminently producers, they exhibited a lot. So they had articles in magazines, with pictures of Al Paley's jewelry, most of which can't be worn, but which is, in terms of concept, absolutely terrific stuff. Along about this time, interest in the crafts was beginning to—previously, if you went to a craft show—I remember the first craft exhibitions in which I showed. I'm talking now about the 1930s. You have some of that stuff in your archives, too. You'd walk past five rooms of paintings, and one room of local sculpture. Had to be

local, because nobody ships two-ton pieces of sculpture around at shows. And then, in the back room there somewhere, they'd have a thing that had been a candy case with some jewelry in it. You know? That was the way the crafts were in the 1930s in this country. [00:12:02] Well, by the time I got out of the business in 1970, gee, there were tremendous craft shows. So, there came the feeling that part of the business of being a craftsman was showing stuff [laughs]. In the meantime, Mrs. Caroe had died. A lot of Mrs. Webb's interests, which originally had been centered in America House, shifted to, first, the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, and into the World Crafts Council. This is all part of an interplay by museum.

ROBERT BROWN: And they both were displaying, or publicity, mechanisms?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Because the Museum of Contemporary Crafts was carefully designed by Campbell, wasn't it—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: That's right.

ROBERT BROWN: —as a showcase?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: As a showcase, yeah. Well, then the people who finally—after Dave—consider that in Dave's background, Bob, there's a New Hampshire League of Arts and Crafts. That makes him different from Paul John Smith [John Paul Smith]. You understand?

ROBERT BROWN: Who's had a far different background. He was into display.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: He was a window trimmer in a department store in Buffalo. Okay? Well, before John Paul Smith, there was Tom Tibbs. Did you ever meet Tom or hear about him? First time I met Tom, he was assistant director of the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery. He became director of America House. Generally speaking, aside from Dave, everybody that—there have only been three, I guess. [00:14:05] Dave, Tom Tibbs, and John Paul Smith. They looked upon this directorship of the Museum of Contemporary Crafts as a stepping stone to some other job. You have to turn out some handsome catalogs, and you give some lectures, and you get a couple of shows on the road, and pretty soon they want you in San Francisco.

ROBERT BROWN: Art museums, you're saying.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Okay, you understand what I'm saying. So what was happening, we remained the same, but the social scene was shifting. Mrs. Webb's interests were shifting. Mrs. Caroe died.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So was there a bit of—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Then the students began to come in with their notions. What they do is not produce pots, which go to America House and don't sell, which is hard on the ego, but maybe if they send them to the national ceramic show at Syracuse, get in the show and there will be a picture in the catalog, then that's an achievement. So, at the end, there was a diminishing interest, and in the meantime, America House got smaller and smaller, and did less and less business. In its heyday, we were selling, as I said, between $12[,000] and $20,000 worth of student stuff there.

ROBERT BROWN: Mrs. Webb just allowed that to sort of dwindle?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Well, no. She wasn't in the least interested their dwindling—in it dwindling. As a matter of fact, Mrs. Webb repeatedly, as did Mrs. Caroe and Mrs. Eastmead—we all agreed that one of the things that we didn't want this school to become was an art school. [00:16:10] There are already enough of them. One more isn't needed, Bob. As a matter of fact, if we got rid of about half of them, everybody would be better off, because a lot of them—I could mention some by name, but I'm not going to—are marginally active, in the sense that they really don't have enough money to pay a good faculty, or to develop good programs.

ROBERT BROWN: I wanted to ask here, not that that necessarily applies to it, but what was—about Cranbrook. You visited it fairly early in your tenure in school, and they were doing crafts. How would you compare it with what you were trying to do at the school?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: I think the Cranbrook approach was in the direction of emphasizing the creative rather than the professional aspect of the disciplines. There weren't any better people around to do this than they had out there, by the way. Marianne Strengell and Maija Grotell, and Carl Milles.

ROBERT BROWN: And yet Strengell and the others were also production people? European-trained.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: But the emphasis at Cranbrook, you say, as teachers, was to become an artist-craftsman, something of that sort?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Well, to be—I really don't know. Be an artist, I guess, in the sense that a painter is an artist. What is a painter supposed to do in your opinion, Bob? [00:18:02]

ROBERT BROWN: Well, keep working at it—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Is he supposed to sell paintings?

ROBERT BROWN: That should be a byproduct, perhaps. I don't know.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: You could spend a lifetime arguing the art for art's sake, or the *l'art pour l'art* philosophy. And I think there's a strong case Beethoven made. He composed for himself, and he didn't care whether anybody heard it or not. So what? Well, I think that's fine for anybody the caliber of Beethoven, but I think if you become very fundamental about this, you think of the artist as he was in Greece, or the Middle Ages, or in Pre-Columbian Mexico, as a working, productive member of the society. He understands the institutional beliefs that surround him, and he responds to those. Okay? As a matter of fact, the comment that you made, which introduced this art for art's sake philosophy, is fairly reasoned. This is 19th century, basically. This philosophy came into being when the artist, by and large, was less and less useful than he had ever been before, with the Industrial Revolution and so on. Well, by—in the 1930s, we were beginning to find out what the limitations of the Industrial Revolution were to be, in terms of the enrichment of human life. That's where we came in.

ROBERT BROWN: At Rochester, then, more or less paraphrasing what you just said, you tried to instill in the students an awareness of their society, an awareness of the role they could play in it, rather than being in their ivory towers, creating for a show? [00:20:15]

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Correct. Correct.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you do that through not only the teaching in the studios, but by meetings with them?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Hammering the faculty, hammering the students. Not in a heavy-handed way, because I don't operate that way, and I've long since learned it's not productive, but by encouragement and guidance. Fortunately, there were guys like Don Benowski [ph] around, who believed strongly in this, and Frans Wildenhain, who thought that a potter ought to be able to make a tea service as well as a highly ornamental vase.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you work fairly closely with the students? Would they come to you quite frequently?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yes. I taught a required course so I could meet all the students, and then—

ROBERT BROWN: What was that in?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: History of art, which all the students in the College of Fine Arts had to take. I also was a kind of administrator, who spent a lot of time in the shops and studios. Keep in mind, Bob, that my own background was as an architect, first, and a craftsman. I felt a particular affinity. If I'd come up through some other channel, I wouldn't have—but I was interested in the actual tooling up [laughs] and production of this stuff. [00:22:04] I had a builder's awareness. People who are builders—architecture is described as a mother of the arts. You've heard the phrase. Have you ever thought what that means? Why, how—why do you describe architecture as a mother of the arts?

ROBERT BROWN: Encompasses—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Have you ever thought that through?

ROBERT BROWN: Not entirely, no.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Well, try it sometime.

ROBERT BROWN: But they were trying to do a bit of that—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Okay, is architecture a practical art? Of course it is, isn't it?

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Okay, and it's a mother of the arts. Was it the mother of the arts because you find, at

grand scale, all the interplay of design and form, and material, and manipulation, or is it because it just provides a shelter where you can show things? It has to be the former, right? Why is mathematics the queen of the sciences? You can't operate in the sciences without it. You can't operate in any of the fields of the arts without this sense of structure and with the manipulation of material in realizing structure does to condition it. This is what I think has been lost a lot from a lot of modern art. Plus, this recognition on the part of the artist of his real obligation to service the institutional life that surrounds him and makes his own life possible. I'm sure that a guy working on a feather coat for Montezuma didn't spend any time wondering whether he was an artist or not. Or a guy making a reliquary in a workshop in 13th or 14th-century France. [00:24:07]

ROBERT BROWN: Did you try to bring out some of these points in your lectures?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: There were—one of our stained glass—a guy making stained glass that you now admire in Chartres thought he was an artist. Felt insulted? No. He regarded himself as a craftsman. He belonged to a union. So did the painters.

ROBERT BROWN: These sort of things, you tried to bring out in your history lectures? Were you trying to show parallels with what these students—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Sure, because it exists. The parallels exist. They're so obvious that once a person's attention is called to them, they see it all at once. I feel privileged—there was a case in Dave's—Dave and I often talked about this. We felt privileged that we had begun life as architects. We both left it, because in the first place, we were both—entered the field in the 1930s, and there wasn't anything to do, except work at a drafting table, doing plumbing lines and [they laugh] so forth. So, well—and then I like to think that both Dave and I had more universal interests, really. I think—I started out, Bob, to be a lawyer. My family wanted me to be a lawyer. I think, after having seen some of my friends who were highly successful lawyers—if I had been a lawyer, I'd be a millionaire, not sitting in a place like this. I wouldn't be the same kind of a person, though, and I wouldn't be surrounded by these things, or know about them the way I do. [00:26:04] Dave was fascinated by the working skills that he saw in New Hampshire, and the product of those things. So, the New Hampshire League of Arts and Crafts came into being, because he knew Winant, you know, the—

ROBERT BROWN: The governor who—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: —governor who gave him the money. What if Winant hadn't been born? There had been some hard-fist guy like Cal Coolidge, governor. Anyhow, this Rochester experience was a fascinating one. We'll have to continue, I guess, from there.

[Audio Break.]

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Reason I was going to shut off soon is I'm getting hoarse.

ROBERT BROWN: Sure. I wanted to ask, though, one last—one thing.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: We'll have a drink afterwards.

ROBERT BROWN: Okay. [They laugh.] One thing I wanted to ask was this. You brought in a lot of high-powered people. Were there jealousies among them? Weren't they awfully hard to administer at times?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: They were all hard on me, but not on one another. Oh, no, they were an astonishing bunch of prima donnas. I know what the director of the Met in New York must feel like most of the time. Extraordinary jealousies. I heard all this, and I had to smooth it over and so forth. When the time comes, you're going to have to take this off the record, off the tape. There's a—did you meet Craig McGart [ph] in Rochester? [00:28:03]

ROBERT BROWN: No.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Craig teaches environmental design. He's excellent. You ought to meet him, just to have lunch with him sometime. He's written a few books on craftsmen in wood. He suggested that sometime I ought to bring a fellow from Sweden. Craig got a Fulbright and went to Sweden for a year. We got a slew of Fulbrights, and Fords, and—

ROBERT BROWN: This was on your faculty?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yeah. No, he was a graduate student. After his graduate year, he got the Fulbright and went to Europe, to Sweden. We had a working relationship with the Kunsthanvicker [ph] school. That isn't the name of it.

ROBERT BROWN: Something like that.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: It's in Sweden. Kunsthanvicker school in—

ROBERT BROWN: —Denmark?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Copenhagen.

ROBERT BROWN: And what did happen?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Anyhow, he met a Swedish woodworker. [00:30:00] The name is right on the tip of my tongue. [Laughs.] It isn't Teener or Keener—Jim Krenov. He showed me some photographs of Krenov's work, and I thought it superb. One of our guys got a leave—oh, in the meantime, I had brought up people for summer classes, like—oh, Toshiko Takaezu. You know her, the potter? Minnie Negoro, and Don McKinlay, people of this sort, for six weeks, that I couldn't bring in for a whole year. We brought Jim Krenov over for a year. He and Wendell were like a cat and a dog. Wendell was intensely jealous of Krenov, and Krenov was intensely jealous of Wendell. I spent half the time listening to these guys tell me how terrible the other guy was, you know? I thought I deserved combat pay for serving as director of an institution like this, but on the other hand, if you're running an opera house, or a craft school, you have to expect, if you have really eminent, sensitive people, you have to live with an awful lot of this. [00:32:04] Hans Christensen is a crazy man. Oh. Hans is—yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: In what way?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: He's intensely jealous of others. Now, he wasn't jealous of Wildenhain, but I'll tell you, he's remarkable at knocking other metalsmiths—except Jack. He and Jack are very close—Prip—are very close friends. This year of Wendell and Krenov was unbelievable. Wendell met somebody as good as he was. Whether you're a prizefighter or a woodworker, to get in the ring with somebody else just as good is a pretty terrific experience if you've been cock of the walk, right?

ROBERT BROWN: How did the students fare with the two?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Oh, they profited immensely. The smart ones did. Some of the more stupid ones were totally befuddled. They didn't know who to believe.

ROBERT BROWN: But this—although you say it was a little almost too much for you, on the other hand, you've kind of gone on that principle?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Oh, yeah, I relished it, really.

ROBERT BROWN: You liked bringing in the top?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Oh, it was a hard life, but this, I found, remarkable. Stimulating to all concern. I would tell the students, "Listen, you are having an unparalleled opportunity to see two highly creative people. Now, you don't have to believe either one of them, but observe them both, and listen to them both, and there will come a time when you'll make a choice and say, 'Well, he's talking more sense than he is.' But the time isn't now. In the meantime, you listen. [00:34:00] Then, for purely practical reasons, because this is the only way to survive, don't take issue in any bold or bitter way. I mean, you can ask questions." Well, what other ways are there to do this? I don't like the way you're going to—you know, your suggestion for how to handle this, but I wonder what other ways we can—are possible here. This is a way to do it. I'll tell you, Bob, for about 20 years, we had something really going in Rochester. I don't know what it's like now, except that a lot of that is gone, or that's what the faculty tell me. I don't listen to them very much. Sometimes I can't help it when I'm lunching with them and they want to beef. But it was remarkable while it lasted.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have—were you able to completely plan the move to the new campus?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yes. And design the building, and—because Mark Ellingson gave his deans wide latitude.

ROBERT BROWN: What did you want at the new building that you didn't have before?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Oh, space, and equipment, and light, and security, and safety from the threat of fire.

ROBERT BROWN: You have fairly large exhibition space?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Oh, yeah, marvelous gallery, Bevier Gallery.

ROBERT BROWN: That's something you wanted to have right there?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: And would you have regularly shown student work and work from outside?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Only a student—only at the end of the year. A student honor show. And the faculty—a faculty show every other year. [00:36:00] Then the purpose in bringing in exhibitions was to stimulate the students *and* the faculty, and to broaden them.

ROBERT BROWN: A cheap way of teaching, huh? [Laughs] Bringing in outside teaching, so to speak.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Not so cheap. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: No, cheap in paying them.

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Then we brought in a lot of people for three-day, short-term visits, you know, that I'd meet and have something interesting to say, and felt had something interesting to say to the students.

ROBERT BROWN: And you were able to do that? You had a fund for that?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: By the time you retired—just about 1970 or so, wasn't it?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: It was not too long after the Krenov was trying—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: What was the role of the school as compared with, say, 1950?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Changed, due to those institutional and societal changes that I mentioned. And I think also, the crafts had become, by this time, too successful. You see, I think Dave Campbell and I, and Frances Caroe, and some of the rest of us were fortunate to have been in at that formative period where we had to fight a lot. After you work your way up from third-class to first-class, there's not much other place to go, is there?

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-mm [negative]. Now that the crafts are first-class, what's happened to the teaching of it?

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: Well, I'll tell you. [00:38:00] There are too many craft schools, too many people calling themselves craftsmen. There are too many people teaching in the universities who couldn't earn their living as a working craftsmen, but Hans Christensen could, or Frans Wildenhain could, or Jack Prip could, or Ronnie Pearson could.

ROBERT BROWN: But there are just a lot of people that have gone through—

HAROLD JAMES BRENNAN: A lot of them are, you know? Well, we turned out a remarkable bunch of people, Bob. What do you say now we have a drink?

ROBERT BROWN: Okay.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]