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Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Thomas Tibbs, 1996 March 19-May 9

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Thomas Tibbs on March 19, 1996. The interview took place in Fallbrook, CA, and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 1]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, an interview with Thomas Tibbs at his home in Fallbrook, specifically Pala Mesa Village in southern California. The date is March 19, 1996, and this is a somewhat impromptu first session for an archives oral history. The interviewer is Paul Karlstrom. Well, Tom, it is indeed a pleasure to meet you and I'm grateful that you're willing to just start up immediately with doing some interview. I was enjoying our conversation earlier and the tales that you have to tell. I couldn't bear to see them just go off in thin air, so it's nice of you to let me turn the tape recorder on. And what I would like to do in this interview, and I hope it is a series and I hope that we will do at least one more, is to, in effect, track your most interesting career, primarily association with museums, with building museums, with, as far as I can tell, promoting contemporary art in different parts of the country, and then also your involvement with crafts. And why don't you -- usually, it's good to start off these interviews in the beginning, not to really dwell on your childhood or anything, but just to lay in a little bit of your own background, family, and so forth.

THOMAS TIBBS: Okay. I was born a Hoosier and I escaped to go away to school, never to return, other than for family visits. My family background pretty much were people interested in automobiles and automobile engineering which was a talent that I had not one ounce of. I had a family that wasn't terribly anxious to see me go into the field of fine arts on the grounds that one didn't make a living at it, happily.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you were interested already --

THOMAS TIBBS: Oh yeah, oh yeah, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did that come about?

THOMAS TIBBS: Well it came about, I think, by some very unusual teachers in the early grades, for example. I had one that saw to it that I got art classes at the museum, and another that was interested in my concerns for music and provided music study. And then when I was in high school, we were visited by the vice president of the University of Rochester to talk to the seniors, and I was so impressed with him, that I decided that's where I was going. It happened also to be the home of the Eastman School of Music which was a famous school. So I went to U of R and the Eastman School and killed two birds with one stone.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now you said earlier that -- I don't know if you did a double or a triple major, English Literature as well? Is that --

THOMAS TIBBS: Yes, yeah, but that came about by fascination with the stunning woman who was the head of the English Department who had more male students than female students always in her classes, and so I took a lot of work just to sit at her feet.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It wasn't then that pure love of literature?

THOMAS TIBBS: Well that was there, but it wasn't -- it would not have compelled me to do as much work in it as I did, so --but the University of Rochester is unique in that the City Art Museum was owned by the University and was on campus, and so all of my years as both undergraduate and graduate student in fine arts was spent in a museum working with collections. We did have a lecture room with some slide talks, but that's very different than going into a gallery and handling original works, and that determined me to go professionally into the museum field.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Excuse me, but what years were these --

THOMAS TIBBS: Oh, early to mid-forties. After finishing the graduate work, I went off to Columbia for a period of time to study with a couple of people that I was interested in. And following that, I was offered a job in the museum, and so I --

PAUL KARLSTROM: At Columbia?

THOMAS TIBBS: No, no, at Rochester.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Back to Rochester.

THOMAS TIBBS: And I joined the curatorial staff back there and the education staff. And they had a small museum. You got a great grounding in all facets of the work and, eventually, an opportunity came along. I struck out on my own and went elsewhere.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was the training like at that time? I mean I doubt that you would -- they didn't have museum studies the way they do now, I would expect.

THOMAS TIBBS: Not the way they do now, no. The only place where you can really do that was at Harvard with Paul Salks. I mean other than that, it was on-the-job training, and -- but I had come to know the collections very well by that time and I had also had the opportunity to be the one to catalogue George Eastman's collection which was owned by the University, having been left to them by bequest. And so all together, it began to gel and one thing led to another. And I love talking and I love giving lectures. And I remember the head of my fine arts department at the University, one of the nicest things and I think probably one of the few nice things really said to me in the way of a compliment was that he determined that I was going to have a career as a lecturer, and so for a kid in college, that was kind of nice, so I guess I've been talking about it ever since.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When you went to Colombia, was it to study -- with whom did you want to study and what subject?

THOMAS TIBBS: Well, oddly enough, the person I most wanted to study with in Colombia was not related to the contemporary field, but she was one of the great classical scholars, Margaret Beaver, who was the authority in the Greek and Roman Theater, and having had to study a lot of classical art and so on, I really wanted to have a chance to study with her, and she was right at the point of retirement. As a matter of fact, when I first saw her, I thought this woman is 80 years old, but it was a fascinating experience, and at the same time, I had my first course with other faculty in primitive arts, tribal arts as we call it now, and what was then considered contemporary, but was a far cry from what contemporary art turned out to be.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was at Colombia?

THOMAS TIBBS: Yes, that was Colombia.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So what did degree were you -- you said you had already done some graduate work at Rochester. Is that right?

THOMAS TIBBS: Oh, yes. I had finished my graduate work in Rochester.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, I see, so this was like just an additional --

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- study.

THOMAS TIBBS: The thing about studying with Margaret Beaver was that it brought the art of classical Greece and the theater together, and while we read the plays and all that kind of thing, it tied the whole thing together, and she was a fascinating person and she did indeed retire soon after. But the fascinating experience that came afterward was that when I was living in New York and directing a museum in New York, and this is now, oh, I would say, 12 to 14 years later, I was having lunch one day in the Museum of Modern Art, and I got on the elevator to go down to the street level and I stopped on a floor and this very infirm lady with a cane in each hand made her way very slowly onto the elevator, and while I was trying to decide is that Margaret Beaver, she called me by name; unbelievable. And we sat down and talked for nearly two hours about what she had been doing since and so on, so that was a great experience.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was 13 years later, and I want to make sure that I can [inaudible] this. You're at Rochester. You said earlier that you met --you married one of your teachers.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That was an interesting --

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: She was in the music?

THOMAS TIBBS: Yes, yes, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Another one of your --

THOMAS TIBBS: Music and music theory. She was on the faculty of the Eastman School and one of its best-known faculty performers, the piano. She was very, very gifted. In as much as I have studied music and worked very hard for any progress I ever made, I sometimes got annoyed at the fact that she could site-read anything and memorize it on site, you know, and she had such strong gifts in that regard that she was envied by many, many people. And she was a specialist in chamber music. Her performance career with chamber music was extraordinary. She's been deceased now 16 years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sixteen years.

THOMAS TIBBS: Um-hum.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you had the same wife to the end?

THOMAS TIBBS: Oh, yes, oh, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Wow. What a wonderful, old-fashioned idea, but I have the same situation, so -- how was it then -- how did your career really get underway? You were brought -- you were invited back here to take a job at Rochester. What was the position? What kind of position --

THOMAS TIBBS: Well, it was a combination. I started out being the curator of prints and the associate in Education. There were two of us in the Education Department, and in that department, we planned all of the educational activities and lectures and tours and so on, lecture series, what have you, and then, of course, the curatorial work in prints. Interestingly enough, this is the early days of television, and the -- my associate in Education and I had the first live art museum television show in the United States, and this is in 1949, '50, '51, '52. This is live television. We had to take the props to the station which we did every week for a half-hour live show. We were on the air for a little over three years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Art education, art appreciation?

THOMAS TIBBS: Art appreciation. We would take things from the museum collection and show them and talk about them. We did them thematically so that there was something that people would attach to and remember and so on. We had a rush of traffic coming in to the museum after every show if it touched upon something that somebody owned, and they would bring -- I can't tell you how many times the Leonardo de Vinci Last Supper has been brought in to the museum because someone thought they had it, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The real one; yeah, the real one.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah, but the show was watched. It really was watched and people were entertained by it. And so to be on live television that early was quite a unique experience. Later on in New York, I did a few test shows when the color cameras were first coming out, and CBS, we worked out a few things to test what could be done with the color camera and long before it got into popular years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's amazing.

THOMAS TIBBS: I remember we set up a still life, and by monkeying with the camera and turning knobs, we could make that still life look like a Matisse or a Rembrandt, depending on what we did to [inaudible] and light it and so on.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm just thinking about what Bill Gates has been doing with -- which, of course, is a whole other subject. What interested me, again we were talking earlier, something you said that really was working with the objects that hooked you, and presumably, you studied art history, but what made a difference to you was being able to go into the --

THOMAS TIBBS: In the galleries.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- museums. And this is something that presumably really set you off on your career and no doubt stayed with you up 'til now.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah. I've been asked many times over the years, How did you decide to become a museum director? And I would say, "You ask any young kid that you meet, 'What are you going to be when you grow up?' he's never going to say, 'I'm going to be an art museum director.' So how you come by it is almost always, I think, a combination of circumstances, some of which may very well be accidental. Had I gone to a school that didn't have the museum on campus and had the typical slide lecture background in my classes, I very well may

have headed into a teaching career. But once that bug bites you, you handle that object. You're hooked for good.

PAUL KARLSTROM: At that early stage, and again, this must be -- was this just post-war or --

THOMAS TIBBS: Oh, yes, just post-war.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Were you in the service?

THOMAS TIBBS: No, no. I tried to be --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

THOMAS TIBBS: -- but I had the misfortune of being six feet tall and weighed 111 pounds. No one would give me second notice, I'll tell you.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were [inaudible].

THOMAS TIBBS: As you see, I'm still a skinny kid.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And, of course, there are plenty of people who would envy that. So you were able then to, during the war years, continue your education.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And then just post-war, when did you actually start the job at --

THOMAS TIBBS: It would have been '47.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. What was the field like then? Because I can tell from our conversation that you, I imagine, primarily on, became involved in the wider museum director field, got to know the people 'cause you seem to be real social and --

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What [inaudible]?

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah, but, you know, it's a fraternity; it really is. And, of course, there are associations that you become a member of, the American Museum Association, and then later the Art Museum Directors Association, and in every way, there's travel connected with it. If you're putting together exhibitions, which early on I was allowed to do and so on and so forth, you get out into the professional world and it's --once you're in it, it's not hard; it's not difficult.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Who are some of the people in the early days that you got to know that you particularly admired or enjoyed?

THOMAS TIBBS: Well, I'll tell you, there were numbers. One that became my mentor and, bless his heart, was Philip Adams who was the director of the Cincinnati Museum of Art. Phil was known as a great orator. I mean that man had a silver tongue when it came to speaking and a personality to go with it. And he came every now and again to Rochester to lecture or to juried exhibitions and that kind of thing, and so all the years after that when the museum directors would have their meetings, Phil and I would take one afternoon and go off together and have lunch and talk and so on. And that went on for a long time, a number of years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Who were some of the others that you remember?

THOMAS TIBBS: Well there's Grace McCann-Morley.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, good, because we talked about her earlier. Could you tell me again --

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah. I first met her when she came to jury an exhibition and we all knew her as the head of the museum. It was on the cutting edge of contemporary art and it was in San Francisco and, of course, everyone envied people who got to live in San Francisco, let alone work there, and she did astounding exhibitions. Her record for exhibitions and her record for introducing new artists and so on was just enviable, and so she was much loved by everybody in that regard and she probably did as much for the emerging American artists during those years as any individual has every done before or since.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You said that others in the museum field, especially those interested in modern contemporary, really felt that San Francisco was the place at that time because of her. Is that right?

THOMAS TIBBS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sort of [inaudible] west for --

THOMAS TIBBS: Well, you know, this is kind of interesting because until abstract expressionism began to develop in the 1950s in New York, there was no contemporary American art in the sense of being avant-garde so much as it was regional. When we talked about contemporary art at that time, we talked about the vastness of the United States and regional art, and when went about juried exhibitions and I have juried exhibitions in all the corners of this continent, we looked for regionalism because that was authentic and you could tell whether a picture was done in the southwest or the northeast and so on. And so contemporary meant a quite different thing, that it meant once the '50s were going, and we had a group of artists called abstract expressionists in New York that established, one of the first time the original American contemporary school became a world movement.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is a very interesting point. I would love it if you could sort of elaborate on that because after that time, of course New York pretty much seemed to take over the mainstream which became the whole notion of center and the regional art then became much more [inaudible] critically or in the writing about -- in fact, this is a big theme in this book that I just finished because it's about modernism in California.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And it's very much the impression that New York appropriated or pretty much ended up owning the significant art and that that which was produced there, and also it was somehow deficient or lacking. Now the way you say it, that seems to be more recent.

THOMAS TIBBS: Except one thing; there's always a second generation of the movement, and that second generation involves some very splendid, young people that move in to studio courses and that kind of thing, but some of these New York art -- well to give you an example. We had a young painter in Rochester who was very gifted. He had had a [inaudible] to Rome and so he had been abroad for a number of years. He came back and we liked what we saw him doing which was a kind of outgrowth of his regionalism, and at that point, Hans Hofmann opened his studio lecture courses in New York and this young chap went to study with Hans Hofmann. And a year later when he came back, no one recognized anything about his work. It was totally abstract and totally expressionistic. That's how the second generation picked up and that illustrates what was going on with lots of people. And I know how forceful that is because when I got to live in New York, I came to know Hans Hofmann very well. I sat in on his studio lectures on a Sunday afternoon right next to some of those who became critics later on and wrote the books and the vocabulary, came right out of Hans Hofmann's mouth, and so he was a very, very forceful man and influenced a lot of young painters. So New York was a central attraction for students or young painters and artists who wanted to be on the cutting edge, and the one place where they could go and do it was in New York at that time. So I give a lot to the second generation.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So do you feel that then destroyed or at least distorted or altered this regional phenomenon you were talking about earlier like when Grace McCann-Morley and others would have, what should we say, a broader view --

THOMAS TIBBS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- of what was possible in contemporary?

THOMAS TIBBS: Well, it also brought out what became a national movement. There became a cohesiveness about it, and yet, regional characteristics still appeared. You would find, for example, those in the Northeast were accustomed to painting in Hofmann style with a thick [inaudible], and those in the Southwest were using dry brush, but they were still in the abstract expressionist vain. They were no longer painting objects. The point of painting was no longer to reproduce an object or nature, but to create a new reality, and so regionalism still was there in terms of that new reality.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Back to Morley because I think there's probably more to say about her. I was impressed by the prominent role she seemed to play in the museum world at that time, and you yourself had, as you said, contact with her. What was the nature of the contact? Did you collaborate in any way? Did you --

THOMAS TIBBS: No. I didn't in those early years. I was an underling on a staff, but I was able to be exposed to those people as it came to lecture or do whatever. And later on when I became a museum director, I came to know her on yet another level, but that was coming close on to the time when she retired and left the field.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mentioned that she announced at one point that she was leaving San Francisco and I think you -- well tell me the story again.

THOMAS TIBBS: Well --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Dismayed with --

THOMAS TIBBS: Yes. She made her announcement that she was retiring at one of the annual meetings of the Association of Art Museum Directors, and everyone was aghast, you know. We all had kind of a view of Grace Morley as being eternal and so there was great surprise and people were saying, "Why? You've got so much; you've done so much. You've got so much going." And I remember hearing her say that with all of it, with all of the exhibitions and so on they'd done, that she had failed in one effort, and that was that she had not established a single, private collection or a collector in the contemporary field. And --

PAUL KARLSTROM: To what did she attribute that? Did she say?

THOMAS TIBBS: I think she attributed it to a real disappointment and the extent to which San Francisco was willing to put some money where its mouth was, so to speak, and that they were willing to have the exhibitions, but it didn't go further than that. And, indeed, she had not, at that point, established a major collection within the museum as a permanent collection, you see, and that's after all the heritage of what every museum director wants to leave eventually is a remarkable document in the way of a collection, and she had not been able to do that, and so --

PAUL KARLSTROM: So at this time, though, there was significant interest already in contemporary art.

THOMAS TIBBS: Well, yes. There was another man --

PAUL KARLSTROM: In the late forties.

THOMAS TIBBS: There was another person, very involved in this field, and that was James Johnston Sweeney who was the director of the Guggenheim. Now this is long before the Frank Lloyd Wright building. The Guggenheim was in a beautifully remodeled brownstone mansion off Fifth Avenue and it was called -- do you know what the name of it was?

PAUL KARLSTROM: The Museum of Non-Objective.

THOMAS TIBBS: The Museum of Non-Objective Art which gave museum credence to pictures that weren't about something and visual objectivity. And Sweeney was also a great orator and we all had him come to art museums to lecture, to soften people up for contemporary non-objective art and so on. Jim did a lot to encourage artists not only in terms of abstract painting, but in experimentation with media, and there were new things coming out, you know, and so on. And I remember one directors meetings one year, we were talking about our budgets for conservation and restoration and we were astounded to hear that the Guggenheim or the Museum of Non-Objective Art had the highest conservation bills of any museum, and we said, "How can this be? Your stuff is all new." Well he said, "It's as old as the theory of [inaudible]." And so he did Grace's job on the East Coast, but he had a much easier time of it because, a, the money was there to support and to build a collection, and it was where the strongest art activity was.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How would you describe their taste? Not that this is a matter of comparing them necessarily, but then did you have a sense of where their interest lay and how they were being differed in terms of the kind of art they liked?

THOMAS TIBBS: Oh, I think it ran parallel.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Very parallel.

THOMAS TIBBS: Oh, yes. I think it ran parallel.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So what would that be?

THOMAS TIBBS: Well, that painting should be permitted a sensible and reasonable divorce from the necessity of looking like something or reproducing something, that paint as paint was good enough reason to be an artist and apply paint to a canvas. And so even though we didn't always understand what the artist was showing us, in time, one could come to the point of understanding it and that there were personal biographies being written in paint on canvas right along. Now we recognize them. We recognize a member of the abstract expressionist group, one from the other. They weren't doing the same thing. Their paintings didn't look alike and the motivations were different and so on. The kind of interesting thing about that group, I used to occasionally go to some of the watering holes around 4:00 in the afternoon where they would gather and people, thick, and what they gathered to talk about --

[END TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: ... interview with Thomas Tbbs. This is Session 1, Tape 1, Side B, and you were interrupted. We were talking about visiting the abstract expressionist.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah. Well we were talking about their meetings and they would go to the watering places, and they would talk about artist problems and the problems of gaining recognition, and they told stories of what the Ashcan School went through and other groups before them, but they were not revealing always what was going on in their studios. They talked constantly about politics and the lack of official recognition of the government for the arts and we have still today, you know. That's an ongoing kind of thing. But we did get some insight into their personalities and their rivalries that were under the social attitudes when they met. Some of them were very unusual personalities. I came to know Adolph Gottlieb really quite well and --

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was he like?

THOMAS TIBBS: Well, he was one of the quieter ones of the group and he had a very -- he had a great interest in ancient America, the American Indians and that early kind of thing, and you have only to examine his work 'til discover where a lot of it came from. He spent time in the Southwest to study cliffs and the like, and so if you were interested in that, you'd get into a conversation with that sort of thing with him. You very soon caught on to some of the things that motivated him. Rothko was a very somber, and soft-spoken, and quiet --

[TAPE SHUTS OFF]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me --

THOMAS TIBBS: -- meditating thing and his persona that came out of his paintings. On the other hand, Franz Kline, as I remember, was a very short guy. If you'd go into a crowded room, you wouldn't see him, but you sure would hear him, and his voice was big and he loved to tell stories that were sometimes in the raw of color and so. And so those personalities are evident in the paintings. I mean when you see the action painting of a Kline, it couldn't be anybody else.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, that's right.

THOMAS TIBBS: So that's what runs through the thing. They're all abstract. They're all expressionistic, but they're vastly different.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me try something here. Excuse me. I want --

[OFF TAPE]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Back again. I'm having -- I think I've taken care of the vocal performance from the dogs and now they're back with us and I'm sure they'll be very, very good. You were talking about the, again, observing the abstract expressionist more to the point identifying or indicating differences between their work, but then the shared quality as well which have to do, of course, with a personalism and this sort of thing. What about the whole idea which became very big for a while, the heroic myth of the abstract expressionist. You knew them, and did you find that a very helpful notion, this, you know, romantic notion of the hero?

THOMAS TIBBS: I don't think it really existed.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

THOMAS TIBBS: I don't think it really existed. They really weren't together all that much. Betty Parsons who had a gallery -- Betty Parsons was herself a painter, and she saw the struggle of these artists and the problems they had in getting their works seen which is, as we mentioned earlier, it was true of all of the cutting-edge artists from the Ashcan School, and -- so Betty Parsons established a gallery for the purpose of showing their work. And Barnettt Newman which was one and was one that was oddly less well known at the time, but he was the literary giant. He was educated in languages and he -- one language that he didn't read was Yiddish and he found that there was a Yiddish paper in New York that had the best art reviews so he learned Yiddish in order to read, so he wrote the catalogues. He wrote the catalogues for all the exhibitions by the abstract artists that were shown in Betty Parsons' gallery, and those catalogues are very important documents to this day in terms of his interpretation and presentation from the literary side of the artists, to say nothing of his own work that was distinctly different. If you're familiar with Barnettt Newman's paintings, you may remember that he started changing the shape of paintings and he finally -- he came up with a painting that, as I remember, was six inches wide and six feet tall which is a very unusual shape, so he was proving that a painting didn't have to be three by five or two by four or any of those kinds of things. And then he began dividing that space, whatever it was, by a single line of the meeting of two planes of color, and he probably abstracted down to the most minimal kind of

thing that any of them did to the point where one might question whether you still call it abstract expressionism, but the basis and root of minimal art is right there in Barnettt Newman in the 1950s. And wherever you hear someone say that a new movement is born that is completely unique and separate from what has gone on, that is a big bunch of baloney, you know, because always, there is something, there's a root there that started somewhere. And I'm waiting to see the text come out that credits Barnettt Newman with being one of the instigators of minimal art, but he certainly was.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you remember, by any chance, who this critic was writing in this Yiddish [inaudible]?

THOMAS TIBBS: No. I've never found that out.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

THOMAS TIBBS: I've never found that out.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That would be interesting to know. Maybe it's in the literature.

THOMAS TIBBS: I suppose that could be found in some. But anyway, Betty Parsons is one of the great people who helped with that. And then, well, there were other dealers. Well Guggenheim, Peggy Guggenheim, as you know, had
a --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sure.

THOMAS TIBBS: -- gallery and her first love was Jackson Pollock and she amassed a tremendous collection of works for those people which, you know, became the basis of her collection in Venice. So there were those people that were strongly behind them and gave them help that they could get only in a place like New York, and that's the difference between New York and San Francisco.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. So what years were these that you were hanging out with some of these guys?

THOMAS TIBBS: Well right up to the end of the '60s or end of the '50s.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, end of the '50s.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where did you go? Did you go to the Cedar Bar and places like that at all?

THOMAS TIBBS: Oh, yes, yes. There were numbers of places.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well what were you doing in New York at that time?

THOMAS TIBBS: Well, I was in a whole different field. I was still in the museum field, but I was associated with the Crafts Movement. A new museum had been built by Ilian [phon. sp.] Vanderbilt Webb who was one of the founders of the Contemporary Crafts Movement. America House was her first project which was a sales outfit for American craftsman, and then her second thing was a magazine which at that time was called The Craft Horizons, and then she decided on a museum and she bought a property two doors from the Museum of Modern Art and she had an architect from New England, from Massachusetts, design the museum because he was one of the leaders of the Craft Movement in New England, David Campbell. And so they built the museum and they began looking for a director and I happen to have put on, prior to that, a few years, a national competition for silversmiths, and for that reason, they got in touch with me and I was offered the post in New York and went and did that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What year did it open up?

THOMAS TIBBS: I went in '55; it opened '56.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see. And previous to that, you were in Virginia?

THOMAS TIBBS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's go back --

THOMAS TIBBS: West Virginia.

PAUL KARLSTROM: West Virginia, right, okay, and I know the difference. Let's go back there if we may just briefly because I think that's very important. That suggested to me, we were talking earlier, just how things really got

started for you in that area, or at least --

THOMAS TIBBS: Okay. Well I --

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- [inaudible] crafts and so forth.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah, yeah. Going from my alma mater, the University of Rochester, and the museum there which is called the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, a new museum was built, the first museum built in the state of West Virginia, and I was offered the post to direct it, and I was ready to get my feet wet and see if I really could do this. And my wife was willing to go and so we went, and it was a brand new building and it had two brooms and floor polisher in it. That was all there was in it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What town -- what city was that in?

THOMAS TIBBS: Huntington. And six months later, I opened a fully furnished museum, the case work of which I had designed and help build and so on, and put together an exhibition and started a collection through gifts and so on. And that's where I got the idea of putting on this national competition for silversmiths and that led to the New York.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mentioned that you were in this position where you had to find some way to fill the museum and you commented earlier that you were sure that it wasn't going to be with [inaudible].

THOMAS TIBBS: Yes. Well, you know, it was a museum, new museum in a state that was not known for either collecting or producing art and it did not have the money that was going to allow for either big exhibitions or certain acquisitions, although it has drawn in these years since to quite a major facility. I did give it a good professional start in the organization, so they have never had to change anything in that regard, but having known a lot of craftsmen through the school for American Craftsmen which Ilian Vanderbilt-Webb had established in Rochester as a part of the Rochester Institute of Technology and to which she brought craftsmen from all over the world, I came to know a lot of these people and so I had an interest there. And so looking for something to put this new museum on the map led to that idea. The Hickock Company was there which people would know as the maker of men's belts and men's jewelry items and so on. And I knew the Hickock brothers and the younger one especially, Alan, who along with his wife, was very active in the art museum, and so I called him on the phone and said, "I want to do this show and I want you to pay for it. He asked me, "What am I going to get out of it? And I said, AIt's going to be circulated by Anna Marie Pope of the Smithsonian Traveling Exhibition Service for two years and your name is going to be on the catalogue. He said, "I'll pay for it, and they did. And so that led to New York and the Crafts Museum.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did that -- now how did this work? Did you begin then building a collection in crafts sort of what generated an interest through this exhibition?

THOMAS TIBBS: Well we did at first through exhibitions --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

THOMAS TIBBS: -- which is obviously where you start, but we did put aside every exhibition by contemporary crafts people, whoever they were or whatever the medium was, we put aside some money to acquire, but we did it by commissioning. We would commission a well-known artist to do a work for that show which became part of the exhibition. As a matter of fact, Margaret Craven-Withers who was the outstanding goldsmith at the time, was commissioned at that time to do a piece for a show. We read the history of enamels. We did an exhibition on the history of enamels and we had Margaret, she was commissioned to do a piece to help rediscover the technique of a lost art of enameling called [inaudible], and so she did the piece and became a part of the collection, and from that point on, that's how we began collecting things was to commission them, which was an interesting way of giving the artist, you know, a special job and so on as opposed to buying something right out of his --

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was the story you were telling me earlier about these silver service that --

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that at that same time?

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah. That was earlier, see. That happened in West Virginia and that was that silversmiths competition that I put on.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

THOMAS TIBBS: And a young silversmith whose name was virtually unknown at the time, although he had just

joined the faculty of Skidmore College, Earl Pardon walked off with all the top honors in that exhibition, prizes and so on. And as a result, his reputation flourished, and Margaret Craven-Withers who was married to Chuck Withers who was the president of Tole Silver Company persuaded her husband to have Tole produced the first contemporary silver service by an American company and they commissioned Earl Pardon to do it, and so his reputation became established through that and he became one of the best known and much loved teachers in that field. He spent his entire career at Skidmore doing that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How many sets were made?

THOMAS TIBBS: It was done on a trial basis to see, you know, how the sell -- as memory serves, I think this is accurate, I think it was 30 services and they were large services. I remember my wife and I bought one and each place setting had nine pieces, so it was like the old-fashioned services that had a piece for everything or almost everything. And after that, there simply was not the demand in the American public to buy contemporary stuff and it waited until all of the Silver Cup companies in the United States, and I think there were four, Kirk, Wallace, and whatever the others were, got together and put on a universal competition for contemporary design and silver service and they came to the Craftsman Museum in New York and we became the center for it, and we did the showing of it when it was completed. And that really did take off and we arranged that every artist who won and whose work was produced by one of the Silver companies presentees agreed to produce one pattern, are still in production these many years later. So that's the one that Earl Pardon and Tole who were the ones that sort of got the thing going with their first attempt.

PAUL KARLSTROM: There's an interesting conclusion to this story with you regarding your service, the one that you had because you offered it to --

THOMAS TIBBS: Well I -- this is just about a year and a half ago and I was thinking in terms of what becomes of some of these things, you know, and I don't have children who will inherit these kinds of things and I was wondering what I should do with this. And the San Diego State University where I taught for 20 years has one of the country's most famous silversmiths, Arlene Fisch on its faculty. She's internationally known and she was a student of Earl Pardon's at Skidmore, and she adored him. And I called her one day and said, "Did you know that Earl Pardon had designed a silver service?" And she said, "I knew he had done it, but I have never seen in it." And I said, "How would you like to own it? And so she now has that service and so it has a whole, new life, you know."

PAUL KARLSTROM: I guess, right. Keep it in the family, so to speak.

THOMAS TIBBS: I've done several things like that. Wharton Eshric [phon. sp.] who's the dean, was the dean of American Furniture Craftsmen, he started out as a sculptor. He lived in Paoli, Pennsylvania in a house that had no right angles anywhere in it, but he was a master at handling wood and doing furniture that was sculptural in concept, and I got interested in Wharton's work, and when I saw his house and his spiral staircase, it didn't have a nail or a peg in it, I decided it was time he had a show. So we gave him a 50th anniversary exhibition and we dismantled half of his house, took it to New York, and collected pieces from everywhere. And it was a great boom to the furniture makers, and to this day, college students who are in furniture design, they know that name. They know all about it. And at the time, Wharton had done a chair which was called "The Wishbone Chair", and it was so named because of the shape of the side structure of it, resembled that of a wishbone, and I acquired the wishbone chair back at that time and we had it for years and years and years. And so a couple of years ago, I called one of the students that I had had who was in furniture making and who knew the Eshric name and told him that my chair needed a little restoration or finish on one leg. I had an Airedale that liked the taste of varnish or oil or whatever it was, and so a little area of one leg needed refinishing and so I called this student and said, "Do you remember my Eshric chair?" And he said, "Remember it? You bet I remember it." And I said, "Well it needs a little restoration because the dog has licked off some of the finish. Can you do it? He said, "Sure, I can match it. I'll find out exactly what it is and I'll match it." I said, "Good, I want you to do it. When you're done, I want you to keep it. So he has the chair." It's going on now to another generation and it tickles me to do that because, you know, it's not going to end up in a garage sale somewhere.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No. One would hope not. Well you have one of the things that are here surrounding you in your home, your adobe home, and I imagine you spend some time considering just what to do with these.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah. Well this table over here, people come in and say, "Oh, you have an Noguchi table." Well, I sort of have an Noguchi table. The original Noguchi table that's in that [inaudible] was quite large and took a large triangular top. I needed a smaller thing and I knew him and had bought one of his bronzes for the Dormine [phon. sp.] collection and I said to him one day, "I would like to have a smaller table." He said, "I'll draw you a template and he did a template for making this table." So it's Noguchi produced by somebody else. Of course, all of them are produced by somebody else.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sort of the way it is nowadays, isn't it? That's right.

THOMAS TIBBS: The Barcelona chairs, if you're acquainted with Barcelona chairs, do they look different to you than the ones you see most --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well now, let's see if my lousy memory can -- they look wide, for one thing. I don't know. What's different about it?

THOMAS TIBBS: Well the difference is these were in the Chicago Bauhaus [phon. sp.] Group and the artist escaped the Bauhaus and Hitler --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

THOMAS TIBBS: -- and they had the short-lived group called the Chicago Bauhaus. The probability is that these came from Germany, although we don't know that for sure, but in any case, a Chicago couple befriended the artist that came and formed the Bauhaus, Chicago Bauhaus, and this would have been in the late '30s, early '40s, and they --as they grew older, they came out to the Southwest, retired in Rancho Bernardo, and about '78, longer than there, closer to 1980, they had go to into a nursing facility and so they were selling things. Well I knew their connection with these guys as well as Charles Eames and some of the other people. And so I went and I acquired the chairs at that point, and then I began realizing there's something different about these, and then I started researching and learned that the Knoll Associates who are licensed to build them have changed the dimensions. The steel work is now 330/2nds of an inch wider, slightly thicker, and the cushions are an inch thicker, and it gives it a little sturdier appearance to the chairs. Now Knoll did that with the full permission of Mies. I think he actually even did the design work, so there is that difference. These look a little on the thin side as you look straight at them. If you had them sitting right next to one that's made today, you would see the difference. So these date from at least the late '30s and, of course, the chair was made -- it was designed for the exposition in 1924 and '25. So they're probably as old as any that you're going to come into, but --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well what we need to do -- I think this is a great start and what we'll need to do when we next get together is then move back to New York and to hear about the setting up of the museum. You were the first director there of contemporary crafts.

THOMAS TIBBS: Well one that I'd like to tell you about was the Tiffany exhibition. I was born into a house that had a lot of Tiffany glass in it. I hated it; I hated it, and as I got old enough to influence my mother, I talked her into, you know, trashing that stuff and updating the place. She didn't live to know what I did it out of because in the late '50s, I guess it was -- I think it was '58, I did the Tiffany exhibition in New York. It brought back from the Victorian Albert and the Louvre all of the original early pieces that Tiffany had sent abroad, and we reconstructed. We even took architectural elements out of buildings and so on, and I did the Tiffany show. And, of course -- and that affected textile design. The Tiffany colors came into textiles, so if anybody wants to blame someone for having given rebirth to Tiffany, look me up.

PAUL KARLSTROM: 'Cause you're right, that's exactly -- then in the early '60s were really [inaudible].

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah, but in the course of doing that, I met Tiffany's granddaughter, the only one remaining and alive, and the only one who had ever paid any attention to her grandfather's work or who even gave his work the time of day and she had preserved things. And she helped a great deal in our researching and developing the Tiffany show. In the course of doing that, I went often to Oyster Bay to the Tiffany mansion where I visited with the granddaughter and so on, only to learn that Tiffany, in his middle years, around in his mid-forties, had an illness, and a nurse was hired to take care of him. And she never left his side from that time on. She was referred to by the family as Granddad's third wife, and she --so she stayed with him and he wanted to provide for her. He built a little cottage on a hill overlooking the big mansion at Oyster Bay and everything in that house was by his hand. So when we did the show, I wanted desperately to get into that cottage, but this woman was bedridden. She'd been in bed for three years, was so bitter at how the world had rejected this man, that she Baldessaried no interviews. She trusted no one, and every week or so, I would talk to Tiffany's granddaughter and she'd say, "I haven't succeeded yet, but I'm still trying. The woman's name was Sarah Handley. Finally, she called one day and said, AMs. Handley has agreed that you could come into the house on the first floor, but you can borrow nothing. I was going out there quite frequently, and just before the holidays, I think it was, you know, right coming up to Christmas time, we were in our New York apartment getting dinner; the news was on, the 6:00 news was on, announcing that the Tiffany mansion was burning, and it did indeed burn, total destruction. And I went out two days later. I found that two sections of the dining room were still standing. The canvas-stenciled walls that Tiffany had done with his own hand, there were three panels that were water-logged, but not burned. I peeled them off the wall and rolled them up to save. I didn't know that a newspaper photographer was on the grounds who snapped my picture doing it which appeared in the New York paper, but I didn't get arrested, but we preserved those and other things and they became a part of the exhibition. But as a result of that, going to see Sarah Handley in her little cottage, realizing that she had laid in that bed with a great picture window that looked right down at that house and she had had to watch it burn. And finally, after being in the lower part of the house for quite a while, her nurse came down and said, "Ms. Handley has asked to meet you, so I was taken up. I

held Sarah's hand for three hours while we talked and she spilled out all of these intimate details of the man.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Too bad you didn't have a tape recorder.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah. And she told me that she spent her time writing poetry and she recited a couple of things for me and so on. And she finally looked at me and said, AI think you're the one that's going to save his reputation. You may borrow anything in the house that you want. That was the last time I saw her alive. Three weeks later, she died, and her -- Tiffany's granddaughter said, "We think that, you know, we always wondered what kept her alive and we think that what kept her alive --.

[END TAPE 1, SIDE B]
[BEGIN SESSION #2, TAPE 1, SIDE A]

PAUL KARLSTROM: So here we are, Tom. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, a second session interview with Thomas Tibbs at his home in or near Fallbrook, California, and the date is May 9, 1996. The interviewer is Paul Karlstrom, and I see that our first session here was on March 19th, two months ago.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah, sounds right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: A little less. Anyway, I'm delighted to be back here at your lovely home, and this may be one of the better views I've ever had while conducting an interview. I think we ought to just jump right into it. In March, we began talking about your long and varied museum career, East Coast, West Coast, and you said something -- well you said a number of things that interested me a great deal, but you started out by marking a change, locating a change within the museum world that had to do with ideas about museums and their collections and you said that there was a meeting where Sherman Lee got up and made an announcement. Could you go over that again?

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah. It had to do at a time when there was an epidemic of sit-ins. Anti-forces were in all areas of American life and they did not miss the art field at all. Oddly enough, it included, among its members, artists themselves, who became anti-object and there was the attitude that art had been too elitist. It was too obtainable by people who had great fortunes. It was not immediately available to the common man. There were groups that talked of destroying museums. They should burned to the ground, that art should not endure. Art should be consumed was one of the attitudes that we were hearing. And museums did, in fact, receive threats and the Association of Art Museum Directors at the time were very concerned with this. The Metropolitan had had one or two sit-ins. I think a number of other museums had experienced that kind of thing with anti-museum campaigns. And the Association was meeting one year and they were starting off their agenda that year with a discussion of what museums had to do to perfect institution and the collections and so on from the possibility of bomb threats and so on. And while we were all being asked what we had received in the way of threats and concerns, Sherman Lee from the Cleveland Museum got up and said, "Well you're talking about maybe having a bomb. I have to tell you, we have had it. And just a few days before, the Cleveland Museum had had a bomb planted in the Rodin sculpture, "The Thinker, which sat just outside of the main entrance to the museum, or what was then the main entrance to the museum, and it blew "The Thinker to bits."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you remember what year this was?

THOMAS TIBBS: Oh, gosh, I would think it would have been '63, '64 possibly, somewhere along --

PAUL KARLSTROM: It was fairly early.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah, yeah, um-hum, along in there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Along with the whole changes in the university --

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah, exactly, yeah. Museums had, you know, thought that they were really above this kind of thing, but it came to a start reality right then, you know, that no, we've got the problem, too. And so numbers of museums had received threats of one kind or another. That, fortunately, sort of dwindled away, but the anti-object campaign that began with the threats to the museum became an aesthetic in art, and artists who had very successful careers in making objects and selling them and so on turned away from that and took up new kinds of art which was called, in some cases, installation art, thematic art, political art, and one thing or another, and it was just at that time that I had occasion to be moved to La Jolla, California, to --

PAUL KARLSTROM: From where? Where were you --

THOMAS TIBBS: From Iowa. I was in Iowa where we had built a very major contemporary collection.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That was the [inaudible].

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah, yeah, and that brought me to California to a little museum sitting on the Pacific Ocean that was a beautiful property. My office was the envy of almost all museum directors because as it was situated at that time, it had about 30 feet of glass opening on to the Pacific Ocean which was hard to take, of course. But in any case, it was a little museum that didn't have an identity and they had decided, the board had decided that they wanted a contemporary museum, so they brought me here to make it. What they didn't know at the time was that the word Acontemporary was changing its meaning in art. It wasn't just modern art, modern paintings, and so on, but this whole anti-object thing was going on, and that was just at the time that we changed the museum to a contemporary museum. And we didn't have big purchase funds. We had only modest funds for exhibitions, so what did we do? We moved right with this new thing that was going on in installation art and conceptual art and found that one of the most productive areas of art was in Los Angeles. Los Angeles itself did not have a contemporary museum. This pre-dates the temporary contemporary as well as the later contemporary museum, and numbers of the now world-renown artists in this area of art were young southern California artists who really had no place, no home as it were. So we took this little museum, and since it was something we could afford doing, we went with that kind of thing. We were indeed contemporary.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did you know to do that? Were your instincts just [inaudible], or maybe you didn't have the budget to do anything else?

THOMAS TIBBS: Well I've always had the idea. I've had occasion to tell people in terms of the public as well as university students for years later. I can tell you everything you'd want to know about what art has been historically, and I can tell you what it is up to yesterday, but if you ask me what it's going to be two months from now, I can't tell you that. Only artists know. Artists determine what art is going to be, so if you're going to have a contemporary museum, you better be looking to what artists are saying and what artists are doing. Even as pointed out, incidentally, to another curious thing, the Museum of Modern Art in New York at that very time had reached the point of realizing that it was a museum of art history, and they had a big thing about what do we do about this. Do we still call ourselves the Museum of Modern Art and so on? So art becomes historic at some point, so we had the opportunity of working with young artists who were cutting the path and setting the standards of what might be a new bonafide movement in art, and we had them right at our doorstep.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you or you and your curator or curators have a dialogue with them [inaudible]?

THOMAS TIBBS: Well I had to hire an assistant director to the museum, so I went to Los Angeles and I got a lot of suggestions from people and this led me to meeting a young man who was working in the art field in Los Angeles. He was not directly involved in the museum at the time. His name was Larry Erutia [phon. sp.].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Larry Erutia, I know him well.

THOMAS TIBBS: You know him well?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, from those days.

THOMAS TIBBS: I brought Larry down here --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Ah, that's incredible.

THOMAS TIBBS: -- and Larry --

PAUL KARLSTROM: He was working with Josine --

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah, sure, yeah, Starrels, yeah, yeah. Well, Larry had entree to all of these artists, you see.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's true.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He was one of the earlier artists.

THOMAS TIBBS: Absolutely, absolutely, sure, of course. And so he came down and we sort of got our program organized and going. We didn't have the happiest Board of Trustees when they saw the kinds of things we were doing, but we gave the first museum notice to such people as Barry LeVa, Bruce Nauman, Robert Barry, Ed Ruscha, Sol LeWitt, Ron Davis, Chris Burden. Now there was a name that was really outrageous at the time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, absolutely.

THOMAS TIBBS: And --

PAUL KARLSTROM: You gave some of these their first museum shows.

THOMAS TIBBS: Oh, yes. We were the ones who really gave them a showcase. Bob Irwin was among them. And we had staff meetings about every other week and I always challenged the staff, and we included everybody, even guards, we would bring in to the meetings because they were the front face of the museum to people. We would want them to tell us what they were hearing in feedback from people that came from museums. So anyway, we'd have discussions about, you know, how far are we going to go with this, and I would always say, "Well, you know, there is a line that we probably someday won't cross, but I don't know what it is. The most I'll ever do is to lift one leg like I'm going to step over it, but I don't think you'll ever see me actually stepping over. So we did some fairly outrageous things. There was one avant-guard dealers' gallery in Los Angeles at the time that was doing new kinds of things, and on one occasion, Larry and I were on a trip to Los Angeles and we happened to have a parking space directly in front of that gallery.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This wasn't Nick Wilder?

THOMAS TIBBS: Oh, no, no, no. Nick Wilder was very tame compared --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which gallery was it?

THOMAS TIBBS: Now I'm having a memory lapse on names. It'll come to me. We parked the car and there was the gallery. We didn't have any business there, but we thought we'd better go in and see what was going on, and then the display room was a great pyramid of old suitcases, I mean very old, beat-up suitcases of every size and description. It was an enormous pile, and not very savory. And we sort of had to hug the wall to get around -- to get to a door that would lead to the office, and the director of the gallery whose name has escaped me at the moment, was sitting there. She didn't look up to see who was coming in. She simply said, "Did you do the exhibition?"

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you do it?

THOMAS TIBBS: And I didn't know what that meant. Larry didn't know what it meant. And she said, "Go back and open some suitcases," so we went back in and I said to Larry, "Look, I'm director; you're the assistant, you open the damn suitcases. Larry opened the suitcases. It was full of rotting cheese and the stench was just awful. And then it was even worse that came when we realized it was crawling with maggots.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No.

THOMAS TIBBS: And I said to Larry, "You know that line we've been talking about that we're not going to cross, this is it. We can do anything up to this point.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Who was the artist?

THOMAS TIBBS: His --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Anybody whose name is [inaudible]?

THOMAS TIBBS: Yes. You know, names are the first go to --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, right.

THOMAS TIBBS: -- with senility. Well that will come to me, too.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm trying to think who that might be. Wow, sounds very [inaudible].

THOMAS TIBBS: It's a very appropriate name. In any case, that became a kind of meaningful joke between us, you know, about how far we're willing to go in the avant-guard, but we had one artist, Newton Harrison, in La Jolla teaching at the university who was a very established painter and his wife was involved in the arts. And Newton abandoned his painting and went in --

PAUL KARLSTROM: You said earlier that he was really a very good painter.

THOMAS TIBBS: Oh, yes, excellent; yes, excellent painter, excellent painter. And he was in good collections and he was successful.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He was responding, I gather, to this anti-object or conceptual --

THOMAS TIBBS: Yes. Well --

PAUL KARLSTROM: He loved it. He [inaudible] --

THOMAS TIBBS: And that seems to have been the case, and so we offered him a place outside the museum to do a piece and he came up with an installation that he called "La Jolla Promenade, and he planted a garden in front of the museum, divided into two sections, and it was all based on a theory. And Newton has been strong now on theories of how one grows one's own food and this kind of thing. And he was having trouble with the snails eating all the produce in his garden, and he found out that snails are great delicacies for ducks, so he put some ducks in his garden and the ducks cleaned out the snails. So he built this La Jolla Promenade garden on the theory of making use of the snails which, incidentally, are the snails, escargot, and also the controlling of the snails, so the garden was in two parts; one part had ducks and one part didn't. The theory was that the ducks would eat the snails from their part of the garden and in the course of the exhibition, the snails in the remaining garden would be purified and would become escargot for a feast at the end of the show. Well this is kind of outrageous.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Eating art.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah. This is kind of outrageous so far as art goes and it was certainly outrageous at that time. La Jolla didn't understand it at all. What had happened to this fine painter. Nobody could figure out at all. But the problem was that the ducks had insatiable appetites, and at night, they would escape their garden, go over and eat the snails, then the garden was going to provide food. Well this suited me just fine 'cause I really wasn't anxious to try to do something with purifying those snails for escargot and feeding the public with them. I think it's a fairly ticklish process, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Should have fed them to the trustees.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah. Well there were a couple that I would have been willing to do that for. So we didn't carry it on to the point of having the feast at the end of the thing. Now Newton Harrison went to England, you know, and did a big show at -- I'm not sure whether it was in a dealer's gallery or whether it was connected with the tape, but he did the Catfish Farm piece that you may have heard about.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, that's famous.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah, and that made big-time magazines because at the end of the show, they were going to kill the catfish and have a catfish dinner, and the idea was that they were going to kill the catfish by putting -- charging the water with electricity. They were going to electrocute them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

THOMAS TIBBS: And a great to-do arose in London of the inhumanity.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Animal abuse.

THOMAS TIBBS: Inhumanity of doing this, and Newton had to face that onslaught of public opinion. And the news report at the time was when people were asked, AWell how would you suggest doing the catfish in? They came back with the answer, AIn the old-fashioned way. You hit them over the head with a [inaudible], so all these kind of odd things were happening. But in it all, the idea of a concept and installation was given a place there early on for artists to do this kind of things, and while it wasn't appreciated in La Jolla in those days, it surprisingly was attracting attention as far away as Europe.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why don't you tell that story you told me.

THOMAS TIBBS: Well we had a man on our board who happened to be treasurer of the board. He's a well-known local attorney and he worked in conjunction with a law firm in Paris that's handled estates and, of course, there are a lot of wealthy Americans who take up residence in Paris as well as Parisians living in La Jolla. And so Bill had occasion to go to Paris for conference, and his wife was with him on this trip and they were invited to dinner to the house of the attorney in Paris that was Bill's counterpart here. And when introduced to the man's wife and "Here's Mr. Ferguson from La Jolla, California and he is a member of the Board of Trustees at the museum there, this woman said, "Oh, tell me about your director, Mr. Tibbs. And Bill said he finally picked himself up off the floor to find out how in the world she would know. She says, "Well we get all of your catalogues. Don't you realize that these installations that they're doing and so on that you have one of the best known contemporary museums in the United States? "Well," he said, "I can't wait to get home to tell the rest of the board that."

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was in the late '60s perhaps?

THOMAS TIBBS: Yes, late '60s, early '70s, yeah. But I remember Bruce Nauman came down one day when we allowed -- we collected a group of artists, or Larry did, and gave them each space to do whatever they wanted to do, and that was my first experience with Bruce Nauman. He did a piece called "The Green Corridor, and it's still referred to in print frequently. And he simply erected two stud walls with sheetrock facing each other. They were

about 18 inches apart and they formed a corridor that was, oh, I would say perhaps 16, 18 feet long. It was so narrow that if you wanted to go through it, you had to turn sideways. Well he intended it to be that. The walls were white and it had a ribbon of flourescent light tubes going down the length of it. What you didn't know, but what Bruce Nauman did know is that when you turned sideways and crept through or walked through very slowly through this thing, that those fluorescent lights turned the whole thing green including you, you know. And when you came out the other end, you were astonished at what had happened to you visually in this simple, little installation of fluorescent lights on a white wall. Well this is the kind of experimentation that was available in installation art that you never had heard of before, and the artists who were going in for it were doing some exciting things. Chris Burden whose name now is legion in this thing was a very young guy. I don't think he had had any museum exposure at this time until he came down and did a piece that was -- it was a funny harness kind of thing. It was done with rope. He had to put an anchor in the floor, and to put the anchor in the floor and fasten these ropes, there was a harness that you, as a spectator, were to get into it. Now until you got into it, the rope line on the floor didn't mean a thing. Visually, it had no impact whatsoever, but the idea was you would get into this harness and you would stretch it out taut and walk around the anchor on the floor and the harness was designed in such a way that it changed the position of your body as you moved into positions that your body normally doesn't ever get into. And as we were talking about it, I said, ALarry, what kind of responsibility do we have? Is this injurious to one's health? you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, right.

THOMAS TIBBS: Well we had to investigate all those things. We had to get out special insurance. We had to have inspectors come to inspect the anchoring of the boat into the floor, you know, all these kinds of things, and finally all that was worked out and people came and they got into this thing. Well young people adored the whole thing. It was a participation kind of piece. And only on one occasion did I have to draw the line and say, "No, we're not going to do this piece; we're not going to show this piece. And it was an artist who was doing a grid of strips of steel about half-inch wide and they were put together in a grid, laid on the floor with undulations, hills, and valleys, and the hills would rise up to maybe two and a half, three feet off the floor, and the valleys, and the idea was that you would walk through this as you were walking through a landscape, and the grid openings were maybe 10, 12 inches apart and so on.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That would be hard to negotiate.

THOMAS TIBBS: Well it could be very hard to negotiate, but as one of the sections was being brought in to the museum, one of the museum attendants that was helping to move it, severed a hand or severed a finger because the edge of the steel had been ribbon-cut.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sure.

THOMAS TIBBS: And I said to Larry, "There's no way in God's earth that the public is going to walk through this thing. There has to be --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was this poor assistant -- did this worker lose a finger?

THOMAS TIBBS: No. It got put back, you know, but the hazard was clearly there. And we always tried to go with the artist in terms of what they would do, and this particular artist chose not to show the piece if the people couldn't walk through it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Remember who it was?

THOMAS TIBBS: I don't remember at the moment, but --

PAUL KARLSTROM: 'Cause there's a lot of them that got attention at that time that didn't necessarily --

THOMAS TIBBS: Yes, exactly, didn't necessarily turn into something.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was it like working with Nauman? Was that the one occasion that -- what was he like at that time?

THOMAS TIBBS: He was a very nice guy. As a matter of fact, my experience with Nauman in terms of how I remember him these years later was that he was one of the most accommodating among that group of artists. Not all of them were. Did you ever hear the name of the Dill Brothers?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sure.

THOMAS TIBBS: Laddie John and --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Guy and --

THOMAS TIBBS: -- Guy and -- yeah, um-hum. They both did pieces for us in those early days.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They weren't accommodating?

THOMAS TIBBS: Oh, they were; yes they were. They were both excellent --

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you said, although you don't like to carry tales, but since I just finished an interview yesterday with our mutual friend, Peter Alexander, you said that you had contact with him through the museum early on and that, apparently, he's mellowed quite a bit, but he was pretty good [inaudible].

THOMAS TIBBS: Well he bought a piece. He was one of the early people working in the resin casting and I've often wondered how he escaped physical health problems as a result since Ron Davis suffered so much, but we bought a piece of Alexander's early on, and I remember it very well and I remember his being there. And I remember liking the piece an awful lot better than I liked the artist at that particular time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He wouldn't like that.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm not going to tell him. He was kind of stressed because he likes to think that he comes out in his work, you know. "You love me; you love my work. You love my work; you love me."

THOMAS TIBBS: Well I don't --

PAUL KARLSTROM: But that obviously was not the case.

THOMAS TIBBS: It wasn't the case in terms of his relationship to me. Larry probably got along with him --

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about that, though? You know, again, we were talking a little bit earlier about this kind of arrogance especially younger artists had, and here we have a group of artists who are getting a lot of attention. That was a [inaudible]. It was international attention being focused, especially in L.A. And how did you find in general that, or if you can make a generalization, they handled it?

THOMAS TIBBS: I would say in general it had a sense of excitement that they responded to because for the first time, they had a place where they could do this in a public arena.

PAUL KARLSTROM: At the La Jolla --

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was it called then? Was it the Museum of Contemporary Art then?

THOMAS TIBBS: The first name that we gave it was the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art. At that time, La Jolla was very insistent upon keeping the La Jolla identity. You know, there is no such town as La Jolla, but it does have its own post office, and this cancellation, you know --

PAUL KARLSTROM: The San Diego --

THOMAS TIBBS: Right, and it is now, you know, they now have rearranged the names, so it's the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art in La Jolla, but at that time, they wouldn't go for taking the La Jolla out of it. But I felt, generally speaking, that these artists were so -- the rift of having any place to do this kind of thing. It didn't do them any good to do it in their studios. It had to have a locale and they had to have a public to somehow become involved with it and participate in it since it had strong attitudes of participation, that they welcomed the place. We had artists in Los Angeles that began to see La Jolla as being more with it in terms of contemporary art than anything.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I remember them talking about that, friends like DeWain Valentine.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yes, right, exactly, yeah, exactly. And so in answer to your question, I think the excitement that they generated and the museum staff responded to them. They responded to us and, mainly, the only role I had to be concerned with was is if there was something that did pose a possible threat to public safety or something of that sort that we would stop short of that. We did a piece in the ocean. I forgot. I don't remember whose idea this was, but Larry came in one day and he said there was an artist that he had been hearing about in the east who did sculptures that floated, and he looked out the straight expanse of glass we had on the museum on the whole Pacific Ocean out there and he began to imagine the sculpture out there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Could we -- excuse me, Tom. Let's turn this over so I don't catch you --

[END TAPE 1, SIDE A, SESSION 2]
[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B, SESSION 2]

PAUL KARLSTROM: ... interview with Thomas Tibbs in his back patio looking out towards Mount Palomar. This is Tape 1, Side B. Tom, you were telling about this -- in-the-ocean installation.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah. Well we decided to go for it and the artist came out and the clearances that we had to do to get permission included the Coast Guard. By that time, we had this coastal authority that was protecting the shoreline, you know, and not allowing construction.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, right.

THOMAS TIBBS: I've forgotten what that's called. We had to go through them. We had to go through county and get county permits, and I think there probably had to be a city permit. The red tape that had to be cut to get this thing, permission to do it, was absolutely enormous. And when it was done, this sculpture that was put out in the ocean, I think probably it was a piece no more than 30 feet in length and it was made of tubular steel and you could see through it, but you did see the shape of it as it would rise and fall. The museum had people camping on its doorstep in protest that we had ruined the view of the Pacific Ocean.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How far out was it?

THOMAS TIBBS: Oh, it was a couple hundred feet.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Didn't it interfere with -- well you don't have surfing right off of the museum.

THOMAS TIBBS: Not right off, but we had to put up various things, you know, to --

PAUL KARLSTROM: To warn --

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah, and it had to be anchored in a particular way. The Coast Guard designed the anchoring of it and the museum had to guarantee that when it was finished that everything would be taken out, even the bags of sand that were on the ocean floor that were holding it, debris removed, and so on. Environmental Protection was right there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's the Coastal Protection.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah, Coastal Protection. But I have to say that we had some very, very good relations and experiences with the artists, and the fact that the museum could adjust its thinking to go along with theirs, that they had the right to fail, and in some cases, the pieces would fail because they were doing something new that was untried and [inaudible].

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you really found yourself directing a highly experimental museum.

THOMAS TIBBS: Oh indeed, oh absolutely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Probably one of the most [inaudible}.

THOMAS TIBBS: And it wasn't that I came here with the intention of doing that. It was just that at that very moment was when all this, you know, became available and we did some more or less standard things along with it, but the --

PAUL KARLSTROM: What were some of the more conservative things?

THOMAS TIBBS: The more conservative things, well Larry did a show called "The New Surrealism where he brought surrealism up to date.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah?

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah, and --

PAUL KARLSTROM: I wonder what show.

THOMAS TIBBS: I have a catalogue of that I could show you. I did an exhibition one day on something that interested me that was a beginning of a breakdown of the preciousness of the art objects when artists made things that could be handled and changed and altered by the spectator.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, like Barry LeVa.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah, yeah, and so I did a show once that was called "Affect Effect."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, I think I remember that.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah. Everyone that came in was invited to do their own thing with each of these things that the artists did and so on.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How fun, how much fun. It must have been fun.

THOMAS TIBBS: It was, yes, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How many years -- when did you retire? How many years --

THOMAS TIBBS: I retired in '72, yeah. About --

PAUL KARLSTROM: It was about 10 years, wasn't it, almost?

THOMAS TIBBS: Oh, no, no. It was less than that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When did you come?

THOMAS TIBBS: I came in '68.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, okay, so you were just really there four years.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah, yeah. Bob Irwin came down. We had him in Sherwood Hall appearance on one occasion as a speaker. We installed the big disk. The first time it had a museum installation was in La Jolla. And, oh, I must tell you, we bought it. We raised some money and we bought it. The price was $5,000 and one trustee resigned in protest from the board.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Inaudible.] That would be -- I guess it's hard to put ourselves back in that time, but I remember seeing -- I mean this all fortuitously connects very well to your story. I remember when Larry Erutia invited my wife and me over to his place in Mount Washington.

THOMAS TIBBS: The house that stood down the hill of the mud slide?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did it?

THOMAS TIBBS: Um-hum.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This must have been --

THOMAS TIBBS: That's how we were able to hire him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, really.

THOMAS TIBBS: He'd lost his house in one of the mud slides.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This must have been I bet '65.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: '65, at the latest '66, probably '65, and he was determined that we would come over to see this wonderful new art piece that he had bought that actually had been installed by the artist, somebody I had hardly heard of, installed very specially in his house in an alcove, special lighting and even special music.

THOMAS TIBBS: Oh, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And he would sit there, and so we showed up and, of course, what he was showing us was his proud possession of a Bob Irwin disk. And we sat there. It was quite a ritual, quite a production. I think it was Bach, I don't know, wonderful music, and there were two chairs. We sat there and had this experience.

THOMAS TIBBS: It was, in effect, a kind of religious experience.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well it was, but, you know, what I find -- I mean I thought it was supremely beautiful and I --

it's remarkable that you ran into these objections.

THOMAS TIBBS: Now consider that if you saw that disk leaning against a wall in a room, it would not arrest your attention at all.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, no, no.

THOMAS TIBBS: It's all a part of that installation. Now here is something that was happening at just that time that, again, the La Jolla Museum was ready to move in step with the artist, that the artist began to control how their works were shown and how they were handled. Bob Irwin required a certain kind of space. It had to be white including the floors. It couldn't be just any white. It had to be a particular white. The lighting had to be of certain wattage, had to be at a certain distance and feet and angled in a certain way to this piece to cast the right shadows for that piece to literally throw it in his face, so he controlled that, you see. And not all museums were ready to give the artists that free hand, but this was beginning to happen. Ellsworth Kelly did a series of paintings. There were what, I think there were five. They were each, as I recall, 10 feet tall and something like six feet wide. One was solid blue; one was solid yellow; one was solid red; and one was solid green, and they were meant to be seen together. You know how we convinced Kelly that we would have it? We agreed on the size of the wall. They had to be exactly so many inches off the floor. They had to be exactly so many inches apart. The wall had to be exactly the white color that he would send a sample of, and the lighting had to be especially installed [inaudible]. The installation was a part of the piece. Now this was a new thing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well I know.

THOMAS TIBBS: This was a new thing in art, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In other words, you're not dealing with the product.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What it did, it seems to me, is actually bring the museums and artists together in a collaborative way.

THOMAS TIBBS: To illustrate how important this is, the Pasadena Museum, this was before Norton Simon won it, the Pasadena Museum later showed Bob Irwin's disk and I was there. I saw it, and it was put in a room with a mixture of other things, and at right angles to it and no further from it than probably 15, 20 feet was a sound box having loud jazz like a coin thing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, right, jukebox.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah, jukebox kind of installation. Now those things were mutually destructive, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. That's amazingly insensitive.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah, exactly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm surprised Irwin would allow this.

THOMAS TIBBS: Well I think this is a case beyond that, you know, happened without his even knowing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Who was that? Jim Demetrion at that time? That was after Walter Hopps.

THOMAS TIBBS: I think it had to be Demetrion. I think it had to be Demetrion. But, you know, I remember the shock of going into that room and seeing the disk so badly placed with its blurring sound of a jukebox sitting next to it. So the artists, along with these new ideas and the idea of installation pieces, was also exercising control in how the work was properly displayed and seen. And this is kind of important. Let me tell you something, and this is almost a confession.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, good, good.

THOMAS TIBBS: I can take a piece of art and install it in a way that was absolutely breathtaking. It may have absolutely nothing to do with the art. I can enhance it. I can take a lousy piece of art and make it look awfully good --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

THOMAS TIBBS: -- by how I install it. I can also take a very good piece of art and put in a bad installation and ruin it, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

THOMAS TIBBS: So the museum person and the curators have always had that kind of power and not all of them have necessarily had the talent or the judgment to go with it. So I'm on the side of the artist in this kind of thing. And we were early on, one of the few places where they could do that and could feel secure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you feel as if -- well it sounds to me as if this would be the case, but I was going to ask you if you felt in some ways not isolated exactly, but being out in La Jolla, you were in a community that was not sympathetic entirely. Obviously, some of the sections do your program and yet you were receiving encouragement from outside all the way from Europe and so forth. Did you feel that you were something of an anomaly being set down in [inaudible] or no?

THOMAS TIBBS: I don't think so because I had spent nearly a decade building a contemporary collection in Des Moines where the anti-contemporary art attitudes ran just as heavy, and there, you also had a very Bible Belt mentality kind of thing, so --

PAUL KARLSTROM: At least there wasn't too much sexuality, though.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Nowadays [inaudible].

THOMAS TIBBS: But we had other things. We joined forces with U.C.S.D. with one of their faculty members, Yahan Teelit [phon. sp.]. Have you ever --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, sure. I used to know her in graduate school.

THOMAS TIBBS: Well, you know, this gal has a brain that won't quit in terms of her knowledge of African art and so on, and she came in and made the proposal that we join forces in Joe Black Art Show. There had been a black --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Afro-American, you mean?

THOMAS TIBBS: Yes, yeah. There had been a black art show in the Metropolitan Museum some, oh, maybe three or four years prior to that and the black community of New York blasted it right out of the water. They were so distressed and disgusted with how it was done.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why?

THOMAS TIBBS: Well it was not well done. It wasn't done in concert with the black community. The choices were inappropriate. Everything that they could find wrong with it, they did. I didn't see that show, but Boston, of all places, later did a black art show and I had occasion to go to Boston, so I saw that one and it was a wretched piece of work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It was wretched.

THOMAS TIBBS: And so when Yahan came in and proposed to us, you know, we had some very long talks and I thought this is the chance to set that record straight. And I put it before the board in terms of our joining forces with another institution and I got no flack from the board in terms of being in concert with U.C.S.D. on something. I did get some feedback in terms of it being a black art show.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What do you mean?

THOMAS TIBBS: Well there were those who didn't want to do a black art show.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why? They didn't think that the blacks could make in the art, basically?

THOMAS TIBBS: Well --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, draw your own conclusions.

THOMAS TIBBS: Draw your own conclusion. Well the better mind of the board prevailed and we did the show. It was a knockout. The catalogue of it which is a complete book is still the textbook of black art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Must have seen it.

THOMAS TIBBS: And, you know, the work came from everywhere, and we had -- on one day during the course of that show, the opposition to it in La Jolla, anti-black attitudes, were so high, that on one day, I was visited by the

D.A.R., the American Legion, and the San Diego Police, and the F.B.I., all in one day.

PAUL KARLSTROM: F.B.I.?

THOMAS TIBBS: Um-hum. Well the word was out that some anti-American thing was going on here and it's hard to believe.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What year was this in?

THOMAS TIBBS: This would have been, I think it was '71. I think it was 1971. There was one piece, one painting in the show that --

PAUL KARLSTROM: The civil rights issues had already been more or less [inaudible].

THOMAS TIBBS: Yes, but not in La Jolla, see. See, you've got that little pocket in there. The unique thing is now it's no longer the La Jolla Museum. It's the San Diego Museum. Then it was La Jolla and you still --

PAUL KARLSTROM: With a strong, we should add, with a strong military [inaudible].

THOMAS TIBBS: Oh indeed, indeed, and the university was still not all that live, you know. The La Jolla natives didn't want that university there at all, so there was all of that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Tom, who were some of the artists, do you recall? I mean we obviously could look at the catalogue.

THOMAS TIBBS: Well, you know, most of them --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was Charles White in it?

THOMAS TIBBS: Well, yes, but most of them would be unknown names, at least at that time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about Jake Lawrence, was he one of them?

THOMAS TIBBS: I think so; I think so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So there was an attempt to get -- not that there were a lot of well-known names, but --

THOMAS TIBBS: No, but, you see -- well a big segment of them came from the East Coast, obviously, but there was one painting that was, interestingly enough, a black painting. I mean the color of the painting was black, black, black, black, and a very heavy impostule [sic]. And what you did not discern unless you looked awfully closely at it with the light in a certain way, the impostule was not from paint; the impostule was from an American flag that had been glued to the canvas and, you know, sort of scrunched up, and then the whole thing covered with black. And then attached to it every now and again was a little sticker, you know, the little stickers of the American flag, little seals. Every now and again, one of those was pasted, and then every now and again, some distance away from the flag was another sticker that said Abull shit, and boy, that was one that, you know, people like the D.A.R. and the American Legion and so on were really pointed to as being [inaudible.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: How was it reviewed? Do you remember?

THOMAS TIBBS: The local reviews were mild. National reviews were magnificent. People came in from --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really supportive.

THOMAS TIBBS: Oh, yes. People came in from everywhere. I was surprised that we didn't get closed down by the fire department for the opening when two or three thousand people tried to crowd in to the building.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How exciting.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah, it really was. It was a major effort, and as large as Yahan's, the result of Yahan's --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is she still at U.C.S.C.?

THOMAS TIBBS: Oh, I think so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: See, you just reminded me; I should go and look her up because we were in graduate school.

THOMAS TIBBS: Well, definitely you should; definitely you should. I don't own that catalogue. I would that I did, I'd give it to you.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well I'm sure -- see, I know I have seen it actually.

THOMAS TIBBS: But this was a pretty earth-shaking thing for La Jolla to be involved in. And then to have reviews point out that this new, little museum out there on the West Coast had done what the Metropolitan in Boston had failed to accomplish in their efforts. We definitely had the black community with us. One day, one morning, I was walking through the museum and it was before it was open, but the receptionist was at her desk near the door which was the original door to Ellen Billings-Skip house that had later got -- been closed up, and as I walked by, I saw a San Diego police car parked at the curb and no one was in it, thought nothing of it. And 25, 30, 40 minutes later, I came back through there and the police car was still there, so I said to the receptionist, "Do you know why that police car is sitting out there? And she said, "Yeah, he's upstairs. And at that time, we had some exhibition areas upstairs where offices now are. So I went up and I saw that a school group with a teacher was there, and the voice was talking to them that I didn't recognize, so I eavesdropped a bit and then I looked around in the frame of the door and a black man in a San Diego police uniform was talking to the kids about the art and he knew what the hell he was talking about. He was a painter.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'll be darn.

THOMAS TIBBS: He was a painter.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's wonderful.

THOMAS TIBBS: It was a marvelous thing. And we made a story of that. We got that story into the press, you know, and we really made hay out of that because it was --

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's an absolutely fascinating story in terms of the negative response and the idea that somehow, and I think you used the term un-American.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Somehow to bring --

THOMAS TIBBS: Definitely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- the blacks [inaudible].

THOMAS TIBBS: Absolutely, absolutely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well things have changed on that score.

THOMAS TIBBS: And, you know, the morality issue. Larry got me into trouble more than once. He brought Ed Kienholz an illegal operation piece.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, did he? Wow!

THOMAS TIBBS: And I said, "Okay, I'm for it. I think this is a good thing for us to do, so he brought him down and the negative press and attitudes on that piece being in the museum was really enormous.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I mean one can, of course, see that Ed's work is very disturbing anyway.

THOMAS TIBBS: But, you see, the abortion issue hadn't even come close to reaching this stage of legal discussions as it is today, but let me tell you how the problem got solved. One day, two nuns brought a group of girls in from the girls' school where they taught to see that piece, and I was astounded and we talked to the sisters and they thanked us for having it. One sister said, "There are no words that can get the message to these girls that we have tried to get to them about this subject as seeing that piece. Well we let that little bit of news --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Then all of a sudden, it was seen as a positive moral teaching too.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yes, exactly, exactly, exactly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you know, Ed Kienholz was something of an old-fashioned moralist.

THOMAS TIBBS: Indeed, indeed, indeed, but there couldn't have been a more judgmental place on the face of the earth to put a contemporary museum doing the newest kind of things than in little La Jolla at the time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about -- let me think of a few artists that you might have -- this is sort of going kind of backwards, but I'm trying to think of artists who may have been particularly provocative within that

circumstance. Did you ever have a show, say, of Robert Graham?

THOMAS TIBBS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: With his, you know, little, new --

THOMAS TIBBS: Yes, we did have; we did have. I was fascinated with him. Miniaturization has always been something that kind of fascinate -- and they were so beautifully done.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah, just the little bees wax figures.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, they're great.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well what might the respond to that be? They were pretty --

THOMAS TIBBS: Oh, I think the response there was conditioned by people's fascination with the beauty of those little things, that they very often even missed the point
that --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Then they weren't looking very closely.

THOMAS TIBBS: No, they were not, but I think that made it --

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about -- this is really close to obvious, Baldessari.

THOMAS TIBBS: Oh, yes, oh, sure, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now see, was he still down in San Diego --

THOMAS TIBBS: Yes. He was --

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- [inaudible]?

THOMAS TIBBS: Yes. He still was because he moved to that new school, Cal Arts. We showed Baldessari's paintings when they completely lost their visual imagery and had just a message on them, you know. In other words, he described on the painting what it look like if, in fact, he had painted the image kind of thing. Yes, we did that, sure. And Baldessari now, he has a one-man show in the downtown branch of La Jolla Museum.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. In fact, I'm going to see it tomorrow.

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah, and -- oh sure, yeah. I was sorry that change took Baldessari and others like him away from this community, but if I were designing an art community, putting together -- selecting the personnel of it, there would be a Baldessari in it, you know, and so we had him, but not for too long.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well he worked a number of years, I guess for (inaudible). I can't remember [inaudible] precisely. Maybe he grew up [inaudible].

THOMAS TIBBS: Oh, yeah. The one thing Baldessari did at the time that I didn't quite understand, and I don't even understand it these many years later in retrospect, when he interred and burned his art and with a declaration, "I will never again make a piece of art, and I remember talking with Larry about it at the time". I said, "That's not going to be -- he's not going to hold to that." He's an artist, and it was true. He's made a lot of art since then, but that one act bothered me a bit in terms of where his mind was at that moment.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well that's sort of like [inaudible], his abstract expressionist paintings [inaudible].

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Inaudible.]

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is Larry still around?

THOMAS TIBBS: Yes, and you ought to -- you really should --

PAUL KARLSTROM: How do I -- can you give me a number?

THOMAS TIBBS: I certainly can. You know, he teaches at Southwestern.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Does he?

THOMAS TIBBS: And directs their gallery down there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is a must. Maybe with a little luck, it's possible that if he's the same as he used to be, get around to almost all over --

THOMAS TIBBS: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- who knows, he might go over to U.S.D. to see this [inaudible].

THOMAS TIBBS: Yeah, yeah. I will give you his telephone number
and --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Absolutely. I may try to see him tomorrow.

THOMAS TIBBS: And we are in close touch.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Good.

THOMAS TIBBS: We don't see each other a whole lot, but --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well I'm sure he'll be pleased, amused --

THOMAS TIBBS: At some point, you ought to talk to the two of us together.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I was just thinking the same thing.

THOMAS TIBBS: Because these things were played back and forth, you know, using each other as a sound board.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, I think it would be fascinating. Let's see, so you retired in '72. Were there any special circumstances around that? I mean --

THOMAS TIBBS: Well, yeah, there were several. My wife was an invalid. She was 19 years invalid, and she had two massive strokes in 1960. She had nurses with her. She had one nurse that was with her 16 years who came with us when we moved here from Iowa. And it turned out that the dampness in La Jolla was just ruinous to her, just ruinous to her, and she was becoming very arthritic and so on. It was not the best climate for her on that score. I had been here only a few weeks when San Diego State asked me to join their faculty and install a course in contemporary art, and I really was interested in doing it, but I declined at that time and told them I just felt that my full attention had to go to the museum for a while. Well the next year, they asked me again and I mentioned it at a board meeting and the board said, "Do it, do it. It'll be good for us. Do it." So I did and it was one hell of a course. It really was a good course. The first time I met the class, John Dirks, who was the head of the department at the time, said, "Now we're putting you in a room that will hold probably 40 people at most. Don't be unhappy if it isn't filled. We expect maybe 25." I got there for the first class. There wasn't 25 or 40. There were 100 students trying to get in. They were all over the -- sitting on windowsills and on the floor and out in the hall, and it started me on a new career. I loved it. I thoroughly enjoyed teaching. But to get Ruth out of the climate that she was in, we had to move inland and I decided, you know, I didn't think she had too long and I decided that I really, at that point, was ready to give my attention to her. The university said they would give me as much teaching as my time would allow, so I went on a half-time contract and I was full time frequently when people were on sabbatical. And I was able to do that and spend time with Ruth that I hadn't, so we moved to Rancho Bernardo where it was drier and so on, so that really was part of it. There was -- I had reached one point with the board where I was tired of trying to convince some of the very people who hired me to build a contemporary museum, were still having to be convinced that we knew what the hell we were doing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Tell me quickly 'cause we're almost out of tape, your definition of how you had to educate one of these trustees who thought that contemporary meant made now. Your response.

THOMAS TIBBS: Well there were those who said, "That's not what we mean by contemporary. Contemporary means that it would have to be made now, and he even gave an example. If someone painted a portrait that looked like the 18th Century England, it would still be contemporary because it was done now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, made now.

THOMAS TIBBS: -- And my response was, "No, our definition of contemporary means it's about now.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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