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Oral history interview with Milford Zornes, 1999 July 18-September 5

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Milford Zornes on July 18, 1999. The interview was conducted at Milford Zornes' home studio in Claremont, CA by Susan Anderson for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

MZ: MILFORD ZORNES
SA: SUSAN ANDERSON
PZ: PAT ZORNES

SA: This is the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. An interview with Milford Zornes on the 18th of July, 1999 at his studio home in Claremont, California. The interviewer is Susan Anderson. This is session one, tape one, side one. Well Mr. Zornes, today we'll cover questions about your family background and early years. You were born in Camargo, Oklahoma on January 25, 1908. You lived there until you were about seven?

MZ: Yes.

SA: And what was Camargo like?

MZ: Well, actually, I was born between Camargo and Versa. But I was six seven miles from Camargo. Well, it was a small farming town. That part of Oklahoma was an area that was settled, mostly, during the land rush in the Oklahoma historic rush for land. My father and his father and brother came down out of Kansas and settled –– homesteaded there. My mother's people came from Iowa. She came from Iowa and with an aunt and uncle. She homesteaded. They had a homestead, she, by building her house, of which they required an establishment as a home. She built it on their property so that there was a home compound and, yet, she was able to homestead that way. And she was a school teacher.

SA: Your mother?

MZ: Yes. She met my father because his two younger brothers were students of hers in the country school. My father had to take care of affairs. He was not able to be in her school and I think he probably had only a third grade education, if that. And I think my mother, more or less, educated him after they were married. He wasn't an educated man, but he was fairly well-read. Or, at least, in my childhood I had the impression, or he always gave the impression, of being fairly worldly through reading or keeping track of the newspapers or something.

SA: And what was he –– what were your parents like?

MZ: Well, my mother was . . . they say that a man always marries a woman like his mother and maybe that's true. I could, maybe, pick characteristics of my wife. A little caustic, a little fussy. Strong in character enough to identify themselves very definitely as a full partner in the marriage. There was never any idea that there was any domination. And I think that's true with us and I think it's very true of my mother. And my father was an intelligent man. In fact, though, as I've said, he wasn't an educated man but, to this day even, I'm sure that when it comes to judgments relative to the principles involved or anything having to do with business ethics or anything of that kind, something of my father's thinking is with me, you see. And he was very capable. Physically, too. He was not a heavy-set man, he was more my build and not quite as tall but he could handle horses and he could handle cattle and he could handle any situation physically. The interesting thing was that while he was a rancher, I think he was glad to get away from the handling of animals. He was very capable with horses but never took the attitude of a horseman. You know, he was a working man. It was just to handle stock and to handle horses. It was just part of the working day life, that was all.

SA: So your father was a rancher?

MZ: Yes. We, the people who settled there, had to live in dug outs and sod houses. Do you know the writing of Mari Sandoz who wrote about the early days in Nebraska?

SA: No.

MZ: Well her writing reminded me so much of my childhood memories because of the –– well, we would say primitive ways of living, now, of course. But they used what they had and I well recall my grandfather had the blacksmith shop. I don't think he was necessarily intended to be a blacksmith but in that country where blacksmithing was required, my father said it was one way of collecting a little money because usually business

is done in a matter of trading. And, I suppose, he was a blacksmith because he could do it and blacksmithing was needed. I remember the old blacksmith shop in a dugout with the big bellows and the typical shop . . . and the smell of it and the idea of it still. I still have it in my memory.

SA: Wonderful. And -– so your mother was a teacher then?

MZ: Yes.

SA: Did she continue to teach?

MZ: No, after she was married. And she wasn’t, I suppose, she wasn’t equipped to teach in modern schools at all. Her education was in a kind of an academy for teachers in a private school. And then when she came to Oklahoma, I think she had to pass what they call a normal test for the local requirements. I don’t know what they were, how they would compare to modern demands. I don’t know. I know it was a one-room schoolhouse. And that I went to a one-room schoolhouse, too.

SA: And – right there in –- was it in Camargo?

MZ: No. That was interesting, too, that we did go to country school but the school year was sketchy. Maybe they could afford to have it four months, maybe five months and my father –- this is another key to his character –- he was, again, I keep referring to the fact that he wasn’t an educated man but he had great ambitions for his family and he wanted them to be educated. I look back upon it as a little naive now. So he had to have us move to town during the school year so we could go to the school in Camargo. A bigger school. It was something that his neighbors -– the regular people of the neighborhood thought he was being a little uppity or high-browed that he had to take his kids to town and go to school when the rest of them went to the country school. But it was his determination. And I’ll tell you another story –- maybe it won’t come up in your questioning. As a young cowboy or young man, the way of marketing cattle was to bring them to Woodward. Yes, you brought them to Woodward, Oklahoma, where they were loaded on cattle cars and taken to Kansas City for marketing and usually someone had to go along with the particular shipment of cattle. And so he was in Kansas City –- I don’t know how many times but for some reason, somehow, he heard a violinist play and I have no idea of whether it was a street player or just in a local entertainment or what it was but some way or another the young man –- he had the kind of a grand idea that if he ever had a son, he’d love to have him be a violinist. So when I was old enough to play -– to hold a three-quarter violin, I had to take violin lessons and my first teacher was a barber in Camargo and then it wasn’t long after that, that we moved to Idaho. I had to go on each Saturday to a Catholic girl’s school in Boise where one of the sisters was a fine violinist and a teacher. But it was amusing that she had to announce -- when I was 12 years old -– she had to announce to my family they can no longer have me come to this school. I was evidently a man by that time.

SA: Oh my.

MZ: And finally my father had me with a man who was evidently a skilled professional violinist. He had part of a music school in Boise, Idaho and this man would question me quite closely. I worked hard at the violin but he would question me and he found out that I was interested in drawing and I’m pretty sure he decided that while I might be earnestly trying I wasn’t talented -– wasn’t talented as a violinist so he brought my father in for a conference and explained to him he probably shouldn’t force me to carry on too much longer because he thought I was slated to do something else.

SA: And did you feel that way, too?

MZ: Well, I did. It was a relief to me but my father, I think, was sort of disappointed.

SA: I bet so. Well, before we go on to Utah, tell me a little bit about what Camargo was like.

MZ: Well, I keep telling stories on the side . . . Camargo finally had a railroad. The railroad came in when I was a child there. It was a small trading town. Let me see, how would I compare it? Just a small town where farmers, ranchers went on horseback and by wagon, usually on Saturday. It was a very, very busy place. Horses tied in front along the street. Wagons in yards and people doing business in local stores and on the roads going into town you’d meet your neighbors and so on. That was the sad thing about going back now it’s -– those places are dead -– they’re empty. And I’m taken back to the time when they were very busy towns and I suppose Camargo had 500 residents but the story about the railroad . . . the railroad came down from Woodward to Elk City. Elk City is on the main highway through southern Oklahoma and I well remember, I could not have been more than five years old, but I remember that we drove west a couple of miles to see the first train come down on this railroad. In about 1962 or 3 I was invited to go to Oklahoma City to teach in the Oklahoma Museum of Art for 10 days. We were there for 10 days and we had a spell of three or four days so I took Pat into western Oklahoma where I was born and we went to Camargo -– rather deserted now. We were having lunch at the only place in town where you could get lunch and some railroad men came in and I don’t know how I got into conversation

with them but in some way I told them that I had seen the first train come down and one of these men in a striped cap and overalls – he leaned back and he said, “Well, my God.” And I said, “What’s the matter?” He said, “We brought the last train down today.”

SA: What a coincidence. That’s really something.

MZ: But any rate I bring that in so that you see that that was a remote place and when I was child Oklahoma City was as remote as New York would be for us now. It’s just something we knew was there someplace.

SA: Well would you mind me asking a little bit about where your family came from and about what time they arrived in that part of the country?

MZ: Well, let’s see, I, probably, I was born in 1908. They came when Oklahoma was still a territory. I think I escaped being born in the territory by three years. And I would say that my parents were probably married, then, it must’ve been three or four years, possibly three or four years before I was born. So that would put them there just about the time Oklahoma became a territory, which I believe was in 1903 or 6, I forget.

SA: But they had lived there and been raised there before that?

MZ: No. As I told you, my father, his two brothers and his father came down out of Kanses to settle on land and I imagine they came, either about 1900 or 1902. And then my mother came from Iowa to teach school and to take up a homestead. I think her homestead was a quarter of section, it’s called. A section is a square mile. The homesteads –- I think most of ‘em are a quarter suchen. Now my father and his –- let’s see, his father had a homestead and she had a homestead and at one time we lived on her homestead. They built a new house on her homestead when I was a child.

SA: And did that constitute the ranch, too, then?

MZ: Yes. Yes. It’s a little romantic to use the term “ranch,” at that time. I think they considered themselves farmers. They raised cattle and they shipped cattle but they raised grain, also. And shipped grain. But they thought of themselves as farmers. Nowadays I just naturally, for some reason, say I was born on a ranch in western Oklahoma but maybe that’s the aura of the west that I relate to or something.

SA: Perhaps, but also the fact that it was stock that they were raising.

MZ: Yeah. Yeah. In the west and California and the far west, I think that’s a habit to call it a ranch rather than a farm.

SA: Well, what is your ancestral background?

MZ: My father’s people, the name Zornes comes from Alsace in France. We were in Alsace two years ago and a great many people in the phone book in Severn are named Zorn, Z-O-R-N. He was French. His people migrated to this country too –- by way of Canada –- two or three generations before my father. And then on his mother’s side, I think it was primarily German.

On my mother’s side, she was Scotch, Irish and English on her father’s side and German on her mother’s side. Her father’s father fought on the northern side in the Civil War. No, they were German –- my mother’s. It was on my father’s side –- his father’s side was on southern. Her mother’s side fought in the northern army during the Civil War.

SA: Interesting. Was yours a religious family?

MZ: Yes, in that I think my father had too much religion because he wasn’t religious. It just seemed to me that he had too – had gotten too much regulated religion as a child and he rebelled against it. All my life I have shared his antipathy for religion.

SA: For organized religion and such?

MZ: Organized religion. And my mother –- I think it was a very ordinary or proscribed –- the church was more or less in her childhood but I don’t think they were particularly religious people.

SA: What part did nature play in your youth?

MZ: Well, as I think back upon it, I have determined that a painter naturally has –- or that is – let’s put it this way –- possibly he has benefitted by a country life and the chance in childhood to be free, to dream around without very much regulation. Now I had my chores and I had to work as a child. In fact, I feel it was a very good thing that I learned to work because to succeed as a artist, you have to work and I had that ingrained into me,

certainly. But I also look back upon lots of free time and lots of just wandering around the canyons and the fields and, with dogs, and I must've had a lot of idle time or at least time when I wasn't severely put to something.

SA: So you really do look back on that with fond memories?

MZ: Yes, I do. I think I had a very natural, rather free, in some ways, a free childhood.

SA: And you have a sister?

MZ: Have one sister. Yes. She was three years younger than me.

SA: And what's her name?

MZ: Her name was Virginia. She died this past year.

SA: And what are your parents' names?

MZ: My father's name was Frances –- James Frances Zornes and my name is actually James Milford Zornes. My mother's name was Clara Delphine Lindsey. Her maiden name was Lindsey. Lindsey is a Scotch clan or is a minor clan identified with one of the larger clans, I think. There are the ruins of a Lindsey castle in Scotland. I've often intended to go there and paint watercolors of it. Maybe sell them to the Lindseys.

SA: You should do that. Well, so was it about at age seven, then, that you moved to Boise?

MZ: Yeah. Well, we moved to Idaho and we lived in the vicinity of Boise. If you know the area –- we lived up on the bench above the town –- a suburb of Boise.

SA: And you were about seven years old then?

MZ: Yes.

SA: What precipitated the move that time?

MZ: Well, life in Oklahoma wasn't very –- the prospects were poor. Farming and ranching was difficult. It was dry farming and depending upon natural pasture lands for cattle. The story was that people gradually drifted away from there and my grandfather was identified by his stubbornness in staying. People would leave and he would buy their farms and that family still –- a half-sister still's living there. They were land-poor people and I think during the last year and maybe even now they survive on oil lease funds. I know that just recently my sister and I, while she was still alive, and her son negotiated the thing, we gave over any claim that we had to any land there simply because our share amounted to so little, and it enabled other members of the family to take over and do something with the country. The land –- the country has deteriorated. Land has eroded and it certainly hasn't anything like the prosperity it had when I was a child there.

I suppose if they ever find –- ever really get into that country to drill for oil, I suppose it's there but it's been years and years. The big companies will lease lands that have a potential for oil and they'll pay a small amount to people living on it just to hold the right to drill someday. It doesn't amount to much --It's poor income but I think in recent years that family has depended a lot on just oil leases.

SA: Now, what did your father intend to do when he moved to Idaho, then?

MZ: Well, I don't think he had very definite prospects. See –- what actually happened was that he, my father had a business all of his life, regardless of anything else he did, of buying property, improving 'em and selling them. We lived in many different houses because he would buy run-down property. He was very capable of putting a place into a nice-looking spot. He'd tear down the outbuildings, take the lumber and build one good building. He would clean up and mow the land until he had a very pretty place and then he would sell it. And he did that up until he was 94 years old.

SA: And so he was planning on doing that, to some extent?

MZ: Well, I don't think that was never a plan. It was just something that he was always doing. Now, he went to work, let's see, what was his first job? I really can't think what it was. He worked for the Boise city in the park. He worked in the park system doing caretaker work. So that was one job that he had. And then we had a smaller tract of land and we did truck gardening. I remember there was a small berry farm and I had a lot of the work to do on these –- in this because it was something that we did outside of his job. And I had to be responsible for a lot of that.

SA: I can imagine. Well, you started to go to school there, then, in Boise and what kind of schooling did you

have?

MZ: Well, let's see, it was the Franklin school and I went to grammar school. I think I must've -– I must've gone from the sixth grade into high school. Oh no, I did the first three years of high school in Idaho and then I came to California to finish my last year of high school.

SA: Well, did you have art instruction? At any point when you were growing up?

MZ: No.

SA: In either Oklahoma or Idaho?

MZ: Let's see -– no, I didn't. Oh, I started being an artist in Oklahoma. In fact, I won some kind of a school prize in painting when I was still in lower grammar school.

SA: When you were still a child, really, then?

MZ: Yes, my mother taught me to draw, actually. Being isolated in a big area with school years quite sketchy, she really taught me to read and write and to draw at home. More or less she taught me to read and write and to be interested in drawing simply because she was a busy ranch wife and working with possibly a couple of hired girls quite a bit of the time. In order to keep me quiet and busy it was one of the things that she did, so that when I did go to school, having the aura of being the kid who could draw or did draw, I was always sort of the artist even as a small school kid. But I didn't have actual art training, other than some way or another I remember the visiting – what was it? My first school years in Idaho there would be a visiting art teacher. She'd come once a day or something like that. This is the way to draw an apple and put a stem on it, you know. And I remember very little of art training.

SA: Did you carry sketch books with you or anything like that . . .

MZ: Well, I think it was just like a kid. He'd sit down and do it and maybe . . . Oh yes, I remember one thing and I shouldn't forget it because I often repeat it. I think this was in Idaho, too, or my last year in Oklahoma because I remember the teacher. It was on Friday and she told us to put our books aside and we were to stand up and say what we were going to do when we were grown. And I remember she wanted us to say that we were going to do this, too, or something like that. Well, I remember – and I joke about this – I was probably a dull, smart aleck kid and I got up and said that I was going to travel all over the world and paint pictures. And I always – this is my byline. I was canceled out by a little girl in back of me because she got up and said she was – "When I get big I'm going to have a baby and I think I will, too." And the kids were saying they were going to be a policeman or a sheriff or something but I think just out of sheer show-off, I was going to be an artist and travel all over the world and I've often said this because it has come true. That's exactly what I did.

SA: About how old would you have been then? Do you have any idea?

MZ: Oh, six, seven years old. I didn't have any actual art training until I had work in high school, in San Fernando High School during the last year of high school when I got here.

SA: Well, what interests did you have as a child or in adolescence that you can remember other than drawing . . .

MZ: I think, actually, about the only interest I can recall was that I wanted to travel. Even now, if you go back to Oklahoma, western Oklahoma, it's sorta rolling, flat country and if you stand on a relatively high place, the world gets to be a blue line in the distance and I somehow still have the . . .

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MZ: . . . or one of the other big companies and things would come from big stores and you always looked forward to Christmas 'cause watercolors and drawing things would usually be one of the presents that they got for me.

SA: That's wonderful. And so she, your mother, probably helped you figure out how to use those.

MZ: Yes. I remember that she – when I was just a baby – they had taken a trip west and they had visited some of my father's relatives in Washington and some of my mother's relatives here in California and it seemed, and she often mentioned this, that there was a family of cousins, my father's cousins, in Washington. And they were young and she was very proud of a little drawing that one of these cousins had made for her. It seemed that it was a family somewhat oriented toward painting and drawing. Possibly her telling me about them had something to do with my doing it.

SA: I've also heard you mention something about an uncle Charlie Zornes.

MZ: Yes. Charlie Zornes was one of those cousins. Later on I got to know him here in California. He had been one of the Wright brothers' mechanics. And he'd gone back east because he was interested in airplanes and when they invented or made their flights, he was one of the first on hand to . . . and then he built airplanes. He was kind of a grizzled man and crippled up quite a bit 'cause he'd been hurt in a couple of falls in the airplanes. Out here and years later when I was taking newsreel pictures I covered a story on him. He had a set up out in Victorville where he was building a powered glider. I'll tell about that a little later in sequence. But he was the artist, inventor, actor, jack-of-all-trades and the joke was that when I showed too much interest in drawing there was some danger of my becoming an Uncle Charlie. And the truth was I admired Uncle Charlie.

SA: You would've loved to become like Uncle Charlie. Who wouldn't? He sounds like a very colorful character. Well, were there any other important role models or mentors in those early years?

MZ: Yes. Of course I had great affection for my grandfather on my mother's side. He had a great way with kids. And one of her brothers (this is amusing, too) when I was a child, he was the great fellow. He knew how to talk to us and had all kinds of ideas. Uncle Herb was the one we always hung around. Years later when I was teaching at Pomona College, I got a new Mercury car one spring just as the term ended. We got in the car and drove to Idaho where he was a rancher and I'll never forget – he had become very religious. We arrived at their ranch on a Sunday afternoon and here he was in his blue serge suit and the deacon of the church was there for dinner and everything was very solemn and he was no longer the happy uncle Herb that I had known when he was a –– no, Allen. That was uncle Allen when I was a child. My grandfather had this habit, isolated as it was, things came to us through traveling salesmen. And if a book salesman or a phonograph salesman or a large picture or portrait salesman arrived he would always buy it because his attitude was maybe it's something that the family needs. But that was one of the choice benefits I had as child was to be in the attic in my grandmother's place poring over many books that were stacked up there. And I think it engendered a love for books. I well remember the big sale that was made when they left the country. You know what a big farm sale is? Everything is put together and there's a big day, a big lunch prepared and a professional auctioneer comes and all the people come and they buy the cattle and the horses and everything and I remember when the books came up for sale, lots of them, just piled in lots, and it was a blow to me. I couldn't understand. I could hardly stand the idea that all the books were going.

SA: So would that sale have been when you left . . .

MZ: When we left Oklahoma. 'Cause my mother's people and my father, let's see, the two families left just about the same time. Because one of her brothers had gone to Idaho and had taken up land –– bought land and I think my grandfather had bought land with him. That was independent of my father. My father was not the first favorite with his in-laws 'cause he was a Socialist.

SA: Oh, really?

MZ: And my grandfather was a Democrat but he was a very conservative one and quite fiercely conservative. And he had three son-in-laws. I heard him tell a man once that he had three son-in-laws. One was a horse trader, one was a Socialist, and the other was a damn fool. I heard him say that.

SA: Better to be the Socialist than to be the damn fool.

MZ: Well, my father didn't back down and I remember lots of arguments. My father, he never was a card-carrying Socialist because they weren't that well organized but I well remember that he was very . . . There seemed to be a newspaper called Appeal to Reason and W.E.B. DuBois was quite a hero in those days, a Socialist leader. I thought of her name the other day because my grandfather would say this name with great scorn. It was a woman. Socialist. But at any rate, because of that, it's funny –– I've been very non-political most of my life 'cause I've been busy being an artist and gradually I've developed a feeling that it's kind of a lost cause to spend too much time being politically oriented. But I've always had liberal leanings simply because . . . I'm sure you're either born into a family in one category or the other and there's a . . . what do they call it? What is the term? It's a screen that you're caught with and it's hard to get through that screen. And I was screened to be a, more or less, to be a liberal in my thinking because of my father's influence.

SA: Well, that's very interesting. You moved from Boise to San Fernando, I think, when you were around 17. Does that sound about right? Because you had your last year of high school in California.

MZ: I believe I was 19 before I graduated.

SA: We can check on the date later so . . .

MZ: No, I was in my junior year in this country high school playing football. I got hurt, and I was hit in the eye and for a time I was cross-eyed vertica and I had my eye pulled out of kilter –– the muscles or tendons were pulled. My father took me to doctors in Boise and I have him to thank for this, too. He went to two or three eye

specialists and they all said that I'd have to have heavy lenses to pull these things back. Well, somehow he didn't like that idea and he finally found a chiropractor who did six months massaging of my eyes until it finally worked away. This pulling. Well now I'm not sure whether time did or he did it, but I still have it. If I look this way or this way, my eyes pull out of . . . But it has never been a problem. Even now with my . . .

SA: Isn't that wonderful.

MZ: . . . eye problems, the doctors tell me that has nothing to do with it. But at any rate -– let's see, where were we?

SA: I was asking you about the move to California.

MZ: Oh, yes. All right. My father (it was primarily our own situation) he was a working man. It was a hard life. We owned a little property but I suppose California beckoned for more jobs, better life, some way or another. And a lot of people were interested in coming to California and my father was determined to come to California and he did go away in the spring –- or no, he went away in the fall. We had a truck and he had done, among other things, odd jobs with this truck and I carried on. I was a pretty husky kid by that time. 17. And I was able to, if things came along, haul something. And I well remember some pretty difficult things in the winter there. Managing a truck on frozen streets and things like that. But at any rate, I was quite capable so he came to California and got work and got started down here, leaving us to come along in the spring. My parents came, my mother and sister came down, and I lied about my age. Oh, I was 17, I can remember distinctly now because I lied about my age because I had to be 19 to get on a government survey job. A friend of mine who was working on what's known as the –- what is it called? That survey called? General Land Office Survey. This kid had worked on this survey one season and he told me something about it. I wanted to do it and I was knocked out of school that spring because of this eye business. So it looked like I would have to lose school – year of schooling and you had to be 19 to qualify. I was tall and he introduced me to the surveyor in Boise who's crew I went out on and we told him I was 19 years old and I got on and I worked that summer. We were sectionalizing townships along the boundary west of Yellowstone so my family had come down in the spring and I didn't come down until the fall. Well, that put me two months late for my senior year and I hadn't been an outstanding student in school but we lived in San Fernando at that time and I wanted to graduate, I talked with the teacher and I well remember the old lady who taught chemistry. And I went and talked to her. She said, "No. You could never catch up in chemistry in order to graduate." And as I walked out, the old lady yelled back at me, she said, "Will you work?" And I said, "Yes, I'd work." She said, "Well, we'll work and maybe you can do it." And I became, strangely enough, having been an indifferent school student, because I had to graduate and was in this strange, big school, which was entirely new to me, I was so intent upon graduating –- I was second in scholarship for my class.

SA: Isn't that something?

MZ: There was a Mexican boy, I remember, by the name of Jesus something or other. He was from Mexico, he was a Mexican immigrant –- he was the top in scholarship and I was from Idaho and I was second.

SA: Isn't that something? You were up to the challenge it sounds like.

MZ: Yeah. And, also, in athletics I'd never been a good – they did nothing but play ball it seemed. I wasn't a good ball player. I seemed to have poor coordination and, possibly, poor eyesight then –- or that is for acuteness in making ball plays but any rate I had toughened up during the summer of surveying so that I went out for the mile and I was the –- I got my letter in running the mile and I held that for two years after I graduated –- the big San Fernando -- you know, Hollywood, San Fernando League. Held that for two years and to have any credit as an athlete was such a boon to me that I even went all out for that. So it just shows that if a kid is motivated enough he can probably do it.

SA: Well, did that move affect you in any way? It sounds positive.

MZ: Oh, yes. Of course, that was during the Depression and to get out of high school and to try and get a job, that was really a rough situation. The result was –- and I hope I'm not wandering too much here.

SA: No.

MZ: But, when I got out of high school in San Fernando, I really had gotten involved in hack writing. How did I get going on that? I was very ambitious. I thought of being a journalist. I don't know whether it was that well-defined but I was hack writing and I would sell photographs and some captions to Scientific American and Popular Science. They would buy photographs and captions and then the old Popular Mechanics –- it no longer exists, I guess. But after I had submitted to them several times, they would send me assignments. And one time, because I had worked on this survey during the summer and had this experience, I proposed writing an article about the public surveys. It had to do with the logistics of packing. And they wrote back and suggested that I

write an article on public lands and they even loaned me photographs and told me where to get photographs and so one of the first articles I ever wrote was for Popular Mechanics.

SA: Now, this was right out of high school?

MZ: Right after high school. And it happened that I was in San Fernando. There was a cactus farm. A fellow had approximately five acres of huge cactus and he was harvesting these cactus apples and in writing the article I found out that those cactus apples were shipped to New York to make cactus candy. Well, I was sitting, writing some notes and the old man was sitting on a bench nearby and he asked me questions. Asked me what I was doing or something and I told him I was writing an article about this cactus farm and he got to asking me where I was in school and then he asked where I was going to college. Well I hadn't thought of going to college. And the old man said, "Well surely, if you plan to be a journalist, you'd go to college." Well, it was a short conversation but I decided right then and there that's what I would do. I didn't have the best scholastic record except for that last year so a friend of mine who was a doctor's son in San Fernando (he wasn't a very good student either and he had gone up to Santa Maria Junior College) and I headed up there and went to junior college the first year. Then later I came back and my father had bought an orange grove south of Pomona College and so I went up and had the audacity to apply for entry into Pomona College.

SA: So you just decided you wanted to go there and applied?

MZ: I just applied and I knew so little about what was required and one of the old professors told me – no, it was the president of the college –- his daughter was in my class, it turned out. And she told me years later that she was not a good student and I admitted that I hadn't been and she said, "We got in -– we got to go to Pomona because they needed bodies." That was during the Depression and they did, they grabbed me. I went in with a rating of Sophomore in Pomona College.

SA: Now, wasn't it a fairly expensive private school? Even then?

MZ: Well, I don't know how expensive. I know it's become very expensive since. But they gave me a scholarship. Because I could claim my training in high school and because I was really determined now that I wanted . . . I'm getting tangled here . . . When I came off these surveys, I went to Otis Art Institute for a while.

SA: Right. That's what I thought.

MZ: Then I came out and could live at home, and because I was going to art school and because I wanted to continue an art education they gave me Sophomore rating and they gave me a scholarship.

SA: Let's see. You went up to Santa Maria Junior College right after high school.

MZ: And then I wasn't satisfied or really oriented to the idea of continuing to go to college so I went to San Francisco and I enrolled in Heel's Engineering School.

SA: Now what made you decide to go to engineering school?

MZ: Well, it was just an idea and I think . . . oh, I know now. In the junior college in Santa Maria I did some work for and lived in the home of one of the art teachers and I took one drawing class from the man of the family. They were both teachers. And because it was a very good drawing, they got all excited that I should be studying art. Well, I still was not convinced that I wanted to be an artist as a profession. I kept skirting all around it. So then it occurred to me that I wanted to be involved in architecture. So I went up to San Francisco and, first of all, I had to find a way to live before I could enroll in the school and the first thing I did was find a place where I could work for my food and lodging in a boarding house. This woman kept several boarders. And then I enrolled in the school. I remember I'd ride downtown on the cable car. I think I had the idea I wanted to stay in San Francisco so I was looking for a job, too and that was hard at that time. I pounded the pavement in any spare time I had. At any rate I finally got settled and went to the engineering school and I got along fine with the drawing. I wasn't good at math. I remember the math teacher was a whiz at giving us all kinds of shortcuts. Bypassing all the prescribed courses and yet it was a little too much for me and I had this longing to travel so I decided I'd get work on a ship. And I even thought of stowing away on the Lurline. I think that was the ship that went out to Hawaii at that time. And I lost my nerve and didn't stay. I went onboard and I was going to hide and have them find me when we were in mid Pacific but I didn't do it. I've often regretted it. Would've been an adventure. But I finally gave up the idea that I could ship out of San Francisco. During the Depression every man that had ever gone to sea went back to look for a job on a ship. So then I hitchhiked to . . .

SA: Probably times were already hard.

MZ: Yeah. And I came down by a little coastline ship to my folk's place and I didn't want to stay at home because without a job I didn't want to be hangin' on my parents. So then I hitchhiked to San Diego and I gave up the idea

of shipping out of there and I started from San Diego and hitchhiked across the United States and there were a few incidents. I remember in Galveston I tried to get a ship and one of the amusing things that happened there –- you –- the way you got a job is to sit in the shipping office and they would call out, “We need so many able seamen.” I mean, “We need a Coal Passer. We need an ordinary seaman.” Whatever. And so the system was to go up and show discharges from other jobs on ships, and if it was a contest between two or three, it’d be the one who had the most discharges that would get the job. Well, I wasn’t getting a job and there was another old man, a sea-faring man, he was quite elderly. He told me it was ‘cause he was too old, reason why he wasn’t getting a job. But any rate we buddied a little bit and one afternoon he said, “Well, let’s go eat.” And I said, “Where we going to go eat?” I didn’t have any money and he didn’t seem to have any either. And I was gettin’ pretty desperate and so we just went onboard a ship, a tanker and we said we’ll wait a while ‘til the crew comes out. They were in the mess –- in the galley having mess and pretty soon they all got up and we just walked in and sat down and the people just brought us some food and I was surprised at this, you know. And then he explained to me, he said, “It’s customary if you’re a seaman and you’re looking for a job and you can’t eat, well, they’ll let you on the ships.” He said they all know what the situation is. So I was there for possibly a week tryin’ to get work on a ship and that’s the way we were –- you didn’t fool ‘em more than once a day.

[SESSION 1, TAPE 2, SIDE A]

SA: This is the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. An interview with Milford Zornes on the 18th of July 1999 at his studio home in Claremont, California. The interviewer is Susan Anderson. This is session one, tape two, side A.

MZ: But I had enough in Virginia and across the south. You could get a room for 50 cents and I remember all the rooms were old. Southern mansions had become rooming houses. Four-poster beds and that sort of thing. And since I traveled and had the romantic idea of the south and all this –- these things all were exciting to me. I can’t remember what my first job was in New York but I got the job of a standby. Oh no, I went to the shipping office first. Somewhere in that area you could get a hamburger for a dime and you could get a room, a cold water room in Hoboken. It must’ve cost me so little that I could manage it but there wasn’t heat in the room. It was cold. And I was spending my time in shipping offices trying to get work on a ship and finally I got a job as standby on a Moore-McCormick ship. The Moore-McCormick line [unintelligible] between Scandinavia and New York. And it was cold and wintery weather and I had to go over to Hoboken. The ship was in Hoboken. And our job was to clean out the holds of this ship. Grain was rotted in the hold of the ship and we had to scoop this stuff up in buckets and pull it up and it could be dumped. I was a kid and these guys were taking advantage. Whenever they could they’d work down below. It was stinking and a nasty job but it was warm, at any rate. I was up on deck dumping this stuff in the cold, blistering wind and I worked at that a couple of days. Then we had come up at noon to have lunch. And I told the mate that I wasn’t going –- I wasn’t staying on deck. I was going below. I said, “I’ve been the one on deck all the way though.” And he said, “Well, you’re kind of a smart guy telling what you’re going to do and what you can’t do.” And he was kind of angry and he said, “What are you here for anyway? What are you doing here?” He said, “Are you a sailor?” And I said, “No, I wanted to get a job.” He said, “What kind of a job?” I said, “I wanted to get a ship –- I wanted to work my way to Europe or work my way someplace.” And he said, “Well, what’s the matter? Are you a seaman?” I said, “No.” And he said, “Then you have no discharges?” I said, “No.” He said, “I don’t want you around here. I’ll give you a hand full of ‘em.” So he took up where his office was on the bridge or someplace on the ship and he made out a whole handful of fake discharges. Said, “Take ‘em and get yourself a job.” He said, “You don’t belong here.” He said, “You don’t seem to like to work.” I said, “I like to work but I’m not going to take the brunt of it all the time.” And he said, and he kind of laughed, he said, “Well, you’re kind of a smart aleck. Get out of here.” And so then I went back to the shipping office and with some discharges I could shovel. And I remember a call came for four coal [unintelligible] and I started to take the job. And a little guy said, “Kid, you don’t want that job.” And I said, “I wanted to get out of here.” And he says, “Well,” said, “I don’t know how strong you are but they’ll kill you and it won’t do you any good and you won’t have any fun in Europe by the time you get there.” He says, “Stick around. You’ll get a job.” So I stayed. I turned it down and eventually they called for a ordinary seaman on a ship going to Copenhagen and so I went and got my stuff and got aboard and I’ll have to tell you about how I entered into my first trip to Europe. I worked on the ship.

SA: So that’s the so called, “Merchant Marines,” then?

MZ: Well, yes. The “Merchant Marines” seem to be a general term. If you’re working on merchant ships you were in the Merchant Marines.

SA: All right.

MZ: And I need to tell a little bit about the voyage itself. I went aboard. Oh yes, I went aboard and we were putting our stuff away in focsal. Focsal is a word for forecastle but on modern ships it’s usually aft. And then all these guys who had signed on started walking off and they said, “Kid, are you going to stay?” And I said, “Well, what’s the matter?” And he said, “The boatswain is coming on is a bum that nobody’s going sail with him. They

said, “He’ll kill ya,” or something but any rate this big Brooklyn bum came aboard. He was the boatswain. And he -– these guys were leaving and he called ‘em all kind of names. He knew a lot of them. And it was quite a row and they had to bring on a whole new crew before we could sail but he – this guy turned around and he says, “Well, all right kid, you’re going, too?” And I said, “No, no, I’m not going.” He says, “You’re going to stay?” And then he started swearing at me and telling me what to do. When he thought I was going to stay he started treating me rough right off. But I stayed and it was a whole day before we sailed. I had to do all kinds of clean-up stuff. And then when we got out beyond the Statue of Liberty they started. They had collected garbage on deck the whole time they’d been in port. And when they got out beyond the Statue of Liberty I had to start shoveling this stuff overboard and there was wind and I’d get some of it back in my face. And it was sour garbage. And then I got seasick. And I thought, of course, I thought I was going to die. I had never been seasick before and this ailment was beyond my comprehension.

SA: Yes.

MZ: So I went to my bunk and in a few minutes he just literally came and set me on the deck manually. He asked, “What the so-and-so are you doing in your bunk? We’re sailing.” Okay. I told him I was sick. Well, that was too awfully bad. And he wasn’t limited in liquor and he says, “So, you’re sick? We’re sailing. You’re going to work.” So I had to work all that day and at noon or about around noon he came out of the mess and was handin’ me a half loaf of bread and I didn’t want any bread. I was sick. But, “Eat it. Eat it.” And the truth is that eating this bread would absorb, and I got to feeling better after eating this bread and so by the evening he said, “Well kid, you did pretty well.” And from then on I got along pretty well with him. He worked me like a dog but we got to be kind of buddies. So that when we got to Copenhagen there’s this sca- –- I never could keep it straight. There’s a scagarack and a catagate. I think the Scagarack is where you first go in past the Comburg Castle. You may know that the Comburg was the model that Shakespeare used for Hamlet. They later filmed Hamlet at that castle. So here we were sailing into Copenhagen harbor and here was the castle standing and the sailors were already beginning to get drunk. And he was half drunk already. Well, and I should say that the night before we got into Copenhagen -– a lot of these sailors were illiterate and they had me writing letters for them. They were going to get paid and they made me promise that I would take half of the pay and put it in these letters. They knew they’d get drunk and this was my first real lesson in integrity.

SA: Really. I can imagine.

MZ: Because I’ve lived a sheltered life with people who were always honest and to be with this rough bunch of sailors was, you know, very callow. But here was a guy telling me to write a letter to some hotel in Hong Kong and to put in some money to pay his bill. And these guys telling me to put in some money because they wanted to send half home to the family. The rest of it was going to get drunk. It was a prescribed procedure. So I wrote letters. Then the first night in Copenhagen we were settling in a inn past Comburg Castle. This lunkhead of a boatswain. He comes and he puts out his arm and he says, “Okay, kid. He comes over here to see the castles – the god damn castles. Well, here are your castles.” Speaking in Brooklynese, you know.

SA: Well, about how long were you in Europe total? That first trip?

MZ: Well, it couldn’t have been much more than a month or so because I jumped ship. And what you do is you’re in port. You’re supposed to draw half your pay, get what liberty you can, but stay on the job and stay on the ship. But if you jump ship, then it’s desertion. And some ports -– they put you in jail. As soon as the police catch up with you, you go to jail. And then they find your ship and they put you back on it. Some ports have no concern about where a sailor’s supposed to be and it happened that in Copenhagen, as soon as I got my half pay, I got out of there and I had enough money take a ferry from Jutland to Cosuer. And I had the connection.

SA: All right. Where did you go then? You jumped ship and you left Copenhagen and you went to -– was it Germany?

MZ: I got to the German border and I saw the German consul there and he was loath to take a sailor’s passport but . . . he looked like Von Hindenburg and he was severe with me but he indicated that a sailor didn’t have any sense anyway. So he gave me a document giving me three weeks in Germany.

MZ: He said, “And in the end if the police pick you up well then you’ve got no protection.” And so I got out of Germany. I had time to ride a bicycle across Germany. I should’ve said -– in Cosuer there was a Danish man had a weaving, spinning mill and I had met him through a Danish family -– a friend in a Danish family when he visited in the United States so I took the opportunity to see him and he helped -– he sent an attendant out to help me buy a bicycle. I had enough money to buy a bicycle. And then I rode down to the German border.

SA: And so, basically, what you did is travel around Europe for short periods of time. Do you think you were there for a few months or was it . . .

MZ: No, it couldn’t have been any more than a month. I got to the -– I got into Luxembourg and was there a day

or so and then I traveled. I had to sell my bicycle when I was in France ‘cause it was a lot of money. And I just simply walked the rest of the way to Paris. The New York Times had their offices in Paris and I tried to act like I could write a story about my trip on the ship and so forth but it was kind of a feeble attempt and they didn’t want it.

SA: Well, I think by this point, it is the Depression now?

MZ: Well, yes, it definitely was. And I don’t think you can put such close parameters on the Depression.

SA: It didn’t really necessarily start with the crash?

MZ: No. I think you’d have to say that there were a lot of things leading up to the crash.

SA: So this trip to Europe this time was not really about the culture, about the art. It was really about adventure.

MZ: . . . just adventure. I was just a kid. I had very little idea of art. I had no background in it really other than that my mother had taught me to draw. I had only a high school education. I wasn’t very much oriented to anything other than trying to decide . . . and when you’re a kid that age and you haven’t a family background of being oriented to the arts or, you know, I am amazed how little I knew or how dumb I could be or whatever.

SA: Like most of us at that age, I think.

MZ: Yeah. Yeah. When I find myself being critical of kids nowadays all I have to do is just think what did I know at that age? You know.

SA: It’s true. Well, did you get a chance at all to see any museums or did you . . .

MZ: Yes. Oh yes. I should -– at least -– I shouldn’t do myself too much discredit because I got in to the Louvre. I did see pictures in the Louvre but that’s strange, too, that for some reason there isn’t much that rubbed off. I can’t remember being particularly impressed or whatever. It’s probably just lack of remembering but . . .

SA: Well, maybe also hunger . . .

MZ: Well, I did go into the art galleries some. Then I finally found an American Sailor’s Relief Society and they made arrangements for me to ship home. I came back on the Berengeria.

SA: And so -– it just seemed to you that it was going to be too much of a struggle to try to . . .

MZ: Yeah. I was confused. I was kind of disoriented or disenchanted with this adventure idea. And -– yes and if you don’t know how to get work and – probably nowadays it would be a lot easier if you could know your way around, but I certainly didn’t and about the only thing I could think of was to get back on a ship. That was about the only thing -– so I went -– let’s see, what’s the French port? Le Havre. They sent me out to Le Havre and that’s where I went onto the Berengeria. And I really didn’t work coming home. It was more or less being sent home by the Sailor’s Relief Society.

SA: Well thank goodness for them. So you got to go back to New York, then?

MZ: I got back to New York and I decided I would hitchhike back to California. And I went to Hoboken. I got a job on a ship again and I hitchhiked down there and I went to shipping offices and got a ship coming through the canal.

SA: And that was on the SS Marian Otis Chandler?

MZ: Yeah.

SA: Now, I believe you did visit the Metropolitan in New York.

MZ: Yes, I did.

SA: It looks like you got your ship out of Baltimore and that you traveled around the east coast for a little while before you went back?

MZ: Well, I hitchhiked -– I traveled on the east coast by simply hitchhiking down from New York to Baltimore and then shipping out of Baltimore. Let’s see, what is the river? Then we sailed on the east coast and we went into this port in Florida. And then we sailed from there around through the canal. The process of going through the canal is interesting, in fact, I did have this experience. I was an ordinary seaman but they put me at the wheel. The seaman is at the wheel but he takes immediate, constant instruction from the mate in charge. And so here I

had a hold of the wheel going down -– what is the name of the river? It's an important river where you dock in Florida. And here are ships coming. We were going around the curve in the river and it looked like ships were running right ahead of us and this guy was telling how many turns to take on the wheel. And I don't know why he didn't take the wheel but that's the way they do it. They instruct a seaman to do it. And I was beside myself. I was scared stiff. I was scared I'd make the wrong move. I remember once sailing out across the Atlantic -– I was at the wheel one day. They gave me a chance. The sailors humored me a little bit so they wanted me to have experience. I went up on the bridge when one of the able seamen was on watch. He had me take the wheel and he let me steer. Oh no, I remember. I was coming up the West Coast that this happened. They let me take the wheel and I remember this Scandinavian guy says, "Slim, look at the lake." And I looked back and it was like this, you know. And the old Dutch boatswain, he wasn`t helping much. He said if this lake was straightened out, we`d be in San Pedro two days early. But any rate this other fella said, "You don`t steer a boat like a car." Because you have to start drifting and when it drifts so far you have to start drifting back and keep your eye on the compass and see if you can't keep somewhere in balance.

SA: Well that's great. You certainly did have that taste of adventure you were looking for. And it does sound like it had some effect on you, too.

MZ: Well, it did, of course. I think I'm amused with myself that I had a taste for adventure and I wasn't a very brave adventurer. I'm not the kind of a guy who looks for –- or never have. I suppose I've always kept on the safe side of things. And I suppose I've survived because of that. I was wiry and strong but I wasn't one of the most robust people and I never had very much of a background in rough living. But here I was always sticking my nose into the idea of doing these things and getting myself into . . .

SA: Well, you were probably a little naive.

MZ: Oh she's got it. Yes, I think that was true. And yet there was always the idea more of travel. I was going to go anyway. Whatever the odds were.

SA: Exactly. Whatever it took. Well this might be a good place to end today because I know when you come back it's really when you start your art career, in a certain sense. You enroll at Otis Art Institute soon after you come back, I believe?

MZ: I think there's one thing we might add here.

SA: Okay.

MZ: Well, coming up the West Coast -– oh, by the way, on this ship out of the east, I was the lowest of the low because I was a wiper in the engine room title.

SA: Oh.

MZ: And when you're a wiper in the engine room your job is to keep the engine room spic and span. Keep things picked up. And the oil spills and everything. And one thing I'd do, I had to go down under the fireboxes and scrape some old paint off and it was hot as blazes, of course. And I was actually below all the heat and could bear it but it was one of the hottest, dirtiest jobs you could imagine. Scraping on a hot area. The paint would just flake off and you'd have to scrape it off so it could be repainted and so forth. But I'd look out from down under these fireboxes and I'd look up into the engine room and I remember there'd usually be three or four men on watch in the engine room and they usually had their shirts off on account of the fire from the engines glistening on their naked bodies and something so dramatic. I think it was then and there that I just had a terrific urge to be a painter 'cause this is -– it just seemed like it was so dramatic that that's what I wanted to get. I don't think I've ever painted a picture of an engine room.

SA: So you really wished you could have captured that moment?

MZ: Yeah. And the first thing I did when I got on the boat in Hoboken I was right on the side of the engine room. And when we sailed I decided I wouldn't sleep to the West Coast because a steering engine is intermittent, you know, turn the wheel and it'll start the engine. Turn the wheel and start the engine. But you got so used to that, that the first night in San Pedro with a silent engine, I couldn't sleep. 'Cause I didn't hear the rattle of the engine. But I stayed all night that night because it was late and then the next day I got my pay and I went home to parents living in San Fernando. By then I was determined I was going to art school.

SA: You just made that decision?

MZ: The prophetic thing, interesting thing, I think, was that the Mary Otis Chandler was named after the Chandler family who owned the Times.

SA: Right.

MZ: And who gave their home for Otis Art Institute.

SA: Right.

MZ: That is their family home. And so I enrolled at Otis and the thrill was –- it was real art school. Typical art school.

[SESSION 2, TAPE 1, SIDE A]

SA: This is the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. An interview with Milford Zornes on the 7th of August, 1999 at his studio home in Claremont, California. The interviewer is Susan Anderson. This is Session 2, Tape 1, Side A. Okay. Well, let's begin. Mr. Zornes, today we're going to talk about your art education and development as an artist. But before we do that I would like to backtrack just a little bit. For the record, I think it would be a good idea to briefly clarify some of the things we talked about in our last interview and we talked about this just a minute ago. You were born and raised on a ranch in the farmland outside of Camargo until you were seven.

MZ: Yeah.

SA: Maybe I should ask you here –- what were you like as a child? I didn't think to ask you that last time.

MZ: I suppose that would be the hardest thing to answer except that there was just my sister and myself and she was three years younger than I was, and so I was more or less a loner and I think that's been one of my characteristics all my life, really. Not to be too much involved with other people and certainly as a child. And I think when I look back upon it it seems like one of the valuable things that came from my early childhood living in the country was that you spent a lot of time to yourself dreaming, imagining, exploring your immediate area. Somehow I believe that possibly could have been one of the . . . things by reason that I became somewhat introspective, and an artist, possibly.

SA: That sounds like it makes a lot of sense. Okay. Well, then you lived in Camargo, probably until about 1914 or so when you would've moved to Boise, Idaho and you would've been about seven. And then you lived there for about 10 years. Then, you think it was in about 1924 that your family moved to the San Fernando Valley.

MZ: Yes. As I had explained on the other tape, I believe, I worked on a government survey that summer. My parents came to California in the fall, I joined them in the . . .

SA: Okay. And you were working as a Lineman, right? On a survey crew?

MZ: Yes.

SA: For the U.S. General Land Office Survey?

MZ: Survey Service. Yeah.

SA: Okay. So in the fall of 1924 you joined your family in southern California?

MZ: Yes.

SA: Do you recall your first impressions of California?

MZ: Well, I certainly remember this experience. Coming from a more or less northern part of the United States and the atmosphere tropical, semi-tropical California. And I think the thing that impressed me more than anything else was the, even at that time, the sprawling southern California situation. Just seemed that you were in a urban situation everywhere you could go. Of course, it's filled in a great deal more and it's amazing that I thought it was that crowded at that time but coming from a wide-open country like Idaho it was quite an experience. I think the one impression that I remember more than anything else was my first view of the ocean.

SA: Why?

MZ: Because as a child, of course, reading adventure stories and reading of the sea I was so curious and excited about seeing the ocean and my first view of the ocean was from the Palisades of Santa Monica. And that made a lasting impression and I suppose though I had been fascinated by the sea, I've been in love with the sea ever since.

SA: Wonderful. So when you got here, to you, it seemed like Southern California was already rapidly developing

then?

MZ: It seemed that if you drove from Pomona to San Fernando you were in some kind of an urban situation all the way through and actually, compared to what it is now, there was quite a bit of open space.

SA: I bet so. Well, did the move affect you in any significant way?

MZ: Well, it was a completely new ride for me. I had been only an indifferent student in my growing up but coming to California I had missed about two months of what could've been my senior year and I was intent upon graduating, if I could. And I well remember my interviews with my teachers when I entered San Fernando High School. I remember that lady who taught chemistry. She told me that I couldn't graduate because I couldn't pass chemistry with that loss of time but as I walked out the door she called and she said, "Will you work?" And I said I'd work so she took pains to coach me and for some reason this determination to graduate and falling in with teachers who really were willing to work with me, it turned out I was, I think, second in scholastic standing in my class. There was one little Mexican fellow, Jesus someone, who was only recently from Mexico who outdid me. He was top. He was the top in academic prowess.

SA: Well that's really something. What about your family? Did the move affect your family in any significant way? Did they have a feeling of starting over or . . .

MZ: Oh, I think so. My father, of course, had been a rancher and in Idaho he worked at various jobs. He worked for the city for awhile in the park service. He was a working man and it was a -– we were a working family. It's just one of those cases where you get a job that you can get 'cause he was a very strong, very able man and he always made good at any job that he did. But in California he became quite well known for his ability to build and supervise big rock and gravel plants. Now, he wasn't educated. He wasn't an engineer. He wasn't even a builder but his know-how was such that he built several of those larger plants and directed them and supervised them. And we prospered as a family. We prospered financially in California. Coming from the country and not having money it was quite an experience for us to know that the family was financially very stable because of his good earnings and I look back upon it as a kind of a very pleasant time and the heyday of building in California, too. Building homes.

SA: Now, this wouldn't have been when he first came out, though, would it?

MZ: Well, no, well . . . his first jobs had to do with . . . He had a brother who was involved in the care of orange groves. There were spray crews and fumigating crews and he worked at various jobs before he was established here.

SA: Well, I'm going to move forward somewhat quickly now and kind of skip ahead. I would like to talk to you about your return to Southern California after your experience in the Merchant Marine. It looks like you returned to Los Angeles in 1929.

MZ: Yes.

SA: And that was the year of the actual stock market crash. You would've been about 21 years old.

MZ: Yes. Yes.

SA: At that point what was it like for you and your family? When you came back from the Merchant Marines.

MZ: Yes. Well, my father was pretty well established in his work in the rock and gravel business. And actually I don't think we had any sense of problems as a family. Of course as a young man who's trying to get a job and to get going it was a problem for me. But my parents were quite well situated.

SA: Okay. That's interesting because they were almost better situated here in California in spite of the fact that the Depression was really taking . . .

MZ: They were. My father did prosper by coming to California. He later had losses because he invested in orange groves out in this Pomona Valley and that was a bad time to get into that.

SA: Okay. So did you enroll at Otis Art Institute soon after you arrived back in Southern California?

MZ: As I recall, and I think this may be reviewing something that we talked about the other day. During my travels in New York and Europe, I started looking at pictures and in galleries. That's one thing I could do. I could get into art galleries. And those impressions along with the boys on the ships around through the canal, the experience of men on the ships and the sea, I came back with a pretty well established idea that I did want to be a painter or it may have been a little on the vague side but it certainly was something that I wanted to venture into. The idea of being a painter. And so my first thought was to go to an art school and the interesting almost

paradox was the ship I came around on through the canal was named the Marian Otis Chandler. Named after the Chandler family in California and they are the ones who established or gave their home for the Otis Art Institute.

SA: Did that influence your decision to go there rather than Chouinard Art . . .?

MZ: Oh no. I don't think I was aware of that at all at that time.

SA: Okay. Well what were your reasons for going there? If you remember.

MZ: I suppose it was simply because it was the first, the only art school I knew of. I'm just not sure that Mrs. Chouinard had organized Chouinard Art School when I first went there.

SA: I think she had. Unless we've got the dates wrong again.

MZ: Well, I suppose so but at least I wasn't aware of it. And I simply went because that was the art school that I knew of and it seemed the logical choice.

SA: Was there any person in particular there that you wanted to work with or that you did work with?

MZ: No, I wasn't aware enough of what was going on in art. Everything having to do with painting and art was such a vague thing for me. It's possibly hard to realize if you've grown up with some kind of ordered education and direction you possibly have influences from your parents or friends but for me this was completely a nebulus idea. You just had very little background. You possibly have very little thought of what you're going to do and, as I've explained before, I toyed with architecture. I toyed with the idea of going to sea. It was simply a young person feeling that he possibly has some value for something but he doesn't know what it is.

SA: Well, who did you study with? Is this who you studied with? Was it E. Roscoe Schrader?

MZ: E. Roscoe Schrader. [Unintelligible].

SA: And F. Tolles Chamberlain? Did you study with F. Tolles Chamberlain, too?

MZ: Not at that time.

SA: Okay. So it was E. Roscoe Schrader?

MZ: Schrader was the one teacher I remember most definitely. Who was the other old teacher at Otis? Holmes. Ralph Holmes. I didn't work with him but I knew him quite well and I remember him because Pat, my wife, studied with him later on. He was an oil painter.

SA: Okay.

MZ: In fact, I don't know that there's anyone who would have been designated as a watercolorist. Truth is I don't think there was anyone, at that time. I think most of the painters at that time were involved either with oil painting or they worked in both mediums with equal interest or, perhaps in many cases, watercolor was simply their sketching medium. Now, in the case of F. Tolles Chamberlain, he felt that large watercolors was a barbaric practice and he assumed that watercolor painting was studied for oil painting or a sketching medium.

SA: But now at this time you hadn't quite met him yet. Well, what was Otis like in those days?

MZ: Well, for an outsider -– a rugged kid who's worked on surveys and on ships -- it was a sort of a kiddish place as far as I was concerned. I felt a little, how would I put it? It was a little bit of too, not a feminine attitude but too soft an attitude to be [unintelligible].

SA: Was it too frivolous for you?

MZ: I was a pretty rugged kid and, in fact, that was one of the reasons that I almost drifted away at that time because I remember I got a chance to go on a survey in Arizona and I grabbed it because it was kind of good to get out in the open and get away from the art school atmosphere. Later on, of course, I began to know what painting was and what the problems were and the disciplines were and I began to have more respect and became involved and at home in an art study atmosphere. But at that time you were young, you had kind of been around with more men than young guys, young kids, and it just was a foreign atmosphere.

SA: Um-hmm.

MZ: It's a little hard to explain, I expect.

SA: No, I think it makes sense. Well, did you go there for very long?

MZ: No, not very long. I went for a few months and then I went off on this survey to Arizona and I'm trying to recall, then, how I came back into the situation. My next experience in school was Pomona College.

SA: Was it Glendale Junior College, maybe? Did you go there?

MZ: Yes. Yes. There again, I remember a friend of mine and I worked at a cannery in San Fernando. We got quite a little bit of money together and he went off to Moscow, Idaho and eventually went to the university there and I went directly from that job to live in Glendale and to go to Glendale Junior College.

SA: But you didn't stay there very long, right?

MZ: No.

SA: I think you did go to Pomona College soon after that.

MZ: Yes, after this business of barnstorming around and working at this job and that job and trying that school, this school and my parents had bought an orange grove just down the road from Pomona College. I came home and there seemed to be such a definite opportunity. I was a little naive about it and sometimes it's worthwhile to be naive because you do things that you wouldn't do otherwise and I had the temerity to literally go up to Pomona College and seek entrance. And it turned out, as I learned later on, that they needed bodies at that time. And having had some schooling at Santa Maria Junior College and then at Glendale Junior College, I think in all truth, I think the registrar simply lumped this together and decided that I was good for sophomore. I went into Pomona College as a sophomore.

SA: Now, were you a little bit older than the other students?

MZ: Yes, I was because I had at least lost two years out of the ordinary time schedule that young people have for getting out of high school and going to college.

SA: Well do you think you were about 21?

MZ: Yes, I would have to be just about that.

SA: When you decided to go to Pomona College were you still deciding that you were going to be studying art there or . . .

MZ: Yes, I was interested in the art department. Definitely. And, as it turned out, as I explained, my work was accomplished enough that I won an art scholarship and it was, I think, the following semester because of my getting acquainted with Tom Craig. Tom had had somewhat the same experience that I had had. Now Tom's brothers and one of his sisters were doctors and he had a background of a family of educated people. I think that the expectation was that he was to be a doctor but about the time he entered Pomona College he contracted TB and they had to live down on the desert. He had gotten acquainted with a lady painter down there and he got excited about painting so when he came back to Pomona – he and I were in just about the same situation. He was about two years late and both of us interested in painting and we became buddies for that reason.

SA: What was Tom Craig like?

MZ: Well, Tom Craig was a big burly fella. A gentle fella and he was a very alive, sensitive guy. He was excited about so many things. And, of course, he was very mentally alert. To me he was a very exciting guy and I was impressed, of course, because in my acquaintances with him I got acquainted with his brothers and his sister was a famous doctor around here. She was known as Doctor Craig. She was a famous Pediatrician.

SA: Isn't that something?

MZ: And his mother was an impressive lady and my association with Tom and meeting people of his family and, of course, he was involved in botany. One of the first college vacations he wanted to write his -– I don't know whether it was a doctor's application for working for a degree, an upper-level degree. At any rate, it was incumbent upon him that he publish something and he was interested in a family of plants known as the gilias. It's a branch of the ficus family. So he and I went on a hitchhiking trip. We carried our art materials and we carried blotter packs and we collected plants and painted. And hitchhiked and the amusing thing was when we were at Stanford or at Palo Alto we got a room in a motel so he could get dressed up and go to the botany department there and annotate their collection of the gilia family. So there was this amusing bumming around and at the same time painting and collecting and, of course, this was all quite new and exciting to me and I was just able to keep up. And then when we were back in school Tom handled his academic problem much better than I did because he was more of a trained scholar. But at least I can owe it to this keeping up with Tom was . . . it had a definite benefit in getting myself oriented into some kind of a realization of academic and artistic areas.

SA: Well do you think that you sort of really learned how to paint on those trips?

MZ: Oh yes. This has impressed me. As you know, you've been involved in this so-called California group. You've written about us and it turns out, what is it? about 25 of us are identified. Of course, there are a great many more artists who need, who deserve to be included in that, but I think one thing that has been of interest to me is the fact that the so-called Plein Air School, I believe, was made up more of trained artists who came out and painted the California scene. Then there was the advent of this young crowd pretty much headed by Millard Sheets. We were avidly, of course, we were going to art school. Millard was at Chouinard and certainly the thought of our training was uppermost but I think on the whole, wouldn't you say with your experience, wouldn't you say that we've been characterized by kind of a rough and ready learning to paint as we go?

SA: I think so.

MZ: And I think, frankly, I think that's what gave us a lot of our vitality.

SA: And so was this experience of traveling around with Tom Craig your first time where you really got to practice being an artist and really practice your technique and that kind of thing?

MZ: Oh yes. We were painting and talking about painting and getting into shows when we could. I think the first things we ever showed was at the Mad Hatter Restaurant in Laguna Beach. Tom Lewis –- do you remember him? He was in Southern California at that time and for some reason Tom and I were sketching in Laguna and we met Tom Lewis and he's the one who got us to show some pictures at the Mad Hatter. That was our first exhibiting experience.

SA: So at that point you were already meeting other artists of that school?

MZ: Well, yes, because we were at the college and I well remember Millard coming to lecture at Pomona College while I was a student there. I'll never forget this young blonde guy. Mary was along and Owen was just a little baby and I remember Millard. I was quite impressed when Millard gave a talk and he showed some paintings. It wasn't 'til a year, about a year after that, that he actually came to Scripps to teach. But we did meet him at that time.

SA: And then did you actually take classes with him at Scripts then?

MZ: Oh yes. That's quite an event here. Tom Craig and I were the first two students to demand the right to go from Pomona up to study with Millard and get credit for it. And I'm pretty, sure, that Millard found himself in the position he was teaching in a woman's college -- and I think it possibly came as somewhat of a surprise. Here were some men students demanding the right to work with him and I think it gave him the idea, basically, to get involved in the Claremont College's art center.

SA: I see.

MZ: I may be wrong. He may have had that idea from the beginning but I've always had the feeling that we had quite a bit to do with that.

SA: That could be. Would you talk a little bit more about Millard Sheets at this point?

MZ: Well, yes, of course. Millard Sheets has been very important to me and I suppose since this is an official record I'll just be very frank about it. Millard, as you –- did you know Millard at all?

SA: I got to meet him . . .

MZ: He was a very strong personality. He had probably influenced Southern California art as much as anyone during his period. And, of course, coming under his influence, at that time, when he came to Scripps, he was sort of my mentor and I was fascinated by him because here was a young man and only a year older than I was who was already established as an artist. A very precocious fella. And I was impressed with everything that he did. Tom and I had quite a lot of contact with him because he was directing the shows at the L.A. County Fair. He did some famous exhibits during that time. And we acted as his assistants. And we discovered, of course, that Millard was always so busy that actually while he was holding down a teaching position, he wasn't always there to teach but when he did teach it was an impressive thing. And I can't recall any definite lesson that I got from him but his enthusiasm and his approach to painting that it was the real thing that it was not an arty thing. That it was real-life experience to paint and paint the world around you. So at that . . .

[SESSION 2, TAPE 1, SIDE B]

MZ: . . . due to satellites of Millard Sheets and it -– being naturally being young, eager to assist, one has to be a painter. I remember Tom and I discussing this with Millard one time. "What is this business where we're getting

to be known as your satellites painting?" And Millard mentioned –- what I've always remembered as a very intelligent response. He said, "Look, if I was not having some influence what would be the point of being with me?" And he said, "Remember that if you grow up in a home there's influences in your home. Later on you're going to get away from those." And he said, "If you're influenced by me and my way of painting you will get away from it because you're both searching and you're both hard at it –- truly approaching art as an exploration." He said, "You'll get away from any identification with me as time goes on." He said, "I hope you won't worry about it." Well, I thought that was a good . . . and that's what happened. As you know, in that school there's a certain, the whole school painted with a certain attitude and approach but each one of us became individuals. But the unhappy thing was and something that had to happen, I'm sure. When I came back after the war and I was engaged to teach at Pomona College, Millard, being very aggressive and very ambitious for the art center, he more or less assumed because of our early associations that I would be his lieutenant at Pomona College. He had a strong idea that he wanted all of the art interest to be drawn to the center at Scripps. Well, by this time, I had a mind of my own, certainly, and I was adamant about holding the art department at Pomona College and I still believe that it was important to do it. So there was more or less a break there and the interesting thing about academic life is that it's some kind of a contest going on and you'll have so many people on this side and so many people on that side. So it was lots of fuss and Millard was an aggressive guy and if he wanted something he was going to have it and so he had his people who were working for his interest. There was a man by the name of [Kenneth] Foster who had come to Pomona College to teach art history and so forth. And Foster and I held out against Millard. We wanted to keep the art department and I'm glad that we held out because I think it would've disappeared. But at any rate there was a rift there and it never did quite resolve itself. I think Millard often felt that I was contesting his points of view and so forth and I did in many cases. It was just one of these cases. But I will say this and I believe that I can say this for myself that while I was openly critical of Millard in some cases, I never failed to give him an enormous amount of credit because I absolutely am sure that I would not have been able to identify myself as a painter had I not had this strong impact of a personality who stood for the things that I could understand about painting. You know as a young person, uneducated in art. Here's a fella who goes out and paints barnyards and country scenes and you exhibit them and you find out there's a world of art apart from the art. That art, traditions of art. There's a whole open world for any active, alive person to simply enjoy the benefit of becoming equipped to draw and paint and put down his ideas in terms of every day experience and every day subject matter. And Millard gave that us here in Southern California and there are many –- he's been accused of being an eclectic and I would accuse him of being eclectic in his work. He tends to copy [Thomas Hart] Benton and others. Draws so much from them but at the same time he was able to digest this and bring it to his own art in ways that was very creative, of course.

SA: So, do you remember him talking about people like Benton and the other Regionalists at that time?

MZ: Not a great deal. I remember he came back one time from New York and he had met –- who was this fella?

SA: Grant Wood?

MZ: I can't think of who it was but he had, literally in one of the galleries in New York, this fella had given him some paintings. Told him he should study them and Millard had just studied, just painted these almost exactly like the painter and he didn't talk much about 'em. Millard didn't want to have it known that he was being this much influenced. Millard had his quirks and you could stand on the side line and be critical but what you were doing was being critical of a very vigorous person who was doing things that you wish you were doing. I think I'm one person who can candidly look at his past experience with a crook and see all the flaws in it. I had made all the mistakes of lots of young painters who think they know so much that they could criticize their betters and find good reason 'cause after all you're looking at the egocentric things of active people. It's awfully easy to be critical of things that in later years, these aren't the things that mattered. They were just the idiosyncrasies that people had to have in order to have the vitality and the energy to do what they do.

SA: So when somebody like Barse Miller criticized Millard Sheets, how did that make you feel?

MZ: Well, at that time it angered me because I was a Millard fan, you see. And I think that Barse Miller had a little tendency to be sharp tongued about other artists. He was a very vital guy, too, but he was kind of excitable and not quite –- I don't know how to put it. He was a good painter but some way or another -– I think Barse's fault –- he was a child prodigy. Did you know that?

SA: No, I didn't.

MZ: His mother was a painter and he was exhibiting when he was 12 years old. And he was sort of spoiled. He had the ability, he had a tendency to be critical of almost anyone else.

SA: Did you know him very well?

MZ: Not too well. I, of course, I was president of the California Watercolor Society in 1942 and we decided to, or I had conceived the idea of, opening the show in San Francisco because some of our members lived up there and

we'd always opened the show in California. Well, he was on the jury and we had to travel to San Francisco as a group. I went up with the jury and on the trip he was quite critical of me for taking it upon myself to open the show up there and he was not the easiest fellow for me to get along with.

SA: Sounds like he was a vocal person.

MZ: What's that?

SA: Sounds like he was vocal. That he pretty much said what he thought.

MZ: Well, yes. It was quite a bit of little cynical remarks.

SA: Well, by and large, though, didn't the artists among that group get along pretty well?

MZ: Yes, I think it was a love/hate relationship. We were all so ambitious and so egotistical and so anxious to show off and yet we were excited about everyone else. The annual watercolor show was a big event and you went with all of the excitement of seeing what everybody had done and envious of whatever all the other artists had done. It was a very vigorous time when you thought as a group, and you contested one another, and you envied one another, and the interesting thing the war ended all of that. When we came back we were all going in different directions and there was never that feeling that we were a group the way it was before the war. But we were always interested and very excited to see what the other people had done during the year. It's hard to explain but I suppose, you know, I admire the movement of French painters. I think that's one of the most refreshing periods in all of history of art 'cause they were the ones who took us outdoors and got us looking at seeing life on surfaces. And here was that group of artists, all differing, competing with one another. Very vigorously. Try working for identification. I really, maybe this is a little bit bigoted or taking a kind of an important attitude, but I think of our California group as being, somewhat, that same experience, as that group of French painters. 'Cause here we were out here in California, somewhat isolated from the east in a country where you could be out-of-doors and paint out-of-doors and each one of us searching for the way to do it. I think I've gained vitality by having the feeling that we've been like the French painters.

SA: And what do you think held the group together? As you were saying, everybody was competing, in a certain sense, but you, also, were supporting each other, weren't you?

MZ: Oh yeah. Of course. As I tried to explain, we definitely were very excited about what was being done and had a great deal of admiration for what others were doing along with the envy, you know?

SA: Do you think that the difficult conditions of the Depression helped make you feel like you were kind of all in it together?

MZ: Well, I suppose so. I'm sure that had something to do with it. I think there were all these factors. I talked about this quite a long time before it was generally spoken of that we were influenced by these things. First of all, we were isolated out west here. There was the Depression when you couldn't get an art career, you couldn't get a job and so what did you do? You concentrated on your painting and then the proximity of Mexico giving us vitality and color, and then the WPA coming in about that time, and then the influence of the studios. I think all of these factors conspired to give us a unique situation here. I used to argue the influence of Mexico a little more than others and then I found that other people were thinking of this as an influence, too, since we didn't travel as much as we do now and Mexico, traveling in Mexico was our travel adventure, in most cases, as far as foreign travel was concerned. And then the Mexican muralists with their vitality. Strong color, bold patterns. I think this all conspired to make us. And then the fact that we could be outdoors painting the sea and the mountains and so forth when eastern artists had to get their sketches in the cold and go to their studios to do view their work, I think there's quite a difference there.

SA: What do you think gave a sense of homogeneity to your work? Do you think that it had anything to do with, oh, the leadership of Sheets or . . .

MZ: Oh yes. I could have mentioned that. I think that was one of the contributions that Sheets made. That he was excited about art and he was in for almost anything going on with the big shows they had at the county fair. Exhibits and teaching in the college and exhibiting and, of course, being a leader, he was usually involved on committees and that sort of thing. Yes, I think Millard had a terrific influence in stirring up interest in painting.

SA: And do you think, also, in kind of bringing the group together?

MZ: Well, it's like many movements. We had no idea that we were a movement of any kind. I think those things come automatically. It was, primarily, the competitive spirit had a lot to hold us together.

SA: All right. Aside from Sheets, who do you consider to be the other leaders in that group?

MZ: Well, Phil Dike, of course. Personally, Phil Dike, to me, has emerged, possibly, to me as one of the strongest of the whole group. This is my personal . . . He was very innovative and then, of course, there was Phil Dike, Millard, Phil Paradise, Lee Blair and many, several artists around Chouinard. And then the older artists, of course, had their influence. That's an interesting aspect of it, too, because I remember serving on juries in Laguna Beach. Often I served on jury with Mr. Griffith and Hunt.

SA: William Griffith and Thomas Hunt?

MZ: I didn't separate those people from so much at that time. Millard, I heard Millard speak about [William] Wendt and some of those as being, somewhat, of another ilk but as far as I was concerned it was just . . . it was just an experience of meeting another artist and I think some of these older artists were valuable to us because they were critical of us. They made remarks about the way we worked. Going out and painting two or three watercolors in a day and just to show off or . . . I think they thought we were showing off. But, I think their critical influence is valuable to us.

SA: Well, who among the artists, would you say, were your closest friends? Aside from -– you already talked a little bit about Tom.

MZ: Well, it was Tom Craig and Millard and as far as being close friends they were the closest . . .

SA: What about – did you know Phil Dike very well?

MZ: Well, I knew him but I wasn't too well acquainted with him. I didn't know Phil very well until he came to teach at Scripps later on.

SA: And that was when you were teaching at Pomona after the war?

MZ: Yes. Phil Dike and Phil Paradise always seemed to be together. They seemed to be . . . and I, of course, I admired those artists, but it often amused . . . all of a sudden Phil Paradise and Phil Dike got attitudes of one upmanship. I remember if you talked about something they'd already done it or something like that. And, of course, again, an ignorant, egotistical kid would react against that. But, there again and Phil always had such a . . . he was always so self contained. Couldn't get around him. He had everything pinned down.

SA: Phil Dike?

MZ: Yeah. And Phil Paradise, too. They both had this attitude and it was kind of healthy because you were always amazed. Here are two guys who knew exactly what they were doing all the time. That always impressed me because I didn't feel quite that secure, I'll tell ya. But as time went on I began to appreciate their work and now, in retrospect, I see them very definitely top leaders in this thing.

SA: What was Phil Dike like as a person?

MZ: Well, he was a rather tight little guy, self contained, sure of himself and I don't think I always felt too comfortable with him for that very reason.

SA: And Phil Paradise was the same?

MZ: Yeah . . .

SA: They seem different personality-wise, though.

MZ: Yeah, he was a little bit cocky. He always had things pinned down but he was kind of a cocky fellow. And he remained . . . I saw Phil during the month before he died and he was still . . . I did a workshop in Santa Barbara and we had a dinner and I wanted to invite Phil and made arrangements to pick him up at his hotel and he wouldn't have it. He came in a taxi and he had a taxi pick him up. Phil wasn't going to let anybody know that he wasn't fully able to take care of himself. Even though he was really not able to get around very well. He always had a sure way about him.

SA: That's interesting.

MZ: To me it's a refreshing thing. Here, I look back upon the time when we were, as I keep saying, we were personalities, we were critical of one another. We looked askance of one another. We were envious of one another. And now I look back on it and it seems so satisfying that there was this group that you belonged to and there's always something that I wanted to impress upon people. Now it's true in my case and I think it's probably true in the case of the others that I don't think any of us would've, or at least not many of us, would have had that much identification had we had to gain it on our own. Being a member of the group and being identified with an attitude and a movement was the way by which we became identified personally. And I think if

I had any wish for any young painter or any aspiring painter, it would be that he have some way of getting outside of himself to the extent that he belongs to something a little larger than his own experience.

SA: Well, now, I think we've sort of gotten on the subject of the California school and maybe we should just continue with some questions about that.

MZ: Yes.

SA: Would you describe the relationship that you think this group of artists had to the land?

MZ: Oh yes. I'm sure that we, as young artists going to the country where our subject matter . . . I think we all have a, how do I put it? -- a love affair with California in a way. Because we had, actually, the sea, and the mountains, and in those days, quite a bit of ranch life. Still is. There still is. And the cities. It offered so much in the way of subject matter. And the beautiful areas and the uniqueness of the country. I think this country, itself, had a lot to do with our building what we keep referring to as the "California idea." And then, of course, the things that we've mentioned, the coming together in this way. I've been in all parts of the world. I've literally been all over the world during the years of my career and it seems that California has just something of almost any other place that you might visit in the world. That is, in terms of the sea, the mountains, even the high mountains. All in a very small area here. Now compared to the east, for instance, you have the big city and you have country life but you don't have the dramatic aspects of the terrific mountains, sea and the proximity to a foreign country, Mexico. It's unique. This country is really unique. Now I'm not clear about this. It is true that Robert Henri was out here?

SA: Yes.

MZ: There again, because we were isolated, I think we were very conscious of the so-called Ashcan approach. I think that possibly inspired artists to know that you could just go paint anything and find design in it. So, in that sense I think we were touching back to the spirit that was developing in the east. As I understand it, Robert Henri was the founder of the Art Student's League in New York. He was the first to exhibit French painting in this country. He taught from the point of view of understanding your world and your own experience. And that was the spirit that was developing back there so, again, I don't think we can say that we had done it all. We were certainly in touch with the spirit of growth that was more American than just Californian. But just the same, I think that our situation is such that we interpret it and these approaches in terms of California and the Western scene.

SA: Certainly. I mean, because if you look at the outcome of the Robert Henri approach here in California, it was completely different, wasn't it?

MZ: Yes, it was.

SA: It was really completely different.

MZ: Around here people were painting the back side of Los Angeles and getting at some of the same things. Of course, there again, I know that Millard was very much influenced by [George] Bellows. In fact, he almost emulated Bellows with that beautiful street scene that he did. I've heard him talk about that, that that picture influenced him so much. It was one of Bellows that shows the street scene in New York.

SA: With the wash hanging?

MZ: Yeah. Yeah.

SA: It's at the L.A. County Museum?

MZ: And Millard did a great painting. It was almost the same idea. So we were certainly influenced by the east, too.

SA: Well, now, were you, yourself, aware of people like Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood when you were just . . .

MZ: Well, yes, by the . . .

SA: . . .starting out, for example?

MZ: . . . by the time Tom and I were here at Pomona College, of course, two young guys talking about art all the time. Talking about pictures all the time. And, of course, then we were very sensitive to and looking at the work of anyone, of course. That was the beginning, or it was during that period that we began to think of the, how did they characterize it? The thought of John Steuart Curry in the east, and of Thomas Benton in the middle west.

SA: They called them Regionalists. Is that what you're thinking of? Or American Scene?

MZ: It was American Scene. I remember there was quite a bit of discussion, quite a bit of argument as to contrasting between regional art and universal art. I think there were those who shied from the idea that we should be so regional in our approach. And I reacted to that in this way. That all art has always been regional. Look at the influences in Italy. The different cities, states and each one a region developing in certain ways. That's always gone on. I don't see that there's any argument there at all. It seems that if it's art, it's art, and if it's an expression of human concerns then it has to start from –- if it's going to have the impact of honest, from the roots up –- it has to start someplace in the region. But . . .

SA: Oh. And so you were actually having those kinds of discussions back then?

MZ: Oh yes. It just seemed like all of us were just . . . that's another reason I compare us to the French. When you think of the French painters sitting around cafés and talking and talking and talking. We probably didn't do that but we were doing an awful lot of talking. All of us. You couldn't imagine anyone getting together but there were discussions about painting in that way. Tom and I were interested in [Wassily] Kandinsky. We were interested in John Steuart Curry. We were interested in all the –- lots of excitement about painting.

SA: And did your knowledge of all of those people come mostly from being at Pomona College or was it more than that?

MZ: Well, I think when you speak of knowledge, it is probably better to characterize it as rumor and supposition. I think we talked about a lot of things that excited us of . . .

[SESSION 2, TAPE 2, SIDE A]

SA: . . . Two, Side A, an interview with Milford Zornes.

MZ: In fact, I still feel I have a very uneducated view of art history. I'm fascinated by it and every once in a while I would read but it's more like just a casual interest in art history like you'd be interested in your neighbors or friends. You don't take time to make a study of it. You just respond to the influences of it and the feeling of it. I think the exciting thing for an artist, eventually, is to reach a point where he may not be all taken with himself but at least he reaches a point where he says, "I have something in common with artists all the way down the line from the beginning." I'm just as capable of, and probably think and feel and respond very much as artists of all this, and this gives you the feeling that you belong to a stream of influence rather than to just feel that you always have to be beholding or looking up to. Of course, it's a matter of great respect and appreciation for what people do but you still make yourself a part of it and that gives your ego, that does something for your ego, turns your ego into strength rather than merely an attitude.

SA: Well, were you reading art magazines, for example? At that time?

MZ: Oh yes, I can well recall being excited about articles. I remember very definitely. Do you know the publication, a French publication, L'Illustrasion? It was a very fine magazine. Beautifully printed and so forth and it dealt with all kinds of art. Oriental art and all fields of art and I remember poring over copies of that. That was a wonderful source of inspiration for me. And then, of course, as we began to get acquainted with the current magazines, like American Artist and so forth, we followed those.

SA: And Art News, did you read that?

MZ: What'd you say?

SA: Art News?

MZ: I don't remember whether that was out at that time or not. But any rate, we did watch what other artists were doing and then it seemed that the magazines didn't seem to have quite the same quality that they had early on.

SA: Do you know when that change came about?

MZ: No, I can't say and I can't identity what that change was so much, but it always just seemed that . . .

SA: It's a feeling you had, huh?

MZ: Yeah.

SA: Were you interested in reading what Arthur Millier had to say?

MZ: Oh yes. Arthur Millier or Millier, he was a real influence. You know, I read the criticism pages now and they don't seem to mean much anymore. Arthur went to the shows. He was a reporter, he would be critical, but he also went to the trouble to visit the shows, say where they were or what they consisted of or who was doing what. And then, of course, the important thing was for young painters, we took him very seriously and if he gave us a dig we felt it and if we got praise we profited by it one way. So, I think of Arthur Millier as the one critic I've known in my life -– art critic, so-called art critic -- that I would say was the real thing.

SA: And did you know him personally?

MZ: Yes. I knew him very quite well. And that's it, everybody did know him personally. And he was right with us all the time and he had . . .

SA: Was he much older than you?

MZ: Well, yes. Not a great deal. Let's see, I was -– I'd say he was in his 40's when I was in my late 20's. He was born in England. He didn't have many of the characteristics of an Englishman but no, he was just a really sound reporter of what was going on and he was willing to give his opinion and you could disagree or not but you certainly paid attention. I think we all profited so much whereas it seems to me that it's hardly worth picking up the paper and reading these things nowadays because you feel that the writers are not concerned about art, they're interested in art, in writing. And they've chosen art as a subject by which they will kind of express their egos and I discount the importance of critics nowadays. But then that's probably a personal attitude. You don't like to be criticized.

SA: Well, in terms of other people on the L.A. art scene, maybe it's a good time to ask you. What about the art dealers at the time? Who did you know well?

MZ: Well, I knew, who was it that used to be in the big hotel? Millard was with him.

SA: [Dalzell] Hatfield?

MZ: Hatfield. Of course, he was best known, I think, and [Earl] Stendahl. Did you know Stendahl? They're about the only ones I knew. I knew the, who was the fellow in San Francisco? He had a French name. I have a funny story to tell about that but I'll wait for a time for it. [Lucien Labaudt]

SA: Okay. And you knew Zeitlin, did you? Did you know Jake Zeitlin?

MZ: Oh yes. Jake Zeitlin. He handled my pictures some. Had quite a bit of experience with Jake.

SA: What was he like?

MZ: Well, he was a very nice guy and a very interesting guy. He was interested primarily in books but he handled prints and small watercolors. He handled my things quite a little bit. After the war I knew him well enough that when I'd come down from Northern California I would, possibly, stay overnight at his house and then after they moved out to the big barn out in Hollywood there I didn't see them quite so much after that. I will say it was through Jake that I met Thomas Benton. I came in – it was a summer evening. It was after the war and I was living, I had bought a place up near Santa Maria, and I had hoped to live in the country but it turned out I had to get to work and make a living. But any rate, I came in and Jake said, "Well, put on a clean shirt and get ready 'cause I want you to go to a party out in Hollywood and meet Thomas Benton." So, I got dressed and went out there and it was a summer evening. It was at some big bungalow house in Hollywood and I well remember going. As I went up the door to go in, Arthur Millier was standing there talking to Benton and Millier greeted me and introduced me to Thomas Benton. I was surprised he's such a little man. Did you know he was a little fellow?

SA: No, I didn't.

MZ: I thought he was a big, burly guy. I had envisioned that he would be, his murals and everything. He was quite small, actually. Remarkably small guy. But the amusing story, I don't know whether you want to take time with this but . . .

SA: Yes. Yes.

MZ: While we were talking a very beautiful girl came up, beautifully dressed, and greeted Thomas, threw her arms around Thomas Benton and then they talked for a little bit and then she said, "Well, I better go in and see what the party's about." There was this big open bungalow and we watched her as she walked away, walking very nicely. I think she must've been an actress. She was so well dressed and stylish. And Thomas Benton just followed, really watching this gal and he said, "You know, early on I wouldn't have women in my classes but she came along and I was teaching in Kansas City," I think he said. "And I decided then that if they decorated the place, I'd have 'em in my classes. And I think she decorates any place." And that was his attitude toward -– but it

was so funny. And he did it in such a cute way. And then he dominated or, this party deteriorated as time went on and he had a lot of his students there and they were reminiscing and the gusto . . . He and his little group of students had been drinking quite a little bit and they'd gotten into a group by themselves and they –- that was their party. The rest of it was going on elsewhere.

SA: Do you remember why he was in Hollywood?

MZ: What's that?

SA: Do you remember why he was in Hollywood? Benton?

MZ: No, I don't remember why, exactly. I guess he was just visiting out there. I remember, one of his students, he was chiding him about, you remember his painting, what's her name and the elders?

SA: Suzanna and the Elders?

MZ: Suzanna and the Elders. And he was accusing this fella, he said, "You made the ground, you prepared the ground for that painting and it flaked off on me." And he was accusing this kid and he said, "You almost wrecked it." He said, "That was supposed to be my daughter's education." He said, "I had to get $12,000 out of it 'cause it's costing me $3,000 each year –- her college." He said, "And it started pulling off the canvas and I had to patch it up." But he was kidding, or digging at his students and things like that. They were bringing up all kinds of little comments, inside experiences.

SA: I wonder what all those students were doing out here in L.A.

MZ: Well, I don't know. I guess they were just people who had eventually come out here or . . .

SA: Maybe they were working in the film industry or something.

MZ: Could be. And I don't think that I knew, that's very interesting, too. That while I did know a good many of the artists around here, I don't remember that group including anyone that I knew very well. But at any rate, my meeting with Benton –- he was amusing, and he was a little caustic, and he was a very small man.

SA: Did you admire his work?

MZ: I've admired his work a great deal. I often talk about his work in teaching. Now, one thing that I have to get at my students about is if they're not willing to work hard enough. They will try a picture and say, "Well, I'm not making watercolor work," or "I can't handle watercolor," or , "I can't do this, can't do that." And I remind 'em that people like Thomas Benton, for instance, would make a shallow box and he would model a whole picture in clay or plasticene. And then I cited Robert Wood who would make a model for his boat pictures and so forth. I'd point these things out to people that, "If you're serious about these things, you go to the trouble of making them work and get ways of making them work." So, I often talk about Benton in that way. For that reason.

SA: Well, that's a really interesting story. Did you meet any of the other major painters of the day? In that early period?

MZ: No. Tom Craig was very chummy with . . . he came out here . . . he's a portrait painter. He worked with tempera and then glazed over it with oil. And Thomas got involved in his technique. [Alexander Brook] We didn't. There were two reasons. First of all, I don't think the Eastern artists came out here that much and secondly, I was living out of the city and didn't have the occasion to meet any of 'em.

SA: Right. Well, we were talking a little bit about Zeitlin. You also had a relationship with Stendahl, to some extent, didn't you?

MZ: Well, yes. Stendahl –- I always enjoyed going to Stendahl's gallery. He always had interesting shows and do you know that the Russian painter . . . Oh –- he wound up in New Mexico.

SA: Nikolai Fechin.

MZ: First time I ever saw Nikolai Fechin he was working in the back room at Stendahl's doing framing. I think Stendahl brought him out here and he worked 'til he got his start as a painter. But my first meeting with him, he was just a workman in the back room but . . .

SA: Well, were you all frequenting the galleries at that point? Was that another popular thing you did?

MZ: Oh yes. Tom and I would go to Los Angeles and if we could we'd go to two or three shows and do as many things as we could possibly crowd in with what little resources we had.

SA: What do you remember about the L.A. art scene in those days? What could you tell me about it?

MZ: Well, to a great extent, the most important single concern was the annual meeting of the California Watercolor Society. The annual show. And, I suppose, I would have to concede that I wasn't very closely identified with the so-called art scene. I would go to these big shows and usually we saw . . . everybody went out to them and then we'd [leave] them and I think we were a pretty scattered bunch. I don't know that we worked, got together like we would think of artists in New York or Paris. I think we were more, what would be the term when you're more . . .
SA: Scattered or . . .

MZ: . . . scattered out over Los Angeles county.

SA: Because it was such a big area.

MZ: Yeah.

SA: And you were already talking about it before as being just, you know, area after area after area . . .

MZ: Yeah, that's right.

SA: . . . being developed.

MZ: Now, but we did get together. We wouldn't fail to want to go to the opening of the annual show, the Watercolor Society. For a time I attended some dinners or get togethers of the California Art Club, wasn't it?

SA: Yes.

MZ: They were mostly oil painters and a good many older men in that and they seemed to be very conservative and I think that they felt critical of our group, the so-called California group as we know it.

SA: Well, you were sort of the young Turks, don't you think? Taking over their territory?

MZ: That seemed to be it. And we'd get the benefit of some of their barbs about the way we were operating. I remember Ralph Holmes introducing me to someone sometimes, "He takes a trip, takes a weekend trip, comes back and gives an exhibit of watercolors." Or something, you know. And so we were a bunch of renegades.

SA: That's funny. Well, in terms of the L.A. art scene, you already said you were aware of the earlier watercolor school. Were there other groups of artists that you were aware of?

MZ: Well, when you say other, now we were the only ones identified as watercolor.

SA: Right.

MZ: Most of the other painters were oil painters. Of course, at Laguna Beach there was that group down there.

SA: Those were mostly the oil painters?

MZ: Yes.

SA: What we call sort of the Plein air school now.

MZ: Yes. Yes. And then I'd meet artists, Los Angeles painters, but again, it's such a nebulous and . . .

SA: Were you aware of the work of Lorser Feitelson, for example?

MZ: Oh yes. Yes.

SA: You must've been.

MZ: Feitelson and . . .

SA: Helen Lundeberg?

MZ: Yes, a very . . .

SA: His wife.

MZ: I think it was during the Public Works of Art that I got better acquainted with them. And I think we looked

upon Feitelson as a quite, you know, an innovative and daring artist because he did these things with simple patterns. I'd like to see them again. I think, possibly, they're more interesting than I realized at the time.

SA: Maybe I'll bring some things I've got that I could show you. You might be able to remember them. What about Stanton Macdonald-Wright?

MZ: Oh yes. I knew him quite well. He was a smooth guy. He was a very sophisticated fella. He'd had experience as European-trained. The thing that impresses me now, and it seems a travesty that he was very imitative of oriental art, and yet he was doing them in oil, which it seemed out of character. I admired his work at the time 'cause it was so carefully or skillfully done. I think, possibly, I'd be more critical of it now. But I remember him. He was always dressed beautifully and he had a very suave in-charge attitude. That's about the only thing I could say, just gave the impression of a very, very smooth talking and acting guy.

SA: Well, in your circle of people, was somebody like Millard Sheets much more of an influence than somebody like Stanton Macdonald-Wright or Lorser Feitelson?

MZ: Oh yes. They were really outside my concern as far as interest in their painting.

SA: Did you think of them as being more modernist or more European derived or anything like that?

MZ: I simply looked upon them as experimenting in a more abstract direction.

SA: Okay. Well, you know, I think when we come back this afternoon, I'll talk to you more about the California school.

MZ: All right.

SA: And, also, about the development of your watercolor and landscape painting.

MZ: All right. Yes.

SA: We'll kind of blend those two together.

MZ: Very good. Very good.

SA: But I think we should stop now. Okay?

MZ: Very good.

SA: All right. Thank you.

[SESSION 3, TAPE 1, SIDE A]

SA: . . . of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. An interview with Milford Zornes on the 7th of August, 1999. This is the afternoon. We did a session this morning at his studio home in Claremont, California. The interviewer is Susan Anderson. This is Session 3, Tape 1, Side A. Well, I think for our session this afternoon, Mr. Zornes, it'd be nice to talk about how you developed into a watercolor painter and also talk a little bit more about the California school. So maybe you could start by telling me how you developed primarily into a watercolor painter.

MZ: Well, when I started painting –- I'm working with Tom Craig and, as I explained, during our college year we spent every moment we could painting, outside of our studies. And we gave equal attention to oil and watercolor. I don't know how we felt there was a distinction. It just seemed like we wanted to work in both mediums. The change came during the war. I painted oils quite consistently up until the time of the war. Well, I was selected as one of the 42 war department artists. And, of course, I carried watercolors because they were expedient, easy to handle and travel. And then after I came home I was busy trying to make a living, and teaching, and working in the studios and if I got a day, or a weekend, or a week, or some chance to travel, I'd take my watercolors and go. Until the things that I was showing, most of the things I was showing were watercolors. So, gradually, I became identified with watercolor to the extent that I just gradually worked away from oil painting.

SA: I know that you eventually developed watercolor as your medium of choice but you started out being equally proficient at oils?

MZ: Well, yes. Possibly, the major interest was in oil, actually. Then, I suppose as you work with watercolors it becomes more and more of a challenge. This sounds a little bigoted, perhaps, but you develop the attitude that anyone can do it in oil but can you do it in watercolor? That really isn't a consistent argument because I found from experience that you can run into the same problems painting watercolor. There is a myth that watercolor is

so demanding because you have to be right the first time. It is true that you like to have a technique that's very direct and spontaneous but just the same, I've listened to those compliments. People will say, "I enjoy and admire watercolor because you have to be right the first time and watercolorists have to be so direct in their work." And then I go home and scrub out a watercolor and make it work anyway.

SA: So you can scrub out areas that you want to paint?

MZ: Well, if you use good papers you can make some changes. And it's true, also, now there's the thought, that watercolor is a more spontaneous medium but still you can work very quickly on location -- you can sketch an oil as fast as you can with watercolor. It's just that in modern times I think watercolor fits our time because so many of us, so many people who develop an interest in painting can't do it full time. They haven't the studio space and they don't have time to let pictures dry. I would say that, possibly, the most vigorous things being done in the country right now are being done in watercolor.

SA: And how do you think that watercolor compares with acrylic?

MZ: Well, I could only start from my own premise and that is I could never warm to acrylic painting. I know that it's a very practical medium. It's very versatile. You can use it so many ways. You can range all the way from watercolor technique to almost an oil technique. And you can work on so many different surfaces. And I would say that it certainly is, maybe it is the medium of the day but I've never worked in acrylic as a –- what do I want to say? -- plastic medium. I have done a few watercolors in acrylics. The disappointing thing or the discouraging thing is that with watercolor, you lay on a wash, then you come back with the succeeding washes and the paper's still open. But when you put on your washes of acrylic, it seals the paper. And you're sliding over a hard surface and you never have that feeling of intimacy that you have with watercolor.

SA: I can see why you would prefer watercolors. Well, did you ever study oil as a separate . . .?

MZ: Well, I not only haven't made a separation in my own work so much but in teaching, now, when I do these painting workshops (they're designated nowadays as watercolor workshops for the most part) but I make this provision, it doesn't matter to me, people can come and paint in oil, acrylic or watercolor. What I'm interested in painting has to do with painting itself and the medium is -– it's only the medium. You have the same design and structural problem in watercolor, oil or acrylic.

SA: Certainly.

MZ: Now, of course, I keep making this comparison but yes, a violin is a different instrument from the piano but you have music in common and the composition and structure of the music is the basic concern.

SA: Certainly. Well, when you first started to study and became interested in watercolor, were there certain artists that you looked to or that you were interested in.

MZ: Well, yes, of course. Again, back to the days when I associated with Tom Craig so much, one experience we had was when Millard Sheets staged a national show here at the fair and Tom and I were the ones who opened all the boxes and hung the pictures and it was like Christmas, you know? Getting acquainted with all the painters in the country. However, that was mostly oil painting. But the point of it is we were very alert to what was going on all over the country and it's a little hard to make the separation. You just watch painting and gradually, as our interests were directed more into watercolor, we were seeing what the watercolorists were doing.

SA: Were you interested in people like Turner?

MZ: Oh yes. Yes. I'll have to tell you about that. Doing the Public Works of Art program, I've boasted and I think I'm on solid ground here, it's been reported that I turned in more individual works than any other artist in the United States working in watercolor. And, during that time there were several programs relative to that program and I remember a program out of one of the big high schools in Los Angeles. They had a big assembly. They had artists and speakers. I forget who the speaker was. He's the one that wrote a book about Millard many years ago. Merle Armitage. Yes. He gave a talk and, citing the different artists he said, "Zornes is the [J.M.W.] Turner of America."

SA: So, why was that? Why did he say that?

MZ: Well, I suppose that he was meaning the prodigious output. Turner was a prodigious worker. I got acquainted with a man who claimed to be a grandnephew of Turner. I was traveling on a ship and he was supposed to be the author of the famous novel, Anthony Adverse and he told me that he was Turner's grandnephew and that the family owned pictures. He said that Turner not only made a fortune selling hundreds and hundreds of pictures but he gave the Tate Museum 25,000 individual works. Of course they ranged all the

way from pencil sketches to . . . and he said that there were bales of stuff that had never been cataloged and I understand that's still true. In the basement of the Tate, there are still bales of stuff up there that have never been made brought to light. But I think this man was speaking of the fact that I'd painted watercolors like mad and much in the way Turner did. But anyway, as a young painter and egotistical and grabbing for any attention, I think I became very much interested in Turner [unintelligible].

SA: After being compared to him especially.

MZ: Right.

SA: What about Russell Flint? That's a name that I've heard some people mention.

MZ: Well, yes. I think my first awareness of Russell Flint, again, here's Sheets studying other artists. I was in Sheets studio one time when there was a watercolor, it was very much like a Russell Flint in a book that he had laying there. We were very much aware of Russell Flint because of his consummate technique, particularly his figures. And –– forget what the occasion was. I had to pick up some pictures for a show at the fair, and actually I had a Russell Flint hanging in my house one time while we were transporting the pictures. Gloria, my first wife, and I were in England at a time when Russell Flint was really in his heyday and we saw his work exhibited everywhere and reproductions of it were seen everywhere.

SA: So, he was somebody that people were looking at?

MZ: Yes, and I think he's the only member of the American Watercolor Society who was not an American.

SA: Well, what about Charles Birchfield? Is he somebody that you would've been interested in?

MZ: Oh yeah. You know, his things during that period were very realistic pictures of American life. Later on he evolved to those rather abstract, remember those scintillating kind of pictures with lots of points and I heard him on a radio interview talking about evolving to that. He was trying to find the effect of light. Trying to pin down and give form to light structure and so forth. He was, yes, he was very much an influence.

SA: And then another artist that I think I heard people mention, Cottman? Another Englishman, right?

MZ: Cottman. Yes. Yes. There was that whole school of watercolor painters. I think we were impressed or at least we became aware of, or I did, of the fact that watercolor was so popular in England and it was, it was a kind of a social accomplishment. Young ladies always took lessons in watercolor painting.

SA: And the aristocracy always knew how to do adequate watercolors.

MZ: There were some leading ones who were the teachers and they set the pace for watercolor painting in England. And because, I suppose, the English temperament is very exacting in describing scenes, our attitude then was correctness of drawing and correctness of drafting scenes. Had to admire the English watercolors because they achieved artistic effects even building it realism to a great extent.

SA: What about Winslow Homer?

MZ: Oh yes, Winslow Homer. He impressed me and I think that all of these three or four times when I've gone to New York, one of the first things I've done going to the Metropolitan is see if I can't find that picture of the Night Watch. He was such a good painter. He did down to earth, solid painting. Oh, of course, I admire Edward Hopper, too, but I never quite got the excitement in Homer's watercolors that some people do but certainly his oils. He caused a lot of attention because he went ahead and worked in watercolor at a time when it wasn't that popular.

SA: Well, do you think you felt more affinity with watercolorists like that or do you think you had more of an affinity with, perhaps, the artists of the American Scene that you were hearing about then?

MZ: Well, yes. We were very much impressed with the American Scene and it didn't seem to be in our thinking, as I recall, about whether they were working in watercolor or oil. It was their painting that we were interested in.

SA: Right.

MZ: And I think, possibly, that has something to say about what watercolor painting was during that period, more than it is now, as far as I'm concerned. Because there, at that time, watercolor was right along with oil painting. It was an expression of the scenes and the thinking relative to these scenes. Nowadays when I go to a contemporary watercolor show, maybe I'm just out of my period, but I don't get excited about many of the pictures because it's usually just kind of the clever way of handling it or the unusual way of handling the medium. You can say, "Yes, it's skillfully done and it's rather smart way of handling watercolor," but then after that, that's all you have. Whereas, a person who's painting –- artists who paint the scene with a love of the

scene and a feeling for it -– it's a different thing.

SA: Well, you know, it might be good to get your opinion about what you think, specifically, the California-style of watercolor technique used by you and the other artists really was. I think it'd be good if you could put that into words.

MZ: You mean how it compared to other areas?

SA: Or what made it stand out. What the chief characteristics of it were or are?

MZ: I think that very thing, to a great extent, that we were able to get outdoors. We could set up our easels looking right at the ocean and we could set up and do street scenes. I did a scene of Wall Street -- set up on the sub-treasury building steps. We were right there. Right in it and with it. And we Californians, possibly, did that more than other artists because, the Eastern painters, the weather would keep them in the studio more and probably they worked from sketches more and studies or and, possibly, held to the traditions a little bit more.

SA: What about things such as, though, leaving the white paper showing or using wet-on-wet techniques?

MZ: Yes.

SA: Could you talk a little bit about what might have been the actual, technical or stylistic approach?

MZ: Well, I think we fell in love with the thing -– what you could do with watercolor. We were certainly guilty of handling the medium, too, because this is the magic of being able to wet the paper and drop color in and get . . . just a moment. We were so in love with this wet-on-wet idea, for one thing, that now, even now, if I go to some city to do a workshop and somebody else asks me to come to dinner and they'll say, "There's something you'll want to see," and I'm afraid I'll see one of my dreary old wet-on-wet pictures and the thing that I have against them is that I was usually just too much satisfied with the wet-on-wet effect without giving it that final definition that makes for solid structure. And then, back to the white paper thing. This is something that I've thought about a great deal and talk about. You do see some very striking things done by artists who deliberately find ways of letting the paper sparkle through or leaving areas. And, of course, I've certainly left my share of white paper. But I've learned that you have to be able to make white paper serve as a color and this is the premise that I go on. I think in such a pragmatic way that if it doesn't have a reason I can't buy it. So, my thought is -– I'll give you this example. Suppose you're looking . . . you're at the edge of a field of grain and in the bright sunlight and the wind. The grain's bending away from the wind and you get such a sparkle on the grain that the only way you could get the contrast between the light and the dark would be to go all the way to white paper. So you just simply say, white represents the pale, lightest color that that grain could be, as compared to the deeper saturation of color elsewhere, you see. So, you simply assign white paper to be one of your lightest colors and you do that consistently so it is structurally sound. But to just accidentally leave whites, sometimes that could be a little false.

SA: And do you think that that's how it started out? Was it to just allow white paper to . . .

MZ: Yes, I think so. I think we were guilty of just saying, "Well, this is a nice effect and I'll let it go."

SA: Kind of a sketchy effect maybe?

MZ: Yes. And I've had the unfortunate experience, of course, of working on a picture, leaving a good many light spaces and then when I finally fill those in I lose the bright promise that the picture had. And so you have to be very careful. If you are leaving whites . . . that picture right over there, for instance, that is Dorothy Canfield Fisher's farm in Vermont. And I've jealously left the roofs all white 'cause roofs can often be the lightest thing in a picture. But I'm not going to be happy with that, entirely, until I make some variation throughout, because the lights are working but it's monotonous, it needs some relief of color in some areas there. I often leave white paper for roofs, following the logic that it's catching so much light or maybe a surface of water and then when the whole thing comes together, then I very carefully give color to areas that need to be taken down from the white.

Then, let's see, there's one other thing about white paper. I argue, too, that a painting is a small surface. Suppose you're looking at several square yards or a square mile or ten square miles of landscape. Well, you're attempting to bring down to a piece of paper the whole impact of that landscape. Just like a burning lens. You're focusing the vitality of that to a small piece of paper and I think that you simply have to think in terms of exaggeration in order to retain that. So I tell my students that you can have almost a rule of thumb. You need to go from black to white, you need to go from intensely warm to intensely cool, you need to go from full intensity to pale neutral. That's a generalization but it gives you license to exaggerate for a storytelling effect. And I dwell on that, too -- that painting is storytelling graphically. And, as we know, good storytellers are often out-and-out prevaricators. Out-and-out liars. They're just skilled in their style of lying. And we have to be skilled in our ability

to lie as painters.

SA: That’s a wonderful quote.

MZ: Because you might as well take a photograph or make a rendering. If you’re going to make a painting you need to be, or you have the right to be dramatic, to pick out the significant elements to dramatize, you see. You have the same right that an author has to create characters that are bigger than life, situations that are more dramatic than everyday life. He has the right to do it because he’s storytelling.

SA: It’s part of your job.

MZ: Yes.

SA: Well, getting back to the California style of watercolor technique, what else, besides this? Would you say that it was looser and more improvisational?

MZ: Well, I think it was more daring in some ways. I think we pioneered and had the temerity to go beyond watercolor -– the traditions of watercolor. Even now, I’ve been teaching in Ireland and my students do skillful watercolors but they’re aghast at what we do in overstating color and values and so forth because it isn’t the accepted technique.

SA: Well there’s a real punch to the watercolors.

MZ: Oh yes. Again, it’s story telling and you have a right to tell it with a flair.

SA: Well, you know, obviously, we need to talk about some of the influences that you already briefly went into and this might be a good time to bring up Hollywood or Disney because that storytelling was certainly an element of, for example, Disney cartoons or it would’ve been part of the training that you would have received, right?

MZ: Well, I think so. Now I worked in the studios but I don’t think I had enough experience in the studio to say how much it influenced me except from the reading point of view. I think on a whole it had a definite effect because in the making of moving pictures there has to be a definite focusing on the idea, the immediate idea, and the ability to state things in such a way that you read it quickly as a well-defined pattern. That you recognize one frame after another or a quick succession of frames. I think in the very process of doing, particularly in the animated studios, the very process of preparing these pictures for filming you were thinking of the readability of it and that is such a prime concern. As a teacher, one of the most difficult things to establish is the fact that readability is a prime concern. I go so far as to demand my students that they give me a picture that I could read 50 feet away.

And I bring that back, again, to the moving pictures. Even though these are pictures flashing, and especially because these pictures are flashing one after another, they have to be readable, otherwise the thing would be a cluttered mess. And so I think the constant practice of preparing cleanly developed, cleanly defined drawings has definitely the effect of giving clarity to our painting, as a group.

SA: I wonder if it also helped people to think in terms of action or movement?

MZ: Well, I hadn’t thought of it as having a definite effect but possibly it does because, there again, I have the argument that movement is just as important in a painting as it is in any other medium. It has to be understood that if you’re watching a dance routine, for instance, it’s the movement that remains in memory. That’s what you have in the way of design and rhythm through a poem or progress of a storyline. So that you need to have the counterpart of this in painting. For instance, if I’m painting a surface of water, I have to think that out there in the distance, the color of water is due to reflection, primarily, but progressively, as you move forward and you’re looking down into the water, the color of the water is due to the color of the water itself or what you see through the water. And by moving from this rich, full color of the water itself out to the surface in reflected color, you’re moving across that surface and also need to change your texture. Right in front you’re going to see ripples and movement in the water whereas it gets smoother as you go out. So, a surface of water gives you a wonderful chance to move into a picture. Or if you’re drawing a tree -- the upper limbs coming down and joining the trunk down into the roots and so on. The storyline told in terms of a line is a matter of movement. It’s just like a . . .

[SESSION 3, TAPE 1, SIDE B]

MZ: . . . vertical up the trunk, stop. Under curve of a branch, stop. Over curve of a branch, stop. You can write it in those word symbols and the result is it’s a continual inter relating these. Now, in a picture, for, instance, you have curve is to curve, and vertical is to vertical, and horizontal is to horizontal. If you watch that, for instance, if

you have the outline of a tree and then the rounded outline of a hill and even into a figure –- a girl standing with her skirt blowing wide -- or something like that so: curve, curve, curve, you see. So you look for the rhythmic possibilities and you conclude that rhythm is just as much important in a painting as it is dancing or listening in music or whatever.

SA: And also abstract thinking. I mean, that's a very abstract way of looking at things.

MZ: Well, it is and I think that's very necessary. You're dealing with recognizable symbols but these are abstract –- these are abstract things. They're not realistic by any means. Your particular symbol for a tree might be entirely different from the next person's symbol. You've abstracted your form out of that. You're looking at a real world and you abstract it in the meaningful symbols, by which you tell your graphic story, you see.

SA: That's really interesting. Well, this is going slightly back, again, to the storytelling but in 1963 when the American Artist did that article on you . . .

MZ: Yes.

SA: . . . you wrote or you said that, "Watercolor painting should be used to capture a moment in time," and I think that relates, also, to storytelling.

MZ: Yes, and I think that maybe that, also, does identify watercolor as giving you possibilities for a very quick statement, whereas with oil you have to mix your paint and plan it a little more, whereas a watercolor, just a dash or two can give you an impression that you can carry away and develop.

SA: Do you think that that ability to capture a moment in time was, again, one of the things that set the school off? That you developed an ability to do that?

MZ: I think so. I think it has to be developed. I think your first impression is, "Can I make a careful drawing of this?" or, "Can I make a correct drawing of this?" Well, if you give all of your thought there, a lot of things can happen during the hour that you're making a drawing. The light can change and many things can happen but if you develop your draftsmanship and, by that I mean your drawing and your handling of paint, if you can develop it to the point where you can assess the character of a line and put it down then and there in a moment's time you're going to get something that you won't get if you study it too carefully. On the other hand, there are times when studying it carefully is necessary, of course. Maybe I'll have a chance to show you some of these things but when I'm in an airport waiting for a flight I can't see very well but as people walking around I see them in silhouette and see their attitudes and I found that I can just sketch as fast as I want to in my sketch book attitudes of people and I'll get something that I cannot possibly get if I have a chance to draw them carefully. The minute I try to start making a careful drawing of someone I get involved with this: Does the foot look right? And so forth. And I lose something that I get in those spontaneous drawings. And then I sometimes bring these home and add a little watercolor. Just that simple process of being perfectly free with line and then adding enough color to give it a little more credibility.

SA: I would like to see those.

MZ: Yeah.

SA: How important do you think style is?

MZ: Well, I think style is . . . you could say it's a very identifying thing. It's your style. As long as you're not saying that style is the end you're seeking. If you're seeking to create an image that's recognizable and someone shares your experience of that image, if you do that successfully, well you're building a style. So many people begin to say, "Well, that's his style," and, eventually, that is very important because that's who you are, in a sense. I think it's just as natural as the way you dress or the way you –- it's personal. I watch people all the time, of course, and here's this fella he's dressed in a sharp way, always. Or another fella that he's always sloppy. And it may be interesting either way but that's who he is and then the same with your drawing or painting. You work with a dashing loose structural arrangement or you draw things with a disciplined mind and that tells who you are and the way you think.

SA: Well, do you think that, to some extent, that forms in nature will dictate what style you might paint something?

MZ: Oh, I think these forms in nature are the very basis of your style. You gain a style, I believe, by wanting to be very truthful so you search that tree very carefully to see what it's branching habits are. Elm, one tree, has a smooth falling line for the extension of a branch. An oak tree, for instance, has a very angular –- it goes this way and this way. By searching out the very significant characteristics of a tree and trying to state it as much as you possibly can, you gradually abstract because it isn't just the exact attitude of this particular branch, it's what is

the habit of the whole tree, you see. And by abstracting that particular habit or that idea -– the way you do that becomes your style. People say, “Well, he has a habit of, this is the way he draws trees.” I had a class one morning and a girl came and she said, “Well, I saw a tree this morning and saw that Mother Nature had ripped Zornes off.” In other words, she thought my style was the norm and nature was imitating it. And yet, as long as we’re talkin’ about style, the mystery is that you cannot recognize your own style. I don’t.

SA: Really? It’s too close to you?

MZ: Now, I can look at a Phil Dike painting or a Sheets and it’s like a signature. You know it immediately. But I can’t see it in my own. And I think it’s because every picture’s a problem and you don’t see it in relation to that last problem that closely, you know? You’re seeking something, you’re seeking the character of that thing, so that’s your concentration rather than the way you do it, you see. So I just think it’s very hard to recognize your own style.

SA: So when you look at that painting over there you don’t see style?

MZ: I don’t . . .

SA: You just see your painting.

MZ: I don’t see Zornes. I don’t see Zornes at all.

SA: Isn’t that interesting but I know what you mean.

MZ: This one here I’m working on, this high-key color is a painting problem. I want to feel like I’m inside a cave looking out but I don’t want to go dark, into dark colors. I want a rich, full color so I’ve stopped at this point to see if I can’t keep this high-key color all the way through. Well, I suppose that there has to be some recognition. Other people find some recognition. All I see is the problem.

SA: This is going back a little bit but it relates to various influences on either your work or other artists in the California school. When you were at Pomona did you develop an interest in Far Eastern art or Chinese brush painting? Those kinds of things?

MZ: I’ve never had a direct interest in Oriental art. I’ve never been interested in emulating the techniques but early on, when I first started painting, we used to go down into Chino, what’s known as the Chino area. Well, Chino simply means China in Spanish. Because that was one place we could get out in the country quite readily. Oh, we had to drive a few miles, and down there were dairy farms and open country and we used that for years and I could still go down there and find another place to paint landscapes. But then when I started sending pictures to shows it’d be Morning in Chino, Evening in Chino, Afternoon in Chino and I had a show in New York and when the catalog came out it was Morning in China, Evening in China and some woman wrote a good review and she said, “This young man has had more opportunities to travel than most.” Well, I’d never been but I had to go to China to vindicate myself.

SA: Well, you know, I guess I was just wondering. In a lot of the earlier paintings by the California school artists it seemed like there was a lot of wet into wet or atmospheric washes.

MZ: Oh yes.

SA: And I wondered whether that had anything to do with Chinese painting at all?

MZ: Well, I think, in the first place as we painted along the Pacific coasts, we had those scenes. We saw those things so much and then I’m very sure that many of us must’ve noted how the Oriental painters have soft clouds floating against mountains and so forth. I surely must’ve been influenced. Well, to complete that idea of painting in Chino, while I didn’t emulate Chinese painting people were saying that my lake had an Oriental look and there again, to have any identification you took it to heart. In my own case I did, certainly, make note of the fact that the soft cloud formations -– how the Orientals did it with mountains coming up out of the mist and that sort of thing. Oh, yes, surely we were influenced.

SA: Okay. All right. Well, that’s good. Well, did Sheets espouse the importance of Oriental art at all, Sheets at Scripps in Pomona?

MZ: Well, I think, possibly, he was influenced very much like all of us. He saw the beauty or the interesting aspects of Oriental art. Certainly.

SA: I know he was very interested in Hartley Burr Alexander out there. Do you know who he was?

MZ: Oh yes. I knew him very well.

SA: Didn't he espouse Oriental or Far-Eastern art and philosophy a bit?

MZ: Oh yes. Dr. Alexander had a meeting every week and we were free to come in and listen and take part in the conversation and, of course, yes, he had a great deal to say about Oriental philosophy and art and, I guess, come to think of it, Millard was very much influenced by a good many of his things. The way that he handled trees and so forth had an Oriental quality and his horses were certainly –– that was more the Arabic or East Indian approach to painting. His horses were right out of mogul art.

SA: Like Persian miniatures and that sort of thing?

MZ: Yes.

SA: I didn't realize that. And do you think that Dr. Alexander was part of that interest?

MZ: Well, Dr. Alexander was more of a scholar. He was interested in art but I think indirectly, in a way.

SA: Okay, more of the ideas rather than the . . .

MZ: Do you know anything about the state capitol of Nebraska?

SA: No.

MZ: I've never been there but it seems that it was characterized by much more use of sculpture, and important sculpture. I'd like to see it because he had something to do with selecting the artist for that. He came from Nebraska. And he was influential in that, and we heard quite a bit about the sculptors who were involved in that. Yes, he had a strong interest in art but I think it was more of a scholarly interest, or at least it was based more on this scholarly approach.

SA: But do you think that he might've steered Sheets in that direction in some sense?

MZ: He very definitely wanted to. See, Dr. Alexander was the founder of Scripps College and when Millard came there to teach, he was impressed by this vigorous young man and I think he took a special interest and started holding these meetings. Either he expressed this idea or I heard it someplace that he felt that Sheets, with his enthusiasm and his abilities, should be more philosophically oriented to art and he probably did have a lot to do with shaping some of Millard's thinking.

SA: Well, probably another big area that would be good for us to talk about is Mexican art. Now, I know you talked about how the proximity to Mexico had a certain influence on all of you. Did you watch [José Clemente] Orozco paint the Prometheus mural?

MZ: The first time I ever visited Pomona College campus, before I ever thought of going there, was when he was working on that. I walked into the Frary Hall. There was no one around. He was working alone and I was, again, being completely uninitiated to painting techniques, I was quite amazed at what was going on. Here he was laying up plaster and working this wet plaster. I think he had somebody helping him and I tried to talk, I tried to ask questions. He wouldn't say anything. I don't know how well he understood English. Years later, here about seven, eight years ago, his son lectured at Pomona College for the Spanish Club so I went to this morning lecture and I wanted to tell him that I had watched his father paint and he said, "Did my father have anything to say?" And I said, "No, he wouldn't talk at all." He said, "Well, that was my father." He said, "I ask so many people what he had to say and I never get anything."

SA: How frustrating.

MZ: So, I could say that I watched him paint but not to the extent that I knew a lot about what was going on at the time.

SA: What's your recollection of the impact of Mexican art on the California school or on yourself or maybe both?

MZ: Well, I think it was something that couldn't be pinpointed as much as it was a kind of a gradual influence. Here we were in a country with a background of the Spanish culture. The fact that this was once a part of Mexico. I think we were very aware of that influence here. I think, well for the painters the exciting thing was the muralists. The very fact that these people vigorously painted on walls and did these big, bold patterns. What we did know of Mexican art was pretty bold and colorful. I doubt if many artists went down to Mexico just to study there at that time. Later on, I think, the school at San Miguel Allende had quite an influence but I think at that time it was just simply the awareness of all this vigorous painting going on and the fact that the Mexican painters could just state the world in terms of bold, simple forms.

SA: Well, I know some of the students, when they were at Chouinard in around 1930 got to paint with [David

Alfaro] Siqueiros on a mural at Chouinard and then some of them later got to paint on the mural that he did downtown. Did you, yourself, have any experience with Siqueiros?

MZ: Well, the only contact I had there –- I was going to college at Pomona and our teacher took us. Mrs. [Nelbert] Chouinard had persuaded him to come for a short time and give us some lectures and criticisms so we were there on one day. On the day we were there several students had made panels, fresco panels, and he gave a criticism of these. And I couldn't help but be impressed with him, as a person. He was a big man and wore a big black sombrero. Pranced around. He didn't wait for people to translate. He talked in Spanish and a little English and the thing that I got from it that I use for my teaching –- there was one painting came up that had to do with workmen. They were standing arms akimbo and they were standing close together and there were spaces under the arms and between the heads and Siqueiros was trying to put over the idea that painting is like sculpture, it should be compacted. It should not be punched full of holes. And scattered. It should work for big forms and so he was gesturing, he wanted to cut down on the light. "No holes through elbows. No holes through elbows." So when I'm talking to landscape students and they have too much light coming between masses of foliage of trees and so forth I tell 'em to pull it together. Make a big shape without too many holes through it and I tell 'em that story quite often. It is important in painting to not cut the thing to pieces with little bits of broken white, you know.

SA: Can you remember anything else about your experience of Siqueiros or . . .

MZ: No, I know that he painted the murals on Alvarado Street. Somebody called me not too long ago to find out what I knew about that mural. I only knew that he did it and he was brought here by the Mexican community to do that. That's the reason he was up here. And it was while he was here that Ms. Chouinard persuaded him to come over but I couldn't say anything more than that I met him while he was here and I knew he painted that. I think the Getty people are doing a little research on that mural.

SA: The Getty? Yes. What they're doing is conserving it. And it will probably be able to open to the public again. They're trying to get it to a point where they can do that.

MZ: Yeah. Well it was somebody, I suppose they just knew that I was an artist around at that time. I wasn't able to help very much.

SA: Well, if these Mexican masters that were here in California, because [Diego] Rivera was also in San Francisco.

MZ: Yes.

SA: Did you go up there at all during that time?

MZ: I saw him working when I went to the fair in San Francisco.

SA: That would've been in 1939, right?

MZ: Yes. Now, he was way up on top of a scaffolding. I could see this big figure sitting up there. During the day we visited the different departments of the fair and I kept coming around hoping I'd catch him when he was down below and I'd get to see him but he was up there all day long. He just worked, worked, worked. And I never did get to actually see him other than that.

SA: Well, just the impact of having these people here and also, wasn't there quite a bit of Mexican art being shown in Los Angeles? Do you remember that at all?

MZ: Probably there's more being shown now.

SA: You think so?

MZ: I think it has taken time to make us aware or accepting Mexican art as serious painting. No, I'm not aware that there was that much Mexican art around. If it was it was more a [unintelligible] type that didn't represent the best of traditions in art but now things have changed to the point where we actually, I think, we're anxious to relate to Mexico and, possibly, inherit some of the feeling for Mexican art.

SA: Well, do you think that there was an influence on the California School . . .

MZ: I think it was very subtle.

SA: Do you think it would've been more in terms of technique or subject matter? Or formal qualities?

MZ: I simply think it's the temerity of big, bold, colorful patterns. I think it had that influence and to me that's a

good influence.

SA: There certainly is something very bold about California school painting so that would make a lot of sense.

MZ: And I've had this thought. I've always been a little cautious about propaganda art. I've often thought that it falls in the category of illustrating ideas and possibly, in many ways, departs from true painting. I think the Mexican painters succeeded in that they did some very powerful painting with the impetus of expressing political and social ideas. I think it was powerful in that that's one case where propaganda art was strong art.

SA: Well, it seems like there might've been a short period around the time that Siqueiros was here when some of the artists were making a little bit more of social statements in their art. But that kind of faded away, I think.

MZ: Probably.

SA: Why do you think, in general, the school wasn't interested on commenting on the difficulties of the Depression, for example?

MZ: That would be hard. I think we were just a bunch of young artists intent upon learning to paint and finding that we could use ordinary things to paint and we weren't prone to place much more importance other than you can make an interesting picture of a railway station or a street scene or a landscape and getting a good picture. I just think we weren't that serious. We were all dead serious about being painters but I don't think we had a lot of philosophical concern about these things.

SA: And not much social awareness, you think?

MZ: Well, no.

SA: That's hard for me to believe, though.

MZ: Well, I just have to say that, possibly, it's hard for me to answer because again, I was kind of a loner. I didn't mingle with people an awful lot. But on the other hand, I still think it was just a matter of being a good painter.

SA: And also a relationship to nature and to the land? That was important?

MZ: Yeah. Yeah.

SA: Which is really not a subject for propaganda, as you were saying.

MZ: I think so and even now, in my painting, I can't seem to feel that I have any –- oh, I'll take it back. If I could have another career I'd like to be an important cartoonist.

SA: Really?

MZ: That hasn't anything to do with painting. That's a separate idea. I'm quite liberal in my thinking and every once in a while –- and yet I never involve myself in these things at all. I've always been too busy being a painter. I've never taken part in a demonstration. I've never done anything to voice my opinion about affairs but I get angry at the way things go sometimes and I wish I was a powerful cartoonist, I could really stick a pin in it and lance it, you know. I envy a sharp cartoonist. One who not only has the ability to draw but has concise . . .

[SESSION 3, TAPE 2, SIDE A]

SA: Well, do you think that, perhaps, rather than reflecting the difficulties of the Depression, that in some ways the California artists, whether they were conscious of it or not, were much more reflecting the American dream or the California dream and lifestyle or something like that?

MZ: I think so. I think while we all suffered the consequences of the Depression –- it was hard to get a hold of money, you couldn't get a job and we all had to –- I'm saying most of us, the majority of us, certainly, felt the pressure of it. But I don't think it had much to do with our concern about painting. We just wanted to be painters and were willing to find interest in objective things rather than the ideas of the times. There were a few people making social comments, of course, but I think most of us were just painting pictures. It was as simple as that.

SA: Well, did you feel like you were part of a greater movement, at all? Did you feel like you had some relationship to those Regionalists that . . .

MZ: No.

SA: No?

MZ: Well, wait a minute. Of course, we heard a lot about the –- let's see, there was John Steuart Curry in New York and there was [Thomas Hart] Benton in the middle West and somebody from Kansas, what was his name? Who was the very precise artist who taught in Iowa?

SA: Grant Wood.

MZ: Grant Wood. Yes, we . . .

SA: Reginald Marsh, maybe?

MZ: Yes. Marsh. We were very aware of them and I think we were very aware of the fact of regional art. Somehow I don't believe we felt that we were making that much impact. Later on we've had to be impressed with ourselves, had people categorize us, before we were very much aware that we were a movement. And that was a healthy thing. I think if we'd have been a movement we would have been soap-boxing about something or other and we didn't get on a soapbox to settle anything, we just painted our pictures and hoped we could get into shows and the result was that we finally made some impression. In the East, as you know, there was a show back there of the American Watercolor Society and nine pictures were selected for the Metropolitan Museum. Joan [Irving] Brandt was one, I was one, I don't know who the others were but that made quite an impression or at least we impressed ourselves.

SA: I can imagine.

MZ: And so we began to feel like we were getting to be part of the American scene.

SA: Wasn't that about 1940 or something?

MZ: Must've been in that general area.

SA: And that was getting right towards the war era period.

MZ: Getting close, yes. I remember, I think I got $145 for my picture.

SA: That was a lot of money then.

MZ: Sold to the Metropolitan.

SA: Wasn't it?

MZ: Yes.

SA: That was pretty good. Well, you know, getting back to the California school, were you very well acquainted with the northern California artists at that time?

MZ: Not too well. The year that I was president of the California Watercolor Society I made a special gesture. There was Dong Kingman, George Post and a couple of others and I suppose when I made president I thought I should do something different or innovative and so I conceived the idea, since we had members up there, that we would try to open the show in San Francisco. And it was quite a venture because we managed to open it at the San Francisco Museum of Art.

SA: That's something.

MZ: Dr., it was a lady director there.

SA: Was it Grace McCann Morley?

MZ: Dr. Morley. Well, she was excited about it and we had a very impressive opening. It seemed in San Francisco people went out for these things more than they were doing down here and I well remember that that reception was a tremendous affair. Seemed like everybody in San Francisco was there.

SA: Did artists go up from Los Angeles?

MZ: Good many of us were up there. I have one story that I amused in telling. I had painted a picture up along the foot of the Sierras. Art Landy and I had gone up there to paint and we had rain quite a bit of the time. It was just funny and one day we got under a cattle shed and we were looking out at Mount Wilson. It was in a kind of a haze. Just a big shape of the mountain and we thought we were safe and I laid down a big wash for skies, mountains. Lo and behold the mist had come in and got on my wet watercolor. Looked just like a snowstorm. And I was disgusted and we were disgusted. We packed up, went down to Death Valley. Well, when I got home I

got that out and put it aside and then one day I got to thinking about it and I did a few things to it and called it Snow in the Sierras. Well, at the opening of this show they were serving cocktails galore and some lady, kind of a dowager type, was balancing her cocktail glass and she got a hold of me and introduced me to her friend and took me over to my picture and very dramatically said Brett Hart gave us the Sierras in literature and now you've given us this. And I've always commented that I had sense enough not to say that it's just 'cause a mist drifted in that I created the technique.

SA: There's that creative line of the storyteller.

MZ: Yeah. Yeah.

SA: Well, so that was the first time that you had the California Watercolor Society Annual up in the Bay Area?

MZ: And it's the only time it's ever been opened up there.

SA: Isn't that something? Well, did that help to bring the two schools or the two . . .

MZ: Oh, I think it might have. It certainly, kind of brought them into our affairs a little bit more, I think.

SA: But was there a crossover anyway? I mean, did you know those people, to some extent, before then?

MZ: No, I really got acquainted with them by going up there. I had correspondence with George Post and Dong Kingman telling of the intention and I kind of drafted them to help me stage it when we got up there. So I got well acquainted with two or three of those fellows.

SA: Did you know John Haley or Erle Loran?

MZ: I knew Erle Loran. Who was the other one?

SA: John Haley?

MZ: Well, I knew the name.

SA: But you didn't know him?

MZ: I didn't know him.

SA: You got to know George Post fairly well, didn't you?

MZ: Fairly well.

SA: What was he like?

MZ: Well, I've been acquainted with him in recent years more than at that time. Incidentally, my wife thinks George is a top watercolorist. She owns about 11 of his paintings. Well, he's a very droll guy and laid back and people comment about him whenever he's giving a workshop. People have been amazed at the simplicity of his approach and, of course, this is one of the things that makes him important to me. He stated things so quickly and directly. I quote from one of Rex Brandt's books -- he quotes George Post -- somebody asked George if he ever used a masking out technique at all and old George said, typical of him, "Oh no. I'm a little lazy. I just thought I'd rather draw around the whites." Consummate answer.

SA: Draw around the lights?

MZ: Yes. He didn't bother using any masking out and he was characterized by his droll attitude and directness. He was a very well liked fellow. It's too bad, the last two or the last few years he couldn't paint at all. Was ill so much of the time.

SA: And what about Dong Kingman?

MZ: Well, Dong Kingman was interesting to me, of course, because, at that time, he lived in Chinatown and when he was showing me around we'd just walk into a restaurant and sit down and they'd start serving. The Chinese revere a painter in their midst, you know. And Dong just lived in Chinatown and lived off of the town itself.

SA: So he was really a part of the Chinese community?

MZ: Oh yes. He was part of the Chinese community and he had a little studio in the monkey, what they call the monkey block. And he was amusing but he didn't do a great deal of painting on location. He made numerable

pencil sketches and developed his paintings from those. One of the last contacts I had with Dong was in Dallas. He gave a demonstration and he really didn't do much in the way of a demonstration. He clowned around a little bit. I always remember that during the talk he said something about he didn't know how to draw cows. He didn't know how to draw horses. After his lecture we went to the home of an architect in Dallas for refreshment and what not and Pat is rather mischievous. Baker, the architect, had a painting of mine that I had done in Utah and it had cattle in it. It was over his fireplace and Pat hauled Dong Kingman over and told him that was the way to draw cows. No, he was a very pleasant little guy. When he had his last show out here at Starry-Sheets [Art Gallery], he hadn't been well and he wasn't quite so, oh, outgoing as I'd known. He was a little –- it was good to see him again but he couldn't –- well, he had a lot of people hovering over him that night and there wasn't a chance to talk to him.

SA: Well, I think, to some extent, people tend to look at the California School as a movement, you know, a historical movement that occurred, mostly, prior to the war.

MZ: Yes.

SA: Now, it sounded like, from what you said earlier, that you would agree to that to some extent.

MZ: Yes, I do definitely agree to that. It developed before the war and it seems to be that after the war there wasn't this camaraderie. There wasn't this interest in one another. People were scattered out all over Los Angeles county. We had drifted into a different interest, I think. And it just sort of dissolved as a homogeneous kind of a movement. And I suppose that's the way movements go. I suppose it happened with the French painters. As they gained some recognition and went their different ways the impetus of the thing sort of disappeared.

SA: Well, but then again, many of you kept on painting in somewhat the same thing.

MZ: Well, yes, individually. David Starry-Sheets expressed it this way, that before the war we were a California group. After the war, our interests spread all over the country. So many of us started being invited to do workshops in Dallas and New England, New York and every other place so that we definitely had a terrific influence after the war. This point of view, this strong design, strong pattern, strong statement, I think we had an impact on the whole country after the war. The individual artists did. And it's broadening internationally because I've taught in Ireland quite a bit and England and France and they still seem to be startled by our bold approach to things.

SA: Do you think that's sort of the main contribution or legacy of the California school?

MZ: I think so. We were instrumental in making paintings something that was a part of everyday life more. I've always been interested in the idea that great music came out of Italy and that was through entertainment of the country. People knew the operas. They knew the songs. They went to the opera like we'd go to the movies now and I think the same thing happened in Oriental art. Japan and China. The skill in calligraphy, skill in brush handling. It, possibly, was done by people who had advantage of time, but still, it had it's effect on the whole community. As we well know, even packaging of tea went to Europe and influenced European artists. Japanese art got into Europe that way. It wasn't taken there as art it was taken there as just everyday design. Who was this American painter, Turner, not Turner but, oh, who . . .

SA: American painter?

MZ: He was very much influenced . . .

SA: [James Abbott McNeill] Whistler?

MZ: . . . by Japanese art. For one.

SA: So, you look at the California school as having a lot to do with kind of popularizing art, in a way?

MZ: Well, in the long run I think it has. It certainly has done it's share in orienting people to the idea that through paintings they can share an everyday experience and I think that's going to be our salvation. I think it'll grow and I take the pragmatic attitude that people will have enough RV's and enough boats to spend their money on and now they're gradually going to think in terms of what could they buy that will identify them. I think they're going to move more and more into the purchasing of art and enjoying art in their homes and becoming critical. As soon as you get a public who is a critical public, then you have growth of art. I think music grew in Germany and Italy simply because the public knew what was good and what wasn't and artists didn't get away with mediocre stuff. And I've seen this happen in this country. When I was first invited to go to Dallas to teach we were treated like visiting firemen. "Oh, we'll bring Zornes or Sheets or whoever from California and we'll be in awe of what they have to offer us." Now you go down there you better do some teaching. You're not down there

just as a celebrity. You're down there to really put out. And that's a healthy thing. A lot of good painters have developed down there.

SA: So, it's more pragmatic now, too?

MZ: Yes.

SA: People really want to learn. Well, overall, do you think that the later works of the California school artists were and are as strong as their earlier works?

MZ: Well, to me, personally, it isn't. I have to feel that there was a period that I belonged to. Somehow, I don't quite feel that I belong to the present point of view. I rather dogmatically and stubbornly progress in my own way. Simply, you have the good fortune, at least, of working at it long enough that you become identified so you're free to follow your own lines and so you more or less do this somewhat oblivious to what's going on around you. And so it's hard for me to tell except that, as I say, I go to the big shows now and I look in vain for watercolor that was done directly on location, spontaneously, boldly and simply. It's so much a method. Laborious. Some pictures have had so much work done on 'em they make you weary and some of them are done, merely, to show a clever idea. And you kind of look in vain for something that really speaks to you. And, in that respect, I suppose I'm taking the attitude that the era that I belong to is somewhat passed and that whatever I'm doing now I'm building my own identity.

SA: And that, when you look back that was sort of a golden moment, then, for watercolor?

MZ: Yes, I think, to me it was and I'm sure it was true of others. That's all right because I know that I'm a better painter now. I think more about growth in painting. Then it was just a matter of working hard and showing and all that. Now I feel like I know what I'm doing more and, in some ways, I'm very satisfied with the thing I've arrived at. It's disappointing to me, it's a startling thing to arrive at the point when you feel you have the best ideas and know more about painting and then you go by . . .and I have to cope with that, which, of course, is contributing to the new approach, too. I simply have to work in ways where I can see the line and I can see the color and it's forcing me to. And even in the handling of my watercolor brush, I can't depend on being able to go back and work things over. I've got to do it now and know what I'm doing in this particular wash or this particular brush stroke because I won't be able to come back into it and improve upon it that much so it's becoming more and more a direct statement and this sounds as though I'm patting myself on the back but, for some reason, I find that I'm doing things instinctively that I didn't realize I had it in me to do. It's like talking to you about getting the spontaneity of these figures. I often compare painting to athletic prowess. I maintain you get to be a good ball player because you do it over and over and over until it becomes a reflex action and I think that happens to us as painters. You draw and draw and draw and you think and think and think 'til pretty soon you do things almost instinctively. Where does it come from? In my limited seeing I can see the gesture. If I have to think in terms of, literally, looking at it and putting it down I can't, but I can feel the gesture of things and sometimes you get more into a drawing that way than you would otherwise.

SA: That's fascinating. Well, just for the record, why don't you talk a little bit about the fact that you are losing your sight because I think that we might as well mention that now.

MZ: Yes. Well, I think it's fair because it's amazing to find out how many artists did suffer this. Matisse and so many of artists have had -– and I suppose they've gone through it –- what's her name? The French painter who was with Picasso? [Francoise Gilot] She was looking at a Matisse painting one day with him and she said, "You must've been happy the day you painted that." He said, "That was the day when I became awfully near committing suicide." But the simple history is this that I had no idea that my eyes were failing. I began to notice dark spots floating before my eyes and so forth and I went for my regular check up at the ophthalmologist and he said, "Well, I have good and bad news for you." And I said, "Well, what's the good news?" And he said, "Well, you're not going to go completely blind." And I said, "Well, what is the bad news?" He said, "You're going to have a hell of a time seeing from now on." That was my introduction -– the first time I ever heard of macular degeneration. Well, I could see pretty well then. If I could see as well now as I could see then I wouldn't -– but I went into a deep depression. It just seemed as though you spent your life learning to paint and thinking about painting and painting's your whole philosophy and your whole life and I just thought I couldn't make it. That's all there was to it. I was making my life miserable and making Pat miserable by bemoaning the fact that I couldn't see but I finally arrived at the point where I just had to turn it around diametrically, and just say, "You can see. You're not seeing as well but you can see." And from then on I, 'course I still have spells of depression but not too often and then you begin to develop a philosophy around what you can do and I mentioned some of the things. For one thing, I've discovered that while I can't read large type, even, still the situation is that to take things into your mind you have to see it. Read it. Observe. To take it out of your mind, you must see it before you put it down or as you put it down. As long as I can see this table and the surface of that and I can see that dark line or that color then I can go ahead. And it's amazing that painting and drawing is about the only thing I can do now. I can't drive. I can't read. And I even have to talk to Pat to have her show me a phone number. I

have to depend on her an awful lot but that's the one thing I can do so I just simply say, "Look, you've invested your life in it. You can do it." And I come in here some mornings and I, "Look, I just cannot do it." I even come to breakfast and tell Pat, "It's just all over. There's no use to worry about it anymore. I can't paint." And then I go back and in 15 minutes I'm working on something and I've forgotten all about it. And I'm painting. And it forces you, of course, to think in terms of the design concept. Now, for instance, I can go on location to paint but I have to use my binoculars and I'll spend quite a long time just looking and looking and looking until I get a design concept. I try to reduce it to the simplicity of a logo. Or the simplicity of a Oriental word symbol. Once I have that then I can depend on memory and experience to paint palm trees, paint fence posts or whatever it happens to be. You have that as your built up vocabulary. There's a danger in it because you can fall into, "This is the way to paint a rock. This is the way to do that." But you really don't fall into that because you're still saying, you're dealing with the nature of rocks. All you need to know is that they're heavy and hard and structured and you have 100 ways of approaching that. Trees, I've painted trees so much that I have digested this idea of a willow tree is one thing, an oak tree is another and so you just simply draw on your vocabulary of experience to give form to new ideas. And it's annoying to not be able to see that picture from here. I have to get it up and hold it up in my face sometimes but, still, I'm able to do it and then I can bring it down to very matter of fact things. Here an artist has a hard time becoming solid financially. I wind up 90 years old and blind and I own a house and two used cars. And I have my health and I have a body of work and I feel fairly confident that I can keep an income from that but still I say, "Look, you've got an income to earn. You can't be fooling around worrying about the things you can't paint." I've got a wife whose comfort is dependent upon it and so you just say you're a working man. You do what you have and to make a living and I'm glad I'm still having to make a living. I just wonder what it would feel like to have enough money that I could draw a good income from the interest. I sold a place so that we came out with about $30,000 and I own a house . . .

[SESSION 3, TAPE 2, SIDE B]

SA: . . . an adventurer. I mean, that's . . .

MZ: Yes. It has to continue to be.

SA: That's almost antithetical to anything that you stand for, in some ways, you know?

MZ: Yeah. In some ways. We get these envelopes –- you play it right and you win a couple of million dollars. It would be irony to win something like that when you spent your whole life working to identify yourself to give you a living. Suppose you did win one of those big prizes. People would say, "Well, he has," or you would say to yourself, "I don't have to worry anymore. That ends my aggressive need." I don't think I'd welcome that. I think I'd almost be disappointed to win a big lottery or something.

SA: Perhaps it's helped to keep your impetus to paint alive.

MZ: Yeah.

SA: And it kept you so vital. You know, at 91 you're still painting and . . .

MZ: Yeah. I'm not a Pollyanna. I don't just sit and say, "you're all that lucky." But at the same time it forces you to sum up what's going on and what you can deal with just as it did during the Depression. You had to wake up in the morning say, "Have I got a job?" Or, "Could I sell this?" Or, "What are my prospects?" "Can I get a picture into that show?" Or, "Did I win a prize or whatever?" And that's the way I've always lived and by living that way I've put myself in a position that I have to keep on living that way.

SA: Actually, I think it sounds a bit like a very positive thing.

MZ: It turns out that it is.

SA: Well, Mr. Zornes, I would like to talk to you about the war years but let's briefly go back to the question of style because I know you wanted to say one more thing about that.

MZ: Well, so many times students or friends, young friends, will ask me, "How do you achieve identity as an artist? Have your own style? Your own definite identification? You're an individual." Well, my answer is, "Simply, be strictly honest because if you're honest and paint and think and proceed as you really see things and as you really think about them, you won't be like anyone else." And even our eyes are different. Some of us, there's a certain degree of color blindness. So many people are color blind to a certain extent. Well this is an asset because that gives you an individual way of seeing color. The point is not to try to copy the way other people use color but it's the way you use color. You have a certain instinct for the use of line or a certain feeling for the monumental aspect of things or the graceful aspect of things or the exciting pattern ways of seeing things. Follow those instincts and follow your own thinking without being too prone to want to do it like someone else and you'll be an individual.

SA: Well good. Well I think we should really go into these kinds of things more later.

MZ: Yes.

SA: But right now why don't we, since we were also just talking about the impact of World War II on the school, in general, why don't we talk a little bit about the war years now.

MZ: Well, the story was actually this. Of course, I was drafted into the Army. I think that was between marriages and this community, a fairly conservative one, I've heard stories later that the draft board, not knowing much about how I was an artist and moving around quite freely between marriages and I think I was just put in the Army 'cause the local draft board thought that that's where I belonged. And I think that happened quite a bit. And those are some of the stories I've gotten in recent years. But at any rate, I was in the Army and I was drafted and then when we were classified, the amusing thing was that anyone in the arts –- anyone from stage carpenter to commercial artist or in the theater or anything that even smacked of the arts -- we were put into a battalion to do camouflage.

SA: Oh.

MZ: And I ended up at March Field Air Base.

SA: And where is that?

MZ: That's up above Riverside.

SA: Okay.

MZ: And so we were a battalion made up of people who were in some way connected, remotely or directly, with the arts and it was kind of a funny outfit to be in because you did have a lot of individuals and it wasn't an easy battalion to shape up, simply because of that very thing. You're not a good follower. And the exciting thing was that after a few weeks of training suddenly we were in a assembly meeting, a training meeting, and it was announced that Sergeant Zornes was to report to headquarters. Well, I was a private and this came as a complete shock and I just thought it was a mistake. I went to headquarters thinking it was a joke but I'd been made a Tech Sergeant. I didn't know for a long, long time why or how I was chosen. It turned out toward the end of the war I ran into George Biddle. Do you know of him as an artist?

SA: Yes.

MZ: Well, he was of the Biddle family in Washington. His brother was Attorney General and the Biddle family was this all-important family in the East and in Washington. Well, I found out that, though I didn't know George Biddle very well, he had been instrumental in two or three things. When he left California to go back East he recommended me for his classes at Otis, to teach his classes. He recommended the buying of a couple of watercolors for the museum. Because he was a well-known personality in the East he was brought into affairs quite a bit. And it turned out that when they selected 42 artists to go over seas, he was on the board. He was actually instrumental in creating the program. And his reasoning was that the war was being photographed from every angle. We might as well have some artists interpreting the situation. So I was selected as one of the people to go overseas. I was hauled out of training and made a Tech Sergeant and sent on special duty to San Francisco to buy my materials and then I was sent on special duty to go to San Pedro to see that my materials got aboard a liberty ship. Or, no, they wanted my materials to get on the troop ship, that I was to go overseas. Well, I met a captain who was a professional architect in Los Angeles and he knew me as a painter and he said, "This'll kill you on a troop ship. You won't have a chance to work. You'll spend all of your time in line going to meals. It'll be an ordeal and I can get you on a liberty ship." And he said, "There's one being loaded now and I'll pull strings and get you on a liberty ship." So the upshot was that going overseas was like a cruise. I was the only enlisted man on the ship. There were four other officers and then the ship's crew." And I had absolute liberty to the extent that when we sailed out of San Pedro we spent a few hours out on Catalina checking the navigational system of the ship and I met the captain on board and he said, "Now, look, this is my ship. It has nothing to do with your rank or anything else. You can live with the officers, you can live with the crew. Whatever you want." I said, "Well, it'd probably be more in my place if I live with the crew," and I did but I made friends with the Chief Engineer and I used his cabin as my studio quite a bit of the time. So we were 60 days going to India from San Pedro. Went down around Tasmania and the Australian [unintelligible] and up through India. And when I arrived in India to report to headquarters –- General Stillwell's headquarters –- I had this amusing experience. There was a certain Colonel Malaney to greet me because General Stillwell was up in Burma at the time and this colonel said, "Now, you have to realize that General Stillwell is interested in art. He's an art collector. He has a daughter who's a professional artist and he would have sympathy with an artist but he also has the problem of getting supplies and men out on the longest supply line in the world. It's farther south through India of any other place and we're not getting the supplies we need for the operations of their plan so he has this concern and when your orders came, an official Army artist, his comment was, 'Now, if we can get half a

dozen for knowledge maybe we can get an Army together.'" It wasn't a very impressive way of being received. On the other hand, when I did meet General Stillwell, he was very gracious and cordial, and he was an enlisted man's general. He put the artists, the officers, through the ropes. Fended for the enlisted men all the time and so I had one or two short, pleasant conversations with him. I was given the loose assignment of sketching and painting anything that was even remotely connected with Army activity so I had a pretty free hand. The pleasant thing was I was about the only one who knew what my assignment was and so I could do almost as I pleased. Generally speaking, when the correspondents were brought together and assigned to go to a certain place I was sent with 'em so I traveled with the correspondents. I knew Eric Severeid and Theodore White and Anna Lee Jacoby and a good many of the reporters.

SA: How fascinating.

MZ: And I had a few experiences of people trying to get a hold of me and get me into other projects. Some fellow, some officer, had a project of creating relief maps so that he could have a running description of what's going on all of the time and he just simply, knowing that I was an artist assigned over there, he simply tried to haul me out and put me to work. I was in a bad position because he had a good chance of getting me assigned to his outfit and I knew this would be death to my assignment.

SA: Yeah.

MZ: So I simply wouldn't work. He said for me to do certain things and I just wouldn't do it. I botched the job or pretended ineptness and he became angry and he kept at me with, "We won't win a war the way you're going at it," and I just told him, I said, "Captain, you know that I came here with an interesting assignment and if you hook me into this thing I won't get anywhere," and it made him so angry he said, "I'm going to give you three days to get yourself oriented back to your outfit or whoever manages you and then if you don't get it you're going with me." So, fortunately, Sheets was there. He went to bat for me and got some other officers and fortunately, we had a couple of officers from Claremont, even. And so they verified the fact that I'd come over on a war department assignment and I got away from this guy.

SA: Oh, good. Well, how long were you on the China/Burma/India front?

MZ: The whole time summed up to about 28 months.

SA: Oh. That's quite a long time.

MZ: Let's see, I got over there in the fall of '43 and I came home in the fall of '45. In recalling what happened you're inclined to remember the amusing incidents. When I came out of Chungking I came out on the same flight with General Wainright. He had been sent to Chungking and then I was coming home from Chung, headed back to the States and there's this little town in Burma called Michanow [phon. sp.]. I had been there when the Japanese were holding it and we had been under fire there and, in fact, I flew out of there on a C47, which could only carry about 40 men. We had 60 or 70. The Japanese were firing across the field. The pilot said, "Let them get in. We'll never get off the ground anyway." But we did. Well, going back to Chungking, we refueled there. It was really quiet. Rather interesting to be back to a quiet place. It had been so active earlier. And it was very hot and I was with three or four other enlisted men in the shade of the wing, you know, the tip of the wing. And about half a dozen officers were standing down near the fuselage of the plane and [General] Wainright was among them and he kept looking at me and finally he came over. I weighed 120 pounds. I'd lost so much weight.

SA: Oh my goodness.

MZ: And he was skin and bones. And he came over and he stuck out his hand and he said, "Sergeant, I want to shake your hand with the second skinniest man." And then, of course, there were all kinds of dodges. I did a good many things to stay strictly on my assignment. And stayed out of the places where I might be put to work. Being a Tech Sergeant, there was always the danger of somebody needing a sergeant over a squad of men or something and they try to hook you into duty. I came back to New Delhi one time. I'd been in China or Burma and our offices were in New Delhi and I got into the files for something and I discovered a letter where someone wanted to make me a First Sergeant. And I asked this sergeant who was in charge, I said, "Who's been tampering with my career here?" I said, "I want to be left, strictly, alone. If somebody makes me a Sergeant I'll get duty someplace." And he said, "Well, I put in for you. How'd you think I was going to get," he said, "I was a Sergeant and I wanted to be a Tech. How'd you think I was going to get to be a Tech if I didn't move you to Sergeant?" And I said, "I'm glad you didn't mess up my career."

SA: Well, it sounds like you were actually on the front with, I mean, in the middle of the fighting then. Quite a bit?

MZ: Well, real fighting it was remote in Asia. It was mostly supply line. It was a little campaign on the Salween River in Burma. The Japanese got up that far and, there again, it was a story. There was a colonel who had me in

tow. When I arrived in Chungking he was a Lt. Colonel, ambitious to be a full colonel and they were trying to have conversations with Yun Mung, the governor of United Providence who was actually the last of the Chinese war lords.

SA: Oh.

MZ: It's he I'm making a portrait of in that book.

SA: Oh.

MZ: Well, this colonel got the idea that they weren't getting anywhere with this fellow. They couldn't have conversations with him so when I arrived he questioned me, "Can you do portraits?" Well, I told him I could. I wasn't thinking of his getting me into -– so, without my knowledge he invited the governor to have his portrait painted by the visiting American artist. So here I was in a position where we had a meeting at the governor's palace. This was in Kunming. And the plans were made and then on a certain day I went and he was to pose for me. I had to do this portrait. There were about 30 officers including his staff and some of my ranking officers sitting there watching me do this thing.

SA: Oh, my heavens.

MZ: And my byline has always been that, "If you're scared enough, get in a situation where you're scared enough and you can get a likeness." Unfortunately, I did. I just sat there and did a portrait of this guy and he treated me very, very well. He was very blunt with the officers but through a translator, through his prime minister, he questioned me. He wanted to know how I enjoyed his primitive province. United Province. And, of course, through the interpreter I explained that I was impressed with the country life and the colorful, the beautiful fields and the wall of villages and so forth and he said he was glad that an outsider enjoyed his remote province because the Chinese artists were too fastidious to understand or appreciate it. And he sent his Prime Minister, while he was supposed to be negotiating with my officers, he sent this officer to take me to his lake palace to see his art collection, which was fabulous. I looked at hundreds of scrolls.

SA: Oh my heavens.

MZ: And when we left there, we were in a jeep going down to the gate of the palace or rather the city offices, and a servant ran down and gave me a nice box and it was a scroll. It was one of the paintings that I had looked at.

SA: Do you still have it?

MZ: I still have it. We don't have it up right now, so I was on the road, on the Burma Road, I was on the first convoy to go into China over the Burma Road. That was quite an event because every night we were entertained in a Chinese city and every night General Chenault flew in to be the host and there was a convoy made of correspondents. They wanted representative people. There were the correspondents and there were the different ranks. All the different ranks and so we were quite a convoy and we were entertained royally every night in some Chinese city that we would arrive at. Quite an impressive thing.

SA: How fascinating. Well, it's hard for me to ask detailed questions because it's an area that's so foreign to me but I have heard that you witnessed the worst famine in history in India.

MZ: When I first arrived in India we sailed up the Hoogly River. That's the approach to Calcutta. We had to become aware of this gradually but after we got into the city I was assigned to a barracks and, in the first place, there was an odor pervading the whole city and it was a kind of a sickening odor and for some reason I felt that the city wasn't clean, you know. I later learned that they cook with butter fat and you know when you fry with butter, you know . . .that sweet . . . And after I knew what this was, well I didn't associate the uncleanliness so much but I did gradually discover that on back streets there were literally people dying in the streets. Out in the parks and out on the flood streets you would have thought there was nothing going on. Nothing exceptional going on. But as soon as I was there a day or two and acquainted I found these back streets where people were dead and dying in the streets. There were a few soup kitchens set up to take care of a few of the people and the surprising thing was my own reaction. Here I was walking around where there were people, literally, dead and dying on the streets and I was just amazed at myself. It hadn't affected me some way or another. I was just looking and I was taking pictures with my camera and making sketches. But there was a little girl. She was probably 12 years old and she was so emaciated she was a living skeleton and she was sitting there on her haunches and when I came up close to her she was a little frightened and she tried to get up and she couldn't and I looked at that one child and looked her in the eye and I had to get out of there. It just flooded in on me that, "Get rid of yourself. You're in a place where people are dying." I heard other men express this same thing. They didn't realize what it was until they had the experience of facing one person. Well, so I went to one of these soup kitchens that were set up and then asked if I could bring this girl there and they said, "No. We'll have her

picked up. You can leave some money if you'd like but we can't, we have to be careful how we feed these people. If we give them food right away and too much they'll die." That was my personal experience. I didn't make many drawings having to do with the famine. [Millard] Sheets did and actually, I don't think I'll put this on the record.

SA: Do you want me to turn the tape off?

MZ: Yeah. I'll tell you . . .

SA: So, we were just talking . . .

MZ: I suppose one of the impressive things that resulted from being in Asia during the war was my trips back and forth from India to China. I spent, possibly, 18 or 19 months in all in China and probably some of it in Burma -– I mean, several months in India, then in Burma and then in China. I think I made 12 flights across "the hump." We had to fly at about 22,000 feet to get through the passes and we had to take oxygen. There was no air conditioning that gives you oxygen so we had to wear oxygen masks when we were at high altitude.

SA: I didn't know that.

MZ: And we went to a place in Assam, the state of Assam. And then flew in from there into China. Over "the hump," they called it. And I'll never forget my first entrance into China. We landed at Kunming and were taken to some, I don't know whether they were warehouses or what but they'd been made into barracks and it was late at night. We were hauled on trucks. Saw very little that night but I'll never forget waking up in the morning and hearing the sounds of China. Rickshaw bells. Your introduction to China, before you see it you hear it.

SA: Oh.

MZ: I had that experience, my first experience in Italy, too. When I came on a train down out of Switzerland to Genoa, sitting in a railway station, hearing people hollering and yelling and singing, you knew you were in Italy. And some of those trips -– it was an impressive experience of leaving China, going into India. Such a great change. And then there were lots of stories about the hauling of Chinese troops into India and training them and having them come back over the Burma Road and the way the Chinese troops were treated was rather bizarre. Men told me that in their training schools that there would be Chinese officers standing, watching these students, you know, that were being trained and if a Chinese soldier would go to sleep they'd take him out and shoot him and the American sergeants who were doing the teaching just rebelled. "You'll either cut this out or there'll be no more schooling."

SA: Well I hope so.

MZ: And so they finally jolted these Chinese back into shape and I had this experience. I had been in Burma and I was in China and I was at some party or . . .

[SESSION 4, TAPE 1, SIDE A]

SA: The Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, An interview with Milford Zornes, on the 8th of August, 1999, at his studio home in Claremont, California. The interviewer is Susan Anderson, this is session four, tape one, side A. Well, Milford, yesterday you were just about to tell me a story about being in China at a party during the war and I thought you might like to finish telling something about that.

MZ: Well, this is in reference to the attitude towards Army service in countries other than the United States. I was at a party in China and there was a couple of Chinese doctors there, and they were in conversation relating some experience of being with their medics in Burma on the Burma Campaign when Chinese soldiers were being taken care of by our medics and one of the doctors just literally said, "Why would your doctors be in the Army when they could be with their practice at home?" And my answer, of course, was that they were in the Army for the same reason that I was and I didn't know how the Army could function without doctors and they didn't seem to give me a very clear explanation of how they handled their medical affairs.

SA: Well, you were one of 42 official US Army artists over there, but now I understand that some non-military men were over there too. Wasn't Millard Sheets non-military.

MZ: Yes, as I understood the program, and I didn't find out a great deal about it until actually at the end of the war. I found out that George Biddle, as I explained, had been instrumental through his brother's influence (who he was a Attorney General at that time). George Biddle was a well-known artist in the East and out of the Biddle family. Socially and in many other ways they were very important in Washington D.C. so they had quite a voice. His thought, it seems, was that the war had been photographed in every way why not have the work of artists as part of the war record. I'm not sure what the process of selection was. I did learn that George Biddle had

recommended that I be one of the 42 artists that were selected and it seems in order to have the possibility of services of top artists, the idea was to induce certain civilians in to the army for that purpose or to go overseas for that purpose. Those of us who were known as artists who were already in the Army were taken out and given a rating so that we could travel and work as artists. And in our case I think there were four of us from California ,actually. There was Millard Sheets, and what was his name? One man I can't remember his name at the moment but Lucien Labaudt who was a San Francisco painter, Lucien Labaudt was killed over there. I had dinner with him the night before he was killed in an airplane crash. It was rather sad because Lucien was a Frenchman. He had all the characteristics of a high strung, wrenched personality, I guess you would say, and he was somewhat dissatisfied with what he was able to do in India. I think he felt that he couldn't get to the crowd, that he couldn't get to where the activity was and so he welcomed the opportunity to go to China and on the night before he was to fly to China he wanted to organize a little party of those of us who were acquainted and came from California or from the states. There were four or five of us who he was acquainted with in the base. Millard Sheets happened to be away at that time so it boiled down to just he and I having dinner at one of the restaurants in New Delhi and he was quite excited about going to China. He had long looked forward to doing it and so forth. The unhappy result of his trip was that he flew to -- I'm so angry at myself for losing, not remembering names.

SA: Don't let it bother you.

MZ: When we went to China we would fly to the eastern side of India to a staging base and it was from there we made the flight in. He was killed when the plane flew in to Chadwa [?], Chadway [?] or was supposed to fly in to Chadwa and they missed the base and they went to a small field not too far from the base. It was an error on the part of the pilot. They took off to go to the base and they didn't make altitude fast enough, hit some trees or some obstruction and the plane was wrecked and Lucien was killed. And that reminds me of a time later on when I was up on the Burma Road in Burma. I was expecting news of the birth of my child. A daughter was born when I was overseas, and I was very anxious to get down to Chadwa to get my mail. I couldn't trust it being sent up because there was no chance of it reaching me so I managed a trip on a morning supply plane. So I went down and got my mail and planned to take another plane back up in the afternoon. I missed the plane by a few minutes. I was driven out to the base and the flight had just taken off so I took a flight just a few hours or so later. When I arrived back up there the supply people I was staying with were amazed because they had already identified me as having been in this wreck with the earlier plane. They had issued me some shoes and the captain in charge that he thought he was able to identify me by those shoes. Then the startling thing was that there was news of some GI's being killed on a plane. Some news got back to the states and Pat had no assurance as whether I was on that flight until she heard from me later on.

SA: Oh, how frightening.

MZ: So there are times when you think that Fate takes a hand in your destiny.

SA: Well, can you talk a little bit about the experience of trying to work in those kinds of conditions and how you went about doing it?

MZ: Well, for one thing, I sketched continually and I have had that practice all my life and I continually search for the most direct and most efficient way of setting down information in sketches. And in the case of Army service, since we were on the move, for one thing, we were issued a camera. Well, I took thousands of photographs, I would say. If I used photographs directly for making a picture a dozen times in my life, I would be possibly pretty near the mark. I just abominate the idea of working from photographs and find it confusing. So I depend most on my sketches and memory as a way of recording. And since we were on the move a great deal and since I could make fast even very rough sketches, I would quite often have a very strong idea for a watercolor. Then when I was bivouacked for the night I would stay up late in order to get something on paper, get a watercolor painted. Good many pictures were done that way and, of course, whenever there was a possibility to set up and work on location I did. But that practice of sketching rapidly and combining the information in sketches with memory very quickly after the experience, even now if I delay in making some kind of record, I do not trust my memory that much. In the case of making the record that we were expected to make where some considerable accuracy was required then if I could do a watercolor later in the day or the next day I could do it quite accurately from my sketches. If you let the thing drift then you go on supposition rather than the actual recording of what you have seen.

SA: What happened to all of the sketches and watercolors that you did?

MZ: This whole collection is part of the war record housed in the Pentagon. I did visit the Pentagon once, but they tell me quite often that people who visit the Pentagon and make their way through all of the maze of hallways and corridors find that quite often pictures done by war artists are on display.

SA: Oh, really?

MZ: Changing show it seems. I've heard that and I understand that if one was to want to publish a book or an article, or there could be some need for drawings or paintings as illustrations, you could possibly get permission to use them.

SA: Oh, that's interesting.

MZ: I have had one or two people think that it might be worthwhile to do a show of the things that I did, but we have never activated the idea.

SA: Right, it would be a very interesting thing to do. Well, did you exhibit those works of art before you came back? Was there an exhibit over there somewhere?

MZ: This was one interesting experience that I had. Going back to the famine situation, after being in Calcutta and seeing people dead and dying on the streets, I went to New Delhi where our headquarters are located and, of course, there was all kinds of news about the famine and I don't know how wide the operation was in India. I suppose there were clubs and groups in many different cities that managed to gather funds to send for the relief. But, at any rate, someone conceived the idea of having a service man's exhibit in New Delhi and it was quickly organized and there were paintings by American artists, Canadian artists, New Zealanders, Indians, English, all of us contributed to this and in my case I had quite a collection of things of watercolors I've done so I was one of the major exhibitors in this show. It was held in the All India Hotel in New Delhi. I remember one day I was working in my little cubic station in the barracks and I was asked to appear at the show because Lord and Lady ...

SA: We'll get it later don't worry.

MZ: The Viceroy and his wife were going to visit the show and Lord Wehl [?] came around to look at my pictures and I do large watercolors and rather strong, bold color and he says, "These are watercolors?" And I said, "Yes." And he said, "I thought that watercolors were tinted little things," and he said, "These seem to be robust like oil paintings."

SA: He was right.

MZ: I'll always remember "watercolors were tinted little things." And then because of that exhibit . . . Jangir [Readymoney] of Bombay, a [Parsee, like Zubin Mehta according to Milford] millionaire and a banker in Bombay, he came to see the show and he asked to see me and asked if we could get permission from the Army to take the show down to Bombay. So I was his guest in Bombay with my show. That was kind of an adventure unto himself. My visit to Bombay I was not only a guest of the Jangir family in their Palatial home but I was in Bombay at the time of a terrible explosion and I made drawings of the wreckage incurred when that munitions ship blew up in Bombay Harbor and literally destroyed four or five solid blocks of the city. It was never publicized a great deal, and it was the case quite often that some things were not reported because the assumption would be that the news would be misconstrued and would be disturbing to the war effort. And that was one instance. I doubt it was generally known throughout the world that that was one of the worst explosions of all time.

SA: And you made paintings of some of the aftermath of that?

MZ: Yes, about the only thing I have left is a lithograph print of a Maratta woman working in one of the grain depots sorting out good grain from bad. A lot of things were burned and they were sorting out the good grain from the bad and so forth. It was such a colorful arrangement of figures and costumes that I made a drawing, a lithograph of it.

SA: Well, you know I'm trying to get a picture of what it was like to be there. It sounds like you were based then in New Delhi and you traveled out from there.

MZ: Yes, life in New Delhi was kind of easy going, pleasant; officers' men were coming and going from different operations and different parts of the CPI [China-Burma-India] theater and it was sort of a gathering place, with very little intimation of war other than that people were coming and going from various operations. People coming back from China, going off to China, coming down from Burma. One thing that I remember very definitely was I was very anxious to get away from the headquarters and get up into Burma. I was very curious about the situation up there where there was some activity and it was my observations that when you question fellow GI's about what was it like up there, what was the scene? And the idea was brought home to me that most people are very poor observers. Now, being an artist, it is my business to observe and I feel very wanting in this department myself but compared with the average person, it's just amazing how little people take note of what actually goes on or what might be of significant importance. Because of the answer I would get from fellow GI's about what it is like up in Burma, "Oh, you're just up in the sticks, you know and up there in the brush," or something like that. You got up there magnificent mountains, magnificent jungle trees, things that are immensely exciting to an artist, of course, and I would assume it would be exciting for anyone. But that was the

reaction that I got so many times. And I think it is possibly something that is very true in a general way and the average person just is not too much aware of the world he lives in. I sometimes think that the true mission of an artist is to see in such a way that people are reminded there is a world to take note of and be interested in. In that regard [here I am meandering again] but in that regard, after the war my people had settled up in little villages in between Santa Maria and San Luis Obispo and my father had some financial losses and he was sort of taking over working in the business again and my parents had rented a house from a grumpy old lady who ran a store right close by. Well, during that time I would grub and sponge on my folks and paint for a week and come back to Los Angeles and she became very curious to know what I was doing. So every time I made the trip up there before I would leave I'd show my work to my folks and to some people that worked for my father. And she would manage to come over and look in when I was showing my pictures and she would not have much to say. But one day she said to my mother and asked what I did and my mother said, "He's an artist," and she said, "Well, I was thinking maybe I would like to have one of his pictures, but I suppose he wants too much for them," and my mother said, "Well, you will just have to talk to him." So next time I went up there I talked to the old lady and made the deal with her to trade watercolor for a couple months of rent for my parents. And so I got the picture framed and delivered to her and she came over to talk to my mother one time and she said, "You know, I'm from Massachusetts and my Old Man Sours, she spoke of her husband as Old Man Sours, brought me out here, set me down in front of these hills and I've hated them for 20 years. I have your son's picture and I look at the picture and I look at the hills and you know I am getting to sort of like these damn hills. And the simple story summed up what a artist is for.

SA: It's a wonderful story.

MZ: It's his business to train himself and to be in the business of observation and evaluation of what he sees in nature and the world around us and this extends itself into the reason for collecting and the reason for following and being interested in the work of artists, I simply believe it's the way anyone can enrich their lives.

SA: Well, I completely agree. Well, how many times while you were over there in the 28 months that you were there were you close to the action?

MZ: On one occasion -- on what was called the Salween Campaign on the Salween River, the Japanese had infiltrated into northern Burma and back as far as the Salween River and there was not a great deal of activity but there were several small battles and the Japanese were forced back down out of Burma. I was very anxious to get up there and anxious to see something in the way of action after all others of this program were in Europe or in the Pacific and they were literally involved in the action. That seems rather strange because I have very little feeling for wanting to be involved in wars.

SA: Of course.

MZ: As long as I was in the theater and that was my assignment, I did have the feeling I wanted to see something other than just the activities of transporting goods and equipment into China over the Burma road and that sort of thing. And at a very remote town called Tin Shing up near the Burma-India border, that was considerably active before I got up there. I remember this old walled city. One day I got up onto the wall to walk around and view the city from above and here was a whole army of dead Japanese soldiers who had been killed up there and had been simply left up there. It was really gruesome to see a skeleton in uniform. A body that was so dried up. There were skeletons still in uniforms sitting in back of the machine gun. I'll never forget that and this sounds a little weird, too, going back into the Salween area sometime after my first visit, and sometime after the first activity there, I found dried skulls laying around. I always liked to have a skull handy for reference and I literally carried one of those skulls around in my barracks bag as a prop to help me in my drawing.

SA: Did you sketch when you came upon that battalion of Japanese soldiers?

MZ: I'm sure that I made some drawings of that. And I'm sure that it's part of the collection. When I was in Tin Chong [?] I had a chance to live with a Chinese family. I was pretty independent in my travel. Few people knew or understood my assignment so the practice was to simply show my credentials and I would be allowed to proceed because there were very few officers or men who wanted to make any judgement of this, as to what I would be doing or not. So on this occasion, and for a time I had a jeep assigned to me, I was traveling in a hinterland in this part of China. And a young man that was working in our army officers in -- he asked where I was assigned I . . .

[SESSION 4, TAPE 1, SIDE B]

MZ: . . . in my home if I could get permission, so I got permission and for several days I was a guest in his rambling home built around a court, where more than one family lived there. It was a family and members of the family and their wives and kids. And it was dominated by an old man, I think I told you about him, and he's the man who, or did I tell you that?

SA: Nope, nope.

MZ: The old man was very grumpy, and he bossed the servants and he bossed the members of the family and one morning I came down into the court. I was standing in a little kind of a wall up above the court and I came down and his grandson who spoke English, the man who invited me to go there. I said good morning to the old man and the old man said something to his grandson and I said, “What did the old man say?” And, “I told him you said good morning,” and I said, “What did he say?” He says, “Ask the American what’s good about any morning when you’re 80 years old.” But that was quite an experience. Their home had been bombed. Part of it was ruined and yet life was going on as though you would think it was right out of -- who was the lady who wrote so much about China? Her novels were made into movies. It seems like life was shining right out of one of her books.

SA: Were you sketching during that trip too? Would you have been sketching the family?

MZ: Of course I was sketching all the time. I made drawings of anything and everything. A lot of work came back to me, things that were not definitely pertaining to war activities were sent back to me. A good many drawings I still have and some of that I sold as the stamp of the war department was on the back of it.

SA: How interesting, I would like to see those some day.

MZ: I tried to think of things that would give you a little more feeling of the atmosphere of the experience of being there, it was a great . . .

SA: Were you usually by yourself working? Did you ever work with some of the other artists that were assigned to that . . .?

MZ: Millard Sheets was there in New Delhi for a while. He and I took advantage of the fact that he was an officer. Now correspondents, people who rated as correspondents automatically had the rating of a captain. So it gave him freedom to move around, and in my case as a war department artist I had a rating of a Tech Sergeant. And because Millard had a little more clout, because he was an officer, he could get transportation and ways of getting around that I couldn’t and so we went on several sketching trips in the vicinity of Delhi. That was the only place where I met with him and associated with him. Let’s see. We made a trip, oh yes, at Christmas time ’43, Millard and I got permission from the government of the native state of Udaipur to visit a native state. As you know, in India there is India and a few states that were still ruled by the Maharajah. More or less independent states. They weren’t that independent but they had that attitude. At any rate, these native states offered a chance to see picturesque India life. We found out that the state of Udaipur was one of the most picturesque of the states and each one of these states had an office in New Delhi, it’s the capitol, so the procedure was to write formally and ask for an invitation. I remember Millard and I composed a letter and he wrote it and we talked about it and asked for an invitation to go to Udaipur around Christmas time. So we went by train up through the Punjab and into Rasputina and then to the state of Udaipur. That was, of course, an interesting day-and-one-half by rail. One of the things that happened when we came up the border of the country was like little independent world ras- . . . and when the train stopped on the pass, let’s see we changed trains in Rawalpindi. From the main lines we changed to an independent railway that went into the state and we had to go over rather a high pass and when the train stopped, the train was invaded by monkeys, a white monkey with a black face, just poured onto the train up and down the aisles. They were a nuisance because they would pick up things and examined our luggage and everything. Then when the train tooted and was ready to go down into the valley they just scattered and they went right back out.

SA: How fascinating.

MZ: We found out that when tourists visit that part of the world that’s one of the things that they look forward to experiencing -- the invasion of the monkeys.
SA: I wonder if that still happens.

MZ: I suppose so. I think that Millard went back after the war, and I don’t know what his experience was exactly, but, at any rate, we were a guest of the state for several days. We lived in a guest palace and the only other guest was an old retired Englishman and his wife. They had been in Indian service. They had retired and gone back to England to live and having been in the colonial service so long they were not at home in England so they came back and they lived as guest of the Maharajah. We had a chance to paint several times and I came down with the flu. I was sick for a few days and Millard had a chance to take a few trips that I didn’t get to take and our host was the Prime Minister of the country, the Maharajah himself was in Europe.

SA: Oh, I see.

MZ: But we were guest of the Prime Minister and he took us to visit the schools and the various institutions. I don’t know whether I still have that picture or not but I had a watercolor, but I think I sold it, of the state

elephant. They got out this great old elephant with tatoo designs on him and paraded him around and I made drawings of the elephant with all these people around. And that sort of bothers me, because I can't think of where that picture is now.

SA: Well, maybe you still have it.

MZ: Possibly, someplace.

SA: Well, could briefly kind of draw a picture for me of what life was like in Udaipur because that probably was an experience that few people have had.
MZ: Well, for one thing it is ruled by the Maharajah, the government and is handled mostly by the Prime Minister and it is quite a compact situation where the schools, it seems, are quite good. The way of life seemed to be rather pleasant. There's a huge lake that takes up a great part of the area, it's an artificial lake, because the dams were built some centuries ago. There is a view across of the palace which was quite impressive and we were taken by boat to a island retreat and we had a chance to paint down in the village, in the city, where we watched women going down in all the streets down to the water to bathe and to wash their clothes. And the women would go to the lake there dressed with their saris. . . and they simply bathe, they manage their saris in such a way they can bathe. Sometimes if you look you can see them partially nude and it's something kind of graceful and pleasant. The only thing was that their guide simply asked us not to --, we weren't inhibited about taking pictures from a distance and so forth and we were asked not to look closely at the women. And he told a story about a moving picture troupe who came there once and they were given guidelines about what their behavior should be, but they disobeyed these guidelines, pointed cameras at the ladies bathing and so forth so nothing was said until they got to the border when they were leaving and the government officials simply took their film and destroyed it. That taught them a lesson.

SA: That's the kind of punishment they deserved, probably. That's too bad but what was it like staying in a guest palace?

MZ: Well, it was quite luxurious. What it was like a pleasant, small hotel designed especially for guests and we were treated beautifully. The only thing that bothered us was our guide, the man who was assigned to show us around absolutely insisted on our seeing everything of interest in the country and somewhat at the expense of our time when we wanted to be painting. I am going to show you a silk screen that Millard designed.

SA: Okay. Let me put it on pause for a minute.

MZ: Millard came home -- he designed several silk screen pictures and this is one of them, this is the city, palace of Udaipur and these are women on the edge of the lake.

SA: Isn't that beautiful?

MZ: Yes, handsome.

SA: You can see them holding jars on their heads.

MZ: Yes, and this is one of the beautiful things in India. The women are small. It's rather startling because of the way they walk balancing these jars on their heads, very graceful, walking in a, standing very straight and you have the impression that they are tall stately women and when you get close and see them very small, almost child-like. Little voices, little small bodies, and it takes away the illusion a little bit of tall graceful women. But in order to balance these, of course, they have to walk in very, how would you explain it?

SA: Probably smoothly, and surely.

MZ: But he's gotten a good rendering of the palace itself.

SA: It's quite large.

MZ: Oh, yes. Very, very big palace.

SA: Well, that's beautiful. Thanks for sharing that.

MZ: Millard, Sam Maloof did the printing of those. He was working for Millard at that time before Sam got into the furniture business. But, at any rate, I saw Millard one day when they were making these prints and I said, "I certainly want one of those of the women on the lake," and he said, "We will save you one." Well, he forgot to save me one and when I went to collect it he had turned the whole publication over to someone to sell and I was a little bit miffed by it and some years later, many years later, I was in Pasadena, you know, right on there on Raymond Avenue, there are second hand stores.

SA: Yes.

MZ: And I was rummaging around looking ,as I often do, looking for books or different things, and I came across this print, very dirty but I recognized it, of course, and without letting the man know that I knew what it was, I asked him how much it was and he said, “Well,” and I said, “What is it?” And he said, “I think it’s by a well known artist.” And I asked him how much it was and he said $11.

SA: Oh, how lucky.

MZ: I got it and called Millard co- . . . and I said, “I finally got the print,” and he said, “Where did you get it at?” I said, “I found it in a junk shop in Pasadena and paid $11 for it.” Millard swore a little bit over the . . .

SA: I know because he would have liked to have found it himself. So he could sell it for hundreds of dollars, probably. It’s a nice print. I’m glad you finally got one.

MZ: I think I ought to say, in connection with this whole thing, that I don’t know what actually seeing the collection I made, what it would prove some how or another. Probably, it’s one of the only operations in my life, I think, when I felt inadequate as to what I really should have accomplished. I think, possibly, if I was to see the collection I’d have a little different idea, but at that time and through that time I simply felt that I was not drawing well enough. I was not getting enough of the essential things and yet you look at those things and after a while they have more vitality and that is the experience that I have had as an artist. You’re awfully self critical at the time you do the thing. But if you do it in the earnest effort to get the essence of it, get the truth of it, then later on you will overlook the faulty drawing or the faulty use of your medium and value the fact that you went after the essential meaning of the thing.

SA: Right. And the details have faded so that you are not comparing the memory of the reality with it.

MZ: That’s right. That’s right. The only experience was a strange mixture we had in India at a time when there was still something of [Rudyard] Kipling.

SA: Right

MZ: And there was still something of occupation of Khyber Pass . . . and there was that way of life that I doubt if you go to India now I don’t know if you would experience that or not.

SA: That’s what I was wondering, whether or not you could ever experience staying in the guest palace of the Maharajah now.

MZ: My doctor, a real lady doctor, she has just come back from six months in India. I think she’s Anglo-Indian, myself, but she didn’t say that. But I asked her, I told her that it seemed that during the war that we experienced in India the break between the old India and modern. I asked her what the feeling was, and she said well there are plenty of places where you can still feel the India of the past, so.

SA: That’s nice to know.

MZ: Country life probably goes on in a lot of ways very much the same. New Delhi was the capitol, of course, and because of that it was a focal point for all kinds of official aspects of Indian life but by comparison, Calcutta was a rough, rattling raucous place. Bombay seems a little more formal in the way of life in some ways. But all I can say is with travel in the streets and ox carts carrying heavy loads and the country still not tourist-ridden. I doubt if it is tourist-ridden now because the country is forbidding in a lot of ways. You know, tourists no longer can go into Kashmir. I did have an opportunity to go to Kashmir and I should have taken it, but the British military when they’re not on duty they can be out of uniform. And because I worked as an artist I was often a guest of British people and I was a Sergeant and I was invited to go with a party to Kashmir but for some reason I thought I would be associating with officers and officers’ wives and so forth and so I think I’ll wait for another opportunity and so I should have taken that one.

SA: But you did go to Kashmir in the end or not?

MZ: I have been to Khamispur, when you look down into Kashmir but I have never been to Kashmir itself and, of course, when you meet Indian people one of the things they want to tell you about immediately is the beauties of the idealized Kashmir.

SA: Well, do you remember a particular series that you did somewhere over there or a particular moment that you can remember that you felt like you were really getting something extraordinary?

MZ: I think, probably, the best things I did were a dozen or so large watercolors I did in the vicinity of New Delhi. I did do some things in Calcutta and some in Bombay. Not having the opportunity to be at the front that much as

I said there is this one Solvene campaign, one of the things I did had to do with civilian activities.

SA: And maybe with the culture of the country.

MZ: Yes.

SA: You were just saying you wish you would have done some more writing while this was clear in your mind.

MZ: I wish I would have kept a better journal. This is one of the things I have regretted through my whole career. I have tried several times to keep an organized journal but I never could do it and I don't know what it is about it but I would make entries for a few days or weeks and then it's all over. I drift away from them.

SA: But you did keep a journal for a short time while you were there.

MZ: If I could dig into finding all those notebooks at the moment I probably could dig into a good many notes that I made.

SA: Well, that's good. Just as long as you keep all those things, in case somebody really wants to study this later.

MZ: Some of it is going to be summed up. My niece is an art professor in Santa Barbara, she's gotten her degree from the University of Santa Barbara. And we're working together on a book idea. She promises that if I will do the writing that she will edit it and so I continually put down notes, stories, and record things I have been telling you with the hope that she will help me organize it.

SA: Oh, good. That's good.

MZ: This book that Gordon did is a [McClelland] biography, but what I would like to do, and what she and I are trying to do, is a book that has to do with the business of being an artist. In fact I probably call it "To Be an Artist", "To Be a Painter". I would like to do a book that would have to do with the experiences an ordinary guy has in trying to find himself and how and why painting does that for him and how you discover art as your way of thinking and operating, a way of giving you adventure, giving you travel, way of giving you the feeling of craftsmanship and all of those things summed up into what it is to be a painter. And larded with information about techniques and the development of techniques and all of that sort of thing. This is what I am trying to do.

SA: That sounds like a very good book.

MZ: I would like to do a book if I had the ability to do a book, I'd like to have a book that would be read by the public rather than just by an artist. Most art books are bought and owned and read by artists, whereas a good many good books have been written by people in special fields, written in such a way that they have appealed to the general public. That's what I would like to do.

SA: That's sounds really interesting. Is there anything else you can think of right now about your war experience, before I ask you a few questions about your experience coming back?

MZ: There was the interesting experience of being picked out when I was in training that it was rather discouraging. You were taken out of your ordinary life, you were stuck in the army, and you did not know how long it would be, and you did not know what you would be going back to after the war, and it turns out that I knew exactly what I would be doing when I got back. I would simply go on as a painter. But I did meet a great many young men who had anticipated art careers and were very much upset, they felt the army was ruining their whole possibility for a career. And possibly in some cases it did deter them from getting on. But in my case I was older than most of the men who went into the service and I was already somewhat established with some kind of name as a painter so that there was no hesitation or even thought of any direction other than getting right back to my painting.

SA: That's right.

MZ: That was quite a definite part of the experience.

SA: Well, what was it like coming back to the United States?

MZ: Well, that is interesting. After being in Asia for 28 months, this was my experience. I was taken out of the modern world, so to speak. I suddenly became aware a lot of times of watching things done by the human hand, the human mind. And when I came back to the United States the thing that impressed me most was that I felt like I had come back to a world chromium-plated, vacuum-packed, pseudo this or that and I almost had a longing to be back in Asia where you watch things being done by human effort and where life was basic. It's strange but actually my first weeks at home it was a kind of a cynical attitude towards our consumerism and our way of life, it just seemed that things were artificial. I longed for sounds of rickshaw bells, or Tonga bells in the

street where I was hearing automobile horns and I longed for sounds of Asia. I don't know what this is other than possibly a romantic response to an experience for awhile, of course after awhile I had to worry about making a living and all that nostalgia faded away.

SA: Did you feel like you changed as a human being, having gone through that experience?

MZ: Well, yes there were several things. One thing in particular, it turned out that Pat's mother had to live with us, we had to have her living with us, we could not afford to have her in a good retirement home ...

[SESSION 4, TAPE 2, SIDE A]

SA: This is the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, an interview with Milford Zornes on the 8th of August, 1999 in his studio home in Claremont, California. The interviewer is Susan Anderson. This is session four, tape two, side A. And Milford, you were just talking about your mother-in-law living with you after the war.

MZ: Well, when she was traveling she did not even get along with the priest. But, at any rate she had -- and Pat worried about this -- she did not get along with her mother very well and she was afraid that this would be really upsetting to me. Pat was just sure that it would be an upset for me to have the old lady living with us. The truth is, she and I got along very well and one reason we got along very well was because my experiences in China where we saw old people being literally the head of the household. Being revered in a household and guided in a household. I developed a philosophy that made it very easy and I explained to Pat don't worry about it, I can get along with the old lady very well.

SA: That's wonderful.

MZ: And I did.

MZ: That was one experience and I doubt very much that if I had not had that experience I might not have accepted the idea very well. Of course, there was then this placing of value upon humanity or human effort rather than just the acceptance of things done by machinery, by all the . . .

SA: Technological benefits.

MZ: Technological benefits. I think when you travel in Asia you can not avoid the idea of being aware of the impact of humanity. Even in my trip back to China after the war some years ago, you get into this great country and you just feel that there's a great sleeping giant and by that I mean a great mass of people and the potential energy -- you just feel the weight of it and I guess what one thing the whole experience did for me was to be able to look at people with a somewhat more unbiased attitude. In fact, I think travel alone does that. That's one of the values of travel and I always wish for friends of mine that they would have the experience of travel if they can afford it simply because you begin to find out that the whole world is not centered in our community and in our own country.

SA: Right.

MZ: And you do discover that, oh yes. This is a definite experience. I found that if I would make my way alone, going out sketching alone or out in the villages in the vicinity of Delhi or places in China if I was alone, I could relate to people. If I was with another GI or a couple other guys you're cut off because when people deal with you as an individual but as an army personnel or as a group of people or two or three Americans you're shut away from them. I remember when we had a rest period up at Khanispur up in the Himalayas we were allowed about ten days leave. It was so hot in the summer that we were given a vacation time at base up in the Himalayas, the lower Himalayas overlooking Khyber Pass. If you look at the map you will see the city Rawalpindi up near the pass and that's where we went by train and then were taken up to this retreat and I, in order to paint, I had to have, I was forced to have a boy help carry my stuff. Not that I couldn't carry it myself but it was simply custom demands of such. So I had this boy carrying my stuff. While I was painting he would go down, we were in the mountains on mountain sides and down below was kind of a cave or dugout and he would go down there and get a pot of hot tea and cakes and I was envious and so I went down with him one day and let myself. Went in here to this dark dugout and all these brigandage looking characters with their beards and turbines and bandoleers, bullets across their shoulders and I remember this old man -- he said, "You Hindu?" I mean it was a Mohammadan country and these are mountain people and can you imagine he did not know whether I was a Hindu from the city.

SA: Isn't that interesting.

MZ: "Are you Hindu, are you English, you American?" I said, "Are you trying to get into my religion, you Hindu, you Jew, you," and I said something to the effect of "No," how did I put it, but, at any rate, I was intimating that, "it did not matter, or I did not think it mattered as long as you were a good person," or something like that. And

he slapped me and said, “You a good man, you a good man.” I found that you can communicate almost any place with anyone if you don’t throw your weight around as identifying yourself, “Well, I am an American,” or “I’m in the Army,” or whatever. If you just go as a human being and I think maybe an artist has a better chance to do it than most because if you go around sticking a camera in people’s face that turns them off. I found that when I was in Nicaragua when I did my little book on Nicaragua. Have you seen that by the way?

SA: Yes, and we’ll talk about that later.

MZ: I found that and I mentioned it in my book, an artist carrying his equipment and he’s a working man and he’s seen as a working man just like anybody else. But you go around as a tourist poking your camera at people and you’re an outsider.

SA: Yes, right and as an artist somebody who is quietly sitting in the environment recording they get the feeling too that you have some care about their . . .

MZ: An appreciation for what they’re doing.

SA: Appreciation, that’s right

MZ: That’s definitely true.

SA: Well, we were talking about what it was like when you came back and how you felt transformed as a person?

MZ: Well ,I tried to intimate in those ways.

SA: What about as an artist? You must have gone through . . .

MZ: Well, yes, it certainly came to some kind of maturing as a painter. It seems a little indefinite but I definitely had the feeling that I was on my own more than I had ever been before. It was almost like leaving your family situation. Here we were a group, we related to one another a great deal. Came back and people had more or less scattered, the war had changed the pattern of things considerably. They had either been overseas themselves or their life was interrupted. Now for instance, Rex [Brandt], because of his hearing, he did not go overseas. Rex possibly made his greatest strides in his career during the war because he had a chance to work. I just cited him as one example. And you came back and there were different artists who had come into prominence and you felt that you had to make your way, and I definitely had the feeling that I was more on my own than I had ever been, no longer dependent upon teachers, or fellow artists or ...

SA: Mentors or . . .

MZ: In some way I was beginning to direct my own destiny a little bit more.

SA: And I think you talked about this a little bit before -- you said that also you didn’t really develop your direction as using watercolor until after the war or was it the war experience of sketching and doing a lot of watercolor that helped . . .?

MZ: That certainly put me on the side of watercolor, having used watercolor all that time. And even after I got home, and when I was teaching, if I got a few days to go to Mexico or take a trip, naturally I would take my watercolors because it would be expedient to use and it just gradually became my medium. It was the thing that was showing more than any other and I became identified with watercolor.

SA: When you were over there on the theater, did you feel that you got to concentrate more on your painting than you did when you came back? For example, because that was your whole focus you weren’t trying to teach or weren’t trying to take care of your family. Did you actually get to kind of dig in and work?

MZ: Yes, that is true; that was the only thing I had to be concerned about. It is true when you come back to civilian life you have your family problems, you have your living to make and it is certainly a different world to live in. And some days you feel the frustration a great deal -- if I could just work without interruption or with full concentration it would make a world of difference and that’s the reason why quite often doing these workshops it’s a benefit. Because you’re away in a foreign country for two weeks, your only concern is the people you’re with, is painting, and your concern is concentrating on their problems and your own. And even though you’re having to give a lot of time to other people still you’re concentrating on thinking about painting, and the problems of painting. And quite often you literally get more done than if you were at home. Plus, the fact you have to teach. And this I can point out as a valuable thing for people taking these workshops, they are no longer where the family can make demands upon then. They can no longer get called to the telephone, they’re no longer obligated for social things in the neighborhood and if they will take advantage of it, this is a definite

benefit to take an outing of a couple of weeks at one of these workshops.

SA: Well, you must be able to get a certain momentum up and I bet you got a certain momentum as an artist up while you were over there.

MZ: It came by spells. After all, that it was quite a length of time and there were dry times when you were homesick or you wished you were home carrying on your work and periods of resentment against the time out and all that. But at the same time, in a general way, it did bring things to a focus.

SA: Well, in terms of the physical environment of Southern California, when you got back did you already sense tremendous changes coming after the war in terms of the development of the land or the influx of new populations?

MZ: Well, yes. I think one had to be very conscious of that simply because this was happening . . .

SA: Can you speak a little bit about that, what it was like?

MZ: I think the thing that impressed itself upon me was the fact that you wish you had more appreciation for the California that you knew during your first experience. And, I think, this happens every place. If you live in a place and they're building projects, destroying a certain area or building freeways, and all this sort of thing you feel that your world is being turned upside down. People in Europe complain about that and in Ireland, and I would think that nothing had happened over there, very picturesque, but here they're saying, "Look in the old days it was so different." And I think you are very aware of changes in a place where you're accustomed to certain aspects of the place, and when they're changed you're very sensitive to it.

SA: Well, soon after you came back you resumed teaching at Otis Art Institute, didn't you?

MZ: Yes.

SA: And were there a lot of people there on the GI Bill?

MZ: Well, there was, yes. Do you know Joe Mugniani?

SA: I know the name.

MZ: Well, he is a professional artist but he took advantage of the fact that he could go to art school primarily to have a place to work and Joe and I became very good friends. He was so accomplished that you did not feel like you were an instructor for him, but we had wonderful discussions and exchanging ideas about painting and there were some others too who were ex GI's. Then when I came to teach at Pomona there was Roger Kuntz, Robert Wood, there was -- oh there's another fellow here in town. They were all ex GI's.

SA: Would Jack Zajac -- would he have been?

MZ: I don't know whether he was or not. But, at any rate, Bob Wood was of particular interest to me because he had the experience of the war. Some experience. And one thing that I tried to do with these four or five ex-GI's was to give them as much freedom as possible in college, they would need me for classes or conferences more than being forced to come to classes. Because they were so busy painting that it was a benefit to them to have my instruction individually. So I had this little group that I treated in that way.

SA: Was it somewhat like that in Otis too or was. . .

MZ: Yes, actually of course in traditional art school that's more the spirit anyway.

SA: Right.

MZ: In traditional art school there isn't the atmosphere of formal classes as much as it is attending painting sessions where the instructor comes in and he visits students individually. And sometimes offers criticism but that's one of the valuable things about a formal professional or a traditional I should say, traditional art school. It's a place where you work with teachers in a more informal way and a more intimate way.

SA: Who else was teaching at Otis when you came back?

MZ: Well, there was Holmes and there was [unintelligible] and Ejnar Hansen with their son and there's one fellow who is a portrait painter, -- Pat I studied with him.

SA: Sounds like you were the youngest and most . . .

MZ: I was one of the younger teachers, yes.

SA: Right, and maybe the only one who has just come back.

MZ: Yes and, in fact, as I recall, I was the only returned soldier who was teaching there.

SA: Right. Was there a lot of energy there? Was it in some ways a better atmosphere for teaching?

MZ: When you mention this, that was the interesting thing again about the Otis art school, it just seemed like it just carried on. Pretty much as it had before. Sort of a certain informality. Studios with people working hard and teachers coming in and out and giving criticism and just a process of studies, solitude and in many respects self-guided study.

SA: Okay. Because I always pictured that with this influx of sort of more mature men coming back from the war that there would be a different character to the place.

MZ: I think it was more true of coming to the college than it was there. I felt now for instance I remember one young fellow he had to in signing up for college courses here he had to take something in the humanities. He came up to talk with me with a hangdog look, . . ."If I'm supposed to take art or music," he said, "I don't know anything about painting," and I said, "Well, suppose you just decided this was a place that you can learn some things," and he had been a mechanic and he was aspiring to use his college education to become an mechanical engineer. He did not know what to do about painting, and so I said, "Well, I've got an idea." I said, "Suppose I know absolutely nothing about an internal combustion engine and I want a painting that describes, I want you to give an aerial color, I want a cross section of engine, I want you to do the block one color, the pistons another, and so forth and I want you to make a rendering in paint to tell me what an engine is." He made one of the best abstract paintings because he did a careful rendering. Being a mechanic he was careful, areas were clean, neat, and it was one of the best things in the student show.

SA: How fabulous.

MZ: And Roger Kuntz, I don't know if you knew him or not.

SA: Yes.

MZ: He died young, you know.

SA: And it was him?

MZ: No.

SA: Oh, okay.

MZ: But Roger -- he was kind of a smart aleck, because he came in one day and had a whole roll of watercolors under his arm and he just threw them out on the floor and said, "Okay, Mr. Zornes, give me the word about watercolors." I got this attitude from some of the others. I would like to pay a compliment to Robert Wood. Robert Wood was really an organized person, he was as much on his feet when he was 19 as he was later in life. But for one thing I have not been on the campus since I was a student and I was assigned to teach out here. I came out one night from Los Angeles to dinner at Frary Hall where all the faculty and students got together and he had the sense to know I was coming on to the campus and he was on his own volition to show me around, introduce me to the right people, show me where I was to be and everything. He did this just because he had sense enough to know that . . .

SA: That's extraordinary.

MZ: He was very business-like and did you know that Robert Wood at all?

SA: I never met him.

MZ: But he was not . . . and if you meet Bob it would be five or ten minutes of greeting and talking about people you knew and so forth and then that's his own business, he was a very matter a fact guy. I had a great deal of admiration for him because he knew exactly what he was doing all the time.

SA: And he was one of your students out there? When did you start teaching at Pomona and how did that come about?

MZ: Well, lets see, that was what year, that was '46.

SA: Okay.

MZ: Tom Beggs was the head of the department. I had studied with him when I was at Pomona, and Tom Beggs had some idea that he wanted to take, as it turned out, I got the story that he had a sabbatical year but he was hoping, but he didn't tell anybody, but he was hoping that during that sabbatical year that he would get a position in another college possibly in the East where he had come from. And he recommended after I left Pomona, I had two years and had pretty well established myself and so he gave me the credentials. Pomona is a denominational college and it does not require the same thing as a university does. So they could hire me on my professional rating and he recommended me to teach for one year and then of course after one year I taught, then, for three years before I left the college and I left on my own volition.

SA: And it did not have anything to do with Millard Sheets then that you were hired there, it was Tom Beggs.

MZ: Well yes, and when I came there for that one year Millard assumed that I was his lieutenant out at Pomona.

SA: That's one of the problems in getting started.

MZ: As I have told you there were factions, one thought it was very well to take everything up to Scripps Center. And the man who taught art history and I held the department at Pomona.

SA: Were you the only art teacher?

MZ: I was the only painting instructor. There was just two of us on the faculty.

SA: Oh, okay. And you taught there, was it three or four years?

MZ: I taught three years at Pomona.

SA: And you were teaching painting and drawing?

MZ: Painting and drawing, yes. And I stressed design to a great extent.

SA: Would you talk a little bit more about Roger Kuntz?

MZ: About...

SA: Roger Kuntz

MZ: Oh, Roger Kuntz lets see, Tom Craig and I pioneered this idea of students going on to Scripps when in school and when I came back to teaching from Pomona then it was a more open thing. I think Roger took courses at Scripps, as well. He had this course with me and yes the thing that I wanted to say about these students and Robert Wood, actually, Roger Kuntz and a couple of others were a little careless about liberties that I gave them and I had a little problem of accounting for them.

SA: Oh.

MZ: But Robert Wood always had sense enough to protect me in that too. I wanted to make that clear. Roger was sort of an easy going guy and . . .

SA: Maybe not as politically astute or something?

MZ: Yeah, Yeah. I don't know whether I am giving you clear answers on these things or not?

SA: Sure, but can you just describe Roger Kuntz a little bit?

MZ: Well . . .

SA: As a person or as a artist.

MZ: He was kind of a tall, husky, good-natured, laughing kind of a guy and, as you probably know, he kind of made a reputation in his painting plenty of overpasses and bridges and things of that kind.

SA: What was he doing at the time that he was a student? Was he interested in more of the American scene type of things?

MZ: Well, yes, I think even when he was in school he started this practice of painting such mundane things as bridges and street scenes and that sort of thing. He was getting pretty well into his painting and that was my reason for giving these guys freedom and I let them work as artists.

SA: Right, so that they would have time, too.

MZ: Yes, exactly.

SA: Up in the Bay Area at that time and maybe even at Chouinard, there was already I think a hint of abstract expressionism, or abstract painting. Was there any hint of that at either Otis or Pomona or Scripps when you came back? Do you remember that at all?

MZ: It certainly was not enough to, let's see, just not very much. It was, did you know Henry Lee McFee?

SA: Yes.

MZ: Well, he came to Scripps and he definitely held to the very conservative approach. He had a very strong following. I was very quite critical of his approach for a time because he demanded that people just paint the way he painted and I was holding out for the idea that a person think on his own and be as innovative as he was capable of being, but I had to take a lot of this back because I saw so many of the artists, and Roger Kuntz was one of them I think, who painted very much like Henry Lee McFee while they were with him but they did learn to paint and they did . . .

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SA: The story about feeling like you were working in the manner of Millard Sheets . . .

MZ: Yes, that's true.

SA: But developed out of that.

MZ: Yes, that's true and you know since we are discussing the ups and downs of my career I think that a lot of . . .

[SESSION 5, TAPE 1, SIDE A]

SA: This is the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution an interview with Milford Zornes on the afternoon of August 22, 1999 at his studio home in Claremont, California. The interviewer is Susan Anderson, this is session five, tape one, side A. And today what I wanted to focus on is the depression years and your murals and other projects during the depression era. Last time we finished by talking a little bit about Edith Hamlin [Dixon] but I would like to put that off.

MZ: Yes,

SA: That discussion off until the last session I think and today focus on this.

MZ: All right.

SA: And first I would like to begin by asking you just a little bit about the depression itself. When the depression hit in 1929 or at least when the crash happened you were about 21 years old.

MZ: Yes.

SA: You have already told me that you felt the consequences of the depression far in advance of the crash.

MZ: Well, that is for the simple reason that in my state, my circumstances, there was very little difference between what it had been and what it became during the depression. In order words I think the depression affected those who were in pretty prosperous situations and suddenly lost it and the shock was the more important thing. With those of us who were in straightened circumstances and trying to find a career and a way of going, it was just natural, it was just the things that were going on where you did not have enough money to go around.

SA: Right. Well that first perception though of really hard times was back in the Midwest, wasn't it, when you were living back in Idaho?

MZ: Well, of course, there again, there is no way I can put a mark on it as to when it happened, because my people were working people. In the Midwest they weren't doing well in ranching, it was a difficult thing. Coming out to California with prospects of finding work, my father was enterprising and he did find work. Actually during my early high school time living in San Fernando that was quite a prosperous time for my family because my mother had a good, responsible job and he was a supervisor at one of these big rock crushing plants and he was quite noted as a millwright and able to build these plants. He wasn't an engineer and he wasn't really a well-

trained carpenter but he understood the plants and he knew how to direct the building of them and so he drew a good salary and we were actually quite prosperous during that time but I personally, of course, was trying to find a career and trying to find a way to go on my own. It was pretty thin pickings, you know.

SA: Yes, right. Well, you know do you suppose though that life in Idaho for other people and maybe for the general population where you were then was more difficult at that time. Looking back do you think that it was that maybe in a sense that the depression hit that area earlier?

MZ: I just have to beg again not very . . .

SA: You're not sure? Okay. Yeah.

MZ: The parameters of that situation simply because my experience and association, my families experience and association was working people and getting a job and making ends meet was just a common, an everyday life experience. Went on all the time.

SA: Okay. Well, you know I think at a certain point probably most around the time that [John] Steinbeck's book The Grapes of Wrath came out, people began to be more aware of the difficulty of people both maybe back in Oklahoma and those who had come out to California. Were you aware of that?

MZ: Well, I guess as I think back upon it I had to be. I well remember how absolutely difficult it was to get anything to do to earn money and actually this I can intercede here I think with the fact that I often mentored and that my ability to draw was my surviving device. I could draw pictures of people's kids, their house or something that they had a need for and get a little money out of a drawing when I couldn't get a job and I couldn't earn any other way. And so I've always taken possibly the rather flip attitude that the depression was the thing that determined my career. It was one way I could survive and I couldn't survive by other means.

SA: Well, did you feel any special sense of compassion for people in Oklahoma or for people out here from Oklahoma or anything? Because you had been from there, did you feel a kinship or . . .?

MZ: Oh yes. I think so. When you come from working class circumstances there is a camaraderie or a kinship, of course, whether you say it's compassion I simply think of companionship experience. How you are getting along? What are you working at? How are things going? That's just about the way things were always.

SA: In 1934 the government started a federally-funded art project, the PWAP, which was a relief project, and you began producing art for the project from the beginning didn't you or did you?

MZ: It must have been from the very beginning, my first awareness of it was I think that Millard Sheets was one of the people who administered locally. I suppose what they did when that program started was to contact known and responsible artists and people in the neighborhood to form some kind of a committee or board to select who might be eligible and my first awareness was, as Millard Sheets explained it to me, just simply saying there was this project and I would be eligible for it if I was interested. Of course, I was a student and struggling to get started and it was a thing I very readily associated myself with. And I think that Millard was one of the first on a board of some kind to whom we reported and turned in our work. Whether he served on that very long or continually I'm not just sure. But he was my first contact.

SA: Would you talk a little bit about your experience? I'll ask you specific questions too, but I just thought you might want to tell me what you found interesting.

MZ: Well, the experience was an invigorating one in that Tom Craig and I had been in school and we had struggled to get our painting organized and I was beginning to get a little bit of a reputation. You'll recall Arthur Millier, I'm sure. He was a very responsible theorist. He was different than critics in most cases because he related to the artist. He reported what they were doing and commented in constructive ways and I was getting some good criticism from Millier and Millard was interested in what I was doing. Millard Sheets was interested in what I was doing and I had gotten a local reputation and won some local awards and at that time I wasn't aware of too much national recognition but it was beginning. So much so that as a young fellow and so aggressively trying to find my way I was very conscious of myself and very conscious about the fact that I was beginning to make some kind of a reputation. That was the stimulus that had me really into it and to have this sure income by the week, to do nothing but paint and not worry about other concerns. It was a real bonus and I made the most of it and appreciated it fully.

SA: I can imagine. That must have been really hard to believe.

MZ: Yes.

SA: At such a difficult time that there was a way that you could really do what you loved to do.

MZ: It really was.

SA: And be paid for it that just . . .

MZ: I find most of my experience is kind of a worm's eye view because I also was much within myself and concerned on my own affairs that it was happening to me that it was fortunate or unfortunate. I was more aware of that than I was of the general happenings and but I have the very definite feeling that it was very much of a lift and so many artists were encouraged and got busy and did interesting things as the result of those programs. And I understand that the writing programs were very vigorously adhered to or followed and a lot of interesting things were done.

SA: Well, now you started out as a watercolor or easel painter on the projects right?

MZ: Yes. That was my contribution primarily.

SA: So, would you explain a little bit about how that worked?

MZ: Well, as near as I can recall we were simply encouraged to paint pictures and turn in paintings to the project and it seems that we were at liberty to turn in as many as we felt that we wanted to do and evidently I was so enthusiastic that as I think I have said before in these interviews that it seems to be on record that I turned in more individual works than any other artist in the whole country.

SA: Now when did you find that out? Did you find that out later?

MZ: It was much later and we were living in Claremont in about '62 or '63 in that time just before we moved to Utah. A woman came to our place and announced that she was on a Ford Foundation documenting that period, that very little had been documented relative to that.

SA: Some kind of a Ford research grant?

MZ: Grant of some kind. And we talked for about two hours recording. She was doing much as you are doing now, asking questions about the time and situations and so forth and it was when she was finished and putting away her things she said there are two things that I would like to tell you that would interest you. First of all, you may be interested that it's known that you turned in more individual things than any other one. And she said, "And I find it interesting that you continue to be enthusiastic about the program." And she said, "It seems a little somewhat puzzling to me to find a good many people who were on the projects had been reticent to talk about it, and seemed to give somewhat less credit than you do. Seemingly, they would rather feel that they had made it on their own rather than by government subsidy in any way."

SA: Interesting.

MZ: I have had this experience in years since, when I was working in Greenland on the Thule Air Base project years later after the war and I was with the engineers, with engineers, and my job had to do with surveying and that sort of thing but I remember a couple of times when I was asked very directly whether I had to benefit by government help. It was almost the attitude that that was a pretty lowly way to get your start or did you have to get started that way. You know, it was the thing that aggravated me a little bit and still does. I think there is still, this may be just an opinion, but I think there is still a kind of a stigma against the idea that you gain benefit by any kind of relief. A deliberate relief project. I think our American spirit is that you aggressively, in a very ambitious way, pounded your way to the top without help. I think we are stuck with that kind of a mental attitude and we have been, mind you I am just expressing a kind of a gut feeling that I get when people talk about these projects. I think so many people have looked upon it and do look upon it as kind of a way that you leaned on to get an edge on things.

SA: The way that some people perhaps might talk about welfare now?

MZ: Yes. I'm trying to remember a remark that one of the engineers' made, he put it in such a way that as though art was a thing that you would not really want to get involved in or couldn't unless you got an easy way into it. You know?

SA: Well, I think that for most people now, at least with regards to those projects, there's probably little stigma attached to that for people in my generation, for example, because it's just something so far removed from us but something like welfare is more of our time.

SA: It makes it easier for me to understand what you're saying.

MZ: Did you read that article that I gave you that they did locally in the newspaper here?

SA: Yes.

MZ: Well, the young lady who did that told me that it started this way. Her assignment was to do an article on the Public Works of Art project and when she came to the business of finding an artist who had benefited by it she had to look around and found me to be the only one she could get hold of who had been very much a part of it. If you read the article you'll find that I've gotten quite a play. There's my photograph in it and pictures of my work and so forth. But really if you read the article it's a very good article about the whole program and yet I've been a little pleased or a little puzzled. Not many people have mentioned the article to me and two or three people who have mentioned it mention it in such a way as though, "I saw your good article in the paper," but pretty much evidence that they hadn't read it fully in the light of what it was. I think the fact that I had my picture in it, they thought it was an article about me when actually it was more of an article about the whole project and I have a feeling that those who did read it carefully just don't talk about it that much. Maybe I'm being a little sensitive on the subject but to me, I am because I feel very definitely that there could be and possibly should be for the health of our country, some kind of a program by which there could be legitimate help for people attempting to get into the arts. I know the hazards of it. I've heard that Holland literally had to fold up and give up on it simply because artists themselves destroyed it. They turned in mediocre work just to draw their stipend and it was the artists themselves who belittled the project. And I think there's always that danger. I think it's a hard, fine line between how the arts can be benefited by the public and still come through with full vitality. It seems that the vitality in the arts or vitality in career success is very much -– I compare it to a tree who grows under nice conditions in the valley and grows straight and tall and the same variety or species on the timberline becomes interestingly twisted and gnarled through having to be battled by the elements.

SA: Have you been following the story about the NEA or the National Endowment for the Arts?

MZ: No, I haven't. I don't know much about that.

SA: Because that is a form of government funding for the arts and there's been quite a bit of discussion about whether or not that should continue . . .

MZ: Yes.

SA: . . . at all and it's been cut back quite a bit so there are different forms of government support but it's becoming smaller and smaller each year.

MZ: And I think one reason is that so few members of the public are able to give full credence to its importance. I think the average person's feeling is, "If you want to be an artist get in there and dig and get it like the rest of us have to get ours." You see. If I'm going to make it as a carpenter or as an engineer or doctor, anyone else, I've got to pay my dues and without subsidy and, yet, if you research it there are probably a lot of ways that other professions are getting subsidy.

SA: Oh, of course.

MZ: It isn't apparent, though, as a relief idea.

SA: Right. Well, you know, getting back to your actual experience, did you turn in almost everything that you painted?

MZ: Yes, I did. I . . .

SA: Maybe that's why you were so prolific.

MZ: Oh, yes.

SA: Maybe other people didn't turn as much in.

MZ: Oh, I'm sure that was true and I didn't know any better. I couldn't see any other reason for doing them other than that was what I was being paid for.

SA: And did they keep it all? Or did they send some of it back or . . .

MZ: No, I never, not literally, I have come into possession of pictures that I did through chances to buy them back on a few occasions but things never came back. Now, the things that I did for the Army if my sketches didn't actually pertain to army movement or army activity or military activity, sometimes they were just stamped with the War Department number and given back to me.

SA: Well, how did you get the chance to buy some things back that had gone to . . .?

MZ: Well, they got into private –- they -– so many of these things go into private possession.

SA: How did that happen?

MZ: Well, I would surmise that in some cases if a watercolor was given to a school or a hospital or something like that and somebody had it in their office when they moved away they just took it along with the rest of it.

SA: I see. So, was there an organized attempt, then, to put these things in public places?

MZ: I am vague about that. I know they did go to schools and hospitals and public places but not what the criteria for receiving these things would be. I know in one case it was a significant time and I've told you about it. One of the big high schools in Los Angeles had an affair one time when they invited artists who had contributed to the program and there were speeches by people who were concerned with it and I keep forgetting the man's name. He made a speech. He was a man who wrote a book about Millard.

SA: Oh, Merle Armitage?

MZ: Merle Armitage. And he made a speech in which he noted the fact that I had turned in so many things and he dubbed me, "The [J.M.W.] Turner of America." Well, being young and ignorant and grasping for any notoriety I could get a hold of I was very much impressed by that. And so I began to find out who Turner was.

SA: Isn't that funny? Well, I know that you had a one-person exhibit at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington.

MZ: Well, now, that's another aspect of it.

SA: In 1934?

MZ: It did seem that when those things were collected and there were exhibitions arranged, evidently, a part of the chores of the administration was to arrange for exhibits. And their responsibility was probably to see that it go into situations where the public would benefit. Now, just recently, I heard that a local college, I think, oh, I'll think of it in a minute, had a couple of pictures that were acquired during the Public Works of Art.

SA: Oh. Could it be Chaffey?

MZ: No, it's over to the west here someplace.

SA: Okay. Well, so that exhibit at the Corcoran Gallery was WPA related in some way, then?

MZ: Yes. Yeah.

SA: I see. And somebody there decided to organize it.

MZ: Evidently. And the story is that Mr. and Mrs. Roosevelt went there and selected some things for the White House, including one of mine. And then, of course, I made the most out of that publicity, also. "Look, I have a picture in the White House."

SA: Right. And that's called Old Adobe. Is that the Old Adobe?

MZ: The Old Adobe. It's set in the old [inaudible] adobe. It's right out south of Pomona or west of Pomona. At the time I painted it was run down. It was serving as a turkey farm, I think. It was full of turkeys and I've been there since. Someone bought it and restored it and at one time a very famous lady -– I visited there and she was a concert pianist, I believe. If I remember. And I marveled at the fact that at the time I painted it was full of turkeys and turkey dung and now here was this rather impressive lady with two grand pianos in the room.

SA: So, President Roosevelt selected that watercolor out of an exhibition?

MZ: Yes. That is my understanding.

SA: Now was that the same exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery? I thought you had a one-person show, too.

MZ: Well, I think it was out of the Corcoran show.

SA: Oh, okay. All right. It was out of the Corcoran show.

MZ: Yeah.

SA: Well, it looks like, then, in 1935 you produced art for another government-funded project called SERA, S-E-R-A?

MZ: Several people had jobs administrating and when the funds ran out I think there was a scramble to find other ways. I'm pretty sure this was a state project. It was either at the very end of the WPA or one of the other projects. I took on a special assignment to do pictures having to do with carrying of the mails. And I had the country mail carrier. I even went so far as to make a picture based on the fact that at one time the government had a program for camels to carry the mail. It wasn't successful.

SA: Not enough camels.

MZ: They even brought some camels and some Arab cattle drivers to this country with the idea that they would develop them for use in the desert areas. It was a far-fetched thing.

SA: How interesting.

MZ: It had all kinds of romance. They claim that to this day or until recent times there's still wild camels in the Mohave Desert someplace. So it's a myth, undoubtedly.

SA: Well, were you traveling around quite a bit even then? Within California, if not farther?

MZ: Well, I traveled around locally, anything that I could get to locally. I remember taking some long day trips. There's a historic stage coach station way down near Salton Sea and I just can't think of the name right now. I remember my wife and I were in San Diego at the time and I made the trip down and back. Made a day's trip. Painted, made a drawing of that. And there were several occasions when I made special trips in local Southern California area to find sights or images that would give me information for some idea of carrying the mail.

SA: But you weren't traveling to, for example, you wouldn't have gone to Washington D.C. for that, right?

MZ: No. No.

SA: Well, how well known were you when you received your commission for the Claremont Post Office in 1936?

MZ: Well, I'm sure I had become a member of the National Watercolor Society by that time. It was called the American Watercolor Society at that time. No, no. It was the American . . .

SA: The California Watercolor Society?

MZ: I was a member of the California Watercolor Society, which has become the National Watercolor Society and I was a member of the National Watercolor Society and I had -– I think I had, possibly won, I'm not sure whether this came after or shortly after or before but I won my first international prize at the Art Institute of Chicago.

[SESSION 5, TAPE 1, SIDE B]

MZ: It must've been that it was recommended by the local administration that I do it. I could be a little more definite about the post office that I did in Texas.

SA: Oh, okay.

MZ: It seemed that they did stage contests. Now, there was a contest to design a mural for, I think it was New Orleans or Kansas City, I believe it was. It was to be quite a large mural and it was open for competition. Artists who were working on the Public Works of Art project could try for these different post offices and I'm trying to think what the advantage would be other than they would insure they were staying on the project or be a prestigious plum for the artist but at any rate I tried for that big post office and it seemed, as clearly as I can remember, I received one of the runner-up prizes, which was the possibility of doing a smaller post office in El Campo, Texas.

SA: I think later on the project changed and it became a competitive national competition.

MZ: I guess that must've been it.

SA: You were awarded them. But I think, maybe, when you received the Claremont post office it was a different kind of a government project.

MZ: It had to be.

SA: Because I think the later one may have been a SECTION UC project. And this one, I believe, was a TRAP project and this one, I think, you were just appointed, weren't you?

MZ: Yeah. That has to be it because I'm not conscious of anything other than that the word came that I was

elected to do it.

SA: And so, maybe in this case the local officials, like Millard Sheets could simply vote.

MZ: I think that surely must've been it.

SA: Do you think that might be it? Okay.

MZ: Because my memory's so vague about it or whether I was too conscious of exactly how it came about. Even at the time, it just simply happened that I had word that I was elected to do it.

SA: Because maybe things developed a bit more because this was 1936. That was quite early, I believe. Your other one was 1939, I think. Your El Campo, Texas one.

MZ: Yes, and I think that's definitely what it was and I suppose, in thinking back, and as this woman said who came to talk to me on the Ford Foundation thing, it seemed that very little had been written about the project or said about the project. So that I don't think that all of us who were on it were all together aware of what was going on all the time.

SA: Well, I think more has been written on it now.

MZ: It has.

SA: But there's still a lot of research to be done and that's why I think it's good to get this all down on tape.

MZ: Yeah.

SA: You know, as much as you can remember. Now . . .

MZ: And that's exactly the way that was. It's just the one here in Claremont came along as part of my assigned work, in addition to doing watercolors or maybe I might have been asked if I would like to do it. I'm not sure about that at all. But the idea of doing a mural seemed, I'm pretty sure, at that time, a prestigious thing to embark upon.

SA: I would think so. Well, so as far as you can remember you got the chance to do it and accepted it.

MZ: Yeah.

SA: But the ins-and-outs of how it came about is a little vague? But, now you did have to go through a lengthy bureaucratic process to complete it, though, didn't you?

MZ: Well, I'll just recount what I can remember. Evidently I was asked to submit designs and I think there was some discussion back and forth as to what the opinion was of my designs. I know there was criticism of my idea of doing it as a frieze. Now, my argument was that if we colored all of the walls in a narrow foyer of a post office it would have an overburdened look. It would look like a cave. My argument was that a line of decoration, I think it's about a three feet or four feet band all the way around the upper walls of the post office, I felt as though that would give spaciousness and it turned out that I was right. But there was quite a bit of criticism. "Why did I choose not to cover all the walls"? Well, there wasn't very much wall other than that, actually. But by making that a definite band of decoration, it enlarged the room and I'm pretty sure that I was right. And I think the people have agreed with me. But there was a lot of letter-writing and tossing back and forth as to whether to accept my idea.

SA: Well, do you remember what their hesitancy was? Aside from that?

MZ: No, I don't think it was anything other than just an opinion. A difference of opinion. And I'm not sure but Millard may have put in a word. I can't remember discussing it directly with Millard but it just may be that we did discuss it and he put in a word to go ahead with my idea. 'Cause I know that he was still -– there's another thing, too. I know that early on he was instrumental in decisions about the thing. At the time I did the mural Millard wrote, when it was finished, a nice little piece about it. Something in the local paper by Millard. He gave me a good word on it. I just can't recall whether he had any word of decision in putting it up or not.

SA: I see. Well, do you remember who you were corresponding with in Washington?

MZ: Well, I can't remember. I do remember this instance, though. I had correspondence or letters from one man. And I'm going to have to ask Pat . . .

SA: Was it Olin Dows?

MZ: Well, it was one of the . . .

SA: He was one of them?

MZ: Yeah. Just let me ask Pat.

SA: All right. I'll put it on pause. It was a well known American artist that you, not John La Farge?

MZ: And listen. I was getting letters from a man with the same name.

SA: Oh.

MZ: And they were kind of peevish letters. They would say, "Why haven't you done this?" And, "Are you doing this?" And so forth. But a very pleasant fellow came out here and we spent a day together. He looked at the mural and we had lunch and we had a good time and he liked everything going on and at lunch I asked him, "Who is this fellow in Washington that's sending me these fussy letters?" He said, "Oh, don't mind him. He's a professional grandson." Beyond that I don't remember very much more. There was some regulated way by which I kept them informed, reported about what I was doing and how much progress I'd made and so forth.

SA: So, it wasn't a question of them not liking your design or any of that, really?

MZ: No, no. My ideas for the design were well accepted.

SA: Well, I know it took you about a year or so to complete it, didn't it?

MZ: Yes, it must have. What with planning it and getting ready to paint it and it poses this technical problem. Where the Claremont post office is located (just below it there are doctor's offices now) but there was an old, empty store building at that time. And I remember I arranged to work in there. I remember it was very cold in the winter and I had to wear heavy clothing. Had no way of heating the place. And the problem was these were long -– you've seen the mural.

SA: Yes.

MZ: These were long canvases. I had to stretch them and, let's see, did we tack them up or stretch them? We stretched them, and they were in sections. But since they were long and slim the stretchers had to be made with good bracing in between. And then I chose to have this well-controlled gradation of color down the top ranging from a deep reddish color into a lighter color, the lower sky. And that band of deep red color goes all the way around and that holds it together. Well, technically, that's very difficult to do because I had to have all the canvases lined up and then I had to take a color and go all the way around and then go with a second and third and by that time you'd have to hurry and blend those together before the paint dried and then you could continue. And to get that smooth gradation from the dark into the light people wouldn't realize but that's a real technical stunt to do that with that great long thing and it's pretty good.

SA: I'll have to go look at it again.

MZ: I wanted to do it because it would be a distinctive way to hold that whole thing together from one end to another, you see.

SA: Was that, probably, one of the biggest difficulties you faced in finishing it, then?

MZ: Well, yes. That was the main thing. As far as the drawing of the objects and completing all this -– that was just a matter of drawing and painting structure and . . .

SA: Well, did you have to send them several different sets of designs and such or did . . .

MZ: Well, I think as soon as they were satisfied with the design. As I recall, I made fairly comprehensive drawings and they sent them back and, do you know a fella, you would know him 'cause he's written articles. He lived here in Claremont. He wrote some articles about the Public Works of Art.

SA: Orville Clarke.

MZ: Clarke. I had some odds and ends of some of those designs and I gave those to him. They were just pieces of design. That's the only thing I think is left as a record of it.

SA: Did you save your letters and such?

MZ: Well, if I did they're lost now.

SA: You don't know where they are now. That's too bad. Would you please describe the subject of the mural and how you chose that subject?

MZ: Well, it was a simple idea. Here is a post office in a small college town situated in the Pomona Valley. All right. The dramatic situation is that to the north we have the High Sierra Madre range. Mountains that go up to over 10,000 feet, Mount San Antonio. And to the south we have what's called the Chino area. The valley where there are dairy farms and agriculture. And it gets its name because in the early days a lot of Chinese people settled there and Chino means China in Spanish so they simply called the town, Chino. Chino area. So there's Chino to the south, the mountains to the north and to the west I used to depict, emphasize the orange industry and to the east I emphasized the college. I have the Bridges Auditorium in evidence and also on the eastern side to the south is a suggestion of the Mexican colony. There over on the east side of Claremont, somewhat to the south, there's a little settlement, we call it Árbol Verde. Mexican people always have a colorful, poetic name for their situations. This little place, simply called "The Green Tree Settlement" and so I have an indication of that. So what it amounts to is just Claremont and environs.

SA: So you took sort of a historical or regional approach? Was that because that was the common thing to do?

MZ: Well, my thought was the post office is for the people. People go in and out every day and I assumed that some suggestion of their immediate surroundings, in terms of painting, would be worthwhile. And I'm still strongly of the belief that people are interested in things that they know. Even in art.

SA: So, were you given some sort of direction at all in which direction to go that you can remember?

MZ: No, I'm very sure that I had my own . . .

PZ: John La Farge.

MZ: John La Farge.

SA: Oh good. Okay. She remembered John La Farge.

MZ: Yeah. Thanks.

PZ: Okay.

MZ: No, as I recall I had my way and when I didn't have my way I argued strongly to have my way. We were having company with my son last week. Sad occasion. My first wife died last week and my son took me to San Diego for the services but I did have a pleasant time being with my son and his wife for the day and naturally memories were evoked and his wife assured me that while my son is a nice fella, there's one thing about him, he has his own way all the time and my son reminded her that he came by it honestly. That he had a father that had his own way most of the time.

SA: So you didn't, in other words, you didn't feel compromised artistically at all?

MZ: No. No, I didn't.

SA: In a sense because you got to do just what you wanted?

MZ: I think I was very conscious that was one of the benefits of the whole project. That here was a chance, here is a chance for artists of a country to bring their own vitality. They're not being told by art experts what is aesthetically viable. They were simply going to the things that people know and that they're surrounded by and it could be the realization that vitality and art can come from those sources. It always has. In the little Italian cities and the providences in the past, it's the art that was produced in those areas, based upon the things that those areas related to. But that's a school. For instance, painters painted everyday things that they knew and that's where their art comes from. And this idea, this argument between regional and . . .

SA: Universal?

MZ: . . . universal art, it seems like a tedious argument to me. If it's art it'll be of universal concern but it has to come, have it's roots some place.

SA: Well, of course, back then it might not have seemed so –- did it seem that clear to you then? Was it so clear . . .

MZ: No, I don't think it was that clear to me. It was simply that – in our simple approach, I think this is one thing that characterizes our California group. We weren't complicated at all. We just went out and painted the things we saw and knew, and I think all of us had to eventually be impressed by what art is, what we represented in

art.

SA: Well, when you were creating your design for the mural, did you make a study of it? Did you talk to people or did you -– how did you determine what your focus should be? Did it just come to you easily or did you have to study the history of the region a little bit?

MZ: Well, yes. You know, you touch on something that I am very sensitive to. When I'm teaching, people will say, "I haven't read those ideas. Where did you read those ideas?" They're my ideas. I'm a teacher. I'm an artist and a teacher and I have a creative mind. Why shouldn't it come from me? And that's the way it was there. I don't think I was consulting anyone much. I just had the idea that this is the way to go.

SA: And so you just knew about those different areas and what . . .

MZ: Well, yeah. We lived with them every day.

SA: Just having been living here for a while.

MZ: Well, that was part of our community experience. I think I included an old Victorian house where Dr. [Hartley Burr] Alexander lived. He was the one who founded Scripps College. Well, he lived in that old house up there and we call it "The Professor's House." I think everyone in town probably thought of it as "The Professor's House" who knew anything about it at all. And, of course, there's the mountains where you look at them every day. And the orange industry was an obvious part of life here. My wife's relatives were part of the founding the orange industry here. All these things were just so very obvious that they couldn't escape anybody's attention or awareness once they were identified.

SA: Well, I know some artists approached it from a much more kind of didactic and maybe even historical, but it sounds like the way you did it you really did it with the more obvious and the more . . .

MZ: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. I'd still like to ask you, what do you mean by "didactic"?

SA: Oh, trying to teach people something. Trying to educate people. That's not what your approach was.

MZ: No, I don't think that I've ever had the idea that I had to teach people anything. I've had the idea that I want to communicate with them some experience of mine. It's nothing more complicated than you sit with friends and you talk about something that happened to you or some trip you took or something that you noted and have been interested in. You feel it's interesting to you maybe it'll be interesting to somebody else or sometimes you're so excited about things that you do and see that you feel obligations to share it with somebody. And I think that's all I did. I just get so bored with people complicating what art is and what it's for. It's the simplest thing. It's practically the simplest thing we deal with if you get down to it because go back to the history of art every place. They did it for a very simple reason. The craft of decorating a bowl or drawing pictures on a wall in a cave or painting a picture to see if you could sell it because somebody might want it for the same reason that you painted it. It's just as simple as being a farmer or a good cook or a good craftsman in any field. You do it because that's what you do.

SA: Well, it sounds like you were creating something that would be accessible to people at that time . . .

MZ: Oh yes. Yes.

SA: . . . but, also, that came naturally to you.

MZ: Yes.

SA: And so, really, you were, at that time, you were clearly in the mainstream of art in the sense that there was kind of a thrust nationally to create public art that was accessible.

MZ: I think so.

SA: But you were just doing it naturally. That's what came naturally to you anyway so you were . . .

MZ: That's true.

SA: . . . you were just in sync with what was going on.

MZ: That's true. It was just fitting into the very thing that I liked to do and was excited about doing. And I wouldn't have any idea wanting to paint a mural, either in my thinking then or now, never wanted to paint a mural that would be annoying to people. Now that sounds as though you're catering but it isn't at all. It's simply common sense. If I invite someone into my home I hope it isn't going to be a place where people are going to be

uncomfortable. If I show them a picture I'm not trying to cater to them, but I want a picture that pleases them and if it doesn't, well, I can't help it and I'm not going to blame them or myself but, basically, I'm a simple soul. I have no desire to annoy people in any way with my art or in any other – I know I did it now and then but I don't intend to. And I get so sick of the smart aleck attitude in art where the prime reason seems to be to just excite people to some kind of antagonistic feeling toward it and I'm pretty sure that that is often the case. I've become so conscious of literature lately because I have to depend on tapes and I'm continually getting angry at some smart aleck writer who merely wants to impress me with how smart he is. He doesn't want to impart or share something as much as he wants to impress me with his smart aleck ability to turn a phrase or be cynical or excite something -– emotion that probably isn't worthwhile if it did have its effect.

SA: Well, were you at all interested in learning to paint fresco or the fresco movement?

MZ: Oh yes. Yes, I got into that to some extent. When I was teaching at Otis Art Institute there was a little group of students who worked around me. I don't know whether you recall Art Landy?

SA: Oh yes. I recognize that name.

MZ: Yeah, well, when I went there he had won some kind of a right to have art school benefits and when I went there to teach he was sort of assigned as my assistant or to be the one that I would look to for help. So we became very good friends and the two of us got interested in fresco painting and then we got a class interested and we got a project of doing a fresco at Hemet. Do you remember the Ramona pageants?

SA: Yes.

MZ: Does that still go on?

SA: It still goes on.

MZ: I'd have to find out if that fresco's still there. But I sort of led the team and Art and a couple of others and a group of four or five students went up there as a joint -– I think I pretty much completed the design but the group of us did the painting.

SA: Now, how did you know what to do in terms of the fresco technique itself?

MZ: Well, of course, being interested in what the Mexicans were doing and then I think I told you I listened in when [David Alfaro] Siqueiros gave a criticism -– some criticism at Chouinard.

SA: So you did go to a class there?

MZ: I went to one of his criticism sessions and then I was aware of the work he did doing fresco a Mexican community on Alvarado street. No, there was quite a bit of thought and talk. After all, it's around the time when [Jose Clemente] Orozco did the fresco here and there's a lot of interest in it and Millard, oh yes, Millard did a fresco at a school in Pasadena. He and . . . Well I can't think of his name now, either but Tom and I, Tom Craig and I saw some of that work going on.

SA: Okay. So you watched the process . . .

MZ: Yes.

SA: . . . enough times that you felt . . .

MZ: Oh yes.

SA: . . . like you knew what to do?

MZ: Oh yes. We quickly digested the idea that it was a matter of working in wet plaster, you just mix dry color with water. You don't use any binder in the color whatsoever. It's the crystalline effect of the lime in the plaster that binds the color and we knew, of course, the demands, that you have to accomplish whatever you do in a matter of six to seven hours at most. Then my experience painting frescos revealed that when you first start the wet plaster has so much water in it it resists the color. You can hardly get any depth of color at first. But progressively as the day goes on and the moisture is absorbed by the wall then it gets to the exciting point where it literally draws the color right off the brush. And that, to be touching a paper and having the color taken right out of your brush –- that's a very exciting thing.

SA: That's magical almost.

MZ: And that's when you get your real deep colors -– during that brief period and then as soon as it begins to

dry, then you're in danger of having it dry and the colors [unintelligible] off because they haven't been integrated into the wall. So we knew all of this and being excited art students we knew all about it and there's still a little fresco down here in Pomona done on a wall in a residence. There again, there's a reflection of the Depression time. My sister and brother-in-law were having a difficult time financially. She was pregnant and expecting this baby, and I made a deal with a doctor friend to take care of her and to trade for something of mine and he was very generous. He said, "Milford, of course I'll do it and whatever you want to give me. Painting or whatever." But he was building a house and I proposed this. I said, "Suppose, couldn't I do a fresco over your fireplace"?

[SESSION 6, TAPE 1, SIDE A]

SA: This is Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. An interview with Milford Zornes on the 5th of September, 1999, at his studio home in Claremont, California. The interviewer is Susan Anderson. This is tape one, side one, session six. Well, Milford, today we're going to talk about your excursions in teaching in the post-war period and what you're doing now, too. And I'd like to start by going back to about 1950. And in that year your career was full of awards and exhibitions, well, your career was full of awards and exhibitions in important regional and national institutions up until about that year. I think the last year in which you received several regional museum and gallery exhibitions might have been 1949, when you were about 41 and you showed at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, the Rotunda Gallery in San Francisco, the La Jolla Gallery of Art . . .

MZ: Yes. Yes.

SA: And Zeitlin and ver Brugge Gallery in LA in that year, which is really pretty active.

MZ: Yes.

SA: And then in 1950 you resigned teaching at Pomona College and that's when you went off to Greenland to work in the Engineering and Supply departments of the North Atlantic Construction Company, which was building an air base in -– is it Thule?

MZ: Thule, Greenland. Thule. That's fine.

SA: Well, what made you decide to do that?

MZ: Well, I suppose I'm answering questions in such a general way it seems that when you put a question to me I can only get at it by a whole view of it.

SA: That's fine.

MZ: You mentioned teaching. I can simply say that I've been teaching ever since I started to paint because for one very simple reason -– there's no other way to learn at all so I was prone to organize classes whenever I could to have some means of surviving and working at art. I've refrained from getting involved in directions other than art so everything I've ever done, it seems, has been, in some way, related so that I didn't stray away from my basic interest. Prior to the war I did have experience teaching at Otis Art Institute. I taught various private classes and accepted invitations to do short teaching stints at – for one thing -– I taught at -– I'm getting things after the war . . .

SA: That's all right. That's okay.

MZ: But, at any rate, in general, teaching has always been a very definite part of my career. It seemed that teaching and painting would go right along together simply because it involved the language of art, which was my language that I was involved with and, actually, the experience of teaching has been one of teaching myself. I think all teachers find that true and so that's a general view of the thing. Well, after the war I did teach -– I had taught -– oh, yes, I had taught -– I mentioned Otis Art Institute and after the war I was asked to come teach at Pomona College and I did teach there for three years after the war. The reason for the Thule, Greenland experience -– I have already mentioned, I believe, reasons for leaving Pomona College. If I haven't, it was simply the feeling that I hadn't really given thought to the idea of getting into the academic world of college teaching. I enjoyed it because I associated with young adults and it was promising because it offered a chance for a kind of a safe career. If you fulfilled your functions as a teacher long enough and had the proper promotions you were pretty well slated to have -– what do they call it?

SA: Tenure?

MZ: Tenure, and have a retirement income. But this seems to reflect my stubborn lack of some kind of vision. I could never see career in terms of advantages. It always seemed career was a matter of meeting challenges as a painter rather than meeting challenges of seeking security.

SA: Well, I think that's wonderful.

MZ: Probably this was out of a careless attitude toward life, no doubt. And I think I've been guilty of keeping a youthful attitude of whatever I was at the moment. I didn't really worry about the future too much. I could look back on chances to buy real estate, chances to hold down jobs, chances to make connections, probably would have summed up to a definite career advantage from the financial point of view but, for some reason I just seemed to pass these things over to a great extent. And I don't know whether I regret it or not. I pretty much have a little bit of a smug feeling that I got along without it.

SA: Well, freedom is important to you.

MZ: Freedom, yes. That's exactly it. I've often said that I refuse to pay myself –- since I have only one life I refuse to pay myself for being bored as much as I possibly can. I just have not enjoyed work when it was work. I've done a lot of things, a lot of physical work, when I was a kid. I did all kinds of labor and work on ships and labor jobs if I couldn't get anything else. But I was young and strong and associated with certain men and it seemed like a natural thing to do and I've never really suffered much from the idea that I had to work. So I guess I can say that work, whether it's been in my field of art or teaching or anything that I've had to do at the moment to survive in some way, it's never been really a bore to me and in some way or another I think every experience has added to my thinking as an artist. Actor friends will tell me that they deliberately observe, they take advantage of situations. If they have to work as busboys or ushers in theaters or –- they somehow add that to their acting equipment. And I think I've actually done that as a painter. I think every job I've ever had, regardless of what it was, has in some way given me some foresight as a painter. So I have no regret about the odds and ends of things I've had to do once in a while.

SA: Well, when you went to Thule you made the decision to go based on the fact that you'd be able to paint. Is that true?

MZ: Well, it came about in this way, actually. As an art instructor at Pomona College I think I had about a dozen students that I was advisor to because they were in the field of art and they had to contend with the other classes to keep up their college work. Well, there was one girl –- I got involved with her family because she was a musician, a singer and her father had worked his way from carpenter to vice president of a big construction company and he thought along constructive lines and he felt that she should go to a music seminary or college or school in preference to college 'cause if she was a musician, go for it. And her mother favored the idea of her finishing college so I was brought in as kind of an arbiter because I was her advisor. And in meetings with the family I attempted to encourage her to go ahead and get her college degree because I had to feel that probably, at that stage, she was already a sophomore and good student. But, at any rate, the point was I was involved in the family and I got acquainted and the decision was that when she graduated I would do a portrait of her. That'd be her graduation present. So when she graduated, that was the time that I decided to resign from Pomona College, but my first chore that spring or that season was to go to their home in Pasadena. She posed for the portrait so for several days I was there. She and her mother and I were there and her mother would fix lunch and we would break from working on the portrait and the girl was quite thoughtful. She was questioning me about why I wanted to resign from a good college job and that sort of thing. And I made a flip remark having lunch with her and her mother that, "I wish I was fancy-free like I was when I was a kid. I could go on a construction job or be a sailor or something and get away from an art career for a while." "Get some perspective." And we went back to posing.

[SESSION 6, TAPE 1, SIDE B]

MZ: . . . all summer out there and I conned people, friends I knew to pose for me, including Robert Taylor. Robert Taylor was a musician. He was a good musician on the cello, particularly. He was dark haired and he and some Mexican national students planned and presented a review of a Mexican song and dance at the college and it was a very good program. And it was so popular that they were asked to do another one. Mr. Garner, who owned all the land up around Padua Hills area, in order to promote sales of those properties up there, he planned to have a small theater built so that the community could say, "We could have a theater, we could have a local restaurant," and whatnot. But he went off to Europe and when he came back the architect had planned and built about twice as much theater as he had wanted to have. He told me about this later on. So when these Spanish students did these reviews they invited them to do it at this big, empty theater and it went over so well. So they got the idea of establishing the Padua Hills Players. And that was said to be one of the longest-running folk theaters of all time. It lasted about 30 years.

SA: When did it start? What year was . . .

MZ: Well, that would be, let's see, in 1930, I would say roughly 1934. '33 or '34.

SA: What year would it have been that you got involved?

MZ: Well, when I came back from Greenland I was . . .

SA: What year was that you came back?

MZ: Let’s see. I was up there up through 1955.

SA: Okay.

MZ: And I came back and I started doing work at the theater just about 1955 or ‘56. I remember that period well because I think it was about the first year that I did that work, or the second year, that I wanted to take Pat and our daughter, who was about junior high school age. We wanted to take a trip to Mexico and Mr. Garner, because of his interest in Mexico, gave me a little assignment of seeing a man in Mexico who was a European who had gone to Mexico as a refugee during the war and he was sometimes leader of the Mexico City Pacific Orchestra. And he was a orchestra leader for one of the moving picture studios. He was involved at a private school and Mr. Garner wanted to make a gift to that school. And so he wanted me to see these people and gave me a little assignment and helped out with my expenses so he could give me this opportunity. I remember that was 1956. So that places that time.

SA: Right. And so how many years was it that you were at Padua Hills or . . .

MZ: Well, let’s see. We bought the Utah place in 1963 and I continued, I think, probably a year or so after we bought the place up there. I continued to do the work with them . . .

SA: I see. And at the time that you were working for them it was still the Mexican Players?

MZ: Oh yeah. And that was interesting because we were kind of a little family. There were the players and the Garners who owned the theater and I was doing the art work. And I had a little job, too, of presenting exhibits up there in the foyer of the theater. I was responsible for keeping up a routine of exhibits and we exhibited Martinez, Marciano Martinez and young kids. And I presented shows for a Mexican painter who lives in Los Angeles who was doing interesting work.

SA: Do you remember who that was? Maybe it’ll come to you later.

MZ: I’ve got one of his pictures. That’s quite a story. I’ll tell you that. I gave a show. Millard Sheets, Phil Dike. I gave shows to a great many of the different artists. Local shows up there at the theater and they were always popular because they were local, for one thing, and people coming out from Los Angeles to the theater also made it fun and interesting. So that was a good experience, too. I enjoyed working, each time getting a show, contacting the artist and getting a show together. It’s quite a chore but it fit in with my job and I enjoyed it.

SA: It sounds like it was an interesting job and a interesting place. Well, it sounds like it was a major turning point for you.

MZ: Yes, because I really had the ambition to get back into the academic world. I admired it and some way or another I enjoyed that first year at Pomona. I enjoyed the events but the next year they did them as a regular routine and the next year the same routine. I saw myself settling into an academic pattern and I resisted it. I couldn’t help but resist it.

SA: Well, things were changing in the art world anyway. I mean, things were going in quite a different direction after the war. You’ve already talked a little bit about how the California school broke up and everybody went in their separate directions and that was also at the time that more abstract forms of art were becoming prominent, wasn’t it? Abstract expressionism?

MZ: I’m sure that’s true. It did seem that there was more and more experimenting in other directions other than the traditional business of scene painting. And it seemed that it just was more and more controversy, an endless kind of controversy as to the different direction. I remember one of my students at Pomona College. After I had resigned she was married to a very influential lawyer, this Mr. Hopp.

SA: Hot?

MZ: Hopp. He’s quite important in California politics and whatnot. But, at any rate, she was quite young but he was a collector and she was much involved. And I remember in a very take-over way and I was a little amused because she was quite a young girl talking to me and I was a middle-aged, experienced painter and she just told me that I should simply go into a more non-objective direction.

SA: And what did you think about that?

MZ: And I just told her that my concern was my painting and my attitude toward painting and my directions, and

I just turned around the corner and she said, “I’m going this way or that.” I couldn’t see it done that way. I’m too independent; I had to feel too independent of trends and directions to be. So it was amusing to me to be countered by, I still think at that time, a fairly inexperienced young lady.

SA: Sounds like she thought she knew what was going on.

MZ: She developed some very definite opinions.

SA: Well, so you never thought about going in that direction? In going in a less representational direction?

MZ: Oh, of course I’ve thought of it, of course, because I think in abstract terms. I am very definitely of the opinion that all art is abstract art and I think it’s necessary to make a differentiation between nonobjective and traditional art rather than abstract versus traditional art. Because all art is abstract. It has to be because if you analyze it thoroughly I would say art is the abstraction of truth. Art is the abstraction of truth. But nonobjective art -– I still question it for my own purposes simply because I find . . . I have experimented; I’ve tried to paint abstract pictures now and then but it doesn’t fulfill anything for me and I invariably find that even my abstract pictures are based upon some very definite theme that I’ve derived from the natural world. If I draw a tree and I take a branch of a tree and bring it down into my picture, down through the trunk, over the root, through a shrub and out I’ve divided my picture into two parts and if I painted one of those areas black and one white I’d have a hard-edged painting. But where did I get that line? You see. I think it’s pretentious for an artist to think he can outdo the immense world of nature in devising and discovering new things. It’s more incumbent upon me to discover a line from nature and abstract it and make use of it for a nonobjective design than it is to me to say, “You’re so sensitive and smart you can invent a line that nature never could.” You see?

SA: Yes.

MZ: I’m too beholding to the wonders of the world to think that I can out-invent nature.

SA: Well, did you encounter other people that suggested to you that the world of art had changed and you should change along with it?

MZ: Not very often because I seem to have fallen into an interesting category. When people were saying, “I like the simple abstract character of your work.” And here I was really not realizing that. I was simply, maybe in a lazy way putting things down without the job of detailing it too much. I think I was just a lazy painter. Again, I didn’t want to bore myself by extraneous detail. So, people interpreted this as abstract painting. Well it wasn’t. It was possibly, slightly nonobjective because it didn’t give me a complete botanical description of a tree or a geological correctness in drawing rocks. It was an inventive observation and invention based upon that observation saying, “What’s the best way I can get away with making that look like a rock? What’s the easiest way I can get away with making that look like a tree?” You see?

SA: Okay.

MZ: I simply have never been able to face . . . no, I have done a lot of overly detailed pictures but I get tired of doing it. So I really believe that, if you’re an enterprising student, you’re willing to start out exploring nature even down to fine detail but then you simply grow weary of doing everything with that fine detail and you keep leaving out as much as you can and still say what you want to say. And that way, I would say that, possibly, the natural development of an artist would be to eventually -– if you live long enough or work fast enough -– you might eventually become a nonobjective painter because what you’re saying is, “I’m reducing this to the essence. To the essence. And maybe I can get it down to where one line will tell the story.” You know. And in a sense that’s what I try to do. I try to start with one line that pretty much sums up my picture and then I relate everything else to that.

SA: How interesting.

MZ: It’s like -– if you’re a writer you call up your editor and say, “I’ve got an idea for a book. I need an advance.” He says, “Well, you know, I could give you an advance when I see at least a synopsis.” What are you going to do? Over the telephone you give him a paragraph telling him what the book is going to be and he knows you’re a writer and he knows you’re responsible so he said, “All right. Send me the synopsis and I’ll sign a contract for the book.” I’m sure that has happened.

SA: I’m sure, too.

MZ: And what that artist, that writer is able to do, he knows what that story’s going to be and he knows he’s capable of spending several months filling in the script that he is going to have to tell that story. So if I put down one line and say, “That’s my picture,” then I’m experienced enough as a painter to assure people that I can bring in other elements to the degree that I could give full credence to that -– the meaning of that line through a

somewhat more complete development.

SA: Well, has the loss of your sight influenced your thinking at all in that direction?

MZ: Well, it has very definitely and it really is a loss. I enjoy life as much as I did when I could see the wonderful world around me all of the time but I'm angry because I'm a painter and I have to dig harder to make it an interesting life. So I use my binoculars and I observe closely and what I look for now, knowing that I can't just look and put it down so readily, I just look for that basic symbol that sums up my picture. Starting with one line and adding enough to at least give it as much substance as a word symbol. An Oriental word symbol. If I could go that far that gives me a form. And then my past experience of painting will give me all information for fulfilling that form. From developing that form into a full-fledged picture. And I feel this way: if I just go the step of finding that line or that simple form I have satisfied myself to a certain degree but I want to communicate it to other people and if I'm not willing to go ahead and create a work that will speak to someone else then I'm so self-centered I only want to satisfy myself and I can't afford it in the first place. I need a product that is worthwhile to somebody that will justify my living out of art.

SA: I think that was a good description of the change in your working methods.

MZ: Yes.

SA: That you've gone through recently.

MZ: And of course I've had to just simply work with bolder color, bolder line so I can see what I'm doing. I mean if I try to deal with subtle integration of color and wet wash, I could get confused quite easily so I'm more and more depending on strong lines, strong contrast. And it's satisfying because really I've been tending to want that all the time.

SA: And has your palette changed or has your kit that you take with you changed?

MZ: Yes, because I used to indulge in 16 or 20 colors or 24. I don't need all those colors. If I can have the three primaries or the three secondary or the six primary and secondary colors I have all I need and then I know where they are on the palette. I'm almost like the deaf musician. I can see it whether I actually see it; I know where the color is. I can get it. When I see it in a wash spread on paper then I can see what it is and you'd be surprised how many things I do without seeing.

SA: It's remarkable.

MZ: There are so many things I do to make it possible for me to see it. I guess that's it. For instance, I can't read the label on the tube, which color it is. Well, if Pat's at hand I'll get her to say what is this color sometimes. But if she isn't around I take a little bit of it on a piece of paper and touch it with water and spread it out and that's so I can see if it's red or yellow or whatever. And then once I have it placed on my palette and I know what it's going to do then I can anticipate pretty well. I can wet the paper -– I use an atomizer a lot. I'll wet the air and then instead of using a big brush and spread the wash I'll spread it with just a regular brush because I wet the paper and spread it out. And then when it comes to individual strokes then I know that if I pull this brush a certain way it's going to give me a straight line and I know that if I touch the brush lightly then press it down full color and thin it out I can get a thick and thin line that will be expressive.

SA: So you're painting by touch?

MZ: To a great extent.

SA: Oh, interesting.

MZ: Yeah.

SA: But, now, you can see the result of what you've done if you look at it closely?

MZ: Well, yes, now, that painting I can't see it -– that one down there. I can't see the detail.

SA: Which is about five feet away.

MZ: It's almost monochromatic but not quite. But if I come up here then I can pretty well see the color and if I get here I can [unintelligible].

SA: Okay. So about two feet away or so you can start to see.

MZ: Yeah, that's the reason I have to stand up all the time because I have to be able to be close enough to the

paper to see it that well. Of course, if I'm working on a small thing and I get tired I'll take a small piece and sit down, put my palette here. But as long as I can get close enough so that -– but the trouble of it is, it never comes exactly sharply clear. It's like looking through a ground glass. And you just simply have to say, "Well, I can get it to as a great degree of definition as I can get," and then know that when I put down the color I will get definition.

SA: And that's just from so many years' experience of painting?

MZ: You just do it. Yeah, you just do it. If I hadn't had the 60 years of painting in back of me . . . I doubt if you could learn to paint if you couldn't see well. You might learn to do sculpture but I don't know if you could learn to paint.

SA: I wonder.

MZ: You could learn to write, of course, 'cause you could use other devices. You know, who was it that wrote the Conquest of Mexico?

SA: Was that [William H. Prescott]?

MZ: He was blind. He wasn't absolutely blind and he had to use a magnifying glass. He had an amazing career. Maybe I shouldn't be taking your tape but . . .

SA: Well, hold on. Well, we were talking about the change in your working methods and before that we were talking a little bit about the difficulties you faced in the first few years following World War II. Sort of making your way without having a specific teaching job or something like that. And it sounds to me like the difficulties you faced were more from having made your decision to go your own way rather than the fact that the art world had changed.

MZ: Yes. I simply have to be truthful and say that -– because you're so much with yourself you don't really take that much interest in the general aspect of things. And so it was looking after your own interest and surviving by your own efforts. I just wasn't that much aware of all that was going on. And it was a difficult time because it was an occasional teaching job, occasional sale of a picture. Just a patchwork of freelance efforts to keep an income coming in and it did come in and you're finally right at the point where it would be very hard to live any way other than on a freelance basis.

SA: Right. And then it sounds like in around 1963 several different things happened. You had the American Artist article.

MZ: Yeah.

SA: You were elected to the National Academy.

MZ: Yes.

SA: And isn't that also the year you bought Maynard Dixon's studio?

MZ: Yes, it was. And that all came about through a kind of definite restlessness. I was unhappy. In the first place I needed more studio and I couldn't afford to build it. That was a frustration. I was working in a garage shelter space up there at our place in Pedua Hills and I couldn't afford to build a studio. I had no means of getting a loan to build one because I didn't have the steady income and I just had an unhappy feeling that the Southern California smog was getting thicker and the traffic heavier and the population greater and the expense of living higher and I just wasn't able to have what I felt I needed to work comfortably as a painter. It was just a restless, restless feeling so everything I did was sort of a casting around to escape from it and the idea of buying a studio in Utah was one way and the desire to get away from the routine -– I don't know how to explain it. And the idea of being in the big open spaces of Utah just became so appealing and I had dreams of living that way for the rest of my life, away from the too concentrated aspects of things. And that's an interesting thing in this moving back. You discover that that whole period was very important -– 36 years of more-or-less feeling that you were not a Californian anymore. That you faced the whole country rather than California. I really felt much a part from California art affairs but the sheer hardship of getting out to travel from that remote area, being sure that I had enough assignments to do, workshops to keep up our living expenses, and working hard to establish possibilities for selling my paintings. And that conflicted because dealers -– if you sold a picture they want 10 more like it. And so everything seemed to be difficult. Then, finally, we had to continually come back to California to travel out to take things to dealers, to meet commitments for teaching, that sort of thing, and we had to come down here and stay. We'd make arrangements for a house for a few weeks and finally we settled at that old adobe, friends of ours had that old historical adobe in Pomona. We got that apartment back there. Then I had heart surgery and then eye problems started to develop and it became harder and harder to get back to Utah until we

finally felt trapped here. The only property we owned was that place up there and we did own it complete. We had paid for it.

SA: In Utah?

MZ: In Utah. The only prospect was to go back there to live and to retire there. More or less to spend the rest of our life there. Then my blindness made all the driving chores fall on Pat. There were so many things that just came –– these things kept coming up as ways of complicating our life if we tried to live up there and still carry on a career. And we just kind of agonized over this. We didn't have money enough to go back and really make the improvements we needed to really get that place in shape for full-time living. It had been all right so far but with coming of age and blindness, that sounds weird, but we just kept facing one difficulty after another and it was such a refreshing thing –- Mike Verbal –- I don't know how well you know him.

SA: I don't know him well.

MZ: Well, Mike is an interesting guy. He doesn't say much and he . . .

[SESSION 6, TAPE 2, SIDE A]

SA: This is the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Interview with Milford Zornes on the 5th of September 1999 at his studio home in Claremont, California. The interviewer is Susan Anderson. This is tape two, side one, session six and we were talking about Mike Verbal.

MZ: We're talking about him because he's become important to me as a dealer and the first time I met him he and his wife were very young. They had a little baby. I bet these kids almost seemed like they were just out of high school. He wanted to see some pictures. For some reason he'd gotten a hold of Phil Dike; he'd gotten a hold of a picture or two and I don't know what possessed him. He had a pizza parlor downtown. Pat asked him one day how he happened to get into a restaurant career. He said, "I don't know anything about restaurants." She said, "Well, you have a pizza place." He said, "Well, it was the only thing I could afford to buy as a business." If he'd have bought anything else he'd have gone in another direction. He's a businessman.

And, I was asking $700 for a large watercolor at that time and they decided they couldn't afford it so later on, it was a few years later, they asked to see things again and they did buy a couple of pictures from me. Then it began to dawn upon me and I guess dawned upon him that he wanted a gallery and the first I knew he had gotten that place. Where he had his pizza parlor there's an old building that used to be a bank and he found a way to buy it. They financed it out of their pizza restaurant and he just gradually made one business deal after another. He built a house up here near Padua as a speculation, sold it at a good price, made some money, and lo and behold he had a gallery. He's into a gallery and some people have said, "Oh Mike knows nothing about art. He's just a businessman." And I said, "Look, for some reason he had the desire to deal in art. Whatever that instinct was it's there and he's stuck with it. He was fascinated."

SA: And so he's your dealer and did he help you find this house, too?

MZ: Well, what happened –- because he is my dealer, he took me to Utah one time. I was entering a show each year at St. George, an invitational show at St. George, Utah, so he took me up there and we went on up to my place and I showed him around and showed him what my problems were. There was a man taking care of the place. It looked pretty good and Mike didn't say anything. We were there two days and he didn't say much. That's typical. And we packed up to leave and he said, "I'd like to talk to you a minute. There's some things you ought to let me talk to you about." And he sat down and he said, "You've got a valuable property here." He said, "I think you could sell it for $500,000. You could spend $300,000 and buy a house in California and have some money for income." And I said, "Well, that's a beautiful picture but I think the bank value would be about $130,000 to $150,000.

SA: But what we need to talk about is how it came about that you bought Maynard Dixon's studio in Zion National Park in Utah in 1962.

MZ: Okay. All right. I gave a talk up there the other day very much on that subject because I was the guest of honor and had to make a talk. I met Maynard Dixon and Edith –- the last time I met Maynard was in the spring of '43 and Buck Weaver, a mutual friend of ours, was in the hospital. I went up to see him and he said the Dixons would be up and so I managed to see them and we went to dinner in Chinatown and Maynard said, "Milford, I just got hold of a little worthless piece of land in Utah. I don't know what in the world to do with it." He said, "Maybe a few of us artists could go together and build studios on it." But I wasn't thinking much about it because that was the day I was drafted into the Army.

SA: Oh.

MZ: And so I was involved in going into the Army and training and going to India. A year and a half or almost two years later I was in China and I had a letter from Edith Dixon saying they had logs on the ground to build a house. Then I came back and Maynard was very ill and Edith hired me and Buck Weaver to help her complete some murals. We were in Tucson and we completed murals that Maynard had designed for the Santa Fe Company in Chicago after doing a mural for them in Los Angeles. So, that's the way things stood. While I was doing that mural she showed me photographs of the place in Utah. I came back and I was teaching at Pomona and the second spring I bought a new Mercury car and we were so excited about that we simply got into the car, Pat and our daughter and I got into the car, and drove to Idaho to visit some relatives of mine and we returned to California by way of Yellowstone National Park, Zion National Park and eventually we got down to where the studio was and we visited Edith there. We stayed a couple of days and went on to California by way of Grand Canyon. Well, literally, years went by because I was busy making a living. Eventually we had bought the place at Padua. I bought supplies from a paint store in Pomona who had a part-time business -- art supplies and regular paint products. I went in there and it was very hot and he said, "You're all in?" And I said, "Yes, but I'm not getting a vacation." And he said, "I bought a Cadillac car and tomorrow night I'm going to fly back on Monday to pick it up. Why don't you come with me and we'll get to drive West and we'll go to a Las Vegas show." So that was intriguing. I came home. Pat encouraged me to do it. All I had to do was cancel a class at Riverside so he and I flew back on Monday, picked up the car in Des Moines, drove West to -– what's the capital of Nebraska?

SA: Omaha?

MZ: Omaha, Nebraska. And next day we had a nice drive through Rocky Mountain National Park or that park in -– then we stayed at Green River, Utah, and we had planned to go across south of Salt Lake and we were advised to take a shortcut down through Hanksville, Utah, and eventually, taking that cross-country route over a new road, just by chance, I discovered that we were down in the Dixon country again. After several years I began to think about the landscape and realized I was familiar with it and sure enough got on down to Orderville, Utah and here was the Dixon place with the gate open. The meadow had grown up to weeds. We drove in. There was no one at home. The yard was strewn with children's toys. Doors were wide open. There were Dixon paintings hanging all over the place and so I left a note for Edith Dixon and we drove on down into Zion and eventually to Las Vegas and met some friends that he'd invited to join us. On the way down I made the remark that Edith had a sign on the gate saying the place was for sale. So I told these guys, "Oh, I'd love to buy that place." Well he was surprised. "What in the world would you do up here?" You know?

SA: Right.

MZ: So we were watching the show. We got in a little late and we got the table right near the stage and I've often made the remark that you had to look through one row of girl's legs to see the rest of the show, we were so close to the stage. And he was kidding me with these men. I didn't know them. I was sitting there kind of sober 'cause I didn't know these fellas and I was abstractly thinking about that place up there and he said, "I think Zornes is thinking more about that log cabin up in the mountains than he is the show." And that was almost true. And when I got home I told Pat that it was for sale and she didn't say anything. I really didn't think she was at all . . . I thought she just thought it was a passing remark. But about three days later she said, "Are you going to do anything about that Dixon place?" And I said, "What could we do? We haven't enough money to buy it." She said, "Well, maybe we could raise it." So I got a note from Edith from San Francisco. She had rented the place to friends, an engineer who had children. That was the reason all the toys were in the yard and he had sent my note to her in San Francisco. We got together and I talked about, "I wish we could buy it." And said, "Well, do you want to buy it?" And I said, "Yes, I want to but I don't know." She said, "Well, think about it and we'll have a talk," and I let the thing go for a few days and then she wrote or called and says, "If you want to do anything about this you better get a little earnest money down so that I know that something's going on." Edith was a pretty straight forward lady. So we sent her $500 to have the privilege to talk it over for a while. I found out that Emil Kosa had thought of buying it. I found out that a Mormon friend of mine, his mother had wanted to buy it for him so he'd come back to Utah. A famous illustrator, Jackson -– I think his name's Jackson. You often saw his things in the old Saturday Evening Post, he had made a down payment at one time. Emil Kosa was very ill with cancer and when I told him I was thinking about it he said, "I would love to have it but what would we do with it? Why would you want to live up there?" Well, truth is, I did want it and we did make a deal to raise $7,000 to make a down payment and the rest of $24,000 we'd put on contract. Payment plan. So we got the place with the option to buy another part. Another acreage.

SA: Could you also describe Edith Hamlin Dixon a little bit?

MZ: Edith was a very interesting person. She was Maynard's third wife. I don't know what his first marriage was but he was married to the famous photographer . . .

SA: Dorothea Lange.

MZ: . . . Dorothea Lange. Edith was quite young. Much younger than Maynard. They were acquainted in San

Francisco. Edith had an unfortunate marriage about the time Maynard and Dorothea Lange broke up and they sort of came together in sympathy, I guess and Edith was very energetic. She had a quick mind and she was all over the place and, actually, since Maynard had been somewhat of an invalid all of his life, he suffered from asthma from childhood, and he had to put up with illness. It's amazing the amount of work that he did with the handicaps that he faced. He countered this physical problem by being somewhat brusque and straightforward in his language. The truth is that he directed Edith a great deal and Edith took the initiative. She did almost all of the carpentry and everything else that went with getting settled up and she did the driving. And Maynard told me one time –- by the time I knew them they had a nice station wagon that had been equipped to carry their equipment and everything and I commented on the nice outfit they had and he said, "Milford, this is an art career for you: You work all your life trying to be an artist, you finally get so you can own an automobile, you finally get a young wife to drive it then, god damn it, you're ready to die."

SA: Sense of humor.

MZ: Yeah. But, at any rate, one interesting incident: because we respected Edith and because we wanted to make her know that we appreciated the place, I made the gesture of sending her a key to the place, making her welcome to go there whenever she wanted to. Well, she did go there one time after we had been up there and after Pat had made some arrangement in the house. She changed the furniture around in all kinds of direction. Made Pat very angry. But that was Edith. She just was a vigorous person who couldn't sit still. You had to like her because she was outgoing and generous and you had to be on your guard because she'd take over.

SA: Yeah. She was an artist in her own right. I know that she . . .

MZ: She was an artist in her own right. She fell very much under Maynard's influence as far as style is concerned but she was capable of satisfying the Santa Fe Company. When Maynard had designed murals for the Santa Fe ticket office in Los Angeles and she and Ray Strong painted those under Maynard's direction. And then when Maynard died, having completed sketches for the Chicago ticket office and because of Edith's ability the Santa Fe Company gave her the contract to finish them. Then she hired me and Buck Weaver to come help her with these murals and the three of us painted them.

SA: But in her own work what was her medium? What did she . . .

MZ: Oh, she worked in oil and I don't know of her ever doing watercolor. Maynard did a few watercolors but she –- there was a very good picture of Tine [Valentine] Tait, portrait of Tine Tait, that I saw and she was a very capable painter. Over the years I think she fulfilled two or three contracts for murals in her own right.

SA: Well, after you took over the studio in Zion National Park you started to have painting workshops there as a means of making a living, is that right?

MZ: Yes. One of our excuses for buying the place was that we could go up there in the summer. We could hold classes and that was our primary objective. We hadn't really given full thought to moving up there at once. We really thought of it as a summer place to work and teach but we had to earn and we almost had to sell our place in Claremont to really come out financially and be able to hang onto everything so it forced the decision to live up there. We wanted to do it but it forced us to realize that we could go ahead and do it.

SA: Right. And so would you talk a little bit about your painting workshops?

MZ: Well, yes, it was difficult to popularize those workshops because when we advertised, I think, in American Artist magazine the first year or two we scarcely broke even as far as earning because of the expense of advertising and getting a flier to send out, mailing and so forth. And the unhappy circumstance was that, for some reason, people throughout the country –- if they thought of going West they probably prefer red to go out to the coast and work with Rex Brandt by the sea than to Utah where they thought it'd be an arid, dry, hot climate. Truth was it was a quite a desirable place to go in the summer because it's a 5,000 foot elevation. The nights are always quite cool and pleasant in southern Utah. High altitude is really a beautiful place to spend the summer. The fortunate thing was that we did these classes about four years before we actually moved up there. And people did come out and study with us and fortunately I made enough of an impression that they went back to their local places in Texas or Oklahoma or wherever and persuaded their local art association to invite me.

SA: Oh, that was a good outcome.

MZ: So, it was more sensible for us to give up our own workshops and respond to invitations and do them elsewhere. Because we discovered these things: that you have a responsibility, you're forced to have certain insurance. The question is, "Are you running a school? Do you have a license to run a school?" We even had a guest cabin and we allowed some friends to stay there to take the course and then we found the state coming in saying, "Are you running some kind of a hostelry here?" There were just too many complications even to get into a small business. Or at least it just wasn't a popular idea and it behooved us to take advantage of the fact that

we had introduced ourselves to this business of painting workshops and that we could be invited to go elsewhere to do them where we didn't have the responsibility of advertising or insurance or anything else.

SA: So you really started or continued to do workshops all over the country and then even foreign workshops.

MZ: Yes. I was invited –– do you know of painting holidays?

SA: No.

MZ: Tony Van Hasselt, the young Dutch immigrant living in Tulsa, Oklahoma, started the first of these travel workshops or, I guess [Thurman] Hewitt, actually, was the pioneer but at any rate, the idea of organizing workshops and then sending a teacher along. [Thurman] Hewitt Tours and Painting Holiday Tours, that's what Van Hostile called his. I went to them and then I was eventually invited to go for Hewitt and then I was invited to come each year for the Oklahoma Museum of Art and I was invited to come for the Southwestern Watercolor Society in Texas and so it got to be a pattern of having a routine tour each year.

SA: Oh. I see. So you could sort of count on certain places that you would go at certain times of year?

MZ: Yes. Of course you had the hazards of sometimes not being invited or you'd be invited every other year or sometimes classes wouldn't fill sufficiently. It was like show business. Maybe you got a job and maybe you didn't. But on the whole it was consistent enough that we survived quite well on a freelance business: not only teaching the classes but having time in between to paint, opportunities to exhibit. There were a good many close calls and going completely freelance is an adventure, regardless. We did survive quite well. We kept up our payment. Bought the place, cleared our debt on the place and felt quite . . . It was amusing, our neighbors in Utah, our Mormon rancher neighbors, are very much stay-at-home people. Our friends got the feeling that, "Well, maybe Mr. Zornes will get successful enough with his painting that he can stay at home more." And here I was enjoying this life of travel.

SA: Well, you're still doing that now, aren't you?

MZ: Yes, indeed. I'll be out all through October. I'll be in Dallas, Little Rock and New Orleans and then back here at Cambria, possibly Puerto Vallarta if that hasn't filled yet but I'm doing quite a stiff schedule still.

SA: Is there a way for you to give me an approximate number of workshops per year that you're doing?

MZ: Well, at the present time I would say that I average eight.

SA: Eight?

MZ: Eight, seven or eight. I have had as many as 12 or 15 workshops a year and that's small compared with –- well, Robert Wood had a heavy schedule. Who is –- lives up in –- well, he's written a book. But at any rate, some of these people have 40 workshops a year. In fact, that's their whole career. And it's quite lucrative if you work steadily at it because you enjoy a fee, you usually sell some work, you usually attract someone to come to your next workshop. On the whole, depending on how business-like you are . . . some of the workshop people have really made a good thing financially out of them because they get everything to sell. They put a brand on their brushes. A sketchbook with their name on it. It almost comes to retail business, somehow.

SA: Right.

MZ: And depending on your own personal popularity . . . It's rather interesting, I've noticed that certain workshop people will make their workshop pretty much a party deal, have a good time on this workshop. Because I'm a stick-in-the-mud about basic principles and fundamentals of art and so forth I get a smaller crowd but I get a solider crowd.

SA: I see. Do you think you're considered more serious [unintelligible] then?

MZ: Oh yes. I've actually won my place to being pretty much one of the deans in this business.

SA: I can imagine.

MZ: There are a lot of newcomers and there are a lot of people who get bigger classes but I can safely say that I'm looked upon as a pretty solid bet.

SA: And so what are your teaching methods when you're on these trips?

MZ: Well, the pattern would go something like this. I give an opening lecture about 45 minutes to an hour outlining the objectives of the workshop. I try to put the whole business of what painting is in a capsule and lay

down the truly basic things and I wind up with the remark that, “This is all you have to really know about painting. You can spend the rest of your life learning to paint.” All I can say is here I am a person who couldn’t understand English grammar and I almost failed Spanish and French because grammar’s a mystery to me but here I am teaching painting as though it’s a grammar. In this field I am a grammar instructor.

SA: How interesting.

MZ: I have to go back to what are the basic things in a painting. It’s nothing more or less than a language of shapes on a flat surface arranged into a design that conveys an idea, tells a story or creates an impression and I even go to the point that the more poster-like you make paintings for me the better I’m going to like them because I want the thing told clearly and simply. And then I explain that contrast is the key word. You simply contrast one area against another. Set them in contrast so it’s a readable design and then I talk about source of color. You have to know how to think of three conditions of lighting and I wind up with a theoretical discussion of line and literally try to say that in these 45 minutes we’ve discussed everything that is really pertinent to art.

SA: That’s wonderful. Listen, I’m going to turn the tape over. Just a minute.

[SESSION 6, TAPE 2, SIDE B]

MZ: And then I follow with a demonstration of doing a watercolor in my particular way. Then I do a demonstration emphasizing values. I do another demonstration having to do with figures and animals and I do another one having to do with the discussion about the limited palette as compared to the complex palette or simply a discussion of the palette. And then, I was loath to resort to this but I found it almost necessary, I found that you could discuss theories to people and they can accept it as a logical argument but it’s like explaining the theory of baseball playing. It’s never real until you’ve thrown and caught a baseball a thousand times, you see? Or batted a tennis ball a thousand times. It’s a matter of testing theory by practice. So because it’s a short workshop I do one follow-along demonstration. I do this so that I can simply alert people to the fact that when you’re dealing with watercolor you have to put it down stronger than it really is because it’s going to dry lighter. You have to make your contrasts stronger than you see them in nature because you’re trying to bring the vitality of a vast area of landscape or at least several hundred square yards of subject matter or even a still life set-up or a portrait assigning the thing, the strength of that, to a small piece of paper and in order to do that it requires the basic requirements of art and that is emphasis. Contrast, overstatement, understatement. The realization that you’re not copying nature but you’re being expressive of a principle in nature. That you are telling a story graphically and you have to resort to storytelling techniques.

SA: And so you have a paint-along session where you’re painting and they’re painting and they’re painting a thing . . .

MZ: And I put the color down just as strong as I can get away with. Emphasize contrast as much as I can and by that process it does result in their being daring enough, then, to go ahead and do it themselves. Otherwise they accept the principle and then they’re so afraid of making a mistake in watercolor that they don’t achieve the vitality of it.

SA: It sounds a lot like teaching a language. You’re right.

MZ: Yeah, must be.

SA: You know you need to make people repeat after you so that they get over the fear of hearing their own voice.

MZ: That’s right. I think it must be so it turns out that in a week’s time, I believe, I can teach as much painting as they do in a semester at college or art school course.

SA: I bet so. So it’s a week long, usually?

MZ: A week is typical. We used to stage two-week workshops but they get so expensive.

SA: How much is a one-week workshop, now, for a person to go . . .
MZ: Well, I charge $500 a day. And then there’s travel and living expense on top of that. Some people book the cost of the travel and living into it, some put you on your own for your meals and some people put you on for your travel. I stay out of it now in every way except what I ask for my own fee.

SA: Right. And then whoever’s putting the workshop together for you handles the rest of the arrangements?

MZ: Yes. Yes. And that way I get approximately $2,000, a little over $2,000 for doing a week’s workshop or $1,500 for a weekend. And the weekend workshops are getting popular. And then it puts me in a funny position because I have the obligation of saying it all whether I do it in three days or a week.

SA: So you have to talk really quickly.

MZ: I just talk faster. And I talk an awful lot.

SA: Well, when you have those week long ones, then, are you getting a different painting demonstration each day?

MZ: Yes. I try to have some kind of demonstration each day. And I watch this very closely because many of the workshop teachers do nothing but demonstrate. They simply demonstrate. “This is the way you do it.” They do very little teaching, otherwise. And this is dangerous because even Robert Wood, who was one of the most skillful workshop people there ever was, he could bedazzle people to the point where he incapacitated ‘em, you know? “How can I come up to this clever maneuvering with watercolor?” You see?

SA: Right.

MZ: I have a more homely approach that I think is more successful in that I face people with my struggles.

SA: Oh. That’s very good.

MZ: I do it in such a way that they know that I’m having to struggle to make the thing work. Which I am. I put it on the same basis as the problem I have every day when I paint a watercolor. I try to explain what my problem is all the time and how I’m either solving it or fail to solve it. And this way you have people taking the attitude well, “I would do it that way.” Or, “If you’d only do it this way.” You have people turning it around and you have people wanting to tell you how to do it and when you do that you have them thinking in terms . . . It’s a, teaching is an art. You have got to give something up and you have to give up your own theatrical benefits. I wonder if an actor, a great actor, doesn’t do something of the same thing. He gets to the point where he isn’t going to show you how clever he is as an actor. He’s going to show you how. If you are thoughtful enough you can really bring a personality to life, you know. And he probably has you feeling that you could do it. I think real accomplishment as a teacher is where you imbue people with the idea that, “I could do that.”

SA: You’ve simplified it so much and made it so honest.

MZ: Yeah. Yeah. If you can’t do that you haven’t really put it over. I heard Red Skelton say one time: “When I’m facing an audience, if there’s one person down there who looks unhappy, I haven’t made it.” “And if I haven’t made people laugh without explaining my jokes, I haven’t made it.” And it’s so true. Some humor nowadays is so stupid. It’s as though you had to be an intellectual to understand a joke, you know?

SA: Right. Well, that’s a very interesting description of how you teach and it sounds like it’s a little bit like –- I mean, it really comes out of how you paint, isn’t it?

MZ: Well, yes, because if you’re really painting you’re not being clever. You can’t afford to be clever because you’re in the business of exploring something. You’re exploring either subject matter or an idea about subject matter or an imaginative concept of something you want to write about. That has to be the objective. You can’t be imposing how clever you are at drawing or how clever you are at handling watercolor. It has to be beyond that or it won’t have a ringing depth as a painting.

SA: Well, would you talk a little bit about how you’d like to be remembered as a painter?

MZ: I would just have people say, “He was a good painter.” And that you’re asking quite a bit because you’re asking people to accept the fact that you were a draftsman enough to make it credible and legible. You were imaginative enough to intrigue people with some kind of a mystic idea. You were inventive enough to find a way by which you can make your meaning clear. In other words, if you want to be remembered as an artist you better just say, “I was such a good painter that all things came together that made me an artist.” I prefer to think of a person’s art as the tool they work with, not the objective. If you go to work on a picture with the equipment to work as an artist –- you have enough drawing ability, you have enough painting ability, you have enough thinking ability, and imagination that you can paint a good picture -- then you have a chance to be an artist in that instance. But if you start with the objective that, “I’m an artist. I’m recognized as an artist. Everybody knows I’m an artist. Anything I do will be artistic. I’m going to create a work of art.” I don’t trust that approach at all. And I see so much of it. I read books on tape and I get caught up all the time in somebody, “Here’s the latest, brilliant artist,” and they’re not going to the trouble of researching to do a great text book. They’re not researching enough to create a great story. They’re resorting to their little feelings, their little reactions, their little ego trips and then expect me to be impressed. I’m not impressed at all because I want a workman. If I want to read a book, I want a person who’s given me a work great enough to make me want to learn from that book. I don’t want to learn about him. I have my own impressions and psychological problems. Who wants it? I get sick of contemporary ideas as to what art is. I really do. And it’s in everything. It’s in writing. People want to show me how clever they are with making pictures. I’m not interested in that. I’m interested in

what happens to me as a result of their picture and I'm not interested in clever antics, in theatrical areas. I want somebody who creates something for me to ponder and to learn from and that I can make part of my own life experience. That's what you expect of art and you don't get it very much now. Or maybe I don't see it but . . .

SA: Well, I think we've probably come to a point where we could stop the interview. Do you have any final statement you want to make about either your career or what you think art is or anything that you would like to add?

MZ: Well, okay, first of all, I could make this statement with absolute assurance and that is: I'm everlastingly thankful that I've been chosen to be a painter. I can't really find any reason to do anything else in life. So that sounds very smug but that's a fact. I can't imagine wanting to do anything else in life other than be a painter. I suppose it's because it has summed up so many things for me. As an ordinary individual it's given me something to exercise my inventiveness. It's given me something to exercise whatever imagination I have. It's given me the demand that I have a craft that I'm skillful at. It has demanded that I be an observer. It's demanded that I have to have some feeling for life in all areas in nature and in human experience. To me, to be an artist and in my case, to be a painter (I suppose people in other arts experience the same thing), it's a chance to give yourself a whole philosophy and form for living your life and so I would give art credit in that way, as far as I'm concerned. And I guess that sums it up. I was going to say that to be a painter gives you an opportunity to exercise almost every natural gift that you've had the fortune to come into life with. And I guess it even gets to the point of any spiritual feeling that I have. I'm not religious. I can't follow any organized religion. I could be a Buddhist as easy as I could be any other religion. That means I can live with people of any religion because I said, "This is yours. You found the way. I want to live with you. I can put up with whatever religion or anything else you've got," and so art really becomes your religion because it sums up all your values. It brings to a focus all of the real values you have. If you're going to be concerned with truth it has to involve integrity or your picture has no validity. It has to involve good workmanship. It has to involve theoretical knowledge of color structure. It challenge you to take a hold of things with your painting. Art is exceptional, even apart from sculpture or music, the composing of music, even. It's where you have to literally take hold of theoretical principles and turn them into tangible forms on a flat surface, mind you. A sculptor can at least go into the round. The architect can work in three dimension. The writer can write it all out. The painter literally has to have enough skill to put it on a flat surface and make it work. The whole dimensional world that he lives in with all it's complications he puts it on a flat surface and makes it work. If you ponder that that's quite a feat.

SA: Certainly is. And do you also find that you have to come up against yourself and your own weaknesses and strengths as a person?

MZ: Oh, absolutely because that's what your whole art is made up of. It's being able to invent your way out of your weaknesses. It's a way of giving form to whatever strengths you have. It's a means of challenging everything that you are as a human being, actually. This sounds as though I'm being very profound but I don't feel that way at all. It simply means that you're trying to find the simplest answer that you can possibly get to to condone or validate what you do. I've often thought about . . . I read a serious book or I hear about people giving their lives to poor people in dire circumstances doing great things and in a very giving way and you think, "My God, I just paint watercolor." And sometimes you have to figure out what's so important about that. But after a while if you think about, you at least . . . I'd quote Rex Brandt. He said, "The painter is the ultimate ecologist." I think that's a very good statement because as a painter you're showing respect for everything that should be of value to people in a material way. He says, "This tree is an interesting, noble thing." He's saying to those who understand the language of painting, "It's worthwhile. It's wonderful. A tree's a wonderful thing." So why go chopping them down and burning them all over the world, you see? And hills are wonderful creations of sculpture by nature. Created and sculpted by nature. If you're going to blow them up with a bulldozer and build, houses are going to slide off because you destroyed the structure of the hill. So a painter's saying all these things in a way that can be understood by thoughtful people.
SA: Well, I think that is a wonderful place to stop.

MZ: Good.

SA: And thank you very much, Milford.

[END OF TAPE]

END OF INTERVIEW

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