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Oral history interview with William Thon, 1992 December 15-16

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with William Thon on December 15-16, 1992. The interview took place in Port Clyde, Maine, and was conducted by Robert Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

[TAPE 1, SIDE A]

ROBERT BROWN: By talking a bit about some of your earliest memories . . . . You were born in New York, in Manhattan itself, I believe in 1906?

WILLIAM THON: That is right.

ROBERT BROWN: Can you say something about your family and what you recall of it? What was its background?

WILLIAM THON: I was one of four children, two boys, two girls. My father was a pharmacist. His father had been a pharmacist and indeed the drug store on 6th Avenue in New York between 11th and 12th downtown. I can remember as children going to visit my grandfather. We were far more interested in the shop that was right next door to him which was a taxidermist and we were enthralled by looking at the mounted foxes and owls and one thing and another with our noses pressed up against the window. This drug store was the type in those days that had the big red and green glass vessels in both sides of the window.

ROBERT BROWN: Your grandfather, had he come to this country from Germany?

WILLIAM THON: Yes, he had. He came from the region around Darmstad, somewhere near the end of the Civil War, as a young man.

ROBERT BROWN: Did he train as a pharmacist over there?

WILLIAM THON: I suspect he trained over there. I think probably he was a pharmacist when he arrived, somewhere about 1875.

ROBERT BROWN: What do you recall of him? Do you remember him pretty well?

WILLIAM THON: He was stern, not a warm individual. He was a small man physically, had a full beard and not given to too much conversation. One of the things about him I remember most of all was the trouble he took at Christmas time in erecting a tree. In his house in Brooklyn there was a billiard room. It was a four-story house. He would start erecting a Christmas tree about a month ahead of time in order to have it finished on time and it was put up on a platform, probably about 6x8 feet, maybe a foot and a half off the ground and the whole top of this platform was organized as a kind of a park. He had a fountain in the front with running water and goldfish in the fountain and throughout the area there were little pathways with little lamp posts such as they had in New York at the time and they were lighted with gas. There were little gas jets in these things. In fact, the entire Christmas tree was lighted with gas. There was rubber tubing that ran all of the tree, little tiny tubing, probably one-eighth inch in diameter, and it was broken up into series so that they wouldn't all turn on at one time. It would be difficult in lighting it.

ROBERT BROWN: He presumably assembled all this if not made it?

WILLIAM THON: He probably made it all. I have never heard before or since anybody that ever had a tree that was lighted with gas jets. It was unique and something to see.

ROBERT BROWN: Were these little jets covered? I mean it could be an extreme fire hazard.

WILLIAM THON: Well, they were open like a candle would be. Of course the jets were tiny, only a little quarter-inch jets. They had to be very carefully placed and I guess you constantly had to watch it.

ROBERT BROWN: Your grandfather was extremely clever, it seems, with his hands in a technical sense then.

WILLIAM THON: He did woodwork with a scroll saw and made a lot of things like cuckoo clocks and the like which my father carried on after his father was gone. I know my father had an import license. He used to buy the works for the cuckoo clocks in Germany and have them shipped over here a dozen at a time and then he'd put them in his clocks which he would never sell but he would always give them away. And at home I can remember as a

small boy listening to all of these clocks cuckooing at different times because none of them was ever coordinated and there would be a dozen clocks all going off. Probably for twenty minutes we would have cuckoo going on.

ROBERT BROWN: In the midst of all this fascination with things technical, how did your mother fare? What was her background?

WILLIAM THON: My mother was a very docile woman who didn't have a whole lot to say. She was loving and kind and a typical mother of the period. Took excellent care of us and she was always there when we came home from school. She tolerated this whole thing, perhaps even enjoyed it. I don't know. My mother was a combination of English and Irish background.

ROBERT BROWN: What was her personality like? You said she was loving.

WILLIAM THON: She was quiet, loving, had no interests outside of the home. She was not a club woman, didn't engage in any activities outside. Her entire life was devoted to the family. She never worked a day in her life. She was always home. I guess that's something that's gone by now.

ROBERT BROWN: Your father, on the other hand, was much more outgoing?

WILLIAM THON: Well, he took charge. He inherited some of the Germanic aspects, I guess, of his father and he took charge. When we were teenagers, we had to inform when we were going out, where we were going, and what time we'd return. And if we were not in when we had declared we'd be, he would come out looking for us and we'd go home getting jawed the whole way. My father was not a big man physically. I don't think he weighed more than about 125 in his life, but there was no doubt that he was in charge.

ROBERT BROWN: Was there German spoken in the home or had there been among your grandparents?

WILLIAM THON: In my grandfather's house German was spoken but not by the time we came along.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you aware growing up at that time in New York of an ethnic community of Germans?

WILLIAM THON: No, we didn't live in an ethnic community, I don't think. I wasn't aware of it. No, we lived in the outskirts of Brooklyn, out near the Queens border and there were no ethnic aspects to it.

ROBERT BROWN: Mentioned in an essay on you from 1964 by Allen Gruskin, you talked to him about your father developing this idea of you children going to Staten Island or the whole family went from about April to October for a period of years.

WILLIAM THON: That's correct.

ROBERT BROWN: How did he decide that? It seems like that would go against the instincts of a disciplinarian. He had to pull you out of school for one thing to take you.

WILLIAM THON: We transferred. We would transfer to a school in Staten Island and go by foot, trolley car to the school. The city would issue rebate tickets to ride. On a 5-cent trolley we would get it for, say, 2 cents with our ticket which we could buy at the school. We took our lunch all the time. There was no such thing as school lunch. We took it in a brown bag. We got along all right that way and at the end of the term we went back there; that is, when the school stared in the fall, we'd go back for a month of two until it was time to move back to the city to join the city schools in Brooklyn.

ROBERT BROWN: What was your father's idea in taking you from about April until October to Staten Island?

WILLIAM THON: Getting the family out of the hot city. We grew up on a beach and ran around without shoes all summer long and bathing suits. We were in and out of the water and grew to like it very much. We felt at home in the water; it was real camping.

ROBERT BROWN: At that time were you already drawing or interested in putting ideas down on paper or canvas, at a fairly early age?

WILLIAM THON: Probably somewhere around eight or ten years old, there was a woman who lived nearby who made black and white pen drawings which interested me enormously and I tried doing something like that with a pen and she would help me. At one point I took a piece of canvas, I learned that was what artists worked on and I nailed it onto the bottom of a wooden box and proceeded to paint a moonlight marine right on the dry canvas and I found it very difficult to put the paint on. I had to scrub it into the weave of the canvas because I didn't know anything about having to ground the canvas or prime it or anything of the sort. It was a piece of dry canvas. We lived in a tent in those days and this was a piece of tent canvas. It wasn't very successful.

ROBERT BROWN: It seems symptomatic of someone who was not only fascinated by determined to try out something.

WILLIAM THON: It was a long time before I found out that a canvas had to be treated with a ground and then a primer and whatnot. Quite a few years went around before I found out about that.

ROBERT BROWN: You got encouragement in these little things from your parents to make drawings?

WILLIAM THON: Yes. I think that they didn't discourage it at any rate and I supposed were amused by it. I used to seize on the blank pages at the front and back of the family books that I'd find in the library shelves and make drawings all over the blank pages which they didn't probably appreciate.

ROBERT BROWN: What about in school itself? Were there such things as formal art instruction?

WILLIAM THON: Very rudimentary. It was the same teacher that taught history and geography and arithmetic and, when the teacher found out that I had some little facility in drawing, I would be asked to draw the picture on the blackboard of the apple or the cup. And I could probably do it better than she could so I always got the job of demonstrating to the class how it should be done.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you become pretty confident in your abilities?

WILLIAM THON: Not really, I don't think. But there was very little art instruction available in the public school at that time. We're talking now about 1910, 1912. It's pretty early. They weren't aware so much about things like art, poetry, music in the schools.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you begin before you were six? Was there a kindergarten at that time in the city?

WILLIAM THON: I didn't go to kindergarten. I went right into the first grade.

ROBERT BROWN: And you had three siblings. Can you briefly describe them? You were the second of four children.

WILLIAM THON: I was the second of four, yes, none of whom showed interest in drawing whatsoever.

ROBERT BROWN: What were their interests and were they boys, girls?

WILLIAM THON: One other was a boy and there were two girls. I guess the girls studied the piano. They received music lessons but the boys didn't. I learned how to play a little bit on the piano by myself and thoroughly outraged everybody by making so much noise about it.

ROBERT BROWN: What happened? Did they ask you not to do it again?

WILLIAM THON: No, no. They were amused by it but I gradually realized how bad I played so, by the time I became of age, I no longer went near a piano.

ROBERT BROWN: Was your family religious?

WILLIAM THON: My mother went to church and tried to encourage churchgoing and we went because it was the thing to do every Sunday but we never really took much active part in churchgoing.

ROBERT BROWN: Then there was no church schools you went to?

WILLIAM THON: No. There was some Sunday School, I remember, but we never went very much. There was no emphasis -- my father was not very religious so he didn't lay the law down in that direction.

ROBERT BROWN: Were there other entertainments or studies that you had outside school? For example, did the family or you go to museums or to the theater or to vaudeville?

WILLIAM THON: There was a period when the family about once a week or ten days or so would go to a movie theater which also had vaudeville of the period. This is around the time of the first World War and we saw various vaudeville acts that came around at that time. Nothing organized about our going. It just would occur now and then. There wasn't a whole lot of money, I suppose, when the four kids had to be taken care of on my father's meager pharmacist's pay in those days. Just about once every week one of the four kids would need a new pair of shoes, for example. That was quite a drain on the family purse.

ROBERT BROWN: Did your father own his business?

WILLIAM THON: No. He was an employee. He didn't want to own his own business. My father had a gypsy-like

attitude towards business and he didn't care for the attitude that was required to handle customers. He didn't want to have anything to do with the public. He wanted to stay back in the prescription department and let him operate which he did rather well, I guess. But he didn't want to handle the public.

ROBERT BROWN: When you lived in a tent on Staten Island in the summer, he would just commute and go into town by ferry?

WILLIAM THON: He had to use all manner of transportation. It took him about two hours. He worked somewhere near the Grand Central district in Manhattan so he had to go on a trolley car, transfer to a steam train that was part of the Baltimore and Ohio that ran from Midland Beach up to St. George where he would then get on a ferryboat and then, landing at South Ferry in the end of Manhattan, he would get on a train and go up to 42nd Street. It took about two hours and a half each way. He certainly had his family in mind when he was willing to do that and in those days each week he would have to be there in the store until midnight. So every other week he didn't get home until 2:30 in the morning.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean a whole week where he'd have to stay there until quitting time?

WILLIAM THON: Yes, that's right. He spent just about three hours a day or more, four hours just traveling. And he was willing to do that.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, he must have felt even for himself it was such a tonic to wake up on Staten Island in the summer rather than the city.

WILLIAM THON: And it was cool, yes, and there was a beach and we were in and out of the water all day long. I guess he enjoyed that.

ROBERT BROWN: Did he ever talk to you or your brothers and sisters about going on in science or anything of that sort? Was there discussion of your plans for life? Was that sort of thing openly discussed?

WILLIAM THON: To some extent. His recommendation was that if we didn't care to continue in school to get some kind of a classical education, the best thing we could do would be to learn some kind of a trade. He never insisted that we become pharmacists. He hadn't liked it himself when his father forced him into the business so he was not going to fall into that trap with us. No, there was no pressure brought to do anything and neither my brother nor I learned any kind of a trade. I think I went as far as grammar school in formal education and then came out and went to work and got jobs here and there. I think in about 1925 I met somebody who convinced me that I should go to art school so I enrolled in 1925.

ROBERT BROWN: You were about nineteen then.

WILLIAM THON: Yes, I guess so. I went up and enrolled in the Art Students League in New York at night while I was working during the day. I lasted there about one month. I decided that I didn't like it. All I saw to draw was a plastic cast of a head of Plato or some classical figure.

ROBERT BROWN: And you thought that was rather boring?

WILLIAM THON: I thought it was boring. I spent most of my time up in the coffee shop drinking coffee and making sketches of some of the other students in my sketchbook. Then, after about thirty days I thought, I don't need to pay to do this. I can look at models in the subway. So that's all the education that I've had in art school.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you even happen to go to the Art Students League?

WILLIAM THON: A friend had recommended it. He had been there and actually was a very good student and was earning a bit of money as a commercial artist. I thought that that was wonderful that he was able to do that and I thought I would emulate him. But it didn't work out that way with me.

ROBERT BROWN: You had previously worked for awhile in a commercial art studio. Your job was a rather mechanical one, I gather.

WILLIAM THON: Well, they gave me a broom. In the first place they said they could only pay me $10 a week because I wasn't worth any more. There wasn't anything they could give me that I could do that would further their business. They said I should get in there before anybody else in the morning and sweep the whole place down which I did. And then they would give me outline of pieces of lettering to fill in the black ink inside of the outline and heaven forbid that I would go over the line anywhere.

ROBERT BROWN: It was a pretty constrictive job.

WILLIAM THON: Well, it was interesting. It was a whole new world to me but I guess I needed more money than

$10 a week so I had to do something else.

ROBERT BROWN: You weren't certain at all even after the Art Students League experience or perhaps particularly because of it that you wanted to become an artist. You weren't certain?

WILLIAM THON: Not seriously. No, I wasn't certain. I can't really say. There probably was no point where there was a clearcut decision made. I guess I simply enjoyed painting. I bought some paints and I found out that you could buy canvas already primed and so largely I guess by doing work at weekends and at nights I gradually learned to like it better and by practice I guess I learned to do it a little bit better from time to time. And I discovered there were museums and galleries and I started to go and look at what had been done before and visiting galleries, looking at it and I decided that some of the things I could do fairly well. What I had seen, I could do things like that myself. So I did.

ROBERT BROWN: You made these excursions on your own?

WILLIAM THON: Yes, on my own. There was one point where I decided to submit a picture to some group show and, low and behold, it was accepted by the jury. It was probably some organization like Allied Artists or one of those organizations in New York. I was of course astonished that a work that I would do would get in a show like that. I was of course delighted and I guess I was on the doorstep when they had the opening so we could get in and see what my picture looked like hanging along side of real painters' work.

ROBERT BROWN: Fairly quickly you were in an exhibition.

WILLIAM THON: I don't remember how old I was at the time.

ROBERT BROWN: You married Helen Walters in 1929.

WILLIAM THON: That is correct.

ROBERT BROWN: And you suddenly had a responsibility not simply to yourself.

WILLIAM THON: That's right. I had to pay the rent and put the food on the table. Of course in those days it wasn't difficult to do. Things were cheap. I remember you could go out and have lunch for about 25 cents and you could get a full course dinner with a bottle of wine for $1.00. Things were cheap. We didn't require a whole lot. We had an apartment. We paid about $40 a month rent. Life was very simple it seemed to me in those days. I remember you could buy a suit of clothes with two pairs of pants for $22.50.

ROBERT BROWN: Now did your wife share your growing interest in art?

WILLIAM THON: Indeed. She was very enthusiastic about it. Became one of my champions. She was very enthusiastic and very encouraging.

ROBERT BROWN: You started, I guess, with a friend a whole company to do advertising displays for pharmaceuticals right after you married.

WILLIAM THON: That's true. We had a little business going in New York where we made window displays for drug stores, pharmaceuticals, and I had a lot of fun. It combined art work with a certain amount of engineering to build some of these window displays which were all made out of something like beaverboard and figures were cut out with a cut awl and then painted.

ROBERT BROWN: A cut awl? What was that?

WILLIAM THON: It was a device that you could cut out figures out of the heavy cardboard. It had a knife that went up and down something like a portable jigsaw except instead of a saw it was a knife blade and you could cut out all kinds of curves with it. So I would draw figures and cut them out and then paint them and use them in these displays.

ROBERT BROWN: You could be pretty creative with this if you wished? You had to talk closely with your clients, I suppose.

WILLIAM THON: Well, I fortunately didn't have to do that. The other part of the business was the salesman and he would take photographs of these displays and take them around and sell the service to the various drugstores all around the metropolitan area. We never would sell any of them. We only rented them and, after a period in a window, we would tell the man it was time for a change now and we would rent him another one and take the other one out and refurbish it and try and place it somewhere else. We had quite a few of them that were making the rounds of all the stores all the way from New Jersey to Westchester and all over New York, Brooklyn.

ROBERT BROWN: You certainly ran it rather cleverly then, didn't you?

WILLIAM THON: Well, it made a living. All through the Depression we didn't have to go in the welfare role or they had some kind of an artists program where they paid artists to paint pictures. I never had to get involved in that. We didn't make a lot of money. We made enough to be able to live on during that trying period around the '30s.

ROBERT BROWN: And your wife also continued to work.

WILLIAM THON: She continued to work.

ROBERT BROWN: Did she stay at a certain job for some time?

WILLIAM THON: Yes, she did until we indeed came up here to Maine to live. She was with the electric company, Edison, down there and did clerical work, bookkeeping and credit work, and so on. She had no problem. Her job was secure. She stayed on it as long as she wanted. She stayed on it all through the war. When I went into the Navy she stayed on at this job and indeed until the end of the war when we decided to come to Maine and build this house. Then she tendered her resignation.

ROBERT BROWN: In your commercial art work with your partner, did you resent having to do that to make a living?

WILLIAM THON: Not at all. I was delighted that I had some skill that was marketable. No, I wasn't resentful whatsoever.

ROBERT BROWN: Because you did then, I gather, in the evenings or whenever you had free time, you would . . . .

WILLIAM THON: I would paint in my studio whenever I had free time.

ROBERT BROWN: Where was your studio, in your house?

WILLIAM THON: Yes, it was the living room, actually, of the house. It was down near the Brooklyn Bridge in Brooklyn. In the meantime, I had become a member of the Sal Magundy Club there in lower Fifth Avenue and there was an outlet there for exhibiting year round and I had then intercourse with other painters and by this time I was put up for membership in a National Academy and so on, and things began to move along.

ROBERT BROWN: This was all still when you were very young, in the 1930's?

WILLIAM THON: It was in the '30s and '40s.

ROBERT BROWN: You became a member of the Salamagundy Club quite early?

WILLIAM THON: Yes, probably somewhere around 1935, I would say.

ROBERT BROWN: Is this a group you knew about and you must have obviously been getting to know fellow artists?

WILLIAM THON: When we moved into a studio down in lower Brooklyn there near the Brooklyn Bridge, we got acquainted with other painters who lived in the various studios in the neighborhood and they were members of the Sal amagundy Club and the Allied Artists and so on. And it became natural for me to seek membership in these organizations to have an outlet for my work.

ROBERT BROWN: Perhaps you could describe some of your friendships with other artists at this time, these very early acquaintances, some of those people who lived in Brooklyn?

WILLIAM THON: Well, one of the men was a man named Ferdinand Warren who later became a National Academician and a prize-winning painter who I liked very much and through him I got to know people like Andrew Winter who later lived on Monhegan out here. In those days Andy lived over on 59th Street in Manhattan in a little one-room place and we used to see him quite often. People like Stowe Wengenroth, the lithographer, and people like that. Next door to me was a man named Ted Moon whose father was the founder and the first president of St. Olaf's College out in Northfield, Minnesota. He was an architect and a portrait painter and indeed a lot of the knowledge that I got out of him as an architect helped me to build this house.

ROBERT BROWN: You had spent a good deal of time with some of these people?

WILLIAM THON: Yes. We enjoyed each other's company and visited around.

ROBERT BROWN: Wegenroth, what was he like? You got to know him very well?

WILLIAM THON: He was a delightful man who knew about this area of Maine. Indeed, he was the one that told me about it; otherwise, I wouldn't have been here. He was a delightful man Quiet, very skilled, very accomplished and good to know.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you feel you were making progress? Were you evolving an individual, personal way of painting? Say about the mid-'30s, were you beginning to develop increasingly self-confidence?

WILLIAM THON: I think that by the middle '30s I was beginning to get some kind of personality in my work that made it a little different from anybody else's. In the beginning, I suppose my work was more or less like a lot of other peoples, broad brush, a lot of paint. But, by the middle '30s, I think there was starting some little personal arrangements of composition, handling forms, using light as though it was a dimension of its own. Things of that sort began to creep into my work and I recognized that and allowed it to grow.

ROBERT BROWN: How did that derive, like using light as a dimension in your work? Do you recall how that came about? Just from talking with other painters?

WILLIAM THON: No. It was something in the process of painting that I began to use it as a dimension, somehow as a physical thing that had dimension. It's difficult to describe but my work began to acquire a lot of vertical shapes and the light seemed to be one of them. It became a vertical shape that seemed to work its way into the compositions.

ROBERT BROWN: I noticed that somewhat later, by the '50s or so, there's what you call at one point paneling of color and light in your paintings but that's somewhat later.

WILLIAM THON: It came gradually, you see, and using the light as one of those panels seemed to be a natural thing to do. I suppose there are times and areas where you couldn't tell whether it was light or not or just some other form of color that was introduced in a given space.

ROBERT BROWN: I won't ask about influences but you said by now you were going to museums and going to exhibitions. What are some of the memorable exhibitions you can recall seeing during the Depression, during the 1930's? Were there any that stick out in your mind? Or museum collections?

WILLIAM THON: Well, of course I used to be in the American wing of the Metropolitan quite a lot.

ROBERT BROWN: Were there many contemporary American paintings there?

WILLIAM THON: At the time, the people's work I seemed to admire was a man Kuhnioshi, you might remember him. He was I think teaching at the Art Students League in those days and I liked his painting very much. There was also a man who lived in Brooklyn who we befriended. His name was Charles Harshanye. I don't think he ever became very well known but he had a very distinctive manner of painting and I think at the time there was a critic named Howard Devree on the New York Times who liked him and frequently would pick both he and I out of a group show and perhaps reproduce our work. So we became good friends. I liked his work very much. Sorry I never acquired an example of it.

ROBERT BROWN: What sort of motifs or subjects did he work with?

WILLIAM THON: Landscapes, buildings, shapes, but they were handled in a very personal way. They weren't the usual broad brush impasto type of impressionist-type painting that was all around me at the time. These had a little different slant to them and of course that's why Devree and Edwin Alden Jewell at that time picked both of us out.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you think those critics were looking for something new and something innovative came along and that one particularly at least peaked their interest?

WILLIAM THON: I think so. I think then as now anything that's a little bit different seems to get noticed.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, what about European painters? Do you recall seeing paintings by contemporary Europeans? Matisse, Picasso, any of the Cubists?

WILLIAM THON: Yes. We enjoyed them and of course we worshipped somebody like Cezanne and tried to paint apples like he did. It is difficult at this time to remember all the names of the people I liked. Renoir, particularly loved his beautiful work, his nudes.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you ever go together with other artists and work from a model, do some life studies, things like that?

WILLIAM THON: Yes, we did a good deal of that. We would hire a model about once a week and one of the

studios around Brooklyn and draw with charcoal and I frequently would draw with a tube of burnt sienna oil paint and a one-half inch brush and paper, getting a very broad effect that looked like sepia, a very nice medium, by the way, for doing quick nudes without any detail. We did that about once a week. We'd get a model for about $1.00 an hour.

ROBERT BROWN: Now the discipline of studying and observing closely a model you enjoyed, whereas the plaster casts a few years earlier you had not.

WILLIAM THON: That's right. No, I found them very dull and, being a beginner, they wouldn't allow me into a life class until I had learned how to draw from the "antique" as it was called.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you on your own, regularly sketching things as you saw them?

WILLIAM THON: Yes. I always ran around in the subway going to work with a sketchbook in my pocket and a fountain pen or a charcoal pencil and I'd be drawing everybody in sight.

ROBERT BROWN: And did those become subjects of your paintings in those days?

WILLIAM THON: Not really. I think it was mainly discipline. I think my paintings were almost always landscape, buildings, outdoor shapes and forms and only now and then would a figure creep into it. Of course, I've always loved boats and if you put a boat in the water moving you have to put somebody on board it in order to control it. So willy-nilly a figure would be necessary now and then.

ROBERT BROWN: Why do you suppose it is the natural spaces or the buildings or boats that interested you when it came to putting things down in paint as opposed to making a sketch?

WILLIAM THON: I don't know. I've always loved, I think, loved the shape of trees because for one thing it allowed the utmost liberty. You could do anything you wanted with a tree and no one could say there was never a tree that looked like that. No matter how strange it was you could always probably find one. Gradually I began to paint things out of my head rather than going out sketching them so now I had control over the whole composition and I could do whatever I wanted and almost never anymore do I paint anything that exists the way other people would see it. So now, when I go out sketching, it's simply for enjoyment. I almost never paint anything from what I sketched. I totally compose the thing, maybe using the idea that there was such a thing as that. Now we have up the road here some abandoned granite quarries. I used to do a lot of sketching in them but the only thing now I need to know is that there is such a thing as a quarry and go ahead and design my own quarry and I keep doing that with trees, with painting like that there, that never existed [pointing to a painting] that's entirely composed. So you have complete control over it and I consider that to be more of an art that simply copying some landscape somewhere.

ROBERT BROWN: The granite quarries you've been working at a great many years now.

WILLIAM THON: That's true.

[TAPE 1, SIDE B]

WILLIAM THON: The beauty of nature, the essence of it that I find all around me here now, I seem to look more closely in my mind's eye of the surrounding landscape. Recently we made a short trip up to the Gaspe region in eastern Canada where we were lucky enough to get out in a boat and visit a bird sanctuary and I'm told that there are 300,000 birds there. I've been now concerning myself to try and paint the confusion of about a third of those birds in the air at any one time. It's quite a challenge, I find.

ROBERT BROWN: This painting of what's in your mind's eye set in very early then, didn't it? Working from memory or, as I think you put it, when you had some sort of vision that you wanted to get down on canvas or paper, you would go do it.

WILLIAM THON: Yes. It became apparent to me that this was what I wanted to do quite early and, by the middle '30s or so, I was already disregarding what sketches I would bring home and paint something entirely different from them. I've developed the ability to be able to walk into a photograph and turn, say, ninety degrees to the right or left and then see the things from that perspective which changes the whole thing. It opens up enormous dimension in a single photograph.

ROBERT BROWN: This was an ability that just evolved?

WILLIAM THON: It's using your imagination. You're looking at the same building that you see in the photograph but you're seeing a different side of it. You're seeing maybe a right hand side where formerly you only saw the facade and what else you imagine you see which is beyond that which don't show in the photograph. You can really do anything you want. Actually you're composing shapes, pleasing shapes, movements on a given area of

paper or canvas in order to create a mood.

ROBERT BROWN: In art you must have felt fairly early on there's a great deal of freedom as done by you. It's almost limitless.

WILLIAM THON: It is limitless. I feel that if I have any function in my art career, it's to try and point out how beautiful nature is in its wild state and I want everybody to come and look at it and see what I see in it. I feel that I'm a kind of a messenger that tries to say, hey, come, look how beatiful everything is.

ROBERT BROWN: You interrupted, though, this evolution, this early acceptance in various artists groups, exhibitions, when you went in 1933 on this strenuous voyage to the Cocos Island off Costa Rica in the Pacific with Commander Edwin Ballantine to look for hidden treasure which was long supposed to have been put there by pirates, I suppose.

WILLIAM THON: That's right.

ROBERT BROWN: Why did you do that? Here you were fairly newly married and your career -- there were some glimmers of increasing success.

WILLIAM THON: It was the best opportunity in the world that I ever could think of to get acquainted with the ocean in all the various moods. I was enormously impressed to be able to stand down in a companionway with my elbows up on the deck with my head out just looking and being amazed at the fury that was garnered up by this ocean. I just couldn't imagine anything more beautiful than that. Here we were, we were laying the trough of these seas which were probably forty feet high and a quarter of a mile between the crest and here I am resting on my elbows, just amazed, looking at this furor that's going on. I was enormously impressed. There is no way that you can paint that to convey the utter fury of it.

ROBERT BROWN: And the huge scale, too.

WILLIAM THON: That's right. Here you are, you're not more than three feet above the water and the crest is a quarter of a mile away and forty feet up and when you're down in the trough all the wind stops because you're in the lee of that big sea and then all of a sudden you're up on top of the next one and all hell breaks out. A great experience! I wouldn't have missed it for the world!

ROBERT BROWN: No matter that there was no treasure?

WILLIAM THON: No. Now when I think of wanting to paint the ocean or a boat, I have some idea of what I'm doing. I've been there. I know how the boat acts. It's like taking a well-made box. As long as you keep the water out of it, it will stay afloat no matter now uncomfortable you might be. You won't sink if you can keep the water out of it.

ROBERT BROWN: So you got this first experience, the great fury and scale of the sea but you also experienced for the first time the tremendous skill, man-made craft of navigation.

WILLIAM THON: That's right. A little flimsy boat, if it's well-handled, can survive in horrendous situations.

ROBERT BROWN: When you got back, you mentioned some time ago to Mr. Gruskin in his book that your parents objected to your going to painting but that your wife on the other hand gave you strong support.

WILLIAM THON: Indeed. by that time I was so well started that there was no force that could prevent me from going on.

ROBERT BROWN: And you didn't at that time consider ever joining any of the New Deal art programs?

WILLIAM THON: No. I didn't find it necessary. I was able to do other work. I did all kinds of things -- bricklayer's helper, different things. I wasn't above doing anything physical and I never found it necessary to join an art project. However, I did take part in sidewalk art shows that they used to hold over in Greenwich Village in New York. I painted some boats and put on a blue and white striped shirt like the French Navy and went over there and stood on West 8th Street with my boat pictures and my wife Helen who worked nearby, she was up on 14th Street, used to come down and bring my lunch and we'd sit there and have lunch along side of my pictures. If course nobody every bought anything there but it was an expo of things that I had done after having been at sea.

ROBERT BROWN: You had some of your first exhibitions in Brooklyn. You had one in a hotel.

WILLIAM THON: In a hotel. There was a group there who rented a suite of rooms in a hotel and I was able to join that and take part in monthly exhibitions that they would hold. The critics would come over and review those

and my name would get out every once in awhile.

ROBERT BROWN: Now you've said periodically that here you were having considerable notice but many of your fellow painters, I suppose, had far more formal art training. Did this sometimes come up to haunt you or periodically? Would you feel, gee, I'm just having a roll of luck but my lack of formal training is going to catch up with me?

WILLIAM THON: It never occurred to me. I remember at that time Edwin Alden Jewell noticed me very strongly and put me in the forefront of American art practically and was in process of writing a book about American art in which he wanted to feature my work but, unfortunately, after a couple of interviews he became seriously ill and he died and the whole project collapsed. Now this would have been somewhere about 1937. So that was ill fortune. During the war, somewhere in 1943, Harry Saltpeter who wrote for Esquire did an article on me with reproductions. It was right during the middle of the war.

ROBERT BROWN: Not calculated to give you the maximum audience because people were rather distracted during the war.

WILLIAM THON: Yes, but I was of course happy to get that kind of exposure. Then Life did an article. That was right after the war, I guess right as soon as I got home. We were still in Brooklyn and they sent over some photographers and did an article.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it before the war that you got advice from a person who studied with Charles Hawthorne?

WILLIAM THON: It was before the war.

ROBERT BROWN: Anthony Panuka?

WILLIAM THON: That is right. You have an excellent memory.

ROBERT BROWN: What kind of advice did he give you?

WILLIAM THON: About seeing color in large masses instead of a lot of broken down detail. He had been a student of Charles Hawthorne.

ROBERT BROWN: You would have learned that from him.

WILLIAM THON: Yes. Up at Provincetown. I liked the idea of the simple patterns of large color areas applied with a one-inch putty knife. Not a fancy palette knife but a real honest-to-God putty knife and paint was put on with that. In the beginning it felt like you were trying to paint with the end of a 2x4 but it became, in the right hands, a very sensitive tool and ever since, for the past fifty years, that's what I've been painting with, all different sizes of putty knives from a quarter inch up to six inches wide.

ROBERT BROWN: And brush became a secondary.

WILLIAM THON: Of course there were areas where a brush was required but the main part of the painting was done with a putty knife and it can be an extremely sensitive tool.

ROBERT BROWN: And that was something that this Panuka . . . . As a painter himself, was he quite good?

WILLIAM THON: I thought he was good and I bought one of his paintings which I've since given to the hospital up here in Rockland. It was a still life. He admired Cezanne very much and of course I did too and the painting of his that I bought was a still life involving some apples. He used pure color. I admired that very much, the color being put on with a knife didn't get muddied up in any way and the color was vibrant and beautiful.

ROBERT BROWN: What about the manner in which you laid it on, thickly or thinly? What about textures? Did you mind about that because with a putty knife you can't quite finish things as you can with a brush, can you?

WILLIAM THON: Well, it was put on quite sensitively. It could be thin. You can glaze with a putty knife with thin glaze paint. You can use the edge of it. I can make a line with a putty knife as thin as a hair just by using the knife edge of it. I think it's a wonderful tool.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it through this Mr. Panuka or some reason that you and your wife in the later '30s began visiting various art colonies in the summer? You mentioned you went, for example, to Rockport, Massachusetts.

WILLIAM THON: Yes. We went to Provincetown and on the Cape and then we went to Rockport, Massachusetts and got acquainted with old quarries in Rockport. By that time, we decided that we wanted to buy some land someplace and we indeed looked at land in Rockport but it was far too expensive for us and we abandoned that

idea rather quickly. But time went on and we got acquainted with Stowe Wengenroth and he pointed out a place called Port Clyde in Maine that we would like if we would come and look at it, which we did and he was right.

ROBERT BROWN: Wengenroth himself, though, lived for a good while in Rockport.

WILLIAM THON: Yes. Wengenroth stayed right on this property.

ROBERT BROWN: He stayed here. He also lived in Rockport, didn't he?

WILLIAM THON: Yes. He, I think, married a woman from Rockport and stayed there but he used to love coming up here and he boarded with a lady from whom we bought this land. Probably the only reason we were able to buy it is because she liked Stowe and thought if we were his friends that we were all right too. So I guess we were in town only about two days when we bought this land.

ROBERT BROWN: What about Provincetown? Did you consider that?

WILLIAM THON: No. Never did, for some reason or other. I was looking for land where the woods came right to the edge of the sea and you don't have that in Provincetown.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have various acquaintances who summered there?

WILLIAM THON: Not so much in Provincetown. We did have acquaintances who lived in Rockport. We got to know some of the people up on Rockport in those days.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you recall who some of those were?

WILLIAM THON: Yes. A man named Anthony Temee who used to paint fishing boats. Let's see, what's his name was the president of the National Academy at that time, can't think of his name, but almost everybody came through Rockport at one time or another.

ROBERT BROWN: But it too, like Provincetown, lacked trees.

WILLIAM THON: Rockport was a little nearer to what we had in mind. There was a rocky shore there and the woods could go rather close by but of course nothing would compare with Port Clyde here in Maine.

ROBERT BROWN: You at that time also made excursions to a place called Beach Haven, New Jersey. Painting excursions?

WILLIAM THON: That was just a weekend. We were coming back from someplace in the south and we had friends that were at Beach Haven at that time so we stopped off to see them. It was a painting class run by a friend of mine and there were other friends that were in the class so we stopped off for a weekend during which time I set up my easel with the class and painted along with the group.

ROBERT BROWN: It was not a place that you had thought of . . . ?

WILLIAM THON: No, no.

ROBERT BROWN: You also went to the Gaspe Peninsula.

WILLIAM THON: In the middle '30s we were there, about 1935. It was all dirt roads up there in those days. It was amusing to see it this past fall, what the last fifty years have done to change the place. We stayed in a little camp with a wood stove and now there are half a dozen deluxe motels and all kinds of restaurants, even a museum. And when we went to Bonaventure Island, the bird sanctuary, we were in a big diesel boat instead of an open fishing boat. We had to get in that boat off the beach where they'd haul it up on the beach with horses but now they have a big concrete wharf there and all kinds of modern inconveniences. [Chuckles]

ROBERT BROWN: It sounds as though you were fairly beguiled by the Gaspe. Would you ever have thought of living there?

WILLIAM THON: No, I don't think so. I think I like living where we are here but I like going there. It's a very rugged kind of landscape with the mountains ending right at the edge of the sea. And of course this is Bonaventure Island, bird sanctuary, which is very interesting.

ROBERT BROWN: In the late '30s, I'm detecting some, perhaps it's more dramatic, this great contrast of dark and light, mostly oils. You remarked that time, I believe, or someone else observed that you did watercolors at that period only for sketching purposes, sort of, I guess, as a record.

WILLIAM THON: Well, that's true. I had taken part in an international show of watercolors at the Brooklyn Museum sometime around 1935 but I abandoned the medium for entirely working in oil for some reason because I guess I was intrigued by the textural aspects of oil and I didn't touch watercolor much again until just before we went to Rome in 1945, '46. I decided to take some watercolors with me to use as sketching material and I began to use it in a little different way, I think, and it became interesting in a way that it had never been before and I came back to the Midtown Gallery with a whole armful of watercolors and dropped them on the floor and Mr. Gruskin decided right away to have a watercolor show of fauna on Rome and ever since then I've been devoting about half my time to watercolors.

ROBERT BROWN: According to Mr. Gruskin's book of 1964, in the 1939 acceptance of your painting "The Creek", which was a winter scene for inclusion in the Corcoran Gallery biannual and the favorable mention of the same painting by Edwin Alden Jewell marked a real high point. You indicated to him it was almost the real beginning of your career.

WILLIAM THON: That's a fair statement. That was the first time I had been selected to be in a show of that caliber.

ROBERT BROWN: That was one of the premier national juried exhibitions of the time, wasn't it?

WILLIAM THON: Yes, it was. I almost swooned with delight at being accepted in the show. We got on a bus and went down to be there at the opening and I guess we probably didn't get to go to bed for two days traveling. We couldn't afford a hotel. We went down and got to the opening and had a hamburger and got on a bus and came home and went to work the next day, not having been in a bed for twenty-four hours. It was wonderful to see my picture hanging in that kind of company.

ROBERT BROWN: At such an opening, would you get to meet very many other artists or was it too much of a crowd of people?

WILLIAM THON: I didn't meet anybody but I was interested in standing around listening to the comments of other people who would talk about it without knowing that the painter was standing near it.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you hear some fairly inane remarks?

WILLIAM THON: Yes, now and then, but generally it was favorable and most of the comments I heard had to do with the strength of the painting. It was considered to be very strong because it was almost black and white.

ROBERT BROWN: In 1941, you took a first prize at the Brooklyn Society of Artists Exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum and thereafter in other years you did very well in that show too. How did that rate for you? Of course that was more of a hometown.

WILLIAM THON: It was hometown and the competition wasn't the same as it would be for an international show but I enjoyed all of it. I had no idea what I had in the Brooklyn show anymore.

ROBERT BROWN: In the Corcoran show did you see a range of work that you might not have been able to see even in New York? I mean, were you seeing some rather extreme modern works, very abstract work, even as early as 1939?

WILLIAM THON: There were some but it didn't dominate it. I think most of the paintings would not be considered abstract. One of the amusing incidents of that show was when we were going into the Corcoran Gallery at the opening there was a demonstration going on outside. It was Peter Bloom who had been rejected and was picketing the place, marching up and down, announcing that his painting was on view around the corner. He had rented space in a storefront and was showing the painting that was rejected by the Corcoran jury and I've since pulled Peter's leg about that a couple of times down in New York where we were both members of the Arts and Letters Academy. He just died, by the way. He had a painting there and it was called something like Italian Sailors Exercising and he had figures on an Italian war ship and he had them up in the air as though they were floating, exercising, and it was a very unusual painting. But anyhow it was rejected and he was picketing. Now that was way back in 1939.

ROBERT BROWN: At least that year it seems the jurors of the Corcoran didn't favor surrealism.

WILLIAM THON: Well they didn't like that one and Peter wasn't going to take it sitting down. He was going to picket which he did.

ROBERT BROWN: Would you have known him somewhat from New York?

WILLIAM THON: No, I had never heard of him until that time. Of course, since then we've seen each other once in awhile at Arts and Letters.

ROBERT BROWN: On the eve of the war you then settled here. You made your first move to Port Clyde, was that just before World War II?

WILLIAM THON: Just before that. It was in 1940 at Stowe's urging we came to Port Clyde and within a couple of days we bought this land and I built a little building there to live in while I would be building this house.

ROBERT BROWN: Is that the little building down near the water?

WILLIAM THON: No, it's right behind you there. The war started and I had to abandon the plans for the duration. So we came back up here about 1945 or '46 and proceeded to build the house. We got it built enough so we could spend the next winter in it and then it was the following spring that word came that I had won the Pre de Rome and my first inclination was to tell them that we can't go, we have too much to do but good sense prevailed and we did indeed go.

ROBERT BROWN: How does you wife feel about abandoning the city for Port Clyde?

WILLIAM THON: Well, there might have been a few misgivings at first but quickly she fell in love with the life here.

ROBERT BROWN: Was the life very bleak for large parts of the year?

WILLIAM THON: We quickly made good friends with neighbors, particularly people up the road here named Cook. Sherwood Cook is an engineer who decided he'd rather be a lobsterman than work in New York or Chicago so he came back up here to be a lobsterman and he married a woman named Gwendolyn James who is the sister to Andy Wyeth's wife, Betsy. So Gwen and Betsy are sisters, Sherdy and Andy Wyeth are brothers-in-law. So we got acquainted fairly well with them and visited back and forth, dinner parties and one thing and another. I'd go out lobstering with them. His family owned an island about six, seven miles out and we'd go out there and sometimes I would go ashore and stay there for several days, camping in a little building that was on this island and I'd be sketching everything in sight. During the winter even I'd be out there. There was a black stove and I could get driftwood off the beach. The island was only as big as a football field but it had a lot of driftwood on it. I'd bring out food that I could heat on the cook stove and keep warm in there. One time I was out there in the wintertime and he was going to get me the next day. And it came on to blow a Northeastern; I wasn't able to get off there for about four days. I had enough food so it wasn't any hardship.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you find you'd be sketching the whole time, even painting?

WILLIAM THON: I'd be sketching. I'd have a book with a fountain pen. I do most of my sketching with a pen and I did a lot of that. I drew everything in sight, including the kerosene lamp that was on the table, I remember.

ROBERT BROWN: Now the local people without Mr. Cooks education and connections, how did they take to having artists around? Were they quite used to that?

WILLIAM THON: They were accustomed to Andy being here.

ROBERT BROWN: He's come even earlier?

WILLIAM THON: He was almost born here. He was here with his family at a very early age. I guess Andy might have been one or two years old. He was crawling around the floor when his father was doing the illustrations for Treasure Island, one of those.

ROBERT BROWN: The local people were perfectly used to artists.

WILLIAM THON: Yes. And Monhegan being nearby, they were accustomed to seeing painters around so I wasn't anything of a curiosity.

ROBERT BROWN: On the other hand, when you came up here, did you feel, well, now I got to make certain I get to New York or Boston but particularly New York several times a year because I do have to keep up my acquaintances and see the exhibitions there?

WILLIAM THON: No, never entered my head. In those days we would go down to New York to be with the family during the holiday season. We would go down and spend Christmas and probably stay there for a couple of weeks into January but only because the family was there and because we enjoyed New York at that time of year. It was safe to walk on 5th Avenue at all hours of the night and look at all the window displays and things and we enjoyed that. And then, of course, to see the gallery. I was picked up by Midtown during the war, it was about 1943 or so, so we would visit with the gallery. We enjoyed the Gruskins and would go to dinner with them a couple, three times and visit and exchange ideas for upcoming shows and Grus was always interested in what I was doing. We completely enjoyed our visits.

ROBERT BROWN: When you enlisted in 1941 or '42 I suppose, I guess you enlisted because you thought you were going to be drafted?

WILLIAM THON: Actually no. I was already thirty-five years old when the war started so I wasn't in danger of being drafted, although I of course had to register and was enrolled but I wanted more to be able to control where I was going to be. So being a sailor and knowing my way around boats and things, I went over to the Coast Guard which was in New York, headquarters, and said I'd like to offer my services. I wasn't looking for a commission, I just wanted to help out any way they thought that I would best function. So they looked at me. And I saw a sign on the wall, "Age Limit 35." Well, I said, is that pretty firm because I'm already thirty-five and they said sorry we can't take you. This was in the very beginning after Pearl Harbor. After awhile when men got scarce they were taking people older than that. Well, I said whatever the regulations. So I left there and went around the corner to 90 Church Street which was the headquarters of the Third Naval District and I told them my experience with the Coast Guard and would the Navy be interested. I told them what I'd been, where I'd been to sea, I could handle a boat and I said if you want me I'll be glad to enroll and they were delighted.

ROBERT BROWN: Particularly by your experience?

WILLIAM THON: Yes. They said, "Well, we can't give you any commission because you don't have any education," which is true. I didn't have any schooling so they couldn't offer me a commission. But they said, "We'll make you a First Class Seaman." I said, "Well, that's fine." So they said, "You don't have to go to any boot camp or anything because you know all that already. You go home and you stay in your home and we'll notify you when and where to present yourself." I guess about three, four months went around before I heard. They simply said you go down to Staten Island to Pier 6 and give them this document and they'll take it from there. So that's all I did. I went down there. They said go to here and there and gather your uniform because I was in civilian clothes. Get yourself into the uniform. I was at this base about three, four days and I heard my name over the loudspeaker system to report to the sick bay. I had no idea what that was for. When I got there the doctor said, "You're Thon?" and I said "Yes." He took a watch out of his pocket and he held it up. He said, "Can you hear that?" It was one of these big old turnips and I said, "Sure I can," and I said, "Moreover, I could hear it if you went to the farthest reaches of the room." And he said, "Okay, fine," and he stamped a couple of papers and handed them back to me and I said, "Well, what's this all about?" He said, "Don't worry. You'll like it." That night I was on the train to New London, Connecticut to the submarine school, not to be a crew on a submarine but to learn something about underwater sound detection. So I became a soundman, operating sound gear on anti-submarine vessels. So that's what I did for quite awhile in the Navy, operating in submarine detection.

ROBERT BROWN: You sit with earphones on?

WILLIAM THON: Earphones and operating the dials and gauges and things and listening. The sound gear amounted to a sending and receiving radio set which put out an impulse down in the water. From the keel of the vessel it sent out an impulse and the idea being that there was something out there, that vessel, and turn around and come back and you would hear the echo of it. From that echo you learned all about the thing. You learned how far away it was because of the time element and you learned the bearing that it was because you had a compass that told you. So you had a target at such and such bearing that was so many thousands yards away and you transmitted that information up to the bridge and the captain would act on it. He would look out there and say, well, there's a surface ship, that's no danger. If he didn't see a surface ship, it would have to be a submarine and action would then be taken.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you in some action?

WILLIAM THON: We were in action, yes. We dropped depth charges. We never knew that we hit anything.

ROBERT BROWN: That's pretty rough duty, wasn't it, when the explosion came.

WILLIAM THON: It depends. At that particular time, we didn't have anything much to work with. We hadn't started to build proper vessels for it. I was on board a private yacht that had been given to the Navy by Ed Wynne, you know, the comedian. He had a boat that was about 110 feet long. He gave it to the Navy and the Navy put a couple machine guns on it and some depth charge racks which operated on hydrostatic fuses that would discharge pressure of the water when you dropped them and some sand gear. But the trouble is the boat wasn't fast enough to get out of its own way and when we would drop these charges, which was a great big canister of TNT, the explosion would go up in the air and it would lift the stern of the boat up out of the water. The lights would go out, the refrigeration machinery would go on the blink because we couldn't go fast enough to get away. [Chuckles]

ROBERT BROWN: You couldn't adjust the hydrant, the lapse in the explosion?

WILLIAM THON: No, because in some instances you were operating in fairly shallow water so that it didn't take more than a few seconds for that thing to get down to where the fuse would go off. But gradually they caught up

with the thing and we were given better tools with which to work and things went better from then on.

ROBERT BROWN: How did this appeal to you?

WILLIAM THON: I enjoyed it all right but after awhile I got a little bit tired of being cooped up down below where I couldn't see anything and I transferred to what's called the deck and I became a boson's mate. A boson's mate's job is to do all the rope work and to be able to anchor the ship and generally take charge of the crew, sort of be a foreman of the crew. Well, I knew all about rope work. I could do anything with a piece of rope, splices, or anything like that. Without even looking at it, I could put an ice place into a horzon... So that was no problem there. Well, one time, somewhere along about 1944, I guess, I had sent a painting to a show that was being held in the Metropolitan.

ROBERT BROWN: 1942. I think the Artists for Victory Exhibition.

WILLIAM THON: No, it was another one. This was somewhere '43 or '44. My name happened to be in the paper with a reproduction of my painting and I heard my name coming over the speaker to report to the captain's office on the base. I didn't know what was going on so I went in the captain's office. Here he was with all kinds of gold braids and he shoved a newspaper across his desk at me and he said, "Is that you?" I saw what it was. It was a review of that show, you see, and I said, "Yes sir." He turned around to his yeoman and said, "Transfer this man off his boat as of now. He's now going to be part of the base personnel." I was grounded then and I was given all kinds of miscellaneous artwork to do. One of the benefits of it, though, was I was able to go home every night because we lived in Brooklyn and just coming across the ferry and one stop on the subway and I was at Burrough Hall where I could walk down to my studio. So from then on I was ashore.

ROBERT BROWN: So the captain had you as one of the ornaments at the base.

WILLIAM THON: I was an ornament. I worked from 8 to 4 and then I went home. I was on easy street and I had no boss because nobody knew anything about what I did. I did more or less as I pleased. They'd come and say to me, "Well, Thon, we'd like to have a nice menu for the Thanksgiving Day dinner, design it," which I did. They had a printing press and everything on the base and they would reproduce all this stuff. I had easy street. I'd say to the chief that was in charge of my department that I needed some color. I have to go to New York to get it. So he'd say, "Okay, do whatever you want. Make out the requisitions." Off I'd go. I'd spend a day up in New York, buy some color.

[TAPE 2, SIDE A]

ROBERT BROWN: In 1942 East Wind was in the Artists for Victory Exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum in New York where it received very favorable mention. Did you recall that? Did you learn of its acceptance while you were in the Navy or at sea?

WILLIAM THON: Yes, I did. I submitted the painting and it was accepted and, while the show was on, I had a letter from Al Gruskin of Midtown Gallery and he told me he was very much impressed with the painting and would like to see more of my work. I didn't get the letter for quite awhile because I was at sea and ultimately when I did get it I of course was delighted and at first opportunity I went to see the Midtown Gallery and to see Mr. Gruskin.

ROBERT BROWN: Was this the gallery you knew anything about before that?

WILLIAM THON: I had heard of it because I knew of some of the painters that were regularly exhibited there. I didn't know any of them personally but I certainly heard of people like Waldo Pierce and Gladys Rockmore Davis, William Palmer, and so on, so I was of course delighted. I went to the gallery -- I forget now what year it was -- but I was in uniform which was something of a shock to Mr. and Mrs. Gruskin.

ROBERT BROWN: Why, because they didn't know that you were in the Navy?

WILLIAM THON: They had no idea. They also thought that I looked quite young to have painted that picture but I always looked a little younger than I was.

ROBERT BROWN: Perhaps you could describe the picture, as you recall. How do you account for its impact?

WILLIAM THON: East Wind was a painting showing some old apple trees in Main during the winter. It was largely black and white with snow, black trees and perhaps a bit of black stone wall and some background trees and a leaden colored sky. A good deal of circular rhythm in the painting and everything was designed to that effect. Mr. Gruskin liked it. He told me later that he kept coming back to it which was very nice to hear. After he got over the shock of seeing a sailor in uniform in his gallery, he brought out a contract of some of his other painters to show me that it was just the same as Waldo Pierce and Gladys Davis. At that time he made a date to come to

my studio to see further work. We had a small studio near the Brooklyn Bridge in Brooklyn and he and Mrs. Gruskin came over and we showed them additional work. He had a contract in his pocket and brought it out and I was happy to become a member of the Midtown Gallery.

ROBERT BROWN: Were the terms, as far as you could tell by comparing with what other artists had, were they quite good?

WILLIAM THON: I wasn't familiar with any relationships with galleries that other artists had. In the past when I'd had some association with a gallery where there was a possibility of a sale I was told that commission would be one-third. Mr. Gruskin said he wanted to take a little more than that. He would take 40% but for which he would render a service such as advertising and putting on shows and the like so I was very happy to give up the additional percentage.

ROBERT BROWN: What as he like? How did he strike you on first impressions?

WILLIAM THON: He seemed to me very sincere, quiet, self-contained, sympathetic, reticent. Mrs. Gruskin was just the reverse. He would walk up and down with his head down glancing at the pictures standing up against the wall and not saying anything much. But Mrs. Gruskin would say to him, "Grus, don't keep him on tenter hooks like that. Why don't you tell him it's wonderful?" She said, "Say something," and he turned around and he stopped and he looked at her and he said, "Do you thinnk I'm going to make a criticism or talk about this painting after looking at it for about five minutes when this man has spent years to be able to do this?" He said, "I'm not going to make a judgment on it in about five minutes." And that's what he would do. He'd walk up and down and look at it.

ROBERT BROWN: That was rather gratifying to you as an artist, wasn't it?

WILLIAM THON: Well, at the time it was a little bit edgy, I thought. I didn't know which way to jump.

ROBERT BROWN: That's true. He wasn't saying anything.

WILLIAM THON: He wasn't saying a word. He'd walk back and forth and jingle two or three quarters in his pocket and not say a word. And that was his comment to Mrs. Gruskin. He said, "I'm not going to say anything about this painting after seeing it for five minutes." Gradually he did say that he liked it very much and when he saw the ones that I had at home in the studio he then brought out the contract and wanted me to join his group and give him exclusive rights to everything I did and of course I was delirious with happiness to be so tied down to such a prestigious gallery.

ROBERT BROWN: Now eventually, after he said finally he liked what you've done and you said he had an ability, Mr. Gruskin, to make you feel you were THE artist.

WILLIAM THON: Yes. He had perhaps twenty-five or thirty disparate personalities to deal with, painters, and he handled them very well. We never learned anything about each other from him. He always kept everybody happy. He listened to all our troubles, advised when it was required, and I had the distinct impression that the entire gallery was run exclusively for me.

ROBERT BROWN: That's wonderful!

WILLIAM THON: I'm sure they all felt the same way.

ROBERT BROWN: How did he convey that to you?

WILLIAM THON: By his attitude. By his demeanor. It was very personal. He was a kind of a father figure. You could depend on him. He would give good advice, it was very sound, never overstepping any borders. He was a wonderful, loveable man whose entire interest was in American art.

ROBERT BROWN: American art. You mean he wasn't interested in European art?

WILLIAM THON: Not to handle in his gallery. He would go to Europe, of course, and go to all the museums but he was completely involved in American painting and furthering it every chance he could get. He promoted all of his painters. He'd send them out to museums all around the country and send traveling shows about. Wonderful man.

ROBERT BROWN: What did you know of his background? How did he get into that business? Did you ever learn?

WILLIAM THON: Well, all I knew was that he had graduated from the school at Harvard for museum directors. I think it was called Farr or some such name.

ROBERT BROWN: The Fogg Art Museum.

WILLIAM THON: All right. Well, he had graduated from that course and I suppose the ideal application is either to be a museum director for which he was trained or he elected to open up his own gallery which he did on a shoestring. He couldn't afford to have an apartment in New York and slept on a cot in the back room of the gallery that he first had. It was on Madison Avenue.

ROBERT BROWN: He didn't start out with any kind of backing to speak of?

WILLIAM THON: Not that I ever heard of. I think the family was from Pittsburgh where the family business was some kind of a department store, somewhere in the Pittsburgh area. I had met a sister and a brother of his but I never heard of any backing.

ROBERT BROWN: At one point during the war, Gruskin attempted to get you made a Naval artist, a combat artist.

WILLIAM THON: I wasn't too much aware of that but it didn't work out at any rate. I was put in charge of some Naval artists who didn't know their way around a ship very much and I was under a job of teaching them something about seamanship so it was a little bit ironic at the time but I didn't mind it. I was satisfied to do the job that they thought I did best.

ROBERT BROWN: Allen Gruskin's strength seemed to have been in making each artist feel very, very wanted. What about Mrs. Gruskin? Was she also active in the gallery?

WILLIAM THON: Even more than Grus. Mary was a very warm and friendly personality who was very outgoing and did her best to make everybody happy. She was a very fine woman. Quite artistic herself.

ROBERT BROWN: Did she work more as the salesperson?

WILLIAM THON: Yes, she greeted everybody that came in the gallery and offered her assistance in any way they would like. She was a great person in the gallery.

ROBERT BROWN: You felt, having become part of Midtown, this was wonderful. Did you feel a sense of security as an artist that you had not felt before?

WILLIAM THON; Well, I felt very lucky because I knew how many people there were painting at the time who had no representation at all, very little chance at ever getting any. I considered myself, and still do, extremely lucky in that respect. There's more and more painters now and, while there are a lot of galleries, it's possible to go all though your life being rather good but not having any representation.

ROBERT BROWN: The number of dealers in those days was really quite small, wasn't it?

WILLIAM THON: Well, compared to what it is now, I suppose it was relatively small and there weren't too many of the galleries that handled exclusive American painting. A good many of them were international-type galleries but Gruskin would have only living American painters. I think Macbeth was one of the other ones that handled Americans.

ROBERT BROWN: Among the handicaps American artists had was the fact a lot of good dealers and, I suppose, collectors favored European work, right?

WILLIAM THON: Well, that was true at the time. We didn't enjoy a great deal of audience in those days.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you aware in the '40s when great European contemporary artists came to this country and to New York? For example, people like Piet Mondrian or a little earlier Max Ernst or George Russ, the German expressionist?

WILLIAM THON: I was aware that they were here but they didn't affect me at all. I never met them and they had no effect on my work. Even by that time I had dropped I think most of the influence. If I had any influence in the late '20s, it might have been a little bit of Vlaminck in my work because I considered the kind of stormy weather that he painted was to my liking and that would have been about the only one that I can think of and that was quickly absorbed into my work.

ROBERT BROWN: But you didn't get to know too many other artists.

WILLIAM THON: No, there was no chance, no opportunity. And, of course, as soon as the war ended, we came up here. I got acquainted with Andy Wyeth because he was already here. I knew Andrew Winter fairly well, because we knew him in New York before he came to live on Monhegan. He used to come over here during the winter

and spend two or three days and we'd sit in the kitchen where the only heat in the house was a big black iron stove and we'd sit there with our stocking feet in the oven and we'd talk about the sea. Andy had been a professional sailor and we'd talk about how lucky we were to be out of New York and up here in civilized Maine where you could do this, sit with you feet in a stove. [Chuckles]

ROBERT BROWN: You felt there were too many formalities in New York by comparison?

WILLIAM THON: Well, you weren't able to live close to nature like you are here. It was important here from day to day the kind of weather it was outside. Your whole day was predicated on what kind of weather it was and this really is the way life in general seemed to be to me, that the weather was important. You did certain things in certain kinds of weather. Cold weather. Midnight. Moonlight. Dry snow. When you walked along it would speak under the bottom of your heels and there wouldn't be anything awake. Everything would be sleeping. It was marvelous. Something that you would never be able to do in the city, for example.

ROBERT BROWN: Winter was a good friend of your earlier years.

WILLIAM THON: I love the winter. I still do. I just adore looking out at snow covered-trees.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you get to know Wyeth fairly soon after you came here?

WILLIAM THON: Relatively soon. Fairly soon. We weren't close friends but he would come in here frequently.

ROBERT BROWN: What was he like as a personality back say in the 1940's when you first met him?

WILLIAM THON: A very talented young man, extremely talented.

ROBERT BROWN: Sort of the envy of other painters?

WILLIAM THON: Oh, the way he could draw was like a wizard. I never could begin to draw like that. Or course, not that I would want to spend the time to even try to learn. There are other parts of painting that to me are more important than that but I certainly admired his skill, still do.

ROBERT BROWN: How did it happen that you received a fellowship in October 1947 to the American Academy in Rome: Did you apply? How did that come about?

WILLIAM THON: No, that took me by surprise. I was up on a stage helping to build a chimney here and Helen came back from the Post Office with a letter and she said that it is from the American Academy in Rome. I told her to open it and see what they wanted. She told me according to this letter I was awarded the Prix de Rome and would leave the United States to be in Rome in the autumn of that year. I was completely shocked, surprised. I had no inkling of this fellowship at all. I knew about it but I never thought of myself as having anything whatsoever to do with it. In the first place, I thought that I at that time was too old and I was married, both of which would have made me ineligible. Well, as it happened, I guess, the Midtown Gallery had submitted my name and I believe at the time -- I was told later, that the Academy canvassed many of the American museum directors and asked them to send in the names of whomever they thought might best benefit by a fellowship and I guess my name appeared on enough of them so that I was selected, non of which I had any inkling of at the time.

ROBERT BROWN: You had been receiving, however, some very favorable notice by art critics.

WILLIAM THON: Yes, I was noticed.

ROBERT BROWN: During the war, Edwin Alden Jewell had placed you at the forefront of the contemporary American School.

WILLIAM THON: Yes, that flattered me no end. I certainly was basking in that kind of light and loved it.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you feel about leaving this big project of building in Maine?

WILLIAM THON: My first inclination was to tell them we can't go because I'm too busy, but fortunately good sense prevailed and a few months later we embarked for Rome for a year there which I thoroughly enjoyed and am ever thankful for having gone and being able to take part in that.

ROBERT BROWN: What did you find when you got there at the Academy?

WILLIAM THON; I found that there was a whole different world from Maine that was warm color. That was a revelation to me that I never dreamed about, about the color of Rome at sunset, for example. It was a whole new world. I was accustomed to more or less black and white of Maine in the winter where trees were black and

stone walls were black and the show was white and the sky was the color of lead.

ROBERT BROWN: Did this immediately affect your work?

WILLIAM THON: More or less. There was a shock, a period of about a month or so when I was under going the kind of a shock but gradually I began to appreciate it and try to do something with the beautiful tones that I found all around me. Also, the presence of age affecting the textrues of the walls it seemed to me to be very interesting. Everywhere you looked in Rome you saw thousands of years of time that made a piece of stone look like Roquefort cheese that intrigued me no end and I tried to imitate the textures of that.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you do that? You mentioned earlier working with putty knives.

WILLIAM THON: I got out my putty knives and started working with them in trying to reproduce the effect of 4,000 yeras.

ROBERT BROWN: What about color?

WR: I painted in oil but at the same time I started to work in watercolor and discovered a whole new technique in using watercolor, combining it with India inks, and the result was very exciting, I thought, and I continued through the whole year of doing watercolors in conjunction with about a dozen oils that I did during that year there.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you go out and paint directly or did you continue in Rome to follow your former practice of sketching and then in the studio work out the watercolors or the oil painting?

WILLIAM THON: Mostly I would go out and simply walk about and look and absorb and feel and smell and taste everything. Mostly observation and sitting quietly and allowing these things to filter into my brain. I could spend an hour sitting on the steps of some cathedral or some of the ancient remains to find a broken column drum and sit on it for an hour or two and turning around in 360 degrees and looking in every direction and just thinking about the thousands of years that this stone has been sitting here and the affect all that time is having now on the textural quality that I see right here and trying to imitate that on canvas and paper was a very absorbing occupation.

ROBERT BROWN: This related to that, where in the early '50s, perhaps not the beginning, but the long series of drawings and paintings derived from the stone quarry here in nearby Tenants Harbor that you mentioned briefly earlier showed the passage of time, the long-exposed face.

WILLIAM THON: That's right. Finding a good deal of the same sort of textures that one finds in Rome on the ancient remains would be on the facade of a quarry wall after it gets overgrown with all kinds of lichens and ferns and vegetable growth I find very interesting. And of course with the quarry you can do anything you want. You can put all kinds of linear effects with pens and brushes and putty knives and I find the quarries still very absorbing and they're right here.

ROBERT BROWN: You had even more freedom than you did with subjects in Italy?

WILLIAM THON: Because you can have a quarry all to yourself, for one thing. You might have a companion of a dog or two playing around you.

ROBERT BROWN: Whereas in architecture or ruins you had to at least give some semblance of resemblance, I guess.

WILLIAM THON: Yes. But it was amazing to me and interesting how quickly I could turn a picture of painting of, let's say, Venice, into a quarry and back again by virtue of vertical lines. A quarry facade could easily become a wall of buildings on the Grand Canal by adding a few architectural devices like windows, chimneys and such, but a quarry is very similar to some Italian city architecture.

ROBERT BROWN: So things were coming together in terms of, say, two things with which you were very sympathetic: architecture, ancient architecture, Renaissance; and nature.

WILLIAM THON: Yes, there was a kind of combination beginning to take place where one could melt into the other very easily.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you ever worry at that point that perhaps this was becoming a little too easy?

WILLIAM THON: No, I never thought that. I was aware of some painters in the past that when there was a little too much facility would transfer the brush into their left hand so as not to be too facile, but that didn't occur to me. I never thought that I was that good, as a matter of fact. Painting was always a rather difficult job. It was

hard work and most of the work was done with my chin in my hand thinking about it before I even started and then the painting would more or less evolve. I would never know how it was going to end. It would grow on the canvas. I would compose it as I went along.

ROBERT BROWN: The same was true even in watercolor. You had to work much more quickly, didn't you?

WILLIAM THON: Oh, much more quickly.

ROBERT BROWN: Although you did devise a means of going back and sponging out and then reworking.

WILLIAM THON: Yes, I've done that. Sponging, scraping. I begin with a great deal of water which allows you to float the color on the top of the water so that it doesn't dry out right away. So you have a little bit of time to manipulate the color and have it flow back and forth across the paper.

ROBERT BROWN: Is that somewhat harder to control?

WILLIAM THON: It represents many more problems than with oil, but I find it a fascinating medium that possesses qualities that you don't get in oil at all. Of course, you sacrifice textural quality but you try to approximate the texture with the way you manipulate the combination of the color and the white paper which you don't intend to lose entirely.

ROBERT BROWN: During these years in the early '50s, you did several stints of teaching which I gather in the end you decided not to make a habit of.

WILLIAM THON: Well, I decided that I had done my share somewhere along the way and refused to go even on juries. It takes you out of your frame of mind at the time and it takes too long to get back where you were in the pendulum, it seems to me. Even a one- or two-day trip to Cincinnati or someplace you have to sacrifice at least a week before you get to where you were before you left your studio so I decided at one point that I had done my share of it and it's time that someone else pick up the reins.

ROBERT BROWN: You were a teacher first in Atlanta, I gather in 1951, in Indianapolis in '52 and Utica in '52 and at an art gallery in West Palm Beach in '54.

WILLIAM THON: Some of those junkets were for more or less time. Some instances it was a matter of three or four days and some of it was maybe three months.

ROBERT BROWN: A big difference between short workshops and courses.

WILLIAM THON: Yes. When I was in Palm Beach, for example, that was from probably the middle of January until the middle of March. I was very happy to get back to Maine after that.

ROBERT BROWN: What kind of pupils would you have had down there? It's not exactly known as an art colony.

WILLIAM THON: No. They weren't the best but almost always there would be one or two that were worth teaching and they made the whole thing worthwhile. The ladies who were filling in time before their luncheon appointments didn't demand too much and didn't get a whole lot, I might add. Most of my time was devoted to the one or two who seemed to be able to understand what I was trying to impart. So it made it pleasurable and I had half of the day to myself in any case so I would just work in the morning with the students and then I'd be free to go painting on my own or go swimming or whatever I wanted for the rest of the day.

ROBERT BROWN: What about when you taught in an art school as in Indianapolis, the John Herron Art Institute?

WILLIAM THON: That was a little more demanding because you had a higher percentage of serious people there and it seemed to go all right. I enjoyed it. It was a challenge. I find that in talking to them I had to unreel myself back over twenty-five or thirty years when they would ask my why I did something which would have become automatic to me by this time. But I would have to stop and explain to them why I did a certain thing and I would have to, as I say, unreel myself maybe back twenty-five, thirty years to realize why I did a certain procedure and that was kind of fun. I probably learned more than the students did.

ROBERT BROWN: Sort of a recollection in self-analysis of yourself.

WILLIAM THON: I was going back to fundamentals which I had not thought about for thirty-four years.

ROBERT BROWN: Now was your teaching largely of matters technical?

WILLIAM THON: No, I was trying to teach the aesthetics of the thing. I said that anybody can come in here and teach how you mix colors and even teach you how toe draw if you have enough time to devote to it, but I was

concerned more with pointing out some of the aesthetics of painting. For example, when the wind blew in a certain direction, it would blow the leaves of the trees upside down so that you were looking at a different surface and it would reflect light in a different way than it would on a normal day. I tried to get them to open their eyes, to stop and look and see, and see with their inner eye and to think what it all means. How the wind blows and try to show them how the grass blows in one direction and so on. I was concerning myself more with that than the mechanics of painting because they could get that in any school, I thought.

ROBERT BROWN: As you think back, did you have a rather light hand? Would you set them to it and then let them sink or swim and then come in occasionally with criticisms?

WILLIAM THON: I would come around continually. I would get to each student at least once or twice during a half-day session when they would set up. I would point out some of the highlights that I think I saw in what they were painting and then I would assess how nearly they were able to interpret that. And of course I always was aware that nobody saw anything in the same way. Once in awhile you had somebody that would have an entirely different view of the thing that you were looking right at. That was always exciting, I thought.

ROBERT BROWN: Eventually you concluded that you preferred putting your energy into your own work rather than in putting it into training students.

WILLIAM THON: Yes. I got to the realization that if I would take a group of twenty-five students out, I wound up painting twenty-five different paintings in my mind and by the time I was free to go in a studio and do my own works, say all afternoon, I had nothing more to say. I had said it all in my mind on these twenty-five different students' paintings that I had done mentally. So I decided that it wasn't worthwhile, worth the vacations away from Maine to involve myself in that.

ROBERT BROWN: You were sort of drained by the time you went to your own studio?

WILLIAM THON: Yes, entirely.

ROBERT BROWN: And you haven't regretted that since?

WILLIAM THON: No. I think no. I think we've had the ideal situation here.

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned earlier -- I think you equated teaching or something like that with being a juror. How did you feel about being a juror? Did you have any problems with having to sit in judgment?

WILLIAM THON: I'd like to think I didn't. Of course, you always go to look at other people's work with a certain amount of prejudice. I realize that and in so doing I tried to be fair and recognize that all of the work is going to be different than mine. I wasn't looking for a whole lot of little Thons to put in a show. I wasn't bothered, I don't think. I think I was fair. I was very conscientious. One of the hardest jury jobs I did was with Isabelle Bishop. You may remember her. Out of a thousand paintings we had to pick one to go to some fellowship. That was very difficult. It took two days. We quickly whittled down the thousand paintings to about fifty, very, very quickly and then down to twenty-five and then to ten. And then it was almost the toss of a coin as to the last five. They were all certainly worthy of giving out this fellowship. We had only one to award and it was a very hard job, I thought. We really worked hard at it. Coming down to the end I think little personal things, a certain bit of color appeals to you. For whatever reason, you finally arrive at the one of a whole thousand paintings. Very difficult.

[TAPE 2, SIDE B (DECEMBER 16, 1992]

ROBERT BROWN: We ended yesterday having talked about your brief stints as a teacher and also as a member of juries of art exhibitions and I think you suggest that work was rather not typical, sort of was occasional.

WILLIAM THON: Very occasional. It wouldn't occupy more than, in cases of being a juror, more than four, five days in a year. Teaching perhaps would be anywhere from a brief workshop that might last a week or two, might even be a weekend lecture in some art school or museum somewhere. At the most, my teaching as been for a season from perhaps the middle of January until the middle of March as I have only done that once. Generally, I tended to avoid getting involved in that area. I found it occupied too much time.

ROBERT BROWN: You really haven't taught in many, many years, have you?

WILLIAM THON: No.

ROBERT BROWN: About juries. You're a member of a number of prestigious organizations. Do you sometimes serve in them in an advisory capacity? Remember, you mentioned the Sal Magundy Club. Perhaps the Century, National Academy?

WILLIAM THON: I've never taken any active part other than being a juror. I never agreed to serve on any

committees or make any commitment about donating time or services to any of those organizations; never served on hanging committees or the like. No, I never took part in any administration of any art society.

ROBERT BROWN: Have you found that your membership or election to various groups is quite satisfying? When you get to New York or in the past, have you, for example, gone to the Salamagundy Club or the like?

WILLIAM THON: No, not anymore. At the time it was valuable because it offered exhibition space and it was another opportunity to get your work in front of the public. Otherwise I had no reason to belong to these. The Sal Magundy Club was a kind of a social club and I enjoyed going over every Friday night which was designated as club night and get a chance to have dinner and play some pool with the likes of Stowe Wegenroth, Ogden Pleisner, Andy Winter, Paul Juley, people like that. That was once a week and it was kind of fun to do but I never took any interest in the administration of any of these organizations.

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned several names there. Were some of those people you got to know pretty well? You discussed yesterday Stowe Wegenroth. What about Ogden Pleisner?

WILLIAM THON: I knew him pretty well. We sometimes would be guests for dinner at his apartment in New York and he would come to all my shows, the openings. We were reasonably friendly.

ROBERT BROWN: What about Paul Juley?

WILLIAM THON: Paul Juley was a photographer and he was probably the dean of fine art photographers, having inherited a business from his father who had started it. Whenever you needed a photograph of a painting, Paul Juley was the man to do it. He was a very good pool player too, by the way. [Chuckles]

ROBERT BROWN: Were you by the '40s having your paintings regularly photographed?

WILLIAM THON: Not on my own. When you say the '40s, I was already now a member of the Midtown group and that was all taken care of by the gallery. They would photograph everything that I sent in for their own records.

ROBERT BROWN: You were elected to the Academy of Arts and Letters in 1951. Were you nominated anonymously or how did that take place?

WILLIAM THON: I was suggested by John Fallensby for membership and he was able to get seconders enough and then my name was submitted to the entire organization and I was elected a member. That's all I knew about it. But I think John Fallensby was my proposer.

ROBERT BROWN: Was he someone you had gotten to know well in New York or here?

WILLIAM THON: I ran into him at an exhibition, one-man show somewhere, and he was in a wheelchair. I had known of him prior to that but I didn't know he was confined to a wheelchair and we simply struck up an acquaintance because we both liked what was on the walls. I then found out that he came up to Maine for the summer so we used to see each other once in awhile during the summer. He had a very nice family and we enjoyed all of them and we got to be fairly good friends. Saw him maybe two or three times a year. They would come up here maybe for an afternoon or lunch.

ROBERT BROWN: Approximately when did you become a member of the National Academy of Design?

WILLIAM THON: I can't remember that precisely. Could have been in the '50s, I guess. I don't even remember who proposed me for that but you become an associate first and then after awhile if you're worthy you become a full academician. Oh, I was suggested by Andy Wyeth. Therefore I'm a watercolor member of the National Academy.

ROBERT BROWN: Why do you say "therefore?"

WILLIAM THON: Because Wyeth proposed me and he is a watercolor member so he would not be permitted to propose somebody who painted in oil, for example. It's a silly regulation but that's the case so therefore I'm a watercolor member and there are only twenty-five in the entire United States who are watercolor academicians. Now very frequently since I am a member I would submit oil paintings and my oil paintings had to go through the jury just as though I was not a member because it's a different medium, you see. I think it's a silly regulation. I think if someone is an artist it doesn't make much difference in which medium he elects to express himself but the Academy thinks differently.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you find it was a rather hide-bound group or, again, you never got particularly involved with them?

WILLIAM THON: I never got particularly involved. As a matter of fact, I don't know as I ever saw one of their

exhibitions. The gallery sends work at the time of a show and I get the catalogs but I've never been down to see a show.

ROBERT BROWN: You took prizes there too.

WILLIAM THON: A number of prizes indeed. Most in oil which is a little bit strange. But I kept sending oils sort of perversely, you see, protesting this silly regulation about being only in your own medium.

ROBERT BROWN: By the '50s the National Academy I suppose was thought of as pretty old-fashioned in some quarters, wasn't it?

WILLIAM THON: I guess so. I think there's been an attempt in recent years. They have instituted a membership committee who, I think, have gone out and invited more venturesome painters to become members, but I guess in general it's a pretty hardbound organization.

ROBERT BROWN: Then again in the mid-fifties, you were back at the American Academy in Rome as an artist-in-residence this time. How did that come about? Did you simply apply to go there?

WILLIAM THON: No, you don't apply. It's simply by invitation of the director, I guess. That's all I knew about that. You're invited by the director. As far as I know there's no other criteria.

ROBERT BROWN: Who would the director have been?

WILLIAM THON: At the time I think it might have been the tail end of Lawrence Roberts' tenure and then I was invited again by Richard Kimble who became the director so I had a couple of runs at being a painter-in-residence.

ROBERT BROWN: How did it work out? You knew much more what to expect when you got there. Did you stay in Rome much of the time?

WILLIAM THON; Yes and no. I found that the job was entirely advisory. You weren't expected to do any teaching at all. Nobody wanted any instruction. They were all people working individually on their own. I was there to answer any questions anybody had about where is a good place to do this or get that. Where to get supplies and once in awhile I would borrow the Academy's stationwagon with a chauffeur and take four or five of the painters around to some nearby hill towns that I had found out about and introduce them to what I considered to be very beautiful spots and turn them loose nad have them do whatever they wanted. But other times we would leave Rome and be gone for a couple of months at a time. We might go to Greece. In one instance we bought a secondhand Italian automobile and started north, keeping as close to the sea as possible and crossed into France and then into Spain and then into Portugal and toured perhaps 4-5,000 miles in the area there.

ROBERT BROWN: You were looking in particular for paintings or not particularly?

WILLIAM THON: I was simply sketching and touring, absorbing information and studying the differences between the landscape in Spain as opposed to Portugal or getting to know what the fishing boats looked like in some little towns in Portugal. In general just getting information and touring around, enjoying it with no schedule. We had no itinerary. We frequently never knew where we were going to sleep the next night. We had no reservations anywhere. Sort of like gypsies and it was kind of fun.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it fairly easy traveling in Spain and Portugal then?

WILLIAM THON: It was easy. We had no trouble at all. The roads were frequently very poor. We ran into snow crossing mountains and had a lot of interesting experiences like that; saw a great many little villages and towns and tried to communicate with the people. They were interested in what I was doing. I would show them my sketchbooks and things and they were interested. We enjoyed it thoroughly and we learned a good deal about the culture of both Spain and Portugal.

ROBERT BROWN:; I know you went to the Prado Museum in Madrid.

WILLIAM THON: Indeed we did and it was wonderful. We would go in there in the morning and spend all day. It's possible to get a little lunch in there so we didn't have to go out and interrupt it. It was a beautiful museum.

ROBERT BROWN: What were some of the things in the Prado that were of particular interest?

WILLIAM THON: Oh, God, just about everything.

ROBERT BROWN: In the '60s you mentioned Mr. Gruskin with the Goyas.

WILLIAM THON: The Goyas were marvelous.

ROBERT BROWN: What was it about them that excited you?

WILLIAM THON: I think probably the skill. The skill in portraying the personalities of the people that he painted I thought was marvelous. Wonderful painter.

ROBERT BROWN: What effect do you suppose that second time at the Academy had upon you work or your outlook? You were there in the mid-1950's.

WILLIAM THON: I don't think it had any marked effect other than just simply a broadening of one's understanding of Italian people and the landscape and by this time you knew what to expect. When you looked out and you saw an olive grove, you knew what the anatomy of an olive tree was like and it simply extended your initial knowledge about the Italians in general.

ROBERT BROWN: Had you become fairly competent in the language?

WILLIAM THON: I would never claim that, but we managed to learn enough to be able to communicate enough to get whatever we needed in the way of accommodation or food or supplies or clothing or haircuts or whatever. We were able to pick up enough and the Italian people are very kind and sympathetic in assisting foreigners to try and express themselves. They feel honored that you make the attempt to learn their language. In general they were very cooperative, we found.

ROBERT BROWN: What about the Spaniards or the Portuguese? Were they similar?

WILLIAM THON: Similar. We were able to get along in both Spanish and Portuguese. We could read better than we could pronounce it. For example, you could get a menu or a newspaper and be able to pick enough of it out to be able to understand a little bit. Pronunciation was a little different than Spanish. In general we had very little difficulty in communicating.

ROBERT BROWN: On these trips would you occasionally run into artists and be with them for awhile?

WILLIAM THON: Never. We never did.

ROBERT BROWN: When you were at the Academy?

WILLIAM THON: At the Academy of course there were always the various fellows that were in residence at any given time.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you recall some of them whom you got to know a bit?

WILLIAM THON: No, we really never had much intercourse with them. Of course a lot of time has gone around now and my mind is not as keen as it once was and I'm apt to forget some of the people. It's been quite a few years; it's probably been fifty years since we were there first.

ROBERT BROWN: The director. You've already talked about Lawrence Roberts. How was he as a host?

WILLIAM THON: Lawrence Roberts was very good as a director there. He had a wide acquaintance in Rome and opened a lot of doors for the fellows. We got into museums which were normally closed, for example, and things of that sort. He was able to open up those doors for us.

ROBERT BROWN: What about Richard Kimble when he was director?

WILLIAM THON: He was good but he didn't have the same acquaintance around the nobility in Rome as Lawrence Roberts did. But he was good. I think he was effective and he ran the Academy very well, I thought. Enjoyed it. He was a good architect and I suppose able to point out a lot of high spots to some of the architects and the landscape architects.

ROBERT BROWN: I think it was in 1959 you went again to Italy and to Greece as well, and I believe you had not been to Greece before that.

WILLIAM THON: No, we hadn't. That was a new venture and we completely enjoyed that. We met a couple of the fellows from the American Academy in Athens and jointly hired a car and made a tour of the Palapalais area long with these two classical students and that was very enjoyable because they were very knowledgeable and were able to point out a lot of things that we otherwise would not be aware of. We visited, for example, places like Olympia and there are extensive ruins there which they were able to describe and that was very enjoyable.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you sketching all the time?

WILLIAM THON: Yes, sketching and absorbing and studying. After I would get back home here I would have enough material to paint for four or five years because it's always there. Even now I probably could go ahead and produce a whole series of paintings based on either Italian or Greek elements.

ROBERT BROWN: In effect, sometimes after these great trips when you came back here to Port Clyde it was as though you could be anywhere. Is that right?

WILLIAM THON: That's true. In my mind I could project it anywhere that we'd already been and most of my paintings that were exhibited based on either Greece or anywhere in Europe were done right here in my studio with the snow half way up to the windows but I could produce a painting of an olive grove in Siena maybe.

ROBERT BROWN: So the isolation that you had here really didn't matter.

WILLIAM THON: No, the isolation helped to project my mind anywhere and you had nothing much to impede the scope of your imagination.

ROBERT BROWN: Is painting to you largely a matter of imagination? I mean the act of painting.

WILLIAM THON: Entirely. Based on certain facts, of course. Using elements of places in Italy, for example, I simply would rearrange architectural elements into what I would consider a pleasing composition and most people had visited places they recognized, say, well, that looks just like so and so. And actually it was simply using the elements in a different way. But I guess I managed to hang onto the personality of a region so that there was always a sense of place that I was able to get into it without actually using anything specific that would be found there.

ROBERT BROWN: You reduced forms and specifics to rather general forms, didn't you? You mentioned this business of sort of breaking things into panels or areas.

WILLIAM THON: Yes, and it seemed to me simple to take canvas and mark on it a whole lot of different arches and vaultings going in different directions and make the stone look as though it's 4,000 years old and people will say, oh, yes, that looks like the Palatine and that's what I wanted to impart. The kind of feeling that you would get when you walked around the Palatine and go down through a little tunnel which they call a crypto porticos, for example. To me it was a joy to be able to do that. You're creating something; you're not copying anything and you're making a composition which you find to be pleasing.

ROBERT BROWN: Also behind such formulating is a lot of observation, right? Often very prolonged observation, as you've explained.

WILLIAM THON: Oh, indeed so.

ROBERT BROWN: Is this something that has continued right up till now?

WILLIAM THON: Yes, I think so. The forms are changed now. The forms are more local; what I see around me and where we elected to travel, nearby Canada, but again it's the same thing. It's rearranging the forms that you see to suit yourself rather than accept what's already there.

ROBERT BROWN: The exhibitions were all handled by your dealer for the most part, weren't they?

WILLIAM THON: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You think you've been very unusual in having had the same dealer, Midtown Gallery, for virtually your whole mature career?

WILLIAM THON: Well, I consider that to be a very good situation. I'm not too familiar with what other painters have found in that respect but to me Mr. Gruskin and the Midtown Gallery was wonderful, sympathetic and understanding and I think honest, which is a very nice characteristic so I haven't had to worry about the financial end of marketing my work. It was done very well by Midtown and allowed me to live in this little town, Port Clyde.

ROBERT BROWN: You had exhibitions every few years at Midtown itself but I take it Mr. Gruskin must have arranged exhibitions elsewhere. We've discussed a little earlier the exhibition at the nearby Farnsworth Museum in Rockland, Maine in 1957.

WILLIAM THON: Yes. Mr. Gruskin was able to send out traveling shows around the country to different museums, including Farnsworth here in Rockland and he also saw to it that I was represented in various group shows all

around the country, in Philadelphia, Chicago and Washington. He would see to it that my paintings were submitted to the various juries or in some cases they were invited by the jury to take part. So he saw to it that I had sufficient exposure.

ROBERT BROWN: For example, the Art and Embassies Program of the State Department. You were exhibited in group shows there about six times or so from the 1960s into the 1980s.

WILLIAM THON: Yes, and my work was loaned to various embassies throughout the world in Europe and Asia. They were simply loaned to decorate the embassies. I remember too he took part in an exhibition of American painting that was assembled by the Johnsons Wax Corporation where they, I thinnk, purchased 100 American paintings and sent them on a trip around the world in order to show the world that America at that time was able to produce other things than machinery and it toured the world. When it came back to the United States, the whole exhibition, the 100 paintings, were donated to the Smithsonian Institution where it now resides.

ROBERT BROWN: All of this was done by your dealer. You didn't have to . . . ?

WILLIAM THON: No, happily I sit up here in Maine and don't concern myself with exhibitions or selling or shows. My dealer has seen fit that I was represented very well without having to worry me about it.

ROBERT BROWN: Here in Maine, can we talk about a little bit about its organizations and institutions? What about the Farnsworth where you exhibited I think for the first time in 1951. How did it get going? What was your impression of it in its first decade or so?

WILLIAM THON: I think for a small town museum it's very high grade. It's a museum that was financed by a wealthy family that lived in Rockland. I think the family fortune was amassed by owning limestone quarries and they financed this museum and I think it's a very good one for the size of the town. I've had two one-man shows there as of now and recently the director was down visiting me trying to arrange another one for next year of my new black and white things that I'm now doing.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you get to know the long-time director there, Wendell Hadlock?

WILLIAM THON: Yes, I knew them all. I knew Hadlock and I knew the one before that but now there's another one there.

ROBERT BROWN: In Rockport the Maine Coast Artists Group. Were you involved with that?

WILLIAM THON: I was one of the founders of that. That was a very high grade organization. It probably had the best art shows in the whole state of Maine. We went for quite a few years having good shows, the best painters available. It was highly successful. Still going, but it's somewhat changed now. But I don't have anything much to do with it anymore.

ROBERT BROWN: About when did you start that?

WILLIAM THON: Somewhere about 1950, somewhere in there.

ROBERT BROWN: So it's gone on for a very long time.

WILLIAM THON: Well, it's still going but of course the character is somewhat changed from what it was before.

ROBERT BROWN: Who were some of the other artists that you founded it with? Can you talk a bit about them?

WILLIAM THON: As I said before, it's a little difficult.

ROBERT BROWN: Denny Singers.

WILLIAM THON: Denny was very active in that. Bill Kingbush, you may remember him. People like that. It was very good. We had shows, changed them every month. It was very active.

ROBERT BROWN: What was Bill Kingbush like? Did you get to know him a bit?

WILLIAM THON: I did indeed. He summered up here and we got to know him pretty well. I think he was a high grade painter and very individual and also contributed some very nice things to our monthly shows up there?

ROBERT BROWN: Personality, what was he like?

WILLIAM THON: I have no particular recollection. He was a normal guy, quiet, came down here to visit once in a while. Interested in books. I have some antique books that he would have liked to buy but weren't for sale.

Outdoor type. I don't think he went on the water much like I did. Denny was very active in the organization, contributed best work all the time. There was a man named Fran Merritt also who later formed a school called A Haystack Mountain. I haven't seen him lately but I guess he's still involved with that.

ROBERT BROWN: When you first knew him he was primarily painting?

WILLIAM THON: Yes, he was painting at that time.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it work that you admired?

WILLIAM THON: Yes. I admired them all for different reasons. Everybody was a different personality and they were all different. There was a young Oriental man, too. I can't think of his name now. He doesn't live in Maine anymore.

ROBERT BROWN: What was Merritt's personality like when you were organizing the Maine Coast Artists? Of course he later developed his school.

WILLIAM THON: He was an industrious kind of guy who would pitch in and help with organizing a show and having a voice in how it should be hung and so on. He did his share of the work attendant with putting on these group shows every month.

ROBERT BROWN: Summers were probably a time of more socializing and interruption I suppose as well here in Maine?

WILLIAM THON: Yes, but it didn't take charge. Everybody respected everybody else's privacy. You could have as much socializing as you wanted or as little.

ROBERT BROWN: What about collectors? Did you get to know some of those who bought your paintings or was that again mostly handled by the Gruskins in New York?

WILLIAM THON: Mostly it was handled by the Gruskins, although there have been people come here and I preferred that they would go to the Gallery to make their purchase, pointing out that there's much better selection down there. I didn't want to get involved in the selling of my work here and I still don't enjoy trying to sell work here. I refer them to the Gallery.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you nevertheless, though, get to know some of the people who began collecting your paintings?

WILLIAM THON: Casually. We never made close friends out of them. There's a few around town who acquired my work that we knew in spite of that. No, we don't make a point of getting to know them too well.

ROBERT BROWN: You're very self-sufficient; you've been so for a number of years in various senses, not merely in terms of making a living and in terms of your work, sales, and so forth, associations with other artists and the like. It always comes back to this, suits you very well.

WILLIAM THON: We have no close association with any of the painters. Our friends here are musicians, doctors, fishermen, lobster fishermen. The only painter permanently in the neighborhood is Andy Wyeth but I don't see him more than a couple of times a year. We have a very nice association with the fishermen in town. I've always had a boat and always loved boats and therefore get along and I understand something of the hardship that fishermen go through in pursuing their daily job.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, your ways of making paintings. This has been written about, photographed. I wonder, the very act of how you make a painting. Is that something that has interested you? You've talked about it and it's been discussed by others or is it something that you simply have a second nature?

WILLIAM THON: I don't know. I probably do things by instinct. I suppose my methods are peculiar to me. I didn't learn them in school. I don't know of any other painter that does the same things I do. I have to paint watercolors, for example, on a flat table because I pour a whole pitcher of water over the paper and it goes all over. I don't know anybody that puts that much water on the paper and the color is actually floating on the top of the water. That gives it an extreme fragile quality. I don't know anybody that proceeds the same way. Well, maybe that's the reason why people have acquired them because they are a little bit different.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you happen to do that method? A very vigorous one.

WILLIAM THON: I suppose it came gradually. I got the idea that a little water was good, more was better and one led to another and it became a gradual method that I do all the time now.

ROBERT BROWN: Had you pretty much evolved your method of doing watercolors and oils, say, by the 1940s or '50s?

WILLIAM THON: Pretty much. I haven't been able to paint an oil now for about a year or more. I'm working entirely on white paper with black paint which I can see a little bit.

ROBERT BROWN: Had you resolved your basic by the 1940s or 1950s?

WILLIAM THON: Yes, in both oil and watercolor. When I was painting an oil I would paint with wide putty knives largely. I'd start a painting out on a flat surface nad put a lot of paint on and move it around with about a four or five-inch putty knife and then gradually get it up vertically on an easel and then pull it all together. But now my work is black and white on paper.

ROBERT BROWN: Is that by necessity?

WILLIAM THON; I can't see color very much anymore and of course when I pick up a tube of paint I don't know what it is. I can't read the label to find out whether it's green, or blue or black so I'm working entirely with black. Sometimes it's a combination of paint and ink with a lot of water on white paper and I can see enough of that to get the paint on the paper and they are of necessity very bold. Sometimes done with a two-inch brush, regular house painter's brush. Sometimes I get something pleasing and sometimes not. I don't see any detail at all. Looking at them with magnifying glasses trying to see what has been done. I'm supposed to have a show at Midtown, this new work, somewhere around October of '93 so I'll be working now all winter with that goal in view.

ROBERT BROWN: In a pending show, has it always been a major goal for you or a stimulus?

WILLIAM THON: It has always been a target. I've always had a show pending, every two years or so and it always gave impetus. Of course I always have two or three times as much as I needed for a show but that was all to the good.

ROBERT BROWN: Would the Gallery come up here and make its selection?

WILLIAM THON: No, I would send everything to New York. I would send everything down there and leave it up to Mr. Gruskin to select what he wanted of the show and then he would keep it all down there.

ROBERT BROWN: How have things changed now with the new owner, Mr. Pason?

WILLIAM THON: I don't really know. I don't know how often or how long or whatever given time that Mr. Pason is in the Gallery. I'm not that much acquainted. I haven't seen his new gallery. They've moved about a year or more ago but I haven't been down there to see it and I probably will try to get down. If I have this show next year, I'll probably try to get down to see it. I don't know how active Mr. Pason is in the Gallery.

[END OF TAPE]

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