



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Elizabeth Mongan,
1979 Sept. 18

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

Contact Information

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Elizabeth Mongan on September 18, 1979. The interview took place in Rockport, Massachusetts, and was conducted by Robert Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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

Interview

ELIZABETH MONGAN: —one more thing that I didn't show you when you were here before.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: This is an interview with Elizabeth Mongan, in Rockport, Massachusetts, September 18, 1979. Robert Brown, the interviewer. I'd like the interview to begin just by asking you something of your childhood, or anything, particularly in childhood that you think may have stimulated you to later go on to a scholarly field. Both your parents were very encouraging, weren't they, of study and learning? Were they themselves very curious about many things?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Well, my earliest feeling, my earliest recollection, was with my mother reading to me. I was the youngest in the family, and long before I went to school, I could read. She was passionately interested in English literature, and she took great delight in it. I don't think there was ever a question of forcing anyone to do anything. But from my earliest memories, there was always a—feeling for literature, and for languages. When I was still quite young, at school—my father was a faithfully busy doctor—I remember going to bed, always, with a book, and mother remonstrate me one time, I think, what to me seemed fairly early in the evening, that I should not be allowed to read in bed, and Father said, "It won't do her any harm." And for the rest of my life, I have never gone to bed—I can [laughs] remember one or two occasions—without a book of some sort. [00:02:01] That it's a part of my life. Sometimes, in later life, they were catalogs. Early life, they were a variety of things. And it was wide reading. And then I—

ROBERT BROWN: History as well as literature? Poetry as well as prose?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: When I was—a little bit later, when I was old enough, I think something like the first year at Cambridge school, I was introduced to Latin. I had seven years of Latin before I went on to Bryn Mawr. I had five years of French. My father was always terribly, terribly eager that we all should have at least one foreign language, just for itself, and a long training in Latin, because of his scholarship. But I never can remember any of it being forced. The idea was that it was something one did and one enjoyed.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And so you took it. You were happy doing it?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You said because of his scholarship. Your father read it, read Latin literature?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Oh, yes. I mean, he was very well-read, and he was terribly interested in contemporary political literature, aside from his medical journals, which he read up until the time he died at 93. There was a long tradition of reading on both sides of the family, and I think reverence for it. This was something that you loved doing. I can't emphasize enough that this was never forced. Now you sit down and do your homework. What have you read? What are you into now? Which is—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you discuss this quite a lot?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: What?

ROBERT BROWN: Did you discuss what you read?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Oh, yes. Yes, of course, certainly. All opinions—it was sort of an open battle at every meal. We were always expected to be—breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and there were tremendous arguments and discussions, and open. [00:04:00] And I think a great feeling, too, that there should be sort of a lack of prejudice, that people would bring their minds to it, and not shout opinions without having some idea of why they were doing it.

ROBERT BROWN: And you would challenge each other if you weren't able—

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —to give just—

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Bang the table and say, "It's my turn." [They laugh.]

ROBERT BROWN: Well, you as the youngest, did you have the hardest time asserting yourself?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Well, everybody liked to speak, you know. Father once said, "It's pretty hard to have four prima donnas." [They laugh.] Not just one, two, three, but four.

ROBERT BROWN: And then your mother and your father, as well, were weighing in with their opinions.

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Yes. Well, that was nice.

ROBERT BROWN: Hmm. What were some of the leading or frequent topics of discussion in your family?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Public events, what was happening. Terribly interested in what was going on in the country, always.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you recall any particular events that were very important when you were a child, that you remember the family discussing?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Oh, I think Woodrow Wilson came to Boston, you know, and that was tremendous, after the war. That was one of the early ones. We all rushed in and weighed [ph].

ROBERT BROWN: He was coming to talk about the League of Nations?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: I suppose so. I don't know. I was too young. But I do remember that this was one great event.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you discuss—would you then, in home, discuss him, or discuss—

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Oh, yes, and discuss Henry Cabot Lodge, and how dreadful he was to oppose the League of Nations. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT BROWN: This was general agreement on that?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: I think we were too young. I think we were [they laugh] I don't know whether it was general agreement. I remember, later on, that father read Madriaga [José Ortega y Gasset], *The Revolt of the Masses*. I think of that, even before—in the '20s, long before the [laughs] revolt of the masses even dawned on people's minds. He read it aloud to us, because he was fascinated by it. We thought it was interesting, but we had no idea what it was prefiguring. [00:06:02] Now, looking back on Madriaga [José Ortega y Gasset], it really was astonishing, that a busy doctor should have decided to read to his four kids a book of such substance, isn't it?

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. Did your father take that quite seriously?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Very.

ROBERT BROWN: He saw that this might, in fact, happen?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: He was interested, and he was pondering it, I think. Although he couldn't have told what's happening—what has happened since, but he certainly felt some intuition about it.

ROBERT BROWN: You weren't raised in isolation from—at all? Even, say, the '20s, which were presum—

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Oh, no. And also, because he was a terribly busy doctor and terribly interested in what was happening around him, and people, that we always had a feeling that it was part of one's duty to look out for people who weren't well. That we were very much aware of sort of public health.

ROBERT BROWN: Your mother also was involved in quite a few things, wasn't she?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Including political science, foreign policy.

ELIZABETH MONGAN: And then she, on the side, she always collected a few little things. She enjoyed doing that. She collected lace, old lace, little snippets of it, and used to sew them down on blue velvet and make a list of all the pieces that she had—Belgian, French, and so on—so that—and made a whole neat little assembly of things.

ROBERT BROWN: That was one of your first exposures to—

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Yes, and then she was a tremendous naturalist. When we were in Maine, as Agnes probably told you, we were taken on walks in the woods, and taught all the wild things, the shrubs and the berries, and the mushrooms, and so on. That was wonderfully free summers.

ROBERT BROWN: You had to catalog them, didn't you?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: No, we didn't. We just brought them home in our grubby little hands and looked at them, and sat down. As long as we knew what they were.

ROBERT BROWN: But you did learn quite a lot? [00:08:01] Yes, your mother wanted you to know.

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Well, she wanted us to know deadly Amanita, and stay away from things that were poisonous. It was quite all right to pick puffballs, but stay away from the Amanita, which was sensible. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Oh sure. Did you begin school, as your sister at least did, in Somerville, in the public schools there?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Yes, but I only went through the—let me see—one, two, three, four grades, because my father, by that time, had become dissatisfied with the teaching in the school, and he didn't think that I was getting enough education. So then I went to Ms. Haskell's School, and I was there for six years before Bryn Mawr. I immediately began Latin, and went on until the end of Ms. Haskell's School, and by that time, I enjoyed it so much that when I arrived at Bryn Mawr, I took two years just elective. By that time, it was really a pleasure, because I could translate terms enough to do it into poetry, which is what we did freshman year.

ROBERT BROWN: What was it about Latin that kept you at it, you think? Was there a particular fascination?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: No, I think it was just—well, it was one of the things the school was proudest of, and we had a tremendous teacher, who was a martinet, who also felt that if you were very cold, that your brain worked better, a little like the English system. So, ever since, as a kind of rebellion, whenever I want to write, I insist on having a very warm room. [They laugh.] It seems to me one being thoroughly cold and miserable does not help the brain work.

ROBERT BROWN: And yet you came to like Latin?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Oh, yes. Because I could write, I enjoyed it.

ROBERT BROWN: And French, you mentioned earlier, you also had a great deal of. Were there other subjects that were developing?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Oh, ancient history was just divine. I always liked—but this was because the teaching was so good. [00:10:01]

ROBERT BROWN: Really? What was it like? Discussion, or good lectures, or much writing?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: I think it was the ancient history was just plain learning. I knew—Brestit [inaudible]—from beginning to end, like the Bible, by the time I went to take my final exam for Bryn Mawr. I had memorized most of it. Isa [inaudible] 2750 BC, after 50 years. I suppose a lot of that was just plain rote, but didn't hurt. We began at the beginning, way back in Central Asia, and just came right on down to the last period. But it was splendid, because any old time that I'm bored, I can turn off any number of things, and either turn on poetry or turn on these various other things. Like Durer, my head is full of figures, images. Sometimes people say, "Well, of course it's ruinous to have had this kind of a strict education." I don't think so, because I wasn't unhappy with it.

ROBERT BROWN: And it didn't—

ELIZABETH MONGAN: It seemed to me the normal thing. We didn't rebel against it. We didn't say we wouldn't do it. Nobody—it never occurred to us.

ROBERT BROWN: Wasn't there a certain imaginative life, even in that—

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Oh, yes, there was, certainly. I mean, in English writing, and the French teaches the same thing. We had to write a French composition. When we had enough background, after three years, we were

taught to write in French.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Plus the life at home, too.

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Very stimulating.

ELIZABETH MONGAN: And then Bryn Mawr itself, of course, was an enormous experience, because there, the scholarship was so good, but it never seemed to me that it was—today, they call it learning for learning, but somehow or other, we managed to have a very good time.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you happen to go to Bryn Mawr?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Because the school were fed into Radcliffe. Both my mother and father thought that we'd had enough Cambridge that it would do us good to get away and see another part of the country. That was the real reason. And they wanted one of the five colleges. [00:12:03] I think it was either Radcliffe or Bryn Mawr. I think that was the choice, but father felt—and I think he was right—that we had been exposed to enough of the Cambridge background that it would be wise to broaden our views a little and go off to a college that wasn't near.

ROBERT BROWN: Hmm. What did he think, in Cambridge, you'd had enough of?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Well, enough of the Radcliffe/Harvard exposure. It would be well to have teachers who had another view of life. Bryn Mawr was a Friends college, a Quaker college. Great sort of freedom of mind. The teaching was absolutely tip-top, but also the whole atmosphere of the college was one, again, of openness. I think that had a lot to do with it.

ROBERT BROWN: Whereas it wasn't quite that way in Cambridge at the time?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: That I don't know. I couldn't say.

ROBERT BROWN: But perhaps?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: I think that he just felt that a change of atmosphere—and I think he was right—that we had been too imposed, and we had been very—in a small community, and it would be well to go and join another community, of learned people.

ROBERT BROWN: At Bryn Mawr, were there particular influences there?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Yes, Georgiana Goddard King.

ROBERT BROWN: Right, as with your sister.

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Only I had her longer, I guess, because I had her again for my sophomore year, and the last two years, I had honors with her, in art history, which was a marvelous experience, because that meant I met with her. My class, for the last two years, numbered five, and I met with her once a week alone. So I mean, that she really was a kind of tutor.

ROBERT BROWN: Did they have a tutorial system?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: No. But to go with the head of the department once a week for—

ROBERT BROWN: Alone.

ELIZABETH MONGAN: —alone, for two or three hours, on Thursday afternoon, was marvelous training.

ROBERT BROWN: What did you cover in art history there, in your own curriculum? [00:14:01]

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Mostly Italian Trecento and Cinquecento painting. But a great deal of what I did with her in honors was in iconography, which was her special interest. Of course, she was famous for the discoveries in Spain, but she was an extraordinary teacher. And then, my senior year, I suddenly discovered archeology. I had been so, sort of imposed by Georgina Goddard King that it hadn't occurred to me that one could take archeology and history of art. And there, I had Mary Hamilton Swindler, who was another tremendous figure in the history of archeology in this country, who is just finishing her monumental book on ancient painting, Greek painting. So that I had a whole senior year with her, in, again, a very small class, so that one learned from these two ladies a sense of scholarship, and how books are made and produced, and what goes into them, and travel. I remember

one year I came back, later on, from Europe, with Georgiana King and two of her friends, on an old canod [inaudible] boat. That was hilarious. The amount of material to get us all up on deck in the morning, with pillows and cushions, and pills, and eyeglasses, and books, and pads. [Laughs.] It was great fun.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, because the lessons continued as you—

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Oh, yeah. Oh, well the talk always continued.

ROBERT BROWN: And there might be notes to be taken?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: No, no notes to be taken. [Laughs.] What you couldn't absorb, you better leave.

ROBERT BROWN: When was this, you had your first trip to Europe? This was—

ELIZABETH MONGAN: First trip to Europe was not—that was later. The first trip to Europe was my junior year.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Were you doing this with any career in mind at this time?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: No. [00:16:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Did you work, mainly, at Bryn Mawr, with books and—

ELIZABETH MONGAN: With books and slides, and photographs. I think that it was assumed that if we were seriously into art history, we would go abroad, as most of us did, in summer holidays, and do the great galleries, which indeed we did.

ROBERT BROWN: And that's what you did your first time over?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Yes. Well, the first time, we did England, nothing unusual—we had London, and then a tour of Devon, and down into Cornwall, and enjoyed all of that. Then we crossed over and went to Paris, and started in on the Louvre.

ROBERT BROWN: This was with Ms. King?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: No, that was with my sister and some friends from college. But we'd already been indoctrinated that this was the thing to do. I mean, it was a sort of mini grand tour. The boys [laughs] of the 18th century. You went abroad, you enjoyed yourself, but you certainly took time to do the galleries, public galleries, and the great collections, Wallace, [inaudible] and all those things. We didn't have any connoisseurship, but we certainly trudged around and looked. And again, I think we enjoyed it. Of course, we probably were rather smug that we knew what we were doing, but we enjoyed it.

ROBERT BROWN: [Laughs.] But was the reality quite different from what you'd seen in photographs and slides?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Yes, enormous difference. Never the same again, having walked in and seen the early Italian paintings in color, having looked at them in brown soup.

ROBERT BROWN: [They laugh.] Many things were sepia, merely, then, weren't they?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Hmm. Did you begin, during that trip, to pick up certain affinities, or certain preferences?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: No, I don't think so. I think it was all too astonishing and too new that I was sort of overwhelmed by it all. Enjoyed it, but I had no idea of going into art history, no. I mean, as a career. I had no idea, even, of making a career. [00:18:00] I was enjoying college, enjoying my friends.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have a wide circle of friends then?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Yes. We'd laugh all—we thought the best all in college. We ran the college. I was vice president of my class for three years. I mean, I was well into political politics. The only thing I didn't do, uh, was organize sport. In the very beginning, I was against that. We had sort of an English idea that we would walk every afternoon, which we did, miles and miles, and miles. Four or five very close friends talking about all these things, literature and things we enjoyed. But we were dead set against organized hockey, which was a big thing at Bryn Mawr. We had organized swimming. I could swim from the time I was six. We just thought they were fearful bores. I was hauled in by the dean, who was M. Carey Thomas, who afterwards became the great dean at Columbia. She looked up over her glasses and said, "I see"—my senior year—"that you have a complete record for non-attendance in sport. How can that be?" "Well, it took a good bit of doing, but for four years, I'd avoided

it." And she said, "Do you mean to say you don't exercise?" I told her, "Yes, we walk all the time. We play tennis a great deal. But not on the hockey field at four o'clock, just because we have to play hockey." "Well," she said, "you cannot graduate—you're aware of that, and you're going to graduate with honors—unless you can show me that you completed your sporting things." So, groaning, I took something called rhythmic dancing, or god knows what all, and got my sporting thing out of the way.

ROBERT BROWN: [Laughs.] But you objected to this organized aspect?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: That's it. Yes, and so did my friends, but I was the only one who managed to have [laughs] a complete record of non-attendance. She really was amused. I think she was horrified that I would have slipped through four years without anybody sort of doing something about it. [00:20:05]

ROBERT BROWN: [Laughs.] But aside from that one taste of college strictness, it was—

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Oh, yes. Because Bryn Mawr is very liberal, being a Quaker college, it was a sort of consensus idea that people did what they thought was right, by and large.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have trouble sometimes knowing what was right?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Oh, I don't know. I mean, I don't think we—

ROBERT BROWN: You had been brought up in a fairly liberal atmosphere yourself.

ELIZABETH MONGAN: I don't think we ever thought about it. I wasn't thinking about it in a moral term as much as issues—again, what the country did, what the college should do, what sort of attitudes you should take toward studies and so on. It was, again, not *pregacia* [inaudible]. I think that would be the father's thing from—but it was sort of—and again, it was inculcated in you without anybody's ever saying it. This was the Quaker way that you kind of got a feeling that this is the way people behaved in polite society, civilized society. You had some concern for other people, and concern for the college, and concern for what you were doing. All that was got through in a very nice way. I think this was the greatness, perhaps, of the Friends' teaching.

ROBERT BROWN: How small was the college, then?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: My class, when I entered, was 131, and we graduated 66. Which was another reason for— one had really extraordinary teaching. And if you broke that down into—everybody was taking art history—if you broke that down into groups, the people who were majoring in English, the people who were majoring in science, it meant that you were a very small group in your department, that you were very well-known to your professors. There was not very much sort of fooling around. [00:22:00] With five people in the class, [laughs] either you worked or you were shipped—

ROBERT BROWN: You couldn't be invisible. [They laugh.]

ELIZABETH MONGAN: No. Or you moved to some other discipline.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you working on things your last year that you were particularly keen on, that perhaps you've carried on after graduation?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Yes. My last year, again, along with the—my second thing was French literature. My senior year, again, I had great luck with having the dean La Skink [ph][inaudible] who was a tremendous figure, and her love was for 19th-century French literature. I began collecting 19th-century paperbacks, as much as I could afford to at the time. They're all up there on the top shelf. I didn't think I should just stay with art history. And then I also took Italian, to add one more language, so that—by that time, I knew I was going to go abroad again, but I thought I should have another language.

ROBERT BROWN: So at graduation—it's 1931?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Thirty-one.

ROBERT BROWN: You did, then—the next thing you did was go abroad?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: No, I didn't, because that was just the middle of the Depression, if you will remember. It was a very bad time indeed, for everybody. And graduation week, Winslow Ames came down from Harvard. He was 27 years old, and he had just been named the director of a new museum in New London called the Lyman Allyn Museum. He had just finished the famous course with Paul Sachs, training of museum directors. Museum course, it was called. He came down to the old Willard [ph] Hotel in Philadelphia, and interviewed me, and offered me a job in the Lyman Allyn Museum that fall.

ROBERT BROWN: Had you known him before, Winslow?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: No, I hadn't. My sister had. [00:24:00] This was the middle of the Depression. Imagine? I thought that, as the youngest, that my father had done enough, getting four people through college, that it was time I took a job. So I accepted. I don't know what I was paid, some minimal thing. And that fall, I presented myself in New London, Lyman Allyn Museum, which was just being finished, just going up. Very small museum, down from Connecticut College, opposite the Coast Guard Academy. Almost no collection, almost no staff. Winslow was the director. His secretary, myself, Mr. Miner [ph], who was the curator of decorative arts, and who loved American furniture, and had a house full of it. I think that was why he was appointed, the art was—he gave most of it. The general factor and one guard, and a maintenance man. That was it. This was a wonderful experience.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Why? What—

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Because you saw how a small museum ran, and then we did everything, every day, by improvisation [laughs]. I mean, we had no great rules to go by. We had no library. Winslow bought books, and I cataloged them and put them on the shelves. We gave education classes to the children. We put on exhibitions. We had almost no money. We did everything on a shoestring, and with sort of as much imagination and wit as we could provide, but it was a splendid way to begin. And that second year, I went up every Monday and took the museum course, so that I'd know a little bit more, with Paul Sachs. That's when I think I really—was Paul Sachs who finally was the direct influence, as he was with my sister, towards museum work, because he was so stimulating and so enthusiastic, and such an extraordinary connoisseur and teacher, that his enthusiasm was infectious. You couldn't go up to Shady Hill on Monday afternoon and not come away enriched. You were taught everything from Greek pots to Ruben's drawings. [00:26:00] At least how to faintly recognize them, and if you didn't know, where to go to find out, which was the most important of all.

ROBERT BROWN: And he was very good at that?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Oh, tremendous. I went up every Monday for that course, and came back on the train, either late that night, to New London, or the next morning.

ROBERT BROWN: What effect did that have, do you suppose, on your work at New London?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: It was so relaxing, and that didn't hurt it, it helped it. We didn't have any regular program. We didn't have much of a collection. Anything I could bring to it would be a benefit.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you help to plan exhibitions? Did they have such things?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Yes, we all—

ROBERT BROWN: You had large exhibitions, or traveling—

ELIZABETH MONGAN: —no, we didn't have a lot. I told you, we had a shoestring. Small exhibitions. [Laughs.] I think a budget, now, that wouldn't—people just wouldn't know what to do with. One of the first exhibitions I did was a little exhibition on the history of gardens. It was a tiny catalog, on pink paper, with a woodcut from *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* on the title page, which was the most beautiful Venetian book, published by Aldus in 1499. I had the temerity to go down to New York and ask Wildenstein, and various other people, for four or five pictures which represented gardens, and then I borrowed some books, and borrowed a tapestry. It was a charming exhibition, and did it on nothing.

ROBERT BROWN: But loans, for example, you could get then?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Oh yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Were they simply amused by your request?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: I don't know. I suppose so. But I was terribly young, I don't know. I mean, I really don't know why I did do it, but I did, and it was a very popular little show, because it was a town in the country. It was a natural thing, in a way, to do. I did it because I thought it would be a nice subject, and it was. It still is. [00:28:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah, it's still a fairly popular one, isn't it?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Then I had a class of young children, on Saturday mornings.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you enjoy doing that?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Oh, yes. That was creative. And I did—we did again—it was just whatever occurred to me, depending on the season and what we were doing. I got them to draw and paint, though I can't draw and paint. It was sort of the—

ROBERT BROWN: Really? How did you do it then [laughs]?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Just talking to them, and suggesting that they go ahead and—this was a nice, bright day. Why don't we draw willows? Or show them a tapestry, or just suggest something, and then we'd all plunge into watercolors and have a splendid time. They were quite young, and I was young [laughs], and I just thought it would be nice if they had—again, it was a community that had never had a museum before, that we were trying to interest the young in the building, get them in and let them express themselves.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it a community with social divisions, or do you recall what it was like?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Oh tremendously. Yes, very much so. It was very rigid, because there was the college, first Connecticut College, and it had this—what was her name? A person who was a very strong woman. I've lost her name. It will come to me. Then, across the way, the Coast Guard Academy, which was gung-ho, *boombity, boom, boom*, all dressed up in blue and white, flag-raising every morning and night. And the town itself had—was rigid. It had the old people in the town, the Bunners [ph], who were—H.C. Bunner was a bright American literary figure, who is now not very well-known. And that house I used to go to very often, for tea, and also later for dinner, and became very close friends. That this was the social life of the town, which had nothing whatever to do with the commercial life, or the college life, or even the naval academy. They rather looked down on them, because they were the old aristocracy, the Chapels [ph] and the Bunners, and there were four or five families in that group. And very English, in a way, and almost like Boston, that you took tea in the afternoon. [00:30:03] You got dressed for dinner, you changed from a cotton dress to a [inaudible] dress, and in wintertime met in town, and in summertime you went all of 20 miles down to the shore, the lighthouse, where the same life was continued. It was very much an intellectual life, again. It was not a—it was social in that it was a small circle, but it was sort of plain living and high-thinking. Again, it was a sort of Bryn Mawr tradition, that tremendous amount of talk, literature, politics, people, but very rigid schedule. Lunch at one o'clock. Was always very good food. Rather dusty house, and tea at four, and dinner at the right time. A great deal of music. The son-in-law played the piano. It was a very interesting little pocket of almost 19th-century New England, aristocratic New England. It was such a small town that I never forgot it. In a way, I loved it. That was a nice relief to the museum, because this was a very sort of pleasant little group of people to talk and live with.

ROBERT BROWN: It was structured, too, wasn't it?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Whereas, at the museum, you were sort of feeling your way, were you, and Winslow Ames?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Yes, certainly.

ROBERT BROWN: What was Winslow Ames like as a director? What was—did he plan ahead, or was he—

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Oh, no.

ROBERT BROWN: —in touch with people around the country?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Again, he was terribly interested in contemporary art at that time, and [inaudible] Colvert and Laudley Garney [inaudible] almost enough to shock the town. He bought the statue, the big statue, of Lachaise's, whom we called Big Bessie, and put it out in the garden, and invited these very ladies I'm talking about to tea, and this was really what we would now call a happening.

ROBERT BROWN: [Laughs.] And how did he bring it up? How did he comport himself on such occasions?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: He was so sure that he was right that it never occurred to him anybody else would take umbrage. He just thought they should realize how fortunate they were. [00:32:00] And then he got bitten with the ballet bug, and went off to New York to practice—and this was when he was 30—one year, '27, '28, and left me in charge of the museum, and came back on weekends. So I ran the museum my last year there. That was really traumatic, because Winslow was dancing in one room, and—ballet dancing. We'd closed off one gallery, and I was trying to carry on the museum in the secondary—in the other rooms. And with a very conservative Coast Guard Academy across the way, we didn't really want them to know that the director was thinking of going into ballet.

ROBERT BROWN: [Laughs.] Did the director show real promise, or was he very earnest?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: No, he was too old—he was in love with it. He was too old, really. Then the war came. Well, before that, I took the print course, which was more to the point from this, with Paul Sachs again. And there, he really, I think, directed me into prints, because that was the last year that he gave the famous print course, and he was a great print collector, though most people always consider him now as a drawing collector. But he had started as a print collector, along with many of his friends in Europe. He had an enormous library on prints. Since it was his last year, and it was a very small class, and I had already taken the museum course—it was my duty, every week, on Monday, to get all the material together for the course. This was marvelous training, that I got the books, I got the photographs, I got the prints, I got everything ready, and then he would come down and lecture.

ROBERT BROWN: That's one of the things you would have learned to do in the museum course, was how to—

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Yes, that's right.

ROBERT BROWN: As though you were getting ready to—

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Yes, but this was, now, a step further, a definite thing on prints, and mostly early prints. [00:34:00] Italian 15th-century prints. The great figures. Fifteenth-century prints, Durer and Rembrandt. The things that he knew and understood, and loved so deeply. He knew a tremendous amount about them.

ROBERT BROWN: When you—this would be chiefly connoisseurship?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: No, it was learning every single thing about—well, yes, connoisseurship, but every—

ROBERT BROWN: Iconography?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: The history of the—

ELIZABETH MONGAN: The impressions, where they come from, the collections, the dealers, where to go to buy them. Who were the great collectors in Europe. And then, after that, when I went abroad in '33, he gave me letters to the then-living great collector, Sterling [ph], who lived in Geneva and gave his great Rembrandts to Amsterdam, to Colnaghi in London, Gus Mayer and his assistant. All my life, these people—well, as long as they lived. Sterling died early. Colnaghi still sends me their catalogs. Uh—then—

ROBERT BROWN: This was in '30—

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Thirty-three.

ROBERT BROWN: Thirty-three. And that was the last year he gave that course?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: This was when you were still at New London?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Yes. Jim Byam Shaw was young then, about my age, just beginning at Colnaghi, and this began a lifelong friendship. And years later, when I had begun with Mr. Rosenwald, we began buying from Colnaghi, on and off. I used to go and see him periodically in London, and I remember one time I went in and he looked up and said, "Ah, Betty, you're here." He said, "I've been waiting for you. I have something for you." He pulled it out with a great roar of laughter. It was a Schongauer drawing of the head of a monk. He hadn't showed it to anybody else. I said, "Why haven't you shown it to [inaudible]?" [00:36:02] He said, "I was waiting for you to come." And so I said, "Well, of course we want it. I'm perfectly sure." And told Mr. Rosenwald about it, and that was the acquisition of that beautiful little Schongauer drawing. Not an engraving, but a drawing.

ROBERT BROWN: So you learned, fairly early, the importance of getting to know these dealers and dealer-collectors?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Oh, yes. Yes, certainly from the museum course, and then even more so in the—

ROBERT BROWN: Print course?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: —in the print course.

ROBERT BROWN: And Mr. Sachs would explain why? He would give you—tell you why?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: He didn't need to tell us why.

ROBERT BROWN: It was obvious?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Certainly. These people didn't, after all—we weren't all idiots. They weren't, and we weren't. We didn't have to have certain things underlined. [Laughs.] Otherwise, we wouldn't have been in the course in the first place.

ROBERT BROWN: He was quite demanding, was he?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Yes. Demanding in the sense that you would give your full energies to pursuing every aspect of whatever it is you were investigating.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. About that time, you went and taught briefly in Florence.

ELIZABETH MONGAN: I went for a winter in Florence.

ROBERT BROWN: With Sheldon Nixon—

ELIZABETH MONGAN: —School.

ROBERT BROWN: What was that?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: That was a finishing school for young ladies from America, and again, it was still—it was a way to have a European year that they were supposed—they—I went to teach art history. It was a good—it was a difficult year, that '35-'36, because Mussolini was engaged in Ethiopia, and the school was in Florence, but because of the Ethiopian war, we started out in Brussels, in a small school. And then, at wintertime, we went on to Vienna, where we had two months in Vienna. Then, in the spring, toward spring, it was obvious that Mussolini was—there was not going to be trouble in Italy, at least not in Italy, though the war was still going on in Ethiopia. [00:38:06] We went down to Florence. Indeed, towards the end of that spring, we were all called down into the Piazza Signoria. We went down—and we were the only English-speaking people left in the city, because mostly everybody else had gone—to hear Mussolini declare, over the radio, the fall of Addis Ababa. They lighted up all the castellos with fires and bonfires, and the students brought an effigy of Anthony Eden down in the middle of the street and burned it in front of the Uffizi. This was a real revelation of what a fascist crowd can be, and this was tremendous memory in my mind. Indelible, that whenever a crowd is out of control, when you're in the middle of it, in a small group of people, what can happen.

ROBERT BROWN: Extremely frightening, was it?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Yes. Well, sort of paralyzing. I don't think frightening as much as kind of annoying and paralyzing. I don't think we had any personal fear, though we should have. We were astounded, horrified. Numb. Then I stayed on during that summer and went to see Berenson quite a lot, and I suppose after—

ROBERT BROWN: Was that your first meeting with him?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Oh no, I met him as an undergraduate. All the time I was in the school, I used to go over weekends to get away from the school, and have lunch or tea or dinner with Nicky and BB, and whoever was in the house. That summer, I stayed on a little bit and got to see more of him. Then my mother came abroad, and we went slowly back through France and England, to America. [00:40:04]

ROBERT BROWN: It must have been difficult teaching that year in the finishing school.

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Oh, it was impossible. Madness. [Laughs.] I mean, nobody's mind was on it, and it wasn't a very serious school in the first place. We were required to speak French Monday, Wednesdays, and Fridays; Italian, Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday; and on Sunday, we spoke English. Which meant that we spoke a kind of Esperanto all week, because by Monday night, you just got your French grammar and verbs going, only to wake up on Tuesday morning to have to find yourself speaking Italian. [They laugh.] It was insane. It was not a serious school. What it did offer, again, was a wonderful opportunity to see the galleries throughout Belgium, and in Vienna. To spend a whole six months in Vienna, to go to the great Kunsthistorisches every day, and then to be able to come down to Florence and do all the hill towns. That this was the memorable part of the school. The serious part of learning was nil. One learned a certain behavior, but I think we would have known that anyway. Never carry a parcel in the street. No lady is ever seen carrying a parcel, always had it sent home. That kind of thing. Very important. And you think now—you go to the supermarket, you go to the—that's been a great influence in my life. [They laugh.]

ROBERT BROWN: Were you doing some research?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: No, I was still too young. I think I knew, in a way, but I hadn't any definite—

ROBERT BROWN: Were some people becoming mentors, or were they mentors? You mentioned Berenson. Was he something of a mentor?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: I think the only one I saw. This was a very small school. It was almost like a convent. We were hardly allowed out, except to go to concerts and the galleries. [00:42:01] There was no question of meeting anybody. Oh, we met the Florentine Society, yes. Sunday afternoons, they came to tea. But these were mostly the usual English ladies and Florentine social life. We always had the same cakes, the same tea, the same talk.

ROBERT BROWN: When you came back, then, that summer, with your mother—

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Then Mr. Sachs proposed Lessing Rosenwald wanted somebody to take care of his collection, which was growing by leaps and bounds.

ROBERT BROWN: Had you ever met him?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: No.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you know of him?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: No.

ROBERT BROWN: Mr. Sachs told you who he was, though, didn't he?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Yes. [They laugh.]

ROBERT BROWN: Which was?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: The head of Sears Roebuck. I was sent down to interview him in the tower of the old Sears Roebuck building on North Boulevard, out of Philadelphia. Nineteen thirty-seven. He hadn't built the gallery then, and I don't know—I spent the afternoon with him. We went over the early books that he had bought, and some of the prints. Up until that time, he had bought a number of things from the August Friedrich collection in Dresden, which had been sold by Berner [ph] in the '20s. Then he'd stopped during the Depression, because he couldn't. Nobody was collecting, and he owed a great deal of money, which he later paid back, to Sessler, the dealer from whom he had bought them. But he knew, at that time, exactly what he wanted. He wanted to make a collection of prints and early rare books, and he wanted somebody to help him, and to organize it and so forth. And I was hired. I mean, that was the one interview. I don't know what we talked about. Not much. Just what I told you, what he had in mind. Oh, he did say he planned to build a gallery, but he hadn't built it at that time. [00:44:01] He was living in Wyncoat [ph], in a very nice house, and I went out to dinner and met Mrs. Rosenwald, and we talked some more, and then I went back to Cambridge, and I was hired. Then the next two years were spent in building Alverthorpe, which was the gallery that he had designed for a man named—well, his cousin, who was a Chicago architect who had done the Wrigley Building. We spent an enormous amount of time on what kind of cabinets should be made, what sort of light we should have, and how large it should be. All the practical details of what was to be the finest print room in the country. I think, physically, probably it was.

ROBERT BROWN: And you worked with the architect on it?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Ah, yes. I went to Chicago, back and forth, and tremendous meetings. All this began—this was a period when people began discussions, and nothing was done without tremendous discussion. Battles with the architect, with the contractor, with the man who designed the bolts. Mm. That took a great deal of effort and time.

ROBERT BROWN: Where did you get a hold of the technical information?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: I didn't. I just listened. I was in on all of it.

ROBERT BROWN: Why was he building a gallery? Was this near his home?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Part of his home.

ROBERT BROWN: It was part of his home, in Jenkintown?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. North of Philadelphia.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah. His intention was to have—probably house his collection, for himself?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: For himself, a private collection, although I think it was always in the back of his mind that he was building it. Everybody thought, first, possibly—never occurred to me. I always thought, from the beginning, he was making a private collection, up until about 1939, when he suddenly, abruptly, gave it to the nation, though he kept it, until his death, in Jenkintown. The prints only went down on loan, and came back. And we bought in Jenkintown, never in Washington. [00:46:03] So I—People asked me, during all those years, what was my address, and I would say the B&O, because I commuted up and down. John Walker wanted me in Washington, Lessing wanted me in Jenkintown, and depending on who wanted me where, but always weekends or Saturdays. Mostly, in the beginning, I went back, because that was the day that Lessing preferred to buy. He was busy with other things, though he had retired. He had many other interests and philanthropies. But Saturday morning was reserved for whatever dealer would come, or whatever prints we had set aside during the week, and we would go over them. And this was a tremendous education also, because the dealer soon learned—you must remember, in the '40s, late '30s and '40s, the world was in a very difficult situation. The war clouds had come up, trouble in Germany, and many Europeans were taking their things out from Europe, and the other big museums were not—hadn't yet begun to collect. The Metropolitan was very quiet. Was only Cleveland and Jenkintown, really, that were active. It was an extraordinary opportunity, and the dealers always know, just as the seagulls know, when you've got a bit of bread—that the minute we began collecting seriously, every day would bring in masses of catalogs, photographs, information. And this, too, in itself, is one of the best educations that any print person can have, because every single day, you've got all sorts of new material. He was not collecting only in one field. We were interested in everything from 1400—well, I would say, at that time, through 1900. Later on, we pushed it up. The mail would be filled with photographs, would be filled with catalogs, telephone calls, so that you learned prices, what was on the market, who had what. [00:48:00] Then we would swift through it all on Saturday morning and decide what we would buy.

ROBERT BROWN: This began almost, practically, as soon as you began?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: At once.

ROBERT BROWN: Who came upon this?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Yes, and Rosenbach would come out with early books, and we would go through what he had, and then the other dealers followed, Kraus and Schab [ph], very quickly. You got to know, again, the dealers, and they got to know you.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You acted as advisor, or as helper, in the beginning? First—

ELIZABETH MONGAN: From the very beginning.

ROBERT BROWN: So you had to develop a lot of expertise very quickly.

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Very quickly.

ROBERT BROWN: You brought some, of course, from the print course.

ELIZABETH MONGAN: No, I began—I mean, he trusted my judgment, I would think, almost from the very beginning. I can remember him asking, saying, "Do you want it, Ms. Mongan?" or "What do you think, Ms. Mongan?" In the very beginning, I would always go and check. I would rush around and get out all the necessary bibliography and bring it down. But as my knowledge grew, I didn't have to, but it was a very serious, deeply dedicated thing. This was almost a religion. We never bought anything—and we bought them one by one. We never bought en bloc. You see, he was against that. I was, too. Very proud of it.

ROBERT BROWN: You felt—why? What might happen?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Because you would get some dogs in among the lot. Why should you buy that? We bought—each one, we bought the cream of the lot. The rest, we gave back to the dealer. They didn't always like that, but—

[Audio Break]

ROBERT BROWN: —saying, in the beginning, you had to refer to books, but then you gradually developed this vast experience, so that you practically get a feel for something, and feel—

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Get a feeling, number one, for the—I suppose the most important thing of all these, with Paul Sachs and with Berenson, is that, whether you're looking at a photograph or an original object, if you're really a serious art person, that you put everything else out of your mind, and look at what's in front of you. [00:50:06] And this is not easy to do. Takes a long training, and discipline. It's easy to say, "Well, I'm going to look at this seriously." It's more than that. If something is in front of you, you have to look at it with an intensity,

to see, number one, what is it? Then, two, what is the real character, and what is it all about? And then, in your mind, you begin to relate other things that you know, what period, what else is there of this kind that you can call up as a counter-image to it? And you put it, again, in its century and its place, in the artistic hand, and then you narrow it down, perhaps to an artist or anonymous man, and look at it all the time. Whatever meaning there is, whatever—in every level. Iconographic, historical, aesthetic. Then you kind of pull these threads together, and ask yourself what sort of a value this object has aesthetically, historically. And having settled all that, you sort of come out of a dream and say, "Well, that's all very interesting." Then comes the problem, do you want it for your collection? It may be a terribly good object for somebody to teach with, but does it come up to a certain level of the kind of thing you're collecting in the sense of quality? One doesn't want to use the banal word "beauty" but of its kind, is it something, perhaps the best you could possibly get, of that sort of thing? And as such, would it be an addition, another jewel in the collection, or would it just be another footnote, a pedantic thing to prove something? [00:52:00] If it's the latter, put it to one side, leave it. And finally, having gone through all these things, come to the question—and it's last on the list—what do you want to give for it? Is the price a reasonable price, or is it outrageous? But we're dealing, usually, with very great dealers, like Zinsser or Colnaghi. They would, after they get to know you, only really offer it. It may seem to me high, but by and large, I've always felt, and I think Paul Sachs, too, never be taken in by a bargain. A fair dealer, reputable dealer, has his right to a fair price. In general, we didn't bargain very much. Either we said we'll take it or we won't. We never went through a long rigamarole some collectors in this country feel they have to do. Of course, the dealers always know. As they come down, they put it up 10 percent, and you argue with them for half an hour, and they take off the 10 percent. This is a waste of everybody's time. Either you can afford it or you can't. Even if you can't afford it, if you want it enough, you will. This saves an awful lot of tiresome negotiations at the end. And it also trains you to go through what I said from the beginning, that all this has to be done in a relatively short time. It isn't as though you're going to a board of trustees, or you're going to go to four or five friends and say, "Do you like it or don't you like it?" This, again, the dealers know and detest. If you're buying something, it's usually well—and Marianna Fikensfeld [ph], the great dealer in Zurich, who became a very great friend later—that your—the relationship you build up with a reputable dealer is of the utmost importance, because they get to know you, and they will offer you their best things first, if they know that you are serious, and that you are playing fair. [00:54:02] That you're not going to buy it and sell it to somebody else, or do something queer with it. That your buying it becomes, for them, too, an honor. You're making a great collection, and it's to their advantage if you all understand each other from the very beginning, that you're going to buy something that you think is great, that they think is great, that will add a certain beauty to the collection. This is the way to do it. But it means an intensity, and it means a kind of exhaustion. After we'd spend a day doing this kind of thing, you didn't really—weren't able to do anything else at the end. It's like a great intellectual performance. You go home absolutely exhausted after looking at perhaps—I don't know how many things. But if you look that hard, and if you bring that amount of intellectual curiosity and a kind of aesthetic sense—the same thing is true with Berenson, that people can't understand what it is that makes a great collection. It's an emotional thing, isn't it? And it's very deep and very intense, and it isn't something you can spread on a piece of paper like a pound of butter and say, "What did you do from 2:00 to 4:00?" There are all sorts of things involved in this question of selecting and seeing—mostly seeing—and at the bottom of the pole is the question of buying. Not the top. So many people say—I mean, think in the back of their heads—"This might be a good investment." It's absolutely the wrong end of the pole. And you must never buy with the idea that you're going to swap or sell. That you must have enough sense in your own judgment that what you buy, you buy for keeps. This is it. You think it's a great object. Otherwise, you wouldn't buy it in the first place, would you? [00:56:00]

ROBERT BROWN: This was Mr. Rosenwald's attitude, too?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Oh, I think so.

ROBERT BROWN: When you began in '37, would you do these things together?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Always together.

ROBERT BROWN: Always together?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Oh, no, later on, the 19th century, and also with Zinsser, he—Zinsser, he didn't like the dealer, but he knew he was good. He thought he was—it didn't get on him. Chemistry was wrong. So he would say, "You go in and see him. I can't stand that man. You put on the table or bring out to me what you want." Then he would tell the secretary to—oh, this was the final thing, which was terribly important, that they were always paid—because he'd had a bad experience in the Depression, owing bills to Sessler, that they were paid, before they went home, a check in their hand. This was another reason that we got first choice, which I started to say. There was no question of going to the trustees, or calling up two or three collectors and saying, "What do you think?" and so "We'll let you know next week" and rigamarole. The dealers knew where they stood, that within 24 hours, they would have a yes or no, and more than that, they would have a check in their hand. And this made for very good relations, as you can understand. Things were not held up. We didn't have to take them to a committee. We didn't have to wait until the board met. What we decided on was decided right then and

there, and I think Lessing took a certain pride in it. Also that I could make up my mind quickly. He didn't care at all for hesitation. Either you want it or you don't want it. That's why I say I had to really look terribly hard and make up my mind. It was a tremendous strain. I remember once, in the early years, I went to see Bill Ivins at the Metropolitan, who knew very well what we were doing. That was before Hyatt. He was outraged, because we had got, at auction, a Schongauer engraving, a little Saint Sebastian, that he had wanted, but he didn't want to pay the price. He was mad with himself, and mad with us. [00:58:01] Number one, that he hadn't paid it, because he wanted it, and he had the money, and number two, that Lessing had bought it. So that when I also—when I went in to see him—I was still quite young—he said, "Ah, it's very easy for you. You have money." It made me mad.

ROBERT BROWN: Because you knew he had the money?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: No, but it made me mad because it's never easy. That if you're buying something, it's just as difficult whether you have the money or you don't have it. You've got to look at it and want it, and know about it. This is the point. It isn't the money. But the decision is the thing. Is this a good object? Is it the best Schongauer engraving that's on the market at this moment? Is there anything wrong with it? Is there any way we can possibly get a better one? Is it something for the collection? These are the questions that have to be asked, privately, to yourself. And he knew that very well. And then, also, he had been rather rude. He asked me, which was a fatuous question, "Do you like early Italian woodcut books?" Because they were the things that he was particularly keen on. I happened to adore them and know quite a lot about them, even at that time. So we spent the next three hours looking at Italian woodcut books, because he had been rude and he wanted to, in a queer way—

ROBERT BROWN: Make up?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: —show that he wasn't such a bad fellow, that we had this thing in common. Well, this is the way he always collected. Why did he—this is what I thought was arrogant—why did he suppose we wouldn't collect the same way?

ROBERT BROWN: Did that happen again with him?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Never.

ROBERT BROWN: You worked pretty closely—or rather—

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Oh, no, he didn't ever work—

ROBERT BROWN: —you got along pretty well?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: We got along, but he never worked with anybody. There was only one person—he was famous for it—that he got along with all his life, and that was Belle Greene of the Morgan Library, whom I knew very well, too, because she was a friend of Rosenbach. We used to meet, when I was in New York, in Rosenbach's quarters in New York, and those were pretty strange sessions, because she was such an unusual woman, to put it mildly. [01:00:08]

ROBERT BROWN: In what way, could you?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Her knowledge was encyclopedic. She knew an object across the room, from here to the tree, if it was a fine ivory, if it was a fine book cover. She had this instinct for quality. Her knowledge was, as I say, encyclopedic, that she went everywhere. Because this was where Morgan's things went—miniatures, ivories, books, prints, drawings, paintings, sculpture. Her whole life was devoted to the acquiring of these things. But with Rosenbach, she could also be terribly funny and quite bizarre, together. I was always the child of the party there. They were amused. I mean, I think they were putting on an act for me, now, as we would say, looking back. They were playing with each other, and playing for my benefit, trying to teach me, these are the ways of the world. This is what happens in the world of book-collecting, which is, I think, more peculiar than the world of print and drawing collecting. That the book collectors are a race apart.

ROBERT BROWN: You were spending a good deal of time on that as well for Mr. Rosenwald?

ELIZABETH MONGAN: Yes. Early books. Well, they go together. I think it's a mistake for—and I always thought it was a mistake, for many of the print groups to separate prints and drawings, and books. Early illustrated books, prints, and drawings—they all belong together, as they are in the great European collections, in Vienna, and Bibliotheque Nationale, and London. It's a mistake to chop Blake up, and put the illustrated books in the Library of Congress, and put the watercolors in the National Gallery. This makes no sense to me. It never did. This was one of the things I rather disagreed with Lessing about. To put the early block books, which are extreme rarity, the very beginning of European picture-making, put those in one corner in the Library of Congress, and to put the early woodcuts, 1440 to 1500, in another little pocket in the National Gallery—they should be together.

[01:02:16] And I think thinking is coming around to that now, in the Metropolitan, to put the drawings under Jacob Bean, and the prints in another place. These are all graphic art. There's no proper word in English for it. "Graphic" is a very bad word, and always has been, but illustrated prints and books, and drawings, and watercolors are all under one panoply, and should be kept there together. This I feel strongly about. I think, in the newer museums, they're doing it. The old curators, each one didn't want to give up their private domain. That's another very important thing, that Billy Ivins felt these things were his. I never felt that they were mine. I don't like to use the word "I." But this was always a public collection. You're only the servant of the collection. These things belong to the people who are looking at them. They're not mine. They weren't Lessing's. These are things we were buying for general enjoyment. The sense of private possession. Always, he lent them, wherever people wanted to see them—in extreme generosity—to any museum, any small college, and anybody who wanted to come could look at them. We gave an enormous amount of time to showing these things, to everybody from schoolchildren up to scholars. Incredible amount of time. Did our homework later, at night. Took the catalogs home. That these were, from the very beginning, in his mind, and mine too, these were not our things. These were things that belonged to other people. This is, I think, of the utmost importance, even with contemporary curators, who get to be terribly possessive. These things were not made for them, or for them to keep. [01:04:01] They have an obligation to keep them, but to show them. Even in the Albertina, the old curators there, it used to be terribly hard to get in to see early 15th-century engravings. Many people used to come back and say, "I've seen the original Durer watercolors." Well, they didn't. They didn't even know they were always shown the facsimiles.

ROBERT BROWN. Hmm. Well—

[END OF TRACK AAA_mongan79_5584_r.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]