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Oral history interview with Margret Craver Withers, 1983-1985

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Margret Craver Withers on November 15 and 29, 1983; and January 17 and 24, 1984. The interview took place in Boston, Massachusetts, and was conducted by Robert F. Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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

Interview

ROBERT BROWN: This is an interview with Margret Craver Withers in Boston. This is November 15, 1983, Robert Brown, the interviewer.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Margret Craver Withers.

ROBERT BROWN: Why don't we begin with something about your childhood. Can you tell me a bit about it? You were born in Western Kansas, right?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: It's so long ago, Bob, I hardly know where to start, but I can't think there was anything very unusual about it. The most important thing in my thinking is the space and the grandeur of the high prairies, the great storms that would come up, and the drama of those things remain with me still.

ROBERT BROWN: This was Pratt, Kansas, that you were raised?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, this was out west of Dodge City even, and in such a wild area, but my father was one of the men that laid out the cemetery many years after we went there.

ROBERT BROWN: So it was hardly a town, was it?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh no, it was hardly a town. My father was in charge of the lumber business and there was a post office, a grocery store, and that was about all, three or four little buildings.

ROBERT BROWN: Your father was a businessman?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. He knew the lumber business and he had a lumber yard there, and you can imagine that very flat prairie, and much of it around, at that time, was real buffalo grass. [00:02:16] And I took the buffalo grass for granted until my mother sold the last piece we owned, that had the buffalo grass on it, and I felt as though a lot of early Kansas went with the sale of that little piece of land.

ROBERT BROWN: That was the natural cover, wasn't it, buffalo grass?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT BROWN: So much of it was not even plowed or grazed on?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: This was used as grazing, because there are little tiny seeds at the bottom of each little blade of grass, and it grows very low—as I have read, thirty feet of root system—the root system goes down 30 feet.

ROBERT BROWN: Good lord! So it's extremely tough.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh yes, oh yes. And it was a good thing, because during the Dust Bowl, when they found out how the winds could just pick up the earth and put it in the air, you knew nature knew what she was doing when she covered that area.

ROBERT BROWN: Some of your earliest memories, then, are of the climate and of the landscape?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right, and the sky. And Robert Louis Stevenson, as I said, wrote the most beautiful early article or essay about the plains, and he called the sky the great Persian bowl, it turned out. [00:04:00]

ROBERT BROWN: So there were very few people around. Were you—as a child I guess, that's the way you

thought life was, was it? To be rather isolated? Or did you have a large family?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, we were six, mother and father, the four of us, but no, I didn't think of it as isolation, because you could see so far there, you could see 20 miles in some directions, even though there were many arroyos and streams. But you could look down and see Mrs. Smith is going out her front door to her garden or whatever.

ROBERT BROWN: From miles away.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Miles away, that's right. And my sister at one time lived six miles away, on her wheat farm, and I could see when she would leave the house and go out to get in the car and some see us. So you see, there was great vision.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you the eldest—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —or were you in the middle? And was it a stern family, or what were your parents like?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I never heard my mother or father have an argument. If they discussed things about us, it was done in private. But they liked people. Both of them had found all kinds of joys in simple, daily lives. [00:06:05] It seemed to me, when I look back on it, as though my parents had no problems. Everything was smooth.

ROBERT BROWN: Had they come out with the first generation to settle that area?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, there had been settlers there for many years, but no, they weren't called early settlers, goodness.

ROBERT BROWN: Where had they come from, your parents?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: My aunt went out—do you know what proving a claim means?

ROBERT BROWN: It means settling on it until you—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Correct. My aunt was a single lady with a lot of ideas, and she wanted to be an opera singer but she felt she had to take care of her mother and father. So she took me, and we went into Colorado to prove up a claim so she would have some land of her very own. And to see her, you'd never think she wanted land. She dressed very beautifully, exquisitely, and loved music and all this. But I can remember the howl of the coyotes, and I don't know whether wolves or not, but there was a lot of howling at night—in this tiny little cabin we lived in.

ROBERT BROWN: This is when you were a little girl?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I was five years old. So I feel like I was born right in the pioneering spirit of the place. [00:08:00] That was isolated.

ROBERT BROWN: That was what?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Isolated. And that was what I call barren, mostly because there was no traffic, no people.

ROBERT BROWN: But your parents had come from where, the East? And they'd come to what was already an established little community?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh yes, they came from Pratt. And it was—well, that was quite a metropolis. That was a large place, laid out—why, I don't know at that time, but certainly in the late 1880s—and the streets to this day are unusually wide. It would be about maybe a six-lane—the main street is like a highway.

ROBERT BROWN: Well that's characteristic of a lot of those little settlements. Well, did your parents have an interest in—that you children be educated and follow your own vocations?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: They had very definite ideas about our education. They took our schoolwork seriously, but—and it was just a matter, of course you did your homework—like, you ate your supper and you did your homework, there was no discussion. If you had your homework done, then you could whatever else it was you had in mind.

ROBERT BROWN: Did they encourage any interest you might have in the arts?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No. The only one to encourage my art interests was an uncle. [00:10:04] He studied in Vienna and he was a surgeon. He liked anything I drew and he would often come and bring me things he wanted me to draw.

ROBERT BROWN: Did he live nearby?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: He lived 60 miles away.

ROBERT BROWN: So your family—there were members of your family who were highly educated and who were well traveled—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —and might open up a broader world to you?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I don't know that my world needed broadening. I just needed—I thought at that time all I needed to do was to gather some years. I always felt too young and I was very eager to be 18 and skipped along.

ROBERT BROWN: We might think of it as isolated, but it really wasn't confining, was it? It was a time when, to be out there, you felt like the possibilities were limitless, I suppose.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right, because you had so little demands on your time, and you could read and play the violin and, you know, just have a really good time, I thought.

ROBERT BROWN: And your parents had this optimistic attitude too, did they?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh yes, oh yes. Someone said to mother one time, after I'd given a talk at the museum, how she seemed to have such a talented child, and my mother says, "I have four talented children." And she believed this—that each one of us had our own talents and they would be used. [00:12:17] She was a beautiful woman to look at, by the way.

ROBERT BROWN: What were her interests, particularly your mother's?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well there isn't anything mother wasn't interested in. She took up pottery at the age of 50 and then at the age of 70 decided to be a weaver, and she took that as a matter of course, as though you've got a new recipe. She was always interested in school. One of the last visits I paid her, she had just come from the grade school. They had had a program, and she couldn't stay away from seeing how someone's grandchild or great-grandchild was doing in school.

ROBERT BROWN: Had she come from a family that valued education and self-expression?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well I, I would say that was just a general pattern.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean among the people out there?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, not everybody, but in the uncles and aunts and so forth, they talked ideas—and I think they had to, as pioneers. [00:14:00] Maybe you could say that as pioneers, they had to worry about just living and having enough to eat, but that isn't what I remember them talking about when they would get together. There were family reunions. Those were very important in our lives. But somehow—I had an uncle who was a sculptor, but nobody thought his sculpture was very good, and I doubt if there's a piece of it in existence. He hadn't any training, but he knew how to manage cement, so his things were made of cement.

ROBERT BROWN: Cast and carved?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Carved, cast, built-up. He was always busy.

ROBERT BROWN: Did he live in Kansas too?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: He lived in Oklahoma.

ROBERT BROWN: What was his name?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Wheeler. Uncle Wheeler. His last name was Phillips—my mother's last name.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, perhaps this is hindsight, but you were interviewed or written about in the Wichita

paper, I think 1938, and you told the person that family tradition was that the children should each have a handicraft.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: That's true. That's true. But there were so many—you know, my brother could do anything. He could weave, he could—and he loved this. [00:16:06] I think he was kind of showing off, but when I became a metalworker, why, he would give me ideas about how I could improve my techniques. And he really knew—he'd have made a good Dieter Roth.

ROBERT BROWN: What form did this encouragement take, of your handicraft? Were you given materials to work with?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh no, nothing serious. I went to art school, and we all started in the painting department.

ROBERT BROWN: You're talking now about the university level?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: But well before that, you'd been doing things, hadn't you?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, not seriously. No.

ROBERT BROWN: In the interview, it was mentioned you did needlework, and then you lit upon what the interviewer called "tooling, in brass plates."

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh yes, all the kid stuff, but I never took any of that very seriously.

ROBERT BROWN: That was just beating little patterns onto brass?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes. And making—it's very interesting, Bob Ebendorf was here the other day—you know Bob—and he was talking about, evidently in his—well, I don't know how old he is, but maybe in his day, how children made beads out of pages of advertising, and they'd cut them up and roll them and glued them and made necklaces out of paper. And, you know all those kind of—

ROBERT BROWN: Some of these things you did in school, did you? Was this part of your elementary school? [00:18:19]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh no, school was just—

ROBERT BROWN: Just the three Rs.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: So this would be done at home?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes, yes. I think it's mostly that if you wanted something, you made it, because you couldn't run down to the corner store and buy it.

ROBERT BROWN: But very young, apparently, according to this interview, you came to have a feeling for working in metal?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, yes—

ROBERT BROWN: Is that true, or is it—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I don't think so. I think—I can't remember that in any case. I was mostly interested in drawing. And that's what took me to the university.

ROBERT BROWN: In high school, was there any kind of an art instruction?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No. Thank goodness I learned how to type in school—high school.

ROBERT BROWN: So the drawing was simply on your own?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: You know, we had the glee club and we had programs of great works, readings from books, and if you knew a poem, you could recite at assembly and all of that. It was kind of—everything was so natural, it wasn't scheduled. And it was freer. [00:20:00] The only thing that was scheduled, of course, was the athletics. And I played basketball. I don't know one thing about any other game, but I played basketball. And

we had a very good teacher. So the goal was always to be able to make the basket without touching the rim from the center line of the court. That was always the essence of everything. Of course, if you did it in a game, why, it was terrific.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you become quite good?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I don't know. I loved it. I had a guard, and she and I had a good time because I could always overreach myself and I know she'd bring her body up and keep me from falling over or from anything from happening to me. She was built big and square and a little bit soft, so it was very convenient.

ROBERT BROWN: She was the big one on the team, huh?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I was the little one, I was called—I had a nickname, I was so little—not Pee-wee—but I was just—didn't grow up until I got to college.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you know that you wanted to go to college?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes, you didn't—you never thought about it, you just went.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have any idea of what you wanted to do there?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. [00:22:00] Going to my uncle, he thought I should certainly go into the art department. And I guess by that time I thought I should too. I wasn't a very good math student. I was very much interested in architecture. And there was one sod house remaining in our area, a real one. And I had visions when I was in high school of doing a sod house with a courtyard, so the wind wouldn't ever interrupt your activities, and so mother could have her flowers unbeaten by the wind. If there was a moral lesson, it was that every morning the iris would bloom—those delicate, exquisite blossoms in their wonderful colors—and probably by noon, there would be enough wind to beat those poor little petals, and the next morning there would be another flower again. But I never did get to do that house. It seems like something undone in my life. But I probably—to this day, if I had to start drawing the plans, I would make some error with my numbers.

ROBERT BROWN: With your numbers? Did you draw and sketch such things as the house?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes. Always drawing. And I drew a lot in the dirt. And I had a friend in the university who came from a very poor background, and she said there was never any paper, much less pencils, and she did her drawing in the bottom of a gravy skillet. [00:24:00] I could see her do that. She was a vital, talented girl.

ROBERT BROWN: When did you go to the university, what year was that?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: 1924—five—1925.

ROBERT BROWN: You could go there and put down for a major from the beginning?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No. You went to the painting department and you learned how to draw. You took still life classes and so forth.

ROBERT BROWN: But you had to take other courses as well, general education?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. And you had to have English lit and you had to take creative writing.

ROBERT BROWN: But your thrust was going to be in the painting department?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes. I spent, right from the beginning, most of my hours in the painting department. The classes were three hours long, so it didn't take long to get rid of a day.

ROBERT BROWN: No, no. Did you have to qualify to get into those classes? Had you sent work ahead, drawings or anything?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No.

ROBERT BROWN: Perhaps you can describe how they began? We can learn something of the teaching of painting and other art forms.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, you know, I was very fortunate. The university, for some reason or other, attracted the painters from the difficult areas of Europe. [00:26:04] These people were either driven out or they saw that the—for the most part, the racial problem.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. In Central Europe.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right, was too rough. My drawing teacher came from Hamburg. And he went back, many years after I graduated, for the first time—he left Hamburg when he was six years old. He made a great deal of his own way as a child in this country. When he went back, the story of his going back and seeing his old mother—she was 80 at that time—was one of the most moving stories I've ever heard.

ROBERT BROWN: Who was this?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: This was Karl Mattern, M-A-T-T-E-R-N. His wife, I think, is still living.

ROBERT BROWN: He came over as a child, then, to America, almost on his own?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I think he had either a cousin or an uncle in New York. And what his life was like in those early years, I really don't know.

ROBERT BROWN: How was he as a teacher?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Kindly and very gentle, but also very firm, in a way that you must have something to say, you must set yourself a discipline and do it. We'd do casts, and our studio was chairs. [00:28:02] You sat on a low chair, a stool, and a regular chair was turned up and your drawing board was put in that, and the cast was set in the middle, and you drew casts, what seemed to me like forever.

ROBERT BROWN: It was a bit tedious for you?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I wanted to know more about why we were drawing this particular cast and it was very difficult to find that out.

ROBERT BROWN: You asked him?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes, he would tell you all he knew. But—

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: So, most of your work with Mattern, at least in the beginning, was with plaster cast.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, no, we had free sketches. We had still life sketching and drawing. We were learning how to use charcoal. And we even had watercolor in the second semester.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you find that to be a much more difficult medium?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, actually, I think drawing is the most difficult of all.

ROBERT BROWN: Why do you suppose?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well I, I have looked at drawings from the ages, and good drawings still seem to me, you know, so very intricate, that just the quiver of a line will make or break a drawing. [00:30:00] Of course, laying on watercolor isn't exactly the easiest thing in the world either, but I liked it.

ROBERT BROWN: But with drawing, you have such minimal means—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: —that you have to be extremely exact.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: It's very lean, and if it's clean and good, it's great. I saw—I remember—a drawing, from about twelve feet away, and it was a tiny little drawing, about four inches. You could read that drawing as though it was done with India ink, at two feet. This is the kind of expression that's always fascinated me. And I thought the other day, I want to go to New York, and what would I like most to do? I would like most to sit down in some print department and just handle drawings. It had something to do with the physical handling of these drawings, which I won't do.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you suppose, then, that you were developing that early a taste for the lean and the minimal, the expression?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: It's very difficult to analyze yourself, I think. You may think of certain people that had great influence in your life, but somehow, I don't see how you can look down at your building blocks and identify them or separate them. [00:32:07]

ROBERT BROWN: But you remember you enjoyed this drawing, that you were excited about this?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes—and terribly discouraged, because so many of my peers had had drawing lessons in school, for better or for worse, and I went there with nothing. And the first six weeks was a very frightening time to me, because I knew that if you did not measure up in six weeks, you were told to go home. And that was very tense, that first six weeks. And then there was Mr. Bloch, who was head of the painting department.

ROBERT BROWN: Albert Bloch.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: He too was a European.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right. Here again, you see, we were very fortunate to have real artists as teachers. I just know that many of the universities at this time or many of the art departments were teaching painting on velvet and burned wood.

ROBERT BROWN: The sort of hobbyist level of—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right. And look what we were endowed with. And Bloch was a fascinating man. He had a temper that was beyond belief, and it was always right out very close to the surface. But his painting always makes me think of Ryder in this country. It was very mystic and very delicate. [00:34:17] He would never let us see anything he had painted. And I said, "Well, why is this? Couldn't we learn something?" And he said, "Yes, you might copy it, and if there's anything I wouldn't want it's hundreds of little Blochs running around."

ROBERT BROWN: [Laughs.] It sounds as though you became fairly forward after a while, asking him a question like that.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, it took a lot of courage to ask him. Karl Mattern was a very different man, gentle and kindly. But Bloch was, I think, a very good painter. I saw so little, even after I left school, but—

ROBERT BROWN: How was he as a teacher, was he very good?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, he wasn't very good, because he would get too upset if you did something wrong. And one thing that just hurt him deeply was [laughs] if you had a messy palette or if you spilled your turpentine. And I didn't like turpentine to begin with, so I wasn't messy with it, but if some student was messy with it, it was just impossible for him to accept, and he couldn't teach any more that day. [laughs] You know, he that deeply about it. But I did learn a great deal from him—I think mostly what I didn't know, [laughs] which was everything. [00:36:13]

ROBERT BROWN: Technique, particularly? Use of oil paint?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: And color, I would say. I think he expected you to develop a unique color sense. And how he went about bringing that about I don't know, but I think we each did come out with a fairly individual color sense.

ROBERT BROWN: So you had drawing and painting, then, all through your four years at Kansas?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes. The second year you had to take crafts. And we dragged ourselves over there with a feeling of dejection and—

ROBERT BROWN: Why? Was it looked down on or something?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, yes. As usual, you know, the painters, they're busy—saying, "Well, now," you know, "you have to go over and take some decorative arts." And there we learned the theory of color to begin with, the theory of light, the theory of paint. We made our own color swatches—and that was real discipline.

ROBERT BROWN: This was in the crafts program?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: Who was the teacher then?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: The head of the department was Ms. Rosemary Ketcham. [00:38:02] She had several teachers. One, Marjorie Whitney, was her assistant. She taught the class I was in. And Clara Hatton—she urged Clara Hatton to go and study with a bookbinder who was the bookbinder for the Royal Library.

ROBERT BROWN: In England?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: In England. So Clara taught chiefly bookbinding, but we had pottery and we had metalwork.

ROBERT BROWN: That's quite a range of things.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, first we had to do a design class, of course.

ROBERT BROWN: And design, what did that mean then?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: It meant how to break up spaces. You were given all kinds of—one-inch spaces—break up one-inch squares into interesting spaces, do twenty or thirty of them on a page so you can compare them, and so forth.

ROBERT BROWN: Again, fairly tedious?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, this was rather interesting. I didn't mind this. And then, when we got to metal, we were to choose what we wanted to do. She had some circles, of all things, of brass, one of the most resistant metals there could possibly be found. And I think she probably like brass because it was a warm, lovely color.

ROBERT BROWN: I think you're more or less quoting her. [00:40:02] [Laughs.]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, I am. So, we started out beating on brass. Well, it was the dullest, most unrelenting material you could possibly imagine. And I asked her one day why we couldn't put two pieces together to develop a form. "Oh, but," she says, "I don't know how to solder." And this was such a blow to me—that I was taking a metal course from a teacher who didn't know how to solder. So—she did but it was a great surprise if two pieces stayed together.

ROBERT BROWN: She had only a fairly fragile grasp—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: —on the technique of metalworking.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: So everything I designed, that I wanted to do, demanded, of course, a lot of soldering. And finally, she said, "All right, if you go over to the library and see if there's any book that will teach you how to solder, I will make you my assistant, and you can teach the soldering." Well, I scurried to the library, and I spent a lot of time over there. It was very difficult. But I—we were right across from the engineering department, and I knew they had a lot of ideas in the engineering department that were basic, like—well, they knew about clay and they had a kiln over there and they baked their clay for some reason or other. [00:42:07] Also, somebody knew about metal. So between the engineering department and the fragile books—there were no American books, needless to say—there was one that I still have, written by a Britisher—

ROBERT BROWN: On soldering?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, no, nothing that basic.

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ROBERT BROWN: —so you developed some mastery of soldering?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, you know, it isn't very difficult. If the metal is clean and you have flux and a good solder and a torch, it can't help but work. Of course, when you talk about mastery, when I worked in regular silver shops, every workman had some special trick that he had done at one time or another with his soldering torch. And one I always loved was when the solder ran uphill and if there was a little speck of solder up there, the flex would cause that to move forward maybe a half an inch from the silver, but if you struck it with just the right gentleness of the torch, the torch would maneuver that piece right back where it belonged, where it came from, and then it became molten. So it's tricks like this that I think all craftsmen enjoy doing—the impossible—you know, the most difficult things.

ROBERT BROWN: You were getting an experience of that with this?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, maybe it's my pioneering spirit. You know, if she had been a good metal teacher, I often wonder if I would have become a metalsmith.

ROBERT BROWN: But you were almost forced into your discoveries and learning on your own during [cross talk]

—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, at least the way was open. I was encouraged, let us say. [00:02:04]

ROBERT BROWN: You weren't going to stick with beating brass; you were going to shape things and assemble pieces.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes. I had bigger things in mind. And then when I took the bookbinding, though, there was a very strong pull. Because all this time, I was doing all the reading that I could—had time to do. There was a beautiful library on the campus, and I had a natural feel for books, so I liked the bookbinding course very much. And for a while there was a tossup as to whether I would become a bookbinder or a metalworker. My good sense told me I'd probably starve to death as a bookbinder in Kansas, but I didn't think I'd be staying in Kansas, anyway.

ROBERT BROWN: You didn't—already you thought—

MARGRET WITHERS: I didn't think. Someone asked me that the other day—also a Midwesterner—did I plan to leave Kansas? And I didn't plan. You know, it just was there and I just grew into it. Whatever I did seemed to take me away.

ROBERT BROWN: Did a great many of your contemporaries at the university in fact leave and they expected they probably wouldn't stay in Kansas?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, no. Oh, no.

ROBERT BROWN: Most thought they'd be going back home, so to speak?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, they all wanted to do whatever it is they wanted to do, but they expected to be teaching at the University of Oklahoma or the University of Wichita. [00:04:09] The main possibility of making a living, of course, at that time was teaching and doing your own work on the side. We all did that.

ROBERT BROWN: What was it about bookbinding that you liked?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, it's a very sensuous [laughs] technique, handling all that beautiful leather. And the gold tooling I liked. I also like the quality of the paper. We were allowed to do—use very beautiful paper. It wasn't all handmade paper, but it was all good rag paper. And our mending papers came from Japan. They were rice or silk. And when we took a book apart to bind it, we really took apart every bit and mended the old sewing folds, and then sewed the book, and backed the book, and cut the boards, and covered it with leather. I did quite well with that.

ROBERT BROWN: You liked the restoration aspect of it as well as the sensual, perhaps? What do—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I went to buy a book—I had started a poetry class—and I didn't know this until I read a letter about a year ago—and so I had chosen a poet whose works I wanted to own, so I wanted to bind that book. [00:06:18] And I went down and I was looking over the book so carefully, as to their size and shape and the paper and whatnot. And the bookdealer said, "Well, why are you buying this book?" I didn't tell him that I really wanted to own it as a book of poetry, but I said, "Well, I'm taking a bookbinding class." And he said, "Well, if you're doing that, why don't you just bind a telephone book?" I love that story.

ROBERT BROWN: That was not your point of view. [Laughs.]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right. Hardly. But I haven't—none of my bookbinding left.

ROBERT BROWN: Most of your courses were in painting and drawing though? Raymond Eastwood was also a teacher then.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: Would that have been in painting?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: He was in painting—although he taught drawing—Drawing II, the second year.

ROBERT BROWN: And what was he like?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, he was a nifty guy, [laughs] had a wonderful sense of humor. I shouldn't say had—he's still living, I think, isn't he?

ROBERT BROWN: I think so. He's taught for many years there. He was a native, wasn't he? Or from that area maybe.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, Raymond Eastwood?

ROBERT BROWN: What was his approach to teaching? Was he—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, he had a permanent smile on his face, although he could look very stern and very serious, but he had a bubbling sense of humor. [00:08:16] He smoked a pipe, I remember. And I think he was more outgiving, in that he would think of an experience that he had read of, of an artist, and we began to get the lore of at least the great painters and great artists in the world. We took a course in the history of art under Bloch, and we got no lore. We wrote—our history quiz was a ghastly thing. We never got an essay question; it was matching up names and dates and schools. And if we missed, if we put an artist in the wrong school, it was a real disaster.

ROBERT BROWN: What was the aim of that, do you suppose?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, I don't know. I don't know. He just went by the book, I think. It was easier to teach by the book. But Raymond and Karl both were much more friendly. [00:10:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Was the lore of artists of quite considerable interest to you and your fellow students?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, we didn't get that much.

ROBERT BROWN: But you learned—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, we—

ROBERT BROWN: The artist's way of life surely intrigued you.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. Masaccio did this because—you know, they had lived long enough and worked in the field long enough to gather up good material about the lives of artists.

ROBERT BROWN: And things that they thought and knew were important, that would be of interested if you were to go on as an artist?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I don't think they thought of our future, because there was no future in art. [Laughs.] Everybody took that for granted. If you taught, yes. And I was supposed to take courses in art education, but I really didn't like that kind of thing. Of course, you still had to pass an exam in order to teach. I felt I should be preparing myself to teach, but that was the last thing I wanted to do, so I was leaving that to the very end. I never did get around to taking any art education courses, but I never needed them here. Well, I was invited to teach in a high school at one time, in Wichita, Kansas, and I don't know how I would have gotten around that not having had art education.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you know just enough about it that you knew you didn't want to study it? [00:12:17]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, it was a very dull business. You know, they would—kind of little doo-daddy techniques they would teach you to teach to the third graders. There was not enough theoretical and material art. It was just dull business.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you think that you needed to be taught how to teach?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No. I don't know what I thought. I was afraid I was going to have to teach, but I didn't want to be taught how. [Laughs.] And I don't quite understand that. But when I did teach, I found it was simply marvelous. And it was—I taught by accident, someone else's accident, and I never had such a good time. I taught the third grade.

ROBERT BROWN: Was this in the '30s?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes it was. It was about—late '29.

ROBERT BROWN: Right after you had gotten out of the university?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I got out of school. I came home to visit my parents, and a girl was ill in the primary school and wouldn't be able to come back. So in order to teach, I had to take a state exam. And this state exam had music, music theory, English history. I'm sure it had math and algebra, but I managed to blank those subjects out of my mind as quickly as possible. [00:14:14] But I passed the state exam—teacher's exam—

in any case. And I read a book on musical theory, and I got 99, and I don't think they knew how to grade papers. But [laughs] anyway, the teaching was simply marvelous. We had the most wonderful time. Because no one could understand which way was east and west, north and south. We asked the janitor if we could put the map of Kansas, paint it right on the floor, and he said sure, if we cleaned it up. And then later we put the whole United States map on the floor. It had to include the seats, you know, and all of that—and lots of the reading material, lots of the geography was involved in what seat you had. If you were sitting in Kansas or Oklahoma or Nebraska, you would have to know what went on in those states, and they'd have to find it out.

ROBERT BROWN: So you taught a pretty general course?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, we had a wonderful time. And the most fun of all was history. Because none of them liked history—we had a very dry book.

ROBERT BROWN: Now this was the third grade?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: This was the third grade. And of course their minds at that time were not loaded with television material, so everything was fresh and new and direct, and they just gobbled it up. So we said all right, now we're going to write our own history, the history of our own lives, so when you go home tonight, ask your parents all about what you did when you were little, and we're going to put these histories up on the board, and then everybody can read everybody else's history. [00:16:20] Where I got such long pieces of kind of like adding machine paper, I don't know. But then each student got to stand up and say anything he wanted to say about his history. And some of them were very funny. And I remember one to this day, as he was going along, and he said, "And in 1928, I was pig-bitten." [They laugh.] Well—but they—you know, they began to really like things that happened. And I had another one—we were talking about the history of Kansas and a great fire that swept the prairies. And one little boy wrote a paragraph about it, and he ended his paragraph by saying, "And that fire put itself out trying to get across the Cimarron River." Imagine.

ROBERT BROWN: Pretty graphic.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yeah. He was one of the Mexican boys. We had two families, and they were the most interesting children. Talk about discipline. [00:18:00] One was a little slow, but the rest of them had very quick minds. And they were very enthusiastic and—they were just good students. They liked to learn, and they would love it if it was some kind of project. So I would send one of them down to talk to the grocery man, ask him what it was like when he built his grocery store, and he would come back with more information about that man and his father, and—so it was a great moment. We really livened that classroom up.

ROBERT BROWN: Apart from that fluke, did you know what you were going to do? Was your family putting any pressure on you to get a job?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, I didn't need any family pressure. [Laughs.] I wanted to do something. And it was while I was doing this, but thinking about where I was going to apply for jobs, that I got a call from the Wichita Art Association asking if I could come in and teach a summer course in metalwork. So from then on I was with the Art Association and the art school and museum. And—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, that—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —that was my big—first—

ROBERT BROWN: This was after what, one term teaching, or a year teaching in the local school?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: It was about a year. I had to teach—finish out that year and teach most the [inaudible] students. [00:20:00]

ROBERT BROWN: As you then started into these jobs, looking back, had the university prepared you pretty well?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I don't know. Maybe I wasn't a good teacher. One student said that I was the best teacher he ever had. He turned out to be a mathematics—he taught the doctoral program in mathematics. And I said, "Do you mean to tell me that I was a good math teacher?" And he said, "You certainly were, because if we couldn't understand it, you drew it out on the blackboard."

ROBERT BROWN: How much of that do you attribute, though, to the University of Kansas experience, and how much to your native curiosity—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, I don't know.

ROBERT BROWN: —and love of getting into things?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: You're talking about my building blocks that are all smeared together at this point. But you must understand, it was a free world, and it was simply marvelous. I think of students in classes now, we had a lot more freedom. We had dull business, but if we wanted to do a project, why, the teacher was—we didn't have any bad teachers. We had some that wanted you to memorize a lot, which I thought was a waste of time, but I wasn't very good at, so [laughs] that might have been the reason.

ROBERT BROWN: But most of them would—if you wanted to try out something they were with you, they would let you?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And you were a pretty enterprising sort, weren't you? [00:22:00]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I had a neighbor friend, and her parents were both extremely well-educated people, and they took a much more active interest in their daughter's life. And when she would go home, she would get more training in this or that or the other thing. When I went home, what I got, I just got myself. My mother put no pressure on us, and we could do other things which we liked to do. We had horses and, you know, could ride horseback—my brother and sister could. But this girl was always just enough ahead of me to keep me fighting. She had taken a lot of piano—from the time she was three, she played the piano. This made her fingers very, very active on the typewriter, and it was nip and tuck to keep up with her. I didn't care much—I don't remember whether she was good in math or not. It was nip and tuck in English, writing, any of that. It was a very good combination.

ROBERT BROWN: That was when you were a teenager. Is that before you went to university?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, this—oh, yes, this was in high school.

ROBERT BROWN: By the time you got out of university, you had some—a good deal of confidence of yourself, did you?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, I don't think so. [00:24:00] I think I felt poorly educated still, but I needed to get a job, and I meant to keep on doing the special things I was interested in.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, did you move to Wichita? Was that about 1930, '31, you took up your new position?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I think so, '31.

ROBERT BROWN: Was the Wichita Art Association a fairly new thing?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, it was an old group put together—and I hope I'm right on this. I always thought of it as the old group. In Wichita there were many printmakers. A publishing house in Wichita brought these artists in to illustrate books and lay out books. They were the evening teachers and part-time teachers at the Wichita Art Association.

ROBERT BROWN: And the Art Association was a combination of school and exhibition?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: It was, in the beginning, chiefly school, and then in 1935, the museum was finished, and then it took on the responsibility, with no addition of staff, [laughs] of running an art museum. [00:26:00]

ROBERT BROWN: When you went there, it was mostly school, and what were you to teach?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, I was a decorative arts teacher, I taught bookbinding, I taught metalworking—metalworking was the department. I taught all the children's classes—drawing and painting to children—and that wasn't very serious, that was Saturday classes.

ROBERT BROWN: But the others were pretty well equipped? Was the metalworking fairly well equipped?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: There wasn't one thing—and as I remember, I was tabbed $25, but I never got more than [$]19. But we had some good board members, we had some very wealthy board members. And one of them was a perfectly remarkable woman, and she wanted to study metalwork. I don't know why, but she did. And so we would take her Rolls Royce and the chauffer and go to the junkyard, and we would gather up bits of iron, old hammers that could be reshaped, wire, copper wire, pieces of copper. And of course the chauffer was just dying, because—and he would bring gray canvas cloths to put down in the back so all that greasy, grimy stuff wouldn't get his car dirty. And then, of course, when the adult classes started and there was anything that was needed, there was either—the hat was passed by the students, meaning mostly the members of the board of directors, but there was always money if you needed it badly enough. You might have to wait for it, but—

[00:28:14]

ROBERT BROWN: But you had to make do with almost nothing in the beginning?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, there was not a thing. Not a thing. Not a bench to work at, not a soldering pit. And then, you see, we'd have to get people to work on these things. And sometimes we'd pay them a bit, but sometimes we got them interested in class, and that's the way they worked out their scholarship, their tuition. So [laughs] it was a very loose organization.

ROBERT BROWN: And what was your theory in teaching, or what were you trying to get across?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, I was doing what I wanted to do, which is to work with metal. And if I had to teach people to do it, it was all right with me—although I loved the teaching, and I enjoyed the people. And of course, as you can imagine, they became my customers when they came and saw [laughs] how hard it was to make something—why, then, they would commission me to make something.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, how soon—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: This book has several commissions.

ROBERT BROWN: So you began—you were advancing pretty quickly. You were taking commissions within a few years?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes. You had to. I think my salary was $80 a month.

ROBERT BROWN: But I mean, you were—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: And I was not living at home.

ROBERT BROWN: You had developed a considerable proficiency.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, we were fairly good by the time we got through [laughs] at the University of Kansas. A book was a well-bound book. And some of them were quite beautiful. [00:30:03]

ROBERT BROWN: And were you working in silver by then?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I worked in silver at the university. I didn't do big pieces, any hollowware in silver.

ROBERT BROWN: Was there anybody who could have taught you that at the university?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, no.

ROBERT BROWN: So it was mostly jewelry?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And flatware?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: And they didn't have weaving at that time. But they had a very good course in pottery. And I would often spend a whole—like, a Thanksgiving vacation doing a pot. Because I'd be working pretty much alone, and I could develop it without any interruptions. But then the skills of keeping that shape—I don't know whether I didn't like them or was bored by them, but if the shape changed from its beginning, this annoyed me. And I think this is one of the big steps toward metalwork, where if I had made that in metal, it would be the same way I left it.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, you're saying in the kiln it would change—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No—

ROBERT BROWN: —or just under its own weight it might?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: The pottery might change?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: A piece of clay, if you don't finish a pot in a day, you have to hold it over. And it will change weight if you don't keep it exactly correct. And we didn't have the equipment, I guess, either, to put

it where it would stay moist but not dry out and not be wet. [00:32:16] If you put a wet cloth over it and it was slimy and wet, you were as bad off as if it were too dry. But I liked the color and I enjoyed the biscuit firing. I thought that was great sport. I would fire the kiln for the teacher and that meant [laughs] a couple of us would go over and sleep on cots, because you had to fire the kiln at night. We borrowed the kiln from the engineering department, and they used it during the day, and so we had to fire at night. Oh, all these things I'm remembering, I didn't know I remembered. But of course, the real key to that whole university picture was Dean Swarthout.

ROBERT BROWN: What was his first name?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Dean Swarthout—I can't—

ROBERT BROWN: In what respect was he the—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: He was born in Germany and brought up in Germany. He brought his whole family over. He was a musician. Gladys Swarthout Frinston was his niece. You probably don't know her either.

ROBERT BROWN: Not really.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: But music was their lives. And my sister played with one of his young daughters. They went to school together. And one year my parents were living in Lawrence while I was at the university. [00:34:00] But Dean Swarthout was an incredible man. He called me in one day, and I was absolutely terrified, because I didn't know what the dean was for. I was just going about my business—and Ms. Ketcham could be frightening enough at times. He had—I don't know why, but he had found out that I had joined a sorority—and I was living in a sorority my junior year, and senior year too—and he wanted me to understand that anyone in the creative fields must have some time alone during the day. There must be some deepening as well as broadening. And he lectured me like a dear grandfather about this. And he said, "If you'd like, you could come back in a week or two and tell me how you've worked your program out." He cared that much. And I've often—I'll never know, you know, how he became that much interested. He was a great man. And he was the dean of the whole art school. A wonderful person.

ROBERT BROWN: At that time, it was one of the few universities with so much, at least in the visual arts, wasn't it? [00:36:00]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, I don't—

ROBERT BROWN: You said earlier, you had real painters, not simply art education people.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I think that must have been true at other universities. I actually don't know. There wasn't that much communication between schools at that time. And I was—then when I got out of school, I was in an art school, and that put you in a completely different category.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean at Wichita?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. You know, if you were teaching in the art department in the high school, you had more prestige than you did being head of the children's department and the arts group.

ROBERT BROWN: Right, because art schools were considered just—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, they just weren't very necessary.

ROBERT BROWN: It was a very practical society, wasn't it?

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ROBERT BROWN: Second tape. Interview with Margret Craver Withers. Robert Brown, and the date is November 29, 1983.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: You wanted to say something that you omitted before, about your grandfather?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I hadn't thought this through very well—about influences on my youth—because my grandfather was an architect and a contractor, built the largest church in Pratt, Kansas. It was calling around over his constructions with him that may have interested me in not only architecture, but stone. Because to this day, I think I would have made a very good stonemason. [Laughs.] In other words, the Pre-Columbian ruins are very close to me in feeling. I get a big thrill out of the Greek walls, and the—obviously, the

stone construction in Egypt. I felt very close to, and I think it may have been this introduction that my grandfather gave me at such an early age.

ROBERT BROWN: What was his name?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, his name was Craver. And he was a colorful little man and went through two or three fortunes with no trouble whatever. [00:02:00] You never thought of him as being flamboyant, but somehow he could do this without any stress or strain [laughs] either way. When he was poor, it didn't seem to matter, and when he had a lot of money it didn't seem to matter either.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you close to him as a child?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I would say so. I spent quite a lot of time with my grandparents. Because I went into Pratt to go to school. They were teaching—I went to a German school first, before I ever went to an English one, but—

ROBERT BROWN: Really? You mean that was a school for German-speaking people—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: Was your family partly German speaking—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: [Laughs.] No.

ROBERT BROWN: —or it just happened?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No. My father was in the lumber business in this small community, and I would take the train and go in and stay with my grandparents. And strangely enough my grandparents were very close. Grandfather Craver fought on the South side for the Civil War, during the Civil War, and my grandfather Phillips was a Northern soldier, and they exchanged experiences, and three Phillipses married three Cravers, so the war didn't seem to make any difference to those two men. I got to know both of them quite well.

ROBERT BROWN: So, exhibit to your grandfather Craver, an interest in what he was doing? Did he encourage you to come around? [00:04:06]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, he always liked to have me, so evidently, he thought I was interested; otherwise, I would have been shooed away [laughs] like all the other youngsters.

ROBERT BROWN: The stone in the buildings apparently impressed you.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, yes, particularly the stone, I think.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you around when they were designing at all? Did you ever—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, yes, of course. I remember his drafting tables—which were enormous, it seemed to me, but maybe it was just because it was a small office. Then, down the block, I had an uncle who was a doctor, and he had an awful lot of interesting equipment, because he had gone to Vienna to study surgery, so he did a bit of surgery. And I was always fascinated by the tools he used—and you can imagine how simple they must have been compared to what's in any doctor's office today.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you think you showed an aptitude for using tools? Not necessarily his, but [laughs] other tools, from an early age?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, yes, if they weren't mechanical.

ROBERT BROWN: If they *weren't* mechanical. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, although a few years ago, I would have liked very much to have had a chainsaw. [Laughs.] That's when we lived in the woods.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, well that's another—[laughs]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: [Laughs.] But—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, when you—after college, you mentioned that you taught for about a year or so around—near Pratt I think, in Copeland, Kansas, or something like that?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT BROWN: And then—this was in the early '30s—you went back East, summer, for schooling? [00:06:10]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, you're probably talking about my summer at Columbia University.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you go to study with someone in particular? And for what purpose?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I just went to get enough credits to teach one more year. And it was at the end of that year that I was invited in to Wichita, to the school of the Wichita Art Association.

ROBERT BROWN: What did you go to study at Columbia?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, one thing was—the thing I remember most was the teaching of geography. And my teacher's name is lost to me at the moment, but he described geography as man's reaction to earth controls, and if you knew that, you were in. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: A man's reaction—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: But also, he had us do a project to prove this. So I used the ant, I remember, and demonstrated an experiment, and I got a very good grade on that. Then, also about that time you know, Dewey was very important, and we kept running into Dewey, then and later. He used to come to the Greenwich House when I was there in later days. [00:08:14] He was a very interesting man. And one of the most exciting evenings, I remember, was Eleanor Roosevelt and Dewey, and they got into a real argument over the environment and the school situation in the country, as well as New York City. And it was a very lively experience. But great people were always parading through that particular dining room—

ROBERT BROWN: Greenwich House, was that affiliated with the Teachers College at Columbia?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No.

ROBERT BROWN: No. It simply was a residence?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right, right. But that's where you would meet the Italians—Italy—the Italian area was just below Greenwich House, and it helped the newly arrived Italians to learn English—and all kinds of food programs and summer camp programs.

ROBERT BROWN: But this was about your first encounter with people like, that wasn't it? I mean, you had—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. [00:10:04] Yes, it was very difficult. I remember being sent to interview a family, living in one room, and on the way up the stairwell, there was lettuce dripping along whether it dripped coming or going, I don't know, but it looked like maybe it had been quite old. And I guess my report was so volatile that they decided [laughs] I was not—that was not my job. We lived there with the idea that we would contribute something to the house. And finally, they worked other things out for my contribution. [They laugh.] So I didn't seem to be able to take the city and its seamiest lights.

ROBERT BROWN: You weren't meant to be a social worker.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Evidently not.

ROBERT BROWN: The curriculum at Teachers College, was that fairly challenging to you, or interesting?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I was found learning something was interesting, but I would have rather spent my time in a museum. But this was a necessity. And as I told you, I really got rather carried away by teaching these little eight-year-olds that were such a lot of fun and had such lively minds. And we would integrate art in every course no matter what, and it seemed a vital way to teach. [00:12:00] But—

ROBERT BROWN: You took some instruction in metalwork while you were there that summer, didn't you?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. Wilson Weir was a remarkable goldsmith. He had had some training in Paris, but what other training, I don't know. But his carving—he carved metal as well as built it up, and I think he probably did the most remarkable pieces of jewelry by carving with a graver. Sometimes he used a little electrical wheel, but for the most part, he attacked the metal as a sculptor attacks stone. And I did one piece under him.

ROBERT BROWN: He took on pupils?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, no, I don't—through a friend, he accepted me. It was through a gem dealer, actually, a very remarkable woman. She knew him well.

ROBERT BROWN: And this woman, you had not—gotten to know before you came to New York? Or—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, I had gotten to know her through correspondence after I graduated from school. Because she would send out shipments of gems, and you could choose what you needed, and return them. I learned an enormous amount, because she was very generous, sending two big boxes of gem papers. And this was a very interesting way to learn about gems. [00:14:15]

ROBERT BROWN: So did you make jewelry then, during the year or two after you graduated from the university?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh yes, I was always making jewelry—in the kitchen or wherever, there was always a place. I started with 17 tools, and I have kept that first piece that I made with 17 tools. And I would hate to have to count my tools now.

ROBERT BROWN: What were you influenced by in making your jewelry, do you think? Is it pretty difficult to know?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, not for me, because the teachers, for the most part, that I had, certainly in the early days, wanted you to make what they knew how to make and what they felt comfortable in making. So whether I liked it or not, I usually had to go along with their type of design. And then, at home, as soon as I had gotten back from a class, I carried on with my own feelings. And strangely enough, maybe this stress of control, of this control, led me to do more experimental things. I have a very early bracelet, and the design is all made with a file, and the file marks are part of the design—rather like the old Indian pottery where the coil was part of the design—or maybe the only part. [00:16:16]

ROBERT BROWN: So you were doing these things without being all that conscious of what was fashionable or what was being shown?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right. I was just doing what was interesting to me.

ROBERT BROWN: What was the name of the gem dealer then?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Gwen Richards.

ROBERT BROWN: And then she suggested you contact Wilson Weir?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Wilson Weir.

ROBERT BROWN: And he was employed by Tiffany's, right?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: What was he like?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: He was a terribly nice little man. He loved to make dandelion wine. And I was not much of a wine-bibber but his wine was so beautiful. It looked like liquid gold—it was just brilliant. And he was very pleased with his winemaking, I remember. He had an ordinary little shop, beautiful tools, beautifully kept and polished. We talked mostly about the materials and the gems, and his experience with the materials and the gems at Tiffany's. And I remember asking him how he felt going into his cage in the morning and being locked in. Because that was—at that time anyway, that was the way Tiffany took care of its gems—and its gold, too, I suppose. [00:18:11]

ROBERT BROWN: And what did he say? [Laughs.]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, he said you could always call for rest, but it was comfortable and it was quiet and peaceful. And the feeling of aloneness helped him concentrate; it didn't bother him. I'm afraid it would have bothered me.

ROBERT BROWN: How would you characterize the style with which he—in which he worked, or the pieces he created? Very traditional or—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, he was doing the romantic type of thing with leaves and flowers and buds. And the leaves had little grooves. He was fascinated by the catbrier, which is a pest here in New England. It has a heart-shaped leaf, and it's a vine that has many curls in its main stem, as well as all the lateral growth. It's really quite beautiful, but it grows into a solid mass and becomes a real bad thing.

ROBERT BROWN: It has thorns too.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: That's right, it does have thorns.

ROBERT BROWN: But he liked to work on that form, the sinuous, attenuating form?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right. Grapes—also, grape leaves and grapes. And my carved ring had grape leaves on it. I can't remember if it had grapes, but it [laughs] probably did.

ROBERT BROWN: Was carving of metal a pretty unusual technique? [00:20:02]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, it was. And I never saw it in any of the Tiffany pieces in the showcases, so I think he did this for his own pleasure. Because it's laborious.

ROBERT BROWN: You found—you were quite compatible as a student—I mean even though he worked in romantic forms?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I was just eager to learn anything about metal, so we never had any trouble.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you find that he was much more adept than the teachers you'd had at the University of Kansas?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh! Oh, this man was a real pro. I guess I could say he was the first real pro I had met. And, you know, it was just wonderful for me. But I was very lucky in finding professional people and studying in little bits here and there when I was in New York for one reason or another.

ROBERT BROWN: But this summer at Teachers College and studying with Wilson Weir was about your first there, was it, in New York?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I had gone at the end of my college graduation, but that was about the time of the Wall Street crash, and it was a very, a very sad city, and there were few opportunities, and there was simply no place for a girl to study metalwork. [00:22:20] I even [laughs] went to a boys' industrial school that someone said had a very good teacher. And he said, "Well, the only trouble is, you're not a boy. I simply cannot take you." And by this time I had tried so hard to find someplace to study that I was angered by it. And it was all I could do to be polite when I left him, because I felt if someone wanted to learn something, they should be able to.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, after the summer at Teachers College, then you went—did you have a job to return to in Kansas?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, I didn't. I went back home and set up my own little bench and work area. And it was then that—I only had about two months of that until I was asked to teach in the public school, so I didn't do very much of my own work. The public school was very absorbing—I had to learn faster than the third graders. [Laughs.] [00:24:04]

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, this was the year you taught the third grade.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: So you stuck with that for what, about a year or so?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well yes, I finished that whole year, and then it was the next summer I went to Columbia University so I could teach another year. And then I was called out of that by the Wichita Art Association.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you know anything about them, the Wichita Art Association?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, no, they were a very—they were just classes, let us say, and not very well organized. But in 1935, they decided to have summer classes. They got busy and organized the school and our classes, and even had a little brochure. And from that the Wichita Art Association school began to be more important, and then it moved into the new art museum. And it was running the art museum, as well as having classes. So that began to put that school—and the museum too—on the map, as it were.

ROBERT BROWN: What were you—were you asked to teach? Just a general series of art courses?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, well, I was to establish a silversmithing department. [Laughs.] And then I was also to teach the children's department. But I also taught bookbinding. But that was at the request of some people that found out I could bind books—and these were older people who were, most of them, book collectors, and they really wanted to know how books were bound. [00:26:16] It was more out of curiosity than their developing—I can't remember one that ever bound any books to amount to anything.

ROBERT BROWN: Did that bother you, that you were mainly teaching people with only a casual interest?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, they were deeply interested. They were good students. The fact that—it was a little difficult to teach in adult school, because obviously, adults are not going to stop doing what they're doing to take up the craft you're interested in. But somehow, they were such good students that it didn't bother you. They weren't—you never had to take the ordinary student, because the ordinary student wouldn't think of coming anyway.

ROBERT BROWN: So they were highly committed—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —to the extent they could, with the time permitted?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: When young students came, they were sent over from the high school. One of my former teachers at the university was teaching at Wichita High School North, and she would send students that she thought had special interests, and they would come to my night classes. And that was fun, too, to have a youthful student that would perhaps do more with it. [00:28:09]

ROBERT BROWN: Could you hold out a hope of a profession for these people?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, no. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Because you hardly had one yourself.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I was hanging on rather—well, I didn't dislike teaching at all—luckily. But you just can't imagine—and I found it difficult at the conference in Washington at the Renwick to—

ROBERT BROWN: Last year.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —explain to people that there was no place to exhibit, there was just nothing going on in the way of artists using materials. The weavers, at least they kept their techniques by going into homes. There were many weavers in the country in the '30s, but their grandmother taught them to weave, or—it was a home industry. The potters had kept alive—I think principally because of Ms. Olmsted in Syracuse—she had an exhibition every year or every other year and at least while they were doing rather traditional thins, there wasn't a place to exhibit.

ROBERT BROWN: But for the metalworkers, nothing?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, there weren't any metalworkers, [laughs] so—and there were no books. [00:30:07] There was one book written by Maryon, who was a really great craftsman.

ROBERT BROWN: Maryon?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: M-A-R-Y-O-N, Herbert Maryon. But his book was a typical dry book. It seemed that the British always have to begin in the beginning, and there are times when [laughs] you need to know how to do something without beginning in the early 16th century. But—there were no books written in this country. A woman wrote a book, a very small book, and not long ago in a second-hand store I was able to get a copy of it—because it's the first book I ever heard of being written by an American. I think her name was Hewlitt [ph]. I've forgotten her first name.

ROBERT BROWN: And I think there was something that the Rhode Island School of Design put out in the early '20s on jewelry-making.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, was that—

ROBERT BROWN: I think it was mentioned at the metalworking conference last year.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: It was written by a man named Rose?

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, that is true. That is true. And Rose was an English—I believe an English-trained craftsman. As I think of his book—why I ignored that—[00:32:12]

ROBERT BROWN: But books in general wouldn't have been too important for your pupils, would they? Just simply to help you?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, they would have helped me.

ROBERT BROWN: Did the Art Association provide you with pretty good equipment or funds to get it?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I think maybe we went through that last time, of this wonderful experience of my going to the junkyard with one of the board of directors.

ROBERT BROWN: You may have mentioned that. To get scraps?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: To get what we call stakes, pieces of metal that we could shape and adapt and put into vices to hammer against.

ROBERT BROWN: So you made your own, in effect?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes. Goodness, yes. I think I was given $90. I'm not sure I got all of $90. When—probably I got about $85, and they were—and then I was told, "Well, we really don't have that other five dollars to give you," or something interesting like that. [They laugh.] But the board of directors were always very helpful and friendly, and if they had a friend who knew how to make something, they themselves would hire them to make a piece of equipment. Or I remember setting up the soldering pit, and this had to be a unit that would take a strong flame, because we were making eight-inch copper bowls, and they had to be gotten red hot, so we had to have plenty of pumice in the container. [00:34:17] And I've forgotten what this container was made of, but it looked like it had been made out of an outsized tub, but somebody had cut it and bent the edge over so we wouldn't be cut as we were working over this, and put it on an iron pedestal with a base, and it turned like a lazy Susan, so you could turn it—which was the design I had given this man. But I thought if it didn't work out that way, I wasn't going to be too disappointed. We had it in—the auditorium was divided into two sections, and I got half and the painting instructor got the other half, so I had plenty of room for my fire equipment.

ROBERT BROWN: You mainly worked with copper, not very much with silver, in the beginning?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: My students all worked with copper. And it was a very difficult project—I wonder how I ever got them to do it. But they learned so much that they became very good customers—they realized how difficult things were. And if someone excelled, they were almost in business—the other students would buy from them. [00:36:05] And one dear little lady was a seamstress. She had retired. She came to me and asked if it would be all right if she enrolled. All she wanted to do was to make pewter porringers. And I said, "Yes, if you're sure you won't get bored making the same thing over and over. You can vary the shape, of course, and the design." And she said, "No, I won't." And she was very delicate and she really looked like a little picture from about 1880—a fashion magazine. But she worked away with her pewter, she set up a little shop at home and worked at home, and brought up things for criticism and did some work in the classroom. And finally, at the very end, she wrote me a very beautiful note, and she said, "I have to tell you that my sisters all had many children, and they all need porridge bowls, and this was my way of taking care of my Christmas gifts."

ROBERT BROWN: Would those porringers have been done according to a colonial design? Were people aware of those, or were they simply bowls?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, no. They were the typical porringer, with a single handle and a thick handle, and a base, and usually a dome bottom. [00:38:02] They were quite traditional. She could vary the pattern, the shape of the handle, and they cut out the pattern.

ROBERT BROWN: But were people in general aware of the colonial styles or did you show them things? Were things being—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well we didn't have any—the museum didn't have anything colonial. [Laughs.] I think they were more aware of the industrial styles.

ROBERT BROWN: So colonial designs might have been seen illustrated here and there, but by and large, people were more aware of machine-produced things?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: They weren't going to try to duplicate them, though, were they?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well they would have liked to, but for the most part, it was very simple.

ROBERT BROWN: Were they going to go on with a career, some of the younger people?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, the ones who were sent from the high school were considering going to art schools or they had some talent or they wouldn't have been there. But there weren't many of those. And most of

these were ladies that enjoyed coming over and making things for their home.

ROBERT BROWN: You had exhibits of the student work now and then, didn't you?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Would they be held at the museum?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And how did they go over?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: [Laughs.] Very big. Because the director, the director of the museum, he was also the painter—we wore many hats at that time. [00:40:05] The president of the board was Maude Schollenberger, a decorator.

ROBERT BROWN: Schellenberger?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Schollenberger. A powerful woman with a powerful drive and a powerful personality. When she decided to put something over, whether it was a fundraising drive—and she raised the money for the museum—whatever she did, she did with style. So when there was an exhibition or she established a ladies' association, it was always done around a luncheon—and we'd usually have a talk in the morning, and then they had their luncheon. And I even had a group of those ladies for an afternoon in class one day a week for about two or three months out of the year. And they were not as interested as the general student that I had, also an adult student.

ROBERT BROWN: Who would design the exhibitions?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, that was extremely simple, because these things were not considered valuable, so they were put out on tables. And Mr. Dickerson, the director and painter—

ROBERT BROWN: Dickerson.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. [00:42:00]

ROBERT BROWN: What's his first name?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: William.

ROBERT BROWN: William Dickerson.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: He had to take charge of that because he was the director of the museum. He hung, incidentally, all the exhibitions. And if there was anything in the decorative arts field, of course, I did it.

ROBERT BROWN: Was he acquiring things for the museum? Was the museum—what sort of collection did it have?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: It supposedly had people—and there again, Mrs. Schollenberger, she knew of a John Steuart Curry that the museum should have. She would call up a few friends and ask them to donate money and buy it. Also, the Murdock collection had been building up. Mrs. Murdock, the wife of the newspaper owner, when she died, left money for paintings to be bought as soon as there was a museum. So—

ROBERT BROWN: So they were mainly buying contemporary work?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Fairly advanced or more like Curry's work, regional?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, they had Childe Hassam, they had—they stayed, for the most part, on this continent. Although they would have liked very much to have gotten a few French Impressionists, but there simply wasn't money for that.

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MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —the museum was located away from the city, which many people objected to. But it was a very beautiful area—it was on the bend of the river, and it was set back in about—oh, I would think they owned about six or eight acres, and then there was a space that was parkland behind it. The river had a park edge too, and the most beautiful trees growing along his river of any in Wichita. And in spring, the wild

dogwood—redbud, I mean—bloomed all along this river. It was very beautiful. So I think Mrs. Schollenberger, I'm sure, picked the spot. And [laughs] the architect designed it with a rather adobe—or Indian-like influence—it was not adobe—and it had a grand stairwell going up to the second-floor galleries. He built just the first unit. It was then to have, as things developed, two wings—and it has developed now—it's a much larger museum with many, many more galleries. [00:02:03]

ROBERT BROWN: Well you were, at least at one point, an assistant director of the museum. As you said earlier, you each wore many hats.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, I'm not sure. I was always trying to get a decorative arts exhibition started, and you could only do that if Mrs. Schollenberger became interested, because she was the fundraiser and we were too busy.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you get along well with her?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No one got along well with her, but—because she had to have her way. And it was fine with me, as long as it didn't involve my teaching or my field. And we rather set a truce on who made what decisions. But she—no matter whether you liked her or you didn't like her, you had to admit she was a powerful, positive person, and she believed that art would [laughs] absolutely change all of Kansas, all of the United States, and eventually, all of the world. So. [Laughs.] And she was a woman of good taste. She owned some good paintings of her own and helped other people buy good paintings. And I think the Naftzger collection, which is the print collection—very unpopular at that time to be collecting prints, but they got interested in etchings, lithographs, and I believe their complete collection was turned over to the museum finally. [00:04:29]

ROBERT BROWN: What was their name?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Natsger, N-A-T-S-G-E-R. [*sic*]

ROBERT BROWN: And they were a family in Wichita which—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —collected prints? Did you see the museum have any influence in its area, if not Kansas?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes. The schoolchildren—the schools took advantage of this museum. And there were enough things in it that meant something to the children. There was John Noble's painting of the white buffalo, and the prairie was still close enough to them that they would understand this picture. And they came in groves. It was my job to interpret these works. I remember John Steuart Curry's *Corn*, which they still own. And many, many—the Childe Hassam was a painting of Paris, so you had to take them to Paris, on that tour. [00:06:05] [Laughs]

ROBERT BROWN: [Laughs] So it—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: But children ask very interesting questions. And it was never a problem to take the children through—even though there were times when—they were always better behaved when they are now, and they were very quiet, but if you invited them to ask questions they would. But it was a very interesting experience.

ROBERT BROWN: Did adults come in any numbers?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes. There was a regular Monday group. And this would be a group of at least a hundred people, which I thought was remarkable.

ROBERT BROWN: This was during the day or the evening?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: During the day. Only—the evenings were just—well, every now and then we had an evening lecture with an opening, but not often.

ROBERT BROWN: But this hundred or so people were sort of loyalists who came repeatedly?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, they were sort of the Art Association ladies' group.

ROBERT BROWN: But you didn't reach out into the broader community of workmen and farmers and—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No.

ROBERT BROWN: —shopkeepers?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No. Just schools.

ROBERT BROWN: In those days was—or in Kansas then, was the art museum considered kind of what was later termed elitist? Or how would you think it was received generally by the population?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, the city fathers paid the bill—all the maintenance bills on the building, so that would indicate the city fathers approved of it to that extent. I would say it's like everything else—those that were interested got themselves there and those that weren't didn't think about it.

ROBERT BROWN: During those years you went for a study—one summer you went to Detroit to study with an English silversmith.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: Arthur Nevill Kirk. How did that come about?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, Mr. Kirk was brought over by Cranbrook, and then his design was found too traditional, so after I don't know how many years at Cranbrook—I'm guessing, but I would say maybe two—he was given a building, a Ford Motor building that was empty, and he could arrange his own classes. And I guess I was the first to write and ask to be in his class. When I got to Detroit—he accepted me, and the dates were set and so forth ahead of time, and probably in January—I don't remember—but I arrived on the appointed date, and there wasn't any Mr. Kirk. And the janitor said, "Well, I don't know anything about this." [00:10:12] So I couldn't believe that it—something had happened and I had not been alerted, but he said, "I'll call Mr. Kirk." So Mr. Kirk was called, and I went on the phone, and he said, "Well, I didn't remember you were coming." And I said, "Well, I'm very much here, and I'm very much ready to go." I was determined to study with this man after he said I could. So he came in. He lived in a suburb—I don't know, it took him an hour or so to get there—and I was his only student that summer. It was really very exciting. And he was a charming Englishman, very well trained. He was from the London School of Art. He knew about enameling. And I did my first enameling and hollowware that turned out on a piece of hollowware later. But that summer, I made a silver pitcher. He warned me about doing too much hammering in one day, because he said you may bruise your left hand—your left hand takes the blow, because that's what's holding the silver. But I was having such a good time, I didn't pay enough attention. About midnight, I woke up with a hand that was terribly swollen and about—almost black, and with terrible pain in it. So I had to learn everything the hard way, it seemed. But I finished my teapot in that summer session. [00:12:22]

ROBERT BROWN: And was he very patient with you?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, he was very good. He worked a little bit on his own things, in this enormous, big building. We were like a couple of little ants over in one corner.

ROBERT BROWN: His own work, what sort of style was it?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, it was very traditional. He did a lot of church work, and while it may have looked modern at the time because he left off—it was more architectural. And later, Wichita raised some money and bought a processional cross of his—which I still have.

ROBERT BROWN: But he was the master of all the techniques?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh yes, he was a very, very good craftsman.

ROBERT BROWN: How would you compare him with Wilson Weir?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, Wilson was primarily a jeweler.

ROBERT BROWN: Very small, detailed work—is that the difference?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, he worked mostly in gold and he used—and he was a jeweler. But Kirk did hollowware, candlesticks—and I don't remember ever seeing any flatware that Mr. Kirk made, and I doubt if he ever made flatware, because he had the most interesting hands. From the large knuckle, his fingers tapered until the tips of his fingers were very, very small. But because of that, he could do very fine work when he needed to. And these fingers also were extremely sensitive. [00:14:26] Now, when you're talking about thousandths of an inch, he could often gauge a thousandth of an inch with his fingers—which is a very remarkable feat.

ROBERT BROWN: And these are skills that he wouldn't have needed doing flatware?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, no. He didn't need them. We all had gauges for measuring, but—

ROBERT BROWN: But hollowware is more of a challenge, is it, in general?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, yes, because it's very time-consuming, because it's so large and involves—I couldn't say more stakes and more tools, but it certainly involves a lot of patient moving of the metal to build a hollow form.

ROBERT BROWN: After that summer, you were to go back to Wichita, of course, right?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes. I was still teaching.

ROBERT BROWN: What was the effect of his teaching upon your teaching? Any that you can remember? [00:16:06]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I knew how to raise a bowl much faster and much better. [Laughs.] And I did quite a lot of hollowware after that. It certainly told me that I could do hollowware.

ROBERT BROWN: So you got confidence in that area that you perhaps hadn't had before?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right, right.

ROBERT BROWN: In terms of style or form, was he an influence on you?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No. No one ever criticized my designs. I guess I went with my design already done, or in my head. When I studied with Baron Fleming in Sweden, we would have discussions about my designs. I remember the number of feet and all of this was discussed. And I guess he did more toward criticizing a design before I started than anyone I ever had. But mostly, my design grew up like Topsy [ph], from the inside out.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: We're looking at a pot and a colored bowl or—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Box.

ROBERT BROWN: —box, done that summer or influenced by that summer of 1936 study with Arthur Nevill Kirk. [00:18:03] The pieces don't look entirely traditional; they look somewhat streamlined. And yet I can see, particularly the knob or handle on the coffeepot or teapot—it looks almost like a classical scroll shape.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I would say this is modern, as—and there's very little of any tradition in that teapot. For one thing, it's a straight black handle—there's a Gaboon ebony handle—and a protector handle on the lid. The knob on the lid was a silver knob, but I isolated it with the Gaboon ebony so it wouldn't get hot, and you could open the teapot without being burned.

ROBERT BROWN: So there is very practical elements in this?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. And as you see, it's very simple. The form is simple, and it's a just slightly domed top with a decorative hinge, which is part of the decoration, and the knob flows out of the hinge. So it was all sort of an integrated design. It's very difficult for me to talk about my own design, it always has been.

ROBERT BROWN: But that knob on the lid of the teapot has sort of an organic quality to it. It grows out of the hinge and it curves up very gracefully, and the ebony almost embraces the rounded silver forms of the hinge. [00:20:05]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. And there's a little pin that goes right straight through, and underneath it has a nice form, where the pin opens out, and there's a design on the underneath side of the lid, so when you open the lid, you know, it's not just a cotter pin opened, but it's—

ROBERT BROWN: It's a decorative element itself.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: The box?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, the box I did when I was in Sweden, and I only did the enamel when I was studying with Arthur Nevill Kirk. He used a lot of enamel in his religious work—processional crosses, all hand-enameled appointments.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you find enameling to be very compatible?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I did miss—I was moving from jewelry to hollowware, and in jewelry, you always have color, and I was missing color very much, so I think I did it with the idea of introducing color into hollowware. That's not new, you know. [Laughs.] That was done 7,000 years ago.

ROBERT BROWN: Was the enameling technique—were you—did you become quickly adept at it? Or did you find it—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: It was not difficult for me at all, no. No problem.

ROBERT BROWN: And this enameling was what, laid in a form of metal?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. It has bezel, we call it. And you just, you dropped it into the bezel, and then you turned the bezel over on the enamel. [00:22:06] Of course that's enamel on a silver base.

ROBERT BROWN: This whole group of silver here includes that box—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: This shows—

ROBERT BROWN: This cup.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: The cup and the porringer shows that I had no idea of staying with any traditional designs. As you can see, this—I really think my work might be described as architectural, if you—is about the only way to do it because as you see, the handle comes up, and—

ROBERT BROWN: From the bottom, yes.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —something else goes through it.

ROBERT BROWN: There's a structure to it.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: A structural quality.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: It's rather interlocked together, in the way stones or wood is put together.

ROBERT BROWN: And the little stubby handles, two handles on the porringer, have a little shield between where I guess the thumb would stop.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right. It just makes it easy to pick up, and it's also a decorative element.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, yes. The flatware, two spoons.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, that's my only flatware. I was wise enough to know when to stop.

ROBERT BROWN: What do you mean?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: [Laughs.] Well, I consider flatware very slow, even slower than hollowware, and also every difficult. You have to develop powerful muscles, and not only do you have to know how to use a hammer against a piece of steel—that will help you—if you do it correctly, the right way to hammer, it will bounce. [00:24:10] You strike one blow, and it will bounce for seven blows. Well, I used all those seven. [Laughs.] And this was a commission that helped me go to Europe to study. It's a salad set, and it was made by one of my dear friends who was one of my students, and her husband owned most of the drugstores in Wichita—Tilson [ph]—Tilton [ph].

ROBERT BROWN: So those pieces, then, are about your last trunk [ph] into flatware.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, no. Oh, no.

ROBERT BROWN: But you found that it's been something that is too strenuous to do?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, flatware. Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Flatware.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes. I think I have two or three other small ladles which I did for my own use. But—

ROBERT BROWN: In doing—the design of the spoons for the salad set, did you think out the functional requirements very carefully?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you make drawings beforehand?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —you always have to, whether you're designing jewelry or hollowware, have function as a part of your thinking.

ROBERT BROWN: But in the case of flatware, how you hold it, how it fits the hand, the balance—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: The balance is very important; otherwise they'll fall in or out of the salad bowl. [They laugh.] Also, this design on the top goes down, and so the handle is off of the table and—making it very easy to pick up.

ROBERT BROWN: So it's like a strap on the top of the handle, and then it comes around to the end of the handle —

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT BROWN: —and projects downward a little bit. [00:26:11]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I actually did this clip at the same time, a piece of jewelry, and I did my own stonecutting. I was bored with just faceted stone, so that one has some planes on the back of the stone. But the top is smooth—no facets on top—and it looks like a mist rising up in it.

ROBERT BROWN: What is the stone?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: And actually, I was told—it's quartz—and I was told by Baron Fleming that I was it was this kind of original work that interested him and allowed me to be the only student in his atelier.

ROBERT BROWN: How had you met him? Had you met him over here?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No. I had seen his work at the library, in a book on Swedish crafts, a very early publication. I decided then and there that I would like to study with Baron Fleming or I would like to go to Germany too, because Germany had beautiful things at that time. But Hitler was romping over Germany, and coming from a democracy, I couldn't tolerate that. So I thought I'd go to Sweden and find out if I could study. And I asked a friend who knows him very well if they'd ask him if they ever took students, and they did, and he doesn't was their answer—so I went anyway, with the idea of showing him my work. [00:28:21]

ROBERT BROWN: Did you send ahead anything?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, no. I would have been—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you write ahead?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, I would have been told no.

ROBERT BROWN: But you went with an acquaintance from Wichita, didn't you?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, I went with a student teacher.

ROBERT BROWN: Gladys Bate?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Bate, B-A-T-E. And—oh, she was a wonderful teacher. She taught calligraphy. And I did a book under her.

ROBERT BROWN: So you went in—it was in the summer of 1938, I believe.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right. And she went to Dalarna to study weaving and I stayed in Stockholm and worked on my metal.

ROBERT BROWN: But you went, and can you describe getting there and what it was—your first meetings—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, I can describe them. We stayed with Baron Ehrensvärd, whose husband was involved in the famous Swedish Match scandal—I believe he committed suicide. So she took paying friends, and had a beautiful apartment in Stockholm. So the day we got there, it was Midsummer, and everybody was out—

and you could read the paper at midnight—it was all very exciting. [Laughs.] And we stayed out until three or four o'clock, because it was so thrilling. And when we went to breakfast, here was a little note, and it said, "I have taken the liberty of getting tickets for the king's ceremonies at the stadium, and you will have to be ready at"—I think—"eight o'clock." And both of us had the idea of sleeping over [laughs] after our first night of Midsummer. [00:30:43] But we couldn't very well tell her no, so we dragged our bodies out and went to this stadium. And it was a very beautiful ceremony, with—I think everybody in the whole of Sweden must have been there—of course, all of the Air Force, such as it was at that time, and the navy and the army—and all took their places. And the stadium was beautiful—and the king looked pretty gorgeous himself. [Laughs.] He was King Gustav, who played tennis and was six-foot-one or two. So the royal family sat on the platform. And the speeches, needless to say, were all in Swedish, so we had to imagine what was going on, but. [Laughs.] But there was so much to look at. And it was a beautiful day—sunny—you can't call it warm, exactly, because Sweden never gets warm in my book. But it was a real experience. [00:32:09] Coming home, we walked part of the way, and there was not one commercial item in any store window—every store window had flowers and the king's picture. I guess this was his birthday celebration. But it was all very orderly, it was all very polite. All these people together, all—you never heard raised voices, you never heard a horn blown. The streets had automobiles, of course, and—but they never blew a horn. And I said one time, "Well, why is your traffic so quiet?" And they said, "Well, blowing horns never does any good. It only frightens the other person and it might cause an accident."

ROBERT BROWN: [Laughs.] How soon was it before you approached Baron Fleming?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I talked this over with Baron Ehrensvärd and I didn't tell her that he didn't take students—and in fact, I didn't tell her that I wanted to study with him, but I did want an appointment and I would like to show him some of my work. And he's a good teacher—he taught in the Royal School of Art. So he gave me an appointment for about two days hence, and that's when I said I would like to start studying the next day. [Laughs.] And he said, "Well, could we wait until Monday?" [00:34:17] That was on Friday, I think.

ROBERT BROWN: You must have charmed him or something.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, he had said afterward that it was the freshness of my approach in design that interested him. And his works were very architectural. He had studied architecture, and his things were very architectural.

ROBERT BROWN: Now here are some examples.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. [Laughs.] Oh, I remember the man who made the flowers for the top of that pot. Wonderful.

ROBERT BROWN: His work is quite elegant too, isn't it?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. He didn't get to be the silversmith to the king for no reason. It was unique—and always eloquent.

ROBERT BROWN: And his work also—those tea servers or coffee servers—they're paneled, the pieces, which is—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: And that is done not by pieces put together; that's done by just bending the metal at angles to do that.

ROBERT BROWN: But that's a fairly traditional form in European silver, that aspect of those forms?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: At this time, you mean?

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. Well, it had been in the 18th century too—late 18th century.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well—

ROBERT BROWN: But he was open to your fresh ideas. [00:36:07]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I felt very differently, though. This is really very modern. This—he belongs in the modern movement of the Scandinavian era.

ROBERT BROWN: It's, generally speaking, very simple. Why the flowers on the top, do you know?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, he liked rich ornament, but he didn't want it all over the place. He wanted it where it would—you put those fingers in those buds and flowers to open that lid, and I think he felt there was greater emphasis if you had plain areas, and then a rich decorative—one rich decorative unit.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, you went—when you went to see him that Monday, you were going to a workshop. And how was he going to fit you in? Did he discuss a plan?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, no, he just said that he would take me, but it would mean that I would be in the workshop, which was around the block from the atelier proper. In the workshop they had a telephone room that was quite a good size, so they gave me the telephone room. Had I stayed a little longer, I was going to be speaking Swedish, because they would talk over the telephone, and I could have absorbed it by just hearing it. [00:38:01] They didn't encourage you to use their language unless you used it very properly at that time, and the pronunciation had to be absolutely prefect. So I took a few lessons, but I took them from a German boy, and I found I was speaking more German than I was Swedish. And I didn't care for that at that particular moment, either.

ROBERT BROWN: Did Baron Fleming come around right away and watch what you were doing? How did you begin?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, when I arrived, he took me around and showed me the whole workshop. It had many rooms. It had a polish room, a soldering room, a couple of—the foreman was in a big room. And there were—the partitions were mostly glass, so he could see at any one time what was going on and where each project was. The polisher was an interesting man. He loved the opera, and because he could sing over the sound of the motors and not disturb anyone, he would be singing away, one opera after another. And when he appeared it was always such a shock, because he had on a little brown paper hat which he had made to keep his hair from getting full of that black pumice, but he couldn't keep anything on his face, so here he would appear, this tall man with this black—blackened face from his work, and he'd just finished off some aria that was very beautiful and he still had rather the look of the part on his face in spite of the color. [00:40:18] But Baron Fleming then had this drafting room across the hall from my workroom. I did all my work in that room, with the exception of solder.

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ROBERT BROWN: So you worked on your own, then, in your own room?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: And you were not going to take your pieces to the different rooms for the special tasks? You weren't to intrude on—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, no. I wouldn't—I was there to learn, and so I made all of my own things—and I always have. I've never been very good about having somebody making a part for me, I wanted to make it myself. Because I think—I just like that continuity somehow or other. The experiment is part of the fun of doing it. So I wouldn't have anyone—and that got to be a joke, because they were all men, and one man started to help me, and he'd already found out that I didn't mind being shown but I didn't want them to do it—just to tell me how or show me how, and then I would actually do this. So he said to this other man, "Oh, she wants to do it herself, she wants to do it herself." [They laugh.]

ROBERT BROWN: Did you discuss with Baron Fleming what you might make?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, I did. I probably have some of the sketches in my *skissblock*, as it's—

ROBERT BROWN: Your sketchbook? [They laugh.]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —called in Swedish. And I sketched the bonbon box right away. [00:02:00]

ROBERT BROWN: He had you begin by fairly extensive sketching?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, not too much. No completed drawings—sketches, yes, but—and I used to draw quite well. I never was a great draftsman, but I drew well. And then as I—the more I worked in the metal, the more I got to where I only drew in the roughest way, to establish volume and relationships and so forth. And then the finished product, the look of it, would arrive in my head, completed, so I didn't do any more sketches. And I have almost no sketches of how it was going to look. I got to that stage, but when I was studying, I had to go a little further than that.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean when you were studying with Baron Fleming?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. Because he had to know what metals to talk about and so forth. The size determines the thickness of your metal, and—

ROBERT BROWN: So he brought in some technical refinements for you? I mean, he—what would you say his

major contribution was to you at that time?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I think it was his devotion to the material, his absolute insistence upon function—if it doesn't work, it isn't beautiful was his idea. [00:04:19] So, that was not very difficult to work out because I had the same feeling about it. I think the tremendous mass of well-made, beautifully made objects in that studio made certainly a permanent and lasting impression. Everything came out with such perfection, and it had been thought through very carefully from the very beginning. He had a wonderful foreman, and the foreman knew exactly which men could do which job. And he was the one that gave out the work and checked it at intervals—especially if two people were working on a piece, he kept a very close eye. And they often worked close together. So it came as close to being the work of one man of any pieces I've ever seen. You can often distinguish when there's more than one man's work on a piece, but it was very difficult in his shop. [00:06:17]

ROBERT BROWN: Had Baron Fleming started the work each time, or would he provide detailed renderings?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: He provided a drawing, and a very complete drawing, and it was like an architect's drawing—very clear, where the measurements, dimensions were all there, so they didn't have many decisions to make.

ROBERT BROWN: Just execution?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: Did he then come around frequently and—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes. He was in his workshop daily. And if he weren't going to be there, he would tell me that he wouldn't be in the next day, so I would—if I had any problem, I would ask enough questions to keep me going for a couple of days.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you feel confident? How did you—how did things work out?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, yes, because, you know, all those workmen were so technically well trained, and they were all so very kind. [Laughs.] And I think maybe they rather enjoyed having a girl around. And they were always interested. They would make tools for me. [00:08:00]

And on the Fourth of July, I popped a lot of corn. I thought I'd better sugar it so they'd like it—I was afraid they wouldn't like just buttered popcorn, and I took it up, and I had an enormous bag, and I told the foreman about this. And he couldn't speak a word of English, and somehow—I couldn't understand any of his Swedish—but he got the idea, and he went out and went to their storeroom and he brought the most beautiful silver tray you ever saw. I was very glad it wasn't salted popcorn, because I could just see all the little salt—all the pits in it. [They laugh.] And then—and we had a party, and the baron came while we were having this passing around of the popcorn, and I shivered for a moment because I thought—well, it dawned on me that I might have at least asked if I could do this. But he laughed. He had a wonderful, hearty laugh, and he thought it was great fun—and especially when he saw them taking one little popcorn at a time, just one little piece. So he explained to them in Swedish they were to take a handful at a time. [They laugh.] But we had many funny times and much laughter. It was an easy place to be.

ROBERT BROWN: But you were just very lucky that he could fit you in, because he had never fit anybody in before.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, that's the trouble with my life, you know? [They laugh.] I feel like I've really had a guardian angel from the very beginning, because sometimes it's been one sentence that's opened up a completely new world. [00:10:16] It may have been that beneath all of that, I had a very great desire to go in this one direction. And I had many discouragements. One time I asked a man at the Metropolitan Museum, when I was trying to find a place to study, he said, "With your background, you have all the drawing you need. You have your design training. You're trained. Why don't you just go to Reed & Barton, or Gorham and get a job and design silver? That's all you have to do." And I was so disappointed I almost wept, because I thought this man—he was the curator of the education department—I thought he would know some silversmith or someone in the big city of New York that I could study with. But he thought that was a lot of nonsense—especially since I was a girl. It was a waste of my time. Needless to say, I checked that dear man off my list immediately. But then the Metropolitan opened up another avenue that was wonderful. I met Leonard Heinrich.

ROBERT BROWN: The armor.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right. And he was so marvelous. And a fifth generation anybody is fairly well trained. [00:12:03] Just to see how he kept his iron in his workshop at the Met was an experience, because all of the iron was in little cubicles, and each cubicle was dated, as well as its source—it was a fragment of another

piece of armor and it would be 15th century German or Austrian or whatever. And his shop was so well organized. He wanted to know how to work silver, and so we traded work. He taught me how to make tools, and I incidentally ran upon a scrap of iron, where he taught me how to emboss iron with sterling and keep a little height on it.

ROBERT BROWN: On the sterling?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Keep height on the sterling, but still fasten it to the iron. And this is without solder—this is with tool work.

ROBERT BROWN: But in the mainstream, you found, say, through the '30s or '40s, that many men, at least, thought, as a woman, why don't you just get a job with a company, so to speak?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes. I never was encouraged, [laughs] ever.

ROBERT BROWN: What did Baron Fleming think? Now you mention, in your little article you wrote in '38 on that summer with Fleming, that he stressed the importance and he believed in the old apprentice system, which he thought developed the finest craftsmen, but did have any inkling that in America there really wasn't such a system? [00:14:13]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes. I told him that—and this was always a wonderful argument then with us, that you didn't have to start at the age of 11. It was fine if you did, but you could be a good craftsman without that. And needless to say, I didn't bring this point up when I was being interviewed for study, but he was always pleasantly pleased with my solder work. And he checked on it very closely. And then later, when I went over in 1949 in the winter to study, he had three girl apprentices, so he had—and they weren't beginning at the age of 11, either, as errand boys—they were really—studied. I think he gleaned these people from his class—there were people that showed special talent.

ROBERT BROWN: He taught a class in design?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Because part of his training, you said, was architectural. He probably had had training in design and drawing, perhaps?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes. He was an excellent draftsman.

ROBERT BROWN: But what I meant was, did he know that in America, the apprenticeship system hadn't held together?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, yes. He was very well educated, and he knew that our companies hired, from Europe, all the people they needed, and they would have been through their apprenticeship. [00:16:21] This is the reason I always thought this country imposed on Europe by not doing its own apprentice work, but the industrialists, as a rule, hired them already trained.

ROBERT BROWN: Was your major piece that you did that summer of '38 the bonbon box?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I believe so, because the lid is all shaped—

ROBERT BROWN: It is.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: This is sunken to that point, and then this is sunken and shaped here.

ROBERT BROWN: So it's constructed of various pieces—so there's a lot of soldering in it.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, yes. And then to solder this up—now had I been working in—

ROBERT BROWN: To solder the band—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —the broad band—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: You had to learn to do—

ROBERT BROWN: —to form a cylinder.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: You had to learn to do a hidden seam, they call it. And this is where we had an

argument. Ordinarily, the odd number feet makes a more interesting design. But we put five feet on this—I think I still have the other foot, if it wasn't stolen from my studio—five feet crowded the design, so we sat and thought this out together, which was great fun. And he'd say, "Well, you know why four feet is—why we can get by with putting four feet on that box? [00:18:16] It's because your eye, at no time ever sees more than two or maybe a little of two and one in the middle, so you're not aware of the number." You know, odd numbers always being more interesting than even numbers.

ROBERT BROWN: Than even numbers?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: But that has four feet. And—

ROBERT BROWN: So you ended up with four feet?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, because it's the way it looks when you see it.

ROBERT BROWN: The way you perceive it, in terms of—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right, you can't see all four feet.

ROBERT BROWN: But that troubled you in the beginning—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I was having a hard time. Because putting another one there—because they were so deep, you see—

ROBERT BROWN: How did you come upon this design for the feet, this sort of triple sort of a tri—or a mountain shape, a chevron shape, and then it ends on each end with a curving scroll?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, it's key to the feeling of the design in the enamel.

ROBERT BROWN: Of the enamel, which you had done earlier.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: And this box—and the bezel too—the forms and the bezel are all related to those feet forms.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]—these triangular or mountain shapes, symbols.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: The feet form—and they're rather interesting, because they go way back under. They're not just little facial feet sitting on the base rim; they go under.

ROBERT BROWN: Under the bowl, under the box. [00:20:00]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: They're more under the bowl than they are on the front. But this was when it was fun to work out details like this. And he was always interested in why things worked or didn't work, and he offered to send us to the assay office. And it could go out of Sweden as made in Sweden, and assayed as been sterling with the Stockholm mark, and so forth. And I said, "No, you forget, I'm an American." [Laughs.] I wouldn't let him do it.

ROBERT BROWN: But you were able to take it away?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. And in those days—my whole summer's work—and I've got to think of the other pieces I did—plus, the pieces I had took over to show him that I had done. I spent the night on a station platform with the trains going through—obviously not every three minutes, but trains going through—I was visiting a friend. And the suitcase was heavy, and she suggested that we just leave it there and come get it in the morning; her brother would help her—help us. And I said, "But I have all my life's work in that suitcase." And she said, "Oh, well, there's nothing to worry about." And so, I must say, I had to not be uneasy, because I was going to her house for dinner, and I had to be alert with their English, as well as some of their Swedish, and I had to keep my mind on it. [Laughs.] [00:22:24] And I had a good night's sleep, and the next day we went down, and there sat the suitcase, sitting right out in the open—it wasn't even up against the station shed. It was under a roof. But they had no more fear of anyone taking that than anything. And I was so overcome by this quality of life in Sweden that I mentioned it one time to the baron, and he said, "Well I have to tell you, we have one chink in our armor: every now and then, if you put a package on top of the mailbox to go in the mail, it may disappear. But," he says, "as far as I know, that's the only thing that's ever disappeared." And they would drive their millions of bicycles and ride their bicycles up to the stations. And here would be—especially, if they were going up to listen to the nightingale. There would be so many bicycles. They'd all pile on the train and go sit in the woods all night and listen to the nightingale, come back the next morning, and the bicycles all looked alike to me, but everybody found their own bicycle. And there was never any locks or anything on the bicycles.

ROBERT BROWN: This was a rather overwhelming summer for you, wasn't it? [00:24:07]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, in many ways. Yes, in many ways.

ROBERT BROWN: You returned to your teaching job?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: To my classes, right.

ROBERT BROWN: But you were spending more time now on doing commissions? Were you getting quite a few?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, there never was any more time, because there was—I wore too many hats. But I just was young and I could work until two o'clock in the morning and still do perfect work. So—

ROBERT BROWN: And you began sending—that fall, or the next year, you sent things to exhibitions?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I found out about this exhibition—I don't know how—in Philadelphia, at the Art Alliance, and I sent the bonbon box, and I had no idea whether it would get in the exhibition. Because you must remember how remote the Middle West was, with no museums and no art schools. There was an art school in Kansas City, and of course in our department in the universities, in schools, but that was not very productive, and it was a lean world. So when I heard about this, I didn't know whether Philadelphia had a lot silversmiths that were trained in the old school, and maybe that's what the Alliance would accept, and my work would not be accepted because it was modern. [00:26:22] And so I was very much surprised to be awakened at seven o'clock in the morning by the telephone operator, reading a telegram that I had won the first award in silver. I think the archives owns that telegram.

ROBERT BROWN: So it was an utter surprise.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, and my boss, Mrs. Schollenberger, was so overcome and so pleased that she came rushing over the class that morning with a complete breakfast set of dishes. You see—

ROBERT BROWN: For you?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. She was pleased too.

ROBERT BROWN: Because that was—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: She was a remarkable woman.

ROBERT BROWN: —evidence that Wichita had reached the big time and done very well.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: [Laughs.] Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Was there—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I had to go on to New York, though, in order to get—to convince her that my idea was good enough to follow through on. And that's when she started the decorative art—annual decorative art exhibitions, which included anyone in the U.S.

ROBERT BROWN: But this was after that war, the Second World War—'46?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: You convinced her—by your experiences?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, all the time I was there, you know, I was trying to get her to—to get decorative art shows from Europe or from big museums or anything. [00:28:13]

ROBERT BROWN: But it took—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Then, finally, when she did have it, it was an open, competitive exhibition for U.S. citizens.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you ever see the photographs or anything of the range of things that were shown in Philadelphia, to see what you were competing with?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I never did, no. They—there was probably no place to publish much.

[Audio Break.]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I draw back to Sweden for a moment.

[Audio Break.]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I think the most impressive thing in Stockholm, besides my own studio work, was their decorative art museum. And that's a long time ago, that they had it so arranged that you could see some of their pieces on exhibition. And then right below that particular item or culture, there would be very thin shelves—I'm talking mostly of jewelry at the moment—and the very thin shelves, there would be 20 of them with glass tops. You could study additional pieces. I think this country has only come to that in the last few years. And after all, this was in 1938—that this had been installed some time before. It was a real visual experience to go there, but if you were a student, it was a real studied place. [00:30:00]

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

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, yes. My time was very short, I always crowded so much into time, because I knew I couldn't stay very long. But all the time I had, I was either going to the museum or an outdoor museum or—there was a gallery there that was worth a great deal of study, and proved the complete wisdom of a little country when it was facing an industrial revolution, because it was proud of its craftsmen. And this is very difficult to explain—and somehow [laughs] I've never gotten down to writing about it. But in the exhibition of every item they had—whether it was a clock or a teapot or a piece of pottery—they would show you a manufactured pot. They would give you how long it took to manufacture this pot, the time, the price, and the value of it. If this teapot was only made—this was the only one in existence, they would mention this.

ROBERT BROWN: This was in a gallery—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —a commercial gallery?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, no. It was partly, anyway, if not completely supported by the government. And you could go through—or the people could go through and decide, if they couldn't afford the unique piece made by hand, they would be told that, here is one made by machinery; it is a good design, but it only costs so-and-so—it didn't say "but"—it said, its price is so-and-so. So you knew exactly what you were buying and what you were losing—[laughs] what you were choosing. And this was in 1938, too, when our small silver shops in this country were gradually being completely squeezed out by the manufacturing companies, with all their publicity. And—

ROBERT BROWN: Whereas in Sweden the two seemed to have not fought each other?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right, they were just two different products. It protected the craftsmen particularly, because this was—their manufactured material was not the great fad—it didn't develop into the great fad that it did here.

ROBERT BROWN: Was there in Sweden quite a public then, for the handmade?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. People ordered things. And of course, where I was, the king ordered everything. [Laughs.] But he needed and wanted gifts and so forth. So I saw all the taste of the king around me all the time, which was very interesting.

ROBERT BROWN: And yet, you could go to the gallery and see what was provided or available for the general public?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: That's right.

ROBERT BROWN: Had that government gallery been there quite a while? Did you learn whether this went back quite a while?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I don't know the age of that, but it must have been, because if someone was wise enough to see what would happen to the craftspeople when the manufacturers were in full flower, they must have started before 1938. [00:34:13] There was a very—this gallery was a very popular gallery and was used a lot—I mean, it had always visitors in it. So—

ROBERT BROWN: Was this metalworking only or was it all—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No.

ROBERT BROWN: —decorative art?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: It had weaving. It had clocks, I remember. Pottery. Woodworking—all kinds of furniture. And then you know, the Scandinavian designers was about the only help the Americans had. Beginning about this time, a group of architects—whether they banded together or they were only simpatico I don't know, but they—Swedish design meant that it was handmade. And while our Mathsson table over there is not completely handmade—or its construction is reduced to ways of speeding up the production, which was never done in any studio I ever saw—any studio was a single—maybe one man made the form and another person would decorate it, but not very often. [00:36:12] So then the Scandinavian—maybe if they didn't know what you meant by "handmade," they'd say, "Oh, was it Danish or Scandinavian?" So it played—and I think this was—

ROBERT BROWN: This was in this country now?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, that was in this country. And I was sorry this never came up.

ROBERT BROWN: This was a shop in New York, or—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, this was very general—lots of shops and lots of places. Of course, Georg Jensen was the beginner of that, and then came Nielsen—these are silver people. And then came the furniture people—because they have to be architects and wanted to make furniture, so they were very well trained. And the architects had a powerful force in this country. And I was surprised that the influence of Scandinavians was not mentioned at our conference.

ROBERT BROWN: In 1982?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: Which began earlier than—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —than they said. I think there was some mention of Jensen. And Anderson talked about it at that time.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. But that was some powerful help. Because there was galleries that would carry their works. And—

ROBERT BROWN: The American architectural profession helped promote this? Or—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No. No, I—well, maybe they did, inasmuch as good architects were always looking for good furniture for their—

ROBERT BROWN: But this was a thread that ran through these major cities—[00:38:07]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes. You could buy Scandinavian things in Dallas, you could buy Scandinavian things in Kansas City. And it was first fresh modern design, really new to this country. Because even the manufacturers were doing traditional patterns—which many of them still are.

ROBERT BROWN: Sure they are. At this point, what about what's now the so-called art deco, '20s and into the early '30s—do you recall that being seen very much? Or was that simply—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: You mean was there a lot of American art?

ROBERT BROWN: —a deluxe kind of thing with a very limited market, it wasn't widely—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I haven't run a really good survey of this.

ROBERT BROWN: But your recollections of these?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: There weren't many art deco people. There are a few very good ones, but I think the Europeans were the leaders in art deco, and also they did the best art deco.

ROBERT BROWN: And you suppose, then, much that was available here was simply imported—French, particularly?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I remember, there was a beautiful box at the modern museum in New York, a silver box, and I'm pretty sure that was not American. I think there was more art deco jewelry. I remember hearing from a museum, saying that he had a piece they thought was my work, and it was art deco. And I was quite shocked by this. And so I've thought about it. I have no photograph of it. As I've thought about it, I thought

maybe it was a little art deco. [00:40:08]

ROBERT BROWN: But these are influences that would have filtered through various channels?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. And you're not being aware of it—you know, it was never the thing to do in this country to be inspired by someone else's design. You had to stand on your own feet. And one time, I went into a real black hole over—when I finished a piece and I liked it very much, but I kept being haunted that it was similar to something I'd seen. And I wasn't haunted by this until I put it all together. And that began to worry me. I thought, Well, I'll just start over if I can only locate—but I still was so uncertain that I wanted to locate this source if I was influenced that much. Luckily, I had to go through some old sketchbooks that they—and I found that I had actually designed that brooch about 12 years before, and I had reproduced my own design. And then I felt all right [laughs] and I delivered the jewel. It was one of the nicest things I'd made—it was about a 21-karat tourmaline, the most beautiful shade of deep pink. And I used naturally, 18-karat yellow gold. And it was for a woman with blonde hair and blue eyes. [They laugh.] It was just right. [00:42:01]

ROBERT BROWN: Were you typical in your independence, in not wanting to—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I think that runs right straight through this country.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, for example, the summer you had with Baron Fleming, you were wary of not trying to use some of his motifs, some of his designs?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, that wasn't difficult. [Laughs.] For one thing, his craftsmen were all very skilled, and I was pretty much a beginner. But no, I liked it for what it was. The one thing that did tie my work to the Scandinavian was the architectural feeling, because I think I mentioned that if I had had been able, I would have been an architect. I loved architecture, and my things are very architectural—my early works. And—

ROBERT BROWN: No, we did discuss that, but you've never gone so far as to say you wished you had been an architect at one time.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes. I really wanted to be, but I had too much trouble with math. [They laugh.] I had thought I had better stay away from it—some big building would collapse because I couldn't figure the stress.

ROBERT BROWN: But in this country, except for those Scandinavian design shops that we—you depended, when you came back from Sweden, on occasional exhibitions, weren't there? Special fairs and the like? In the late—I'm talking about pre-World War II.

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MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —they were so few. You know, I mentioned the art alliance, which was such a surprise.

ROBERT BROWN: 1939.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, that's what we were last speaking of.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: And the World's Fair one was not very extensive, and it was '39.

ROBERT BROWN: The World's Fair in—New York World's Fair.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, San Francisco.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, San Francisco, the Golden Gate International Exposition, mm-hmm [affirmative]. And you sent several pieces there.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, I didn't have several to send, but they're not in catalogue, but I go in the show. But the international voice, of course, were the ones that made the great splash.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean the things from abroad?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, there was Grant Fleming and Nielsen, all of those.

ROBERT BROWN: I thought you'd sent a teapot, a bowl, and a mug.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I did. I did, and it's listed here. But you could see all of this is Scandinavian. All of

this is foreign. All of this is too. Stone Associates was represented there with William Spratling.

ROBERT BROWN: Were they represented by fairly traditional things?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. Stone Associates tried to change and simply its work, but Margaret De Patta was there too.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, she became later [inaudible] jewelry as well.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right. Let's see, what did she show? She showed jewelry.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, is her work fairly advanced at that time or? [00:02:02]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh yes, she was a quarter Blanchet [ph] too. Yes, she had studied at the Bauhaus. This gave her completely fresh outlook on her philosophy, and in turn her jewelry was very fresh and new and really wonderful. She's a great jeweler.

ROBERT BROWN: The exhibition, you didn't get to that show did you?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, no.

ROBERT BROWN: Did it have much impact, or because of its location was it rather limited at that time? I mean, is it at that time a Bay Area exhibition?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right, I think it just—its influence was mostly in the west because if you notice here's a [French word] and maybe a lot of people have never seen those pieces. I was fortunate. I had seen much of that.

ROBERT BROWN: You could have seen it in New York or in Europe?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: In Sweden, no, no, no they didn't have exhibitions.

ROBERT BROWN: I thought maybe there were shops in New York which—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, I don't think [French word] French, and the Scandinavians might have shown through the Scandinavian Society, which, at that time, was a very strong society.

ROBERT BROWN: During these years leading up to World War II you were still had your position at the Wichita Art Association, the art museum? [00:04:05]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: That was your steady involvement there. Then you wrote in '42, as you were looking at earlier, in *Kansas Magazine*, about the crafts in Kansas. In your article in *Kansas Magazine* you describe fellow craftsmen in Kansas and try to indicate that—you call them designer craftsman as opposed to being mere technicians, and something as you said when you reviewed Fleming's work a little earlier in another magazine, that the designer craftsman produces beauty along with usefulness. Apparently you had spotted in your own state some people.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, you know, the home weavers were weaving, I always called mittens [ph] summer and winter because that's gone on for centuries, they had good things being done technically all over this country in the northwest as well as the southwest as well as the Midwest, but they were what I call artisans. They were making no attempt to design anything, or if they did design it wasn't very good.

ROBERT BROWN: But there were these other people in Kansas who, on the other hand, were good designers?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, there weren't that many working. One of the girls I mentioned here, two of them, three of them were teachers. [00:06:00] And they weren't producing while they were teaching. I would say it was very, very limited. There's a stone polisher. There were people in Lindsborg, Kansas doing some pottery. And then I imagine Poco Frazier who became a sculptor, and his work is well known in the Middle West.

ROBERT BROWN: Poco?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. But there were very few artists. There was a group in Texas, Velma Dozier, that group. And I was sorry some of these people that were leaders in those early, early days weren't mentioned too at that conference because she taught in her own house and had a beautiful big studio. She was, I would say, the leader in that whole state at that time. She started out very simply and learned as she went. I don't

know that she studied a great deal with other people.

ROBERT BROWN: So there was a—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I think she just—

ROBERT BROWN: —broad base for a receptivity to the crafts following World War II?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, this was—this was hard work, you know, to get people to—if someone was making a chair, that was traditional, and it was handmade, of course, he talked a great deal about its being handmade. Then we had to try to say that—try to convince people that perhaps a fresh look at the design element was important. [00:08:06] And a lot of them, of course, because everybody else wore the traditional things, they wanted that too. It was very difficult. Other people had come to me. The museum paid me $80 a month for all my work, and I worked in the museum as well as the classroom—[laughs] I even helped the janitor at times, but I really made my money from people coming to me and wanting to have something made. And this was very difficult for them because they couldn't walk out with it, you know, the next day. But there were enough people in Wichita who did this. And I started on this basis of always working on commission basis. Right now there are three exhibitions I could send to, but I never was in the habit of developing a body of work.

ROBERT BROWN: You're saying about right now there are, yeah?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: This moment, you know what I'm talking about?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, well, I could have been exhibiting for some years, but my habit and my commissions, I still have some commissions, if you can imagine, and I retired a couple years ago. And so I just have so little work.

ROBERT BROWN: So you took these on, at a deliberate pace, and as you finished one then you began—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: That's right.

ROBERT BROWN: You didn't stack up.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: And when my studio was robbed, [00:10:01] it took an enormous amount of my work. So that leaves me with very few pieces at this stage of my life.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, and '41 is, in one of your papers, a letter to you from Carl Milles at Cranbrook, and perhaps you'd written in or enquired about teaching at Cranbrook. I'm not quite sure. And at any rate he says he's pleased that you studied with his friend Erik Fleming and at Cranbrook silversmithing is charge—Italian, but he says it's not anything like the work by Fleming. Were you—had you put out a feeler about going to Cranbrook?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Going to study but not to teach.

ROBERT BROWN: Study, not to teach.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: And what came of that? Did you in fact go?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, no, he discouraged it with that letter, and I thought I'd better work on my own instead of going to someone whose work was not going to be of use to me. Because this was—these were always expensive forays for me.

ROBERT BROWN: Cranbrook was pretty thin, in those days at least, in terms of metalsmithing.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: But on the other hand it had a lot of publicity in those days too didn't it?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I think I mentioned before that it had brought Arthur Nebelkirkel [ph].

ROBERT BROWN: Sure, you'd gone to work with him.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], who was a thorough craftsman, traditional design but very thorough craftsman. And he wasn't opposed to modern design or an individual with an artistic background

wanting to use it. [00:12:04]

ROBERT BROWN: Well, you continued into the wartime at Wichita, right?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, I was trying to knit for the soldiers, and I could see that the war would be over before I got anything done and it wouldn't be any good for anybody anyway. So I—

ROBERT BROWN: Evidently one time it seems you had written a manufacturer in New York about designing for him, and he said that they—or taking on designers? This was at Graff, Washbourne, and Dunn in New York.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, well they turned out to be great friends. They later asked me to do some work for them, and I couldn't do it.

ROBERT BROWN: But you were feeling a little restless. You wanted some further outlets?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I felt I'd like most of all to use my talent for the war effort, and I wrote to the Red Cross, and I was promptly turned down. And then I thought, well, this is hopeless, and I went to the navy. I spent about almost two months in the naval hospital outside of Chicago working, and they had no metal work, but I was well trained in leather and bookbinding and all the other things, and I could do pottery, though I didn't care much about it. So I was going from there to New York to find out if there was going to be silver available for my classes in Wichita. [00:14:01] That's when I met the head of the gold plant about her accident.

ROBERT BROWN: The gold plant.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, that's Handy & Harman's gold plant down on Fulton Street. And he said, "Well, you know, my boss, the president of the company, would be interested in what it is you have." So that's how I met Mr. Niemeyer [ph]. He had his secretary go to the files and pull out two photographs from World War I of silver shops for the veterans. This wasn't occupational therapy as much as it was a curative kind of thing. And he had kept those all this time, and my great mistake and regret is that I didn't ask him where he got them. How did he get these?

ROBERT BROWN: And he didn't—had his firm done that work in World War I?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh no.

ROBERT BROWN: Or helped?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well that—oh no, no.

ROBERT BROWN: No?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No. And of course that just lighted a fire under me. Not that I didn't know all the time that there were many things they could be doing in metal that would have that forearm supination, and you see all the doctors wrote prescriptions for exactly what motions they wanted, and there would be nothing as perfect as twisting that bracelet, metal for a bracelet. It would give the perfect forearm supination action they wanted. [00:16:05]

ROBERT BROWN: Which is what, a way of strengthening the forearm?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Pulling and twisting, pulling and twisting, and there were so many of those prescriptions that were just natural for metal work. So when he showed me these photographs I was absolutely enchanted. And then I told him about how sad I was that I couldn't work with metal or do anything with my skills for the good of the war effort. And he said, "Well, maybe we should work out something." This was direct and immediate. And then I was invited to meet a couple of the board members and have lunch with him and the manager of the gold plant, and maybe you think I wasn't a scared rabbit. [Laughs.] I had never been in such a high-powered business circle in my whole life. And they all listened to what I thought was possible, and I gave the same old thing, my first reaction at the naval hospital. And so I went on about my business. I was going to do two days at the museum, and the head of the gold plant as I left said, "Call me up tomorrow." So tomorrow I called him up, and I was out in Brooklyn in the museum. And he said, "Well, come for lunch. You're in." [00:18:00] So they set a date for my arrival, and I assumed that's all I had to do, and I arrived on that date, and no one was looking for me because they hadn't heard anything from me. I thought once they said I was hired they meant I was hired.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you drop your employment in Wichita?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, I did.

ROBERT BROWN: Fairly quickly?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, because this gave them two or three months, I think it was.

ROBERT BROWN: This was in 1944 that you came on board with Handy & Harman?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: So you did arrive in New York, and by the you had a more detailed plan of what—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I couldn't have a very detailed plan because I had to make some models of what I knew could be done with these physical motions that I remembered from the navy hospital and work out how much it would cost the hospitals and so forth. And then you had to get the door open to get in to tell your story in Washington. And I'll tell you it's not an easy thing to walk up to the US Army and say, "I have something you need."

ROBERT BROWN: So Handy & Harman hired you, but you were to work through—you had to go to the Department of the Army?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, well yes, I was hired to help the hospitals, if that were possible.

ROBERT BROWN: I see, so they didn't even know that that would be possible, Handy & Harman.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, I mean, they thought I could do it, you see. They had no entre into this, no nothing. [00:20:02] I just went down cold.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you? Where did you go, to the surgeon general's office or?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, but I talked to the chief occupational therapist, and she listened to my story very politely, and then she said, "But it would be far too expensive, you know. We couldn't possibly go into metal work." And so I was wearing a pin which I had made out of two simple pieces of silver, and I took it off, and I said, "Would 16 cents be too much for this object?" You see, the army would get a reduction on price. And, "Well," and then I said, "I don't know about your—" luckily I'd been to a naval hospital so I could explain my reaction to the Naval hospital, and I said, "I saw the navy using skins that cost more than $60 a skin, and I saw the men cutting right down the middle of these skins for belts, and it would make about three or four belts at the outside. And I felt that there was a great deal being spent in some hospitals for these materials and for a worthy cause. So she bought the program. And I—she said, "How would you propose to start?" And I said, "Well, first of all I'd have to see what shops you have and who's doing the work now." She said, "Of course, all our people, all our teachers, for the most part, are volunteer Red Cross people." [00:22:00] So I went up to Forest Glen, the adjunct of Walter Reed Hospital. There I found a woman from Ann Arbor, Michigan. She was trained at Skidmore, so she had had jewelry training. So I sat down and talked to her. I met her in the cardiac ward, and we went over for coffee, and we talked about this. And I said, "Well, what do you think Handy & Harman and I can do?" And she says, "Well, it's very simple. I can round up immediately 10 good people. We can have a class, and you can name the time, and I hope it begins tomorrow." And with that we started with the Red Cross, training the Red Cross, and they had to have a space, and then the occupational therapists became interested.

ROBERT BROWN: The 10 people she mentioned would be that would go out and teach?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: You were going to train the teachers.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right, and that's the way I always worked it. And then the army bought my program, shall I say, and I was officially sent to the hospitals by the army. Handy & Harman paid all the bills, helped set up a unit, the first unit at Walter Reed, helped—Mr. Niemeyer came up and say us all working away, and we didn't have enough equipment and stock. [00:24:01] And the army was a little slow sometimes at getting a polish motor in or something. And he says, "Margret, let's just equip this. Quit fooling." Of course that was just what I wanted him to say, and he did. He really loved the whole idea. He would come if I'd call him up and say, "Why don't you come down to Washington tomorrow? We have some work finished, and it looks good, and they all want to meet you anyway." And, well, he often came.

ROBERT BROWN: He was a very accessible man, was he?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, yes, yes, he was a great president. You know, he knew when to enjoy things and when to work, and he had, oh, he was considered one of the five great businessmen in New York by *Fortune* magazine, by Better Business Bureau. He has all kinds of metals and things. Oh yes, he had the vigilance committee which kept people from making—stamping silver that was not high enough quality.

ROBERT BROWN: But his own business was mainly technical. Is that where his main expertise?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: He was business, and then they hired, of course, all their engineers and chemists and so forth for the silver plant and the gold plant both.

ROBERT BROWN: So you were fully occupied then at Walter Reed and later at other hospitals? You would spend most of your time—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: We worked out sessions, two-week sessions for the occupational therapists, and they came in shifts. [00:26:02] So I had a lot of people, but I also asked that every time we had a therapy session we have at least one patient as a guinea pig. This turned out to be a very interesting thing because one of the patients, the first patient I ever had, became the master restorer at the Metropolitan Museum. And here's his story.

ROBERT BROWN: And this is Walter Rowe?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: R-O-W-E?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, and this is—I labeled it for you, first patient to attend the first classes at Forest Glen.

ROBERT BROWN: And was he and some of the other people, were they—did they have any kind of a background in metalsmithing?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: This man had had some bracing background. He knew who Handy & Harman was, but he thought that they owned and produced industrial products, not silver and gold. So this Metropolitan Museum bulletin is May of '71.

ROBERT BROWN: In which his story is told?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, and he mentions Margret Carver of Handy & Harman in the article.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, were these men who had had injuries and who had to be physically—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh yes, everybody, all the GIs that came into the hospitals were classified. Certain hospitals were neuro-psychopathic hospitals. Certain hospitals were tubercular hospitals, but then there were the general hospital was Walter Reed in Forest Glen. [00:28:03] And the first day I got there and an enormous number of GIs came in which were the results of the first land mines, the first people that had run into land mines in France.

ROBERT BROWN: Right, not long after D-Day then.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right. And this was—no, this was before D-Day. This was during the war. And this was a brutal sight. It was just too awful because some where blinded and all of them still in shock, you know. It was awful. But I also took—worked with one boy that was on 48-hour leave from the front, and they called it battle fatigue, and he was crying. And I went up to him, and I said, "How would you like to make a piece of jewelry for your wife or your daughter if you have one?" "Could I?" He says, "I'm not here for very long." I said, "That doesn't matter. There are all kinds of projects." And he made a very beautiful bracelet for his wife, and he made a barre for his little daughter, and he asked me if I would mail it because he didn't have any time left. He'd used up all the time. And he went out of there laughing and smiling, and it was just a remarkable thing that I just happened to be there on that day and work with that one patient. [00:30:02] And all the time the occupational therapists around were, you know, watching this process, how I got him interested and how quickly you can—

ROBERT BROWN: You have a real gift for that, didn't you?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I was a teacher. I loved—I never wanted to teach, but I found I loved to teach, so this was really wonderful for me. I did enjoy it.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you hear—you get reports back then from your graduates, your occupational therapists?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: The OTs did, the occupational therapists would send me letters every now and then, and some of them would even snatch the pieces away from the men and send them to me because they knew that I would photograph them. And you'll find photographs in my material.

ROBERT BROWN: Were there—were you quite pleased? Was the level of work fairly good for beginners?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh well, that was too short a time to get very high-level work. But some pieces were—nearly all pieces were good. They were as good as any commercial stuff, but they weren't works of art.

ROBERT BROWN: Did many of the men—did you learn to stick with this and—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Not that I know of.

ROBERT BROWN: How long would they—I mean, in occupational therapy would they be going for weeks and weeks wanting—maybe?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, it depends upon their ailment.

ROBERT BROWN: Some cases, yeah.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: And we got mystery patients too from, I think, well, we had them from all over the world. [00:32:02] You know, great generals coming there for—to get away from pressure and maybe get special medical treatment because whenever I gave a talk in the auditorium about the metal work the officers came. And they were just in the same old outfits as everybody else, but they always came up and talked to you and thanked you, and their manners were [laughs] such we knew we had several titled Frenchmen and Englishmen. What their titles were we didn't know because they were all under an assumed name, just like Winston Churchill came here one time to visit the museum. He flew in and visited the museum, and the museum was completely closed for his visit, and he sat in front of the Kahn [ph] wing. It's, they're got a submersible, the Japanese got a submersible, for about an hour. All of [inaudible] Gallery got up, walked out, put on his hat, and went to his car and flew back to London.

ROBERT BROWN: So this was work you stuck with then into 1945 or '46?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I started our own conferences in, what did I say?

ROBERT BROWN: Forty-six.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Forty-six, well, then I had closed my work, my hospital work in late '45 and early '46. [00:34:06]

ROBERT BROWN: Would you travel around the country or would you mainly stay at Walter Reed and Forest Glen?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh no, I went to all nine service commands of the U.S. Army. I went to two air force hospitals, and I went to the naval hospital in Washington D.C.

ROBERT BROWN: And in each case you'd go there to train and—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, same programs.

ROBERT BROWN: —was the equipment—by then was the equipment fairly good? They knew what to have?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh yes, yes, because the therapists had visited Walter Reed, and I could always send them a list of suppliers, and I had a very good time working with suppliers because there were so few good tools. And right away a man came to me named Gesswein. And there is still the Gesswein company carried on by his sons. He's dead now. And he talked about what tools I thought I was going to need, so he set up and had tool makers make good tools, and they made one tool which in one catalogue was called the craver [ph] mandrel. I don't know whether I mentioned that or not.

ROBERT BROWN: No.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: It was a three-purpose mandrel, one you could make bracelets on, pill boxes or smaller things and smaller, and these were step downs, and the small end for rings and bezels for jewels and whatnot. Then Mr. Niemeyer asked me to a luncheon one day where he brought in his gem friends, and because he was on the vigilance committee, gems being sold—false gems being sold were also being taken care of by this vigilance committee. [00:36:09]

ROBERT BROWN: Now, this was a vigilance committee of the metals and precious gems trade?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, right, in New York City. So he just said to me would I be interested? If the men needed any gems for their jewelry would I be interested in what his friends might contribute? And I said, "Why of course." [Laughs.] It was his idea though. And here I sat around the table with the greatest gem dealers, the pearl men, the ruby men, but the whole works, the sapphire man, you know. There were the great ones in

the whole world. And they were all very pleasant, very nice, and they all got up and said yes, they'd send me a box, or they asked me what I particular like. We didn't get diamonds, rubies, and emeralds, but one man who was a ruby man, sapphire, sold only sapphires, said, "Well you, I want you to come to my house. I want to talk about this some more." So this was a frightening thing because you went up in this ratty old dusty building. These gentlemen were all absolutely exquisitely dressed, if you could say that about a man, and they all wore a ring of some kind of a stick pin. This was a ratty old building with a ratty old elevator, and when I got up there here were doors and gates, and you went through one gate and it locked behind you, and then you stood at a window and announced yourself, and it was a spooky existence and enterprise. [00:38:09] And when I finally got in here was the darkest room, dingy, nothing in it buy two tables in front of two dusty windows. And there were four chairs. And there was no rug, no—and the walls were dark. The room was dark. And I thought, wait a minute, I'm glad my secretary knows where I'm going. I have gone and I stood there for a few minutes in the middle of this big room, and then this very smiling kindly man came out, and he said, "Now, you tell me what you'd like to have." So I told him again that they needed cabochon stones. They needed good stones but not expensive ones. So he brought—had it. We sat down, and we visited, and we—this is where they show their gems. It was the perfect light for showing sapphires, especially star sapphires. It's the reason this little old table was poked over by the window. And he said when they brought the things there were a lot of—now, everything was imitation. You know, it's what—it's throw-outs. And I really had to swallow hard to say this because I hated to look a gift horse in the mouth, but I said, "I regret to say I can't accept those. A, I'm not wanting—I'm wanting to raise the level of their taste, and I want them to know something about good semi-precious stones. [00:40:03] And besides that imitation stones are many times more difficult to mount, and they wouldn't be very proud of a glass stone, even it looked like ruby."

ROBERT BROWN: Now you're talking about the—these would be the soldiers.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

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MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —had another box. It was beautiful stuff: agates, some nephrite jades. Oh, it had turquoise, very good turquoise. A lot of really good semi-precious stones in an enormous box of this stuff. Well, he visited for a while longer and he showed me two stones that he was very pleased with and they weren't sapphires. I don't think I ever saw any sapphires at all except the one he wore. But he had these other stones which he liked and while these were—these could have been extremely rare in the whole world, they turned out to be opals. Had they been opalized turquoise, which all the gemologists say is a possibility from the standpoint of the way nature works, they would've been invaluable. But anyway, I was happy not to see them as opals. And they were very beautiful blue opals. The body was solid blue, almost like turquoise and then they were opalescent. So, that really—slight me. I said, "Well, now you have two of them, don't you think you could sell one?" "Well, no. No, I really—these are mine. I really don't intend to sell these."

ROBERT BROWN: Okay.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: And this—I really was disheartened. [00:01:58] But anyway, he then showed me a packet of zircons, enormous package of zircons, and literally thousands of carats. And there were zircons that I'd particularly liked because they ranged from pale gold—these were faceted zircons and good-sized stones. And pale yellow to olive to deep olive to light brown, and all very brilliant. They were all good stones. And, well, I just wouldn't attempt to imagine—you know, it must have been $40,000 worth of stones there. So, he sent the boy to wrap up the package from the soldiers and he had two packages. And when I got down to my office, there's all that—lot of zircon was in one of the packages. Well, I shivered in my shoes and I called him back and I said, "I think your boy's made an error. I got home—I got down to my office with all those zircons." And he said, "What?" [Laughs.] And I said, "Yes. I was showing Mr. Niemeyer what we called our loot and I opened this package and we were both very surprised." And he said, "Well, you could bring—could you bring them back?" And I said, "Well, I can't bring them back but I can send them by messenger." "Well, wait until you can come." And I said, "Well, I can't come tomorrow and I might not be able to come next day." "It doesn't matter. It's all right. Give me a ring so I'll be here." [00:03:58] So, I went back down there carrying this—raw gems and then went through this same process of getting in—and we had a short visit and I thanked him for Mr. Niemeyer and myself for his generous gift and handed him the zircons. And he pulled out of his pocket one of the turquoise—which I still own. I've always wanted to mount it and I got [they laugh] all the gold ready to go when my studio was robbed and they took all the special gold that I'd had made just for this stone. So, I've never mounted it. I don't know whether I ever will or not. But it's beautiful stone. I carried it to London because Dr. Alexander, I believe his name was, was as world-renowned gemologist. And I believe he's the one that said that it was possible for a turquoise to be opalized. And he looked it over while I was in London at the Goldsmiths' Hall, at the conference, and said he was sorry but [laughs] it was a blue opal not opalized turquoise.

ROBERT BROWN: But these men were good—great deal motivated by patriotism, weren't they, these gem dealer—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes, oh.

ROBERT BROWN: —friends of Mr. Niemeyer's?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yeah, we all were.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: We all were. That's right.

ROBERT BROWN: And so, a good many of the soldiers, you suppose, went on to accept jewelry as well as make things—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I—

ROBERT BROWN: —metal—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —I have no idea. I have no way of knowing that.

ROBERT BROWN: Were these gems then distributed around the country to the various hospitals?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, yes. [00:05:57] Yes, we divided them up and gave each hospital that had a metal shop some of them. And this was one man wasn't the only one to respond. We had a pearl man, Mr. Pond [ph], and he gave, really, a lot of seed pearls that you could, you know, put in necklaces and—

ROBERT BROWN: Oh.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —pretty elegant.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: And I don't know how the therapists dealt them out but—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, you closed down this program, then, in late 1945?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: Then what were you to do, work further—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, all the time, we'd been looking at the future of metal work in this country, you know? This never left my mind from the time I went there because [laughs] that was my idea. We had to get some good teachers in the field. We couldn't depend upon Europe to supply all our teachers.

ROBERT BROWN: And this was, naturally, in the interests of Mr. Niemeyer, too, wasn't it? I mean, his patients—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, it was, it—

ROBERT BROWN: —supplying the raw ingredients, yeah.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: But this craftsman use is so little that my department was closed, not because there wasn't a lot of things to do after I left but because it just didn't pay the company. The small user was completely closed off. Even now, if I buy silver, I'd—I could buy it from Handy & Harman but I would have to pay a burden and I might just as well buy it from their dealers. [00:07:54] But I have a—I always specify Handy & Harman's product because I know it's always on—plus side. If it's sterling, it's just—not sterling but a couple of points above. So, if you use so much solder—well, my stuff is never tested—it's legitimately sterling.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, would have been '46, you exhibited some and you also went to a silversmithing conference at the Goldsmiths Company in London?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: That's when you took over the turquoise—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right, right.

ROBERT BROWN: —helpful here.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I—

ROBERT BROWN: What was—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —that—

ROBERT BROWN: —how'd that come about, your going to that conference?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, the clerk of the Goldsmiths Guild came to Mr. Niemeyer's office and Mr. Niemeyer wanted to show him [laughs] what we were doing with our war effort. So, he brought him over and I showed him things that had been done by the men and what was—so forth. And he was very much interested and he said, "Well, I hope you'll visit England sometime." And I thought that'd be the last thing on my agenda. But in less than two weeks, I was in—headed for a conference. He had invited me to a conference which The Goldsmiths Company had set up. They're an extremely wealthy guild. And they set up this conference for—I think it was 12 men who had been at the front. These were all good silversmiths. [00:10:00] And one of them was a designer and not a teacher. Maybe more of them but I think most of them were teachers who did work on the side the way I worked my life out. And I was invited to be the only foreigner that's ever been invited and the only woman. And so, it was really quite an experience to go to get out of the business world and back into the art world. It was held at the London School of Art and I had—you have, probably, in your file, since I gave you part of my things my notebook with the names of all the people that attended this conference. From this conference then—

ROBERT BROWN: What was the purpose of the conference?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Was to aid these men to get back into working with metal after their time at the front during—

ROBERT BROWN: And aid them, what—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —the war.

ROBERT BROWN: —with lectures? Or did you also, then—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, no, we were—it's a workshop.

ROBERT BROWN: It was a workshop you sent them—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes. It had lectures and one thing they ask of me, if I was invited over, would I give a lecture? And then, I gave several talks, one—

ROBERT BROWN: Not the—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —to the ministry of health and one to the ministry of rehabilitation and one to the veterans' ministry. And these were all given in Goldsmiths' Hall, which is a pretty elegant place.

ROBERT BROWN: And you talked about the experience over here with—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —the occupational therapy?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, just how it started and what we are able to accomplish. [00:12:00]

ROBERT BROWN: It's a conference of the 12 of you sponsored by a Goldsmiths Company. It was you would each work on something and compare notes—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: We worked on—

ROBERT BROWN: —on what you were doing?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —our own thing. We just—everybody did what they wanted to do. And we made our own tools right there and I made the cigarette case and something else. Forgotten what. But that was a very difficult thing to do. Box work is very specialized work. And my—

ROBERT BROWN: So, you—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —cigarette case has a spring hinge in it. So, you press a button and it opens itself. You don't need—

ROBERT BROWN: Okay.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —two hands.

ROBERT BROWN: So, it was partly learning for you but part—and for them, it was getting them back on their feet—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: —psychologically.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right. And I would take things to my hotel room and file and file and file at night. [Laughs.] And then, on the last day there, I had a tea for them. And I had brought over Hershey bars because I knew I was going to be hungry. But when I got there and saw how little food there was, I saved the Hershey bars and I had them broken them up. I didn't even have—every time a new person wandered into class, I thought, oh, dear, there goes a Hershey bar, because that—someone without a Hershey bar. And I couldn't get any sent over that quickly. You know, nothing happened that fast. So, they all had Hershey with their tea whether they liked it or not. [00:14:03] [Laughter.] The Goldsmiths' Hall gave a party for us and because I was the lady there, they asked me to pour and I said yes. And the clerk of The Goldsmiths' Company led me up to the tea urn and I thought now it's time for me to just disappear because I had no idea how the Englishmen take their tea, how to serve an Englishman tea. But just then, the servant came forth and did the actual work. [Laughter.] So, all I had to do was stand and smile as each one picked up their teacup. But it was very beautiful tea and—

ROBERT BROWN: Was the—what about the work there, technically? It's fine, I'm sure. What about—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, all those men were so well trained. They'd all been trained, either at the London School of Art or the other art school or—there is a regular school for training artisans more or less but they had branched out and they—there was one teacher there from there. But the others were from all over the country, from Ireland, from Scotland, from all over.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, that same year, '46, you were in an exhibition at—Tulsa, Oklahoma, at its Philbrook Museum, I guess, for—organized by Ben Fraser, is it? He was a—he corresponded with you and—to which you'd sent quite a few things.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I did?

ROBERT BROWN: Rings, [inaudible], sugar shaker, a bowl—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh.

ROBERT BROWN: —picture—a pitcher and a box with an enamel medallion. [00:16:06]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, I guess I must have sent my total supply. I'd forgotten about that—

ROBERT BROWN: And—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —exhibition.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, he had, in—afterward had flattered you by comparing the quality of your work with that of—colonial silversmith. And you wrote him saying that you lamented the fact that people better—what you said is, "People better start teaching this craft or it's going to die out." And this craftsmanship that you admired will be a thing of the past. Were you really quite concerned that the—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —this part—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes, and that was a driving force behind my conferences, you know? Or I called them mine and then Harman financed them. But we only took teachers. We didn't take designers. And we took teachers that had had good courses in design in other fields they could—and Carlton Bell was really a potter. He's still a potter but he did good smithing and—

ROBERT BROWN: You wanted people with a broad design background and then they could do the—teach them or began to teach—introduce them to—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, we never taught design at the conference. It was—

ROBERT BROWN: Teaching technique?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —only manipulation of silver. And we prided ourselves on, 35 minutes after that—the first conference opened and all the rest were just the same. They had hammer and piece of silver given to them by Handy & Harman, in their hands. [00:18:03] So, they were ready to look at a demonstration of how to start moving your silver and they're on—they were on their own in design. As it came up, they could do whatever they pleased with it. But they were helped to do that.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you—now, did you have any connections to Wichita—because in '46, you were—exhibited in the National Decorative Arts and Ceramics Exhibition at the Wichita Arts Association. Was that—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I—

ROBERT BROWN: —about the first—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —learned more about my—keeping in touch with Wichita when I went to the conference. I'd forgotten all of that, most of that.

ROBERT BROWN: But you did occasionally, you did—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I—it was every time.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I either gave money or Handy & Harman gave money or Mr. Niemeyer gave money. And, in one case, Baron Fleming gave a piece of his work as a prize. I always furnished jurors.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Now—

ROBERT BROWN: —who set up these exhibitions? Because these were, for a few years, the most important ones in the crafts, in the country, weren't they, these—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Again, the only ones for the total country. Others were regional.

ROBERT BROWN: And these—but you weren't directly involved in this, in—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, no.

ROBERT BROWN: —setting them up?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Uh, well, only that I tried to get them set up before I ever went to New York. And I—the time was not right—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —right, and—

ROBERT BROWN: The war interrupted that to an extent.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, yes, and—

ROBERT BROWN: If I—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —Mrs. Schollenberger was the leader in all of that. She had her vision, as she says. [00:20:02] And then, the director was a painter. And he had to do all the work and it was incredible how much—he was Bill Dickerson, a very good painter. But, you know, he simply had to oversee the unpacking, the repacking, the catalogs, the—he—it was an enormous job because it got quite a response from the very beginning.

ROBERT BROWN: But you weren't directly involved, say, in 1946 except as an exhibitor or arranging jurors and so—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: That's all.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. You still had your—or you were still attached to Handy & Harman?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes. Oh, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: But that—those exhibitions, were you aware at the time that they were having quite a lot of impact? The Wichita exhibitions?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes, you had to be because it was the only exhibition and it was annual and set up as an annual so people could work toward someplace to show, because many of the other regional ones didn't do anyone any good except those in the region.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you a little worried about the thinness of the things sent in metalworking? Is this—because you were—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, no.

ROBERT BROWN: —worried about their being more teachers and the like?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, I just thought anybody that was working in metal—and I thought this would draw out maybe people who had worked with these small shops and were designing on their own. And there was a man named Reese and—

ROBERT BROWN: Reese, first name—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —who can tell you about Reese? [00:21:57] Well, he was a flatware man and did the most beautiful flatware up until his—very late age. So, I had heard about him and, of course, I knew about Per Smed. And I don't know whether we talked about Per Smed or not.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, maybe—so, that's—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: It's P with an E-R, capital S-M-E-D. He was a Norwegian, but he was also a teacher of that—printmaker over there. He's a painter but I have a print he's made—Bernard Childs.

ROBERT BROWN: And where was he a teacher, Smed?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, he had his own shop in Chicago, out of Chicago, in Illinois.

ROBERT BROWN: So, these people—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I believe.

ROBERT BROWN: —were out there but they were isolated from—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I was—this is what I wanted to get in—you know, out of the wood—was anybody that was working at all. And there were quite a few discovered—of people that were doing very beautiful stuff. And there was a man in New York, I can see his work as plainly—and he did all kind—he did mysterious things, beautiful jewelry with little doors that you opened, [they laugh] dream-like sequenced things. But they were exquisite pieces and I got to know him a little bit and took him up into—down in—some watch faces, the most beautiful shape, oval shape, a rounded oval watch face that was given to me by one of those gem men that the boys in the hospitals wouldn't have any use for. And I held those out thinking there'd be a craftsman that could use them. [00:24:00] So, I gave them to this man I wish I could take them with me, I would —

ROBERT BROWN: So, the momentum was picking up and then—but did you discuss the need for teachers and the like with Mr. Niemeyer? You—and just how—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —can you describe a little bit how you moved toward setting up the first conference, which was in—I guess in '47, actually. You were then—were you at—was it Handy & Harman's hospital department? Is that what you were—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, that's what's—

ROBERT BROWN: —it was called at the time, they—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, and then it was changed kind of to the craft department. But, well, we talked about this as the war was drawing to a close. And this was nothing new for Mr. Niemeyer. And he was so interested in the hospital program that he expected the other program to be a success, too. And it was his natural instinct to take care of anything that needed taking care of. And so, he opened every conference and he opened the one in Rhode Island. The first one was held there. And we were very fortunate because Gorham had

furnished that studio, admittedly many years ago, and it had been closed for 20 years. And it's—enormous rooms.

ROBERT BROWN: At the Rhode Island School of Design?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yeah, and separate from the school, you know, you went in your own way and it was really wonderful.

ROBERT BROWN: So, you—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: But there were big acid vats, there were big torches left there. It was a matter of cleaning up the place.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you—was—arranged for the school to cooperate or to give—provide these facilities? [00:26:04] Was that difficult to do or were they interested in—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No. The man, you remember, who said—you thought was dead, he used to be at the Rhode Island School of Design.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, I didn't mean—[Antonio] Cirino?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, no, what—

ROBERT BROWN: The director?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —was very synthetic. He'd just done an exhibition at—

ROBERT BROWN: So, this was Max Sullivan, the director of—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Max Sullivan.

ROBERT BROWN: —art museum.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right, and he'd done the first really good exhibition of craftworks. And I remember there was a hand on the cover of his catalog. I wasn't—I don't think I was invited to exhibit. This was an invitational show or may have been a local show, but he had it.

ROBERT BROWN: By "the first really good," you mean the first really good one there or—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Or anyplace. Anyplace.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, in comparison, say, with the Wichita show?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, this was—this must have been an invitation show. This was before the Wichita shows, too, his show was.

ROBERT BROWN: So, he was an actual backer—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Did—so, did Mr. Niemeyer or you approach the school through him or through—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I did.

ROBERT BROWN: —someone?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I did that. Someplace I had—photograph in the—two of those. Went out—

ROBERT BROWN: And you—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —and took it.

ROBERT BROWN: —you are—they got everything, equipment, the shape of all that happens?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, no, that was our responsibility. So, we were down there scrubbing, [laughs] and cleaning, and whatnot. [00:27:56] We brought down all our—I brought, always, the small tools and we suggested that if anybody had metal tools, they should bring their own.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, how did you find—secure students for the conference?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: We—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you put out—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —advertised—

ROBERT BROWN: —advertisements someplace or—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, and we wrote to several schools that we thought would be good to have a metal department. If they were a strong art department, we wrote to them and wrote to the director. And if he passed it on to some potter or some—some of them at that time had design teachers that just taught design. So, then they applied, and we had a jury of selection.

ROBERT BROWN: Was that—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: The first group was—very lean group. I had to pull in—couple of not very promising people, but at least bodies.

ROBERT BROWN: Mean it was hard to get the word out, probably.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right, right.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Because they had to support themselves. The only thing that was free was the instruction and material. And they had to support themselves, so they had to come to Providence, stay a month, feed themselves, and—

ROBERT BROWN: What was the program, do they—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: It was to be a workshop with lectures. And every lecture was a meaningful lecture. Was either done by a metallurgist that would teach them more than was written in books at that time—and—or gallery people. [00:30:03] Edith Halpert was one of the lecturers and—

ROBERT BROWN: What would she lecture on?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, she was just talking about how she sold art and if—she explained that all of her creative people went—had seven-year cycles. They would start a new cycle of work and development and they would pretty much round that off and start a new—another one at the end of seven years she discovered. She kept notes on all this.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: She was trying to get those people that were getting close to a new period of creating work to set up an insurance policy. She'd hold their money and invest it for them and then, during the lean years up there, new appearance—so, their—the work that looked different—and people that couldn't recognize as a—whatever—whosever it was, they wouldn't buy it. It would take a while to get a new type of work or a new—

ROBERT BROWN: Accepted, yeah.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —correct. So, she came to us and I asked her how much she'd charge and she said, "Well, I won't charge anything but I will put this in my pool of money of—for the painters. They have to borrow from me." Was a very good talk. At that time, she was fairly frail. She worked hard but she had to have someone with her. And so, we entertained with two ladies, I remember. [00:32:03] And when this happened, unless they objected, we nearly always had a lunch, so there's—dinner, rather. We couldn't stop the students. And our Indian boy was [Dooley] Dewey Shorty. He found—had to open a window and he crawled up the brick wall, opened the window. And he was in the studio at work at seven o'clock in the morning.

ROBERT BROWN: So, how had he come to the conference?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I had asked Granny Duncore [ph], who was head of the Indian Department at that time—

ROBERT BROWN: Gotcha.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —if, yeah, he didn't think it would be a good idea to have an American Indian

conference. So—

ROBERT BROWN: And Indians—part of the Bureau of Indian Affairs?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right. And he said yes, so a few days later, he called me up and said, "I've done a lot of research and which would you rather: Chester Yellow-Hair [ph] or Dooley Dewey Shorty?" And I said, "The lat—I can't tell from here but I'm sure Chester Yellow-Hair would be a bit roughly treated by the press. I don't—we better go in for that." I think he did it mostly for fun but Dooley Dewey Shorty was a wonderful man. He had family and he was wearing one of his bracelets. It was a cast bracelet; he was Navajo. And I showed this to Baron Fleming and he said, "You know, if you hadn't said that this was American Indian and cast—the simple way it—you say it, like, I would never have believed it. [00:34:02] This is one of the most perfect castings I have ever seen." It was cast flat maybe and it—well, I he wanted me to keep that. He was—planned to leave it in his rooming house, and so I still have it. But I bought it.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, someone like the Navajo Indian, what would he have learned at the conference?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: He made flatware, he made a bowl. He put his Indian stamps—he brought his Indian stamps with him, which he had made. And he talked about how he made—told me—it was a wonderful rapport between the students. I didn't get in on all this, certainly not the first year because that was the year we were making the movie goal [ph] and this was doing two things at once every minute. I—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, who was in charge of smithing at that first conference, in charge of that?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: William Bennett [ph].

ROBERT BROWN: And you knew of him—he was an Englishman wasn't he—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, he was at the conference.

ROBERT BROWN: And you had the week—the year before.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right. Reginald Hill was also from the—

ROBERT BROWN: Goldsmiths' Company?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —Goldsmiths' Company.

ROBERT BROWN: And their job was to, what, teach technique mainly?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, that's all they did was—got on a student—student and just do the rounds all day long. And it was a long day. We said we'd start at nine and we'd stop at five. But hammers were going long before nine. Of course, Dooley Dewey Shorty got in at seven and he'd let anybody else in that wanted to come, so—[laughs] since he was on the inside. [00:36:00] So, they were long, long hours and they all worked hard and they were—they—I looked, not long ago, at some country pieces. And they're—you can't believe they all started with the same size material. They could cut it down if they wanted to, but most of them didn't. Out of the same thing and pitchers came —not very many low bowls. Everybody took it up. Some were square, some were triangular, you know? Was—it was really incredible.

ROBERT BROWN: This would be—was a fairly short class and—a month or—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: It's a long workshop.

ROBERT BROWN: It's a long workshop. I mean, you were taking people, in some cases, had no experience whatsoever in metalsmithing.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: We preferred that, really, but—because to start out with forming, you know, you get the feeling of the material that you can use in jewelry or anything else, just as I used to tell—the people in the hospital, said if they knew how to make a coiled wire bracelet, they would be able to guy a tree or they—[laughs] that, you know, that if—they were learning about wire and how to handle it, it didn't mean just making bracelets.

ROBERT BROWN: So, these men, too, or these people at the conferences were learning basic techniques—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: —whether or not they would all—you hoped they'd become teachers.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: They—from my conference, they were all teachers. We didn't take anybody—

ROBERT BROWN: You'd hope they'd begin to teach metalworking—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: That's right.

ROBERT BROWN: —where it hadn't been taught.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right. And they—

ROBERT BROWN: You worked with—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —all did [F.] Carlton Ball taught metal and he—[00:38:03]

ROBERT BROWN: [Inaudible.]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, Carlton Ball's [inaudible].

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, that's—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: He was a beautiful potter. And he was too good a potter wheeler, really, you know, to come to conference because he couldn't shift over, although I have heard that he has done metal work. And he saw that there was a good metalworking teacher. I think we got him—

ROBERT BROWN: He adopted his school—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —from Mills College in California. That's where he was when he came to conference and—

ROBERT BROWN: But then, a man like that would spread the word, make—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —where he was teaching, he'd try to get in a metalsmithing department.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right, right. And I hadn't followed through to find out who the great jewelers and smiths of this particular area studied with, but in many, many cases, I know they studied with Acontha [ph] Reed.

ROBERT BROWN: And Baron Fleming, was he at that first conference or—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, no. No, I just had one teacher a year and—

ROBERT BROWN: In 1948, following the conference, I guess, there was an exhibition of the work in a Gorham's shop in New York.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], and at Riverside Bank.

ROBERT BROWN: Was industry—you know, a bank, for example, were they interested in showing these things? Was there [inaudible]?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, you know, Handy & Harman was a [laughs] powerful and great company and they could have anything they wanted. This is what brought into—their conference—brought to the conference the most important thing that happened—except, course, the basic teachers we had and the money we had to work with. [00:40:05] And it was someone who could—because of the power of the company, the press was taking up so much of my time that—what is Handy & Harman doing? Were they starting to introduce people that could make sterling—were they starting up a company in their own—you know, all these imagined things of the press. And I saw I couldn't do both jobs, so that's when we ask Nathan and Erskine [ph], it was then, public relations firm to come aboard. And we were so fortunate because [laughs] they went into it in a scholarly and very good way. And they knew what to publicize and what—where to publicize and that helped, too, to get us the next group of conferees, the publicity from the first group's—because this went out in school magazines and school bulletins. You know, they weren't out just to publicize Handy & Harman. And, in fact, Handy & Harman play a very quiet role in the publicity. It was mentioned, of course.

ROBERT BROWN: But they could get things—make things happen.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, anything—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —in the country.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: Margret Craver Withers. This is January 17, 1984. [00:42:03]

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ROBERT BROWN: We've been talking most recently about the earlier of the Handy & Harman conferences, which were in Providence, the first two were there. And the following one in 1948, there was an exhibit in Gorham's windows in New York. And then we discussed for a bit the publicizing of the conferences, and how that spread their influence. After two years, were you pretty, very, very pleased by the results they were having?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh yes. I still think it was really a bit of magic. And part of that was the fact that we opened the conference, and in less than 30 minutes, people were busy whacking away. We had opened the conference officially, and we had had a short demonstration, and people hammered away to get the feel of it. And then, of course, there was a longer demonstration. But it was the speed with which we approached the material, we didn't talk about design, we just went in to describe, by demonstrating the malleability and the ductility of the material, because all these people were design teachers, they worked in, they expect clay to be soft, and pliable. They expect threads to be gentle, and drippy, in my case. But, [laughs] they don't expect metal to be what I call plastic. And I'm not meaning another material, I'm meaning a quality. And a simple demonstration of two curved arms with the silver in between under forms demonstrates very quickly how you can move the metal in any direction you want to. [00:02:20] And the magic part of this was that of all 12 people, there were no two similar forms. You think you'd come out with six-inch bowls, maybe six, seven, or two of them. There never were two alike, or even, I could say never even similar. Which was very gratifying, and very pleasing that these people had their own, they were developed already as creative people. So that all they needed was the technique. And then I think I mentioned the fact that the technical department of Handy & Harman, the lab, the chemists, the metallurgists, came and gave us talks, which would bring about a deeper understanding of why the metal moved the way it did, and what was its maximum temperature, or for kneeling. All of those technical things.

ROBERT BROWN: So the diversity of their results was surprising to you, wasn't it?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Frankly, it was. I thought we might have a lot of bowls that looked similar. [Laughs.] But not at all. First thing you know, here came a pitcher, and here came a big flat bowl that did something else. [00:04:06] Or a triangular bowl, or a square box, or not really a box, box work is a very different thing. I don't believe we ever had a box. Maybe we did.

ROBERT BROWN: Because that's quite a skill in itself, isn't it?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well it's special, it's like trade work, setting they call it, the bottom of a tray is highly technical. And usually in a shop of seven people, like the army, seven, there's one man that sets all the trays, because he has to be very, very skilled, and spread that tension so carefully that the platter really sits flat, it doesn't waiver.

ROBERT BROWN: You had remarked on that amazing skill in the production at Baron Fleming's workshop, if you recall.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, I'm sorry, I repeated.

ROBERT BROWN: No, no, not in the same—no, it isn't being repeated, it's—you say they were people already in the careers, but us another reason that possibly explains the diversity is that people weren't quite so self-conscious, or so closely in touch as they are today through magazines, through conferences and the like?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right, this was just brand new, you know? There were no books, and no exhibitions, no nothing. It was so lean a world that—and craftsmen, as a rule, are very poor people, they, I think I probably mentioned this, that they were nearly all teaching at least part-time, and doing their own work beyond that. [00:06:11]

ROBERT BROWN: Did the Metropolitan Museum of Art's exhibition, *Form and Hand Wrought Silver*, come out of these conferences? Or how did that—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Took place about the same time, didn't it? In the late '40s?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right. Because here we were now, things were beginning to grow, and there were American forms in silver to be seen, and you knew these people were going to develop, and no one knew what hand wrought silver was. So this exhibition was primarily to let people know that there was American hand wrought silver, and oh, it was a great deal of the exhibition was panels with the technical information, some historical background. And then just one case of finished pieces. These were all conferees' pieces, with the exception of one. We borrowed one piece from John Prip, that was very, very beautiful.

ROBERT BROWN: Who had just gone onto the school for School for American Crafts?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: Who originated the show?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Emily Nathan. She had done an exhibition for, and—or for the Metropolitan, for the English-Speaking Union, I believe.

ROBERT BROWN: An exhibition of silverwork?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, no. No, no. And so, she had an entree with Henry Francis Taylor. [00:08:05] She talked about this, he was very shy, because the museum had never allowed any commercial company to promote or back an exhibition. Now I'm very sure that's right, I wrote that once, and I spoke to someone at the Metropolitan, and they thought this was right. I didn't speak to Henry Francis Taylor, because by that time, he had passed away.

ROBERT BROWN: Now you, at more or less the time indicated, I believe in a letter to somebody, that it was probably the first industry-sponsored exhibition at the Metropolitan.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: And Henry Francis Taylor was a very nervous man about this, because he certainly didn't want any publicity in his museum, and he was up there before the press conference, eyeing this show very critically. And of course, I don't, know that Handy & Harman's name was even on it. It was—

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. They were the people who had sponsored it?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right. Right. And then—

ROBERT BROWN: And who was the curator at the Metropolitan that, with whom you worked?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Tone Mann [ph].

ROBERT BROWN: Would it have been Robert Hale—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No. No. I have a letter from him in my files, asking me if I would be interested in selling a piece of my work for their collection. And I wrote back and said whenever I got a piece I thought was good enough, I would let him know. [00:10:05] But I never did. Because I couldn't do that, somehow.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, Emily Nathan had something of an entre at the Met, but—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: —the question arises, why was the Museum of Modern Art not approached? Because it was beginning to show some contemporary design things by then. Did that occur to you?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I think it was because of the enormous amount of handwrought silver historical works that the Met owned, that we thought it was a better place, A, and I believe Kaufmann was at the modern museum.

ROBERT BROWN: Edgar Kaufmann.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: While Rene d'Harnoncourt and I often talked to him about our projects. Kaufmann was a real industrial man, his attitudes were design and industry, and that's what they were building up. D'Harnoncourt was also very questioning about a place in this particular time, we're talking about 1947, or before that even, '45 I'd talked to d'Harnoncourt. And he was very much into this industrial design, he felt that this country would go completely in that direction, that perhaps there was no place for craftsmen who wished to work things by hand. [00:12:10] And he said so, he talked about small industries, he could see that, but then, I always loved it, he got out of his desk at the end of our discussion, and the debate, I might say, all I could say, you know, was defend the fact that a hand wrought piece did something for your soul, [laughs] as well as your dinner table, or wherever you—a useful object wherever you were using it. And he took out of his desk drawer

the most beautiful hairpin, it was made someplace in Africa, by hand, and it was obviously a hand bought piece. And he did this with such loving care, and he enjoyed this piece so much that you knew that if you stayed with him and talked to him long enough, he would be a good backer for any good silversmith. I remember taking that hair ornament down, and having a good photograph made, and returning it with, his hairpin with a photograph, because I said somebody, you might want to use that photograph. [00:14:00] But he was a man of unusual sensitivity, you know, he was an artist himself. And—

ROBERT BROWN: But you simply didn't have the time or the occasion to completely convince him that the Museum of Modern Art might?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I think he was testing me to see where I really thought my program, our work, was going. Was it going into the commercial silver companies, really? Or was it possible for someone to work in metal as others worked in stone, or paint, or whatever? I think he had a very inquisitive mind, and he was highly critical, he was very, very nice, I believe he sat in on one of our committee of selections. If he didn't, Edgar Kaufmann did.

ROBERT BROWN: The committee of selection for the—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Conferees, they had to apply for a place at the conference, and then a committee.

ROBERT BROWN: What was Kaufmann like to work with?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Very nice. He had very distinct taste, who wouldn't? He probably, by that time, was living in his Frank Lloyd Wright house. [Laughs.] But, his department was, he was especially interested in industrial design, and the development of it. And it was a wonderful time for the museum to be doing that.

ROBERT BROWN: But you felt that with that industrial design cast, it might, in time, industry might sort of overwhelm the handwrought? [00:16:03]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well I just felt that, I just felt mostly that the Met was a more compatible atmosphere for it.

ROBERT BROWN: For them though too, you had quite a gap between your exhibition of contemporary work and their handwrought collections. They were—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —more antique, weren't they?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yeah, all the museums at that time prided themselves on cutting everything off in 1830. I don't know why 1830 instead of 1840, or '50, but most of them said oh, we don't collect anything after 1830.

ROBERT BROWN: What was the impact at the Met, and on the public, of *Form and Handwrought Silver*?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well I don't remember, we didn't count noses at that [laughs] time. But I was always fighting with museums, because as I moved around the country, I always went to a museum, I always talked to the director, if I could get in, and talked about silver as an art medium. And I received some very strange and funny answers, like, what would we be doing with silver, who would clean it? And then, of course, I came upon Cleveland very early in my career, Dr. Milliken was a rare individual who liked all the arts, and paid particular attention to the decorative arts, both historical and contemporary. His May show was extremely popular, and I never liked to stand in line, but I enjoyed standing in line for that. [00:18:08] I was in a block long line to get into the museum, to the opening, to what they called the preview of the opening. It had been previewed the night before, but this was the public preview. The contemporary May show, which included all the crafts. And yeah, I—

ROBERT BROWN: But he was exceptional, wasn't he, among directors at that time?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, I tried so hard to get that man an award of some kind, because no one ever paid any mind to this. For one thing, his exhibition was limited to the people who had worked in Cleveland, or lived, I mean you know, in the area, and it was an area show. And that was probably what it was, he kept his own fire burning, as it were. But, he was a marvelous man.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you get to know him a bit?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh yes. Then I was invited to be on his major juries every other year for four or five years. And that brings us to *en résille*, when we're ready to talk about that rare kind of enamel.

ROBERT BROWN: And that gets you to when, the '60s or so?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, that, what about time? I'm glad I don't think about time. But there are times when I need it. [00:20:00] Oh, '50. Let's see. Probably early '50s.

ROBERT BROWN: The—sure there were some people from who you got reactions about that show at the Metropolitan, weren't there?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well I joined, going up in the elevator, there was a wonderful poster made with I think Fred Miller's pitcher on it. And it was just plain as could be. And someone said in the elevator, "Well that's pretty plain looking stuff, should we go see it?" And another woman, wise in silver, said, "Well, you know, some of the early American silver is also plain." I gave her a star right away.

ROBERT BROWN: But apparently it did get good reviews?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, Emily Genauer reviewed it, as I remember. Oh, of course the Met could have anything it wanted in the way of coverage. And it was certainly important to their conference, because the minute that it was mentioned that conferees' works were shown in the Metropolitan, we never had any trouble getting conferees. We never had real trouble except the first year, and that was difficult. Because, well, everything was new.

ROBERT BROWN: And even finding people, you said?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: The American Federation of Arts then arranged a tour of that exhibition, is that right? [00:22:00] There was a national tour, I believe.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: They did. And then the State Department bought it, and it went international.

ROBERT BROWN: They actually bought it? Was this a fairly unusual thing for them to do?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well they bought the pieces. And that came back to this country after I left Handy & Harman, and it was dismembered by my coworker Helen Volver.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean at the ending, huh?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right. I don't know whether the State Department sent the whole thing back to her, or not.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you ever hear what impact the tour of the show had?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: In Europe?

ROBERT BROWN: There and here.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, it had a big impact here. We got a lot of letters, and we had made a movie, you know, at the first conference, talking about working day and night, and night and day, and the movie was often used with this. And that was a powerful impact.

ROBERT BROWN: Was this the movie *Handwrought Silver*?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh yes, this was how to make a silver bowl, it was done in color, it was done by two men who invented a camera, and it was called the Lamperts cope [ph]—or Dr. Lampert. He was a surgeon who operated on the bone behind the ear, people, the doctors up in the gallery couldn't see a thing, because it was such a small, small incision. [00:24:05] One quarter inch square, I believe. So, he talked Rene Gruau into inventing a camera, or a system, so this could be thrown on the screen. And the doctors in the gallery could see everything he was doing. He not only did that, but he did it in such a way that they could see this operation from the surgeon's point of view, actual point of view, his hands could be their hands, that was doing the surgery.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, was the camera mounted on his head?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, it was done with mirrors.

ROBERT BROWN: Mirrors. And so you had done—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well there may have been a mirror on his head too. Probably was.

ROBERT BROWN: You adapted that then for the making of this film showing—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, a Dutch doctor came to our house for dinner, he was very enthusiastic, he'd just been to see this operation, and he was so impressed with this movie. It just happened at this time, Mr. Niemeyer, the president of Handy & Harman, thought there should be a movie of ours blended work. And we had only entertained the idea briefly, because the movies I had seen were pretty awful. And such as, one man came up with a script, Miss Craver gets in the taxi, Miss Craver goes to the—blah, blah, blah, and Miss Craver does this and that. [00:26:05] And this was nothing I had in mind. And we threw that out. I was worried about getting that thrown out, because this man wanted to work for Handy & Harman very much. But Mr. Niemeyer was very wise, and was always giving anybody their head that he believed in. So we threw that man out, and this, you wouldn't hardly believe this, it was within a day or a few hours after getting rid of that movie maker, that this one dropped in our laps, and of course I couldn't wait to talk to him to see if he'd be interested in doing a craft film. He not only was interested, he had done a, already started a series, one woodworking. And he wanted to do pottery and weaving.

ROBERT BROWN: Using this camera?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Using this camera. And it couldn't be more wonderful, I was so thrilled I could hardly believe it. And when I say the results, I'm still thrilled when I see this movie, if I can find a copy. Because you can see what the hammer actually does, you can see that it just washes that metal, and it's just a remarkable thing, even to this day. Strangely enough, of course, all the conferees used it, and departments that had metalwork, but it was used many, many, many times more by seventh graders, seventh and eighth—sixth and seventh graders who were into a series of how things were made. And the movie was shipped to schools all over the country. [00:28:03] Which was a surprise market to us, we had no idea it'd go beyond art schools, and people with especially interest in it.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you able, or was Handy & Harman able over the years to see how it, indirectly at least, influenced people to go on in metalworking?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No. We, you see, I married and left the company, and we weren't very great anyway at getting results, and summing things up. We could have done that, but it would have taken an enormous amount of time. And there was always so much to do, because I knew that this was the great and golden opportunity of a lifetime, and I wanted to use every minute, every dollar, every penny, going forward, I believed in the results, or I couldn't have done that?

ROBERT BROWN: Going forward, what, with the conferences you mean?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well with anything that was good for the metalworker, who at that time was called a silversmith.

ROBERT BROWN: In other words the movie, for you, was just one aspect. You were pleased with it, but you were proceeding on several fronts.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh yeah. Oh yes. Oh yes, all kinds of things. You know, more exhibits, more demonstrations, more of everything.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, when was the next *Living Silver* done? Was that done fairly soon?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Strangely, not [laughs]—that sounds very old fashioned, no. Yes, we did that, I believe within a year. And I had a wonderful time, I spent two weeks at the Metropolitan, the whole day for two weeks. [00:30:03] And it was just glorious. But—

ROBERT BROWN: But that was a film of contemporary silver.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No.

ROBERT BROWN: No?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: This was a film to show you what handwrought silver was, to be exact. That was the reason for it. And of course, we started with very early pieces, and I remember in the Egyptian storeroom, being the first to unroll a big bale, if you call it that, of linen that was about 4,000 years old, and we wanted to use it as a backdrop for something we were photographing. And I got goosebumps unrolling [laughs] that linen that was 4,000 years old. [They laugh.]

ROBERT BROWN: Especially [inaudible].

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: And then we had some Chinese pieces, and we had a wonderful time arguing with

the curator about whether or not we could clean it, because he didn't want it cleaned, and we wanted it to look like silver.

ROBERT BROWN: Who prevailed?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I think we used it black, finally. I think he won that round.

ROBERT BROWN: He was worried about the risk, or he wanted to preserve the—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, well he felt that it was very old, that it was a very fine piece, and to take the oxidation off would mean they would then have to keep it clean, and in the keeping of it clean, it would gradually wear down. It was a wonderful ladle, and it wouldn't have worn away for another million years, but I could understand his feeling about that. [00:32:04] So, we finally used it as it was. But the blurb is what's old fashioned, it—and we really moved in rather heavily on, well [laughs] what handwrought silver was. And now, I think—

ROBERT BROWN: You mean you were very—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —it seems redundant.

ROBERT BROWN: —you were very detailed, you reiterated, and—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I haven't seen it since you and I saw it over at the Met, over at the Boston museum. But it seemed a little old-fashioned. But the other film, the training film, will be just as good 200 years from now as it was the day we made it, I was pleased to see.

ROBERT BROWN: The same times, you say this was just one little part of what you were doing. I think in late 1948, you went back to Scandinavia? On a trip.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: What was the purpose of that?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, I was always going back to study, and study I did.

ROBERT BROWN: What did you study, or with whom?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, well I went back to Baron Fleming's shop again.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you recall what you concentrated on then?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Let me see. At that time, I made the liqueur cup, and made the tools for it, which the National History Museum wants. And—

ROBERT BROWN: You made them because you would need very specialized tools, and you wanted to have ones of your own thereafter?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh yes, you always made your own tools, Bob. Seldom, I have a backlog now, and probably if I were doing hollowware now, I would be designing around my basic tools. [00:34:04] Not deliberately, but unconsciously. But I'd be sure to have to make one tool. Because you get so involved in a design that you want it to be, you want to express yourself somehow or other. And if you don't have a tool, you know, you make one. I was over there just last week, making a tool.

ROBERT BROWN: Now did you learn out of his working, how to make tools? Was this you learned here and there over the years?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Most of my tool work, I did at the Metropolitan, under Heinrich, Leonard Heinrich. I think—

ROBERT BROWN: That was about the same time, wasn't it, you were learning?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —we mentioned that.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, Heinrich was the chief—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Armorer.

ROBERT BROWN: —armorer, or the conservator there of their armor collection.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: Right.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Although I did learn how to make, I watched tools being made wherever I studied.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have to have additional equipment to make tools?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, we [laughs] junkyards furnished our equipment, as a rule. Once in a while, for that particular liqueur cup, I did use one very good piece of steel, and hardened it, because it had to cut. It was a cutter to put the design in the edge. At that time, I thought I was going to make a dozen of these liqueur cups. I was lucky to get one done, and not really, I would have died if I hadn't gotten one done. But once an idea is finished, it's very hard for me to make two of anything, that's the reason I've avoided making cufflinks, and earrings, a few things like that. [00:36:00]

ROBERT BROWN: You were never meant to be a production silversmith.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, I tried tricking myself by working two at a time. And that slowed me up a great deal, you see, even when I was doing it, in the process. And I had the lure of finding whether it was going to work or not, and whether I was going to like it or not. Whether it was going to be mediocre, or whether it was going to be a piece of prose that turned into poetry. [Laughs.] You know? That cutter left a thickened edge, which I had been careful to develop as I raised the form. But it put the two grooves below the thickened edge.

ROBERT BROWN: Just below the rim?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right. So—

ROBERT BROWN: Extremely elegant piece, parted on what the arcs, four arcs, and then in the midst of which, there's a sphere.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: This sphere is movable. So if you wanted another drink, you could ring for it. Or, if you were getting delirium tremens, you could have advanced notice.

ROBERT BROWN: [Laughs.] How big is that piece?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: That's—Well, that's a small piece, that's not more than, I would say, three inches at the outside, it even has, the base is a little dome.

ROBERT BROWN: What did you have in mind in doing it? I mean apart from the utilitarian need.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, I'm as bad as Picasso, I just start out and it just grows. When I first read, he had said he never has anything in mind, he just goes to the, to his studio, and here's the paint, and begins to be put together. I thought oh, he's crazy, I don't believe that. [00:38:02] But then I thought about it, and I do believe it. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: And in fact, that's what—do you think the form may have been at all affected by the sort of classical work that Fleming's workshop did? Remember, we discussed it earlier [inaudible].

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well I know, everybody thinks my work has a Scandinavian influence, but I never felt that. I felt it was, they were just seeing something modern, and you know, there's an enormous amount of time between my work and the last craftsmen, last American craftsmen to work in this country. We were talking about Per Smed, he was Norwegian, we talked about Mr. Stone, he was English. I don't know who the last craftsman was.

ROBERT BROWN: Well those were people who were really, they were very much older than you, and were at the end of their careers when you first—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: Right. So there had been quite a gap.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

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ROBERT BROWN: Continuing the interview of January 17, 1984 with Margret Craver Withers.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: How would you compare the effect of that Scandinavian study trip in '48, '49 with the impact it had on you in '38, when you first went in the summer of '38 to study with Baron Fleming?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: In '38, I was a beginner. Uh, I made the bonbon box in 1938 there. Um, I was a true—well, I'd made a teapot and a few things like that, uh, but then, when I went in '48, '49, whichever it was—I knew how to move metal, you know. I, um—I did that. I did also that year an 18-inch silver bowl. That's an enormous bowl for a woman to do. Um—

ROBERT BROWN: Because of the weight, holding it?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. It's so heavy to hold while you work on it. The base I finished after I got home, but I did the bowl completely in Sweden, and then that was stolen from my studio here in Boston, along with some other parts of my life and work.

ROBERT BROWN: So you were able to carry it a little further and perfect some things you already had in motion, but—when you went back in the late '40s. [00:02:01]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, it did more than that, you know, to get away from the routine of Handy & Harman, and just be able to sit down and work, oh, completely out of the atmosphere, out of the country. Nobody could [laughs] reach me except my secretary. But, um, and be in the milieu of a good craft shop is always very thrilling: the sound of the hammers, and the purr of the polish motor, the odors of metal, the colors that the metallist moves from the acid vat back to the bench. Their shop was kept as clean as this apartment. Uh, it was scrubbed down every night. Every bench was scrubbed, so every tool was completely put away. Uh, the floor was scrubbed. Uh, it was spotless, and a wonderful place to work.

ROBERT BROWN: About that time, you—in New York you studied with a Dr. Puff [ph], or Pow [ph], at the American Museum of Natural History Gems.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes, Dr. Pough, P-O-U-G-H. Well, Dr. Pough is still a gemologist. He was also a volcanologist, if that's what you call someone who studied volcanos. And he was very interested in the volcano that, at that time, that just grew up out of a farmer's field in Mexico. [00:04:00] But he also was a great gemologist.

ROBERT BROWN: Why did you go to him? Did you have a growing interest in setting gems?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, well, I always set gems, and I thought sooner or later I was going to put pressure on a gem that would fracture it, because I felt I didn't know enough about the laws of crystallography. Um, he was very good, and he was very interested. I was going with a group of people, part of the time, anyway, that wanted to become experts in gem identification, so we were going through the whole business: specific gravity, all the tests, and so forth. And the only trouble with that was, whether I was studying with Heinrich at the Met or Dr. Pough at the Natural History or wherever, there never was enough time. [Laughs.] He had the most exciting thing one day when I went to talk about this. On his table in his glorious, big office was a bolt of the most beautiful shade of golden green silk, and in front of this bulk—bolt of silk—

ROBERT BROWN: Golden green silk?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Wrought silk. In front of this bolt was a piece of gem material called brazilianite, and in front of that were two brazilianites that had been faceted. And here was a real supply, at that time, of brazilianite. [00:06:00] That's all they found in Brazil. They shipped it to him. He had two stones packed: one the museum was to keep; the other was to go back to the president. And he had had this silk dyed to match the stone for the president's wife. So, oh, I always saw something exciting up there.

ROBERT BROWN: This showed you even more of the potential of gems, this time with him.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, well, who—you know, there are such glorious colors in the gem world, and to say nothing of the crystals that grow natural.

ROBERT BROWN: When you have, uh, your metal, but you also have a gem, does this sort of split your ideas in two tracks—what can I do with the gem; what can I do with the metal—when it comes to designing?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, are you talking about gem cutting? Because I did some gem cutting.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, not that particularly, but once it's cut, incorporating it into—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —oh.

ROBERT BROWN: —a metal piece.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, well, I often sketched the whole thing in a gem paper. I'd open the gem paper and see this gem, and there would come the whole idea. I had—

ROBERT BROWN: You'd sketch it in your mind.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, I'd just put it right in the gem paper. I just sketched it right inside. They have little foldup papers so that gems won't get lost, and I would just quick do it right there on the paper.

ROBERT BROWN: Was that—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: You know, like Lincoln did his address on the back of an envelope.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, yes. [Laughs.] Was—in your mind, were the—when you did things using gems, did the metal become subsidiary, or, let's say—that's perhaps too extreme—did it become—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, uh, this—

ROBERT BROWN: —supportive of the gem?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: This had to be a total thing. You know, when you've got the two, there's—there should be a relationship, color-wise and whatnot. [00:08:04] I grew quite bored with faceted gems because it—I felt they were not completely at home in other than architectural types of settings, or settings that reflected the cutting, and that's the reason I started cutting my own for a while.

ROBERT BROWN: And you made more eccentric cuts, not regular—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —faceted ones.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Irregular?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, and cuts that were, um, smooth, or clear on the top, polished on the top, and frosty on the back, that made it look like a mist was coming up through them, and forms on the back that would show through, and odd shapes, if there were turquoise or malachite or hematite around, those things.

ROBERT BROWN: Then you were married by 1950 or so? And—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Fifty.

ROBERT BROWN: —decided that you'd no longer be full-time with Handy & Harman. Was it the simple—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well—

ROBERT BROWN: —reason that you were going to live up here in Massachusetts?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right. Um, with Charles then the president of the Towle Silversmith, I had to move to, uh, New England rather definitely. [They laugh.] I was advisor, um, for a while to the department, but, um, I think the companies—and I believe I mentioned this—deciding to, um, cut out all small orders, handle—the small orders would be handled through dealers—spelled the end of the department, because we were advisors to buyers and so forth, craftsmen. [00:10:18]

ROBERT BROWN: And Handy & Harman felt they had done their part, in terms of publicity and films and that sort of thing.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, um—

ROBERT BROWN: They still weren't through with the conferences, though. They were continued for a bit longer.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, they—but they were under my aegis, that—those I've stayed very close to.

Um, but other works I didn't.

ROBERT BROWN: The, um, conferences, the last three conferences, were School for American Craftsmen.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: How did that come about? Was that—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Um—

ROBERT BROWN: Did they approach you, or how did that—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, they did, Mrs. Webb.

ROBERT BROWN: Mrs. Aileen Osborn Webb—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: —who was the power there, American Craftsmen's Council.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right. She was the power of everything: America House, the museum.

ROBERT BROWN: She came to you, and—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, she came to Mr. Niemeyer, really. Whenever she wanted [laughs] anything, she went to Mr. Niemeyer, and then he would call up and say, "Shall we do it?"

ROBERT BROWN: And what did you think of the idea?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, it was all right with me if they wanted to establish a studio we could work in, and some facilities for exhibition. [00:11:58] They made all kinds of promises, um, which they did not keep, so we locked horns in no uncertain term. Um, because I didn't—I wasn't developing a year—this took a whole year to develop one of these conferences, um, and I wasn't about to let it go down the drain because the head of that school didn't think it was important that I have all the things I asked for.

ROBERT BROWN: By this time, was the school in Rochester?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: So how did you finally resolve that?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, if we weren't on tape my language might be a little stronger. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Well, please express it as you can.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I first talked it over with the director, and he said, "Well, yes, we had hoped to get those cases ready." I wanted, and had gotten, the conferees'—a few conferees' pieces from the year before. I wanted those on exhibition before the new conference opened, and, oh, a whole lot of technical data. I wanted in cases that they could study on their own, and we wouldn't have to include it in the classwork—

ROBERT BROWN: Because you meant for the classwork to be hands-on work, other than—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, yes, and to move very controlled, and, uh, move forward with a certain amount of speed.

ROBERT BROWN: Good deal of momentum, right.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right. Right. So we had to take things in our own hands a bit. [00:14:02] And then I went over and talked to the head of the Rochester Institute, and that helped.

ROBERT BROWN: The science museum, as well? So the—oh, the technology—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, no, this was—

ROBERT BROWN: —Rochester Institute of Technology.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right. He was a nice man, understandable.

ROBERT BROWN: And he got things done for you.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: So it began in rather rocky fashion, huh? [Laughs.]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Very. Very, because the director had invited some people to join my conference, so the first thing they had to do was throw them out.

ROBERT BROWN: People that you didn't think—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, there was one there that was a terribly nice man—I won't name him—and—but he didn't need that training, to begin with. And we're good friends, but this man had no right to offer openings that might come.

ROBERT BROWN: What was the mechanism by which you got conferees now? You had a jury, right, that would screen them?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, we mailed out folders to colleges, announcing the competition for space.

ROBERT BROWN: And then who were the jurors? Were you—can you remember some of those people?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: The committee of selection. Oh, we had a sculptor. We had someone from a museum. We had nearly always someone—there was always someone from the museum. Teachers. Educators. Uh—

ROBERT BROWN: And would they meet in New York?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And in—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Mr. Withers—Mr. [laughs]—Mr. Niemeyer gave them a gorgeous dinner at the Waldorf Astoria. That was his idea of a heavenly, you know—a wonderful place. He and Philippe would discuss the menu. [00:16:00] I never had to bother with that. And it was all very nice and pleasant.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have a role in selecting the sculptor or the designer?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes, that was my responsibility.

ROBERT BROWN: So you got to know some of—you developed a fairly broad acquaintance with the jurors, did you?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, yes. People are always very interested in a program, you know, that was going on.

ROBERT BROWN: What kind of fine artists, so called, would you want to have as a juror of prospective metalworking students? Did you look for particular qualities in that sculptor's work?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Ah. They sent photographs of what they were doing. If they were potters—we had Carlton Ball. You know, I think I mentioned that. He was a potter. And if we—but they had to send photographs of their own private work. They had to be teachers, to begin with.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, these are the jurors, I'm asking about.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, no. These are conferees I was into. Oh, the jurors were just people of taste and intelligence that could look down a list and look at the photographs and decide. They were always hard to come by because so few people knew about decorative arts, and fewer still knew a thing about the contemporary decorative arts.

ROBERT BROWN: But you said, for example, one was a sculptor. Would this be an exception among sculptors, someone who would know how—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, it was.

ROBERT BROWN: Who was it? Do you remember the—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, it was—it was Cecil Howard. He had done a portrait—

ROBERT BROWN: Cecil Howard, yeah. [00:18:00]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —of Mr. Niemeyer for the gold box that was given to him by Handy & Harman for his 50th anniversary with the company. So he had Mr. Niemeyer pose in his studio. But I had known him for quite some time. He worked mostly in Paris, was quite traditional—

ROBERT BROWN: But did he have a—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —a sculptor.

ROBERT BROWN: —broad acquaintance with contemporary art? I assume he might have, living in Paris.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, he was interested in things he handled, and was a very sensitive man. Paul Manship, and—I should look down that list. I probably would be very impressed that that many people [laughs] would come look at the material and have a good dinner.

ROBERT BROWN: But for them, this was still fairly a new area, wasn't it?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: For sculptors there—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —or even many of the museum people you had as jurors.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. But we couldn't get great silversmiths, because there weren't any. And we didn't want to import them from Europe.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, you would do that, because the principal teacher might be an imported person, right? Once—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes, we had to get our people from Europe. There just weren't any people working, using the material as an art medium.

ROBERT BROWN: Did the exhibit—or the conferences in Rochester finally work out quite well?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, very. Oh, yes. Oh, yes. It just took a—

ROBERT BROWN: A little while. [00:20:00]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —a Simon Legree attitude for a while.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, and Mrs. Webb was always supportive of these things, was she? She sort of stayed back from that.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, she was supportive of her director, and—but all I had to do was talk to Mr. Niemeyer, because she had great regard for Mr. Niemeyer.

ROBERT BROWN: One year at Rochester you borrowed silver objects from Yale University.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: What was the reason for that?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: We had a good time doing that. Well, same old story: we were trying to get museums to show contemporary silver with their good silver, and Rochester had a very good collection, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Of older silver?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes. And they were willing to put on this very nice show, which was very pleasant for us. We helped in that we borrowed very early American things, and rare things, like John Coney, and a few pieces from John Marshall Phillips, who was famous for his taste in American silver collecting.

ROBERT BROWN: And a teacher and curator at Yale.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right. Terribly nice man.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, you said that you became, as a result of this encounter, quite a good friend of his.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. After he died, I had a letter from him that he had written just before he died, and I think I probably still have that letter, or you have it at the Archives. [00:22:03] [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: At the—what was the basis, really, for your friendship, or for your common interests?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, we both—I loved the stories he told about where he got his things, and one story—he was in England during the war as a GI, and he was scrounging around for American silver, and he found quite a good many pieces, which he bought for Yale at even then not very cheap prices. But the English people were the collectors of good early American silver. That's where our good silver went. And he was aware of this—well, became aware of this while he was stationed over there. Well, then, there was all kinds of stories, and one time we picked up a tankard. It was during the selection of these pieces for the Rochester Museum. And we found—I found it had a false bottom in it. And this thrilled him, because he couldn't figure out why—I couldn't either, but—why it had a false base in it. Well, he was a man of great taste, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Did he speak at the conference, or—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I'm sure he was invited, but I think he didn't get to do that. But we urged all conferees to certainly get to Yale to see that collection. There's where I learned an enormous amount, because one time they had one piece of American silver right beside one piece of English silver. [00:24:08] And suddenly my good horse sense told me that one reason the early American silver was so plain and strong, I always liked to describe it, was because the American silversmith was just limited in his tools. Now, you see in an old shop these tools last forever, and the tools I sent down to Washington were copies of late 17th-century tools, that they were taken care of. You know, they'd go on and on. So the Americans, they couldn't have brought very many with them, although John Coney had a long list, and I should be careful what I say. Kathryn Buhler would be able to answer that for us right off the top of her head. But they had to make their tools over here, and that took time. And part of that was, I think—part of the simplicity of the early American thing—was due to tools, as well as rejection of the decorative forms used by royalty and the monarchy.

ROBERT BROWN: And possibly they just weren't all that aware of everything that was being done in Europe. There was this factor of great distance.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right. [00:25:56]

ROBERT BROWN: Well, was that conference in which you had the exhibition from Yale, was that a particular success, or how—was it—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, there again, there was—that was not the day of nose-counting in museums, but the museum was very pleased. They had a simple opening. They had—it was done in a very interesting way. They had, as I remember, one large case. They had beautiful cases, and all kinds of space and equipment. We were never crowded. And one was a lady in costume, serving tea, and everything on that tea table was made by a Rochester silversmith. And this was very flattering, you know, A, to the museum, and the people who were interested in the museum. They had one case of Rochester silversmiths, by the way. Old ones.

ROBERT BROWN: How was the effect on the School for American Craftsmen? Could you tell? They were bringing in some masters from Europe to teach. Did these conferences help further their silversmithing program?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I think that and John Prip, you know. He went there early on.

ROBERT BROWN: Because he was there by then, wasn't he?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Mrs. Webb came down and asked me who to get to teach, and she wondered why we couldn't use an American, so that was easy to work out. And I gave her some names of people that might teach in her school. [00:28:07] That was just—

ROBERT BROWN: And you suggested several Europeans, you gave her.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Because you felt there were no Americans, so at that point—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, at that time there just weren't any real pros, because the people were brought over, you know, were real pros. They had years and years and years of work.

ROBERT BROWN: They'd been brought up in a thorough apprentice system.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it this conf—the conference about 1951 was, I guess, the last of them, wasn't it?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: It was in Rochester. And about that time Fred Miller in Cleveland, who was certainly coming along, and a very promising person, wasn't he, had wrote you saying that he was sorry it was the last conference, and then he points out that you—probably no one else could have furthered the appreciation of handwrought silver as much as you did.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I think that's very polite of him to [laughs] write that letter.

ROBERT BROWN: And you wrote back. I mean, weren't you at a pretty pivotal position? With the Handy & Harman—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well—

ROBERT BROWN: —connection, with your training in Europe?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, I—

ROBERT BROWN: With your many contacts?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —I knew the sense of power, but I also knew that you had to control what you were doing, and keep your eye on your objective, or you could waste your time a lot, because, you know, I was invited to speak all over the world, and while that was flattering, that wasn't helping me do what I wanted to do, in a way, of furthering the training of American silversmiths. [00:29:59] I promptly learned that, early and soon, out in Wichita, Kansas, because Mrs. Schollenberger was not a professional, but, you know, she was the boss of that museum, and she would never let any of us go out and give talks. If anybody wanted to hear a talk, they came to the museum, where—and she set this policy, and it made so much sense, that I felt the same. And she seldom asked us to give a talk for the entertainment of people, or if she did it had young people in it, and teachers, or somebody that would help, A, the museum and the museum school, [phone rings] there in Wichita. So she was a very wise woman.

ROBERT BROWN: And Miller perhaps, and very politely, indicating that you carried on with singlemindedness, and that was your real strength.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, as I say, that's very nice of him to say. [Laughs.] He's a wonderful craftsman, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: About that time, though, he also wrote you and—saying maybe there—that conferences aren't the—no longer needed as much as they had been, or at least as the way they'd devolved. He felt that conf—

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: —twenty-four, 1985, continuing the interview in Boston with Margret Craver.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: —side, please.

[Audio Break.]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, the conferees were given a great deal of freedom, so if they wasted their time talking they were on their own. We never pressured them. We never let time get away, though. [00:32:00] We had a very hidden schedule, but it was there. Certain demonstrations had to be done on certain days in order to keep this—always keep advance of their needs. The lectures I think were very wise. They were never more than an hour long, and if we—anything, I thought we had too few of them. We probably had only three or four in the whole month, but they were important metallurgists, or important lectures.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, again, Miller, as, I guess, a recent student of a conference, laments the dislike that most of his fellow craftsmen seem to have of a discussion of technical matters, and—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: They didn't like the technical discussions?

ROBERT BROWN: Or it seems to imply. And—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, that's all the conference was. I—maybe we're reading it wrong, because we

—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, maybe he's speaking of craftsmen in general, not simply at the conference, at a conference itself.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Mm. I, I have a feeling he might have been.

ROBERT BROWN: And he felt that at the conferences there should be more demonstrations, or maybe not just at the conferences, elsewhere, by skilled Europeans, and he reiterates, "and no talk." [They laugh.]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well—

ROBERT BROWN: Perhaps that's what he—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: He was an excellent conferee. Needless to say, he had a good knowledge of jewelry-making, a good knowledge of design before he came, and he walked right into that, as well as John Paul Miller, as well as all the rest of them. [00:34:04] We didn't have very many losses in what ended up in being about 60 people. The losses were very few. By that—and I'm—I don't mean people didn't care about it. One man came with the idea that he was retiring the next year, and he wanted something to do. Well, needless to say, he wasn't going to tell us that, and that—I considered him a loss, because that's not why we were doing the conference.

ROBERT BROWN: And he pretty soon petered out?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, he kept on with his work, but he was an older man who we discussed whether we should [laughs] invite such an old man. He was probably 55. [Laughs.] And after that, we probably lowered the age limit, because we didn't want to waste our money on people that were not going to share it with students.

ROBERT BROWN: I wanted to ask about several allied things with broader topics. One was the—and it's not simply this particular time—the American Craftsmen's Council. Had you been involved with it before you were directly involved with Mrs. Webb and the conferences? Had you been involved with it in New York or elsewhere?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I have never been, ever.

ROBERT BROWN: You never have been, and you never were then, either.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No. No.

ROBERT BROWN: You must have been aware of it, of course, in the '40s, the 1940s.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Um—

ROBERT BROWN: Or was it—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: It was a small—it was a small group, with good ideas. [00:36:02] But they were just beginning. Now, America House was probably the most powerful unit in the beginning, because they were selling objects of craftsmen—admittedly, many of them were home, the home crafts, and jelly, and soap, and [they laugh] I don't know what all.

ROBERT BROWN: It was quite a muddle, the inventory, wasn't it?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, but you have to admit it was kind of great, that it started this way, with potholders and all of these things, and then grew into something special. And Mrs. Webb saw to that. She was head of it, you know, all the time, and she—I think it's kind of wonderful. And then, finally, it was discontinued, and all of her energy and money went into the museum.

ROBERT BROWN: The museum succeeded—in a fashion, it succeeded America House, the Museum of Contemporary Crafts.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, it was going on at the same time.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it a fairly thin reed in the beginning, the museum, before she devoted so much attention to it?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, she started out rather well. She started out in the building they sold to Modern not too long ago. And she had Tom Tibbs. Tom Tibbs was—I don't know how she found that man, but he

was a man who knew craftsmen, and knew a great deal about the history of American crafts. [00:37:58] He probably was, um, the reason for the success of that museum.

ROBERT BROWN: Did that museum have much impact in its early days, or was it sort of—people were only slowly becoming aware of contemporary crafts?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, yes, everything grows, you know, from, from beginnings. Um, he was more interested in the quality and the historical significance of crafts, the creative power of the craftsmen and their works, than he was in the publicity and that side of the thing. I know I talked to him one time with deep regret that the very first exhibition he ever did had no catalogue. In fact, I don't know that he had very many catalogues in all of his tenure there. And he was sad that he seemed not to be allowed to have catalogues. And I talked one time to Mrs. Webb about this, and I said, "You know, if you only had a catalogue for every show you do in the museum, you would have the complete story of the rebirth of the crafts, the American crafts." And I think her answer to that was, "Oh, I have to just think about where I put my money." And you had to appreciate this. It was all—it was all her money.

ROBERT BROWN: Sort of a one-person show, wasn't it?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. [00:40:00]

ROBERT BROWN: The—you must have been aware at that time, certainly by the early '50s, the controversies as to crafts as an artform, as opposed to crafts as a combination of utility and beauty, an object of use?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, I know. I always think of Edgar Kaufman when I think of that, and form follows function, etc. But that was normal, a normal cycle, and, as all cycles and all pendulums, they have to go so far before they come back. This never bothered me. I thought everybody had to work out their own problems.

ROBERT BROWN: So it never touched you very directly.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I don't think so. I was too busy. One person, not a metalworker, that we should certainly mention, and she was not a dyed-in-the-wool handcraftsman—she was a handcraftsman—Dorothy Liebes, the weaver, she started out as a handcraftsman and then branched out into all kinds of designing for mills and wallpaper companies, [laughs] and all kinds of things.

ROBERT BROWN: Was she a friend of yours at that time?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: But she was a big force. Well, I can't say we were old friends. We met on juries, and had very great differences of opinion, but that's what's good about juries, if there's anything good about juries. [00:41:57] Because—she was about to throw out an enamel because it was not the popular color of the season. This is in the later part of her designing for the industry and textile mills for costume, and so forth, and decorators, and orange was the color of the year. And this was very difficult for me. I had no objection to orange, but [laughs] I felt we weren't there for that reason.

ROBERT BROWN: And you were seeing a gifted designer seemingly being affected by the market predilections.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, if you're designing for industry, that's one of your criteria.

ROBERT BROWN: Sure it.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: But when we met, we were judging crafts.

ROBERT BROWN: Is this for exhibition, for an exhibition?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. This was one of the—I was on one of the contemporary craft juries.

ROBERT BROWN: At the Museum of Contemporary Crafts?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. I probably was on more than one; I forget that part.

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ROBERT BROWN: —January 24, 1985.

[Audio Break.]

—continuing interviews with Margret Craver in Boston, and today we're going to talk first about her development, I guess, rediscovery of the *en résille* technique. When did you do that, and perhaps you can

explain a bit what it is? When did you first—how did you learn about it?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I really learned it in an empirical way, which is very difficult for me because otherwise I had studied metallurgy, I had studied art and so forth, there was no one who knew a thing about *en résille* because it was first done in Paris in 1620, and according to the historian it only lasted 10 years. After I worked on it for 13 I decided I decided I knew why it only lasted 10 because it was so very tedious. It's the most brilliant of all the enamels because the background is only glass. This doesn't show, but the black background is clear, and all of the enamel and gold and the platinum merely floats on the top, so it's a very jewel-like technique. This one is owned by Cleveland. It's the first one I ever saw. It made such a marvelous impression on me that I thought if I were an enameler this is what I'd want to do.

ROBERT BROWN: So this is an early 17th century French example.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right, and one of the very best in the world. [00:02:00]

ROBERT BROWN: You see this and get interested in the technique in the early 1950s, about that time or?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right, right, when I was asked to be on their jury a few times. Every time I'd go out I would ask to see this, and finally they took it up to the lab and opened it up, and if that had not happened I probably would still be trying to find out how to do *en résille* because you learn so much from the inside on the back of the enamel. This is brilliant and very, very beautiful.

ROBERT BROWN: You were jurying a craft show there, the May show or something?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: The May show.

ROBERT BROWN: The May Show. And this is extremely intricate, these forms. How large is this broach?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: It's about three and a quarter inches in its greatest length. So it's the largest piece I know of too in the kind that I'm most interested in, which is the domed *en résille*. There are others that are laid flat, and they nearly always warped downward.

ROBERT BROWN: Downward in a concave way.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: And they're not very beautiful, I don't think, but a lot of people like that. These are the brown ones and the finished ones. I would say, probably I've seen, well, less than a dozen, and I've been every place except behind the iron curtain. This is a fragment, but this shows you what the other looked like before it was mounted. [00:04:01] They mounted it over glass silk. Why I don't know because look how much more beautiful it is without a back, and that's what they worked so hard for is to have this enamel folding and no back, no metal back. These little gravettes are the same design. They show up in the design that I just showed you. So the same man did this evidently that did the Cleveland one. This is owned by the Victoria and Albert.

ROBERT BROWN: These forms, the rabbits and the other forms here are not on the top surface they're—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, they're floating right out on the top.

ROBERT BROWN: On the top, and it's laid onto molten or very, very hot glass?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, not hot, it's put on glass cold and then put in the oven, but this is not like a normal enameling where you put it in and take it out. You have to account for the fact that you're either working with an enamel base or a glass bass, and they must be heated up very slowly, and then the reduction of heat has to do with how they temper or how strong the glass is for the whole piece. Now you can see the back, and this shows how they curl the edges under.

ROBERT BROWN: Of the metal, of the gold?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Of the pure gold, this is pure gold, all of this, and this is what told me the story too, again, as to how they worked the gold. [00:06:07] And one time someone said that it was really a goldsmith's art not an enameler's art, and the more I try—got into this the more I realized that was absolutely true, that I was working more with the gold than I was with the enameler. There were the problems. How thick is it? How thin can you make it? How can you keep it from bubbling? All of those things were gold problems.

ROBERT BROWN: So the gold, before, is laid on top of the glass, but you've previously curled the edges of the forms in gold?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And then they have to fuse into the glass a bit?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, they just sink down.

ROBERT BROWN: Sink down into the glass.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, it's very, very simple once you get it all put together and then you put it in the kiln.

ROBERT BROWN: But you have to very gradually heat it? What is the most fragile thing, the gold or some of the enamel colors?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, the gold is the most difficult of all to work. To keep it under control and get it on the base under control, and then the base will accept it just as soon as the temperature is right. Now Evans, in her book, she's the one that wrote that this was only a 10-year activity.

ROBERT BROWN: This is Joan Evans?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, and she's the art historian. She owned this piece, and it's the most perfect piece ion existence. [00:08:07] When I saw it first it was in its original case of blue velvet, and it looked like it had just come from the jeweler's. Whoever owned that through its whole history took very good care of it. And to think it was made some time between 1620 and 1630. The pearl was perfect. Everything was perfect about this.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, is this—the glass seems to be again backed with a blue color.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, yes, that is because they made the face, instead of clear glass, as the Cleveland one I showed you first, this glass is blue, kind of a dark cobalt blue. Then underneath that, to make that brilliant, there is kind of crinkled pure silver, and that's down about one quarter of an inch beneath the surface of this. But that reflects light, and I think they could have done—well, maybe not though with the dark glass they might not have gotten the brilliance that I found was more fun to have than to put something behind it which almost reduces it to a cloisonné piece.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, yes, I can see that.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I may have a picture of one of [inaudible].

ROBERT BROWN: In fact, these pieces would only glitter and reflect if they were sort of moved away from the woman's chest, right?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: It's when the light would strike it from the side or come from behind. [00:10:04]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: And the doming, you know, helps hold the light in too. This is a spectacular piece, and I hope they will have it on view when we have the show over there in June. It's a British and American craft show at the V&A. They asked me for a piece, and I said I hoped they would take a piece *en résille* because that's where I studied, and they were very kind and helpful over there, and I would like them to see what a modern *en résille* looks like.

ROBERT BROWN: You studied with them, or you mean studied the piece?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, I just studied their pieces, and they were very generous. They would go to the vault and get them all out. They would put them on the table and walk out and leave me. I just had all the time, and they invited me to come back and so forth. This is another one of their pieces, a smaller pendant.

ROBERT BROWN: That's wonderful. The photograph from the side shows the glitter from the backing.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right, now this is a flat one, and this, I believe, is owned by the British Museum, and they like this very much.

ROBERT BROWN: It's a—isn't it?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, I think it's older. I mean, that's younger than the others, a later piece. Now I put this in just to show you how I started with the glass and the wires. I think I used silver wires, and I was very pleased with the complete freedom or at least rejection of the old designs, the Renaissance gravettes and foils and so forth. [00:12:18]

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, the others were very rigid designs, yes.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: And this pleased me to no end, but I was playing very deeply in the body, and I was using enamel as the body, and middle of the night after it had been in the kiln for 16 hours I had taken it out just before I went to bed, in the middle of the night all the way down the picture hall and in our bedroom I can hear the little ping, and it's fractured. So I learned me—well, I don't know whether this was the first lesson or not, but I had about a half galloon of these lessons. But this is one a little more successful done in 1961. It's enamel, an enamel base with enamel colors and gold.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean it's not a glass base?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, it's not done in glass.

ROBERT BROWN: And the form itself in gold, did you design that to complement the forms in the enamel?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, a man ordered a gold bowl, and I think I just started out, as you always do, on a piece of paper and worked out a design, and I wanted to [inaudible], and I wanted to be able to—the fingers, to pick it up by reaching under that finial that has the *en résille* on the top of it. [00:14:06] But this is the one that is now owned by the Metropolitan.

ROBERT BROWN: So by then—now you were able to control the results more predictably.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, yes and no. I got thinking about this, and I thought what if something happened to this enamel? I'm not really that clever with it. I'm not that capable. So I was about to say, "Well, now, this is the end of my experiments, and I think I'll go on with my own work." But it hurt my conscience a bit that if anything happened to this I just have to say, "Well, I'm sorry, I can't make another one. I don't know how." So then I stayed with it. On the back there's a complete, a mirror monogram of the owner's initials and the date, 1961 Clyde [ph]. And I believe that is my own maker's mark.

ROBERT BROWN: Are these forms you laid down gold wire to separate the enamel shapes? Does that lay down the surface of the enamel as we saw they did in the 17th century?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: This one is little flecks of gold, and it has one wire around the edge of that form.

ROBERT BROWN: But they were laid on the surface of the enamel just as the French laid theirs on the surface of the glass?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, and on the top of the left-hand side I laid turquoise colored enamel all in one swash. [00:16:04] And on the other side I put gray.

ROBERT BROWN: It's a very strong form, very simple form, isn't it, compared with that early one you should us which was—of course that was fractured too.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, this is very restrained. I had a deadline, and we call this the peanut bowl.

ROBERT BROWN: Now we're back to historical example.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, we are. This is one that's owned by the Louvre. And very strange is that rusty color, and I didn't get to study it too long. They were very kind and invited me to spend several days, but it looks very, very different. I was eager to know if they would take it apart as they British had done, and they said no, they couldn't do that. So until I could either get a very high-powered microscope, and it's amazing how many European museums do not own high-powered microscopes, and I didn't carry mine with me, so I just looked at this one.

ROBERT BROWN: What were you particularly curious about, that rusty color of the glass?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, the background.

ROBERT BROWN: And what lay behind the glass? You couldn't tell. They wouldn't open it up for you.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right. [00:18:00] This is just shows how to—the beginning of one of them looks. It's later on, something they didn't have in the 16th century, which is ceramic fiber, but in any case, first you make the form, and you can see the ledge of the glass. The glass has already been formed, and then the *en résille* parts are similar, waiting to be put in the over, and they will sink right in.

ROBERT BROWN: Does the glass melt slightly before the gold?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: The gold never melts. This is another piece, and it shows how you can put the enamel on, and now there are gold around those colors are fine gold wires in this case.

ROBERT BROWN: And you put the color in, you lay the wire on first, and then put the color in?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right, just rather a cloisonné method. I don't use this method hardly at all.

ROBERT BROWN: Some of this, the blue particularly, doesn't look as though it's on the surface, is it?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, it is.

ROBERT BROWN: It is. It's all on the surface. Now these forms that we see in these pieces, are these ones that just developed as you were working on the pieces?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, you deliberately make a form. I wanted to—as you can see I'm always trying to break away from the formal designs, and I had this one. [00:20:10] And I was using what we call liquid enamel, and I thought, well, that might do it, but it didn't do it. The color migrated, and the whole thing kind of got lost.

ROBERT BROWN: It was too liquid that it was too uncontrollable?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, it migrated for some reason or other that no other enamel had ever done. This is one of my very early pieces, and it's one of the most [laughs] elaborate, don't you know [ph]? The glass is etched, and then the black around the outer edge is put on the backside, and the front carries the pans of enamel on gold. We call this Stonehenge.

ROBERT BROWN: And then why does the handle, something above it, looks like the handle of a violin or a—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, doesn't it? Well, that's the clasp actually. The top part of that slips up and there's a hook inside. So that's the clasp on the necklace.

ROBERT BROWN: Which you made too then?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh yeah, oh yeah. No one touches my things. Now this is just a little *en résille* ready for its mounting. This is on glass and made up of little dots, little pans of color, little pans of gold with the enamel on the top. [00:22:05] There it is, one that's melted. Not a very good photograph is it?

ROBERT BROWN: Sort of pale. Now was that backed with anything? It is backed is it?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, this is backed with about an eighth of an inch underneath or more. Underneath the *en résille* is pale gray enamel that's not completely melted, so it's a little rough.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative], you knew that would happen?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I tried hard to make it happen?

ROBERT BROWN: How did you keep it cooler [inaudible]?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: That was one that I could take out of the kiln when I wanted to. It didn't have any glass involved in it. So I just watched it, and [inaudible] on just begun to melt and I took it out. This is a piece that has a design in the background. We called it time because it looks like some ancient script in the top, and the other looks like some computer, figures of some kind, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Now how was that design laid in the background?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well—

ROBERT BROWN: You worked on the back of the glass?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, no, these are two separate pieces, and one is mounted in the front of the optic, and there's a little rim right down, and then this one the back is laid with another little niche. [00:24:09] And it's closed in the back.

ROBERT BROWN: That's very effective. Did you do this sort of thing very much? Did this suggest itself as a fruitful idea?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: What sort of thing?

ROBERT BROWN: Well, I mean with two designs, one sort of vaguely a reflection of the other?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Or they're adding to the other, yeah. Well, no—

ROBERT BROWN: Because it's quite dramatic, isn't it?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —I don't think so. There's the back.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, I see, the back is simply gold, simply metal.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Now this is the one that finally turned up at Optics USA. This is before it was mounted.

ROBERT BROWN: This was at the big show in 1970. Did it get a bit of comment from that show?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, they—in the catalogue they gave it a nice color spot and photographed it in color and larger than life size, which was very effective. And this is one that I hope may go to the show at the V&A. Remains to be seen because somebody's done something to it. It traveled quite a lot. That show, you know, went to Europe, and I just missed it in Madrid, Turkey, other places, and I don't know what they've done, but they've mounted this on a piece—a quarter inch piece of plastic, and that would completely destroy a feeling of *en résille*. [00:26:06] Now, I didn't put it back on this. I don't know whether you can tell or not.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, I can.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: In the box, but that will take on whatever color you wear it with. The background will be blue over a blue dress or green over a green dress.

ROBERT BROWN: Would you do that very often? Because you—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Now I do it almost continuously.

ROBERT BROWN: Because when you pointed that out in the French—the early pieces, the one piece that had no backing, you admired that.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, I didn't see why I'd go to all that work and then make it look like an ordinary enamel. This is an interesting piece owned by an artist.

ROBERT BROWN: Sort of a tear drop or a pedant shape, oh yes. Well, your mountings are marvelous too. What do you try to have a mounting do? It seems to get plenty of room and prominence to the *en résille*. The mounting is sort of subservient, and yet it's a pretty interesting form, simple form in itself, strong form.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I try just to frame it, you know, that's all. Because if you get a fancy mounting you spoil the *en résille*.

ROBERT BROWN: Sure.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: So all I try to do is just to keep the mounting as simple as possible.

ROBERT BROWN: Was this a broach too? Was this to be worn?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, this is a broach. You see how it changes? I put on the top of this one a sprinkling of pure silver, and then after I got it out of the kiln I ground it down, and this is the only one I've ever ground down. [00:28:04] Lots of enamelers grind their enamel to make them smooth and opaque sometimes, but I didn't. I've never done that except in this one, and it seemed the gold flecks were too prominent and too much like Post Toasties. And I ground this whole thing down, and then I polished it again, but you can see how different it looks in the different lights.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh yes, yes. So you ground only the little gold flecks or the silver flecks? You didn't grind the —

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh, I went right over the whole business.

ROBERT BROWN: The whole thing?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, this is to show you what can happen? This one was kind of a strange one, but I rather liked it, and I was going to mount it. But I thought before we mounted it we should take a picture of it. And we had had a new piece of camera equipment called the flash, and we took some flash pictures, and the next morning I went over to get to work, and I looked and it was fractured, and there was nothing I could do to

eliminate that fracture, I never could get it back together.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean it was completely fractured through? Is it from one side to the other?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, you can see. Yes, it goes all the way through. So that's the reason I don't—I haven't sent many to exhibitions because I'm afraid they'd use a flashbulb. I sent one with a big notation on the promise of the director that no flashbulbs would be used on it, and I didn't get it back after the show for a long time. [00:30:07] And I called him up, and I said, "What's become of my *en résille*?" He says, "Ooh, I'm just now taking some pictures of it." And I said, "Well, not with flash I hope." "Oh," he says, "Well, I just have." So if he got by with it he was very lucky. Because of the stress between the glass and the enamel it's easily gotten out of balance.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, what is the—is it the momentary heat from the flash?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: I hear your mounting is more elaborate?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Is this lady—I didn't know what to do with her because she wanted one that—she loves gardens, and so I had to make it a little reminiscent of a garden.

ROBERT BROWN: Of a garden, mm-hmm [affirmative].

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: So that's why the clasps are a little more elaborate than usual?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, those, they're just decorations sitting out there. That's the winter part of the garden, and the inside is the sun [they laugh] part of the garden.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, this is nice.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: This is an interesting one because this is made of 22 karat gold wire, the necklace section is, and I thought, well, that's so frail. It's pulled to 30 gauge, so that's very, very fine wire, and I thought it'd never hold up. [00:32:03] And I busily backed it with fine plastic threads, and the gold would have nothing to do with that.

ROBERT BROWN: What do you mean?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: It would not bend the way the plastic wanted to go. It wouldn't do anything I wanted it to do. So I took away the threads, and I just saw that the gold was going to behave. And it did behave, and it's been worn and worn. You can take the pendant off and wear it just as a gold necklace, and there's never been the least trouble with it.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, you've got a clasp with bands at period intervals.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, yes, because it's so fine it would get caught on things.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, but up—there was more strength than you though?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: You put that many of those little wires together and gold is just incredible. I'm sure if I'd ask John Paul Miller you think I can get by with this he would have said no.

ROBERT BROWN: Because he knows a great deal about—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —tolerance in metal.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Everything about gold, and I was sure it wouldn't work, but I wanted it, and I was going to get it one way or another. And—

ROBERT BROWN: Now the pendant, is it mounted or is that—there's a piece of gold, a band at the bottom, but is it held—is it clamped onto the glass, or is it held by little gold strips?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: That's a whole unit comes free. You get the whole thing off, and when you take it off it's all together. It's mounted.

ROBERT BROWN: This? Oh this, this is a whole unit through here. [00:34:01]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: But is this on—the enamel's all the way at the top, and this is certainly left clear glass.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right.

ROBERT BROWN: So more and more of your recent pieces have no backing in there.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh yes, that's right. I don't think I'd ever back another one. I better not say that because tomorrow I'm may design one with a back.

ROBERT BROWN: This is that same thing again. Oh, it's certainly variety is infinite if you don't back, the colors are picked up in the—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I guess we can have Josie once she got her doctorate [ph].

ROBERT BROWN: [Laughs.] Right.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: And see with the back off.

ROBERT BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Isn't that fun?

ROBERT BROWN: It's marvelous.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I think that's the best shot.

ROBERT BROWN: This is the clasp you did?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, she's so good at loosing things, so I rather overdid the clasp. I think it's a little too powerful. I regret that they're necklaces, but I thought I'd better have it that way. And I couldn't get a box maker to make a box, so I made the box myself. And I—when I finished it I put it on the door of my studio. The Craver Box Company is just gone under. This is one of my favorites.

ROBERT BROWN: Why? Can you tell why?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, it's free.

ROBERT BROWN: Swirling pattern, yeah.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: And it's the way I wanted to handle the enamel from the very beginning. And all the others have been leading up to this. [00:36:04]

ROBERT BROWN: These, the enamel, is it lying in pods, as you call them, of gold, or is it freer, flowing in the glass?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Ah, the black flows on the glass, but blue is in little pans. Floats, pans, I call them.

ROBERT BROWN: There was no—in this you'd overcome the problem of migrating enamel?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, I didn't go—I didn't fiddle with that.

ROBERT BROWN: No, that only occurred with liquid enamel. This is now powered enamel, is it?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right, I just finally got back from staying with what I knew how to manage. It's quite as nice on the back as it is on the front. I've always been drawn to that one, that side too, when I find it looks better on the back.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you do your—in that last stage did you do that mount only after you'd seen how the form emerged?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Oh yes, always, always.

ROBERT BROWN: And you take your cue from the way the piece turns out?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right, because they change a lot in the heating process.

ROBERT BROWN: A great many of your mounts are simply these rounded ones, the—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Just the frame [ph], that's right.

ROBERT BROWN: Is that in a case where you don't want any competition with the *en résille* piece itself?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right. Or if it does anything else it should show what it is, a broach or whatever, you know. It should be controlled by its use. That's kind of a muddy color there, but I like the pure mud color better. I don't think I have one in brilliant red. [00:38:00]

ROBERT BROWN: This is right? You mean the background color on the right is muddy?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yeah, that's what I was trying to—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, what you wanted it.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: —was the mud color, but then when I moved—when you move it you get that [laughs] brilliant red which is quite fun.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, now this was backed with a rather elaborate gold metal backing or support is it, or is it meant to sort of—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well—

ROBERT BROWN: Can we go back to the previous slide? So you have metal backing of the muddy color in here, do you?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: But you leave it open in the lightest area of gray.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes, it leaves everything open. All I backed was where there was enamel.

ROBERT BROWN: But is that enamel on the back or enamel laid down on the front?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: This is—

ROBERT BROWN: No, but the gray and black enamel I mean.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Gray is on the back, and the black is on the back. Only the—

ROBERT BROWN: The red?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Only the floats and the gold on the back.

ROBERT BROWN: These red—the float and the gold and the red really do seem to float in this particular piece.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yeah, it's this part here. And the beads are hand cut beads, and they are very, very interesting. They're very difficult to line up to—they look better when they're being worn, when there's weight on them, and I showed photographs for the weight so it wouldn't look so wiggly [ph].

ROBERT BROWN: These beads, you had them hand cut because they can—they fitted together?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: I bought them already cut. They were cut in Africa.

ROBERT BROWN: Is this a fairly recent piece? [00:40:01]

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yes. My last *en résille*. And then I always wanted to stop in the middle of an *en résille* or in the beginning of an *en résille* really because I saw something so beautiful that I wondered why I went any further. And that was pretty much stuffing with the glass and the metal and forgetting about pans and all that. So I did a series of these which I called *Silver Lunar*, and they were either glass and silver or glass and gold, and I then didn't want any interference on the neckpiece. So the neckpiece only gives to let your neck into it. There's no fastener on it, which makes it very nice. And this is very—this has a good mystique because as you wear it and you turn into the light you have the necklace on, but if you turn away from the light or very apt to show no necklace at all.

ROBERT BROWN: The necklace itself is what a—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Well, that could have been glass if I had had time, but I would have needed a special glass that would give to that to put your neck through, and it is a nylon.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. These solar lunar pieces that have no boundaries, they just pick up color from the surroundings.

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Right, they're quite brilliant. But I didn't see why everybody wants to put glass in frames. [00:42:01] You know, reduce stained glass windows to jewelry. I've never understood that, so I thought, well, I will do my own glass jewelry.

ROBERT BROWN: So it took you a while, though, to get to this point? Did you have to be around the—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, no, this came along, you know, this is just a—

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, some of these you did a long time ago?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: No, they're all done in the month of August. I just started doing them, and I can see how much fun they were, and I couldn't stop. I'm just kind of like a mad machine. No two are alike.

ROBERT BROWN: So you've done this within the last year or two?

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Mm. And if you wanted to be a real good goldsmith you really should start as a costume designer, and then it really helps to be interested in animals. That's the end.

ROBERT BROWN: Were those pictures of you as a little girl? On the—

MARGRET CRAVER WITHERS: Yeah.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]