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Oral history interview with Stephen Etnier, 1973 Feb. 22

Contact Information
Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington. D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Stephen Etnier on February 22, 1973. The interview was conducted by Robert F. Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is an interview with Stephen Etnier; Robert Brown, the interviewer. This is February 22, 1973. I'd like you in this interview to talk generally about your life and career, your life as it is related to your career. Maybe you could just begin at the beginning, if you wish. Do you want to talk about family, childhood, memories, things that led you to do one... thing or another?

STEPHEN MORGAN ETNIER: I think that sometimes when you're asked what motivated you, frequently I think when this embarrassing question is asked, I say I think I took up painting so I wouldn't have to work. I was very shocked by my father's office and I regarded going to an office somewhat the way you would going to school. I figured if I wasn't careful I'd be trapped in that kind of a life. I think I must have made that decision very early that I was going to get out of business no matter what, because it was too close to school.

BROWN: You mean it seemed to be too confining. What was there about it?

ETNIER: I didn't like the idea of having a boss all the time who was taking the place of a teacher. As far as I could make out, one went through a good many years of having a boss. Then I think I must have realized fairly early in life –that I was extremely sensitive to all kinds of stuff around me, in nature. And some sort of urge to tell other people about it, I couldn't quite decide what it was or how to express my reactions. At a very early age, say at around 10 or 11, I started trying to write verse, and all kinds of things to get myself across. It wasn't until I got started at the Hill School in Pottstown about 1919 to 1920 that I got in the library one day and saw some Western paintings and then I remembered that I'd been out West myself and I started copying some of these paintings in pen and ink, which didn't seem to be very satisfactory but, not being a very outstanding student, either academically or socially –I wasn't much of an athlete or anything so I wasn't accepted too well by the other boys. So I started doing Western pen and inks of sunsets and horses crossing the horizon at sunset. I made them into school magazine covers. I think that's probably the very beginning of the urge, the first time that I could get over what I felt. I was very sentimental about the West. I'd been out there and it was very romantic and very cowboyish. I was very impressed by the mountains in California and Arizona and places like that.

BROWN: You went out West and went to San Francisco and to the 1915 Exposition there and all. Do you have memories of that?

ETNIER: Well, what impressed me more than the Exposition was the trip out on the ship "Great Northern," and seeing the Panama Canal and the tropics for the first time made a terrific impression. She was the first large ship through the Canal.

BROWN: What way? You've gone back to the tropics repeatedly since then. What way do you think it initially impressed you?

ETNIER: Well, I just couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe, having been in the East all my life, that there was such an impressive world. Then there was a long period when I didn't go back to the tropics, or make any effort to get back because I got dragged abroad and I got dragged out to the West Coast several times. I think my parents were probably having some sort of a feud. May mother probably decided that the best thing to do to keep her marriage going was to take the children and go away. So we went out several times to the West, to the Grand Canyon and all those things everybody does, the Yosemite Valley, Banff and Lake Louise. And all those places I thought were pretty impressive. And that was one of the first things I set out to do.

BROWN: And when your mother took you on these trips, did she stress certain things?

ETNIER: Having gone to Vassar, she had a terrific cultural obsession. It seems to me I was going to every God-damned Cathedral and church there was. Then, out West, as well, I remember going to old missions and places like that, and art museums too which left me pretty cold at that time. As far as painting was concerned, when looking at them I just thought they were a lot of brown boring pictures.

BROWN: Did your mother lecture on them or say, "You must look at this" or "This is good."

ETNIER: No. She just said, "Go." Sometimes I'd be dragged through. Then I was taken abroad, just after the First World War, and we went through the battlefields, and we went to Switzerland. I was pretty impressed by Switzerland. We went to England. I got sort of romantic about taverns and things like that in England but on the whole, Europe never –I never fell for Europe. Paris was exciting because this was the beginning of sex awareness. And there were girls all over the place. This was another cultural binge on my mother's part. I was sent to the Louvre and when I came back and reported I'd missed the Mona Lisa, I had to go back and see it. Tell, the Louvre bored me itself. Just the long corridors with nothing but a lot of brown pictures in them.

BROWN: Did your mother seem to enjoy these things, these trips?

ETNIER: You mean the cultural part or just the trip?

BROWN: Or any part of it?

ETNIER: Yes, I think she thought she was doing good for herself and for the children too. Although I find that from some of these letters I've been looking through, that she went abroad back in 1899 and she really covered the place pretty thoroughly, covering tons of art galleries.

I didn't realize that she'd been exposed to that much stuff. She evidently knew what to do and what to look at. I wouldn't know now where to go or what museums to go to, or what painters are represented in the museums of the world. I know that El Greco paintings are in Spain, in Madrid.

BROWN: Did your sister go with you on this?

ETNIER: Yeah. My sister usually. Yes, she went along. She was along on practically all of them.

BROWN: What was your father's attitude toward these things?

ETNIER: He stayed at home. I guess, he was having such a perfectly good normal time. I don't remember that he came into it at all. She just did it, and as I say, I guess it was probably some sort of family strain that caused the trips.

BROWN: When you were at the Hill School as far as you can recollect, where you really began, almost as a way of proving yourself, doing these little drawings? For publications.

ETNIER: Yeah. I started writing then too. I wrote several stories that had backgrounds in the West and things. And so it gave me a chance to describe these things with words. The pen-and-inks didn't seem to come out. They didn't look anything like I wanted them to look like, so I tried writing. They accepted a couple of stories.

BROWN: Was there much encouragement there from teachers?

ETNIER: Yes. Very much so. I had very good English instructors. I was extremely simpatico with my English. The rest of it, I mean the mathematics or anything else. I was terrible.

BROWN: Why were you sent to these schools, rather than staying in York?

ETNIER: Well, for instance, the English Department –it was a great discovery to me, one which –I forget the word, onomatopoetic, or something like that –when you use these, I was told these words conveyed the sound of the sea or something like that. You could use words that gave you a quick mental picture of what the word was about. This was also exciting to me. Was it onomatopoetic?

BROWN: Onomatopoetic. Why do you suppose you were sent to the Hill School and to other schools, rather than staying in York?

ETNIER: I think my mother had slight delusions of grandeur as to her status in the town and having this Vassar experience I guess she decided that she was going to make her family a little bit better then –from some of the old letters I've read recently, she evidently loathed York, Pennsylvania. She was sort of apologetic to my father when she heard he was coming down to work there. He would find it very boring and one thing and another. I can see that she'd been tearing around New York quite a bit for a Vassar girl in 1898 or somewhere around there. She seemed to get to town. So I thought she was, you know: dressmakers and all that sort of thing. She was doing pretty well for a minister's daughter, I didn't think there was that much cash, because at that time my grandfather just started in on his turbine business. I don't think they could have –I'm mystified that they were doing as well as they were at the time. My mother had a cousin who was provost of the University of Pennsylvania and I think he was very education conscious and he affected my life. Later when I got kicked out of Yale, he got me into Haverford College, and I think he was the person who convinced my grandfather to get my mother to get some culture, or something. And probably started the whole chain.

BROWN: He was a cousin of yours?

ETNIER: No, a cousin of my mother's.

BROWN: After you were at the Hill School only a short time, then you went to the Roxbury School...

ETNIER: I got kicked out of the Hill School for cribbing on an exam at a summer tutoring camp. Then I was taken back again, and then they caught me with some cigarettes and they threw me out again. Then I guess I then ended up at the Roxbury tutoring school.

BROWN: At these schools you seemed to be rebelling against them. Consciously, or did you find...

ETNIER: I loathed the schools except for the experiences I had with some simpatico teachers, I think. I was beginning to get aware of music. They had a thing called a red record in those days, and I'd discovered symphonies and things like that and we used to get up –if you had a Victrola, you'd get a group of kids and you'd get in a room and play red records for hours. It seemed to me to be more important than a lot of other things we did. Of course it didn't seem important at the time.

BROWN: But school officials and the authorities were kind of stern and ridiculous figures to you?

ETNIER: Well, they were dusty gray little people who never had their suits pressed. They were all covered with chalk and I didn't care for either the classrooms or the people who inhabited them. [Pause] I don't know how long you want to go on about this.

BROWN: When you went to Yale, what was that like?

ETNIER: Well, you've got to jump there, because when I went to the Roxbury School; this was a school filled with black-sheep children of the fairly rich. I think they were charging about $4.00 an hour for tutoring fees then and this was quite a bit of dough. I was made aware of the fact that this was an extravagance. But the tutoring school was very, very casual and the faculties were completely different from the prep school faculties. There I really did get onto a school magazine. At the Roxbury School I drew and contributed prose, sketches, and one thing and another, did covers for that thing. And there again we listened to a lot of music and I discovered symphonies. Then we –several of the kids had even written for Harper's magazine. One had had a novel published at the age of 21, or younger. Lucius Beebe was there and he had his first book of verse published before he'd even got there. He'd been thrown out of his prep school for trying to blow up one of the buildings with some dynamite or something. There was a lot of drinking going on. It was during Prohibition. We were discovering girls. Some local girls who used to come over from Waterbury and they'd take off with one or two of the boys every evening so sex was conveniently located too. And we really studied pretty hard, well but this was just to get you into Yale. In the middle of this, when it was discovered that I couldn't get into Yale without a good many conditions –this was the class of '25 –the Yale authorities said well they thought it was silly for me to go there in the class of '25. I'd better take a year off and come back in the class of '26. So my mother yanked me –I don't know where and how she got the idea, but anyway we decided to go to South America. My mother and sister and I took off on a ship for Rio and later we went on down to Buenos Aires. I was terrifically impressed by Brazil, particularly Buenos Aires.

It was sort of like Paris had been, though not that impressive in a way. About this same time I ran across Somerset Maugham's Moon and Sixpence. So when I got back to Roxbury School, after that trip, I entered the class of '26 Yale and wasn't doing too well. I could see I was going to get fired so I transferred over to the Art School, thinking I could just hang around New Haven, which I sort of liked. I didn't like the Art School.

BROWN: What was that –a very confining thing?

ETNIER: The art school I thought was very stuffy with a lot of those plaster casts that we were supposed to draw from, and old gin bottles. This bored the hell out of me. I wanted to set the world on fire by doing big landscapes or something.

BROWN: You had still only a vague idea of what you wanted to feel. Still you didn't like what you saw there.

ETNIER: I didn't like what was there anyhow. Oh, in the meantime I was painting in my room at Yale. I had a football-playing roommate. I had the place pretty well messed up with an easel and so forth. I was doing Western landscapes and some South American pictures from memory. There was a local frame maker over on Chapel Street, and I managed to persuade him to put some of these things in the window to sell. I think we sold one or two of the damn things. So somehow in this period I got the idea that between the Somerset Maugham reading and the fact that I was already painting on the side, and I ran into a hockey coach who introduced me to Van Gogh's paintings. This was the first time I had ever seen anything modern that was not so stuffy and brown. This sort of opened up my palette, even there in New Haven.

BROWN: Was Van Gogh's direct and rather...

ETNIER: Well he showed me a picture of the Van Gogh billiard table, Cafe at Arles, and that impressed the hell out of me. I just thought that was a terrific picture, but this had to be pointed out to me, I never would have stumbled on it without this guy's help. He then showed me all kinds of other impressionist pictures. So, at any rate, to make a long story short, I finally announced to my friends that I was going to go, leave –run away and go to South America to paint just as Gauguin had gone to the South Seas. I went to my tailor and ordered six or eight suits, and took cash for three of them and billed my father for all eight of them. I got two or three hundred dollars that way. I tried –I borrowed some from my friends. I managed to get enough money to get the steamship ticket. I wasn't too damn sure that I wanted to go but by this time it was all over the college that I was leaving for South America, so they started having parties and we all went down to New York to see me off.

BROWN: This was in the middle of a term, was it?

ETNIER: This was right in the middle of winter, yeah. This was about January. January or February. So off I went. Then I was in a terrible –this was in the days when we carried walking sticks and some of us effected the single eyeglass, of which I was one –who'd leave New Haven with walking sticks tucked under your arms in your overcoat so they wouldn't see you in New Haven. But when we got to New York we thought: "Why don't I carry them in Paris." So when I got on this steamship I was reading Huysmans, and people like that. I was very champagne- and liquor-conscious. So I didn't speak to anybody on the ship for days, and they'd began speculating about what I was up to. I thought I was older than I was. So I would sit on deck reading Huysmans and things that I thought would make an impression on the other passengers. And finally we got to South America, and they'd heard the whole story and some of them were extremely friendly. So when we got to Brazil, we started going out to night clubs at the other passenger's expenses and they would introduce me to other people around town, so I didn't really get much painting done. I'd told them all I was going to paint, of course, because I thought that would make a good impression.

BROWN: And you had brought equipment with you?

ETNIER: I hadn't brought equipment. So this was mostly a sexual venture really, because there was an awful lot going on at night in Brazil. Finally after I was down there for three or four months, I began to get quite broke and moved out from my hotel down to the cheaper and cheaper and cheaper ones, and I began to get pretty homesick. When I didn't have anything else to do, I started painting. I would go out and take a taxi to try to find someplace to paint. Well that got to be quite expensive... I finally bought a lot of wooden panels and got some postcards and converted the postcards into broken-color paintings, a few of which still may, I think, exist.

BROWN: You mean you'd look at them and analyze the colors and break them up?

ETNIER: I had had a fair amount of instruction at that time. I can't remember just where –in the summer of –I think we must have missed the Pennsylvania Academy entirely in all this.

BROWN: I don't know that you've talked about that. I think you went there a bit later.

ETNIER: Yeah. Was it later? All right. We're in Brazil now, right?

BROWN: You were talking about making do with postcards and panels.

ETNIER: Since I told my family I was going down there to paint, I had to come back with some paintings, otherwise I don't think I would have done a damn thing. But in the process –in the process of doing these few paintings, I did go to the local museum in Rio and in the local museum I saw some good, conservative paintings of the mountains around Rio and places that the Brazilian painters, academic painters, had done; and I realized that I had a long way to go because they were really doing what I wanted to do, which was to tell people how wonderful Rio was.

BROWN: At this time you didn't seem to have the facility?

ETNIER: Well, I'd seem a Matisse in a window of Knoedler's about that time. I think it was a Matisse with a view from a hotel room. It was done –it's still I think the best Matisse he ever painted. It was a view through a window of a river, the Seine, I guess. It was done in broken-color and very slapdash, it seemed to me, compared to other academic painting of the kind we had at Art School. That's the kind of thing I'd tried to do in Brazil to make it as bright as it seemed to me to be, even as bright as the broken-color. Even in these lousy paintings it still wasn't bright enough, partly because I was painting awfully small pictures, and didn't seem to be satisfied.

BROWN: Were you pretty excited about what you saw down there?

ETNIER: Yeah. Oh, God. It was a very romantic experience in every way. I think it's probably the best experience

I've had in my life. Everybody was so friendly. I was completely on my own and so many things happened. There were a lot of them you wouldn't have approved of, like tea-dancing every afternoon and staying up till 3-o'clock or 4-o'clock in the morning. No wonder you couldn't paint, if you lived like that. We went to bars and night clubs.

BROWN: When you came home, did you have something to show your family?

ETNIER: Well, I had these lousy little things which my father took one quick look at and said "If you call that work, forget it."

BROWN: Was he at this time pretty much agreed that you could be an artist?

ETNIER: No. I don't think so. I don't think he really ever approved of my being an artist until he had interviewed Harvey Dunn and N. C. Wyeth and found that they were anything but sissies, that painters weren't all pansies.

BROWN: When did he do that, at about this time?

ETNIER: After I got back from South America and got me into Haverford College –I didn't last very long in Haverford College. So this fellow Harvey Dunn was an illustrator who my father knew. He'd been an illustrator during the First World War. He was a very serious- minded man. He had been a rancher or something out West. He was an enormous guy. He came to see me one time at my father's request. He asked my father to let me go to Pennsylvania Academy or somewhere. Then Dunn and my father went with me to see Mr. Wyeth. Wyeth also looked like a blacksmith, and my father must have thought, "Well, if these two guys are in the art racket, maybe it isn't too bad." But he wasn't really sold on any of it until actually I'd finished with the Pennsylvania Academy and I got my first press notices. When he saw something in the New York papers, he thought that was pretty - that was all right.

BROWN: But up to that point he still had hopes of your coming into the family business?

ETNIER: Yeah. Everything was directed to do that.

BROWN: Was your mother at this time encouraging you in what you were doing?

ETNIER: She practically always had to encourage me. I don't know, I guess I had her pretty much under my thumb. I never realized then that I had as much power to do –I was able to do anything I pleased anyhow. I didn't realize then I had the power. Now, having two sons, I see what they can do. They can do any damn thing they want. I can say "No," but I can't get away with it; unless they want to do it, they do as they please. I guess I was doing the same thing. I was sent to another tutoring school when I got back from Brazil, and I was also shipped down to Georgia in an attempt to get me doing something to get me into the S. Morgan Smith Co. and be an engineer.

BROWN: Was this work a great responsibility that you had when you were in Georgia?

ETNIER: No. An uncle of mine was in the power business down there. The company was going to sell some turbines to the Georgia Power Co. He had an interest in the Georgia Power Company so he just got me the job just like that. They didn't know what to do with me when I got there, so they made me part of an engineering gang. Our job was to figure out how much water would be in the lake after the dam was built. So we ran a line around the proposed water line. By this time, of course, I had been exposed to Yale, Haverford College, and everything else, so I was regarded as pretty outlandish by Georgia standards. They didn't take to me too well when I first got there. I had to do a few things like crawl up cranes to make a good impression. Once I had gone up a couple of those, I guess they decided I was alright.

BROWN: You were considered simply a fancy...

ETNIER: But while I was there, I decided I was –this was when I was under the influence of Scott Fitzgerald, I guess, because his career seemed to be so spectacular that I thought I could duplicate it. So I was going to write a novel too. So I spent all that winter writing a novel called The Mauvais Quart d'Heure, [laughter] which I picked up somewhere. I think it was probably Huysmans or Oscar Wilde.

BROWN: Did the whole setting down there pretty much impress you?

ETNIER: It was sort of romantic in its way, because it was the first time I had ever run across the colored man as a social problem, which was interesting. I began to get sort of a yearning for some of these girls down there, the colored peoples' girls. Wives and one thing or another wandering around were pretty hot numbers I thought, though I never did anything about it. But they used to talk about some of the –the bosses lived on one side of a stream and the colored people on the other. There were about three or four hundred in the village across the way, about of us whites on the other side. They used to talk about slipping across the stream at night, which some of the whites were presumably doing, but I don't think they were.

BROWN: But it gave you a feeling that they might do it.

ETNIER: Well, then, as I say, they ran this thing just as they made their own regulations as to how things were carried on and, you know, going out with a rifle at night looking for a colored guy in the woods is sort of exciting.

BROWN: You mean when somebody was running away, to discipline someone?

ETNIER: To discipline them for minor offenses and sometimes major ones.

BROWN: But you weren't there long, were you?

ETNIER: I was just there one winter, about five months, I guess.

BROWN: And then you came back to Philadelphia?

ETNIER: I'm not sure what the thing says. Did I go to Haverford College?

BROWN: Well, briefly. Then, I think in 1925 you went to the Pennsylvania Academy. What was that like? Could you describe your time there?

ETNIER: The one thing that I liked about that was that it was the first time that I really had sort of an apartment of my own. So I promptly went clown to Weber's and bought myself a great big easel and a whole stack of already-stretched canvasses. Of course, I had started going to classes but I thought I could do better. So I started making up pictures in the studio to sort of prove that I was an artist. (I ought to have something on canvas in the studio.) So I made up some very unsatisfactory pictures of absolutely nothing at all. I was stuck with the same damn thing I had at Yale, which was (there was no question about it), you had to stay in the antique class until you were passed. I had Daniel Garber who was my instructor. He was a toughie. So I did drawing after drawing after drawing of Roman emperors and no matter how careful I was I could never get him to pass me. There was always something wrong with them. I would get to the point where I would get very discouraged. There was a back hall group. Most of the time the students talked art back there. That's where I first heard of John Carroll and that's where I first heard of Picasso and a whole lot of other painters completely new to me. But the Academy was ignoring all this backstairs group. They were academic as the devil.

BROWN: How did they teach? You mentioned Garber and the antique class.

ETNIER: Well, Garber was in the antique class. I've really forgotten. Harding, I think, one of the painting instructors, George Harding.

BROWN: You mentioned Henry Breckenridge.

ETNIER: Oh, yes. Henry Breckenridge. He was a broken-color painter. Everybody was painting sort of broken-color. That was as far as they went. But there was no –this fellow McCarter, I think his name was, Henry McCarter. He would take this back-hall-steps gang and a lot of them would just sit around and let him talk about how we really should be painting.

BROWN: Was he a teacher there, too?

ETNIER: Yes. I think he was. Yes. He was a teacher of a sort. But I don't –but he didn't seem to have any standing with the faculty because it was sort of bootleg –at least we considered it bootleg.

Then, of course, this same crowd would have dinner every night at some little restaurant and keep talking painting.

BROWN: So this became more important than the formal instruction.

ETNIER: Yes. Well, I finally broke away from the antique class by having Pinky Carroll do my –do a drawing that passed me and I got into a portrait class and a life class. But that (after the novelty of seeing the girls posing nude) wore off; that became boring too.

BROWN: Pinky Carroll was –?

John Carroll's wife.

BROWN: He was in Philadelphia then too?

ETNIER: No. She was a terrific painter. Here she was –she was only about five feet-three or something and she was doing canvasses about eight feet high and having to crawl up and down the stepladder to do them. They

were very strong, really –she paid no attention to what the other students were supposed to be doing. She and a few other people were really sort of exciting to know.

BROWN: It sounds like this was a time a lot of the students weren't having much to do with the formal curriculum at the Academy.

ETNIER: Well, there were a lot who paid attention, but there was enough of this –I didn't realize it at the time, but this was probably an advanced group. I guess there is always a group that doesn't agree with the establishment.

BROWN: But you were fairly free to come and go?

ETNIER: Oh, yes. It was during that time also that I went up and stayed a summer with Breckenridge at Gloucester. He was very broken-color.

I did some work there but on the whole I was sort of bored in Gloucester.

BROWN: Were there many other artists up there then when you went?

ETNIER: Yes. There were a lot of agreeable people. I was sort of playing around then. I had a Packard roadster, one of those old 12-cylinder things, and I spent most of my time tearing into Boston, and one thing and another, leading quite a social life. There were a couple of night clubs around there. I really didn't do much work.

BROWN: You mentioned several times "broken-color" and that, for example, at the Academy this was about as far as most of the painters went. Could you explain what that meant then?

ETNIER: Breckenridge and a whole bunch of them had picked up this notion that there was no black in nature and so we were all using, at least I was using, ultramarine blue for black. So all the pictures came out bluish – and we believed this theory, you see. We were told this, and it was the word of God that there was no black in nature. Therefore, you didn't use any black paint. This really held me back for a hell of a long time because black is now important to me, in paintings. If you work in all bright the whole picture ends up by not being bright. It wasn't until years later when I was with Rockwell Kent that I discovered that you've got to hold things down and pick up part of the picture.

It can't be all terrific or it kills itself.

BROWN: But these men sort of preached broken-color minus black.

ETNIER: You couldn't understand. You'd try to paint a portrait without using any –of course I guess I probably could have used burnt umber instead of dark blue. But I just picked on ultramarine and so all the pictures were looking like the wrath of God. At least I wasn't getting any results there which were pleasing. So, I mean, if you want to take this period as a whole, I hadn't even started to paint.

BROWN: In your own mind you hadn't done anything.

ETNIER: I was using this partly as a romantic occupation: as an excuse to get away from my family, as an excuse to be on my own. But I wasn't really too interested in painting. There was too much going on in the world. I will say that one of the biggest influences was, unfortunately, Mr. Beebe, who was a very dandified individual.

BROWN: You were in regular touch with him?

ETNIER: Yes. He lived up there, near there.

BROWN: What was he up to at this time? What did you do together?

ETNIER: Well, he was leading sort of a checkered career. Got kicked out of Yale. Went to Harvard. Graduated from Harvard. Then he went down to work for the Herald Tribune shortly thereafter. He was with the Herald Tribune for years. But he had the same sort of family trouble too. But he just went about his own way. His father died when he was fairly young so he never had the fights I had.

BROWN: Whereas you had all that tension.

ETNIER: Yes.

BROWN: About this time you also got married.

ETNIER: Yes. I got married about the second year in the Pennsylvania Academy, to Mathilde Gray from

Greenwich, Connecticut, whose family were fairly affluent. They were in the oil business. It was, you know, one of those great big social weddings in Greenwich, Connecticut.

BROWN: Was she in art school or anything like that?

ETNIER: No. She had gone to school with my sister down in Baltimore.

BROWN: Did this change your lifestyle considerably?

ETNIER: Yes. This was sort of amusing, this period, because when I got married I took a house in Philadelphia. I was sort of ship-model-happy, so I put a sign out in front of the house "Ship Models for Sale."

My wife and a bunch of the art students, we had a sort of social life of our own. Then I decided to paint in Bermuda. So I moved the whole damn family to Bermuda. I guess there was only one child born the first year we went down there. I was terrifically impressed by Hergesheimer at the time, and I ran into Hergesheimer when we got to Bermuda. We took a house in Bermuda along the golf course. I played golf every day, all day, and there were no pictures being produced in Bermuda to speak of, either. So I think when we got back from the Bermuda trip, my then mother-in-law took me aside and said, "Are you ever really going to paint?" I thought it over and I said to myself, "Gee. I have carried this bluff long enough. I have got to do something about it. It was just about that time that Rockwell Kent came to Philadelphia and gave a lecture on his trip to Alaska, with his son. The book was called Wilderness, that he had written about that time.

When I heard him, it was sort of like the original business of reading The Moon and Sixpence because here he was leading a romantic life.

I could see he was a very disciplined individual. So I thought if I went to talk to somebody like that, he would either make me or break me. So I wrote to him and asked him if I could study with him. He was living up at Ausable Forks at the time. So I wrote to him, and I got permission to come up and bring some of my work up there for him to see. He'd never had any students. The pictures that I took up there were not too hot. Mostly broken-color and one picture that I had painted on a schooner coming back from Bermuda. I thought it was pretty good. But when I showed it to him, he said, "Well, that part that you think is good is obviously an accident." He wasn't the least bit impressed by the stuff, but I must have put over something to make him agree to take me.

BROWN: You were very eager that he take you?

ETNIER: Yes. I figured if he didn't fix me, nobody would. I loved his work. I was terrifically impressed by his work and also by his life. So whenever he said anything, it was the word of God. To me, everything Rockwell Kent said was the word of God. So, I just packed up the family and moved up there in the fall. We became very friendly with the Kents. We'd have them to dinner. I was living in the house of some dentist in town, and we'd go up to his place for dinner two or three times a week and he'd come down. Every couple of days we'd go out painting together. It was there that I realized how hard he was working and what beautiful results he was getting. So in practically no time at all, he had my paintings looking a hundred per cent better than I realized I could paint. I couldn't even believe that this was happening. I mean, the hell with broken-color. "That's not the way to make a mountain look like the mountains are. Paint the mountains the way they are. Paint them just as they are." Although this is the same thing Winslow Homer did. He said, "All I'm doing is painting what I see." And that's all Kent was doing.

BROWN: Kent was able to make you look and think.

ETNIER: Yes. The big thing - somehow with all the instruction I had up to that time nobody said anything about values, which was a very simple problem, you know, that things gray as they recede, that they become more colorful as we get closer. Well, once I started doing that it didn't seem to matter what the hell the color was like as long as the things stayed in their place. You tend to make your skies a little bit too blue, but if you really look at the sky very carefully, the first thing you know you're painting the sky pretty close to the way it is.

So, the things were looking good. One of the paintings that I did there, a year or so later, was accepted at the Carnegie Institute, just as I had painted it then. You wouldn't believe I could have done that well right off the bat.

BROWN: You think it was because you were...

ETNIER: I'm not saying that the paintings were great. What I'm saying is that they looked like - in other words, the mountain passes or things that I was painting there, snow scenes and one thing or another, which were, of course, done at Kent's house, looked like I wanted them to look.

BROWN: For the first time?

ETNIER: Yes. And then he, of course, he said, "You're putting too much crap in the picture. For Christ's sake, simplify. You don't really give a damn about there being a store there or this and that." So he just talked plain common sense.

BROWN: And he'd never taught before?

ETNIER: No. I guess –I think he'd had one screwball guy –I think that fellow who later ran a restaurant out in Hollywood, Mike Romanoff, I think got tied up with him at one time. But I think they broke up in short order. As far as I know, I was the only student he ever had.

BROWN: How did he teach? Did he paint and you'd watch him paint?

ETNIER: As I think I've said before, he'd go out with four canvasses and he'd have one spot and he'd paint. He was very fussy about painting at the hour he was painting. In other words, you couldn't paint a late afternoon in the morning, because the light naturally had changed. So he would paint for about an hour and a half or two hours on one picture. Then he'd go grab one facing in a different direction. Maybe one was a picture of a barn and maybe one was a picture of a mountain. Another was a picture of a hayrack or something. But they were all painted at different times. So I became very conscious of the fact that if I wanted to make them look right they had to be consistent as far as the time-of-day went. Of course, none of this has anything to do with A-R-T. This is simply trying to make things look the way they look.

I think I can say that there was never any talk about A-R-T. We just wanted things to look the way they are. Actually he's quite abstract if you look, really. I still can't ever think of my pictures as being anything but just pure realism. I've never been in any way, never in any way, have I tried to produce art.

BROWN: Have there ever been moments when you felt you should produce art?

ETNIER: Oh, yes.

BROWN: At this time you must have gone up there feeling you must produce art.

ETNIER: No. I didn't. Because the motivation was never for art. It was simply to convey how excited I was about my reactions to various-and-sundry places. I managed to get quite excited about the Adirondacks while I was there. Not too excited, but fairly excited. At least I found some things that I thought were well worth painting. So it wasn't really to produce art. It was simply to tell people how exciting the Adirondacks were. And that's the way I feel about Maine. The only reason I paint is because this, I think, is wonderful and I want other people to know that it's wonderful. You should paint what you love.

BROWN: Well, at this point you were going to Maine, weren't you? Your family had been going there.

ETNIER: Yes. I had been coming here since 1904, when I was a baby. I've been doing a fair amount of talking.

BROWN: At this time, also, after you left Kent you went down to study with John Carroll.

ETNIER: That was sort of a delicate thing because John Carroll had been the hero of that group in the back-halls at the Pennsylvania Academy. He was one of the more sophisticated painters at that time. But I hardly dared tell Kent that I even had heard about Carroll, although they knew each other.

BROWN: Why was that? Because they were quite different as artists?

ETNIER: Yes. John was, you know, painting Parisian things, sort of a French manner. Very, very mannered. I thought I would sort of like to get some of that zip into it and get a little bit more advanced than Rockwell. I thought it might put a little pep into my work. I thought I might get some new ideas.

BROWN: You thought Kent's work was kind of plain by comparison, or plodding?

ETNIER: There was quite a contrast. But then I went up to see John.

John, knowing that I had studied with Rockwell, I guess, gave me more or less a carte blanche to move in. Well, I took a studio in New York and he would come there and look at what I had been doing. Of course, since he was a figure painter primarily, I started doing figures. But figures just never really interested me. I mean, they didn't mean anything to me. It probably improved my drawing by having to do figures. Of course, I had never done, really done, any work at the Pennsylvania Academy with figures, so this –well, also it gave me an excuse to have a naked girl in the studio.

BROWN: Were you at this time developing a work routine?

ETNIER: Oh, yes. I was working hard. As soon as I got in with John I was painting enormous nudes and all kinds of stuff and doing some work on the stuff I had done with Rockwell Kent. Some friend of John's came in the studio one time to go out to lunch with us, and he said, "What are you doing with these things of yours?" And I said, "Not a goddamn thing." And he said, "I think you ought to get a gallery." And John put it well. He said, "He's a little bit young for this sort of thing." But then this fellow, whoever he was, went to see a couple of dealers, and then John capitulated, and we went to talk to Frank Rehn, who was John's dealer. And Frank Rehn sent me to the Dudensing Gallery, which was run by two of the Dudensing brothers. They weren't doing too well. I guess nobody was doing very well then.

BROWN: This was the early depression?

ETNIER: Yes. It was 1930 somewhere, 1929, 1930. It wasn't Valentine Dudensing, it was Roy and somebody else Dudensing at 5 East 57th Street. They had a nice-looking gallery. They had a pretty good group of painters, Arnold Blanch and Mangravite. They even had Grant Wood, I don't know what. But whatever they had wasn't selling too well. But this guy, Roy Dudensing or somebody, said he'd give me a show but I'd have to pay for it!

BROWN: What did that mean? You'd have to pay for being exhibited?

ETNIER: I'd have to pay for the rental of the gallery. I think it was $100 a week or something like that. So he talked me into doing it. I figured if this is the way it goes, this is the way it goes. I didn't realize this was sort of a disgraceful thing to do. But at the time I thought you've got to start out somewhere. So that's what we did. He ran the show for two weeks, and he sold a couple of them, even to strangers. My father's friends bought a couple. This was, I think, in the fall. I guess this was in the winter around '30 or '31. And I was painting to beat hell. I was painting lots in the summers here in Maine. So I had the show and then, by God, according to my records, I must have had another show that same year. Two shows there at Dudensing. The second show was pretty well received by the critics. I was amazed that they were as simpatico as they were. The second show I didn't have to pay for. Then I got into a mess with him economically and decided to get out. There is no point in going into all that.

BROWN: Had he before that been fairly encouraging?

ETNIER: Yes. He was very encouraging. We were perfectly friendly, except he was in a bad financial way and he got me mixed up with some painting: I sold some Arnold Blanch paintings to my mother, and he was going to take half of the Arnold Blanch paintings and my mother was going to get the other half, and I was to do the selecting for my mother. Well, it turned out I ran across a letter on his desk that said he was really only paying Arnold Blanch what my mother had contributed and he was taking half –not having put up anything. So, I don't know how it happened, but Mrs. Stern of the Milch Galleries must have heard about this to-do that I was having with Dudensing. I think she came to me and wanted to know if I would like to move into Milch. So that's how I moved into Milch and I had my first show there in 1932.

BROWN: What were the Milch's like as dealers? Could you characterize them a bit?

ETNIER: They were just about as wonderful as they could be. I was with them for 35 years, so it must have been alright. They had sort of an old-fashioned gallery with an upstairs gallery and a downstairs, sort of "come-on" gallery. They had the one man shows upstairs. For about three or four years I had a show there every year. Then I thought I was overdoing it, so I had a show every two years, though I could easily have had two shows a year because I was painting that much.

BROWN: What were you painting at this time? What kinds of things?

ETNIER: Mostly things here in Maine.

BROWN: In Pennsylvania, too?

ETNIER: No. Very few in Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania from a painting standpoint bored me. I've gone down there, well 10 years ago I tried to paint a picture down there. There's nothing there but those damn barns, what I could see. Oh, I did paint some railroad pictures in Pennsylvania. That was very early. In my first show, my first unbought show at Dudensing, I had some pretty good railroad pictures. I gave one to Lucius Beebe years later. There's a photograph of it there in the records, of unloading telegraph poles. That's a pretty good picture. It holds up.

BROWN: What were you intentionally doing, when you were painting during these years? Trying to record, as you said earlier, your excitement in seeing?

ETNIER: Well, I'll tell you. Somehow I got the idea that I was seeing a lot of things that excited me, like the sun on the back fence, or the sun on a railroad car that seemed to me to be very muted and exciting, to me it was

exciting. You know, people aren't seeing all the beauty that's just around them everywhere, even in a gas station. I was painting gas stations. I was painting from the inside of the car showing the steering wheel, a row of houses behind it, outside the car. So I, in a way, I sort of had a desire to help people see. They weren't seeing all the obvious things, like river banks weren't the only things you could make paintings of. In some of the early reviews of my stuff, this is referred to as if it was pioneering subject matter. It said my work would last longer than one would think because he's doing the backs of electric lights, signs and stuff like that. I painted in Pittsburgh, unlikely subject matter, but they were quite atmospheric. If it was a Pittsburgh picture, it looked like Pittsburgh. It was smoky and gloomy but it held together.

BROWN: You went there deliberately to paint it, didn't you.

ETNIER: Well, in the Pittsburgh case I just happened to have a friend with whom I had gone to art school, and I visited him at his house there so while I was there I painted a bit. But there are lots of pictures that I never painted, like the outskirts of Boston and those marshes near New York City, as you cross the Jersey marshes. There are hundreds of pictures I would like to do there. But I was always too lazy to go there.

BROWN: A lot of these pictures at this time, of gas stations and railroading and industrial setups, some people, I suppose, could see your interest in painting the everyday.

ETNIER: Yes. This was I think even pre-Sheeler. I don't think even Sheeler was –I had never even seen a Sheeler. Maybe we were working on the same thing at the same time. But Sheeler's work wouldn't have appealed to me anyhow because they never had that atmosphere. You know, the smog was –Sheeler never did any smog. And it was the smog that I liked. It was the effect of the smog or the sun breaking through the smog that seemed to me to be the important thing, not the architecture.

BROWN: As you did these things, did you have social feelings? Do you think the Depression sent you into this kind of stuff?

ETNIER: No. No.

BROWN: It had nothing to do with that.

ETNIER: No.

BROWN: How did you feel when the social realists came along in the thirties, the ones who were much-heralded at that time, who painted with social commentary?

ETNIER: Well, that just bored me. Still does. I don't know whether you'd –Grant Wood, I guess would be included in that. Grant Wood, I sort of...

I admired his meticulous technique and he had a terrific simplicity that a lot of the other guys didn't have. But there were plenty of other people painting then, Walter Kuhn. There's no social commentary there really. Other people's paintings I admire enormously. I terrifically admire the ability of Walt Kuhn and hundreds of other painters who have no particular message. But I also feel, in a way, that they don't have anything to say. They just set up a model and try to make a picture out of it and that's sort of going out with the art in mind rather than –they are not particularly excited except here they've got the guy in a costume and they are doing a picture. That's why I am just not very excited about people. So I've very seldom done people, just a couple of old fishermen that I knew and liked that I've ever attempted portraits of.

BROWN: You paint mainly what excites you?

ETNIER: If it doesn't excite me, I don't want to do it. It's amazing for how many years you can keep up the original excitement. I've talked to Andy about it a good many times, and he thinks, I think I've said this to you before, that both of us are really painting the same picture over and over and over again. Most painters do, except possibly for Picasso. Picasso's a terrifically brilliant guy but I don't have any feeling for that –it's an art excitement which is beyond me, but not a life excitement. In other words, I think it's amazing that he can conceive of so many ways of painting and making them always colorful and exciting as paintings. But they leave me cold as far as my personal emotions are concerned. It doesn't make me sad or doesn't –if anything, it makes me slightly gay. Matisse makes me gay. But I have the same reaction to Matisse. That to me is art, you see. And has no bearing on whatever I'm trying to do, which is to simply being excited about being in the world and alive. You get experiences that are so outrageously beautiful, like the first time you hear a symphony, that you may or may not –like "My Heart, Thy Sweet Voice" from Samson and Delilah –the first time I heard that I thought I would die; it was just so beautiful, you know. Death and Transfiguration; Strauss: the end of that, My God, that's what I call a moving experience. This is really telling somebody about how wonderful the human emotions are. Whatever the hell they do in music is abstract. You know, of course. So, I see something, and I think, Jesus, this is so Goddamn wonderful I've got to tell people about it. I don't know why I feel it's important. I also want to tell

them about the minor experiences that may be; there's just this old signpost out by a road that's weathered, and it has a certain emotional appeal, just looking at the signpost. So I've had the experience, but whether I want to take the trouble to go back to the studio and put it down –I can frequently do it from memory, but I prefer to do it on the spot so I get the sign post, whatever it did to me I can probably get it to do for others.

BROWN: What does the signpost do to you, let's say, this is a hypothetical case. How would you describe it?

ETNIER: Well, I did do a signpost about 15 years ago, out in the back country here in Maine. It just has some faded direction signs. There was a quality to the wood and the fact that it was pointing directions one could almost visualize stagecoaches going by. This is a terribly literary approach to painting possibly. But I notice this same sort of thing in some of my friends' paintings, that they incline to get a little literary too. That's dangerous on the corny side, which I'm sure has nothing to do with art. But it has to do with whatever I'm mixed up in, if it's art or it's painting.

BROWN: The texture is important?

ETNIER: Textures are very important. I think, especially as it is affected by light. That's why I practically always use, paint the sunlight because it seems to me to bring the texture out. The light, say a tropical light on a blue wall with a Pepsi-Cola sign on it. You get the red and the blue and the brilliant sunlight, and some of it in shade, which gives you a contrast, can make a plain ordinary wall very exciting. I can show you a picture of it now, if you'll take time. And it comes out being a fairly good picture. Now, people buy the goddamn things.

BROWN: Is that important to you?

ETNIER: Yes. That's important to me because that's how I was brought up. If I couldn't –I think if I didn't –if they didn't sell, it would get, back to my father that I was a failure, that I wasn't really supporting myself. And if I wasn't supporting myself, I think it was knocked enough into me that I would have an awful inferiority complex just painting and not selling.

BROWN: But you had a pretty early success. Even here in the '30s during the Depression you were having exhibitions regularly at the Milch Gallery. Did the Milch Gallery have a wide clientele?

ETNIER: They were a pretty respected gallery. Their mailing list was pretty catholic, you know, they had all kinds. But they certainly had the cream of New York on their mailing list. A lot of the people like, you know of, would come in regularly.

BROWN: The Milch's –how did they go about presenting work? Were they fairly active entrepreneurs?

ETNIER: They didn't take very many new painters on. They had a pretty stuffy group, I think, on the whole.

BROWN: Did you turn up for openings, that sort of thing?

ETNIER: No. I never went to any openings at the Milch's. I don't think. The only opening that I was telling you about last night was the one where I met my hostess of the night before and couldn't remember her name and I figured that socially I would ruin myself if I went to any more openings.

BROWN: Could you describe some of the people you were close to in the thirties; dealers, co-artists, other people? What of the Milch's? Were they very close to you?

ETNIER: Yes. I got along very well with the Milch's. The gallery was sort of my office when I was in town. Of course, I was living in New York quite a bit in the early days. So I would just go in and hang around –they would talk endlessly about how they made friends for Winslow Homer and how they did this and did that. You know, we'd talk about what was happening over at Macbeth with Andy's work. Things like that. For hours and hours.

BROWN: Was Wyeth already showing in New York?

ETNIER: I forget when his first show was.

BROWN: How did you first meet him? Through his father?

ETNIER: Through his father. Yes.

BROWN: You'd known him from when he was very young?

ETNIER: Yes. But, you know, it was just the same thing as the back hall at the art school. We'd sit in the back room at the dealer's. And that's one of the reasons I don't particularly like where I am because if you go in there you say your little say to the dealer and then you get the hell out of the way because you are in the way of sales,

or something. There's no place just to put your feet up in the air and yak for hours. So, I don't go to New York very often because there's no place for me to go before lunch. It's nice to drop into your dealer's for an hour or two before lunch, then go out to lunch, maybe with him or somebody else. And then if nothing's going on, you can drop back later in the afternoon. When I had shows, when I was in town, I would practically always drop in at the end of the day to see if any sales had been made. I didn't go to the openings, but I kept a careful eye on how a dealer lives through that waiting for somebody to come in and buy a picture. I don't know. I'd go crazy if I were a dealer.

BROWN: Well, you got quite fine reviews at this time, didn't you?

ETNIER: Yes. The reviews then, they were enormous by comparison with what's happened since, with all the competition.

BROWN: It was true for the reviewers –I know that men like Henry McBride and Howard Devree both seemed to comment on how gifted and versatile you seemed to be. Did you have this sense? Did the work sort of stream out of you? Did it seem to come easily?

ETNIER: No. But I had a sort of a quick shorthand way of painting that looked very juicy. I think it was this juiciness that appealed to these guys and, as I said, I was very facile. Actually, I figured, because I had such a basic inferiority complex from my youth when I flunked all those exams that, if I was able to paint, I was probably cheating. I really thought I didn't know how to paint and somehow I'd fooled these guys into thinking I was good. So I sort of played that facility. And one way to be facile is to paint fast and you keep the paint nice and juicy. You end up by painting pretty lousy figures because you paint them so fast. I was getting away with this, but they frequently referred to my figures as matchstick figures. You know, I'd just make them the way you do a matchstick figure. This was considered sort of novel but it sort of worked out. All I was doing was, I was covering over the fact that I didn't know how to paint a figure. If I had carried them any further, they would have fallen apart. But it had to look as if I didn't want to go further and I still don't know how to paint a figure and I still use –now I plod along trying to make it look as if I painted them fast. But I may fuss around for a week or so getting the figure, now I don't put many figures in, but I try to get it right and then to try and make it look as if I painted it very easily. This is the sort of thing I think I am losing today, this juicy paint. The older I get, the more I feel tied to the generations ahead of me, and I'd like to be able to paint like Fitzhugh Lane or other people.

For instance, if Fitzhugh Lane knew as much about Maine as I do, he came up here about four or five times –but just short summer visits –well, if he were here as much as I've been, he would have done some terrific stuff.

BROWN: What is it in these men's work that you like, as opposed to what you call the juicy quality of your earlier work?

ETNIER: Well, the restraint. I mean, there was no trickiness. As I get older I know how they did it. And I respect the guy who can really sit down and spend some time getting the thing to go over the way he wants it. Now, for the last ten years I think I am trying to get them complete. But even now I get bored and release them before I should. But I think, you know, if you were to sit around and look at a picture for two weeks and finally take a figure out or put a figure in and suddenly the picture sings –I was working on a picture just this week of a big boulder on the shore, and it needed a figure. So, I finally put a figure in. It looked like hell. I put another figure in. I erased him. And finally I got one just about right. Well, now if I do a little bit more work on it I think the picture could sing out. Finally I end up with no figure at all.

BROWN: Whereas before the last decade or so you would release a painting without a feeling it was completed.

ETNIER: Yes. Because, in a way, I was getting away with it. I am sure there were a lot of people who didn't like the way I painted.

BROWN: Did you feel guilty about this? You intimated you did.

ETNIER: Yes.

BROWN: Why do you think you did it for so many years?

ETNIER: Because I was getting away with it. And they were quite satisfactory to me. They were pretty good. But I knew they should be better. That's the main point.

BROWN: Were you also these years consciously perfecting what you had done, learning from what you'd done?

ETNIER: Well, you can't help but –if you paint as much as I did, you –it's very interesting. You learn to draw by drawing. You don't learn to draw by somebody telling you how to draw. I didn't realize this.

I was learning to draw. I mean, I am not scared to draw anything now. But I always had a terrible inferiority

complex because, back in the Pennsylvania Academy I could never get those damn drawings past Garber. You see what I mean?

BROWN: Somebody had to do it for you?

ETNIER: Yes. And I felt I cheated then, and I was probably cheating.

If anybody questioned what I had been doing, I was getting away with it with something that they just didn't know enough about.

BROWN: But that season with Rockwell Kent put you in your -- confirmed your confidence in what you do.

ETNIER: Yes. I've got all the confidence in the world now. But I still know, I still don't feel I could draw the way I should. When I look at Wyeth drawings, I realize how little I know about the subject.

BROWN: Was he a man who has been pretty important in your career?

ETNIER: Oh, yes. We used to haggle about subject matter quite a bit and look at each other's works. And as Andy grew older, you didn't go into his studio anymore, when he was working, because he didn't want comments. I think that's a good thing. I very seldom let anybody see uncompleted work. Some of my friends I consult and –my brother-in-law Bob Solitaire and I talk endlessly about each other's work. Sometimes he has some good ideas and sometimes I help him.

BROWN: But by and large, you - by the thirties, you had your feet under you, did you? Here you were getting reviews, here you felt you could turn things out.

ETNIER: I could have worked much harder than I did. If I had to now, I could put on a one-man show in New York from a standing start. Here it is, February –I could put on a one-man show of 18 fairly good pictures two months from now. Because when I go down south and paint in Nassau I do 30 pictures a month. Thirty of them aren't necessarily good, but I may get out of the thirty that hardly need any work at all.

And some of the others, with a little work I can bring them out.

BROWN: You've been cruising for years and sailing. It seems that for forty years or so that a good deal of the year you've been migrating from Maine to somewhere in the Caribbean or elsewhere, painting, but also simply sailing. Could you describe how this has fitted into your regime? How it has possibly worked on your painting?

ETNIER: In the painting part, there again to go back, you always paint what you like. I had run into the island of Barbados back in 1921 and that was a very romantic island to me and I was very sympathetic with the colored people there. They had the same integrity the Maine fishermen seem to have. I knew them pretty well. So I was always very sympathetic and liked to paint down there because I could almost picture myself as a colored person Jiving there, on a small boat and going out fishing and one thing or another. One of the ways of achieving that -this simple life –was by cruising in a sailboat. I think I took my first cruise when I was about 15, up to Bar Harbor. In those days having an engine on a boat was considered very vulgar. The thing to do was to lick nature and get wherever you wanted to go without any artificial aids. My first trip was with a friend of mine. We had this 30-foot sailboat. When I first saw the mountains on Mt. Desert, I might as well have been in Spain. I had achieved this all by myself by sailing for four or five days, and this reward looking up at Mt. Cadillac to me seemed most impressive. I didn't know Maine had anything like that. It was terrific. And from that time on, I had the bug. I've had a great many boats since then and I cruised in all of them. Cruising was the only thing that appeals to me. I don't like racing very much. It bores me. There's a certain something that you get from having your whole goddamn house in the cabin of a boat. If you are anchored in a harbor, you get a very snug feeling. The fact that you've covered a hundred miles that day is very rewarding to the ego. You've really achieved something. You've covered a great distance. Maybe it rained, maybe there was a thunderstorm, maybe the tide was against you, all kinds of things. Sometimes you get dismasted and sometimes you hit a rock but somehow I've always managed to survive. I've done everything dumb that can be done in a sailboat, and I have developed an enormous respect for the weather. If I take the boat from here, even though now lately I've been going down by power to Nassau, I'd make about 200 miles a day. It's hard work, even if it's under power. You still get the snug feeling when you get in at night. You have a drink, cook dinner, one thing and another, and you have a nice snug bunk. It's back to the womb, so you see that cruising is different from other kinds of sailing.

BROWN: So you really, though it has its terrors and its rigors, it gave you a feeling of security, did it?

ETNIER: Yes. And also I think it's an ego-builder. I think the mathematical navigational part builds my ego. The fact that I set out from one point and get to another 100 miles away makes you feel that you are pretty goddamn smart. [Laughter] You'd just as soon have about 15 people in the grandstand when you pick up that final buoy.

BROWN: During World War II you were in the Navy. Was this sort of an extension of this ego for you?

ETNIER: I never realized for a moment, having been such a poor mathematician, that I could ever learn to navigate offshore. I could do dead-reckoning and did when I was young. I cruised around here dead-reckoning, but when I got into the Navy I had to learn how to pick out stars and what to do with them. This was a fairly complicated navigational thing which I mastered much quicker than I thought I ever could since it involved mathematics. But there were two or three years of taking star-sights, knowing the stars, knowing where we were exactly within a mile or so when we were well off-shore. It was very pleasing. That, and ship-handling. If you are making a dock, even with a small boat or a Navy ship, the crew is waiting for you to make a boner, and if you don't mess it up, you feel pretty good. It's an ego-builder. There's nothing quite so exciting as hearing water rushing by, whether it's under sail or with power. There's something very soothing and stimulating about the sound of water.

BROWN: Your family has been on a lot of cruises with you too, haven't they, over the years?

ETNIER: Yes.

BROWN: Were they pretty closely involved with you?

ETNIER: They were always helpful, you know, take the wheel for a while, that sort of thing. The kids, actually I think we overdid it by letting the kids get too much cruising too young so that I think they got bored. When we went cruising they couldn't wait to get to the next movie house or something like that. They never stayed aboard and enjoyed the womb. (Laughter) They went ashore right away.

BROWN: Well, all this cruising and all that you were doing in these years, in New York, which we have been talking about, when you were having your shows once or twice a year, in New York itself, were you quite involved in the art world?

ETNIER: Well, I knew practically all the painters. You know there were clubs of painters, the Coffee House Club. John Carroll and Hopper and Rockwell Kent and Glackens and everybody belonged.

There weren't so many artists then. The Coffee House Club, I think, had 100 members and that was practically the painter list for the city of New York. I knew a lot of them. I didn't know them very well. Kuniyoshi I knew pretty well. I guess if I really put my mind to it I knew quite a few. I knew Arnold Blanch. And there was a whole Woodstock community that we used to see. With John Carroll living up in Woodstock, I would meet a lot of them up there. So I would say that I had at one time or another run into almost all of them. A few I missed like Demuth, who lived in Lancaster very near my home town of York and whose work I have always respected. His was a sort of sad life. Demuth didn't ever live to see how much he would be respected.

BROWN: Were there any artists you were particularly close to as friends. Or were your friendships pretty wide? Here you are cruising with old friends and others who are not artists.

ETNIER: Well, I cruised a lot with John Carroll. We had an arrangement where we would paint in New York in the winter and then he would come up in the summer and we would get into this boat that I had then, which was a 50-foot sloop. We would anchor off an art school in Boothbay Harbor, so we could have some girls available. Then we would paint around the town in the daytime and come back to the boat in the evening and then having met some girls in the process go out roller skating or dancing or the movies in the evening. We'd do this for two or three weeks at a time. So about three of these trips and the summer was gone. Sometimes we'd also go as far as the Canadian border, places like that and do some painting. Actually when you are actively cruising, it's almost impossible to think of getting to your destination and painting at the same time. You've really got to get someplace, and anchor, and settle down, and then stay for a week or so to paint. You've got to switch gears from the cruising to the painting. And the same thing happens when I go down to Nassau. When I get there, I tie up to a dock and that's the end of the goddamn boat. From that time on, it's painting. I get up every day, drive over to the waterfront, and start looking for something to paint. I don't think I have ever come back without something started.

The hardest part about painting, to me, is not the painting. It's getting the idea and trying not to get too hackneyed, or repetitious. Occasionally I do something a little bit different than I would normally do –try to get from being repetitious. There's a painting over here in the Harpswell School that I painted about 10 or 15 years ago down in Florida of a travel lift. It's a yellow travel lift that lifts up boats. It's very bright yellow in the sun with this sort of Florida soil, this Florida waterfront soil. It was done very quickly. Now as I look back on it, I didn't think much of it at the time, because it didn't mean too much to me when I painted it. It was just one of those things I went out and said to myself, "Well, I can't fool around any longer. I've got to paint something. I'll paint the damn travel lifts." Well, actually, some of these come off. Now that I look back at that picture, which I didn't even think enough of to ever even show, it looks pretty good.

BROWN: So sometimes what you come to paint is almost accident?

ETNIER: Yes. Yes.

BROWN: By default of finding anything else.

ETNIER: I figure even if it's going to be a lousy painting at least I'll get the exercise in drawing and maybe I'll have an idea in the middle of the painting that will save it. Maybe I can inject something to pull it out. I keep using that expression all the time –pulling the picture out. You can have a picture sitting around the studio for years and suddenly decide what it needs to pull it out.

BROWN: And you get some satisfaction in doing this, pulling something out and finishing it?

ETNIER: There's great satisfaction when you really pull it out.

BROWN: To get back to John Carroll. You and he hit if off pretty well? Did you have similar temperaments? What was he like?

ETNIER: Very close friends. Yes. He had a terrific sense of humor. He was a very gay person. I tried to woo him into cruising. But I think I was showing off to a certain extent, because I made it into a very mysterious thing. Navigation, I made it more difficult. And also setting the sails. He was older than I was and I was probably trying to impress him with what a difficult skill I had mastered. So he ended up by going down to New York and buying some hounds. He had a stable of his own, his own pack, which bored the hell out of me. I hate horses. So he could do something I couldn't do and I could do something he couldn't do. But aside from that we were both very girl-conscious and also very hardworking. I regarded him as an authority on anatomy. He really knew his stuff. He dissected corpses. He knew his muscles and everything else. So if I ever picked anything up about anatomy at all, it was through him.

BROWN: Were there other painters that you had pretty close relations with?

ETNIER: Not really. I really don't have close relationships with a great many people. There were four or five at a time. I see my old address books and all kinds of people that I used to know have dropped out of my life. Natural things. Maybe they get remarried or something. They disappear.

BROWN: Have your various marriages affected your work? Did they cause major interruptions or, on the other hand, did they push you into, spurt you into new work?

ETNIER: That's pretty hard to say. I don't know. I think after you start painting for a while, you're, say like a dentist, you're a dentist: you're a painter. You just keep on painting. I think you go through periods of great shock. When the war, for instance, knocks the hell out of you naturally there's no painting then. I slipped into an art school just about the time I got out of the Navy and did a little work in San Francisco. Then I got back into the routine. I went to Los Angeles and finally I whipped up a show. In about a month I painted 17 pictures and put on a show. But I don't think marriage had any affect. Even when I was between marriages, I still worked.

BROWN: You had a certain momentum. When you were in New York, did you see the beginnings of what became the Whitney Museum?

ETNIER: Yes. Very definitely. I was in on that from the very first show. I showed there three or four times until. I got into an argument. The Whitney, to a certain extent, had its own group of intimates. They were being very helpful to a lot of artists who needed money. Of course, the Whitney opened when everybody was pretty broke. I showed there two or three times. I can't remember now how the thing came up, but I finally wrote a sort of strike letter. I guess I was told by John or somebody that they had had a meeting and that my name had come up to buy a painting. But they had turned me down repeatedly because I didn't need the money. This got my back up. I wrote to the Whitney Museum and told them I had heard that this had happened. I thought that I had every right to be as encouraged as less fortunate artists. From that time on I was dropped from the Whitney and I think I am still on the blacklist there.

BROWN: You mean at that time they were as much a charitable organization as -?

ETNIER: Yes. They were being charitable to some perfectly good painters. They were helping painters out. That was a nice thing to do. But you don't know how it feels to be on the other side of the fence and to be ignored because you're not poor enough. I didn't know where I stood exactly, whether they really didn't like my work or what.

BROWN: You are suggesting that the Whitney, even right away, became a rather important factor in New York –

ETNIER: It was a very important place from the time it opened.

BROWN: Why was that? Was there nothing like it when it opened?

ETNIER: Well, there again, it opened at the time when I said there were a hundred or so painters around. Everybody I knew was showing there. Of course, I was one of the kids, but at least I got into the place. I was in enough to know that I wouldn't have been dropped if I hadn't written that letter.

I did the same damn thing with the Pennsylvania Academy. After I went there for some years, even though I didn't do much studying, but I was there four years, I think, off and on. They had these annual exhibitions at the Whitney, at the Pennsylvania Academy, at the Chicago Art Institute, at the Carnegie and the Corcoran and so forth. And I was in all of them. And suddenly the goddamn Pennsylvania Academy started having shows and they had a senior selectman who did the inviting. Suddenly here on my native hearth, so to speak, the guy they selected to select the painters decided that I was too antiquated or something. So he didn't show me, even though they had previously bought a painting of mine –a Haiti painting.

BROWN: When was this?

ETNIER: This was, I don't know, around 1938 or '40, I would imagine. So I wrote to them and I said, "Look here. You've bought a painting of mine. I went there for four years, and I've served on your juries and now you're having annual exhibitions and I am not even invited. So what are you going to do about that?" So the same thing happened that happened at the Whitney. I haven't been there since.

BROWN: I see.

ETNIER: But I've learned one thing from that, which is keep your mouth shut. [Laughter]

BROWN: Have you served on many juries?

ETNIER: Yes. I used to serve on quite a few.

BROWN: What's your feeling about juries?

ETNIER: I don't approve of them. I don't know quite why. I am probably more qualified to serve on a jury now than I ever was. Presumably I know more about painting than I did 15 or 20 years ago. But I don't keep in touch. To put me on a jury is like putting Winslow Homer, I guess, down from Prout's Neck down to the Carnegie on a jury. To pull me down and start looking at things –I don't really know what the hell is going on. I'm probably even more out of touch than Winslow Homer was. That would be unfair. So when they send in these ballots to elect young people, I don't know the names to begin with, unless they send me photographs I have no idea what kind of things they paint. So I don't think it's fair to vote on them.

BROWN: Why and how did you go into the National Academy of Design, a very old organization?

ETNIER: Well, there again. I was modern enough about the time I went in there to realize it might be the kiss of death and I heard about Hopper turning it down. A lot of people said if you go into the Academy you're going to be out. I sort of agreed with that. But there were a lot of people in the Academy whose work I respected and one thing and another. Not only John Carroll got actively interested in joining the Academy and made it and promptly made Full Academician. He told me it was a great place. They had a lot of money to spend. They had dinner parties and they wore black ties and it was something to do. Just because of John I broke down and subsequently was honored. It was very flattering, and I couldn't believe there were enough painters in New York who knew my work, much less would ask me to join. So on the whole I was very flattered.

BROWN: When did this happen? In the '40's?

ETNIER: Somewhere around 1935, I think.

BROWN: By that time you'd lived away from New York for quite a while.

ETNIER: Yes. I didn't know New York –so I got in and the first thing I know I started getting a few gold medals and things. I thought this wasn't bad. My father loved gold medals. (Laughter) So did I, to a certain extent. I thought this was pretty cushy, you know. I went to one exhibition there and that's the only time I ever set foot in the Academy. I feel somehow it should have a meaning. It's always handicapped because there are always enough old fuddy-duddies like myself who want it to stay the way it was twenty years from whenever you're talking. So this keeps dragging it back and dragging it back. Then there are a lot or people who they take in just because they are getting old and want to do something nice for them before they die.

So they get them into the Academy, something they have been foolishly shooting for, just to make them feel good. Well, as a result, the Academy gets a high percentage of fuddy-duddies. Painters, you know, who are really just not too good.

BROWN: You generally steer away from organizations then?

ETNIER: Yes. I learned that fairly early.

BROWN: What was the Coffee House group that you mentioned?

ETNIER: They changed into, as far as I can make out, what the hell was it called, something about Artists Against –this came during the Spanish Civil War and they were against fascism very strongly. They also, they were the group who wanted to have the big museums pay you to exhibit. Well, fascism, I'm just not politically-minded enough.

I didn't even know that they were having a Spanish war, much less cared who won or anything else. But everybody else was all worked up about it. So I went to a meeting. They got up and denounced this and denounced that and I was sitting right in the back. So the next day I sent in my resignation because it was a political thing not an art thing anymore. The only thing they did about art was that they wanted to be paid for showing, and I thought it was a privilege and one you should be grateful to be invited to show. It would be like going to a party and making the hostess pay you for coming. [Laughter]

BROWN: What had it been like before they got political?

ETNIER: Then it was evidently a very nice place where they all sat around like a bunch of old crows and talked about art. There were also writers in there too.

BROWN: Did you like that? Were you quite involved in that?

ETNIER: I liked that. I liked that kind of idea. This was just exactly the way it should be. You know, a bunch of The Eight and so forth used to go down to, not Locke-Ober's but Luchow's, and sit around there and talk painting till one or two o'clock in the morning over sauerkraut and beer. That's what I would like to do –if I was in New York - I'd like to be a member of a group like that.

BROWN: Why aren't you in New York? Why did you finally leave New York completely, except to go occasionally to visit your gallery?

ETNIER: I finally realized that you can't –I mean that New York just made me too goddamn restless. There are too many things going on. There are so many attractive females that all you do is get yourself in a great big mess and you can't think about painting at all. I like it up here. So I realized if I was going to continue to work I had to get the hell out of there.

BROWN: Do you sense that you don't really have a need for being able to go a few blocks and see another artist, that kind of thing, as you can do in New York?

ETNIER: I envy people who have it because here there's nobody –I mean, everybody I know is in the roofing business or some damn thing –we have absolutely nothing in common - so whatever I'm doing they somehow aren't interested in. They are all successful businessmen or professors or something and their world doesn't touch mine anywhere. So, as a result, it's very hard to keep yourself stimulated enough to keep working. Because if you live in an artistic community like, say New York or Woodstock or someplace like that, painting becomes to feel important because people are talking about painting all around you. They are comparing their sales records or their reviews or their methods. All this is going on so you begin to feel you're in a worthwhile world. But here you've got to do your own patting on the back and get enough satisfaction from an occasional letter saying "Here's a check." People who buy pictures just don't applaud. They don't, as a rule, write letters of appreciation. So it's hard to keep your ego up. But I am old enough so I don't need that. I think if you were young it would be very difficult to live here and not get your back slapped once in a while.

BROWN: Your father died in 1948. In his later years, what were your relations with him? Was he a formidable presence on your mind whether you were seeing him or not?

ETNIER: Well, I was always aware of the fact that, and this is where that dirty business of selling pictures came in –that it was important to me to be successful from the financial point. He may have pretended -he got satisfaction out of reading press clippings. But I would say that his –for instance, he tried to get me to be a portrait painter because I could make more money as a portrait painter. And I just couldn't. He couldn't see any reason why I wasn't a portrait painter. The fact that it didn't mean anything to me was neither here nor there. That's where the money was. And he had read [that] a lot of portrait painters were very prosperous. So we really never got together, never really spoke the same language. But I was still –I mean, I felt I had to have his admiration and so the only way was to be able to tell him that I sold $15,000 worth of pictures in the last year. Then I felt that I could hold my head up.

BROWN: What about your mother? She lived a bit longer than that. She was the one who first dragged you, as you expressed it, early in life, to culture. What was her relation to you later in her life? You said, when you were a young man you had her sort of under your thumb. How did it continue?

ETNIER: Later in her life she became –she didn't have, to my way of thinking, the ability to concentrate. And she used to make me very nervous by starting in on one subject and ending up with another. She had a loose idea of what I was doing, figured it was alright and that I was successful. She also knew that I had a show every two years, so she knew that I was still at work and that was about all that was necessary to her. I think there were still press clippings coming out so I would send those to her. Sonny-boy is doing O.K. Actually I don't think she had any judgment as to what was a good picture. She liked everything I did. It was automatic just because I was her son.

For instance, she didn't like the Franklin Watkins. She couldn't stand it. It was a portrait that I got Watkins to do of her. She thought it was terrible. And the only way I got it done was to make her promise not to look at it until it was finished. But she was amazingly sensitive about a lot of things, like decorating her house and so forth.

She was very fussy about the glassware she chose and things like that. But painting was just not down her alley. Nor was it down my father's. They really never got the paint. Ever.

BROWN: In the late forties, you were married again, and you pretty much basically stayed in Maine, except for your cruising. And this phase of your life now, for virtually 25 years or so, has this been a period of, how would you characterize it, one of great productivity? Did you finally get at what you wanted to be doing?

ETNIER: Yes. I think in that period, this is from the time I married Brownie –there was, of course, a big upset there when my former wife shot herself and I sort of had to get over that. Then I was very proud of Brownie marrying anybody in the state that I was in. But from that time on, there has been absolutely nothing but a very well regulated peace and quiet, slightly interrupted and improved by having two sons. But there again I figured that two sons was something my father would have given his eye teeth to know about. I had four daughters and so he had no one to carry on the name. But that was sort of like selling pictures: to have some sons. I got a kick out of their pleasing him again, though he never saw them.

She's a pretty tough taskmaster. She certainly was earlier. She's letting me loaf a bit now. But in the early days, she prodded me into getting the hell off somewhere and painting, and if I was in Barbados, not to spend too much time sitting on a beach; at least get a painting done every day. Then I could relax. So I painted a great many West Indian islands with her along. And painted for years from the boat in Nassau.

BROWN: Did she feel that you have a great deal to say and that you must work at it?

ETNIER: I think she has a fair amount of respect for my work. She's come to realize that I am not going to set the world on fire a la Wyeth or Picasso. But I think she has as much respect for my work probably as I do myself. I know I am not tops but I think whatever I've done –I have accomplished what I set out to do. I have been painting pictures and I have painted a great many pictures of things that meant a lot to me and they are usually adequately done. Some of them are extremely well done.

BROWN: So at this point you feel that you have pretty much done what you should have been doing.

ETNIER: I feel it's a good, clean, closed book. I am almost at the end of it. The fact is I've done better than I expected to do because most of my life I just couldn't believe what was happening to me. Imagine getting a review in the New York Times as a twenty-two year-old: from that you get a feeling of confidence. This lets you go on and do the things the way you want to do them, without being scared any more. I please myself. That I've had to say may not be too important but at least from my experience and whatever I've seen of life or of the world, I probably could have done a lot more. I could have worked harder. At least I think I got what I had to say said. It's a job almost done. I think from now on I can polish up the pictures. But, if I have had anything to say, it has long since been said.

BROWN: The factor of chance still lies ahead, doesn't it? That there may be something...

ETNIER: Oh, yes. I might have other subject matter, but as I said earlier, you're really, no matter how many pictures you paint, are saying the same thing over again. I can give you some examples. John Carroll painting the same things over again. Rockwell Kent painted the same things over and over again. Andy Wyeth painted the same things over again. Even Picasso. I mean, even Matisse painted the same things over again, to a certain extent. I can't think of any painters who more or less don't fall into that category.

BROWN: Is there a monotony to...

ETNIER: No. Yes. Occasionally I say this is a little bit too close. I mean, I am doing too many damn pictures into

the sun with this light on the water. Somebody ought to jump down my throat for this. It's a wonder somebody hasn't. But I also have sort of a way out with three different dealers. There's one in Texas, one in New York, and one in Pennsylvania. If I get –I can distribute similar pictures to three different sales areas. [Laughter] They don't rub noses too much.

BROWN: In the future, what do you think you are going to be working on? Polishing fewer paintings? What do you think?

ETNIER: I sort of feel it's the end of the line. And your presence here helps me to confirm this. So I've really been kicking myself for the years that I didn't spend more time being a bit more athletic. I think I could have played more golf and more tennis than I did. But I did do a lot of boating. So you can't have everything. Now I know I am too old for boating, and so I am getting a hell of a kick out of tennis and golf. I am lucky that I haven't got a bad heart or something so I can do it. So playing tennis is for me like school recess.

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