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Oral history interview with Gilbert A. Franklin, 1978 April 13

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Gilbert A. Franklin on April 13, 1978. The interview took place in Providence, Rhode Island, and was conducted by Robert Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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

Interview

ROBERT BROWN: This is an interview.

[Audio Break.]

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[Audio Break.]

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Have we—oh, it wasn't running before.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: This is an interview in Providence, Rhode Island, with Gilbert Franklin. This is April 12—13—1978. It's Robert Brown, the interviewer. I'd like to begin by asking you something of your childhood, if you could describe bits of it. What do you think were some important things that happened to you during it? Perhaps keeping in mind your later career, but not necessarily, if there were events or people that were quite important to you then.

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: All right. My early childhood, in England, I don't recall too much of. I came to this country when I was about five, and we moved to Attleboro, Mass. My father was a jeweler. So we were living there. But I do remember always being familiar with tools, and having work going on around me, and being able to have tools and make things myself. That's—

ROBERT BROWN: Your father was a jeweler—made jewelry?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Made jewelry, yeah. He worked in a jewelry factory, too, but he made jewelry. He was a jeweler.

ROBERT BROWN: Was he doing mostly custom orders? People would—

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: The things that he was doing at home, yeah. In the factory, he was doing some of that, but not so much.

ROBERT BROWN: Would he stress certain things to you when you—if he ever talked about his work, what he was trying to do with it? [00:02:00]

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Some, but that's not very clear in my memory. What is clear is just sitting beside him at a bench, working with him. Learning how to handle a jig saw, pliers, shears, working with metal, files. Doing the simple things that, at eight or 10, I could do. Then it just continued from then on. I've always done things like that.

ROBERT BROWN: Did it seem that you would go on to do something with your hands? Is that what you wanted to do?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Seemed to, yeah. Always been in the background. It seemed—I guess there's a point between grammar school and the early years of high school where one thinks, of all the things, that one might be a journalist, a pilot, you know. I don't know, the wide-ranging kind of more adventuresome things or professions. But in back was always this feeling that it would be something that I would do, with my hands. Drawing was always very important to me. I always—I can remember doing that as far back as I can remember anything.

ROBERT BROWN: What would you draw? Anything particular, or just from the imagination?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: No, I think, originally, just copying things. Indian heads, full-rig sailing vessels [laughs] all that kind of thing. You know, there are always three or four people in a class or something who could do things, and they seem to be the ones who make pictures for the other kids. You know, that kind of thing.

ROBERT BROWN: Your family—into high school, you continued to help your father?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: No, not by then. He was not making custom jewelry at that time. [00:04:02] That was rather sad, because he felt he was just a cog in a factory at that time.

ROBERT BROWN: By then, it was the Depression, too, wasn't it?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah. The height of the Depression [laughs] which is a—

ROBERT BROWN: Do you recall—

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: —strange phrase.

ROBERT BROWN: In school, was there any encouragement from that end, in school in Attleboro?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah. We had very simple classes in art, maybe once a week or something like that.

ROBERT BROWN: So it was a fairly minor input, but—

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: It was very minor, up until high school. There was a little bit more in high school. But I had—outside of school, the associations were much, much stronger. I knew people who were just a little older than I was, three and four years older, who were very, very skillful makers of all kinds of things, and I gravitated toward them. They were very—we were close friends.

ROBERT BROWN: Were these people who were working in the jewelry business?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Some of them. Some of them were just friends who were—well, they were just sort of between high school and going to work, that kind of thing. They were—well, one in particular, a fellow named Alvin White, who's now a very distinguished gun engraver, custom gun builder, we were great friends, and we made everything, everything we wanted. You know, ship models, knives, bronze casting, all that kind of thing. We did our own research. We did our own setting up of our own little shops and so forth. That was running along parallel to school, say from the age of 11 or 12 right through high school. [00:06:07] When I left high school, I went to a program that was brand-new in Attleboro at that time. It was called the Jewelry Trade School, Attleboro Jewelry Trade School. There I learned a good deal more, mostly in the area of die cutting and designing for jewelry, which I was certain I was not going to do some way or another. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: It was very, very tedious work?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah. Yeah. I'd had a—I went from there, I guess, to—and I worked in a factory for about a year, and that was all I wanted of that. But in between there, I guess during the time I was in high school, I met a fellow named Warren Cameron [ph], who was a painter, fairly good painter. He had been a prize-winning painter when he was a student here at the Rhode Island School of Design. He was the first one who said, very definitely, in a professional way, "You must go on and study." People always sort of regarded me as being artistic in some way, but he was the one who said, "You've got some talent. You've got to develop it. You have to study."

ROBERT BROWN: Whereas other people thought you could just putter around that as a hobby?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Sort of, I guess. Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: In Attleboro, weren't you fortunate there were quite a few people, you said, contemporaries, near-contemporaries, who were also interested in making things?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah, yeah. Most of the friends that I knew were all of that persuasion. They just liked to do things with their hands, make things.

ROBERT BROWN: Would you say that was, as you were in your teenage, one of your chief interests, was making things?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Were there that many other distractions, or this is what you really concentrated on? [00:08:03]

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Outside of what I had to do, and by way of attending school, that was my real interest. I always had a little shop of my own, a little place to work. So that—

ROBERT BROWN: Your parents encouraged you in this?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Very much, yeah, yeah. That, I was very fortunate, because I always had a lot of support that way.

ROBERT BROWN: When Cameron suggested you go on to art school, was that an easy decision, or could your family back you in that?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Hmm, they backed me spiritually. Financially [laughs]—

ROBERT BROWN: Couldn't at that time?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Couldn't very much.

ROBERT BROWN: This was what, about a year or two after you'd been in the factory for a year or so?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah, just about. It was 19—I came to the School of Design in 1937. I graduated from high school in '36. But they were very—they understood. It was a real break for them, because I had been working, and that was income for them, which everybody needed at that time. But they understood that—I suspect they thought perhaps my going to art school would result in my getting still a better job as a designer, say in jewelry or something of that sort. But there really was no opposition, and it was all support, which took something from—it was a big financial loss for them to do that, even though they were not paying tuition.

ROBERT BROWN: But to lose your income?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: To lose the income.

ROBERT BROWN: But you went there thinking you didn't want to come back to be a designer?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: No, I knew that was [laughs] I wouldn't do that again.

ROBERT BROWN: You wanted to be more like Cameron? Freelance?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah, I guess—I really came to study painting. [00:10:00] I really wanted to be a painter. I had been doing some painting at home on my own, and drawing was my real—I mean, I was more proficient in drawing than anything else. He was a painter, and he encouraged me in the area of painting, and I did come to Providence to learn to paint, but very quickly, in the first year that I was here, I sort of reverted back to what I had been doing before, which was essentially carving. Only here, I had real tools and large equipment. Stone. A lot of things that I had been working on before were rather small, miniature things, and the idea here was truly sculpture, not replicas of other things, but original work.

ROBERT BROWN: When you began here, what was it like for you?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Heaven.

ROBERT BROWN: You came here for your first year. Heaven?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Heaven. [Laughs.] Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: The curriculum suited you?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yes. It was just exciting to be in what would have to be called a city at that time. It was larger than it is now. Certainly more active. But being in a small town and moving into this environment, having a museum, having all of the things that go on, was very exciting. And the people, the other students. And being able to just spend your time learning. Those were four marvelous years.

ROBERT BROWN: What were the interests of your fellow students? How would you characterize them?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: I guess most of them were—it was a large group of painters, and a large group of people who were interested in industrial design. [00:12:05] And illustration. You know, the commercial aspects of design. Although the first year was a fairly comprehensive foundation program, which was based in the general Bauhaus idea.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, it was? Hmm.

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: So that, that first year, we were all thrown together. It didn't matter what we were, what our ultimate aspirations were. We were all studying the same kinds of things.

ROBERT BROWN: What were those things?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: At that point?

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Well, design, surface design. That kind of thing was [laughs]—and I can remember that we did things to—with sticks of graphite, freely, to music. That was one of the big, expressive things that came. There's an educator in New York—Steinhoff [ph], I think his name was, but I can't remember exactly—who had some influence on the teachers who were working with us at that time, and it was this kind of musical making marks and motions without trying to reproduce a visual image that you had seen. Then a very simple, but beautifully direct way of working with clay and plaster to make simple sculpture. The funny thing was that I met John Howard Benson at that time, who was the head of the sculpture department. Very quickly, I moved out of that foundation program, and under his wing, moved physically from building over into his area, and began to do stone carving. [00:14:05] I had been doing something as a design problem in the foundation area, having to do with stone carving, and he came over to tell me something about it, and the first thing I knew, I was over there under his tutelage.

ROBERT BROWN: So your program was fairly soon altered.

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah. Thoughts of painting just slipped right away.

ROBERT BROWN: That was no problem? You didn't have to complete the other—

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: No. What I did with him stood in lieu of whatever we were required to do for form design, only I was just doing it at a little more advanced level in the sculpture area, and under his direction.

ROBERT BROWN: How did he teach?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Well, by example, very largely, but also he was a great philosopher about how one did things. At that time, his direct connection had a lot to do with Eric Gill. His beliefs were coming from Eric Gill, who was a great letter-carver, and not such a great sculptor. A lot of the things that Gill talked about suited Benson, who was a great Catholic layman, too, and these Catholic philosophy, and Aquinas, all of that stuff, got mixed into this—to an approach to fine art from what we now would call a craft level. [00:16:04] That is, if you knew how to make things well, then by extension, or by inference, one could learn how to make them better into that realm of what we call fine art. That was the basis for learning how to do things. I can remember not really buying all of that, but it was so clear. The exposition was clear. The description was clear. How to use the tool. If you use a tool a certain way, it produced a certain result. When you had enough of those experiences, you had a vocabulary, and then you could make whatever you wanted. It was a little bit rigid in some ways, but it fascinated me at the time.

ROBERT BROWN: It didn't recall for you the drudgery of jewelry design? Because that, too, demanded knowing your tools.

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah, but the end [laughs]—

ROBERT BROWN: I see. The light was at the end of the tunnel, right there.

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: I mean, one—the fact that you're producing something for someone else, and ultimately it's a mass-produced thing, and that you do it under conditions that are totally different—it was like night and day. One felt, in the school situation, that one was continually improving. Not only one's manual abilities were improving, but also your mental and other characteristics. [00:18:00] It was just one was educating oneself.

ROBERT BROWN: Did Benson spend a good deal of time with you?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah. We were very good friends as well as a student-teacher relationship. That time, he lived here. Later on, he commuted from Newport, but at that time, he lived here, and we were very close. I worked on things for him, and we just had a very good relationship. It's through him I became very close to a number of other teachers in the school. My feeling of going through the school at that time was much more semi-colleague and friend of my teachers. Very close to them, both in and out of school. Felt very fortunate about that.

ROBERT BROWN: This wasn't typical, though? Were many of your fellow students fairly close to—

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: A few. A few. As I look back at it, I think it must have been atypical, but at the time, it didn't seem to me that I was any different from anyone else, except that, where everyone else might call him Mr. Benson, or Mr. Frazier, or Mr. Raemisch, I would call them John and Waldemar. It never seemed strange to me. We were just really good friends. We were on the same wavelength, I guess, and there were others who were, too. Have to say that. But it wouldn't—I don't think it was the general condition of the school, although school, as it was constituted at that time, would permit that in a way that's just not possible any longer. [00:20:05]

ROBERT BROWN: What was there in its makeup then that—

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Fewer students. [Laughs.] More teachers. And less hassle. I guess things were at a slower pace, perhaps.

ROBERT BROWN: What was this wavelength? You said you were on the same wavelength. What, with, say, Benson or Raemisch—

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Frazier.

ROBERT BROWN: Frazier. What do you mean by that?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: We understood each other. For some reason, these men would go out of their way to instruct me, to talk to me, not only about the thing at hand, which might be drawing, painting, and sculpture, but life, and how an artist lives and thinks. I felt that—I suppose, if you were to put it into a familial context, it was as though they were uncles or something like that, who had a real interest in some special nephew kind of thing. It was mostly—it bounces back and forth. A teacher talks to a number of people, and then he gets something back from them. Of a given number, there will be a few who just respond in a way that he knows that the message has gone home and he's gotten something back that he hadn't expected, even, so then he gives even more. The exchange increases the exchange. We had that sort of a thing. I was eager to learn whatever they had to tell me. For instance, I sort of sat at John Frazier's feet for years, and our only direct relationship in which he would be advising me directly about something would be drawing. [00:22:08] He was a painter, I was a sculptor, and yet we talked freely about painting and about sculpture, and about books and everything else. So I learned a lot from him, although we were—I wasn't studying sculpture with him, but I learned a great deal about what—a lot of people were telling me what art was and how you do it, and how one develops, and so on, and so on. Frazier, I always felt—the thing that interested me about Frazier was that he seemed to be able to convey to me what it meant to be an artist, what an artist was like as a person. Discussions of that kind just made me want more than ever to be an artist. Today, the expression "role model," it's all in vogue. He was not only a role model in that sense, but he took a great deal of pains to describe what it was like to be an artist, what an artist did. Was there a difference?

ROBERT BROWN: Did he think there was?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Not so much. I don't think he strove to make it seem different from something else, but there was that sort of intangible, and maybe mysterious, thing, which he was trying to explain all the time. And not to make it a mystical kind of thing, but putting it in terms of a man or a person who searches for quality, let's say. [00:24:05] The more intensely you could make the search, or the better you learned to make it, the more reward you would have, and that the rewards were in making the search, not necessarily in making a terrific work of art, putting it up, having it sold, or having it acclaimed. But the fact of making that kind of inquiry, reacting to it, and guiding your life—having those values guide your life was the important thing about being an artist, and not the acclaim and so forth. Some of us learned that lesson too well. I mean, I think we—for the longest time, it didn't seem important to try and do certain things, although a lot of us, we were showing in exhibitions even before we left school. But it didn't seem to be in that same—it was sort of, this is what I've done, not, praise me for it.

ROBERT BROWN: A good deal of that knowledge of what you had done was still fairly private, wasn't it? You didn't want it to be generally known, or it didn't concern you whether or not people knew?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Saw what we were doing, you mean?

ROBERT BROWN: Or knew what you were going through. This internal process—is that—

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: No, I don't think that was—no, that didn't seem to be a consideration then. [00:26:01] At least—maybe I was backward about it. [They laugh.] It didn't seem to be so much in vogue in those days.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you ever have discussions as to what is art with some of these men, or with your fellow students?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: All the time. All the time. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Do you recall what you thought art was at that time?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: It was something different every week. Whatever exhibition I had seen, or book I had read. I had a friend who used—we'd start these discussions, and he would say, "Art is when"—dash, and then whatever. [Laughs.] Instead of, "Art is" and describing it. It was always "Art is when." Which—it was a joke at that time, but it's very close to what people say now: art is what you say it is, or what you wish it to be. But of course, at that time, everybody had very firm ideas about what art was, and who made it, and who made it well, and who didn't.

ROBERT BROWN: Is that because the craft within art was still very strong, wasn't it?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think the craft was, and the—

ROBERT BROWN: The traditional.

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: The gods were all in their heavens. Cézanne was Cezanne, Matisse, Picasso, Rembrandt, Rubens, so on. There wasn't that much questioning about that, at least in my experience. Began to be a little later on. I also had very, very strong influence and relationship with Waldemar Raemisch and his great sense of—what should I say—art history. [00:28:06] The roots of art, Western art, sculpture in particular. Well, they influenced everything he did, same way they—by the same token they influenced me, too. There was always—at that point, I think, there was—one was looking back as much as one was looking forward, and at that time, in this country, there were not the exciting figures, it seemed to me at that time, anyway—this would have been in the late '30s—who were—I mean, no one seemed to be really pushing up in this country who would match a Matisse or a Picasso, or any of those people who were still all alive. We were looking to Europe, looking to the past, in a way I'm certain that would not have been true, say, had we been in New York or Philadelphia or Chicago. I think that it was a fairly provincial outlook at the time. But it didn't seem to matter, because we were pretty busy just trying to develop ourselves as people and as artists. Maybe it's not too bad, not—

ROBERT BROWN: These men each encouraged your development, didn't they? Faculty?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: So that the development was perhaps the most important thing, or the developing, right?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT BROWN: The act of it.

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: They were all very strong characters. [00:30:00] They all had very definite characters. They were individuals. They certainly didn't think alike. They didn't agree on many things. Being in the middle of it was rather nice, because [laughs] you had the benefit of all of this stuff without having to subscribe to any one in particular.

ROBERT BROWN: Could you characterize them? For example, Waldemar Raemisch. How long had he been here? Very long?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: He hadn't been—he came, I think, if my memory is correct, in 1938. At least he came to Providence around 1938—it might have been early 1939—from Berlin. So he hadn't been here very long, and he couldn't speak very much English. I'd had some German in high school, so I was sort of translator for him a little bit. I could understand what he was saying, and I admired what he was doing, so that association was very—

ROBERT BROWN: What was there in what he was doing—

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: —quickly and firmly—

ROBERT BROWN: —in his work that you liked? What tradition was he?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: His own tradition at that time was—the kinds of things he was doing at that time were almost directly related to the things that Lehmbruck was doing in Germany, but his roots went way beyond that. The two things that interested him in the past were the medieval sculpture and the Greek sculpture, and these were always the things that we talked about. [00:32:02] We didn't talk so much about what he himself was doing, because I was always helping him do it, so I was, in a way, sort of an apprentice to him. That I saw the thing develop all the time, and of course he did explain. We talked about it. But mostly he was—in long conversations, we would talk about what he knew about the past and how that related to the present. He was a very thorough, very careful man. In the beginning, because of difficulties with his language, he taught always by

example. "This is how you do something," and then he would do it, spend an hour working on something. That was marvelous, because you saw someone who was a master manipulating the clay, carving the stone, using the plaster. That was just fine.

ROBERT BROWN: What did you absorb from medieval or Greek sculpture as he interpreted it for you? Do you recall? What were the lessons of those to be for a contemporary artist?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Oh, I don't know. I guess it was all sort of vague and misty. We had some good pieces in the museum, which are of that sort. It was—I suppose we romanticized it a little bit. Pretty hard to take that in and put it right into the context of our own lives, so that it was always something that was in a museum. [00:34:00] It never did really relate to us, except that it was something we would try—it was a standard that you'd try to achieve, in terms of your ability to, say if it were a stone piece, carve the stone. Somehow, the imagery and the further intent of the thing, say, a religious object, at least to me, it didn't ever come into it. I was always interested in the formal aspects of art.

ROBERT BROWN: Was Raemisch a fairly warm man? What was his temperament like?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Oh, yeah, very. Very friendly, very warm. Had a great sense of humor. Very serious. Worked very hard. Because when I knew him, it was late in his life, and he had fled from Germany. Well, I don't—my recollection in those days, I must have spent two or three evenings a week with him at home, at his own home, and certainly most of every day in the last couple of years that I was a junior or a senior, sculptor.

ROBERT BROWN: How did he happen to be brought to Providence so late in his career after he'd fled Germany?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: He was sponsored here by some group in Philadelphia. I don't know whether it's a Quaker organization. My memory slipped. There is a society there, though. It has a German name, and they did bring a number of people, scholars and professional people, to this country. [00:36:02] They sponsored him, and they would try, then, to place these people, in either professional life or institutions. I guess they approached the school, so he came to us.

ROBERT BROWN: This was about the same time that the German museum director came, isn't it? Alexander Dorner?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Dorner was a little later, yeah, but around that time.

ROBERT BROWN: Was the management of the school pretty open to change and to bring in new people at that time?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: I think so. I think so. I mean, given the context of what we were at that time. The school was just beginning to push out from being sort of an atelier group kind of school. I guess, in 1937, '38, the so-called College Hill Building was opened at that time, and that was the first big, new structure that was designed specifically for what it housed: painters, sculptors, and so on. With that building, we began to take on more of the air of a college, and a little less of a limited art school. It was fairly open, and I think, at that time, there were new people coming in. We had a new dean, and he wanted to get—there was a great drive at that time to make art useful in terms of having it serve society, having it serve industry, and so on, so on. [00:38:00] So there was always sort of—there was a tension within the school between the areas that were definitely headed toward outside professional activity, such as industrial design, architecture, apparel design, interior design, and the ivory tower of sculpture and painting. That kind of tension wasn't bad. I think it was fine, since we were all, as students, able to move sort of freely between one studio and another. There was very little housing at that time, and I guess only for women, so we all lived on the hill up here in rooming houses. We were sort of together all of the time anyway. So there was a sort of collegiality about it, even though it wasn't formalized. Do you want to talk this much about the school? [Laughs.] I don't know. We're getting—

ROBERT BROWN: I'd like to quote—wondered if you could—could you perhaps characterize John Howard Benson? You've mentioned how he—

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah. He was very—he was just a very special man, and as I say, he was the first man at the school who sort of took me under his wing and brought me into his home, and had me work with him closely. He was—

ROBERT BROWN: This happened your first year, didn't it?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Beginning of your first year. Was he a very ebullient person?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Very.

ROBERT BROWN: Serious as well?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Very serious. Loved life, loved to eat and drink, tell stories. He just had a great time, you know, and he had a very keen mind. [00:40:04] He had a great love of precision, in the best sense of that word. If we were having a conversation, he would be at great pains to make sure that I understood what he was saying, not by reiterating, but by choosing carefully what he was saying. Had a wonderful expository style, and I think that was very attractive to me, and very—commanded my attention. I think all of these people had that. They were marvelous teachers, and without knowing it, if you were in their orbit at all, you were learning how to teach, and that was a nice thing, without having it being spelled out as "Ed" with a capital—"Education" with a capital "E," art ed, or anything of that sort. You just—it had to do with precision of language and a certain style, a certain organization of the material. Began at one place, went through, ended at another, and there were conclusions to be drawn, in the tiniest ways, so that one felt that, almost at the end of every day, one had learned something. That is a great feeling, because you get up the next day and you're really eager to learn something else. That characterized all the time that I spent at the school as a student. [00:42:02] I really felt that way. Just couldn't wait to get there.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, John Frazier was an administrator as well, wasn't he, off and on? What was he like? You've mentioned the amount of time he spent with you. Was he a very special case in terms of being—among the teachers?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yes, I think he was. He really—he was a great student himself. He never stopped being a student, and he was a student of himself, and he was a student of his art. He was not loathe to pass on whatever he discovered to someone else. He had a very engaging way of doing it. He was a very imposing figure. He was about—both he and Howard Benson were 6'3" or 6'4" in height, and very dramatic in their [laughs] demeanor and manner. They really did command attention. But they really never took advantage of that. Some people really flaunt whatever they've got. They were pretty reserved [inaudible] in many ways, but in a way that made you want to pay attention. Frazier just—well, he just liked to talk to people. He liked to know what they were thinking, what their experiences were, and then he'd tell you about his experiences. [00:44:01] It was a—I can remember, later on, when I was a young teacher, I'd spend about a half an hour every morning before the day began in the college, just talking to him, and we'd just review—it was a conversation. But it began the day very nicely. If he were a little bit down, I might try to lift him up. If I were [laughs] pretty low period, he'd try to pick me up. At that point, Bob Hamilton, the painter, came to the school. This was after the war. We three used to sit in Frazier's office and just sort of talk for about a half an hour before we went our separate ways to classes, and that was very nice. It was a good thing. Certainly, as the most junior member of the faculty, I felt as close as possible to the most senior member, and that's a nice feeling. The door was never closed.

ROBERT BROWN: In your own work while you were—your four years here as a student, did you sense you began developing a style or a particular mode, individual mode of expression? How far along were you in your work, would you say?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah, I guess somewhat, although I didn't realize it. It's only now, if I look back. I have some few pieces that were things that I had done at that time. I guess there was some early beginnings of what one might call a style. It's always been a problem for me anyway that—I mean, my work changes, so it's hard to—I don't think one could see a style running through the whole range of the last, say, 35 years or so, but um—[00:46:10]

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have any—do you think you were influenced at that point by any particular contemporary work?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah. Mile [ph] was a great favorite of mine at that point. Rodin, of course, because I was very much interested in portrait sculpture.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you do some then?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah. Yeah, I was doing that.

ROBERT BROWN: You got some commissions and stuff like that?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yes, I did, and I did portraits of Benson, Frazier. Most of my colleagues and fellow students, too, at that time. So I was doing a lot of that, and that was heavily influenced by Rodin. Although Raemisch was a very good portrait sculptor. He got me interested in that. But the—I don't know. It just did not seem to be important to me at that time. As I say [laughs] I might have been a little backward about developing a style and so forth. I think—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, you were interrupted a bit by the wartime service. Didn't you have—

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: No, I was not.

ROBERT BROWN: Once you left, did you have to work, or did you immediately start teaching here?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Well, I started teaching not at the school. I taught at Newport Art Association, and I taught at Moses Brown, and I guess I was doing some odd handy things around the school for a while. [00:48:02] Then I did work in the shipyard, too, for a while during the war.

ROBERT BROWN: What was that, fabrication work? Design?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: It was mostly supervising fabrication. Actually, what it was, I was able to read blueprints, and the foreman [laughs] who was in charge of the shift I worked couldn't read them, so I was his interpreter, translator.

ROBERT BROWN: These teaching assignments, at Newport Art Association, for instance, was that rather easy and recreational?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah, that wasn't very serious professional stuff. There were very few students. I can't even remember how many there were and what I did. It was rather—people came in, and I guess I conducted a class in modeling and portrait sculpture.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you happen to have a couple of shows before—in the '40s? Providence Art Club, and then one out in San Jose, California.

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Well, I—

ROBERT BROWN: Did somebody invite you?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: No. San Jose was my first teaching assignment outside of this area.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, I see.

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Right after the war. But I was exhibiting at the Providence Art Club while I was still a student. Had a very good exhibition at one time with Raemisch and Frazier. I guess it was with Frazier and Benson and myself and another sculptor. [00:50:04] I guess there were—we had two teachers, two students. That was kind of a nice thing.

ROBERT BROWN: The art club was a pretty generous outlook for people in the area to show?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah. It was fairly important in those days. There weren't all that many galleries, and that gallery was rather a nice one at the time, and they were very generous in making it available to people who were not members. They had very interesting shows. They did—I think almost everyone of importance exhibited at the art club, because the only other place was the museum, and at that time the museum maybe had an annual show, and that was also very easy, open, and democratic. Everyone could submit, and almost everybody got exhibited. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, really?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah. It was funny. But it was nice, because one did have a chance to show one's work. A lot of people saw it. You saw it in a sort of professional surrounding. No one ever—it didn't seem, at the time, anything that you were exhibiting in a museum. It wasn't any special thing. It wasn't as though you were exhibiting in a museum outside of the town. It was a family museum, sort of.

ROBERT BROWN: Was the museum taken pretty much as the school's museum? It was used very much by students?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah, quite a bit.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it a museum of some importance to outside as well? [00:52:00] Some of its art objects certainly are—

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah, even at that time. It had a very good collection of—certain items were really first-class. There were some classical things that were always good. They always had some first-rate French painting.

ROBERT BROWN: During these years, before you went out to California, had you traveled any?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah. When I left school, I won the one big fellowship that was given at that time, which

was an alumni traveling fellowship, and I went to Mexico. I spent about six months there. Went with another fellow, who was a painter. That was very good. I liked that.

ROBERT BROWN: What did you go there to do? Look at these Mexican work?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah, all the Pre-Columbian stuff there, which was very much in vogue at the time. I was very much interested in stone carving, and there was an awful lot of it. [Laughs.] You see, the war was just underway then. That is, we were just getting into it at that time. So what normally had been a fellowship which meant that you'd make the grand tour of Europe was—one was not able to do that, so I chose to go to Mexico at that time. That was very rewarding. It was good to see some—a great deal of art that had nothing to do, it seemed, with whatever I had studied as the background of Western civilization. It had a freshness and a very powerful impact. [00:54:00] So naturally, I did some Mexican sculpture for a while. [They laugh.]

ROBERT BROWN: What did the power of its impact consist of, as you recall?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: It was always—their sculpture is religious, votive, in nature, but certainly at the opposite end of the spectrum from—

ROBERT BROWN: In formal terms, what is it?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: In formal terms, well, they're very—I suppose it was the very powerful animal and bird, snake, forms. All of the—I suppose just a great deal of non-human, non-figurative sculpture. Finding oneself viewing that in a way, and being affected by it in a way, that one wouldn't have thought possible in terms of one's background and looking at, say, Greek figurative sculpture, or medieval, religious work. I don't suppose I ever really understood it, but it interested me very much formally, just how they carved the stone, the kinds of stone that they used, and trying to relate the very strong, almost terrifying character of the imagery with the people who made it, and how and why they were doing this. [00:56:06] Because all around one were the ancestors of these people, and the Mexicans are, in general, very gentle and quiet and very warm people. And to think, you know, [laughs] that this same type of person had made these rather—well, they're not horrible things, but I mean, they're terrifying, commanding, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Pretty brutal?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: —brutal, some of them. Well, the brutality comes—it's not from lack of ability to do the delicate thing, or to make a fine form. It's just—

ROBERT BROWN: I didn't mean it in the formal sense. I mean the emotional effect.

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Right, the emotional effect is very—

ROBERT BROWN: You were mainly doing carving, then, for a while after that?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah. I tried to work a little bit there. I did some carving there. I did a lot of drawing, and I did some painting, but I found out early on that if you're really in a strange culture and a new land, it's best to just travel and look at it all. I always did draw, but just moving around and seeing what it all looked like was the way we spent our time, mostly.

ROBERT BROWN: Suppose if you'd gone to Europe, or been able to go to Europe, you would have done differently?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: I'm sure, yeah, because when I did finally get to Europe, which was—well, about eight years later, seven or eight years later, that had a tremendous impact on me. [00:58:12] I think it might have made a difference. It's hard to know in retrospect.

ROBERT BROWN: You said the Mexican experience made you do, in quotes, Mexican sculpture, for a bit afterwards.

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: What more general effect do you think it had on you? Had you been doing lighter, more graceful forms before you went, or more precise, representational things?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: I guess what I had been doing was mostly model things with the sensual surface that you can get working with your hands and wet clay, and the very sensitive, tactile kinds of forms and surfaces you can make that way. Again, this would be in, let's say, Rodin-esque. But I think Mexico led me to see a much more formal, almost geometric kind of thing. Of course, to see those Chac Mools, those seated, reclining figures, which were the basis for Henry Moore's reclining figures, were—that was very important to me, because it was—

at that time, just before I left, Moore was beginning to be known in this country. [01:00:15] At least, I began—there were some books published. There were some works to be seen. To be able to see a lot of that kind of stuff that had influenced him—and of course one was reading what he was talking about and saying at the time. You know, preaching the gospel of the vitality of primitive work, the vitality that comes from making something that has meaning, in a way that those of us who make art today can scarcely know. It's removed from its meaning in terms of affecting people in a broad social way or a religious way. Having read this sort of approach to sculpture, or knowing that point of view as doctrine, having the opportunity to see the actual things was quite important. It made me, at that time, just before—I mean, I was making the swing from Mile and Rodin to Henry Moore as—my interests stayed with Moore for a long time. [01:02:00] I guess that that was sort of a pivotal point. I think Mexico was interesting to me from that point on.

ROBERT BROWN: Did some of Moore's concern for reflection or meaning in contemporary terms—I mean, contemporary social or religious terms, creation of archetypes and the like—did some of this come into your work at that time, following—seeing his things and being in Mexico?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Why do you think they were sort of broadly expressive of our society?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Yeah, I think there was some of that. There was a whole period there that—say, from 1942 to 1947 or so, five years there—that seemed wildly eclectic. I was trying everything that seemed to appeal to me, and just trying all the things to see how they were done, why they were done, and trying to find the thing that suited me best. I was doing any number of things, but there always seemed to be some thread running through it. I think a lot of my work is very—fairly simple, fairly formal, and there's another part of my work which is a little more complex, has richer surfaces, has to do with character of people and so forth. There's always been a little bit of a back and forth between those two things.

ROBERT BROWN: A little more specific, and then a little more general.

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Right. [01:04:00]

ROBERT BROWN: A tension in that, do you know?

GILBERT A. FRANKLIN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah. I've always tried to—if you took, say, opposite ends of a balance see-saw or something, and on one end there was a very simple kind of—almost Brancusi, or just a sphere—the most—the simplest geometric shape, and at the other end something wildly Baroque, sensual surface, direct terra-cotta thing that—a Bernini study or something like that—those two things had always interested me.

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