



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Herbert Gentry,  
1991 May 23

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

**Contact Information**

Reference Department  
Archives of American Art  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560  
[www.aaa.si.edu/askus](http://www.aaa.si.edu/askus)

# Transcript

## Interview

LIZA KIRWIN: This is Liza Kirwin for the Archives of American Art, interviewing Herbert Gentry at the Capital East Gallery, Washington, D.C. We're doing the interview in the National Gallery's East Building. I'd like to begin at the beginning; I had read that you were born in Pittsburgh in 1919. Did you grow up there?

HERBERT GENTRY: No, I was taken away from Pittsburgh when I was six years old, to New York, where I was reared. I grew up in New York City.

MS. KIRWIN: What part of New York City?

MR. GENTRY: Mostly in Harlem. Eventually I moved to the East Side and lived there for a short while, on my own, and got married. In Harlem I lived uptown, on Sugar Hill, on Washington Heights. It still is beautiful but a little rundown now.

MS. KIRWIN: When did you first study art?

MR. GENTRY: I first studied art when I was 17 years old, at night school. Right after graduation from high school I went to school in the Bronx, at Roosevelt High School, right across from Fordham University in the Bronx. It was in evenings, under the WPA art program. I studied there a year and a half.

MS. KIRWIN: That was 1938, '39?

MR. GENTRY: Yes. In evenings I attended Roosevelt High School under the WPA program. A year later I started at NYU [New York University] in evenings.

MS. KIRWIN: Were there any noted instructors there in the WPA program?

MR. GENTRY: I can't recall them there, no, there were teachers who painted. There might have been, maybe they became famous, I don't recall, I was only 17 or 18. I was just interested in art and very happy -- we had different teachers each time, so it wasn't a specific teacher for each session.

MS. KIRWIN: Did you go to NYU specifically to study art?

MR. GENTRY: No, I didn't take art, I took business administration to satisfy certain people in my family. At the same time I had art lessons that were direct art lessons from people I met growing up. I met a lot of artists -- plastic artists, musicians and writers, very famous people who visited our home. My mother knew many people as she was a dancer -- many musicians, writers, painters. So they would come to my house and I would go with my mother and my stepfather from time to time to visit them. I met Duke Ellington, even Paul Whiteman I met, my mother knew him. I met almost everyone that was in Harlem during that period who was famous.

I can't recall the names right now but I met so many people who were coming in. They would have sort of open house, like, -- I can't think of the word in French [salons], an open house where people discussed, they talked about what they were doing. And since some of them were very famous already, I just sat there and listened. And then so many of my mother's friends had traveled to Europe in different shows and experiences, so I used to hear people come and talk about Paris and Berlin, what was happening there in the arts. Music and writing, especially in painting.

Very early I did what most children did -- I drew quite early, but at that point I didn't know I was going to be an artist. But as you know, all children are artists, they're born artists. My father was a printer but my mother and father separated. He stayed in Pittsburgh where I would visit him from time to time. As I said before, my mother being a dancer helped to meet these people and to be in the milieu of art.

MS. KIRWIN: What kind of a dancer was your mother?

MR. GENTRY: My mother had studied ballet and Modern Dance but she was a chorus girl, and at that time a lot of women who were sort of attractive, it didn't matter what their education was, especially African American women, used their beauty more and more, as you know, and it was very difficult for them to get occupation in their immediate field. If they had all the attributes they had, they had to use them, which [he laughs] they still do.

So my mother was a chorus girl, she was the captain. At that time my mother was saying that a lot of fathers and mothers would take their daughters to the theater and wait for them to come back. That's how it was at that period. My mother became the captain -- in other words, she was the one who came out and she would speak or

sing. My mother didn't have a voice, so she wasn't a good singer [laughing] even though she loved it. But she would, you know, "talk" a song.

I would go and see these shows all the time. She became a Ziegfeld girl, she and Bessie Buchanen, who was my mother's best friend. She became the first African American woman alderman in New York City. You never heard of Savoy Ballroom in Harlem?

MS. KIRWIN: Yes.

MR. GENTRY: At that time they used to have beauty contests, once every year, I think, and my mother won the beauty contest that year. The next year her friend won it. Bessie Buchanen, and the director-owner of the ballroom [Charlie Buchanen] saw her and fell in love with her and they got married. And he said, "I never want to see you up here again!" to her and to my mother. Anyway, at one show she was in, in Manhattan, Harlem, in a couple of shows the end girl was -- guess who it was? Josephine Baker. And my mother always told me how a lot of the other chorus girls they didn't like Josephine Baker because it seemed that every time the manager would come by, she would do something different, you know, she tried to attract their attention. But my mother and my aunt -- I called Bessie my aunt -- they thought she was great, they thought she was funny, and they pushed her, told her how great she was.

Now, I'm going forward, when I was in the United States Armed Forces. I was in North Africa and from there we were sent to the island of Corsica. At that time we heard that Josephine Baker was in Ajaccio, the island's second-largest city, and I always wanted to see her, meet her in person. My mother always said, "If you ever meet Josephine Baker, you can walk up and tell her you're Theresa Gentry's son. I don't ever send you to anyone if I don't feel it's right."

I remember I took a few of my buddies and went to Ajaccio and we saw her. She was seated there, standing were all the French soldiers and officers, colonels and generals, and I looked at her and I just saw her in her uniform. You know about her?

MS. KIRWIN: Yes.

MR. GENTRY: It's unbelievable. You know, you've heard a Frenchman [he sings], "Josephine, my Josephine, c'est la France, c'est Paris" les choses comme ca, because she represented France, because most of France was occupied, and you know Paris was definitely occupied by the Germans at this time. I never felt anything like that. Here this American woman was here in Corsica representing the country. The officers and men were crying, you know, because she was a symbol of freedom. After I saw that she was more or less by herself, I walked up to her and I said, "I'm Theresa Gentry's son," she said, "Oh!" she hugged me and said, "Your mother was very sweet to me. One of the few." I'll never forget it. That was very nice to hear that.

Now, I'll go back to Harlem when I grew up. I went to the Harlem YMCA and I took drawing lessons there when I was 17, 18, continued to do that. I frequented many of the poetry readings by different artists. As I said before, my home was a place where people came, not necessarily famous people. My mother and stepfather looked very nice, and a lot of young people liked them. All my friends liked my parents. My mother was very direct and she liked to be in the company of my friends, because I had a very young mother who was open to new things.

At that time I didn't quite understand it. One time I looked at my mother. I'd walked down the street with her and the other men were admiring her. "Oh!" And I didn't like that, being an only child and a boy, you know, give them mean looks. And I didn't understand what I had then, you know. At that time everybody wants a "big fat mama." I don't know about girls but boys do, you want a mama to look like a mama. And she didn't. I'll never forget. She was before her time, even eating the right foods. This was something that she felt and knew, she was experimental. Certain things she would give me to eat and I had to eat it, [he makes a sound of disgust] I used to hate it. And then I remember, I would say, "Look, Mother, why don't you fix the food that the other mothers fix?" And she said, "Go and look at those mothers and come back and look at *me*." That was the big difference, even the younger ones, you know. But that still didn't convince me. You know, a kid, you want everything like everyone else.

But I didn't realize she was a great woman. She always would explain to me many things which I listened to but I didn't think I was listening to these things. For example, certain things "if you want to do something, then do it, work with it." Then other things she would say like, for example, "if you had something to say to someone and they made you angry, don't wait till you get angry, don't wait, simply say 'I'll get a drink and then I'll tell you what I feel.'" Tell a person directly: "I don't like that, I don't think that was fair. And then maybe you could be friends."

And I thought I didn't understand that then but now I do. I think that's the better way of doing something if you can do it. Because why should you fight and be like -- many times it's a misunderstanding.

MS. KIRWIN: When you went to NYU you were studying business administration --

MR. GENTRY: I just went there two years because –

MS. KIRWIN: And then you were drafted for the War, or you enlisted?

MR. GENTRY: Yes, I was drafted into the Army. And then I went overseas. Prior to going overseas I was sent to Camp Stewart in Georgia [Just outside of Hinesville, GA. In November of 1940 the Anti-Artillery training center was officially designated Camp Stewart. It is now called Fort Stewart], and put in an alerted outfit, meaning that I was only in the camp for five months before the outfit was alerted to go overseas. I thought I was going to get a furlough to return home and our outfit was sent right back to New York -- Fort Dix, where I was inducted -- and from there we were going to go overseas.

But I thought I was going to go into OCS [Officers Candidate School] I was ready to go into OCS -- everybody wants that, the uniform, you know, and at the last minute no one was allowed to go because this outfit was alerted. So I said, "The hell with it, I'm going to see my mother," so I went "over the hill" just to see my mother, you know, I couldn't go overseas without saying hello to her. And then we went to Trenton, New Jersey, and I was caught [he laughs].

I looked around and found friends of mine were following me, especially one fellow who told me, "Don't do that, you have a very good chance of going to OCS, don't do that." But I said, "What are *you* doing?" He said, "Well, I'll go with you." So I got in a telephone booth in Trenton -- I'll never forget that -- and I called a girl friend of mine, and I was about to call my mother and looked up and there was the M.P. [Military Police]. Now, I don't have to tell you this but I looked up and this guy says, "Come on out." And I looked and there was this M.P. who was going to high school with me, he said, "Why did you bring all these people? Maybe I could have let you go." And I said, "I didn't bring them, you did, because your outfit is alerted." So they took us back to camp and just two days later we were sent overseas.

That was a very sad thing, going overseas without returning home. I didn't mind going, I just remember that trip. We didn't know where we were going. And on this boat many soldiers who'd traveled on the same boat before said, "We're going to Russia." On the whole trip they played a song, we had an Army band to keep the morale up, and the theme song was [he hums "As Time Goes By," theme song from film "Casablanca"]. And then we landed in this foreign place. Guess where it was? Casablanca! That was the hint. [both laugh]

MS. KIRWIN: Where else did you serve other than North Africa?

MR. GENTRY: We guarded Casablanca for a year because that was in anti-aircraft which guards the city. In other words, the Allies had taken over Morocco but German and Italian planes were bombing us from time to time. So we guarded the city for nine months. From there we were sent to Corsica. That's where I met Josephine Baker. We stayed there, and then to southern France. From there we came to Paris, during the liberation.

[Audio break]

MR. GENTRY: At certain times things were peaceful in Casablanca. So I was put in Special Service from time to time and I'm the one who arranged the entertainment. They knew I was painting, so I was painting even at that time, and I had an exhibition -- my first exhibition when I was in the Army, in the U.S.O. I had a show there. That was very nice.

MS. KIRWIN: You went into Paris with the Army?

MR. GENTRY: Yes, I wasn't in the first, nor the second or third wave, because the French wanted to liberate Paris, it's their country, their city. So I came in two days later and I saw the city. Unbelievable. Beautiful lady. Fell in love with it.

MS. KIRWIN: That's when you decided to stay there?

MR. GENTRY: Well, that wasn't the only reason because I didn't stay there. When I was discharged from the Army I returned to the States and was discharged here, same place where I was inducted, Fort Dix, New Jersey. Then I went back to work. I was working for Consolidated Edison, an electric utility company. I intended to go back to NYU and everybody said, "Oh, you're ready to go back go back to NYU --" And then I start thinking of Paris, every night. And really, I was really *dreaming* of the city, it's not a concrete, it's a spiritual thing. Have you ever been to France?

MS. KIRWIN: Yes.

MR. GENTRY: You've been to Paris? You like it there?

MS. KIRWIN: I like it.

MR. GENTRY: You know, I mean, it's something about this, even today all my friends -- I look back on friends I've known for 30 years, mostly Americans, and all of them say how happy they were in Paris. I spoke to Swedes about it. There's just something about Paris. I think there's a certain free feeling you have. And it didn't mean that everything was perfect there, sometimes we didn't have -- this was later on when I went back. But as I said I'll go back to the period before I went back as a civilian.

I was thinking. I said, "I want to be an artist. I *am* an artist." And I said, "I think I'd like to go to school in Paris," I told myself. "There are many sacrifices, though." So I told my mother, and she said, "Oh, here I worried about you for three and a half years," crying and all that. I'm an only child, by the way. That was pretty rough. And I said, "I want to go." So I called the State Department and they advised us not to go at that time.

MS. KIRWIN: That was 19 -- ?

MR. GENTRY: That was '46. They claimed they were doing this to aid us. I said, "Why not?" The reason for it, you know, it was very difficult right after the War. They didn't have all the conveniences that they had prior to the War. Food was rationed, cigarettes and many things that we just take naturally to have in our possession you couldn't get quickly. Even electric lights and heat, you'd just have that a certain part of the day. But that didn't matter. I said, "Well, that's nothing."

I'd been in the Army, and the feeling I got, I could never describe that feeling, you have to live there a while and participate in the everyday life to understand what I'm talking about. You *might* feel it -- I think women might feel it, I'm generalizing now, more so than males. It's truly spiritual. And I felt that, I didn't intellectualize it.

So I said, "Well, I'm going." And then I said I wanted to study on the G.I. Bill of Rights, being a veteran I had a right to the G.I. Bill of Rights. So I called the Veterans Administration and mentioned the school I wanted to go to -- it was a number of schools I went to. I did the Civilization Francaise at the Sorbonne. You know, that's the civilization course. Do you know anything about it?

MS. KIRWIN: No.

MR. GENTRY: It's a course that foreigners can take at the Sorbonne. It's like the junior year abroad, you get credit for it. You study French, the language, French history and geography, the whole idea of the French way of living and thinking, philosophy. I thought that was good because you get credit, I wouldn't have gotten credit for the art school; but I had two years of college so I would have gotten credit for that.

So I took that, and at the same time I took French at Alliance Francaise. That's in New York too, in America. It's a language school. And then of course I went to Beaux Arts, but I didn't like Beaux Arts, it's too stiff, too academic. And I went to La Grande Chaumiere -- do you know anything about that?

MS. KIRWIN: Yes, now, at the Beaux Arts school, could you say a little bit more about why you -

MR. GENTRY: I mean, it's academic -

MS. KIRWIN: Were there a lot of Americans there in 1946?

MR. GENTRY: No, not very many. I was one of the first ones. The Beaux Arts was, as I said before, has a very long history, so it's much more "Classical." And that's OK but these periods change, and I went there for a short while but I didn't like their approach to art. So there was a number of schools, like La Grande Chaumiere, and they had some good teachers - [Ossip Zadkine] Zadkine, a great sculptor, and Yves Brayer, a great teacher; I didn't care for his paintings. And I liked their approach, it was much [more] open, freer, dealing with today. So I went there and stayed there for two and a half years.

MS. KIRWIN: When you went to Paris, did you have much of a sense of what was going on in art in America at that time, in 1946?

MR. GENTRY: Well, I was interested, quite naturally, in the visual arts but I've always been interested in all the other art forms without intellectualizing them. I repeat that, because a lot of people - I knew a lot of the musicians. Most of them were older. And I knew a lot of the writers, but I didn't -- "oh, I know this person is famous." They were just there. So that was -- now I realize that was even better. But when I went to Paris I met some of the *very* famous artists, but I was older and that was something else: I was on my way, I knew more about art.

MS. KIRWIN: If you could talk a little bit about La Grande Chaumiere -

MR. GENTRY: It was an art school. You say you know something about it?

MS. KIRWIN: I know of other people who have gone there.

MR. GENTRY: Who went there with me? When I went to Paris I lived at the Cité Universitaire. Have you heard of that?

MS. KIRWIN: Yes.

MR. GENTRY: I don't have to explain it, then. Or shall I?

MS. KIRWIN: Go ahead, explain it.

MR. GENTRY: Cité Universitaire is an area something like International Houses in New York but much larger. There are different buildings that represent different countries and the architecture of each building was the general architecture of that country. Like, you had the Belgian House, the German House, French, Swiss, American House, and I lived at the American House. At the American House we had -- my friends had buddies, a lot of American soldiers came, who were veterans who were painters and studying painting. And then Kosta Alex, a good friend of mine. I went there in 1946, he arrived in '47, we're still friends, with Bill [the G.I. Bill]... He's a great sculptor, Kosta Alex, he's in Geneva now. And I met Herbie Katzman he arrived in '46 too; he's in New York, I still see him, I hear from him; he's not too well now. DeVito [ph]; a lot of American artists. All of them artists, and all of them had been in the Armed Forces, and they studied in different schools; art schools in Paris also. A number of them went to La Grande Chaumiere and they went to Leger's school, many Americans went to Leger's school --

MS. KIRWIN: Did you ever go there?

MR. GENTRY: No, I never went to Leger's school, I went to La Grande Chaumiere -- I taught there during the summers afterwards. And I liked them. And their approach was so different, it opened the way for Modern Art. For example, under the G.I. Bill of Rights, you had to register and put your name down and the Veterans Administration wanted you to let them know exactly what you were doing in school, how many hours, and how many hours you *stayed* in school. And we went to La Grande Chaumiere, you know, you went there, you had the models, the professor would come and he would critique your work.

Yves Brayer even, he would look at it, you know, I'll never forget he would say, "You like that?" And you'd say, "I don't *know*," and he'd accept it, you know, and he's supposed to tell you. And he'd walk away and come back and he'd look at it again. He'd say, "You really like it that way?" -- you know, you're drawing the model, you're not in the *paysage* [countryside] but inside -- and you're drawing the model. "Do you like it that way? You're *sure*?" "Yes, I like that form." Then he'd say, "Paint!" And that was a good approach, we felt --

MS. KIRWIN: So how did you communicate to the G.I., how did you represent that?

MR. GENTRY: We were no more G.I.'s, we were civilians, we had nothing to do with being G.I.'s --

MS. KIRWIN: I mean when you were applying for the G.I. Bill.

MR. GENTRY: -- except the time when we came to pick up our money every month. [Laughs.]

MS. KIRWIN: Did you have any trouble having that *paid* for under the G.I. Bill?

MR. GENTRY: Well, I went there before 1946. The Veterans Administration said that if you want to go now, you can go, but told us all about the obstacles -- "you won't get your money for a whole year, because we have no one there yet, but it will eventually come. Do you still want --?" "Yes, I still want." In fact, saved my money to go there. I mean, I didn't see my friends, I had to sacrifice. Because I'd *seen* that city and I said, "I *must* go back there." So I could close out everything. Everyone couldn't understand. "You don't want to see your friends?" But I knew that was the only way to do it. I was determined I wanted to go.

So, anyway, I stayed a year *without* getting my G.I. Bill. And then eventually the Veterans Administrator, his name was Scherr [ph], a very nice man, came over and he opened the office, at the American Embassy. So every month we would get our checks.

MS. KIRWIN: You say there were a lot of Americans there.

MR. GENTRY: When we say "a lot," there was a lot because I knew most of them who were there. Yes, and they were forceful, they were forceful, they were forceful. I think Americans -- I'm going to jump to something with you now -- I think Americans -- you've heard of Montparnasse?

MS. KIRWIN: Yes.

MR. GENTRY: OK. I have a feeling the Americans in Montparnasse, the artists -- writers and painters, but most of my friends were sculptors or painters but I knew them -- I think they were more forceful in a *positive* way than

the Americans who went there during the roaring twenties. And I'll tell you why I feel that. Because, you know, prior -- you know, we were Vets -- and they come from all different milieus, whereby a lot of the Americans who went to Paris before, in the twenties, were *wealthy* Americans.

What made me think of it just now is that when we first we got to Paris, every time you would see a Frenchman, he knew that you were American, you know. Not all, but many of them, they thought you were rich. In the beginning that was distasteful in the beginning, because if you spoke English, right away they'd expect you to spend money. And then I was finally *aware* of what was happening and I explained to the French "we're students, we don't have money" [Laughs]. Have you spent any time in Montparnasse?

MS. KIRWIN: I've visited there.

MR. GENTRY: Well, a lot of Americans went with Swedes, who hung out together with a lot of the Swedes. Because after World War II, other nationalities of Europeans it was very difficult for them to leave their respective countries right away, because you know they didn't have very much money, the students, and they couldn't go, but the Swedes were independent because they were neutral during World War II. So I hung out with a lot of Swedes, who hung out with Americans. Indeed, Swedes most of them speak English fluently, especially today. So I met a number of Swedes.

We met the French, and we had a wonderful time in Montparnasse. We would select La Coupole and all the different cafes in Paris who'd have meeting places and we would sit there and discuss -- but I want to go back to La Grande Chaumiere regarding the G.I. Bill of Rights. You know, as I said before the American Veterans Administration felt to get the G.I. Bill you were supposed to spend a certain amount of time in school. But in this Academie, La Grande Chaumiere, they felt that no, no, you're supposed to go out and meet the *people* also; that's a part of art -- to meet the people in the cafes, to go to the country, to visit. That's the part -- speaking to the people, and listening to people who couldn't speak the language.

Right away I remember one time we had an inspector from the Veterans Administration went to the school and said, "Well, look, what's this 'paysage' [landscape] thing, So-and-So's supposed to be in school but he's not drawing the models." We had to explain to him "that's part of the system." [he laughs] And it took a long time before Americans understood that.

[BREAK IN TAPING]

MR. GENTRY: By the way, I was lucky, I met Gertrude Stein.

MS. KIRWIN: You did? Talk a little bit about that.

MR. GENTRY: No, Richard Wright -- you've ever heard of Richard Wright?

MS. KIRWIN: [vaguely] Mmm -

MR. GENTRY: No? Never heard of him? Well, I think he's still named the most famous African-American writer. He was invited by the French Government to come and live in France. I think he was the first American ever invited by the government, and how he was invited was because of Gertrude Stein's help, she was so influential in France. And even Jean Paul Sartre, who was a friend of hers, and Simone de Beauvoir. And I went to meet him -- I never met him but I knew people who knew and had met Richard Wright, so I went to the boat to meet him when he was invited to live in France, and there was Gertrude Stein, so that I met her. She died the same year. So that was very nice. I met with her a very short time but I knew him.

MS. KIRWIN: Did you know any French artists early on in Paris?

MR. GENTRY: Oh, I knew -- you know, it was not that easy for Americans to meet the French. I don't know how much time you spent in France but I lived not in France, I lived in Paris, and Paris, it belongs to the world; because the world made that city, it's not a French city, it's a city created for people: great writers and painters and thinkers *lived* in that city. But I have French friends, very good French friends, but it's not that easy to meet French people. There's the language barrier, I speak the language now. But when you *do* meet them, though, and they finally decided they'll be your friend, really friends forever, unbelievable, but it takes a long time for them to greet you.

So we were in contact with many foreigners we met in Paris, that's how Paris is. That's in the beginning. Later on after you live there a long time, you'll meet maybe one friend, French friend, or another, and then you start meeting -- and then you become part -- but Paris is a city that I feel that foreigners meet other foreigners. And that's great too, because it's in the great exchanges, you know -- the Swedes and people from different parts of Africa, writers and people come there and all of them new because it's not their country but it's their city; doesn't belong just to the French, who can't claim it, can't tell you to go home. That's the great thing about

Paris.

Eventually I even met, I knew Giacometti. We would frequent the cafe, maybe you've heard of it, La Coupole in Montparnasse? And he would go there every night, very late, around 10:30, to eat. And when he would walk in, all the waiters would stand up, you know, and he would shake 10 or 15 hands. Kosta Alex would be with me and we would shake his hand, the waiters would shake his hand. And then they would seat him, and after he was seated they would walk away, and he would eat and no one would bother him while he was eating. And then as soon as he finished, he'd had his coffee, a lot of the young people would go and say hello, and the waiters would speak to him. Sometimes he would say, "Won't you sit down?" And then he would talk for about maybe 20 minutes with different people and then he would start going to his studio to work. So I met him.

I studied with Braque. I had six lessons with Braque. You know Braque -- [MS. KIRWIN: Yes.] I never met Picasso but he -- Braque said to me, "Oh, you'll like Picasso. His temperament." But he liked my drawings, so that was very nice. A beautiful man, very intense, but quiet like.

MS. KIRWIN: Where was he teaching, or was this just private?

MR. GENTRY: This was private, in his home in parc du Montsouris which wasn't very far from Cité Universitaire, Boulevard Jourdain -- I don't know if you've visited that area; it's in the Fourteenth section [Arondissement] of Paris. And then I knew him in -- and that was wonderful. I met a number of artists who were not known but for a long period of time we spent more time, as I said before, with American artists. And believe it or not, the Swedish artists because they had a lot in common with American artists.

MS. KIRWIN: Was it your original intention to go to school and then come back to the United States?

MR. GENTRY: Yes. I meant to go and spend just about a year.

MS. KIRWIN: How long were you there at your first stretch, because I know you did come back to the United States?

MR. GENTRY: I stayed from 1946 to [pausing to recollect] we came back in about 1950 -- I had two children who were born in Paris --

I married an American girl, we married in London, a singer and dancer, a singer *and* a painter, Tadea Werfelman [aka Honey Johnson, Tadea Gentry]. Her first name is really Evelyn but she gave -- she was a painter and singer. We married in London. You know, at that time and still today it's difficult for foreigners, even difficult for French, to marry in France, did you know that?

MS. KIRWIN: I didn't know that.

MR. GENTRY: For you to marry in France, you had to live in a certain arrondissement for a certain period of time. And then they had to find out the laws pertaining to marriage of the state where you come from. And then you had to have a physical examination, blood test and all of that. Then you had to post banns. So it was a little difficult, so I went to London and in London it's very easy. One party goes over, stays for 10 days, and on the eleventh day the second party can go, and then you get married. But anyway I married in Paris.

MS. KIRWIN: And had two children in France.

MR. GENTRY: Yes.

MS. KIRWIN: You were teaching at that time?

MR. GENTRY: No, at that time I was still going to school. I went to Ecole des Etudes Sociales, a school of social studies, and continued at La Grande Chaumiere. I opened a club gallery in Paris -- maybe you've heard about that? [MS. KIRWIN: Yes] It was a place in Montparnasse where people met in the cafes during the day and evenings we had music, a lot of so-called musicians, mostly Americans but also we had French musicians and a lot of them were studying Classical music at Ecole de Musique and a lot of them were playing jazz. But all of them came to play jazz, even the Classical students. "We love Classical music and it is great and everything but it's not free as jazz!" So they would come in and jam -- the word "jam" as that was used, playing together.

And then we had paintings that were hung in the club-galerie because a lot of the young artists were in Montparnasse -- not only Americans, foreign artists. Honey [Tadea Werfelman] was a painter, she studied with Orozco in Mexico but she also sang, so she sang in the club. It was like *the* place in Paris for Americans, she was loved. And it was a very special club because we felt -- it was not a place where you drank and only briefly met. It was in Montparnasse and as I said before our clientele was mostly American students or maybe those who maybe just had finished their schooling. A lot of the painters and even the top musicians.



I remember when Benny Goodman [bandleader and clarinetist] passed by on his way to Russia. He lost two members of the band, they decided to stay in Paris. One was Zoot Sims [tenor saxophonist]. I don't know if you know much about jazz of that period, very famous. It's very sad that American young people your age and younger don't know about jazz. The American art form, the only one whereby the European young boys and girls know -- they know more about it than Americans and it was born here. Most of them carry, have records of the old musicians. That's all over, especially in Sweden and France.

I told you Zoot Sims quit Benny Goodman. Roy Eldridge [Jazz trumpeter, David "Roy" Eldridge, aka "Little Jazz"], a very famous musician, stayed in Paris. And then evenings we had those jam sessions. And so we had a lot of the top musicians who came over from America and they would play at our place at night, and during the day we had like a cafe and the gallery.

MS. KIRWIN: Did you show your own work there?

MR. GENTRY: Yes. It was very difficult for foreigners to exhibit, especially Americans in Paris at that time. That's a very important point.

MS. KIRWIN: That was 1953?

MR. GENTRY: We opened our first show in 1949, [reflecting] '48, '49, '50, '51. A lot of them [the French] didn't think Americans could paint, they had no background for art, a new country, you know, old country in existence for a long time, and America's new. So we were prejudiced. So in 1951, I think, we formed a gallery, called Gallery Eight, maybe you heard about this?

MS. KIRWIN: Yes.

MR. GENTRY: So I was in a group show there. That was very nice, it lasted for about five years, four years I think, yes.

MS. KIRWIN: Were you a member of the cooperative?

MR. GENTRY: Yes. I can't recall whether I signed my name but I exhibited there and all my friends exhibited there. And then later on -

MS. KIRWIN: Did those people at Gallery Eight, did they also exhibit at your club?

MR. GENTRY: Some of them, yes. It was very informal. This was just a part of, like, a social place to meet and of course you had -- I had the top jazz musicians in the world who came there to jam; I mean, the big names. But we also had, like -- you ever heard of Larry Rivers, the painter?

MS. KIRWIN: Oh yes.

MR. GENTRY: Well, Larry Rivers was in Paris, he would come, he plays piano, I don't know if he's got a band. Myron Schwartzman plays piano, he's the one who wrote the book on Romare Bearden, called, *Romare Bearden, his life & art* [New York, Harry Abrams, 1990]. You ever seen the book? [MS. KIRWIN: Yes] Just came out, well Myron Schwartzman, had just left him, he's in Larry Rivers's band. But Larry Rivers was enjoying it, hardly do anything but he's interested in playing his piano. So he used to come. He'd say, "Herbie, can I play?" So I said, "Ask them." [Larry Rivers played saxophone at Gentry's club-galerie in 1950, the writer Myron Schwartzman played piano years later with Larry Rivers' band in New York.]

And one of the reasons why I feel that jazz music is one of the purer art forms, sometimes I think the painter in America is the jazz musician, because you can't lie. You see, no one can make you great just because they have money and push you. They do that in art, they can do that, but not in jazz music. Because you play, and you know, you create while you're playing with musicians. And the other musicians know when you're not playing, so you walk out when you don't feel or you cannot come up to them.

That's something interesting, I think. And I know, and I remember, as I said before, when Larry Rivers would come and say, "Herb, can I play?" I said, "Yeah, ask the musicians," you know. And he would go, and then he would leave -

MS. KIRWIN: Did you yourself play?

MR. GENTRY: No, but I took piano. So I know music a bit. But then he'd leave and he'd say, "Oh Herb, I can't tonight, they're too heavy for me." And he was playing with top musicians. He was playing with Kenny Clarke -- you ever heard of the Modern Jazz Quartet? [MS. KIRWIN: Yes.] When I was New York when that was formed, Kenny Clarke was one of the top drummers in the world, he was there. I think that Larry Rivers really had nerve [he laughs] to really want to play with them, you know. But he did it because he was very, very interested in

music, he liked –

I don't know if he was even painting then. He was drawing a bit, and we remembered in Montparnasse, when he returned to the States, and all of a sudden a year later he was famous. And everybody in Paris thought, that's strange because he returned home at the right time. You see, I think in the American art world they didn't mind Americans going to Europe to study, to spend a certain period in Europe, because they knew art was flourishing in Europe, you know: "America's a new country."

However, when the New York School came into being, they wanted to take over the art world, [he laughs] and say that this is the New York School, a new way of expressing oneself. So the fellows who stayed, or the artists who stayed, it was not that easy for them to come back and meet the art world. But Larry Rivers just returned in time. There was a friend of mine named George Spaventa, maybe you've heard of him? [MS. KIRWIN: Yes.] He's passed, a very close friend and a wonderful person. He's one of the few Americans that the French listen to, because he knew art history, he knew so much and they listen to him. But prior to that they frowned upon Americans when it came to art.

So when New York [school] started as an art area of the world, all of that type -- Rauschenberg was over there, I know Rauschenberg, I met him later, but he didn't belong to the group that hung out in -- you've heard of Sam Francis? [MS. KIRWIN: Yes.] I knew Sam Francis. He did well in Europe, right a way, but he had been sickly, he had tuberculosis, I don't know if you knew that, and he was sent to Switzerland but he continued to work. He's doing quite well. And Romare Bearden, I met him there in 1950 and that's how we became very close friends.

MS. KIRWIN: How did you meet him? Did he come to your club or?

MR. GENTRY: He came to the club because he said he heard about this. "Herbie, Gentry?" And then we talked, he's my best friend, I never had a friend like him in life. You ever met him? [MS. KIRWIN: Never] You lost something. So he came to the club and he intended to paint in Paris, but he went to the Sorbonne, I think he just used the G.I. Bill for philosophy or something; he was a mathematician too. He graduated from New York University.

And he and I used to hang out together. And he met a lot of my friends, I met some of his friends, and we would go to different places in Paris, and go to the museums, and talk. He was saying how happy he was to be in Paris. But then he only stayed a year and he returned and I didn't see him for all those years. And then I went back to New York and we became even closer, until he passed. A wonderful person. He was a little older than me.

Four days ago I was in a panel in New York -- I don't know if you know about that? At the Studio Museum. I didn't plan to say this, it just came spontaneously, that he was my brother and my father. Because I was an only child and I was separated from my father. I had a stepfather but it wasn't the same, I mean, he was a very kind person, but the warmth I got from Bearden was a paternal warmth. And of course fraternal too, because he was like my brother and my friend. I miss him very much now. He was an unbelievable great artist and a great person. He was a giver. And anyhow, I met Romare there, and I came back to New York –

MS. KIRWIN: Did you have to close the club?

MR. GENTRY: Oh, another thing: the man who owned the building wanted us to buy the building. We didn't have the money but he said he would loan it to us because -- when we went to Montparnasse, it was famous before, but later on it wasn't that famous until the Americans went there. You know, they broke all the rules and regulations, they did everything, so it sort of opened up and became quite livable, lively. So this man who owned the building was very wealthy, had a few buildings in the Montarnasse area, and he said, "Why don't you buy this place?" I said, "We haven't got the money to do that." He said, "I think we can come to something." Because we had helped him because so many people came to see us and the people who came to see us were people in the arts, you see, and that brought back Montparnasse. Plus a lot of Americans throughout Montparnasse. So they were there, so all the Americans came; a lot of the French too. But one of the reasons why I frowned upon his offer right away was because I saw [laughing] a few mice in the place – it was an old building and I said, "I don't want that place." That was one of the reasons I didn't accept it, but what I intended to do was come back to the States anyway. So I came back to the States.

MS. KIRWIN: What year was that?

MR. GENTRY: I came back in '51. I stayed a year and my marriage broke up in New York. And then I decided -- I had a hard time seeing my children. I went to the courts and had a hard time. At that time they were really prejudiced against men: the father was wrong, the male was wrong at the beginning. Briefly, it's much more open now. I'm the one who went to the court because I wasn't allowed to see my kids. I went to the court, I instigated the whole idea of meeting the judge, but they said no, no, I couldn't see my children. My mother is going crazy.

So I went to my wife at that time and said, "You want to go back to Paris?" She gave me no argument. So we had a wonderful time in Paris and we really worked together. We liked each other also, you know.

MS. KIRWIN: Why did you decide to come back to the United States if things were going well?

MR. GENTRY: Well, because, well, one of the things -- my former wife was a singer, very popular in Paris with Americans. It was very intimate, she was loved; Honey Johnson, that was her singing name. She was engaged to sing in one of the very important clubs -- she's still living, in London, so I don't want to bring all of it up -- one of the biggest. We decided that we'd go over there, with the children and she made -- not a mistake, but I really think she got nervous. She was a great singer but she was a person, a painter too, she had to sing with a love audience, intimate audience, friends, people around like around the fire, say. And she was great.

But when she came before a big public, that was not her thing. So I was on the lights, I was in the back when she was about to sing and I said, "Remember, don't make a speech." This club was a very, very chic club and if she'd done well -- it was supposed to be for a three-week engagement, then she was supposed to open in New York. Well, you know, she was not show business, she was an artist, and the two singers, the two performers who appeared before her both were Latin with dark hair, and in this club each one of them missed two nights.

So when my wife appeared, she's dark-haired and they didn't want to take a chance on this, so they had engaged another artist who was very famous in London to be there in case she didn't show up. You know, they just took that for granted. So when she walked out onstage -- I was in the back, I couldn't see her, and she was well-gowned by friends of ours who went to London, they had been fashion designers who became very famous in London, they'd been in Paris and studied. She looked fine, everything was fine, and she sang a French song that was arranged by a top American arranger at that time, and she sang it well, in French. And people, some women start giggling, and then someone started to talk. And she made a speech. "I always understood the English were very polite but I see I was wrong." I said, "Oh!" I couldn't get to her in time. So they didn't extend the contract.

So we had to go back to Paris. We'd bought an apartment, so I sold my apartment and we worked with the Mars Club for a while, she sang there, where we spent so much -- we had two kids and they were very young, only 11 months apart. So we had to find an apartment, a very expensive place. But then she worked at the Mars Club. The Mars Club is a place in Paris where -- it was the second place with mostly Americans, club on the Right Bank off the Champs Elysées, and a lot of very famous people like Americans who'd go to Paris, even the "name" Americans like Frank Sinatra, he was in Paris, he was very happy that no one knew who he was but after the third day, you know, he got nervous -- he would go to the Mars Club and they would ask, "Would you sing?" And he was so happy to sing. And she sang there for a while. It was opened by two Americans.

And then it was time for us to go back. So we went back. My mother said she wanted to see the kids. And things didn't work out so well. I met Walter Cronkite too in Paris, and I used to see him very much. We used to walk along the Seine together. He's a wonderful man. And he told me at that time how much he loved Paris. Every night, I don't know, oh, I met him when I went back to Paris and he was very nice.

MS. KIRWIN: Where did you live when you came back to New York?

MR. GENTRY: When we came back I stayed with my mother. And then my mother got an apartment next door to where she lived and we lived there for a while, then it wasn't large enough so I stayed with my aunt, who owned a house in Hamilton Terrace in town; stayed there for a while. Then we went to the East Village -- you know much about the East Village? [Liza assents] We moved into a place called Paradise Alley. I didn't think was beautiful but they had a lot of writers and painters but they claimed it was like Paris and to me it wasn't like Paris, but you had some very nice people, creative people, there. These were friends of my wife, who most of them became my friends.

MS. KIRWIN: Were there a lot of painters living there at the time?

MR. GENTRY: Painters, and writers, musicians. But mostly painters and writers. And they were very nice people, creative, in Paradise Alley. It was a slum building, you know, but that was supposed to be "in" but I didn't see it as "in." And then that was during that period my wife and I broke up. Then I decided when I couldn't see the kids, I was intending to stay in the states but it bothered my mother that she wasn't able to see the children because she helped take care of them. And then my wife met some other people that were not so nice, and they were against me. It's a long story.

So my mother said, "Look, you tried to do everything you could do to see your kids and be with them, and if you really want to go back I will miss you very much but I will understand." But I went to my former wife and I said, "Look: I know you love Paris --" She never sang in the States. She had people listening to her, people said, "Oh, you're not ready" and she listened to other people. So she never sang again, can you imagine? And she was so great. And she was a great painter too.

So then I decided to go back, to return to Paris. But I did ask her, "Do you really want to go back? I know you love the city." "No." So I didn't bother saying anything and I went back.

MS. KIRWIN: Did you show anywhere while you were in New York, were you painting then?

MR. GENTRY: Yes. I showed in one gallery and was listed there; I can't remember, it's so many years ago. [MS. KIRWIN: [consults papers] Burr Gallery, New York 1953.] Yes, I showed once. I was in one more show there, a group show, but I had a one-person show there. As I said before, I showed in Paris at La Grande Chaumiere, I mean I taught there for a year. But I think the reason why they asked me -- well, the director was a woman, I can't recall her name, but she came to my exhibitions when I had them; that was nice. But I think the reason why they asked me to teach there was because I spoke a little French at that time -- I speak French now -- and they needed someone to help out who spoke English.

MS. KIRWIN: The last time we met you talked about Beauford Delaney, I met Joseph [Joseph Delaney] but -

MR. GENTRY: Where did you meet him?

MS. KIRWIN: Knoxville, Tennessee.

MR. GENTRY: Oh, recently. For interview, maybe.

MS. KIRWIN: I went to talk to him after about his brother's papers, because he had the contents of the Paris studio but he didn't have the records, he didn't have the papers that were with the studio. I wanted to ask you about him, what was he like?

MR. GENTRY: I knew his brother first in the Village. And I met his brother Joseph in Greenwich Village. I met him at a very, very delicate period in my life, which was right after we separated, and I would go over to this cafe -- I can't think of it, a crazy cafe where a lot of artists lived, I mean frequented, on Eighth Street.

MS. KIRWIN: Were you still trying to seek out of cafe society when you came back to New York looking for the same thing?

MR. GENTRY: Well, I mean I thought of cafes as highly civilized, I didn't seek them, just that you feel good if you ever spent time in cafe life, it's very important. That's where a lot of great things are created, not necessarily in Paris but throughout the world. You have the time to sit down and write and still be with people but you don't necessarily have to have the person sit down with you. They can acknowledge that you're there and they can look in your eyes and see that you're busy, they leave you alone. And you can write if you get used to the cafe life.

Anyway, I used to see Joe Delaney and we would have very nice talks, I liked him. So I met him before I met Beauford. We talked and everything, and as I said before I was separated from my wife and it was a very sad period, I would have my children with me from time to time. I would go over to East Village and pick them up and take them to the Park in Greenwich Village.

[BREAK IN TAPING]

MR. GENTRY: [mid-sentence] instead of, you know, love's great but life is important, you know? Some people say, "I love you but I hate you." [Liza laughs] I never understood that. I believe in liking, because if you like someone you share everything, love seems to be interwoven.

MS. KIRWIN: Let's get back to the Greenwich Village Cafe.

MR. GENTRY: And as I say, that was the period when I was beginning to return to Europe. Maybe I would have visited Paris, I wouldn't have returned so quickly if I'd remained in contact with my former wife. But anyway, I was very unhappy because there was a time -- in the beginning I was able to see the kids and I took them to the cafe where I met Joe. And then I couldn't see them, so I told Joe, "I'm going to Paris" and he said, "Oh, I'd like to do that sometime."

And then when I finally decided to go it was 1953. Beauford, I didn't know him well. And then when I got on the boat I looked around to see who's on the boat and -- did I tell you this? [Liza confirms] He was on the same boat and I spent all the time with him and it was a beautiful experience. This man was so philosophical. And then I guess he talked about things that we both never, you look at the sky - look at the blue and the clouds and we would talk about this and we would talk about feelings and thoughts and it was a beautiful time I spent those five or six days with him. And he had never been outside the States, but I had been to Paris.

And then we arrived at Le Havre and some people came to pick him up. I don't know what happened, I went directly to -- I've forgot where I went but I was in Paris, I knew Paris. But I did ask him, I said, "Anything I can do

for you?" He said, "No, I have friends who're going to pick me up." And then they picked him up and I went elsewhere.

And then eventually I saw him in Montparnasse. He became an artist in Montparnasse and everybody knew him in Montparnasse because he was a person that, he was a great artist. But the greatest philosopher I've ever met. He was older than most of the students, so he had all these wise sayings, and anybody had any psychological problem they would go and see him. Like for example, one time something was happening, I didn't know, I went to see him. He said, "What's the matter?" "Well," I said, "the money's low, I'm very unhappy and I don't want to write home for money and I've money coming in." And he would open a little purse he'd carried, he opened it and he said, "Look, I have enough for a little coffee and a croissant for -- oh yes, now tell me: what's the matter?"

And you know, I never really tell people all my problems. All of a sudden I caught myself: wow, great psychiatrist here, psychologist. And I'm talking to him and opening up and feeling better, I mean really. I realized -- well, I knew that later -- how important it is to have someone to talk to, have a dialogue, or have someone you can talk to and they would listen, maybe advise. And he would say these things. I felt good, you know! And that's what he did to many people -- the French and everything, yes. He was a great artist, I would visit him from time to time.

And then later I met a painter named Larry Potter, an African-American painter, Larry Potter, a great friend of mine, who "passed" in Paris, who would eventually exhibit in New York, I'd have to write the forward to his exhibition. Both the Delaneys liked him very much and he was a very sensitive person. I remember we would walk to visit Beauford in his studio and in his studio everything was spick and span. And he'd have these big American white sheets all over everything. [Speaking in high falsetto] "-- with Beauford." Everything was covered, this was part of his little illness become, I think. I mean hit a certain niveau [level] and after that you know you go right to the top in thinking and philosophy, philosophical statements. And then I think the mind can't go any further. He was so great, in everything -- in painting, knowledge, warmth.

Larry was very sensitive too. We would knock on his studio door and Larry would say, "Pardon me, open". He said, "All right, if you're not busy, can we come see you now?" That was very important to respect his privacy. He said, "Oh yes, you and Herbert Gentry, always." Invariably we'd sit down and he'd fix us a little tea and he'd do his hands like this. [Liza laughs] We had a wonderful time. When he was in Montparnasse, the center, one of the cafes, Select Cafe, or the Dom, all the waiters, all the French people, Monsieur Beauford and he didn't speak hardly any French but they all respected him. He was so kind. And it was the duty of all the artists in Montparnasse if they saw Beauford out there pretty late at night, they would take him home. He was a concern. He was very important to the American art life in Paris. And he was a great friend of James Baldwin [author], too, I guess you know that.

MS. KIRWIN: Yes, I was going to ask then you watched him progressively go -- his mind?

MR. GENTRY: This is what happened. See, I was invited to exhibit in Denmark in 1959 when the Danish painters were invited to exhibit at the Riverside Museum. It was an honor, and they were the most famous Danish painters. But this museum does not exist any more, the Riverside Museum in New York; and I was invited to go to Denmark. So I went to Denmark and I had this exhibition and I stayed in Denmark for awhile, I worked there.

But I kept the studio in Paris, and I would go back from time to time; out of the year I was back to Paris every three or four months. What were we talking about?

MS. KIRWIN: I was asking about his health.

MR. GENTRY: Oh yes. So as soon as I'd go to Paris he would be one of the few that I'd know I had to see right away -- Larry Potter, my friend who had died, and Beauford Delaney and a number of friends but those two were the first two or three or four that I would go and see. So I would go and see him. Then I noticed that he started to get really away from me, he wasn't very clear in what he was saying, he was going way up in the sky about what was happening, but it was [laughing] beautifully poetic. And I loved him. He would make statements like, "The sun is a sunny red." He was right. [Laughter.] And you go with him and then you say, hey, you know, but maybe he's a little off, but he was so great.

So he was very happy when I would come and give him a hug and we would talk and I'd find out if he had any money. I always would have a little money and I'd take him to dinner. And one time Romare Bearden came and spent about two weeks in Paris and he and Annette, his wife, widow. First he would ask for Beauford and then we took him down to an American restaurant, [belonging to] a fellow named Haynes [Leroy "Roughhouse" Haynes]. You never heard of him? An American restaurant in Montmartre and we went there. Soon as he finished -- "Beauford was hungry, he ate so well," but all of a sudden right after he finished wanted to go right back to Montparnasse, that was his home area, see he knew that. Then I knew that he was getting old, because he got nervous, but while he was eating he was hungry -- maybe hadn't eaten that day. Not because he didn't have

money but this sickness was starting.

And then I heard someone say that he gave some of his paintings away. I went and found that person, I got those paintings back. But then he started giving some paintings away. Some people might have taken advantage of him, took his paintings. Everyone is looking for Jimmy Baldwin, he was very close to him. But he was with Darthea Speyer, you ever heard of her? [MS. KIRWIN: Yes.] She was the Cultural Attaché at the American Embassy. I knew her then, and then she always told me she was going to open a gallery; she opened a gallery.

MS. KIRWIN: In New York?

MR. GENTRY: No, in Paris. She was the Cultural Attaché in Paris.

MS. KIRWIN: Did you know about an exhibition that she organized? I think it was in 1953, that would have been the year you came back to Paris. It was called "American Painters in France."

MR. GENTRY: Yes, but she was still working for the American Embassy. She was the Cultural Attaché. Rudy Aggrey [Orison Rudolph Aggrey] had just left, I just spoke to him yesterday, he was the Cultural Attaché, then he became ambassador -- he's African American. But he told me, he said, "Look, I'm leaving. I like you to exhibit but I'm leaving but this woman named Darthea Speyer will be the next Cultural Attaché." And I went and I met her, we became friends. What happened at that time, was only two American Embassies that were having exhibitions of American art. One was in London, the other was in Paris. So she was arranging exhibitions in the American Embassy in Paris.

Then I think a year later the money was low, so they stopped having these exhibitions in both places, and I understand that she put her own money in. She was very wealthy. Her brother was James Speyer who was at the Chicago Art Institute. Then she and I became friendly. Then she'd say "But I think I'm going to open a gallery." I said, "That's fine." Then one day she said, "I've found a place." So she opened this gallery. Did you visit the gallery? [Liza says no] It's called Darthea Speyer. It's on the Left Bank, if you ever want to go -- give her regards from me -- She's still there.

MS. KIRWIN: Did you show at her gallery?

MR. GENTRY: She never exhibited me. She never asked me but she did everything else. Through her I got into the Cité Internationale des Arts -- that was the place where -- you ever heard of that?

MS. KIRWIN: Cité Internationale, I didn't --

MR. GENTRY: Cité Internationale des Arts -- I'm saying it in French, with an American accent. It's a place where they have studios for artists, painters, and also musicians. Not students, from different countries, and each country has one or two studios backed by, financed by the country itself. America has four studios but they're backed by companies, not by individuals. And to go there you have to apply from the States. But I lived in Paris and I was there, so Darthea Speyer got me in there because she had a lot of pull.

MS. KIRWIN: What year was that?

MR. GENTRY: I was breaking up from my second wife -- everything is measured by my children. Well, that's what life is about, you know?

MS. KIRWIN: I want to go back to that exhibition that she had organized. There was a story, it was a juried exhibition and hundreds of paintings were submitted, and none were deemed suitable for exhibition; this was an exhibition of "Americans in France." I was just wondering whether -- this was 1953, if it was one that Darthea Speyer organized it.

MR. GENTRY: What reasons did they give?

MS. KIRWIN: Well, this is the problem. Trying to get to the bottom of the story as to why none of these works were deemed suitable to exhibit, and I was just wondering if you had submitted works to that show.

MR. GENTRY: No, no, the reason was -- see, the pretext why I wasn't exhibited: she said, "When you come back to Paris you have to be in Paris to exhibit." I said, "Well, I lived in Paris, I belong to the first group of Americans that came to Paris after World War II." And she said, "Of course you know I like your work." I said, "OK." But I was doing quite well in Scandinavia, too. They were buying my works, you know, I exhibited at the Royal Academy -- the only foreigner ever exhibited there, until one year they exhibited a Danish professor but he's Scandinavian. And you know, in Paris, I mean, I wasn't selling any works, you know the French never bought paintings. You knew that, I guess.

MS. KIRWIN: Who did buy, the Americans?

MR. GENTRY: The French never bought paintings. The French didn't even buy their own masters until recently. Now, they're pushing to buy; they made a big mistake, the French never bought. Foreigners would come to Paris and buy. Foreigners loved to buy paintings in Paris but the French themselves didn't buy at that period. I'm glad you mentioned that because I want to find out more about that. I'll see her when I go to Paris –

MS. KIRWIN: OK. If you find out anything -- I wanted to ask about the politics in France. After the War, could you describe maybe the feeling toward Americans in France and then did you see it change --'

MR. GENTRY: Yes, after the War –

MS. KIRWIN: -- in the initial acceptance of Americans as the 1950s progressed and the Korean War started. Was there a greater sense of anti-Americanism in France?

MR. GENTRY: Of course. But in the beginning they were pro-American, helped to liberate the country you know. I think the French like the Frenchmen. I think they're a little -- when you say "the French" you have some who don't and some who do. Meaning that some like Americans. I mean I've met a lot of young French boys and girls who just loved Americans. "I love them" -- you know I think they like the way of life in America -- people are free to move around, and tradition wasn't as old as in France so they didn't have to follow their forefathers as much and they can do what they want in America, and the music, the jazz. It's a new country, lively, Americans are more open. So you had a large amount of the people who loved Americans.

But I say, quite naturally politically I think there were Communists and left wing people who were anti-Americans. And I mean with the McCarthy administration coming into being I think that did a lot to hurt America and make people dislike Americans. Which was unfair because they should never have done that because of this one person. But the French [he laughs] they don't care for many people. But on an individual level I think Americans kind of like the ones who are living in Paris. I mean on a governmental level because the regime of McCarthy I think a lot of Europeans dislike the situation, like a lot of Americans dislike the situation and didn't want anyone to press them. And they were about to lose a lot of great American minds and people that were creative. And many of the film makers and very important people who were hurt had to leave and go to other countries; and of course a lot of them picked Paris. Because it was the city that belonged to the world.

MS. KIRWIN: In France after the War did you feel that there was a sense of an African American arts community in Paris, or –

MR. GENTRY: That's a very good question.

MS. KIRWIN: -- was there no feeling of a society like that?

MR. GENTRY: When you say "artists" do you mean artists as a whole or plastic artists, painters?

MS. KIRWIN: Basically talking about painters.

MR. GENTRY: I'm just trying to think: Romare Bearden came in '50 but he wasn't painting, it was almost like he was painting because he was involved with the painters and he was walking around and visiting museums and discussing painting constantly, and he was a painter. See, when I went over in the beginning, I can't recall another one in '46. But Ed Clark -- ever heard of him? See, I missed him because I had returned to the States. When I returned to the States in '51, '52, Ed Clark came to Paris, I missed him but when I returned we became friends in Paris.

A painter named Williams, who was always alone. I think he came in '51 too. I can't think of all the names right now. I want to remember some because I want to, Ed Clark, Romare Bearden, there's another painter, he should be mentioned. I can't think of his name right now. He should have been on that panel with us.

MS. KIRWIN: Bill Hutson?

MR. GENTRY: Yes, Bill Hutson came over, but he came around – Beauford is '53, Bill Hutson might have gone to Paris around '55 or something like that [1963-1964].

MS. KIRWIN: Was the Civil Rights situation in the United States and discrimination in the arts that exists today to an extent, was that a motivating factor to your being in Europe rather than the United States?

MR. GENTRY: Well, I wasn't conscious of that, I enjoyed the freedom in Paris, which even white Americans felt, if you haven't had that experience, it's very hard to explain to you. It's not the country it's the city. Can you imagine, first being away from your parents, on your own, to move on your own? To be able to make a turn, do anything you want to do more or less, and if you're an artist – really to go and express yourself without having to

join a club or – Being away from home that’s enough. So Paris, I liked it like a Swede would like it or like any other young person would have acted that comes from a background that was stiff. Not that my family was stiff, but for example, I’ll give you an example. You would meet Swedes, and when I had the club, Swedes would come. And you would see them, and “What are you doing?” “Well, I’m eating bread.” “Why are you eating bread?” “Well, fresh bread is good.” “I haven’t got so much money.” “Why don’t you go home?” “No, no, I’m happy here.” [Laughs.] Starving, but happy. Freedom is important, freedom of the mind. Oh it’s so stiff in Sweden, you know. You find that, that’s true for all foreigners, they felt free, and most of them came from well to do families, who are upper-middle class. So they came from areas where, from families where they felt secure financially. So, Paris you just felt free, free in Paris. And that’s even how a lot of foreign young guys and girls feel about coming to America, especially to New York or the larger cities. You can do anything you want to do, like in Sweden you can’t throw garbage in the street, you can’t do this, you can’t ride your bicycle on the sidewalks. You can’t do all those things, but young people want that. They’re tired, Momma says “pull up your pants, do this, do that.” So I think that’s one of the things in Paris, you’re able to do that what you wanted to do without bruising or hurting someone else. So I think Americans felt that, especially under McCarthy. That was a terrible man, and I think it was due to him, that a lot of people might have been jealous of America, envied America, because they disliked Americans. Also some of them had a pretext, because they could use this one person and say that’s all Americans. Once you met Americans, they were much more open than most people and the French will admit that and they liked them one to one.

MS. KIRWIN: Did you exhibit at any of the salons in Paris?

MR. GENTRY: Oh yes, I’ve exhibited at a number of salons down there. The Automne a number of them, yes. They are not as important as they used to be. I exhibited at Gallery Seine, which was one of the top galleries at that time, and I met Michel Tapie was very important art critic, he wrote about me in Paris.

MS. KIRWIN: I wanted to ask you how the French critics reacted to the American painters in France.

MR. GENTRY: I told you that before, just have to say this: I think they had a little prejudice, they closed out. The French can be that way too. That’s why I had to form the new gallery. “Oh, American’s can’t paint, American’s don’t know anything about art history.” And then they have their prejudice. That was unfair. We had some American artists who were really doing great work.

MS. KIRWIN: You’ve been identified with the CoBrA group, what does that mean to you?

MR. GENTRY: CoBrA, you know what it means don’t you? C-O for Copenhagen, B-R for Brussels and A for Amsterdam. Well I knew a lot of them because they were in Paris, I was in Paris before some of them. I know Corneille, I know Appel [Karel Appel], I know all of them, but I was in Paris before they were there. CoBrA, I think started in ’49 [November 8, 1948], I was there in ’46, but at that time when the CoBrA movement started, that type of work way of approaching art started in three areas. At least three I know of, it could have started in more, in France is was Tachism, you’ve hear of Tachism, their approach to spontaneity in painting, Abstract Expressionism in America, and in Scandinavia and Holland you had the CoBrA and they were smart. They worked in Paris, so they were able to have that momentum of being in Paris. And they were smart too because they had C-O, for Copenhagen, and B-R, for Brussels and A for Amsterdam, so there’s three countries, so that could give them this power that they had three countries involved. To be a member of CoBrA you didn’t necessarily have to be from those three countries, but the people from three countries named the organization and they were in the forefront, so those countries got the power, but you had English CoBrA, you had an American-Japanese, Tajiri [Shinkichi Tajiri], have you ever heard of him?

MS. KIRWIN: Yes.

MR. GENTRY: I just left him, not too recently.

MS. KIRWIN: Yes, well he was connected to the Gallery Huit (Paris) wasn’t he?

MR. GENTRY: Yes, Tajiri’s a very important person.

MS. KIRWIN: Is he now in Sweden or Denmark?

MR. GENTRY: No, he’s in Holland. Shinkichi Tajiri, well you may know him, he’s Japanese-American, he’s a painter and he worked with [Isamu] Noguchi when he was in the prison camp – concentration camp, no not a concentration camp. What were they called, during World War II? [Internment camps]

MS. KIRWIN: What were they called, they’re not detention camps?

MR. GENTRY: No, not detention? I can’t think of it.



MS. KIRWIN: Detainment? I know what you mean? We'll have to fill that in later.

MR. GENTRY: Anyways, he decided that he would be one of the ones to volunteer to fight in the American army in World War II. You heard about that didn't you?

MS. KIRWIN: You told me about it.

MR. GENTRY: So we talked about that. And I think I explained to you that he was well-liked in Paris. I mean really, he was a nice guy, a likable person, he is still. And while he was in the Grande Chaumiere, right away I think I told you that, people saw that he was very special in his artwork. And Kosta Alex who will be here soon, I'd like him to do something for me, he's Greek-American, first generation American, both parents came from Greece. Great sculptor, he built his studio right next to the Grande Chaumiere and Tajiri took it over after Alex left. Tajiri, right away, they saw that he had something special to give in his way of approaching his sculptures. And didn't I tell you [a group from] Holland came and they saw his work, and invited him to come to Holland. While he was a student, he was a nobody. So he went to Holland and after about a year and a half, the second year, they invited him to represent them in the Biennale, saying that he was the greatest sculptor in Holland. Isn't that an honor?

MS. KIRWIN: Very, yes.

MR. GENTRY: So he did that, then he lived in Amsterdam. He always wanted a castle, eventually he bought a castle on the border of Belgium and Holland [Castle Scheres in Baarlo]. I visited him a year and a half ago, 38 rooms. And he came back here, and he got a little disappointed, something happened, I don't know what it was. He didn't feel free here, and he went back. But when I was in San Francisco, I went to a Japanese gallery and I told them about him. I asked them if they were interested in just Japanese artists or - it's a Japanese gallery - or Japanese-American. And I went there, and they said "We're interested in you!" Then they asked me about Tajiri and they were interested in him to exhibit there. Very nice gallery.

MS. KIRWIN: I'd like to get in touch with him if you have his address?

MR. GENTRY: I can't give it to you now, but I will give it you because it's - Mary Anne [Mary Anne Rose], is here, I'll ask her, my wife.

MS. KIRWIN: Ok. How does your work relate to stylistically to other artists who were members of CoBrA?

MR. GENTRY: Well, there's a certain spontaneity that exists. I work with my, my subconscious plays a great role, I don't calculate, I'm not generalistic and the form plays the great role. The figures come into it, the faces come into my work, that I don't calculate to be the types that appear, but they are the types that I've met in my life. My base is African American also it's in my paintings the people I've met throughout the world, American, African American, but I've met people throughout the world, who are my friends who actually I love and we've done things together so this appears in my work. But not generalistic.

MS. KIRWIN: When did you arrive at this, has your work always been related to some aspect of spontaneity or is this something that you developed when you were in Paris?

MR. GENTRY: Well, I think that as I got older it has been developing more and more, because I believe that everything one sees is photographed in the subconscious, but the positive things, esthetically, the statements come out when you need them in paintings. I think that should be in writing also. It's not in journalism because there you definitely have, must write about, definite say on that subject where the mind is constantly working alone, and I think that's an important part about what art is about not just because it's my way of doing. I almost know that now, at my age. Art is mysterious, it's about me, it's about you -

[END OF TAPE 2, SIDE A]

MR. GENTRY: [In progress] - it's about my family, my forefather's, my mother's, it's not only me who's painting, it's the people who lived before me, connected with me because I feel that when you are painting, it should not be difficult for you, it comes to a time where it should not be difficult for you. If you have lived a certain period of time, you've been working at this one thing it should be a little easier for you because what you are doing - you're noting what you've done, what you've seen, what you've experienced in life. From this point of view, from an inner point of view, not an outer.

MS. KIRWIN: I ran across this name, and I don't even know how to pronounce it, but I wanted to ask you about it because I'm completely in the dark about this - what's that word there, Danish? H-Ø-S-T-E-N [means autumn - in Denmark the Danish artists traditionally exhibited as groups in salon-style shows, the group Ms. Kirwin refers to would have been one of these. Gentry was invited to exhibit as a guest with such a group after living in Denmark several years], I ran into this in one of the catalogs about you. Are you familiar with that word, it's a

movement?

MR. GENTRY: Oh yes, I know, that's a group, a northern group of artists and they are a little bit something like CoBrA. They wanted to compare that. That's another group of artists.

MS. KIRWIN: How do you pronounce it?

MR. GENTRY: It's a Danish word, (pronounces it), it doesn't relate to almost anything, here let me see.

MS. KIRWIN: I wanted to ask you that question because I had never heard of that group.

MR. GENTRY: No. I'd like to go over with my wife, go over it again. I think it's a Danish group that came before CoBrA, that's what it was. If you really wanted, when Mary Anne comes we can go over it again. That's what I figured, it's a long time ago.

MS. KIRWIN: Ok. Are a lot of these monotypes here at the gallery.

MR. GENTRY: No, most of these are graphics, they're lithographs or serigraphs and some are etchings and the drawings of course.

MS. KIRWIN: Are the ones at the museum monotypes?

MR. GENTRY: We have three graphics and then you have oil on paper, we renamed it used to be monoprint, it's a one time print, Romare Bearden and Herbert Gentry renamed them. Bearden did it mostly because when he first did these monoprints. I saw them, when I came back from Paris and I said "Gee they are beautiful," he was much freer, even though his works are great, but he was much freer because you have to work very fast. But it's oil based, instead of them calling them monoprints, because it's a print, it's a one thing, you can call it monoprint, then people say it's prints, it's more than a print, so he named them "oil on papers." If he had called them just a print. You have to work fast. Have you ever seen it done?

MS. KIRWIN: I've done them with glass.

MR. GENTRY: Oh, you've done it with glass same thing, so you know then it's oil based. So you work fast. Therefore, if you can get everything in, oh, you're a painter?

MS. KIRWIN: No, my husband's a painter, but I've made prints this way.

MR. GENTRY: You work fast right, and you work before it dries and then [hits the table for effect] when you finish it's a print, however with me, I was not satisfied with that because I like the idea of spontaneity, but there are certain forms that it's not finished, it's not enough so I used to take them home and paint on them, so I finished it off with oil paint, and it's oil based, so that's "oil on paper," that's a painting. And Bearden did the same.

MS. KIRWIN: How did it come about that you worked on something together? You gave me a video of you creating something -

MR. GENTRY: It's too bad you can't see it now, because that would maybe help you - The Danish filmmakers came over to New York and they wanted to do a film on African American's contribution to the cultural life of New York City. This was just a segment of it. So they interviewed a lot of the writers, musicians, dancers, it's a big thing. Then they came over and they said they wanted to see Romare Bearden. So we went out to his studio and then someone asked me who did I like in music, and then they asked Bearden. I don't know how it got started, but then someone asked, "Well, what about, why don't you play something?" So we put Count Basie on. So someone said, "Why don't you do a painting?" "OK." So he put the paper out there, and he had this liquid paint and he put the music on and we painted. I had never done that before, and he had never done that before either. Because I love him and he loves me it was very easy. Very easy to work, I never thought of working with someone and we talked while we were doing this. And everyone asks me, "Where's that painting?" I suspect that someone, I think I saw this person take this work out. I mentioned it to him, he said, "No Romare took it." I know Romare didn't take it, it was at a show and it turned out to be fine. And Romare says, "This is what I do, and this is what Herbie does?" He's so sweet you know. I'll just give you a highlight, Romare says, "We didn't paint that, we danced" and I said "Yes, we danced" and that's what art is, the inner person, the inner dance is expressed.

MS. KIRWIN: When did you move to Sweden?

MR. GENTRY: I had an exhibition in Stockholm in 1960.

MS. KIRWIN: Was it because you were exhibiting so often?

MR. GENTRY: Yes, I had an exhibition in Stockholm. I went to Stockholm for this exhibition, a very nice gallery, old Swedish lady, very nice lady, she had a son in Spain, she's passed now. She had a very nice gallery, many of the top Swedish artists, that's where had their first big show. And she picked that which she felt was great, that's what she said. And I had this exhibition, and it was very nice, vernissage [exhibition opening] and everything, and that evening I wanted to go home, I had an apartment right across the street, she had an apartment for the artists. And there was a Swedish doctor and his wife, who was a doctor too, "Oh, you have to go to the English speaking club." "Oh, I'm sorry I don't want to go." "Please, we'll drive you there, and we'll drive you back." Really I'm a morning person, believe it or not. I like to get up in the morning. But I went, and when I went there, it was a big, not a hall, but something like a hall or square. I sat in front of two women, and I was so sleepy. And some of the people had been to my show, and there were a few Americans there, Swedes, and native speaking. And just to be polite I asked one of the ladies who we were talking, "May I have the dance." But I was so sleepy. And she said yes. At first one of the one I had asked, she told her girlfriend, "He thinks he's something the way he's looking." And I wasn't paying any attention, I was so sleepy. But it was an English speaking club, and I met a few Americans and some Swedes. And a few people from Senegal and then I danced again, and we talked a bit. And I said, "May I have another dance?" We danced. This sounds like too much, but it's true, she told her girlfriend, "That's the man I could spend the rest of my life with." And I met her, and we married.

MS. KIRWIN: And that's your wife now?

MR. GENTRY: No, that's not my wife now. [Laughs]

MS. KIRWIN: That's your second - what was her name?

MR. GENTRY: That was Ingrid.

MS. KIRWIN: Ingrid.

MR. GENTRY: And she was Swedish.

MS. KIRWIN: What was her last name?

MR. GENTRY: Her last name then was Stenvinkel.

MS. KIRWIN: Can you spell that?

MR. GENTRY: S-T-E-N-V-I-N-K-E-L.

MS. KIRWIN: Ok, thank you.

MR. GENTRY: We danced, and it was very nice, and the next day she came to my exhibition. And we started seeing each other. And then I went back to Denmark. I wrote letters to her. Her brother's a painter [Jan Stenvinkel].

MS. KIRWIN: When was that marriage?

MR. GENTRY: We stayed together from 1962 to 1976.

MS. KIRWIN: How did you meet your third wife?

MR. GENTRY: Who's here? [Laughs]

MS. KIRWIN: Yes, I need to know her name too.

MR. GENTRY: [Mary Anne Rose] You'll meet her, she's upstairs. You ever been to Sweden?

MS. KIRWIN: I've went to Malmo?

MR. GENTRY: That's where we have our place.

MS. KIRWIN: It's very nice.

MR. GENTRY: So I'm in Malmo and New York. What did you ask?

MS. KIRWIN: Your third wife, how you met?

MR. GENTRY: Oh yes, I had a studio in Cité Internationale des Arts, but I was in New York and Sweden. I kept the studio, and I was in New York and me and my second wife we were breaking up. Something was happening and a little bit of jealousy on my part at the Royal Academy. Her people were really big in the art world, but they had

never exhibited at the Royal Academy. That started something funny happening within the family, maybe the Swedes. I the American foreigner had the biggest show you could have in the country. And I think this – her brother was a painter – we were very close – but I think something happened, and we were sort of falling apart. So I was in New York and she said, “I’m going on my vacation and why don’t you come home and mind the children [in Stockholm].” And I said, “Of course,” I went back to Sweden and took care of my kids for three weeks, had a wonderful time. Then I looked on the table in our house, she never wrote, she called home, and “If you want to we can get a divorce, in two weeks,” you can do that in Sweden, fast, so I didn’t bother to do anything and just before I left and I signed the papers. Then I went to Paris. She said, “Why did you sign those, I didn’t mean it.” Anyway, so she came down with my little girl, she was calling night and day, and it was finished for me. I was hurt. Later I learned there’s so much finer in life that men and women are a little different in that area. I should have known that being with so many aunts. Anyway, it’s a different thing between a male and female. And I see that now. She’s a very fine person. I took care of the kids, and she came back the same day, and I went back to Paris. On the way there I went to the art fair in Basel, it’s one of the most important art fairs. Basel every year in June, and I had two things in that art fair. Then I returned to the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris. When I was at the Cité, every night she was calling, long conversations, waking me up at three o’clock in the morning, “Oh we made mistakes” and I was very sad, here’s the second time I’m losing my children. It bothered me very much. I’ll always stay in Stockholm, Sweden, or at least near to them. So I’m sitting in the lobby of the Cité one afternoon and I was supposed to go and see someone else’s paintings, an American painter and then I was going to go to dinner at this American restaurant, in Montmatre, and then see a film. But I was very sad, and all of a sudden someone walks over to me, “Look, I’ve been here for ten days and the manager tells me you speak English?” And I said, “Yes” and we started talking and I liked her voice, and maybe because she was American and I was really homesick, had just left America. She was bouncy, American bouncy, and she was much younger than me. So all of a sudden I said, “Would you care to have dinner?” And I took her to dinner. And we talked and laughed, I had never had so much fun in my life. But she claims, she will tell you that I said, “Are you American, do you have a Eurorail pass?” “Do you want to travel?” I don’t remember saying it that fast. Anyway, then we traveled together, throughout Europe. We had a wonderful time. And that’s a very important thing, to travel with someone. And that’s 13 years ago, and you’ll see her.

MS. KIRWIN: Well, when you can travel with them then –

MR. GENTRY: Yes.

MS. KIRWIN: You can marry them. [Laughs]

MR. GENTRY: Yes, but I taught her how to travel, because I had traveled and exhibited in different places and now she’s younger than me, but we have a lot in common she’s a painter. We’re good friends, a love and friendship. We have a lot of fun together. But she claimed that I right away said “Do you want to travel?” I don’t remember saying that, but then right away we talked about there are two classes of men after divorce and how they react to women. And it’s true I guess. I didn’t think I fit either of them, I know a lot of friends who stay single, by themselves. Or others who make a pass right away. Have you heard about that too? That’s why I guess I was waiting for this one, this bouncy voice. We’ve had a nice time. And I have three kids, and when they saw me with her, right away, my little girl, Elsie she was only about five, and Nicholas was about seven or eight, and we went to the hotel and right away they got into bed, you know, and that’s Daddy’s. At that period they accepted it right away, because they hadn’t seen me. And you’ll get to meet her.

MS. KIRWIN: How long have you maintained a studio in New York?

MR. GENTRY: Well, you ever heard of a museum director named, Pontus Hultén?

MS. KIRWIN: Yes.

MR. GENTRY: Pontus Hultén was the former director of Moderna Museet in Stockholm, and at that time, it had the largest collection of American Art, than any other museum. Pontus was the director [1958-1973]. Next was the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. And Pontus, he was my friend, and he heard I was going back to America. He said, “Do you think I could do it in New York?” You know he did the machine show at the Modern museum [*The Machine as seen at the end of the Mechanical Age*, 1968], I don’t know if you knew that? And he was offered directorship of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. He’s like the most important man in museum world of contemporary art. He said, “Can I do something for you?” And I’m like, how can this Swedish guy help me, I’m from New York, and he said, “May I suggest something?” and he suggests “Go to the Chelsea Hotel. You know the Chelsea Hotel?” “No.” “Well go there, and I’ll come over in ten days, take your family there, I was still married to Ingrid, and we’ll have Swedish, Christmas breakfast with you.” I said, “OK, I’ll look it up” and the second thing he gave a letter to me, to present to Bill Rubin Museum of Modern Art, Twentieth-century art, and he says “Give this letter, and I’ll see you.” So I went to Bill Rubin, and I gave him the letter and Bill Rubin says “You know I don’t see anybody, because I’m crippled.” A lot of people didn’t know that, I didn’t know. He said, “My wife knew you in Paris, she’s gone to your club. But look at this letter and I’m going to read it to you,” and

then read it, "Dear Bill, this note will introduce Herbert Gentry. We have a number of his paintings in our museums in Sweden, but dear Bill, he is an American." That's what Pontus did. Then Bill said, "I can't visit, but I'll send someone by." They came by and they said they liked, and nothing happened until recently, when Agnes Gund bought - You ever heard of Agnes Gund? Agnes Gund is the woman who started a project in New York called Studio in the Schools (began 1977), where artists meet artists. The young artists are children; the other artists are professional artists. Mary Anne works under that project, where they teach the artists, I mean guide the young artists. She's started that program, Agnes Gund, a very wealthy woman, because they didn't have art in the public schools, they had them when I was going to school in New York. So she helped to finance this, and she put it into the New York public schools, and then she has corporations that help her. You should maybe get her, Agnes Gund. They're very wealthy, and now she will be director of the Museum of Modern Art, head of their board. Now why did I mention her? Oh, yes, yes, anyway, she bought a painting of mine. She said she wants to put it in the Museum of Modern Art, now she's the president. She has a beautiful collection.

MS. KIRWIN: What year was that you came back and stayed in the Chelsea Hotel?

MR. GENTRY: Yes, that year, that was 1970, and we got a place there. Officially it's our apartment, seventy percent, no about sixty-five percent of the people at the Chelsea Hotel are permanent residents, so I'm the permanent resident there, it's my place. It's not like a hotel, it's our place. You said you haven't been to Chelsea?

MS. KIRWIN: Well, I haven't been inside.

MR. GENTRY: You must visit, when you're in New York. I have a painting up on the wall, Larry Rivers - and others.

MS. KIRWIN: But your studio is separate?

MR. GENTRY: My studio is separate. We've moved three times, I had a studio in Harlem for a while. And one of the reasons I got that studio, [my wife] Mary Anne [Rose] shares with me. We work together, that's another thing too. Studios are expensive to have. You ever heard of the Schomburg Library? They knew about a building in Harlem, it was a storage building, and they were thinking about converting some of the storage space into studios, because they wanted to try to bring back Harlem as a cultural area if they could. So they invited a young African American artist there, and gave him a year's rent free. And then they advertised, no journalists wrote about this place, and they asked me did I want to get a place there. They thought it would be very nice to have an older artist there too, encourage, to speak to younger artists. I thought it was a big space, and it was reasonable, but I thought that would be good, because I'm from Harlem. Another kind of Harlem, but I still lived in Harlem and we got that space.

MS. KIRWIN: Who was the other artist that was there first?

MR. GENTRY: Well a lot of them were not known, the younger artists, but then there was upstairs on the sixth floor were some known artists. Have you ever been to the Studio Museum in Harlem?

MS. KIRWIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MR. GENTRY: Well you know the director [Kinshasha Holman Conwill], her husband has a studio there, what's his name?

MS. KIRWIN: Conwill was her last name.

MR. GENTRY: It will come to me. Well, he [Houston Conwill] has a studio there, and a few very well known photographers are on the sixth floor. Anyway we had a big space, it was very nice and we loved it, even going up there was pretty rough. The space was so beautiful. Then they had trouble heating the place and finally they said they would heat by electricity, and that would cost like three times the amount of money. So we decided to get another place, down on 27th street, not too far from the Chelsea, which was smaller but it was very convenient. While we were in Europe this time, the people we sublet this from, the woman's a photographer, she has a whole floor, she rents from the man who owns the building, so just when we're about to return to New York this time, we got a message, she called us and said that they have to move. They found another place, that we really liked, so we said we'll move in there with you. It's a little bit smaller, she and her new husband got the entire floor, she's a photographer. So we have another place, it's very nice, not as big as the one in Harlem, but we can work there. It's right across from the Empire State building, it's very nice, you can see it. So that's what we have.

MS. KIRWIN: Well, I guess I don't have any more questions. I wish we had more than one day to do this, because I could then listen to it and come back. Maybe we could interview you again sometime in New York.

MR. GENTRY: That would be fine and if there's something you want to ask me, give me a call.

MS. KIRWIN: Is there something you would want to add?

MR. GENTRY: No. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Last updated... *February 1, 2006*