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Oral history interview with Arline M. Fisch, 2001 July 29-30

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Arline M. Fisch on July 29 and 30, 2001. The interview took place in San Diego, California and was conducted by Sharon Church for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Arline M. Fisch and Sharon Church have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written prose.

Interview

MS. SHARON CHURCH: This is Sharon Church interviewing Arline Fisch at the artist's home and studio in Mission Hills, a neighborhood of San Diego, California, on July 29, 2001, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Arline, you are now 70 years old, vitally involved with your art and committed to an ongoing studio practice, which is all around us. What are you working on right now?

MS. ARLINE FISCH: I seem to be continuing to work with some textile structures. I just completed some knitted pieces that are going to accompany the showing of my retrospective exhibition at the Textile Museum in Washington. I wanted to have some new pieces that fit into that particular category, so I made some large knitted collars, which I had made earlier in the mid-eighties, but I haven't made again for quite some time, so that was kind of an adventure.

I realized why I don't continue to do them, and that is that my neck really took a beating from using the knitting machine, because it's rather strenuous using wire on the knitting machine, especially making large, expansive material. I'll probably continue to do that anyway, but I'll just have to keep ice packs on [Laughter].

I'm also exploring a lot of braiding, especially spiral braiding, which a student of mine did a research study on a couple of years ago. She's not using it anymore, so I feel that I can explore it on my own, and it enables me to work with my colored wires that I like in making some tubular and conical forms. I'm also using the spiral braiding with strips of material to make things that are very springy in their final form, and I find that's kind of fun to work with.

MS. CHURCH: What long-term projects are you working on, Arline?

MS. FISCH: For some reason I've decided to do saints. I think it relates to the earlier things that I did, which were angels. I thought, do I want to do more angels? And then I thought, well no, I could do angels and then I could do saints. So I'm working on saints. I've done quite a lot of reading about saints, and I've talked with a friend, Randy Long, who's very interested in saints, and she's provided me with all kinds of research material and books. There's even something called Holy Traders, which are little playing cards that are saints instead of baseball players [Laughter]. I have two sets of Holy Traders, so I have all this research material about saints.

I've decided to do only women saints, and I thought it would be interesting, over the next ten years, to do an alphabetical series, starting with A. I don't know if I can actually do all of the letters, but I'm going to try that. The hard part is trying to work on those in between what I call my regular work, because it's a long term project, and it's not going to be ready for a long time. I mean, I can't do 26 saints quickly. But as I do them, I also don't want to show them. It's sort of like secret work that I do in between the things that I'm making for exhibitions and so on, so I think it will be long term.

My idea is not so much what kind of jewelry they'll be -- they will all be wearable -- probably mostly pendant forms, because that seems to enable me to work the most freely, if it doesn't have to attach to something. My idea is that they would then be mounted onto something like an illuminated manuscript, so that they would become more like an icon of a saint -- looking at Russian icons, which I've always loved, but didn't see any reason to make. I think this is a kind of offshoot of that.

MS. CHURCH: I saw the Oxford dictionary of Saints sitting on your desk. When you talk about making icons, I can see the kind of shallow relief that you've worked on in the past, translating into this project.

MS. FISCH: Yes. And if I was 30 years younger, I would chase everything, but it's really hard for me to do that now. Much as I love that process, it's really hard on your skeletal system, and I'm not sure that I can do those anymore. So I have to think about other ways of depicting saintly forms. And they'll be, I think, more abstract

this time. The ones I've made -- I think I've made three so far -- are relatively abstract; that is, they don't have real faces.

The connection with the individual saints may not be totally obvious, which is why the illuminated manuscript idea appeals to me, because I can actually write the story of the saint in an accompanying installation.

MS. CHURCH: You bring up the point of not making the faces. In terms of making icons, that's such an issue, whether you should make faces or not. There's such a rich language of symbolism connected with the saints.

MS. FISCH: That's true, but when you look at icons from the Byzantine Church -- and I've been in Russia fairly recently and looked at a lot of Russian icons, and they're still making icons in the old style -- they are painted, and then often surrounded by metal reliefs. I don't think I want to do any painting. I don't feel competent to do that. They won't be painted images, but it has occurred to me to use reproduction images, Xerox images or something like that -- setting them in the same way that the icons are set, with a metal surround. But I haven't done that yet. That's my long term project.

MS. CHURCH: It's very exciting. In fact, now that you said you've made three -- I am trying to figure out how to pry them out of you [Laughter]. So, you've come to this point in your career where you've really decided to take on a huge project, lining up with another history that's connected to you. You're going to engage in it for ten years.

MS. FISCH: I think that's probably how long it will take. I could be wrong about that. And you're the only person I've told about this, because I don't want to be pressured into showing them until I'm ready to do so. That's why it's a sort of secret project. But it's hard to find the time, even though I'm retired. One would think I'd have lots of time, but the ongoing work, which is work for exhibitions -- mostly for exhibitions -- takes up a lot of time. And I'm much slower now than I used to be, at least it seems to me it takes me a lot longer to do everything than it used to.

MS. CHURCH: You have always managed to balance your life with your obvious feelings of obligation to an ongoing exhibition engagement. And so, you're going to continue to somehow balance all of this.

MS. FISCH: I hope so, because I don't want to give up the opportunity to be an exhibitionist. I've always enjoyed that kind of challenge. I do respond to thematic exhibitions as something that I find stimulating to my thought process. I'm going to do some chatelaines, for example, because there's going to be a chatelaine exhibition in a year or two. I've made a chatelaine in the past, and I'd like to try doing a few more of those, so that's a little project.

And then, Mobilia Gallery, with whom I deal, has just written and said they're going to do an exhibition of jewelry based on paintings, which I've always looked at. So, I'll participate in that because it gives me a chance to do something that I might otherwise not do. I've always wanted to do a stomacher, you know, that sort of corset like form. And I thought, well, here's the perfect opportunity to do that. I do like to respond to a challenge.

MS. CHURCH: But you're not going to let the saint project overlay with the painting project? You're not going to let that one out?

MS. FISCH: No, the saint project I feel committed to, I just don't know how long it will take. I also am not totally convinced whether the form will remain consistent. The three that I've done so far are all pendant forms, and they're all about the same size. There's the possibility that I would maintain that format, just because it would make for more consistency.

MS. CHURCH: Just last year, a retrospective of your work opened at the San Diego Historical Society, and the name of the exhibition and the accompanying catalogue is Elegant Fantasy. That seems to be an apt description of your work. Can you describe your work, put words around your work?

MS. FISCH: Well, what I would like to think my work looks like is elegant, and dramatic, and inventive, and beautiful. I don't know that things all succeed in all those categories, but I really have always liked working larger scale than things like rings and earrings -- I don't make rings and earrings. One, I don't wear them very much, and two, the size is too small for me. I don't like working at that scale.

On the other hand, I don't like working larger than wearable scale either, which is sort of curious, because I've often thought, well, if I don't like working these little things, why don't I work on sculpture? But I'm really not interested in doing that. I really like the fact that what I make is worn, and I want it to be worn. I suppose I'm my best client.

MS. CHURCH: You're a great model.

MS. FISCH: [Laughs] Well, it means that I can try everything on, and I know how it feels. I want what I make to be not just wearable but comfortable, in the sense that when you put it on, you feel elegant, you don't feel uncomfortable or restricted, other than, some need to stand up straight or move in a certain way, but aren't immobilized by a piece of jewelry, because I don't think anybody wants to do that. So the beauty aspect is the psychological aspect.

I don't think that people want to wear things that have a negative impact. People wear things to be provocative, even politically provocative. That's not of interest to me. I'm not into sharp edge razor earrings or things that are hazardous to your health. But I want the things of mine that people wear to enhance them and to do so in a very positive way, so that it makes you feel good to wear these things, and you feel good because the response from the public is a smile or a glance that is approving, not disapproving.

MS. CHURCH: I find your work to be ‘high attraction' work. You want to pick it up, participate with it. What about this word whimsy, which is often --

MS. FISCH: Well, it does come into the work, and I think it's because I don't take it all very seriously.

MS. CHURCH: Yes, you do [Laughter]!

MS. FISCH: Well, I mean, the work is serious, but I put something on and it may just strike a funny spot for me, and I think, well, this is pretty silly. And I might enhance that idea a little bit. It's a way of trying to maintain a sense of humor about what I do, that it's not heavily intellectual. It's intended to be, in some ways, frivolous, because what I make is certainly frivolous. It's not serving a particular physical function. It's not holding a garment together, or keeping you warm, or any of those kinds of functional aspects that some jewelry serves.

Mine is purely decorative; it's intended to decorate the person in a positive way, to attract the public -- a little bit like birds with beautiful feathers. Why are some birds beautifully colored? It's because it has this particular attraction within nature. And I like that metaphor also, the idea of the butterfly or the bird having this beautiful garb that is purely for attracting some kind of visual response.

MS. CHURCH: I would say that attraction is frivolous only on one level. I think you mentioned the deeper psychological import of jewelry that serves our need to feel a certain way and our need to project certain things about ourselves. Do you think that the whimsy keeps it a little bit accessible?

MS. FISCH: Well, I would hope that the whimsy means something, it satisfies me. It keeps me from feeling too totally serious about what I'm making. I try to maintain a kind of balance; what I'm making is a decoration for someone to wear. There are some certain deep psychological reasons for doing that, but on top of that and in place of that maybe, is the idea that this is fun–that you do this because it makes you feel really terrific, and you get this nice response from people, and that makes you feel good.

MS. CHURCH: And it does seem that you're vastly entertained by your ideas, which is great.

MS. FISCH: [Laughs] Well, yes, sometimes I suddenly see something that could happen. I work on these dress forms and mannequins that stand around in the studio, and I put things on them, and then I don't pay any attention for a while, and suddenly I see, oh, look at that, wouldn't that be fun, to have something that swings like that, or to have something that flips around the head like that -- wouldn't that be fun? Then I try and make it have that sort of energy.

I also think that the whimsy is a kind of energy that is evocative and meaningful for people. I mean, it makes something not be just a dead issue. It's something that's lively, and kinetic, and engaging with people. I suppose it also keeps me engaged, that sense of humor.

MS. CHURCH: One of the things that I love about coming into your studio is that it's already populated [Laugher]. You have a full mannequin at the doorway wearing a hat, and then you have some dresses on another, and you have all these bodies around in your studio.

MS. FISCH: Well, and they're all named. The lady by the door is Delores, and the lady standing up there is Madeline. They're my friends, and they keep me company in the studio. But more importantly, they provide me with a ready form, a ready body on which to put things, to work things out. And then I actually try everything on myself, as I'm working to see if it moves and how it feels, is it too heavy, is it the right size?

People have said to me, "You can wear your things, you make them all for yourself." And in a way, that's definitely true. I do make them all for myself, because I'm the model that I have to try them on. I don't think I'm the only person who can wear them in the end, but it is true that I'm the body that tries them on.

MS. CHURCH: I think that's so important as a jeweler, to understand how a piece is working with gravity and

space on the body.

MS. FISCH: I've never understood how men can be jewelers, because they don't know what it feels like. It also is important to know how it feels psychologically. When I was in Denmark in the sixties, making these big full-length pieces, I would wear them to the Royal Theater, because at intermission, there would be a promenade -- people walked around at intermission, and it was a chance to get a response.

I had a friend who would get all dressed up and escort me, and I would wear my long gown and these full length silver pieces, which were quite outrageous at the time: we would just promenade up and down, and the Danes would just stare. But you know, some people would have a positive response of smiling or even saying something. That was a way of sort of gauging whether this was going to be a possibility, because I certainly didn't want people to scream or look away in horror, or be angry.

Those are all negative responses, and I don't think anybody wants that -- I mean, I certainly don't want that kind of response in a social situation. You might want that response in a protest march, but you certainly don't want it at the opera. It was an interesting experiment. And we would have a friend walk behind us and sort of listen to what people said [Laughter], so I could get some feedback from that experience. I haven't done that here very much, but I do wear my jewelry, often.

MS. CHURCH: And when we got off the plane, my seatmate, whom I had shown your catalogue to, knew exactly who you were because of what you were wearing. So you have an identity. Arline, how do you describe yourself? Do you tell people that you're an artist, a metalsmith, a jeweler, designer? How do you do it as efficiently as possible?

MS. FISCH: I think the best way is that I'm an artist, because when I say I'm a jeweler, that sends out the wrong signal, and people immediately think, one, I have a shop, and two, that I work in gold and precious stones, none of which is true. Sometimes I say I'm a jeweler, because in a group of artists, it describes the field that I'm in. I don't think I ever called myself a metalsmith, because I don't think that I am. I don't make hollowware, and I don't smith things. I put things together. But I don't think of myself as a metalsmith.

Artist seems to be the easiest thing to say to people that puts them on the right track, that I have a studio and I create things, but I'm not in business, and I don't make wedding rings. And then I'm a teacher. I think for me, those have always been connected, artist and teacher. And so, that's the most succinct description of what I do. Right now, it's actually a somewhat difficult time for me, because I've retired from teaching, and that's always been an important part of my identity.

Although I'm teaching workshops -- and those are always very positive experiences, because people come together for a very particular purpose. They're all excited, and it's a very short term thing. They go away really jazzed by what you imparted to them, which is a little different than the long term teaching involvement with students. So in a way, my artist/teacher description is now only artist, and that's a little hard for me. I'm struggling with that, because I'm so used to gathering information, and catalogues, and adventures, and letters from colleagues, and having a place to share them. Now, I don't have that, and that's really hard.

MS. CHURCH: I can imagine. It would be nice if there would be a way for you to keep some aspect of teaching in your studio practice. Have you thought about it?

MS. FISCH: At the moment it works somewhat because I still am involved with some of the graduate students, but that will be over within a year or two. I won't know the students who are working now. I think it just has to be in my head, a way of realigning my thinking. That may be forcing me to be more in touch with my colleagues as a place to share things. That hasn't been easy here, because most of the colleagues that I have don't live here.

MS. CHURCH: Right, you're very international.

MS. FISCH: I've always had friends in different places, and it isn't so easy to have the kind of discussion that we had last night, for example, because there aren't people here that I relate to in that way. Which is kind of surprising, because I've lived here a long time.

MS. CHURCH: You're going to have to come to Philadelphia [Laughter]. What was your training, just briefly? It's been documented, but I think it might be nice for you to just go through it a little bit.

MS. FISCH: I went to public school in New York City, in the New York City system. We lived on Long Island, in Bayside, Queens. The high school I went to had an art department of 12 faculty, and so I had art classes all through high school. I think the primary direction for most of my classmates was graphic design, commercial art -- it was called commercial art -- and almost everybody went to Pratt from my high school.

I knew that I didn't want to do that, I don't think I had the ability to do that, actually, the technical ability, and it

wasn't really what I wanted to do. So I opted to go to Skidmore College, which had an art department within the context of liberal arts education. I sort of concentrated more on painting than anything else, although I took art education, because I knew that I was going to teach. I mean, that was my career path, teaching, but painting was what I did most.

I did hardly any three-dimensional work at Skidmore. I did a lot of screen printing with Alice Moshier, and painting with several different instructors. Then, because I knew I wanted to teach, I decided to go directly to graduate school. I didn't want to teach children. I knew that I didn't want to teach children [Laughter]. My art education classes involved practice teaching in the one-room schoolhouses around Saratoga Springs. Although that was an exciting opportunity and interesting, I knew I didn't want to do that. I don't relate that well to children.

I knew that I needed to go to graduate school, and I applied to all of the schools in the Big Ten, because I wanted to go someplace very different from Skidmore. I decided I would go to whichever one gave me the most money.

MS. CHURCH: Quite pragmatic.

MS. FISCH: Well, I had to be self-supporting going to graduate school. It was a toss up between Wisconsin and Illinois, in terms of the offer, and I decided to go to the University of Illinois in Champaign. I went thinking that I would study art education, which I did, but that I would concentrate in painting. Right away, I knew I wasn't going to do that. This was in 1952, and the graduate students, all of them, were mostly male, and they'd all been in the Second World War, so they were older.

I was 20 years old when I started graduate school, and I just didn't feel that I had anything to say in painting. The paintings I had done before were all flowers and abstractions, and so on, but there wasn't a lot of content. These guys were really heavily into content, and I just didn't feel I could measure up in that arena. So I took courses in ceramics, and I took courses in metal, and I worked in both of those things all through graduate school.

It was very funny: we had a seminar with the dean of the school, a graduate seminar once a week, and it was a research seminar. Basically, we had to write research papers. That was something I knew how to do. I had gone to Skidmore, which was a liberal arts school. I had written hundreds of papers, so I knew how to go to the library and do research, and write a paper. I would come to these seminar classes and I would get these glowering stares from fellow students. Finally, one guy said, "How do you know how to do this?" I said, "That's what I know how to do. That's my education." It was, in the end, rather ironic because we were all job hunting at the conclusion of this masters program looking for college level teaching positions.

[TAPE BREAK]

MS. FISCH: I was sent a notice from Skidmore that Wheaton College was looking for an art instructor, and they wanted to hire a Skidmore graduate, but it had to be someone who had a master's degree. I was probably the only applicant, so of course I got the job. I was the only one in this seminar that had a job in May, and they all just said, "How did you do that?" I didn't have the heart to tell them I was probably the only viable candidate for that particular position. It was because the head of the art department at Wheaton had taught at Skidmore, and she wanted to hire a Skidmore graduate.

MS. CHURCH: I wanted to ask you about your choice of Skidmore. I think that at that time, Skidmore was unique in its particular approach to an arts education within a liberal arts curriculum. Were you aware of that?

MS. FISCH: Yes, and that's why I chose to go there, but how I knew about the school was my next door neighbor's daughter went to Skidmore. She was probably instrumental in my mother's accepting of the fact that I was going there instead of to either Pratt, which was the art school that she thought probably I should go to, or Marymount, which was the Catholic school that I also applied to. It didn't help that my parish priest said to my mother that he thought I'd be doomed to hell if I went to Skidmore. He later apologized, many years later, but it didn't help my choice at the time.

I thought it had a lot of things going for it, for me. Not only did it have an art department, it was a small school. I went to a high school of 5,000 people, a New York City high school that was huge -- maybe not that many, but many thousands of students, co-ed, and I was quite young. I started high school when I was 12, and I finished when I was 16. I always felt a little bit unprepared in the co-ed world, so going to a women's college was important to me, and it was absolutely the right decision for me as well.

Basically, I was quite shy, and it gave me an opportunity to learn about leadership and gave me the opportunities to do things that were very significant in preparing me for what I've done the rest of my life in relation to organizations. I ran the art club, I worked on the yearbook, and I did a lot of things that I probably wouldn't have done in a co-ed school, because I wouldn't have felt competent or comfortable. I felt very

comfortable at Skidmore, so it was a really good decision for me.

Among the teachers that were at Skidmore, probably the most influential for me was Alice Moshier, whom I mentioned earlier, because she had this grand gesture in the way she approached everything, and I greatly admired that. I think in many ways she influenced how I have conducted my own career. So it was good for me to go there.

MS. CHURCH: One more question about Skidmore. When I was there, it was in its final years of being a women's institution. I remember that everyone who ran the school, with the exception of the president, was a powerful woman -- Was that the way it was when you were there?

MS. FISCH: Yes, and all of the student government was female. It disturbed me a lot when I went back to Skidmore, I think in the late seventies, and met with students, and learned that although the male population was only 25 percent of the school at that moment, the governance was 75 percent male. I was furious and railed about the fact that what was important to me at Skidmore was this wonderful opportunity to have leadership skills imparted to me by example, and then opportunity to exercise those leadership skills on my own by the time I was a junior and senior in college. That was absolutely invaluable.

I was very sorry that Skidmore decided to become co-ed. I was just at Skidmore in May this year and met the new president, who's a woman. It's the first time there's a woman president, and I feel very good about that. There is a better balance: it's almost fifty-fifty now, male-female, and I feel a little bit more confident that women will have a better chance for leadership.

MS. CHURCH: And she's a collector of crafts.

MS. FISCH: Yes, she is.

MS. CHURCH: One more question about your education. When did it occur to you that there was such a career as an art-jewelry career. When did that appear to you as a viable route?

MS. FISCH: Not while I was at Skidmore. I didn't do any jewelry work at Skidmore, surprisingly. I knew I wanted to teach. I knew I wanted to teach at the college level. I wasn't sure what I was going to teach, because I clearly needed to have some kind of a skill, particular skill, if I was going to get anywhere in that arena. But interestingly, my first job at Wheaton was "studio." I taught painting, I taught printmaking, I taught drawing. I didn't teach any crafts at all. It was sort of a general studio course to support the art history program. It was a really good place to begin, because I didn't need any particular skills.

Wheaton is in Norton, Massachusetts, which is very close to Attleboro and Taunton, which are the jewelry centers of the United States. I probably wouldn't be a jeweler except for that circumstance, because I was also working in ceramics in graduate school. When I went to teach at Wheaton, I needed to have a studio of my own, and there was no ceramic studio. There was just this sort of generic drawing, painting studio. So I went looking in the community for a place to work, and what I found were jewelry studios, because all of the people who worked in industry, or many of them, had their own little private workshops where they worked on weekends and at night.

Just down the road, five miles, I found a workshop with a very nice gentleman who said, "Oh please, come and use my studio, and here's a key." I could go there anytime and work, and he was there in the evenings to help me if I needed help. And it became what I wanted to do. Also, I felt comfortable using the material. I never really liked working with ceramics. I hated being dirty, with the clay under my fingernails. I really didn't like that. Sometimes there's a circumstantial aspect that directs your career, and that was it, I had this opportunity.

MS. CHURCH: What was his name?

MS. FISCH: I don't remember. But I'm very grateful to this man, and I regret that I don't know his name. While I was at Wheaton, it was a very isolated community. It was a very small school, about 300 students at the time, and it was a very funny place. My friends there were a very odd assortment of faculty in Classics and English Literature. My goal after the first year was to leave there [Laughter]. So my second year was devoted to, how do I leave here, looking for jobs?

One of the ways to leave there was to apply for a grant, and Fulbright was a possibility. I applied for a Fulbright grant to go to Denmark, because I realized that the two years of working in metal that I had had at the University of Illinois were really not enough, especially since it wasn't a very high level program.

MS. CHURCH: And that program focused on metalsmithing?

MS. FISCH: Primarily. Because the man who taught it was Arthur Pulos, who was a silversmith. I really felt

passionate about working in metal because I had had some success at it, I certainly didn't feel that I had the skill level to go very far. So applying for a Fulbright was a good thing. I applied to Denmark for two reasons: one, they didn't have a language requirement; and two, Denmark and Sweden were where silver was happening in the fifties.

I applied at large and didn't really know if I had a chance, so I also applied for a lot of teaching jobs. The jobs came through before the grant came through, and I sort of tentatively accepted a job, I don't even remember where -- in the Midwest somewhere. Then suddenly, I was called for an interview for a Fulbright, which, if you apply at large, the school that you went to hasn't supplied the necessary interview materials, so you are interviewed by somebody.

I was interviewed by the Dean of Mass College of Art, who was very funny. I took my little cigar box of work -- I worked pretty small at that time -- and I went to see him. He started out by saying, "I don't know anything about jewelry, but I think all I'm supposed to find out is if you are articulate and you're not going to be a bad representative of the U.S. So talk to me."

MS. CHURCH: [Laughter] And you were good at that.

MS. FISCH: We had a 45-minute conversation, and I guess he approved of my comments, because I did ultimately get the grant to go to Denmark. And that was important, both technically and in pushing me to continue in that direction. It was in '56, that I went to Denmark, and it was not easy. The school decided at the last minute that I would not attend, that they didn't want a foreigner. They didn't want any Americans.

MS. CHURCH: Was it only one school?

MS. FISCH: Yeah.

MS. CHURCH: And what was that school?

MS. FISCH: It was called Kunsthaandvaerkerskolen, which is School of Decorative Art, or School of Arts and Crafts. When I applied for the grant, I said that I could go to school or I would be happy to work in a workshop, and I was assigned to the school. Before I ever got to Denmark, I had a letter from the Fulbright office in Copenhagen saying that the school wasn't so sure they wanted me to come. Did I have any other possibility? What else would I like to do?

I wrote back and said, I would love to work in a workshop. That would really be preferable, even to going to school. They tried to do that and were not successful, because again, I was a foreigner. It was a very protective environment at that particular time, but the Fulbright office in Copenhagen simply leaned on the school and said they had to accept me.

MS. CHURCH: The Fulbright people.

MS. FISCH: Yeah. The Ministry of Education in Denmark was on the Fulbright committee, and I think they simply said, you will have this student. There had been several American students at this school before, not in the jewelry, I don't think. No, there may have even been one in the jewelry program, in the silversmithing program. At any rate, I met with the Rector of the school, who was very anti-American -- I don't know why -- and very rude, who said that I was really only there to steal their ideas, and I would have to be able to understand Danish if I was going to go to this school.

I was already taking classes, but I ended up hiring a tutor because he so intimidated me about it. Also, he didn't think I was serious, because I actually was going to the ceramics department in the morning and the goldsmith department in the afternoon, and nobody in Denmark did that. You were either a jeweler or a potter, but you were not both things, so he thought I was not serious. I said, well, I would do my best, and I worked like a dog.

I went to ceramics school in the morning, from eight until noon, then I went to the Goldsmiths High School from noon to 5:30, and then I went to Danish classes from six to eight. This was six days a week. I was determined that he was not going to defeat me. It was very difficult in the Goldsmiths School, because all of the students had served their apprenticeship and received their journeymen's degree, and been accepted to the school, for a two year program to learn design.

It wasn't really technical enough for me. However, I was determined I was going to succeed at this. I learned Danish real fast, because the teacher was saying very rude things to me, and I wanted to be able to answer back [Laughter]. I learned enough Danish quickly so I could say to him, I don't think that's true or whatever.

Anyway, in December, there was a meeting of the Board of Directors of the Goldsmiths School, because it was sponsored by the goldsmith organization. I was seated next to someone who spoke English, who was head of a

workshop. He made the mistake of asking me how things were going, and I had had it by then. I told him how things were going, and he was sort of shocked and said, "Well, what would you like to do? How can I help?" And I said, "Well, what I think would be better is if I was in a workshop where I could make my own things and somebody could show me how to do that."

He said, "Well, I will see what I can do, and you will hear from me." I had a letter from him in about a week inviting me to work at his workshop, which was one of the largest jewelry workshops -- it didn't have a retail shop -- a jewelry manufacturing place in Copenhagen. It had about 40 people working, which was big. He told me to come see him and I did. He showed me around, and he said, "Okay, this is how it's going to work. You will show me what you want to make, and I will tell you who to work with. And I will say to the men" -- because they were all men -- "that they are to help you. But they are going to do that only if they think you're serious."

"We start at 7:30 in the morning." I said, "Well, that's a little hard for me, because I should probably continue to go to ceramic school." And he said, "Well, then come at noon, and I'll tell them that you're in school in the morning, and you are here from noon to 4:30. You will sit next to Sven here, who speaks a little English" -- he was a younger person -- "and he will help you. And where he can't help you, he will direct you to someone else." So that's what I did from January through the end of the academic year, and that was wonderful.

MS. CHURCH: Do you recall the name of that workshop?

MS. FISCH: Yeah, Bernhardt Hertz, Goldsmiths. And he subsequently took Glenda Arentzen also into that workshop when she had a Fulbright.

MS. CHURCH: So you really forged some important paths.

MS. FISCH: What he said was, he had friends, engineering friends, who had gone to the United States on Fulbrights, and had doors opened for them. He said, "I can't understand that we wouldn't do the same." So that was his attitude.

MS. CHURCH: Do you remember his name?

MS. FISCH: Otto Hertz.

MS. CHURCH: So this was this man who ran the workshop. How wonderful. So that was really a fortuitous --

MS. FISCH: It was. It played a big role in my life, and it was a wonderful experience. I did work every day, and I worked hard. I made, I don't know, maybe ten pieces. My goal was to learn how to set stones. And so, I learned how to do pearls, and faceted stones, and cabochon stones. They also had an enamelist. That was the only woman who worked there, she was an enamelist. I didn't really want to pursue that, so I didn't. I worked only on small brooches -- I think they were all brooches. And they weren't madly exciting in design, I don't think.

MS. CHURCH: The floral piece, Garden, is that from that time?

MS. FISCH: No, no, I don't think I have any pieces left from that period. You know, I tried to present things that worked within what they would accept. I would show Otto a variety of things, and he would say, do this one, do that one. So, that worked pretty well. At the end of the year, at the end of the school year, I had made a small exhibition at the Fulbright office of both my ceramics and jewelry-- I did do ceramics. I did hand built ceramic things, and I probably did, I don't know, ten vessels in that year, working in the basement by myself.

I did also -- I forgot about that -- I knew how to work with glass. I did some little glass jewelry things in the ceramics studio, because there was a kiln available. Then, at the end of the year, I had this little exhibition at the Fulbright office, and I invited the people from the school. Everybody was surprised: the goldsmiths didn't know I made ceramics, and the ceramics people didn't know I made jewelry; also, the students at the school didn't know that I was working at this workshop, because I did still go to the Goldsmiths School on Fridays. They had a silversmith who came on Friday, so I went on Friday and I made a set of salad servers, in silver and brass.

MS. CHURCH: At this point, you were still doing ceramics as well as the jewelry. Without the benefit of hindsight, were you still thinking that you were going to be a craftsperson with a more generalist approach to making?

MS. FISCH: I guess I was thinking more about the need to be able to do a variety of things in terms of teaching. As it turned out, Skidmore offered be a job. Actually, they offered me a job before I went. They were one of the schools that I had applied to. When I wrote and said, I've gotten this Fulbright, Marion Pease said, "That's fine. We'll wait." And so, I actually had this job waiting for me at the end of the Fulbright year, nut it wasn't absolutely for sure.

The cultural attaché at the American Embassy, who was on the Fulbright commission, who was, I later learned, responsible for my being there at all -- she had insisted that I come, because she thought that that door needed

to be opened for exchange, that all of the Fulbrighters before had been in other fields, and that this was an area that had not been opened, and she wanted it opened.

MS. CHURCH: You didn't know that you were the point of the sword.

MS. FISCH: But she urged me to stay for a second year, and so I applied to stay for a second year.

MS. FISCH: And who was this woman?

MS. CHURCH: I don't remember her name. And, of course, I was granted that extension, and then I had to say to her, "I'm not accepting it. I have this job offer," because I wasn't willing to risk not having a job to come back to. I mean, I had left the United States with no money. I arrived back in the United States with a dime, enough to make a phone call. I'm not a great risk taker financially, and I just couldn't face not having some security. When this job was available, and it was considerably more than I had earned at Wheaton, I couldn't pass it up. So I regretfully declined staying in Denmark for a second year.

MS. CHURCH: Did the Fulbright grant provide you with enough money to support yourself while you were in Denmark?

MS. FISCH: Yes, it did. And I was even able to save enough to travel around Europe in the summer.

MS. CHURCH: One other question. In the 1950's, you were a single woman. You were competing mostly with men to do things that are highly singular. You had to fall back continually on your own resources. Did you ever think, gee, I'm doing something special, or did you just do it because it was there to be done?

MS. FISCH: I never thought about that, and I think that's a tribute to Skidmore. It never occurred to me that I couldn't do whatever it was that I wanted to do. And my father, in particular, was very supportive of that. He would support anything I wanted to do as long as I had thought about it and made a decision. My mother was not so enthusiastic, she worried a lot more. I guess that's mother's role.

MS. CHURCH: But she allowed it somehow.

MS. FISCH: She allowed it because my father insisted that I do what I wanted to do.

MS. CHURCH: I think that they were unusual parents, then. Because I'm not so sure in the fifties that was a normal thing for your daughter to do, to be going around the world on her own. And I think somehow that you did have some parental --

MS. FISCH: Well, I wasn't all that young either. I was 25, I think, when I was in my Fulbright year. But it was certainly an adventure, because I didn't have anything to return to financially. My parents were not able to support me, they were sending my siblings to school at that time. I had to be on my own, and I knew that.

MS. CHURCH: Are you the oldest?

MS. FISCH: Yes.

MS. CHURCH: Arline, you made a decision not to pursue a fine arts career, and you chose crafts, and that was connected to your teaching, but then you were increasingly drawn to make jewelry, and obviously, with your large works, to this idea of body adornment. Why was that such a match? Was there something in your past that prepared you to do this? Were you somehow inherently drawn to this activity?

MS. FISCH: Working with my hands was something I had done since I was quite small. I'd been a Girl Scout. My mother was a Girl Scout leader. We made baskets, I made my own clothes. I was very comfortable making things. I don't know that there's a great history of jewelry in my family. There isn't. It wasn't anything that I knew anything about. I simply admired it, not contemporary stuff, but ancient material. I was drawn to the Egyptian stuff. I was drawn to feathers. And I spent a lot of time in a natural history museum. As a Girl Scout, that's something you do a lot of.

I guess it all kind of entered my mind, this idea of decorating the body as being very appealing, as being something very human to do. I'd never been particularly interested in fashion, although I have a sister who was a fashion model, so she was very involved with the fashion world. I knew a lot about the fashion world, but it wasn't where I wanted to place my work. I had the opportunity early on, through my modeling sister, to think about having a business, designing jewelry for the fashion trade, but I rejected that idea because it was very high stress. It was not necessarily making anything, it was thinking of things, but not making them. It's the making of stuff -- that's how I think. I think with my hands more than I think with my mind. The idea that I would make things, I think, is probably the driving force. But it ended up being jewelry. It's probably more serendipity than anything. I started working in metal, and what I made was jewelry. I made some vessel forms, but I didn't

really relate to those. I related to the jewelry. That was where I felt stimulated, and I continued to pursue that.

Because I was also teaching and had some other, more academic interests, I looked at things, I read books, but mostly I looked at things. I went to museums, and my travel has always been motivated by museums and things to see, as opposed to beaches or meeting people. I travel to see things. And the things I look at suggest, maybe because my mind is already focused in that direction, more things that could adorn the body. And so, it's kind of a self-perpetuating circle. One thing leads to another thing, leads to another thing, and then I need to think about it, or I need to go look at some other things.

So I go look at things, I see something I didn't expect to see, and that pushes me in a slightly different direction. That happened very much the second time I went to Denmark, which was in the middle sixties. I went with the idea -- my proposal was to make non-jewelry things, pomanders and small objects, because I thought they would be interesting.

[TAPE CHANGE.]

MS. CHURCH: This is Sharon Church, and this is tape two of my interview with Arline Fisch at her home and studio in Mission Hills, a neighborhood of San Diego, California, on July 22, 2001, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

MS. FISCH: It's July 29.

MS. CHURCH: What did I say?

MS. FISCH: 22nd.

MS. CHURCH: Thank you, Arline. We were talking about your second trip to Denmark, and you were describing your interest, in making small objects such as pomanders.

MS. FISCH: Yes, that was the proposal I submitted to the Fulbright organization, and I went dedicated to pursuing that particular direction. But, at the same time, I also thought that I would look at other things. At the National Museum, I discovered this wonderful collection of Mongolian jewelry, which was full body adornment. It involves, because the Mongols, at the time that this material was collected, were nomadic -- the women wore all the wealth of the family, and so they had hats with great hanging elements that covered the ears but weren't hung from the ears, great pectorals and things that hung all the way down the back; it was very exciting.

I went to the director of the museum and asked if I could have an opportunity to study the collection at closer range. Again, through the auspices of the Fulbright office, I was able to arrange to go on Mondays when the museum was closed. I could say to them what pieces I'd like to see, they would bring them to the library, and I could examine the pieces. I did a lot of drawings from that work, which was very inspiring, and it led me to do these full length and much larger scale pieces, which I hadn't thought so much about before. I had done some larger things, but nothing like that.

That particular opportunity was especially important. I also rented a workshop space in Copenhagen at this time. I went back to see Otto Hertz, and he said he just simply couldn't manage anymore, and he thought he'd done his share, which I absolutely agreed with. But he did suggest somebody that might have space, and it turned out that this workshop was on the top floor of a very old building in the very center of Copenhagen, run by a man named Stig Berg, who was a silversmith, but who mostly did repair work.

However, he had a wonderful studio. It was very well equipped, with the biggest chasing bowl I've ever seen -- it was almost a foot and a half in diameter. And I worked very happily in that studio. Stig came not very early in the morning. He was a sole proprietor and did mostly repair work, so he worked on his own schedule. He simply gave me keys, and I could come and go as I wished. It was wonderful because I could walk to the studio from where I lived, and it was right in the center of town. At lunch time, if I had the energy to go up and down these 17 flights of stairs, I could go out on the street for lunch or go listen to another Fulbrighter who was an organist playing at the church around the corner, or just go sit in the park.

At any rate, it was a very, very productive time for me, and I did this time extend my grant, I stayed, actually, almost another six months. It was a time when I looked at a lot of things and I made a lot of things. I did do a number of small objects. I did some pomanders, I did some small portable shrines, I did small sculptural forms, and then I did some hanging forms. Another of the Fulbright people that year was a marine biologist, studying jellyfish, hydra medusae. She said to me, "You know, you'd really like what I'm working with. Why don't you come over and look?"

So I went to the lab, and here were these incredible things that I had never looked at before. They were all, of course, dead, they were specimens. They were very intriguing, but it was difficult to see how they were put

together. So I went and actually looked at books of diagrams of hydra medusae, and I made several hanging forms in silver that were hydra medusae, because I felt so inspired by the form of them and by the way in which they move.

I've just recently seen a wonderful jelly exhibition at the Monterey Aquarium, and I feel totally reinvigorated by the idea of jellyfish, because again, these were living ones that move. So yeah, that was the hanging one that I made in Denmark.

MS. CHURCH: This is the Hydra medusa, made in 1968, in your catalogue.

MS. FISCH: Yes.

MS. CHURCH: And this is clearly a theme that you have returned to.

MS. FISCH: Well, I have. I mean, some of the things were because I did a collection of "Fish by Fisch" in the late nineties, but more recently by actually looking at jellyfish specifically. The living ones were much more inspiring than the specimen ones that I had looked at so many years ago. And I've seen jellyfish in reality in actual places. I took the ferry from Cape May across to Delaware, and the sea was full of jellyfish, which are so beautiful, as long as you're not in the water. At any rate, that was another inspiration from that particular time in Denmark.

In the fall of that year, having done the whole year, I was interested in having an exhibition, and it was very fortuitous that I was able to organize an exhibition at the Museum of Decorative Arts, the Kunstindustrimuseet, which is a very prominent museum in Copenhagen. They didn't normally show the work of foreigners, the living artists that they showed tended to be Danish, although they showed, certainly, historical work from everywhere. I had looked at all their pomanders, which they had been a major source of inspiration and of study for that year.

They were very amenable to hosting an exhibition, especially since it was subsidized by the Fulbright office and the U.S. Embassy. It was a marvelous thing called "Fantasies in Silver." And it created quite a stir in Copenhagen in the press, because I showed not only my pomanders, but the hydro medusae and the full-length body ornaments that I had made. It was most unusual and received a lot of review in the press, most of it favorable, some of it sort of scandalous. I mean, how could you imagine wearing such things? Otto Hertz, my old friend, wrote me a wonderful note saying that he never imagined, when I had been there in his workshop ten years before, that I would end up doing such work. He was quite astonished and pleased. So that was very nice.

That Fulbright experience was a very positive time for me and a very productive time. I then subsequently went back to Denmark in the next two years. I was there all of '67 and part of '68, I went back in the summer of '69, and then I lived there again in the spring and summer of '71 on sabbatical leave. I went back to Stig Berg's and I worked for another eight months in that same workshop.

MS. CHURCH: So you had an encapsulated experience in Denmark because you started out learning technique, then you got to some conceptual work through the museum and through your relationship with another Fulbright person. What was her name?

MS. FISCH: Joanne Allwein, now Von Weissenberg.

MS. CHURCH: And she was a marine biologist.

MS. FISCH: Right. And she actually lives now in Finland.

MS. CHURCH: Your work in Denmark really is exemplary of your interests, one in the natural world, and the other in the history of your particular craft.

MS. FISCH: Yes, it's kind of a fusion of those two things, I suppose.

MS. CHURCH: One thing that is of interest to me in any artist is that moment when they give themselves permission to be who they are. And I think that that's a hard thing for a socialized person to do, to decide that they're going to be truly unique. And it seems that in this 1966 trip, you were able to get to that place and make this large work, and seize on your interests and claim them.

MS. FISCH: It was a very seminal period for me, and I'm very grateful that I had the opportunity to do that, which I probably wouldn't have had, except for that Fulbright support, both times.

MS. CHURCH: Do you think there's something to being on your own, independent, in a foreign country that frees you up somehow of expectations?

MS. FISCH: Oh, absolutely. It was an opportunity to do whatever I wanted. There was no one to answer to, and I also didn't have any obligations. I mean, I had no commitments to exhibitions, I didn't have to teach, and I didn't

have any organizational responsibilities. I barely had a telephone. So it was a very free time for me. But it did also have some social aspects, because I had a very nice group of friends, including an American who had taught at Skidmore and was, by this time, married to a Danish poet and lived in the country outside of Copenhagen. Helen Dewell was her name, and it was through her I met all kinds of interesting people -- writers, and artists, and sculptors.

My connections in the jewelry field were all those people I'd gone to school with ten years before, but it was very trade association, and it wasn't terribly interesting socially. Through Helen, I met all these design people, and architects, and through her husband, lots of writers. And so, it was a really interesting time. And also, there was a very stimulating group of Fulbright people who were in various fields, and it was a fairly cohesive group. So I also met people through that connection that enlarged my experience. They were musicians, for example -- one was an organist -- and I went to lots of concerts because Richard was involved in concerts. It was a wonderful experience. I don't think I can duplicate that again. You can't go back.

MS. CHURCH: Right.

MS. FISCH: When I went back in '71 and lived in Copenhagen again, it worked very well, because it hadn't been a long hiatus and all the people I knew were still there, and I could just pick up where I had left off. The thought of going back much later was just not anything that I wanted to do, because it could never be the same.

MS. CHURCH: So the first time you went, that was in '56, and it sounds like it was a solitary, very focused trip to learn something.

MS. FISCH: Well, it was, because I was a student, Fulbrighter -- there wasn't a lot of extra money, and because I was working so hard, had all these classes, there wasn't a lot of time either, and it was a very focused but not terribly enlarging experience. When I went in '67, it was very different, because then I was a research scholar and had a whole different position, and also a much different income. I could move around in a very different way, and I moved much more into the Danish society than I had had the opportunity to do when I was a student.

MS. CHURCH: You were older, a little bit more prepared.

MS. FISCH: But also, I had the right network of people to connect with, and I still see some of those people when I go back to Denmark. On visits, I still see some of the designers and architects that I knew then, although, my dear American friend, Helen, has died, and some of the Fulbright people I knew are gone.

MS. CHURCH: Is that Helen Dewell?

MS. FISCH: Yeah. She taught drama at Skidmore.

MS. CHURCH: And so, this time you found what I have always thought might be found in Paris . You know, you had people to talk to and ideas to throw around.

MS. FISCH: Yes, and wonderful opportunities. I mean, I could work at the museum, I could work at a library. I could work at the workshop. It was just a very enlarging experience.

MS. CHURCH: Had the attitude of the Danes changed in those ten years? Were they more accepting of you?

MS. FISCH: Yes. But also, I wasn't in a student situation. I wasn't in a school situation.

MS. CHURCH: You were established.

MS. FISCH: Right. Although, I remember having a discussion with the editor of the goldsmiths magazine, in which an article had appeared calling me a gifted amateur -- that was the title. And I challenged him at a dinner party at his house. I said, "You know, I really took offense at that: why am I called an amateur?" He said, "That's a compliment." And I said, "Not in my book." And he said, "Well" -- I'm sure he was trying to put a good face on -- he said, "an amateur is someone who does something because they love it." And I said, "You mean a professional does something they hate. I mean, that's not quite enough." The reality was I had never served a proper apprenticeship, and so I couldn't possibly be called a professional.

MS. CHURCH: Do you think that there was a distinction in his mind between someone who makes a living through his or her craft and someone who uses that craft as an art form?

MS. FISCH: Yes, I think so, because all of the Danes who are well known in the field basically work as designers. They don't actually even make anything anymore. They design, and it's made, and it's manufactured, and it's sold. And the selling is an important aspect of it. The fact that I didn't do that, that I had this teaching position that supported me, also made me suspect. I didn't need to be serious. I could make all these ridiculous, frivolous things because, clearly, I didn't need to earn a living at it.

MS. CHURCH: I think there is a question in everyone's mind about whether you make a living from the work that you make or whether you are supported in other ways. And I think for some reason that's much more an issue in the crafts than it is in the fine arts. I don't think anyone expects the same thing of a fine artist. It must be our tradition.

MS. FISCH: Well, I'm sure it does come down to the fact that you make things that are at least marginally functional, and that people buy those things, and they don't pay astronomical prices for those things. Therefore, you have to make a lot of them. If you're going to do that, then you have to work at it full time, otherwise you couldn't possibly earn a living. And that is a kind of trade position.

It's the same for painters. They just don't talk about it in the same way. I mean, painters, if they're going to be full-time painters and earn their living, have to sell quantity, because they aren't going to make one painting a year that's going to support them. They make small drawings, they do prints, they do lithographs. But nobody notices, or nobody talks about, the entrepreneurial end of that, except scathingly, of those few people who are up front about it.

MS. CHURCH: I also think that no one would call David Smith an amateur because he made his living as a welder, and that he made his art on the side. I think that there are different rules are applied.

MS. FISCH: Yes.

MS. CHURCH: And so, it's interesting that that observation was leveled at you when you were there. You've talked a lot about going to Denmark and that during this second trip you spent so much time visiting the museums. Traveling has been a huge part of your art. Did you travel as a child?

MS. FISCH: No, I was interested in thinking about that when you sent your questions, and no, my family didn't travel. My father traveled in his work, but not very far. I mean, he traveled up and down the East Coast and as far as Chicago. I lived in Cincinnati for two years because my grandparents lived there. My father actually emigrated from Austria before the First World War. He didn't have any interest at all in traveling back, he never wanted to go back.

Part of my childhood was during the Second World War when you couldn't travel anyway, and it was always just a kind of distant dream. I chose to go to the Midwest to graduate school because I wanted to get another experience from the East Coast. I lived in the Midwest for a couple of years, decided that was enough, I didn't want to live there anymore, and came back to the East Coast. Then I went to Europe, and I found that really exciting and very compatible, but I also decided that I didn't want to live there.

I guess I don't remember now whether it was the first time or the second time, maybe the second time. The question came up, would I like to stay in Denmark? And by then, one of my classmates was head of the school and I could teach there, and there were opportunities, but not enough. I looked around and I thought about it, and I thought, I don't want to be an alien, although, my friend Helen had very much become Danish. She didn't vote. She was very interested in politics. She didn't vote, because she kept her American passport. And I said, "How can you do that?" I want to be involved wherever I am.

So one, I didn't want to be an alien. And two, I didn't see that Denmark offered the kinds of opportunities that America does, just because it is small.

MS. CHURCH: Opportunities --

MS. FISCH: -- For my work.

MS. CHURCH: Exhibitions?

MS. FISCH: Exhibitions or --

MS. CHURCH: Sales?

MS. FISCH: Whatever. I just didn't see that it had the potential for me to do what I wanted to do. It had potential, it just wasn't in the areas that I was particularly interested in. If I wanted to open a small shop and sell my work right there, maybe it would have worked, but that wasn't interesting to me.

MS. CHURCH: At this point in time, in America, the crafts movement was really picking up steam. You must have felt that you were part of something that was getting to be quite an extraordinary phenomenon.

MS. FISCH: Well yes, the change between the fifties and the sixties was astronomical, and the craft world was very vibrant here. It didn't seem to be that vibrant in Denmark, and that was the only place I had lived, so I couldn't comment on living elsewhere, although later I lived in London. And although I loved living in London, it

wasn't something that I wanted to do on a permanent basis.

MS. CHURCH: Well, I think of you as really being quite involved with the development of craft in this country, having started the program a little later on at San Diego. You really were involved with so much that was going on here. So it's interesting that there wasn't that same, maybe, energy in Europe.

MS. FISCH: Well, there may well have been, I just didn't feel a part of it, partly because of language. Unless you can participate in the language fully, you don't understand what's going on. And also, I didn't really like the restrictions, at least in Denmark. The restrictions were, you had to do things in a certain way if they were going to be accepted. As long as I was a foreigner, I could do anything I wanted, but if I was a permanent resident I wouldn't be allowed to get away with what I was making.

MS. CHURCH: But then, that second trip must have really sealed your desire to get out and see things.

MS. FISCH: Well actually, that happened on the first trip. After that student year, I traveled around Europe for two months on my own, meeting people here and there. Traveling at student level, you meet lots of people along the way. And it really fueled my interest in just the excitement of seeing new places, and being in new places, and having to figure out, where am I sleeping tonight and how am I getting to the next place, what is the next place, and all those things. It kind of stimulated my interest, I just didn't have the financial means to do as much as I might have wished.

After 1957 I didn't go back to Europe until '64, when I went to visit some people in Denmark, and I went to visit some friends in Paris, and in London. That was just a summer, like a month, but that certainly made me see that I wanted to do a lot more traveling.

MS. CHURCH: When you travel, do you do some advanced research in terms of the museums you might want to go to or do you note certain pieces that exist that you might want to be looking at?

MS. FISCH: I wish I was that well prepared. I tend not to be a terribly well prepared traveler. I'm basically a city traveler. I'm not a landscape traveler. So I know why I want to go to a certain place. I knew I wanted to go to Lisbon because I knew Gulbenkian Foundation was there and all those Lalique pieces were there. Yes, I do know those things. But I'm often surprised, and that's wonderful to be surprised.

I remember in the sixties, between that first year and the extended six months, I again did a tour around Europe, only this time I had a car and drove through Prague. It just happened that there was a butterfly exhibition, and I had never thought about looking at butterflies, but that's what there was. So I spent the afternoon drawing butterflies, and when I got back to Copenhagen, I made butterflies.

MS. CHURCH: Again, that serendipitous opportunity and being open to it.

MS. FISCH: And just allowing it to happen.

MS. CHURCH: Yes, isn't that great? Arline, at what point do you think you became international in terms of your scope and your interests?

MS. FISCH: Probably 1964, which was the start of the World Crafts Council when there was this huge conference at Columbia University. It was one week, and there were, I don't know, there must have been close to a thousand people, maybe not that many, but a lot of people. I went the whole time, and it was fantastic. I met so many people, and it was so exciting, and I knew right then that I wanted to be involved with that organization, because it brought people together that I would never meet otherwise.

I was very fortunate in that I was very shortly involved in the organization. I think what happened was, in 1968, there was a conference in Peru, which I went to. At the conference, there was an exhibition, which Paul Smith was in charge of. It was an exhibition that involved the pieces that people who were delegates brought with them, so it had to be arranged in two days after everybody arrived. Paul needed a lot of help, so I raised my hand and a whole bunch of us -- I remember Cynthia Bringle and Edwina, and a whole bunch of people, Ron Pearson, I think -- we all just kind of jumped in and helped Paul set up this exhibition.

There was a whole group of Peruvian art students who also were assigned to do this job. I suppose my presence was noted, or at least I was noticed as somebody who might participate in this organization. And although nothing formal happened at that time, in 1969 I think it was, I was asked if I would like to be on the committee for the American delegation. I said, yes, absolutely, I would want to do that.

[TAPE BREAK]

MS. FISCH: The next conference was in Dublin in 1970 and I was invited to give a lecture on "Large Scale Ornaments." I guess I was also on the U.S. official delegation, but I wasn't in any way an officer, so I didn't

attend the business meetings or the executive committee meetings at that conference. It was a wonderful conference, and I did meet lots of people, some of whom I had met in Peru before, so it was renewing acquaintances. This conference was in, I think, early September, and I was on sabbatical, so I was going on to stay in London that fall for the next three months.

I had previously arranged to work in the workshop of Gilian Packard, who was the U.K. person in charge at the Dublin conference. Gilian, who knew I was coming to work in her workshop, introduced me to lots of people on her delegation. I met lots of British craftspeople, some of whom I knew already, but some of whom were new to me. That was a nice preparation for that time in London. It also was my birthday. The conference must have been in August, because my birthday is August 21st, and Lois Moran arranged a little birthday celebration at the final banquet dinner, which was in a castle in Shannon.

MS. CHURCH: Oh, wow!

MS. FISCH: That was great fun.

MS. CHURCH: I bet. Was it a special birthday?

MS. FISCH: No, I think it was just my birthday, but it was an interesting place. Subsequently, over a number of years, my birthday coincided with World Crafts conferences, so I have celebrated my birthday in lots of marvelous places in the world. In 1971, there was an executive committee meeting in Malta. And because I was living in Denmark at the time, I knew about the meeting and was told that I could come, even though I wasn't on the executive committee. So I did.

I thought, hey, here's a wonderful chance to see people I like and to go to a part of the world I've never been. I got a tourist trip from Copenhagen to Sicily, to Taoromina, and then I flew from Catania to Malta, and spent, three days, maybe, four days at this meeting where, again, Gilian Packard was there and Brooke Horgan the New York staff, and Mrs. Webb and Mrs. Patch, of course. It was marvelous, because it was a very small group. Again, although I was not an official, I was warmly welcomed and had a marvelous time meeting everybody and joining in all the social activities, although I didn't go to any of the meetings.

Then, in '72, there was a meeting in Istanbul. This time I was, again, on the American delegation. I arrived on a round the world ticket at that meeting, because I had been giving a lecture-workshop tour in Australia the month before, which had been organized by Maria Gazzard, whom I had met in Dublin, who was head of the Craft Board of Australia. Maria invited me to come to Australia, and I was their first foreign official lecturer. The brief there was I had to go to all eight states, because it was government funded and because it was a way of making it democratic.

I had this marvelous trip around Australia. I went everywhere, to Tasmania, Perth, Adelaide, and Alice Springs. And in 35 days, I gave something like four workshops and 17 lectures [Laughter]. They kept me very busy, but it was a great adventure. I had a fantastic time. And because I wanted to go to this meeting in Istanbul, I bought a round the world ticket, which was quite marvelous because it's a set number of miles, and you can make up to 50 stops as long as you stay within this mileage.

I had a wonderful travel agent here, and I told him where I wanted to go. I stopped in Delhi for three or four days on my way, because it seemed like such a long trip from Australia to Istanbul. I spent three or four days in Delhi, where I knew somebody that I had met in Copenhagen who was a designer, a rug designer, and I had spent several evenings with him in Copenhagen. He invited me to his home for dinner, and I met some other designers and textile merchants.

Through the World Crafts Council, I had a letter of introduction to the editor of an Indian design magazine. It turned out his house was right behind the hotel I was staying in, and I was invited for afternoon tea. It turned out that he had a salon every afternoon. It was incredible, marvelous, because all these people kept arriving -- all these business people, and design people, and architects just kind of dropped in at Patwant Singh's house in the late afternoon for tea.

I was included in this very intellectual and prestigious group for the afternoon, purely, again, because of my connections through the World Crafts Council. Maria had given me his name and written him a note that I was coming, and so he sent a note to the hotel and invited me to tea. It was wonderful. Then I went on to Istanbul, and that was my fortieth birthday. I don't know who specifically organized it, but there was a surprise birthday party on a floating fish restaurant on the Bosphorus, north of Istanbul. It was wonderful.

Marcia Lewis had organized a gift, which was a crocheted silver bra with dangles signed by everybody at the party. And I still have that. It was marvelous. Marcia made it while she was in London, and she came to Istanbul and had everybody sign these little pieces of silver. As a commemoration of my fortieth birthday. It was great.

MS. CHURCH: I want to try to imagine this community that is now global. I'll just speculate and I'll ask the question. Was the craft world so much smaller then that everyone sought out that kind of camaraderie that comes through having the same experience with media? And was there a need to connect and communicate in a way that maybe is not the same now, because there are so many publications, and is so much information?

MS. FISCH: Look at how many people go to conferences, go to the SNAG [Society of North American Goldsmiths] Conference, because I think there is a need still to have physical, face to face contact. And it was very important to me to do that. When I came to California, I didn't know anybody. I had never been west of the Mississippi before I arrived in San Diego to take up this job. The only person I had met was a designer, an industrial designer named Douglas Deeds. He was a student at Syracuse University when I was trying to decide whether I would take this job in California, where I had never been.

I called Arthur Pulos, who had been my teacher at Illinois -- he was teaching at Syracuse -- and I said, "Art, what do you think? And he said, "Well, come on over, because I have this student from San Diego." I drove over to Syracuse and I met Deeds, who told me about San Diego, and said, "When you arrive, give me a call." So he was the only person I knew. I called him up and he invited me to his family's home for dinner. It turned out he had a studio there, a working studio, and I was invited to use that studio, so for five years, I used Doug Deeds' studio as my studio here in San Diego.

MS. CHURCH: We're sort of jumping around. When did you move to San Diego?

MS. FISCH: In '61.

MS. CHURCH: So you're here in '61, and about to become a world --

MS. FISCH: Well, I was here in '61 not knowing anybody, and I needed to know people. You were asking about the craft community, and this actually leads to that. The first thing that I did was to get involved with the local and regional craft organizations, because I didn't know anybody. I joined an organization called Allied Craftsmen of San Diego, but I also joined the Southwest Assembly of the American Craft Council. At that time, the American Craft Council had regional groups, and I joined the Southwest Assembly, which was pretty much Los Angeles based at that moment.

I volunteered my services and I ended up on the committee or the board. I don't remember what it was called. Eventually, I ended up as president of that assembly, and I met lots of people through that. Southwest included Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, Hawaii and Southern California, not Northern California. I met all kinds of people, and it was an important network for me. I suppose because I knew about the American Craft Council from living in New York, that was an easy door for me to open when I came to California. And then, through the American Craft Council , I entered the World Crafts Council.

MS. CHURCH: The American Craft Council in New York -- now, are you talking about knowing about it when you were --

MS. FISCH: When I was at Skidmore.

MS. CHURCH: At Skidmore. And how did you find out about the American Craft Council ? Did somebody tell you about it?

MS. FISCH: They published a magazine and they ran a museum.

MS. CHURCH: Now, I don't think everybody just knew about that. Did you run into it on the street? Did you see the magazine in the library?

MS. FISCH: Well, I don't know. It just seemed that I always knew about it, I guess.

MS. CHURCH: Someone had to point me in that direction. You know, look at this magazine -- oh, I haven't seen that before.

MS. FISCH: I certainly was aware of it when I taught at Skidmore before I moved to California. I wasn't involved with it very much, although there was a conference in '57 at Asilomar, which I did not attend, but I knew about and read about avidly, and wished I could have gone. Then, there was a conference at Lake George, which was just north of Saratoga. I didn't actually go to it, but I saw some of the people. I can't remember why I didn't go. I wasn't in town or something like that. By then, I was beginning to know people, and I guess I sought out some connections with people because I wanted them.

MS. CHURCH: This idea of people and correspondence is getting to be a big theme in your life, that you have actively sought people out, you've maintained connections. You've really benefitted from that network that you've created for yourself.

MS. FISCH: Well, I have. I think, perhaps, part of it is that I'm a single person. I need to have connections in some other way than home, because home is lonely. So I reached out a lot to meet people. It was also exciting, although it was not always pleasant. There was lots of contention and egos bruised, but there was also lots of promise and lots of activity. Through the Southwest Assembly, we had conferences, we had meetings, we had exhibitions. And because I was involved, I also was invited to jury something or invited to give a lecture somewhere, because I was going to be there anyway for a meeting.

It's like pebbles that you throw in the pond, the ripples expand, and you keep meeting more opportunities and it builds. Also I wasn't -- although basically, I'm a relatively shy person, I wasn't shy about volunteering to do things or to present things, because I found that interesting to me intellectually to do that. And I'm good at organizations, so it was not hard for me to do that, and it was, in many cases, very selfishly motivated.

MS. CHURCH: Well, there was a mutual benefit.

MS. FISCH: It got me places and it introduced me to people that I didn't have to approach totally cold, because they were in a field that I knew.

MS. CHURCH: I would like to turn to some of the work and influences that have been active in your art. They are so linked with the travel. I'd like to talk about how you have gone to look at objects and artifacts in museums, and what information you absorbed. One thing that I note is that you're not after the content of the piece. You're after something else. You're looking for variability or --

MS. FISCH: Well, there are lots of things that I derive from what I look at. Sometimes, it's only the way something's put together; I notice that and I think, oh, isn't that an interesting thing. I draw that, and it goes into my notebook, but it also goes into my head that that's a possible thing to do. I don't know at that moment what it's going to be used for, but I'm interested in that particular connection or that particular device that I hadn't noticed before.

I try, when I go to museums, to do two things. One, to appreciate what I'm looking at, just to see it, but then to isolate a few pieces that I really look at in detail. I study and I draw not with any purpose in mind. I mean, I don't go looking for specific things. I just try to be open-minded and keep my eyes open. It's interesting that every time I go back to the same place, I see something different. I've probably spent more time at the Metropolitan in the Egyptian collection than most people, and I still see a new thing that I didn't see before, every time I visit.

I'm surprised, delighted, inspired. Maybe I don't ever do anything with that, but at the moment, it's exciting, and I write it down and make notes, I do some drawings. Maybe years later -- I do go through my sketchbooks from the past, just because I think, well, there's probably something here that I haven't used that I thought was interesting, and maybe I should revisit that. I just kind of page through, and sometimes I find, oh, now there's something. I always wanted to do something like that and I never have. Why don't I try that now?

Sometimes, I just continue to skip over but think about various things. I don't go looking for specific things, but I go with an open mind. And again, I've probably looked at the pre-Columbian gold at the Metropolitan in their treasury in the Michael Rockefeller wing hundreds of times, but I still love looking at it, and I still notice something new that I didn't notice before.

MS. CHURCH: You said the word love. There is a kind of love that you have for some of these things that you see. It seems that you are very secure in what you want to be making and your approach to art. But at the same time, you allow a connection to occur so that you can be, like you say, open to the work that you see and allow it to have an impact at some point.

MS. FISCH: Well, I guess I want to have impact from other things. Because if everything has to generate from inside my head, it's going to get stale after a while.

MS. CHURCH: I think that's a good observation.

MS. FISCH: Sometimes I do reach an impasse. I think everybody does from time to time. I work through that by cruising through my sketchbooks, because if I can't get to a place to see something new, I have all this information that I could look at. I find that more meaningful than looking at photographs. I love looking at colored images, but I don't find them very provocative or directly provocative in terms of what I'm going to make, because there's not enough information in a photograph.

MS. CHURCH: Do you think that drawing not only requires observation, but allows for translation, as well?

MS. FISCH: You're already beginning to figure out, how would I do this? Yeah, and that's where I make notes, because, I'm standing up with a sketchbook, and it's not very comfortable, and I can't do anything very extensive or detailed. So I make some observational drawings, and then I make notes. Try this, think about this;

what if? My sketchbooks are full of those kinds of little directives. I don't always pay attention to them, but that's what's fun about going back through the sketchbooks, that I have all this conversation with myself that I can renew.

MS. CHURCH: I think that's marvelous. You're looking at these museum pieces aesthetically, and you're allowing yourself to just have a very pure response to them. And then you begin to translate them somehow. Then there's this other component in your work, which is technique. It's mixed up with all of this. I don't think it's separate from it. But in your speculation, you're also thinking about how it might be made.

MS. FISCH: Right, how would I do this? Or, I observe something and think, oh, what happens if I try this in metal? And it's not always a metal thing that I'm looking at.

MS. CHURCH: One of the stories I'd like to capture on these tapes is how you developed the fiber textile techniques in metal. And certainly, that came with an observation of a piece in a museum, and then boom, a whole lifetime [Laughter].

MS. FISCH: Yes, it wasn't quite so immediate. It was direct, but not immediate. Because in '63 when I went to Peru, I looked at pre-Columbian textiles. And I saw also gold sewn to cloth. When I came back, that's what I did immediately. I made a piece that I've just remade, as a matter of fact, for the exhibition at the Textile Museum. I made a velvet bib that I sewed silver pieces to, and that was the immediate direct result of what I had looked at. But it looked like a pre-Columbian rip off, so I didn't go on with that.

It was interesting, but I didn't see any future in that. Although now I see that I could have moved in other directions with that concept, but I didn't. The next thing I made had nothing to do with the pre-Columbian things, except in shape. I made the same metal pieces that I made to sew onto something, but this time I actually wove in and out of them. And that was not something that I had seen in Peru. It was just something that came out of my knowing how to weave.

I thought about, why don't I try this? I did two pieces, I think, like that, where I made the metal elements and I wove in and out around them. Yes, that piece which is silk and linen, that's actually woven in and out of the metal pieces. That was a little bit more of a step away from the original inspiration, at least technically. I did another very large piece like that that was so labor intensive I thought, I'm not sure I want to do this anymore.

However, I might have continued with that, except that then, I went to Denmark on Fulbright research grant, and that was not part of my program, so I actually didn't do anything more with that for several years. I went back to Peru in '68, for the World Crafts Conference. And this time, the Gallo Gold Museum was open, which it hadn't been in '63. So that's when I saw this little tiny fragment of woven gold. And I thought, oh, now that's interesting. Why didn't I see that before? Well, I didn't see it before. I didn't immediately do anything with that either, but it certainly was in my head.

The next time I approached the idea was in 1970 when I was in London working at Gilian Packard's workshop, and I couldn't work there at night, because she had an elaborate alarm system. That meant I had to leave whenever the last person left, which was usually about 6:30. In the early fall, that was fine because it was light out and I could be a tourist for the rest of whatever the light would be. But as winter came, I thought, I need to do something.

I was living in this one room, a little bedsitter in the middle of London, which was not a terribly comfortable, relaxing place. I thought, if I just had something to do, then I thought, well, I know how to do these things. Why don't I try this? And that's where I made my first woven metal piece, because I could do that not in the studio. I could make the components at the workshop, and then I could work on it in my room.

I also did a spool knitted piece for the same reason. I don't know that I had that in mind, but maybe I did before I went, because I had the material. I had some 30-gauge 18-karat gold that I must have ordered specifically with that in mind, because I sat and did this little spool knitted thing hours on end in my little bed sit at night. And when it got long enough, which was as far as my arms would reach, I took it to the workshop and made the findings for it.

In the workshop, I wasn't doing textile things at all. I was doing, I think, some chased pieces and some constructed pieces. The other half of that year, in January, I moved to Denmark. And there, I went back to Stig Berg's workshop where I had a giant chasing bowl. So, I didn't do any textile things there because I had all this other opportunity and interest. It wasn't really until 1971 when Van Nostrand -- the publisher -- asked through a gallery if I would be interested in writing a book. I thought, I don't want to write a book, a textbook. There are plenty; I don't need to do that.

But I thought about it, and I thought, you know, this textile stuff is really interesting, and there's no information. By then I had begun to try a few other things, and I realized there was no specific technical information. So I

contacted Van Nostrand and said, if you would be interested in this subject, I would be interested to do this book, and I prepared a little outline of what I thought I would cover.

They said, "Well, that sounds interesting." I said, "Well, I'm not sure I want to do this, because I'm not sure how big the interest is. I'm interested, but I don't know if there's an audience for this. I'm going to Australia on a two month lecture tour, and I will offer a workshop in this subject. I'll see how it goes and whether people are interested." In the meantime, I had done some work with my students at San Diego State.

MS. CHURCH: So it was more than a rudimentary --

MS. FISCH: Yes, it was more than just that one or two things. I wasn't doing very much, but I was saying to the students, why don't you try this and why don't you try that, and we will all do samples like this. I developed a curriculum, and we did samples. And you know, everything worked. It was really interesting; the students did exciting things. And so, I did this workshop tour, and there seemed to be interest. When I came back, I said, okay, I will proceed with this. I had to write a sample chapter, and then the contract was signed. I spent a year doing everything and preparing the manuscript.

[TAPE CHANGE.]

MS. CHURCH: This is Sharon Church interviewing Arline Fisch at her home and studio in Mission Hills, a neighborhood of San Diego, California. Today is Monday, July 30, 2001. This interview is for the Archives of American Art, the Smithsonian Institution. Arline, you've been talking about how you developed the various textile techniques in metals. Can you continue with that story?

MS. FISCH: In the year that I prepared a manuscript for the book that was eventually published, I sat here in this studio and I made samples of everything that I knew how to do. And because I had decided that I would photograph works in process, because it seemed too complicated to do it with a photographer, I used the advance from the publisher to buy a very good camera and to have some lessons in black and white photography so that I could take step by step photographs in the studio as I was making things.

My recollection is that I did all the samples, and then I sat and wrote the text. It was very fortunate that at that particular moment, the university had just established a typing pool that nobody was using very much, and the dean said it was okay for me to have them type the manuscript for my book. I actually wrote longhand, then dictated into a tape, which I delivered and had it typed, which was really very nice because it made it much easier than my having to type the manuscript myself.

I was able to spend my time making the samples and photographing them. The photographing was hard for me, because that's not something that I felt really comfortable with, but I'm glad that I did it that way, because it meant that I didn't have to prepare multiple stages of something for a photographer. I could just photograph step one and then go on and photograph the next step, and so on. In the end, it worked out better for me.

I also decided that a year was quite long enough to do this project, so I was determined to finish it in a year. A few techniques I rejected out of hand, and I later had to recant that. I first said no, you don't ever want to make knots in metal, it's too difficult, so macramé was out. Of course, that's not true, and in the second edition, I fixed that. But I did things like caning, which I hadn't done since I was a kid, when I remember caning canoe seats.

Everything I tried worked in metal, although some things worked better than others. The book has an introductory chapter on referential material. Doing the research for that part was really probably the most interesting to me; I kept finding examples, historical examples -- never a place where you could say, ah, in this culture or this period was everybody doing textile techniques in metal. It wasn't like that. For example I found a Greek head wreath that was made like a basket. I just found things unexpectedly.

People, like Jack Larsen who knew I was working on this book, would send me things. He'd see something and he would send it to me, and other people would do the same. I accumulated samples, examples, both photographic examples and actual examples of things like strainers and so on. That chapter was interesting just to demonstrate that I wasn't actually inventing anything. I was simply looking at things and transposing them into a more contemporary mode or format.

When the book was published, it was well received, it was well reviewed and all of that, and it sold well, but it didn't seem to have much impact. I mean, I didn't see any work coming back. The book went out of print in ten years. It sold steadily and then it went out of print. Unfortunately, it went out of print just at the moment that Van Nostrand sold that division of books to another publisher. The editor at Van Nostrand said they would have reprinted because they felt there was still a market, not a huge market, but it was worth redoing, but the new publisher sat on it for a year and a half, and then decided they wouldn't do it, by which time they'd destroyed the plates. Reprinting it was out of the question, even though I now had the copyright and could have done that. It meant it had to be republished, which was a much harder thing to convince some other publisher that they

wanted to do, because they had to front up all of the expenses.

I would periodically write letters to a whole bunch of publishers, one or two of whom would express interest, and I would pursue that, but nothing came of it. After about eight years, I got tired of doing that, but I was tired of having people send me postcards or calling me up whining about, why can't I find a copy of your book? For a while I had the university make Xerox copies. They were really not very good. It was okay; you could read the stuff, but it was hardly a nice presentation, but it at least took care of the whiners, and I didn't need to think about it.

Then, I saw a book by Shereen Laplantz on twill basketry [Twill Basketry : A Handbook of Designs, Techniques, and Styles, 1993] and it was very handsomely done, by Lark Books, which does books on textiles. I thought, okay, I'll give that a try. I'll write to them. I wrote this letter, and I had a phone call back from the publisher saying, "I have that book right here on my bookshelf. We'd love to do it." That was really wonderful.

It was republished in 1995, by which time I was seeing some results. It had taken all this time, from '75 to ‘90 before I began to see more than one or two people. Mary Hu has always used basketry techniques in metal from the same time that I started, but there wasn't very much else going on. Then suddenly, there seemed to be a lot of activity, and since '95, there's been an increasing amount of interest, and I find that really exciting.

Lots more textile people are interested in using metal. There are a lot of weavers now who use metal warps because the structure enables things to be self-supporting. There's a lot more going on, when this second edition went out of print this last year, I was determined to get it back in print quickly. That's going to happen. It will come out in September, 2001.

MS. CHURCH: So a third edition is on the way.

MS. FISCH: Yes, and the only thing that's different about the third edition is the photographic section. When I did the second edition, I added a lot of material. I took out a little bit, but I added a section on machine knitting, which I hadn't done in the seventies, and also put in a section on knots, because I knew by now that you could, in fact, do that. There wasn't a lot more that I had to say technically. I didn't see any reason to rewrite the book, but I did agree to redo the portfolio section, and it's actually twice as large, with a lot of photographs.

There are about 50 artists from different parts of the world represented. There are Norwegians, and Danes, and Australians, and Europeans. That was exciting to me, to ferret out people who were doing interesting things. And, of course, since I sent everything off to the publisher and it's all too late to do anything, I've discovered a lot more people.

MS. CHURCH: Well, that will be for the fourth edition [Laughter]. I am glad, because I was one of those people who had the first edition, and it disappeared. Then, when I got to PCA, the library had a copy and that disappeared. I don't know what was going on, but your books were disappearing. And I think all of us were eager and thrilled when you republished it. And then, when you told me that was over, I thought, oh no, we're going to go through this again: it's going to disappear.

MS. FISCH: Well, happily, it will back in print very shortly, and hopefully it won't happen again.

MS. CHURCH: It's obviously a really useful text for a lot of people.

MS. FISCH: It seems to be something. I just finished giving a little three-day workshop at the Canberra School of Art in Australia, and a few of the students actually came from other parts of Australia to do this workshop, because they were already involved. They were already crocheting or knitting in wire. It was exciting to learn that the book had had some impact, that it had introduced the idea.

MS. CHURCH: Yes, that's great. Now, I want to back up a little bit and find out how you were introduced to textiles, to fibers. How did that happen in your life?

MS. FISCH: People ask me all the time, where did I start? Was I a weaver first or a metals person first? I was a metals person. I did very little in textile structures, although I had always been involved in dressmaking. I always made my own clothes, and so I was interested in fabric, but I had never made any fabric other than printed stuff.

It was when I was at Skidmore teaching a variety of things: art education, silkscreen printing. I think I taught lettering once. I was never going to teach jewelry because Earl Pardon was there, and Earl made it very clear that he was not going to share this field. I knew that when I went there.

One day, the department chair, who was Marion Pease, said to me, "Why don't you take over the weaving program when I retire next year?" I knew it was because she wanted to give me something that would be mine. And I said, "Well, Marion, that's wonderful, but I don't know how: I don't know how to weave." And she said,

"Well, I'll teach you, and we'll send you to school." So I said, "Well, okay, that sounds interesting." The weaving studio at Skidmore was a wonderful place.

I took lessons from Marion -- she sort of tutored me and showed me a loom, and showed me how to string it up and so on. And then I went to Haystack for six weeks the next summer. My first teacher was Jack Larsen. My second teacher was Ted Hallman. In Jack's class, the first thing he said was, "I've done my time under the loom. I don't plan to do anymore, so don't ask. And you're to string up a double cloth." We had very specific instructions, and I'm thinking, oh my god, I don't know how to do this, but I'm certainly not going to tell him that I don't know how.

The next morning I got up at six, took my book, went to the studio, sat under the loom and figured it out from what Marion had told me and what I had in front of me in the book, and I got it strung up. I don't know that Jack ever knew that I didn't know anything, because I performed okay in the end. At the end of three weeks, I had managed to keep up and do some interesting samples. And I think I even made a piece but, I think they were mostly samples, pretty good samples. I was quite pleased with the result but it was a harrowing introduction. I learned a lot. And then, the next session was Ted Hallman, which was rug weaving, which technically was not so difficult, but introduced the use of really brilliant color in marvelous wools. So that was an exciting time, three weeks also, and I again made samples. I still have those and am rather proud of them.

I went back to Skidmore in the fall and started teaching weaving. My first student was Nancy Merritt. That's another Haystack connection because Nancy married Fran Merritt's son and became a weaver. I taught weaving for only that one year, because midway in that year, a job announcement came from San Diego State College -- it was a college then -- for a person to start a jewelry program. And it was Earl who handed me the job description [Laughter], and said, "You might want to apply for this."

So I did, and I got the job and came out here to teach metals but the students found out very quickly that I knew how to weave. There was a small weaving program in the Home Economics Department, several buildings away, but none in the Art Department, but there were several looms standing in the room I was teaching jewelry in. So I set up the looms and showed the students how to work, and before I knew it, I had started a weaving program.

I acquired a number of used looms. I just advertised in town, and it's amazing how many people have looms they don't use. I acquired enough looms for a class, found a classroom to put them in, and voila, we had a weaving program, which I taught along with the jewelry program.

MS. CHURCH: So you started a jewelry program and then, almost without thinking about it, you were simultaneously building a weaving program.

MS. FISCH: Yes, it was unexpected.

MS. CHURCH: Because of demand and interest.

MS. FISCH: Yes. And I probably couldn't have done it if I had been older than I was at that moment, because it took an enormous amount of energy to run both programs. But I did that for all through the sixties. We hired Joan Austin to run the weaving program in 1970, and I never taught it after that. At any rate, in that period of the sixties, the textile field was just blossoming, and it was exceptionally powerful in Southern California, centered in Los Angeles.

Everybody was very excited about things like pre-Columbian weaving, and large-scale textile structures, sculptures, and off loom weaving. All of that was just so exciting that I got quite caught up in that. I never actually did very much myself, and I never presented weaving in exhibitions. I never presented myself as a weaver professionally, but because I was teaching, clearly, I needed to do some things. I had a large floor loom, and I did weave some wall hangings.

I was very taken with Sheila Hicks' work. She had a small exhibition -- I think it was her first exhibition in the U.S., in La Jolla, in it must have been 1962 or ‘63, of her little frame loom tapestries. She had, I don't know, maybe 25 of them, but they were all quite small and very beautiful. She came to the exhibition and I met her. As a result, I went to visit her in Taxco the next year, in 1963, and that was very influential. I did some small frame weaving tapestries, and I had the students doing those as well.

Ultimately, what happened was the textile program became a kind of research program for me. That is, I could think of all these things that could be explored. I didn't do them myself, but I gave it to the students in assignments or suggestions. The students did absolutely wonderful work, and I had marvelous students. Ferne Jacobs came, for example, one short summer program I did at San Diego State. That was her first involvement, not with weaving, but with more contemporary ideas about weaving, because she'd been working at the Weaver's Guild in Los Angeles. I was very excited about the textiles, and the field was very exciting, but I never quite made the leap to being a textile artist.

MS. CHURCH: Well, I still think of you as having a strong affiliation with textiles.

MS. FISCH: I guess the material that I preferred was metal. And so, I never quite made the leap to becoming a textile artist.

MS. CHURCH: And you're not classified in that category.

MS. FISCH: No, I never put myself in that category. I suppose looking back on it, I certainly had that option. I could have done that, but I chose not to because I wanted to concentrate on the metal.

MS. CHURCH: Currently, craft artists move between media; they are crossing over and mixing things up. You were really one of the first among the post-World War II craft persons to do this. And you did it in a very honest way, not even consciously. You were crossing over. I think this is one of the things that is so interesting about you. You were a metals person working in fibers techniques and developing work that is at once ornament and clothing.

MS. FISCH: I think some of that comes from the fact that I really was an art education major, and as such, I had a generalist background. I didn't start as an undergraduate majoring in a particular medium as students do now. Skidmore encouraged that kind of generalization or open ended education, and I think that was very valuable, so that I didn't get so stuck in a direction that I couldn't move out and try some other things.

Early on, I incorporated some ceramic things in my jewelry. I never felt really satisfied with that, so I didn't continue it. But I did some little Faience clay modeling and incorporated that in a few pieces. And I did some glass very early on, just little melted glass beads that I incorporated into rather large neckpieces. I've lost track of those, so I don't even have good photographs, but they were actually quite successful.

MS. CHURCH: It would be nice to see them now. In terms of your work in metals and in textiles, the body has always been central to your work. I know you've made other things, but wearability, the body seem central to your work. How does this work that you're creating function on the form, both physically and psychologically? Let's just talk about the physical aspects first.

MS. FISCH: I think we did cover some of that yesterday in my saying that I try everything on, so all of that has to do with comfort and movability, and flexibility, but the idea that all of what I do is sited on the body gives it a dimension, gives it a scale that I'm comfortable with. I've tried working larger, off the body, and I don't feel as comfortable or as confident there, so I chose not to pursue that. But the idea that what I do goes on the body gives me a destination and a limitation that I like. It has some drawbacks, but it's sort of setting parameters for me that I am very happy to work within.

MS. CHURCH: Limitations have, I think, two things: they give you a clear arena in which you're working, and also, they can tell you where not to go beyond. They give you a very defined arena in which to operate. Do you think your traveling makes portability important, the fact that you can put it on your body and go? Is that maybe something that's involved?

MS. FISCH: You mean in terms of making it, that I can make it anywhere?

MS. CHURCH: No, no, no. That it is the art form of nomadic peoples.

MS. FISCH: I've never thought about it in that way, but I know that I don't care to have the work hung on a wall or put in a box on the wall, although it may be nicer for people to look at than to have it tucked away. I have, in some instances, actually made situations for the jewelry to be in when it's not on the body, so that it does at least have a presence when somebody's not wearing it. In actual fact, it's really wonderful to think that what you've made is moving around in the world and isn't sitting in a corner somewhere, or in a garden somewhere, where only a few people get to see it.

MS. CHURCH: The social aspect.

MS. FISCH: The social aspect is really intriguing, and it's always interesting to me to observe somebody that I unexpectedly ran into who's wearing something I made.

MS. CHURCH: Like yesterday.

MS. FISCH: Like yesterday, yes [Laughs]. That's very gratifying, but it also means that what I've created is moving in the world apart from me, and that's very rewarding. I like that aspect of it. I suppose, in some ways, it may be why I don't like doing small things like rings, although certainly, they have a bigger opportunity to move around in the world than the things I make. But they're not so noticeable, and I like the noticeability. I guess that's my ego trip thing.

MS. CHURCH: Well, it might even be a little bit more connected to theater, and performance, and spectacle.

MS. FISCH: I suppose so. I certainly don't think that women wear jewelry or beautiful clothing to be not noticed. My perception is, if you want to be a wallflower, you don't wear exotic things, because if you wear exotic things, you're not a wallflower, you are noticed. I love running into Zandra Rhodes, for example, who lives part of the time here in San Diego. You always know Zandra wherever she is, at the opera, or at a party, or walking down the street, because she has flaming pink hair and wonderful exotic clothes. You always recognize her.

I wish more women had that sense about them. Not very many people are quite so flamboyant as that. But it is nice to see women moving around in a social situation wearing things, whether it's my jewelry or somebody else's jewelry , or wearing a beautiful piece of clothing, that makes them individual and noticeable, and gives them a presence in a group situation.

MS. CHURCH: I was surprised yesterday at the Neurological Science Institute piano performance, how many people there knew you, were wearing art jewelry, and were excited to talk to you about their jewelry. I felt that you had had an enormous impact on the San Diego community through this idea you have about how jewelry can be a social and visual --

MS. FISCH: But yesterday was unusual, I think. It happened to be a group of people that are interested in jewelry. They shop at Taboo Studio, they belong to the San Diego State Art Council, they've supported my work. And so, they can have a conversation about it, and that's fun for me, but it's not so usual.

MS. CHURCH: Well, I was really astounded, and I thought that they were very educated about --

MS. FISCH: Oh, yes, well, one of the women you met was a former gallery owner, and she used to sell my work, and so she's very familiar with it, of course.

MS. CHURCH: Well, you'd fool me! I think you've turned the town around. We've touched on this, but I want to make sure we explored it: the psychological aspects of jewelry. The jewelry physically sits somewhere between the person and the viewer. It's on the body, but it is exposed to this larger audience. And I think that there's a conversation there. I think you explained to us what you're saying through the jewelry, but there is an effect of the spectacle, and then there's the audience.

So there are three things going on: there's the interior, private part of the person wearing it, there's the performance of the pieces, and then there's the audience that receives it. Do you have anything to say about all of that?

MS. FISCH: You know, if someone's wearing string of pearls, the pearls may be very beautiful or they may be fake, but the audience doesn't respond to that, they simply notice that they're pearls. But very few people would venture to comment on such a piece of jewelry, whereas, if someone's wearing a piece of art jewelry, something that is out of the ordinary, the tendency is for people to comment on it. They come up and they look at it, and they say something about it, and that provokes an interaction.

Personally, I like that, because it's hard for me to initiate a conversation with somebody. But if I'm wearing a piece of jewelry, people come up and suddenly I'm engaged in conversation. I think that may be also what happens with people who buy jewelry and wear it with a certain amount of self-confidence, that this is going to attract attention, and it is a way of opening a conversation or introducing a person.

I think, in the past, people have said things to me like, oh, you have to be tall and thin to wear your jewelry, and that's not true. I've seen many other shapes of people who wear my jewelry very well [Laughter]. I think it takes a confident person; that's the key. If someone feels very shy and non-self confident, then the jewelry's intimidating and they shouldn't wear it.

I remember once at an opening of an exhibition of mine where I was showing full length pieces, a man came up to me and said he was very interested in one of them full length pieces for his wife. I knew his wife, she was a very shy, demure person. It was awful of him to think that she would, in any way, be able to wear that piece. And I said that to him. I would be happy to have your wife have a piece, but it's not this piece, because I don't think she'd wear it. Not only wouldn't she wear it, she would be devastated. I thought that was really so insensitive of him to think that she could manage that. It was certainly not anything I wanted to be involved in.

MS. CHURCH: So you are actually very aware of the effect jewelry has and the appropriateness of it. I think I've read about your desire not to have the jewelry overwhelm the wearer.

MS. FISCH: Right. I don't want what I make to be hung on "walking-around" pedestals. I mean, that's fine if I've hired mannequins to do that or models to do that. But for people who own the jewelry, they have to feel that it's part of them, and not that they are simply an alternative to a wall or a pedestal to support my ego. I would not

be happy with that. I'm delighted that people wear my work, and I'm delighted that it engages social interaction by people noticing the work. I'm pleased that the people who wear it have the ability to respond to that, that they feel comfortable to talk about it and share their excitement about the piece with whoever is questioning them.

MS. CHURCH: So in some ways, your work finds its own home. There is a personality match between the work and the wearer.

MS. FISCH: I would hope so. I think that most often the work is purchased by the women who are going to wear it, and not by people giving it to them. Occasionally, there are a few men who buy things for their wives, but they know already that that is acceptable. I don't have men buying things saying, well, I don't know if my wife's going to like this. If there's any question about it, they shouldn't buy it, because it's just going to make it uncomfortable for the recipient.

One of the advantages of not selling the work myself is that it relieves that tension of, "Is it possible to exchange the work?" I have a very dear friend whose husband wanted to give her a piece of my work, and I was thrilled that she was going to have it, but he chose the wrong piece. He bought it at Taboo, though, so she could take it back and exchange it for another piece that she preferred. And that's what happened. She was happy, and he had done his thing.

MS. CHURCH: It's interesting that your audience is comprised of women, who have been described in marketing journals, as those who buy for themselves, who have a lot of confidence, who have a need to dress in ways that have to do with their identity. Does this begin to describe the person who --

MS. FISCH: Yes, and I think it describes the person who buys art jewelry in general. I think that's a good description for most people who buy contemporary jewelry. I think that people who are collecting high karat gold and diamond jewelry buy it in another way.

MS. CHURCH: I do think that a jewelry collection is built differently from many other kinds of collections, because it's often based around the person who chooses to wear it.

MS. FISCH: Yeah, it's one of those difficult areas for people who make jewelry, I think. Because I remember Inge Assenbaum, who's a collector -- she owned a gallery in Vienna, but she was also a collector, and I remember going to look at her collection, which was 20th century, but started with Joseph Hoffman and the Wiener Werkstatt period. As she was showing me the collection, she said, "Oh now, these pieces I'm not going to keep, because I bought them for the wrong reason, and they don't belong in this collection." And I said, "What do you mean?" And she said, "Well, when I bought those, I was only thinking about how I could wear them, and that's not a way to build a proper collection."

She was an art collector, so she knew from a scholarly point of view that this was not the way to collect, but I think for most contemporary people who are not scholars, that what they collect is mostly apart from themselves. And then suddenly, there's jewelry, which is not apart from themselves, and that creates another whole dilemma, because do they buy things that they think are significant and belong in their collection if they're making a serious collection of 20th century jewelry, or do they only select those things that they can themselves relate to on their body?

Are they not buying some things because they can't wear them, and buying other things because they wear them but they are not significant? I think that's a real dilemma, and it's a dilemma for the artists in the field as well.

MS. CHURCH: I think it's a very important issue that isn't discussed too much, and maybe ought to be opened up within the field for some dialogue. I too want my jewelry to be worn. That's my most desired effect. I would not want it to be bought in a collection and put into a drawer somewhere.

MS. FISCH: No, but then there's this -- what happens when a museum buys it, and nobody's ever going to wear it again? I had to think about that. I want it there because it means that more people have access to it, and that it becomes part of a continuum of the history of ornamentation. So clearly, I want my work to be in museum collections, but the trade off is that nobody's ever going to wear it.

MS. CHURCH: Does it shift, then, in its intent? Let's say some of your fabulous collars end up -- and I'm sure they will -- in collections. Then it shifts away from the performance spectacle into, maybe, artifact, like you say, into history. And then it will become part of a study, part of a cultural --

MS. FISCH: Yes, and that's what I mean that it has, in some ways, much greater access, because more people will see it in a public collection than would ever see it in private ownership, and I become a part of the tradition, a part of the history of ornamentation. It also becomes an artifact in social history, because it identifies a period.

Recently, the LA County Museum did an exhibition of 100 Years of California Art, and they chose to show a piece of mine from the sixties. The show was very comprehensive. It included design, craft, painting, sculpture, architecture. It was an enormous survey.

They chose the halter piece of mine; they wanted that specific piece because they felt it represented the sixties in California. I tried to interest them in a more recent piece, because I thought it would be better for me to have a more recent piece in the exhibition, but I could understand, when I saw the exhibition, why they wanted this particular piece. It was very related to Rudi Gernrich, the designer, who was doing topless things, and it was, in fact, related to that. I was a great fan of Rudy Germik and he influenced my thinking a lot about fashion, it's one of the few pieces where the jewelry actually becomes clothing. It's not something that probably would work now, but it was very much a part of the sixties.

MS. CHURCH: This was your 1968 Halter and Skirt, silver and printed velvet. It's a wonderful piece.

MS. FISCH: Well, but it is of the period.

MS. CHURCH: And it has become an artifact. Is it important to you that your work have a life on the body and then be received by a museum? Is it important that it be more?

MS. FISCH: I wore that piece. In fact it never fit anybody else [Laughter]. Well yes, I don't necessarily want to make pieces that go from my studio to a museum. I would like them to have a life for which they were intended before they get there. That doesn't always happen, and I don't always have control over that. I certainly wouldn't turn down the opportunity to have a piece in the museum collection for that reason, but my preference would be for them to be worn first.

MS. CHURCH: Arline, the catalogue of your retrospective exhibition, Elegant Fantasy, divides your oeuvre into 15 distinct categories that are thematic, and are in no way chronological. Some of the categories, such as Flowers, contain works that span your lifetime of making. Do you think that making is cyclical or spiral like rather than linear? How has your work evolved?

MS. FISCH: Well, it certainly hasn't been linear, for me. If anything, it's spiraling, because I come back to ideas that I didn't feel I finished, that I moved on from too quickly. Mostly, I come back to ideas because they still interest me, but I abandoned them because, at the time, something else interested me more. I don't feel uncomfortable coming back to ideas, revisiting ideas, even revisiting work just because it was nice work and I don't have anymore of it now, and I wish I did. Some of the knitted things that I've just done have that reason, that I liked them, they're all gone, and I'd like to see more of them.

Maybe I have a few ideas that I would change now from ones that I did before, 10 years ago or 12 years ago. I'm comfortable doing and revisiting ideas, but I also like to make jumps to something different, and there have been times when I've made really big jumps in what I do. When I learned to chase, for example, that was a big jump from the small unit construction things that I did earlier, to being able to make these large, in some ways, monolithic pieces that were both figurative and in relief. That wasn't just a technical jump, it was a conceptual jump for me.

Moving into the textile structures there's also a big jump, because it meant that work could be flexible and soft. That whole idea that metal could be soft was a concept that was new to me and was exciting to pursue in all kinds of ways. I don't know that I've made that kind of a jump recently, and it bothers me a little bit that I haven't. Undertaking the saints project is actually a deliberate step to jump start a new direction, a new way of thinking, not necessarily technically important. The reason I'm keeping it very private at the moment is that I haven't made the necessary steps yet to feel that I've accomplished what I think is possible to do there.

I've often responded to new ideas that present themselves in a variety of ways. Sometimes, it's a suggestion from an exhibition, a thematic exhibition that provokes a certain line of work. Sometimes, it's a new material or a new process that I've learned that provokes a body of work or a direction. When I was in London in '79, I spent a lot of time at the Victoria and Albert in the costume collection, specifically looking at things like ribbons, and purses, and fans. I wanted some new ideas to work with, not just in the textile structures, but also thematically in my work.

And that was actually very productive, because I did lots of work afterwards, for many years afterwards, that involved what I learned in terms of ribbons, handkerchiefs, and using metal to look like fabric that wasn't actually woven. It wasn't actually fabric construction, but it looked like fabric. And all the work I've done with pleats comes out of that, comes out of the fans. I realized, as I was learning how to make pleats, that, in fact, pleats are a favorite of mine in clothing; I've always loved pleated clothing. Making pleats in metal just feels wonderful and provides me with a whole range of form ideas, I can make fans, or I can make brooches, or I can make necklaces, but I use the pleats as this kind of fabric-like structure.

Sometimes, an idea just comes because a material presents itself. The Elephant series is one of those categories. I thought I should do some work with stones, but cut stones don't appeal to me. I love looking at them, but to me they're like jellybeans [Laughter]. You know, it's fun to sort of play with them, but then they have to be set, and suddenly the whole thing loses its magic for me.

But I found thin sliced agates that are just so evocative, because they all have images in them. They're mostly landscape pictures. The problem was only finding them thin enough and small enough that you could wear them, but I found a whole bunch that you can buy for a dollar a piece. I bought lots of them, and I spread them out and said, oh, I think I'll do this one. It was challenging to figure out, one, how to set them, and then two, how to add something to them. I mean, it's easy to set them, but then what do you have? You have a stone with a piece of metal around it.

And I wanted to make a contribution, to create an event, so I tried adding metal parts. The first one I did, I completed and I thought, it needs something more. I looked at it, and I thought, it looks like an African landscape, there ought to be elephants there. I remembered that I had seen at a tradeshow these little carved elephants from India. They were very crude, and I didn't buy them because I didn't need any elephants, but I remembered them. Luckily I had the card from the guy who was selling them, so I called, and I had to buy a bag of 100. [Laughter.] I only wanted five or something.

I bought this bag of 100 elephants, and it worked perfectly. It was just what this piece needed, but then I had 95 elephants left [Laughter], and I had these stones. I thought, oh, you know, this is kind of fun, I think I'll do some more of these. I think , in the end, I did about 12. They were laborious. They were all hollow constructed with multiple kinds of metals, and every one was an engineering problem. And I had to figure out, of course, how to hold the elephants in place.

It was an intellectual and engineering challenge to work on those, but they were fun. I really enjoyed doing them. I don't want to do anymore of them, but I don't feel that they're so out of line with my thinking in the rest of my work. They were provoked by a particular situation, and they have a certain kind of humor in them. My favorite one is Hannibal Crossing the Alps, which is only three elephants, but the stone, to me, looked like a mountain pass. It just occurred to me that mountains connected with elephants through Hannibal. So that's the piece.

All of them have a little bit of humor attached to them; I just enjoy that kind of little private joke. It was a private joke for me, because I don't necessarily think it communicates so overtly to anybody else.

MS. CHURCH: It is nice to hear you talk about these pieces, because I sensed the play that's in there for you as an artist, that you're having a lot of fun with your work, and that you're responding to materials that are out there. And then, I think of you as a fabricator: you pull things together and you put things together.

MS. FISCH: Right, it certainly wasn't out of my way of working. The subject matter was maybe a little out of the way. But you know, there was a period when I used feathers -- and I don't remember when that was, early seventies, I think. It was because the first woven piece I did, I used feathers that a friend of mine, who raised macaws, had given me. They were beautiful iridescent blue feathers, and I kept them for a long time not knowing what to do with them, and then suddenly there was a way to use them.

I got really excited about using the feathers, and I showed it to a British friend. A week later, I received in the mail from her five beautifully matched parrot feathers. She said, "Here, I thought you'd like these." I made the piece right then, right away, because there were those feathers that were so beautiful I wanted to use them. So I made a feather brooch.

When I came back to the U.S., I thought, well, I should look at more feathers, and I wonder where you buy feathers. You can't buy tropical bird feathers: you have to have friends for those. I looked up feathers in the yellow pages, and there was a company called Hollywood Fancy Feathers. I went, and it was eye opening. It was incredible. It was feathers for the costume industry, the movie industry. You could buy feathers sewn together, you could buy feathers still on the bird -- you could buy all kinds of feathers, all from domesticated birds.

I was really taken with the vibrancy of color, the softness of the feathers, the sensuousness of the feathers, and I just wanted to use them, so I did. I made a whole bunch of pieces that just focused on the sensuousness of the feathers. I used them not one at a time, but in masses. I maybe did that for a year or two, and I haven't worked with feathers since. That's not true [Laughter]. I remember now that sometime in the eighties, I was going through my collections of stuff, and there was this box of feathers. I thought, oh, those are nice. So I actually did another set of pieces where I used only single feathers.

MS. CHURCH: I think it's wonderful to allow yourself to be seduced by material. It seems to get some juices going. I think of your feathers as often a wonderful counterpoint to the metal. Those two things work together, yet they're very, very different in texture and feel.

MS. FISCH: And they accomplished something for me that I didn't have available any other way at the time, and that was color and softness. Those two factors were really significant for me, and at the time, I didn't have another way of accomplishing that. And the feathers are marvelous material. I've responded to other materials as well, like mesh.

When I lived in Vienna in '83, I found a place that sold beautiful sheer stainless steel mesh. It's available everywhere, but I had never run across it before, and they had it in really, really fine stuff. It was like silk. I was absolutely enamored of it, so I bought a lot of it and I came home and made a whole bunch of work out of it, just because I thought, oh, this material is so gorgeous. I still have some of it, so every once in a while, it surfaces again.

But that time in '83, when I made a large fan necklace, that was focusing on the potential of that material, which was the moiré patterns that you get by layering it. That piece is totally driven by the material.

MS. CHURCH: In terms of that cyclical or spiral-like model for growth as an artist, I see a lot of connections between the feathers being made of the fans, the fans being made out of the pleats, the pleats being made out of the mesh, the mesh being fabric.

MS. FISCH: Well, they are certainly interrelated. They don't necessarily happen simultaneously, and they don't happen once. I mean, they come back. Keeping the materials around, but not necessarily out in the open, I sometimes suddenly rediscover something. My feathers are still in a box in the drawer over there, and every once in a while, I'm looking for something and I open that box, and I think, oh, look at that, maybe I should think about that again. If I'm busy doing something else, I just close the box up and put it away again.

But if I'm at a stage where I'm sort of casting around for where am I going next, I might take that box out, leave it out, look at it, think about it. Maybe something will happen. My work, in that way, does not progress logically. It's quite an intuitive kind of progression.

MS. CHURCH: That's connected to something that I would like you to respond to. I don't want to make you feel awkward, but I think of you as having been really at the forefront of the field for decades. Somehow, what you do is always fresh, and yet, you have these things that you revisit. You've been talking a lot about how you trigger yourself, how you get out of a time where you feel maybe stagnant. Do you think that's one of the reasons why your work has always been so important to the field, that you are moving along?

MS. FISCH: I guess I'm not sure how important my work is in the field, but I suppose it does change in ways that make people want to look and see new work. But I actually think of myself more as a plodder –that I kind of plod along in my own little world. If I didn't make the effort to put my work out in public, it wouldn't go anywhere. I learned that early on.

[TAPE CHANGE.]

MS. CHURCH: Sharon Church interviewing Arline Fisch at her home and studio in Mission Hills, a neighborhood of San Diego, California, on July 30, 2001, for the Archives of American Art, the Smithsonian Institution. Arline, you were talking a bit about how you've stayed fresh as an artist in the field.

MS. FISCH: What I was going to say was that I realized that it was important to enter exhibitions, enter competitions, to respond to calls for thematic exhibitions and so on, and I was very religious about doing that. I didn't win a lot of prizes in competitions, but I was in the exhibition, and so I think that's what kept my work in front of the field, at least in front of the eye of the field, that I was always there. I was not the star, but I was always there.

I think if you want to make a career in a field, that you have to do that, that you have to put yourself into those uncomfortable situations. I don't do very much about entering competitions anymore, but I do participate in exhibitions that interest me. I will respond to requests for pieces in exhibitions, and I think, do I need to do this anymore? I probably don't need to do it anymore, but it's interesting to do it, it's a way of putting my work out in the public, and I have always wanted to do that.

MS. CHURCH: Well, beyond that, I think you've developed a public, so that people are curious about what you're doing now. And to everyone's delight, you seem to always have something new.

MS. FISCH: Sometimes that doesn't seem so easy to me, but I struggle to do that. I like the challenge of having to come up with something that fits into a particular theme. I'm not always completely happy with the result, but at least I tried. And, as I say, I plodded along and I responded, and that was important to me.

MS. CHURCH: The idea that you enjoy the opportunity to exhibit as a means of staying connected seems to be a strong, driving force for you.

MS. FISCH: A long time ago, I guess, in very basic terms, I thought, do I want to be rich or do I want to be famous [Laughter]? And I decided that fame was more important than money. Having made that decision, since I don't have any money, I'm committed to at least trying to keep my name out there in the public view.

MS. CHURCH: That's great. Arline, with regard to technique, how much do you think is necessary, and how much is too much? I think none of your work is overworked. When does a piece become a virtuoso performance and not art? And when do you know, as an artist, when to stop working on a piece?

MS. FISCH: I don't consider myself a very good technician. I'm not very patient, I actually don't like, always, the process, and so my goal is to get it don. I'm excited about a piece at the beginning because I have this vision, but I'm impatient to get to the end, so my goal is to accomplish that as quickly as possible, with as little stress as possible. A lot of my work is very labor intensive, so it seems sort of contradictory what I'm saying. But in reality, I work on a lot of pieces at one time, because I do become impatient, and not bored, but tired. I get tired of doing something over and over again, or I get tired of making multiple pieces of something because I need multiples to end up with a singular piece.

I tend to not focus on the technical aspects. I just want to get it over with, I want to accomplish the vision that I had, and I want to do that just as soon as I can. I probably don't overwork a piece because I'm finished with it before it gets done. Overworking is not an option, because I'm finished with it long before it's overworked. I have to make myself, sometimes, go back and actually finish it properly, because I finished it conceptually too quickly.

MS. CHURCH: Well, it sounds like you have many the pieces driving you at the same time, and maybe the next piece pushing you.

MS. FISCH: Yes. If I stall on a piece, I simply put it aside. I don't sit there forever trying to figure out how to work it, because I may not come up with a solution. And I abandon pieces. Sometimes pieces get thrown aside, maybe a year later, I'm moving it from one place to another, and I think, all right, why didn't I finish that? I could do that now. And so, things get done in that way. I don't really think that I'm very good technically, because I'm not a perfectionist about it. I want to get it done, I want it to work, I want it to look good. If it's not perfect, that's okay with me.

MS. CHURCH: I think most artists might agree with that.

MS. FISCH: From that point of view, I'm probably not a very good craftsperson, because I'm not finicky enough. I'm not perfectionist enough, I think. It helps that I don't work small scale, because the smaller the scale you work, the more you have to pay attention to the tiniest details. That may be one reason why I like working big, because I can get away with less detail.

MS. CHURCH: But at the same time, it may be part of what keeps you prolific and fresh. You're not getting bogged down.

MS. FISCH: I just can't fuss over a piece, and I don't get any great joy out of findings. I find it hard to focus on, is this the perfect finding for this particular piece? If it works, it's okay with me.

MS. CHURCH: Right, right. Well, along with that, you're making a lot of this work for women, to be worn. And certainly, your choice of technique, is absolutely appropriate for the function and for the visual effect of the piece. You're usually making these things for women. You are a woman. There's a strong feminine sensibility in everything that you do. Do you think of yourself as a feminist? Do you think of your work as particularly feminine? Do you think you're particularly about women, for women, by women?

MS. FISCH: I don't think of myself as a feminist activist. I make work for women because women wear beautiful things. I tried making work, making jewelry for men. It's a lost cause: they won't wear it, so why would I make it [Laughter]? And also, I don't relate to it, because I can't try it on, and it seems to me it doesn't fit into our societal structure. Much as I would like it to, it doesn't. And so, I simply stopped even thinking about that. I make work for women because women are the people who wear jewelry, and that's really the only motivation. I want it to enhance the beauty of women, because that's what jewelry's supposed to do. I don't know that that's a particularly feminist attitude.

MS. CHURCH: In some ways, it might not be.

MS. FISCH: It might even be offensive, right [Laughter].

MS. CHURCH: But I think it's very true to your endeavor. The other category that I'm curious about with regard to your work is whether you think of yourself as a modernist.

MS. FISCH: I live in the modern world, and so I suppose from that point of view I'm a modernist. From the aesthetic point of view, I think I'm more related to post-modern, in that I lift from the past, and I've always done that. I'm not as influenced by contemporary architecture, for example, as many jewelers are influenced by that. I'm interested in modern architecture, but it doesn't impact on my work very much, because it seems too brutal for me for the purposes of what I'm about. I think my aesthetic is just one of great eclecticism.

MS. CHURCH: Well, that's good. I like that! How important has the philosophical dialogue within the field and the attendant written criticism been to your development as an artist?

MS. FISCH: I used to care passionately about discussing why you make jewelry and what is it about. I suppose that has become so much a part of what I do that the conversation about it is not as provocative for me anymore. I read all of the criticism in the field, and I find it very interesting. A lot of it doesn't apply to my work because it's more about the content of work than about the form. I think my work is more about the form and ornament, and not so much about content.

MS. CHURCH: And since you're reading these magazines, and I know that you subscribe to many, how have they impacted your development? I know you've been in them, you've been reviewed in them, you've been the subject of articles. You also read them to find out about the field. Can you talk about how important those publications are?

MS. FISCH: I also write for some of them. I think the publications are very important in delivering the field to the larger society. I don't know that they are as impacting on me as an artist. I find them very interesting, and they certainly provide me with information about what's going on in the field. Do they have a direct impact on my work? I don't think so.

MS. CHURCH: They're more about the public.

MS. FISCH: Yeah, it's more an educational tool. I promote the magazines to the general public because I think they're carrying a message that I would like to extend to a bigger audience. And that's where I think they're the most significant.

MS. CHURCH: So in some ways for you, these magazines are tools and devices to --

MS. FISCH: For outreach, to reach out into society. I want them to be good, and I want them to present good work, because that's the communication device to a larger society.

MS. CHURCH: And you actually feel like you participate in that.

MS. FISCH: Well, I try to. As I say, I write occasionally, not very often. But I also present my work to them for publication.

MS. CHURCH: And finally, with regard to your art, do you see yourself as an American artist or as an artist who happens to live in America?

MS. FISCH: Some characteristics about my work are very American, in that they're non-traditional. And I probably couldn't have survived doing what I do in a lot of other places, at least not early on. Denmark was much too small and too traditional in its thinking to accept my work. They just thought it was odd. I found England very restrictive in the early years, because of their hallmarking regulations.

I didn't have to comply because I was a foreigner, so the restrictions didn't matter to me. I actually had a wonderful solo exhibition at the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths in London, where I showed work that could not be hallmarked because it mixed gold and silver together. They actually even bought a piece. But I said to Graham Hughes, you know, this isn't hallmarked, and he said, we won't tell them, which is a good thing.

In Austria, I found that people were very intellectually involved and angst ridden, and that simply didn't fit me at all. I didn't feel a part of that community in any way. I'm American in spirit. I like to explore, I like to try new things, I like to go my own way, and I think those are all very American characteristics. From that point of view, I think I am an American. I have put my work into an international scene because I wanted to do that. And it has been accepted, but I think it's always been accepted as, this is by an American.

MS. CHURCH: So you represent us.

MS. FISCH: In some ways, not always well. I think people take my work into these international contexts and they identify it as American, at least that's been my impression.

MS. CHURCH: So do you think you're actually perceived as quintessentially American?

MS. FISCH: No, but as American. I think maybe Marjorie Schick is quintessentially American, in the European view anyway.

MS. CHURCH: Arline, I'd like to talk about your teaching, because as someone who knows you both by reputation and as a colleague, I find it difficult to separate your life as an artist from your involvement with teaching. You have been given the distinguished Craft Educators Award by the James Renwick Alliance, and you were named outstanding professor at your home institution, San Diego State University. Can you talk about the relationship between your art and your teaching?

MS. FISCH: They've always been absolutely connected. The motivation for teaching has been my work, and the motivation for my work has often been teaching. If I had to provide the students with the latest information and to keep them abreast of what's happening now in the field, then I needed to keep up myself, and I needed to try new things. So in some ways, a lot of what I know, technically, was driven by the need in teaching.

For example, I set up an aluminum anodizing facility at San Diego State because, one, I was interested in it, but also because I thought this was an area in which there was a lot of potential in the field, and there was no place for the students to learn this otherwise. I had to learn in order to teach them, and I had to set up a facility in order to make that possible. So I consider them totally intermixed. I think that it's important for students in an art school to be taught by people who are professionally active. I think that's the way to provide a proper mentoring system.

I've always thought it important to share my work with the students, but not to impose my work on the students. Although I'm very involved with the textile techniques, there are students who don't know anything about that, because that's not of interest to them, and that's not imposed upon them. Initially, when I was exploring that field, I actually said, okay, I'm going to teach a course in this, but the students knew that ahead of time. That was, again, a very close intermingling of my own work and the teaching opportunity, so I think of them as very closely related.

MS. CHURCH: You received a university arts education, and you also apprenticed, though I'm not sure that was an apprentice situation.

MS. FISCH: No, I didn't actually apprentice. I studied in Denmark, but I didn't actually serve an apprenticeship. I don't know that apprentice type education starting at 15 is very relevant to the development of an artist. Although, I was just recently talking to a German jeweler who did go from high school to an apprenticeship, and then later went to school to have a degree, because he's now teaching. But I think that's very unusual.

A true apprenticeship is really a trade orientation. It's so consuming at the beginning that there's no opportunity for thinking, and there's no opportunity for artistic development. I think if the motivation is to be an artist, that other kinds of education are more valuable. If the motivation is to be technically competent, then certainly, working in a workshop is very good training.

MS. CHURCH: Do you think people should have experiences in both?

MS. FISCH: It would certainly be an interesting development, to have that kind of opportunity. There are programs in England, and perhaps now in Europe as well, where students do a year out. Unfortunately, it's not a long enough program, but they have a three-year program, and one of those years is out of the school. I mean, ideally, it would be maybe a five-year program, with one year out, but not the last year, that it might be in the middle somewhere, so that the student has already developed some aesthetic concerns and some capabilities in design, or in drawing, or in conceptualizing form, and some rudimentary skills, and then goes into a workshop where the skills can be developed in a very narrow way.

That kind of discipline can be invaluable. Then, the student comes back and can apply that technical competence to his own ideas. And I think that could be a really interesting evolution. What's happening in other places right now is there are some residency programs that are available to people who are coming out of school. Those residency programs kind of provide a haven for experimentation and development of a body of work that can then be presented to a gallery or an exhibition, or to sales. But that's already a little bit beyond the educational aspect.

I happen to think that the education of an artist within a liberal arts context is important for other reasons, that it provides a basis for understand what art is about. It provides a whole realm of potential sources of inspiration. If you take a biology class and you take an anthropology class, and you take a drama class, look at how you've opened your eyes to potential for the development of your work. And you just simply don't get that, and you don't even get it in an art school.

When an art school exists within a university, and actually allows students to make use of the university, not just to provide it with funds, then, to me, that's an ideal education for an artist.

MS. CHURCH: And you think that a year of professional immersion in a trade would provide a kind of rigor and something else that doesn't exist in a university setting.

MS. FISCH: Well, it can't exist in a university setting.

MS. CHURCH: It wouldn't be appropriate?

MS. FISCH: It wouldn't be appropriate. Maybe a better idea or a more feasible idea for a student who's going to seriously go into the field, that following undergraduate education, they might do a year before going to graduate school. And many students do that. I think if they apply themselves in that year to the acquisition of technical skills, that that really is of great benefit.

MS. CHURCH: You have learned a lot on your own. In fact, I would say that when you look at your work, you taught yourself. And I think that curiosity is a pretty strong driving force in your work. You've talked about the fact that teaching is a mix of instruction and learning. How do you inspire your students to go off at a certain point and be their own artist?

MS. FISCH: From the very beginning, I've tried to stimulate development of ideas; how do you develop ideas. We all do that, we make assignments that force the student to go out and look at nature or force the student to go look at historical material in order to build a kind of vocabulary that is not the same for everybody, because everybody looks at the information differently. As long as there's a broad enough field of information, everybody's going to respond to different stimuli.

I think the important thing is for young students to develop a vocabulary of form that they understand, that isn't just serendipitous, that isn't just, oh, well, I drew this so I'm going to make it. That they can develop an idea from whatever source they've used, but that they use sources. I often say, I don't expect you to get this idea out of thin air. Ideas don't come out of thin air. They come out of thinking, and looking, and learning. I've always tried to build that into assignments, that they have to go and find something that's going to provide the stimulus for the ideas that are hopefully going to develop.

MS. CHURCH: So you link up their making with research, and questioning, and dialogue.

MS. FISCH: Right.

MS. CHURCH: And probably drawing too. What about jewelry? That's something I'm curious about. Is jewelry a craft? I think of it as a concept. When you use or when one uses words like body adornment to describe the art form, there's even less of a connection to a specific medium. And you have explored a huge range of avenues of making that are not necessarily restricted to metals. A student who wants to work in that arena of body adornment, what's their preparation?

MS. FISCH: If you're in a university situation, then you have access to things like anthropology, which I find very provocative. I love looking at anthropological journals. I learn a lot from them. History, drama -- if you have a good drama department, they have a costume department, and one can send students there to learn that jewelry hasn't always been a ring or an earring. That it has also been clothing, and crowns, and great regal ornamentation that goes well beyond what they see in the local department store. Hopefully, that's kind of mind opening.

It would be nice if there were opportunities to, maybe more systematically, learn the history of ornament. In some institutions, there are such courses, but they're rare. On occasion, I've actually taught seminars in art of the object or history or decorative arts, or design history. There are a whole bunch of names you could call that. However, mostly, I haven't had the time to do that, so I try to incorporate the history of jewelry into lectures within a studio context.

It becomes not terribly systematic. I think it's a bit hit or miss, maybe, from the students' point of view, that they don't necessarily see this as a logical, linear progression, and often it isn't even presented in that way. If I happen to have prepared a group of slides on Egyptian jewelry, then I'm going to show that to the students. The next time, it might be classical Greek, it might be contemporary. They get a kind of non-linear set of information, which maybe isn't the best. Hopefully, if they're interested enough in the field, they read and look at pictures, but one doesn't always know if that's true.

MS. CHURCH: One of the things I struggle with as a jeweler is that my strengths and interests are only one component of the education that I must deliver to a student in a metals program, within a crafts department, within an art school. And indeed, I don't have a class full of people who want to just be jewelers.

MS. FISCH: No. And it's always been very stimulating to me to have students with other interests, the classes are usually large, so you might have 24 students, of which only 12 are art majors. The rest might be from anywhere,

but they're there because they think this is an easy class, or they're mildly interested, or they made jewelry in high school -- I mean, any of those things. It's a challenge, then, to deal with the idea end, because technically, they're all at the same level, most of them. They don't know anything, so you treat them all the same. But on the idea level, you get marvelous responses, because they come from different backgrounds. If you have a physical education major and you say, now, we're all going to work with common objects, they come in with sports shoes, and balls, and bats, and that's very different from what the biology student comes in with. I've always enjoyed that kind of mix. I think that at that stage, students are not so sure about what they want to do anyway.

And it may be that a business major finds himself absolutely drawn to making something and decides, well, maybe he'll pursue this a little bit more. He'll do a wood class. And you say, well, you really need to know how to draw, so maybe you better go take a drawing class. It's kind of opening up worlds for people in ways that they didn't necessarily expect. Most of them come into a beginning jewelry class and they think they're going to make rings, but we don't make rings.

So for them, it's dealing with the unexpected. For me, it's dealing with this sort of chaos out of which I have to draw some kind of order and to whom I have to impart technical skills. I have no assistants, so I'm running around dealing with that number of people, trying to keep them from killing themselves, and also from burning up whatever it is they're working on, at the same time, trying to talk to them about what it is they're making and why they're making it. That's always been a very provocative challenge, so I've always loved teaching beginning students.

Advanced students are another thing. They think they know what they want to do, and they're not as willing to explore as one would like to think that they ought to be. That level has not always been my favorite. Then, at the graduate level, you have people who are committed. They may not be as good as they think they are, but they are committed. You can suggest, and provoke, and challenge and get wonderful responses. So working with graduate students has, of course, always been a great delight and a privilege. And there's a dialogue. One of the nice things about having a graduate program with multiple students is that there's an opportunity for conversation, that it's not just a one on one dialogue, and that it isn't just the teacher and the student, the one all knowing and the other being subjected to criticism, but that it's a conversation amongst people with shared interests and shared goals. I find that has been very rewarding for me, and hopefully for the students as well. I have always encouraged the students to speak to each other, that it isn't just a one way street with the instructor.

MS. CHURCH: Since you're talking about the graduate students, I want to go now to the Exhibition and Catalogue School of Fisch. The play on the words is wonderful. The work is wonderful. I think that the idea of a school talks about a particular approach to teaching, and a philosophy that is imparted to students that makes them and you a part of this school. Can you put words around that? What is that School of Fisch?

MS. FISCH: The title, actually, wasn't my idea, that came from the Danish museum. They couldn't resist, and I agreed to it because I thought it was wonderful. But I was a little worried that it suggested that there was a teacher and disciples. Certainly, that has never been my role as a teacher, I never wanted to be creating disciples. I wanted to choose students -- I mean, I had to choose from a big range of students, but I wanted to choose students who had their own voice, because I wanted very much to demonstrate that this was not a discipleship, that my working with students was an evolutionary process, that it was intended to assist young artists to find their own voice.

I tried to choose a great diversity of students, and also, students who didn't all go to San Diego State. Unfortunately, it ended up being connected totally with San Diego State, which was not my intention, because I deliberately chose international students who had spent only short times at San Diego State, but who had come specifically to work with me and with whom I felt a real relationship. I'm not sure that was so clearly understood.

MS. CHURCH: Is Hanne Behrens one of those?

MS. FISCH: Yes.

MS. CHURCH: I think that does come through when you read the book.

MS. FISCH: That was my intention, so there are students from many countries, some of whom came to San Diego State specifically for a short period of time, some of whom were at San Diego State and then went to other countries and are working in another environment after the fact. I was very proud of that exhibition. I thought it looked wonderful at the museum, and I thought that it did represent a broad range, both in time and in style of work. I felt that it was a good representation of what I hoped to achieve in my teaching.

MS. CHURCH: Which is independence?

MS. FISCH: Independence and a personal vision.

MS. CHURCH: You have a long history with the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts -- as a student a long, long time ago. You teach there. You were a board member. What is the role of craft schools like Penland, Haystack, and Arrowmont? How do they fit into the larger educational arena? What are their strengths? And do you think they compete with degree programs, compliment them, or do they function entirely separately?

MS. FISCH: I don't think they function entirely separately. They certainly compliment other kinds of educational experiences, but they can exist independently. And I think that's important, because there are many people who come to a need to enhance their education later in their careers. It's not easy to drop into a university program at the age of 40, nor is it possible even to take the time out of an already busy adult life to go to school. Haystack, and Penland, and Arrowmont provide an opportunity for people who are in need of new energy, in need of new information, or who simply are in need of community.

I think that's probably the most important thing that these schools provide, because a two-week period of time isn't going to change your life very drastically. Technically, the amount that you can learn is somewhat limited by the time, but the sense of community is so strong in these schools that that's what people talk about. That's what they remember about their experiences at these schools, not so much what they learned, but what they experienced.

I think that many of the people who teach in these schools are not academics, so they're not coming in giving assignments, that's simply not how these schools operate. They deliberately choose people to teach who are professionally active in many different ways, some professionally active like yourself, both teaching and making, and others professionally active because they work all the time, their sole livelihood, is producing their work.

In the same session at a school like Haystack, there may be somebody in every category that's not necessarily in the same material, but there's someone who is an academic, there's someone who runs a full time studio, there's someone who does large scale commissions, there's someone who writes. All of those options are presented in a way that's totally available, that you can sit next to any person you want at a meal and talk about whatever provokes you, or whatever information you want, or whatever you want to know.

How do you do that? How do you do a craft fair? Or how do you get a Fulbright, or how do you work in another country? Those are hard questions if you're out in your own little community at home, where you don't have access to other artists or you have access only to a very few artists, and it's a very limited world. But you go to a place like Penland or Haystack, and suddenly, you're in a very big world, a very big community of artists, all of whom have some measure of competence, some measure of confidence, some kinds of experience, and they're there because they're willing to talk about it.

So the community thing is that sharing. People don't go to Haystack or Penland to be alone. They are alone already. They come there to be part of a group, part of a community with shared interests, but not shared experiences. I think that's what's so very vital about those particular schools, that they provide this kind of range of experience that can be shared one to another in a very comfortable way.

MS. CHURCH: Implicit in what you're saying is a kind of generosity that might characterize these communities.

MS. FISCH: I think if you don't want to share, you wouldn't choose to go there. Occasionally, I suppose there have been students who have gone with the idea they're going to gain, they're not going to give, but I think that's rare. And certainly, once they get there, the spirit of sharing is so strong that it is really hard to resist.

MS. CHURCH: I think that those schools provide a very unique experience that you're describing. I wonder if you think that craft, as an activity, as an art activity, has something special within it that inclines us to share, to seek out this community.

MS. FISCH: Oh, I think so, if you look at organizations, for example, in the craft field, there are all these organizations, and everybody is very generous in sharing information in print, or in conversation, or in exhibitions. It's difficult to find that same kind of sharing in other places in the world. It also doesn't appear to happen as readily in the painting field, for example. I don't see organizations of painters getting together, talking about shared interests. I think it's a much more solitary enterprise.

Maybe it is just solitary by its nature, or it may be solitary just by tradition, but it tends not to be a shared communal activity, whereas craft seems to be, in some ways, because it requires more of a mentoring kind of education, so that there is a need to pass information from one generation to another generation, technical information, that it provokes or stimulates this kind of sense of community. I'm not sure.

MS. CHURCH: I would think that's a major component. I think that because we make things for human use, that we're interested in one another, and that we have an agenda. Most crafts people, at some point, hook up to

function and to utility, and the fact that somebody else is going to use it or wear it. And that makes a craft a little different, I think, as an art form.

MS. FISCH: Yes, it's not so isolated. It's not so distant.

MS. CHURCH: Arline, you conduct a lot of workshops in these schools, but also in places all around the world, to community organizations, and graduate schools, and professional groups. What do you hope to impart in the brief encounter of a workshop?

MS. FISCH: I like teaching workshops because it's a very different kind of experience. It's very short term, it's very intense, it's very committed. People are there for a particular purpose. It's not philosophical. There's not time, really, in two days, to have a philosophical discussion, and that's not what people are looking for. People are looking for contact and for technical information.

The workshops I give are almost totally in the textile techniques, because that's the kind of information that's easy to impart in a short period of time. Many years ago, I did do, occasionally, a chasing workshop, but it's really hard to do anything in a very short period of time. And also, that's a very specialized technical thing that requires a certain kind of skill that is not easy to develop quickly.

The textile techniques are so basic and so simple that sometimes I feel like a fraud doing these workshops, because anybody could do this. They don't need me there [Laughter], but because I had this book out, and although I think the book is very clear, it's not a step by step book. People want to know more, how do you do that? I can see that you do it, but exactly how do you do it?

The workshops I've given in that area are all based on making samples. So, it's a very quick paced kind of, we're going to do this for an hour, and you're going to produce this, and then we're going to do something else for the next hour, and you're going to produce this. And I show slides in between. It's a very vigorous, physically active period of two days, and people end up thinking they've learned a lot. Actually, they've learned something. They haven't learned maybe as much as they think they have, but hopefully, what they take away, and what I hope they take away, is just the idea that it's possible, that I can do this. It's not hard -- because it isn't hard. The hard part about teaching workshops is you never know the end result. You don't know what happens to people after they go home. For the most part, they probably don't use it. It was just information, and it doesn't fit into their scheme of things, their way of working.

Those people that do connect with it, sometimes send me photographs a year later, saying, look what I did. This is what you showed me and what I've done. That's very gratifying, but that's not so usual. Interestingly, I probably do more workshops for textile people than I do for metals people. I think it's easier for a textile person to change materials than for a metals person to change thinking and process. It's much harder for a jeweler to learn how to weave than it is for a weaver to learn how to use metal.

MS. CHURCH: That's very interesting.

MS. FISCH: I think the textile people seem to see more potential for their own work, and I think there is probably, in many ways, more potential. Certainly, you can put metal on a loom, and suddenly there's all this potential. They actually don't need me to show them that, they can just put it on the loom. But I actually do teach workshops occasionally on working on a loom, because people just have questions, what happens if this breaks, and simple questions like that can get answered in two days.

MS. CHURCH: I think sometimes a workshop provides someone with a reason to leave the business of their normal lives and set aside everything to do one --

MS. FISCH: I think workshops are appealing to people who are working in a studio alone, for the same reason that someplace like Haystack is appealing. It's a sense of community, and it's non-judgmental. Especially my workshops are non-judgmental: nobody makes a finished product; we're not committed to a finished product: we're committed to making samples, because this is a learning situation. It's totally non-judgmental, and that's very comfortable for people, they feel relaxed and easy.

MS. CHURCH: And some people think that's an excellent form of learning.

MS. FISCH: Well, they also think of it as an excellent form of entertainment.

MS. CHURCH: Right [Laughs]. It's a vacation.

MS. FISCH: It's sort of an educational vacation. I think that's true for a lot of people, but it is, I think, driven by one, a wish to learn something new, and two, a wish to be in a communal situation.

MS. CHURCH: Now, there has been criticism leveled at people like me, who give workshops saying, oh, aren't

you promoting a kind of non-intellectual learning? And there's something in my gut that says, no, I'm not, though I have been challenged with that question. Has anyone ever asked you about that?

MS. FISCH: No. I don't equate it with university education. It isn't. This is a short term, quick shot, and for whatever reason you want this, I'm willing to give it to you. I'm not going to change your life, I'm not going to change your work, I'm not going to make critical judgments about what you do. I'm simply showing you how to do something. I'm saying to you, there may be a way that this will fit into your existing work, and there may not be. You have to decide, but here's the information. It's certainly not intellectual in any way.

MS. CHURCH: And I think that it is another form of generosity, where you're sharing something.

MS. FISCH: I'm answering a question that someone has asked me. European artists, craftspeople do not do workshops. They don't consider sharing what they have discovered sensible, because what they're doing is showing somebody how to do what it took them a long time to learn. They're showing somebody who's going to be a competitor. I guess, because I'm not involved in the business world in the marketplace, that has never been a concern for me.

I do occasionally feel concern that I'm encouraging people to do things which are inconsequential. But again, that's my role or my responsibility in that situation. I'm simply providing the answer to some questions that people asked me.

MS. CHURCH: Arline, you have a long history with the Fulbright program. Can you talk about your experience with this international exchange and your ongoing involvement with it?

MS. FISCH: I've been very fortunate in having four Fulbrights of different categories. The first one was a student Fulbright, the second was a research scholar Fulbright, and the last two were teaching Fulbrights. It's a fantastic program, in my view. It provides incredible opportunity to enter another culture and to share some knowledge with that other culture.

At the student level, I was the recipient. At the research level, I was sort of both recipient and sharer. In the teaching situation, of course, I was actually invited to come to share information, so I was giving rather than receiving. I've been on both sides of the program. I think it's a remarkable program, that has provided me with opportunities that I wouldn't have had otherwise to live in other countries.

It is a long term program, the shortest one, I think, was actually only a month, but mostly they're a year or a half year. That gives you a chance to live in another country, to live in a society, and if you pursue the program as it's intended, that you encounter your colleagues from that country, and that you make connections that aren't just for your own personal benefit, that you make connections that continue after you go home.

I think it has been invaluable for me, and I think for many people who have been involved in the program. It's been particularly good, for artists, because it's provided them with opportunities to do their work in another situation and to be involved with artists from that community. There are certainly lots of other international programs, more and more so. More and more schools, colleges and universities, are developing exchange programs, both for faculty and for students, and I think that's really a move in the right direction.

I've had many international students come to San Diego State, all under varying conditions. I think the very first one who came, I had to organize a visa for. And that meant that the person had to be a bona fide student, but she was only coming for one semester. It took me ages to figure out how to do that, but I did figure it out. She had to go to the American language program, which she did reluctantly, but I said, this is the only way I can get you a visa; you just do the minimum over there. They understand that they are providing you with a visa, but they have certain demands that they are going to make on you. The rest of the time, you're over here. She was a wonderful student, and the arrangement worked well.

Subsequently, there were many students who wanted to come who didn't need a visa; either they were coming as a tourist, so they would be there for a semester, but they would be a tourist on a visa that I didn't have to sign off on. I was able to invite them to be visiting students, visiting scholars, all kinds of, I suppose, slightly irregular arrangements that I was able to make through the art department. And that worked just beautifully.

MS. CHURCH: Did you meet these people abroad?

MS. FISCH: Well, some of them wrote to me, some of them I met. In some cases, if they wrote me, I wanted to meet them before they came, and I would arrange to do that. Some came on Fulbrights, so I didn't have to be concerned about that, but the idea that the art department allowed me to just have visitors was really wonderful. Now it's not possible to do that, because there are all kinds of official exchange programs. Instead, the opportunity is more that you engage another institution and you sign a contract as a one for one exchange.

In many ways, that's great because it doesn't involve any money and it's already in place. In other ways, it's more restrictive because it's bureaucratic. At our particular university, for some reason, when it became this very structured thing, they suddenly said, well, we're not going to do them in the art department because you don't do enough, you don't exchange enough people. It's only one a year. I said, well, how many does it have to be?

They're envisioning these numbers, and in mechanical engineering or marine biology that might be true that there are dozens of people that you can exchange with another institution, or at least half a dozen people. That's not true with an art school. There are never going to be dozens of people. It seems to me that one for one a year is okay, and why can't we do that.

[TAPE CHANGE.]

MS. CHURCH: This is Sharon Church interviewing Arline Fisch at the artist's home and studio in Mission Hills, a neighborhood of San Diego, California, on the afternoon of July 30, 2001, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Arline, now I want to talk about your service to the field, which has been extraordinary. I don't think there's any other active artist who gives more selflessly of themselves to the greater good. In fact, I think your art and your teaching are inextricably entwined with this third part, service to the field. How do these three professional activities relate to one another?

MS. FISCH: My involvement with organizations was actually very selfishly motivated. I wanted to connect with my colleagues. I found that it was very refreshing and invigorating to be involved, especially with national and international organizations, because it expanded my view of things and offered an opportunity for me to also bring an expanded view back to San Diego, to my students. San Diego is a relatively isolated place; it's not like Los Angeles, where people stop off on their way to something.

So to be able to share with students a broader vision, it was wonderful to be able to invite my friends, whom I met at various organizations, to come to San Diego, come as my houseguest, come as a lecturer, come and give a workshop. Over the years, I was amazed, as I packed up my office recently, to see how many people had actually come through San Diego, because I had met them in various places. People from Australia, people from England, people from Europe came to San Diego, and I was able to either have an evening party or have them lecture at school, or come and give a critique, or whatever.

It was an opportunity to expand horizons for the teaching aspect, but it also expanded my horizons. It offered me many opportunities to travel, and also to meet new people. In return for that, I was willing to do whatever kind of administrative work was needed, or whatever kind of contribution I could make to the organizations from whom I was deriving so much benefit myself. I've always felt strongly that people should pay back for what they get, so I was willing to do that.

The American Craft Council I felt was very important. It offered conferences, it published a magazine, it had a museum where work was exhibited, it ran competitions. When the opportunity arose for me to be a craftsmen trustee, which at the time was an elected position, I was happy to do that. It was a three year assignment, and it meant I went to board meetings in New York, I think, twice a year. There were six craftsmen trustees, and it was a marvelous involvement.

We stayed often at Mrs. Webb's penthouse apartment, as a whole group, so we had a lot of interaction. We met with the "real" trustees half a day, because that's the only amount of time they met, whereas the craftsmen trustees, were primarily involved with program development. The "real" trustees were the people who had to think about the money and the fund-raising, but the craftsmen trustees were the ones who talked about, what should ACC be doing in the field, what kinds of activities should there be, should there be a conference and where should it be, and what should the program be? That was wonderful, and I really enjoyed having that opportunity, but also, I benefitted enormously. I learned a lot, and I just had great experiences with craftsmen from all over the country.

I was invited to go back on the board of the American Craft Council in 1993. There are now no craftsmen trustees that are elected. There are people who are craftsmen who are trustees, but they are not set aside positions, and they are not elected from the same particular constituency. I rejoined the board for six years, two three year terms, and my primary responsibility this time around was the library, which I felt very strongly about and wanted desperately to have continue. Whereas, many members of the board were if not opposed, at least questioning whether this was a viable financial responsibility for the council, and would it be better to put the library in another institution, to give it to a regular library or to put it in a university as an entity.

I felt strongly that this was a responsibility of the American Craft Council to its membership, to provide a research center. It was a struggle, but I am happy to report that I think the library is now confirmed, that it is a

viable program. It has recently hired a new librarian, but more importantly, the collection has been catalogued and is available online. The catalogue is available online, not the information.

The most important part of this library is the catalogue collection, because in the early years, exhibition catalogues were really no more than brochures or very minimal publications, which most libraries think of as ephemera. They don't keep that kind of material. In fact, it's a very important documentation of the craft movement in America, which is otherwise nonexistent.

ACC has about, I don't know, something like 5,000 pieces. Now that it's all been catalogued, I'm willing to give them my collection. I wasn't willing to do that before, because I wanted to be sure it was going to be maintained and properly accessible, because there's no point in having the material if nobody can use it. So that was my primary concern in the second round of being on the board of ACC.

MS. CHURCH: And those catalogues really are our true history.

MS. FISCH: Well, there's just not a lot of material that was published. It's really hard to find material from the fifties, and even from the early sixties, so I thought it was especially important to keep that material. I was elected a Fellow of the American Craft Council in 1979. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to attend the ceremony because I was living in London at the time, but my brother went and had an encounter with the secret service, because Joan Mondale was also being made a fellow, and my brother, in his inimitable fashion, arrived late and sort of crashed through the door, and the secret service closed in on him -- [Laughter] -- I only heard this later, of course.

In October, I'm going to receive the ACC gold medal, which I'm really excited about. I've given this gold medal, I mean, I've made the presentations of this gold medal to several colleagues, to Alma Eickerman, Ron Pearson, June Schwarcz, and to Brent Kington. I am really proud and pleased to be receiving it myself. I don't know who's making the presentation, it will be a surprise.

I moved directly from the American Craft Council to the World Crafts Council. I explained earlier my involvement in the early years, but I was elected a director in 1976 at a conference in Mexico. I became a director, which meant that I was on the executive board. From '76 through '80, I went to regular executive board meetings. I think they were once a year. Several times, they were at this wonderful greystone mansion that I think belongs to Columbia University. It's in Riverside, New York, with a very intimate setting so that everybody who was on the board actually stayed there. The meetings were very intense and very interesting.

I became vice president for North America as part of my responsibility. That was a rotating position between Canada and the U.S., and I don't remember when I took that over, maybe in '78. Then, when my vice presidency was over, I was appointed secretary to the board, so that I continued my involvement on the executive board of WCC, through '85, I believe.

MS. CHURCH: What kinds of issues does the World Crafts Council deal with?

MS. FISCH: It was a very difficult organization because it had such broad scope and worldwide membership. It had a number of member countries -- members were countries, rather than individuals. And it followed the UNESCO protocol, more or less, so many countries became members and would send a delegate to an annual meeting or a conference. Usually, the annual meeting was less significant than the meeting held in conjunction with the conference, and there would be delegates from all the member countries at the conferences. Then, at the annual meeting in between, there would mostly be just the executive board.

The kinds of issues that arose had to deal with things probably of more concern to developing countries than to someplace like the United States and Canada. Marketing issues were a big priority, and the organization never was willing to take on the responsibility of running a marketplace. In fact, the first secretary general was Jim Plaut. His interest was in establishing some kind of marketing arm, and he eventually left the organization to set up another organization called Aid to Artisans, which does a very successful job of helping -- they don't do direct marketing. They provide consulting services to organizations in developing countries who need marketing assistance. It's been a very successful small organization, but it wasn't something that the World Crafts Council took on.

The WCC tended to try to deal with larger issues of communication and assistance, but not direct marketing consultation. To my mind, its most important contribution was that it brought people together so that they could, on an individual basis, discuss how things could be better in their particular country. Unfortunately, it was hard to fund that kind of organization. It did receive funds from UNESCO -- I don't remember what it was called, but an annual subvention, but it was fairly minimal.

The member countries paid dues initially based on the UNESCO percentages, so the U.S. was actually making the major financial contribution. At some point, the American Craft Council just felt that wasn't either feasible or

fair, and declined to do so any further. When Mrs. Webb was alive, she often funded people's travel so that they could come to meetings and conferences. She and Mrs. Patch, actually, were very generous in subsidizing a lot of the travel, especially from developing countries, so that craftsmen delegates could attend meetings and conferences.

The organization is still in existence, but not very visible. It was for the last six years, primarily focused in Asia, which has the most member countries and the most interest in trying to use the organization to promote marketing. They have provided a secretariat, first in Sri Lanka and then in Kyoto, in Japan. The president was a woman from Sri Lanka, and then, more recently, a gentleman from Morocco, and now it has moved to Greece. The president currently is Greek, and so it has moved back to Europe from Asia, that is, the secretariat has moved back to Europe.

It will be interesting to see whether it becomes more visible. I have maintained contact sort of peripherally because I'm interested, and they send me minutes and notices of meeting and so on, but I don't have any official position. The person who goes to represent the United States is Lois Moran from the American Craft Magazine, and she keeps me informed about what's going on as well, but it's simply not the vital organization that it was. For about twenty years, it was just really a vibrant organization.

Lots of Americans were involved because they attended conferences, they paid their own way, and they helped to subsidize the event. Those conferences were very well attended, but that's not happening any longer. In the time that I served on the ACC board, the first time, and WCC, there was a lot of correspondence involved. It was not easy for me to do all of that, but I, at various times, hired a secretary on my own, just because I couldn't do this. The hard part was finding someone who could take dictation, because I learned that was, for me, the most efficient way to do business.

I had a telephone hour in the morning, eight to nine in the morning, when people could call me at home. The rest of the day, I simply didn't answer the phone, so that I didn't have to deal with that. I had a secretary who would either come here or I would go there one day a week. I would have prepared the things that had to be answered, and I would just simply dictate the answers, and then that person would go off and type the letters, and I would sign them whenever they were ready. It worked really well.

Then, for a while, the university provided that service through the secretarial pool that I had mentioned earlier. I tape-recorded everything, but that was less satisfactory to me than having a personal secretary. The challenge right now would be to find someone who can take dictation. That's practically a lost art. Now I'm not sure that I could handle the amount of correspondence that I took care of. If I had to do it now, it would be more difficult.

MS. CHURCH: You said that this was speeding your interest in communication and international relations. I think that you have a very strong belief in something pretty big, in some kind of international crafts community and exchange.

MS. FISCH: Well, but that exists.

MS. CHURCH: Didn't you help build it?

MS. FISCH: [Laughter] Well, I helped build it for myself, at any rate.

MS. CHURCH: And all of us, really.

MS. FISCH: I have certainly tried to maintain that, and other people have joined in. There are lots of other people who do the same kind of thing. At one point, the American Craft Council had an international department that was run by Dorothy Hafner, a ceramic artist, now a glass artist. I worked directly with Dorothy in programming people like Claus Bury and Gijs Bakker to come to America to do lecture tours through the ACC international department, which I helped direct behind the scenes.

The only requirement was that they had to come to San Diego [Laughter], where I had to be able to be involved with them in some way, so that extended the international network for the American Craft Council.

MS. CHURCH: And certainly, we all benefitted, because when those people came to this country, everybody heard them, saw them, and saw their work.

MS. FISCH: I'm not the only one responsible for that, but I participated in it, and I certainly benefitted from it as well. SNAG is another organization where I was one of the founding members. That's the Society of North American Goldsmiths. I didn't go to the very first meeting. I think I was invited, but I didn't go, but I went to the second meeting, which was in Boston. That was the meeting at which we decided what we would be called, which was this huge battle between Stanley Lechtzin and me over whether we would be called goldsmiths or metalsmiths.

Goldsmiths was a word that did not have wide usage in this country, people were called jewelers or silversmiths. Metalsmiths also was not a widely used word at the time. This was 1969, or '70 -- '69, I think. I had just come back from England, where the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths was the guild. I maintained that "goldsmiths" was a generic word that referred to people who worked in metal, particularly precious metals, and that that would be an appropriate and edifying title for us to have.

Stanley and some others maintained that metalsmiths was more appropriate, that goldsmiths was not in common usage in the U.S. I had to agree with that, but metalsmiths also wasn't in common usage, and it didn't seem to me to be as, I don't think I mean precious, but as important sounding as goldsmith. The only reason it became goldsmith is because SNAG sounded better than SNAM [Laughter], as an acronym. So the acronym won, not the title.

I guess the first time that I served that organization I was the secretary, and that was in the very early years. Our first organizational meeting for the whole organization was at the conference in St. Paul in 19 70, at which we all tried to write a constitution and bylaws, amidst much screaming and shouting of maybe 30 people.

I remember after one session, where nobody could agree with, which word should it be, and where should it be, and Heikki Seppa maintaining it should be something, and Brent Kington maintaining it should be something else, and me maintaining it should be something else, riding down in the elevator with Harry Bober, who was our guest keynote speaker -- he was an art historian -- and Harry saying, "This organization can't exist if everybody's going to be a prima ballerina. Somebody has to be in the corps." [Laughter.]

MS. CHURCH: Is that when you decided to get a bigger membership [Laughter]?

MS. FISCH: The organization struggled the first couple of years, but we had a person who volunteered an office -- Ron McNeish offered office facilities, and an executive director in Pittsburgh so the organization worked there for several years. I guess I wasn't terribly involved. I was busy living abroad and not being more than just a member of SNAG and attending an occasional conference.

But in 1982, I had this long letter asking me would I be willing to serve as president of the organization. I was living in Vienna, Austria, at the time, and I wrote back and said, how can I do this? I haven't been involved, I haven't been on the board. I don't know what's going on. Why me? There must be lots of other people. Mary Lee Hu had been president and I think Tom Markusen was the outgoing president. I actually don't know how I allowed myself to be talked into this, but I did agree.

I returned to face this huge deficit in the organization. I mean, it was a big financial crisis, and I didn't know how we were actually going to solve that. But there was a good board and there was a conference coming up. The conference was going to be at Asilomar, and Doug Steakley was in charge of that. I convened a board meeting here in San Diego, at which we discussed, what's going to happen at the conference.

MS. CHURCH: This was just prior to my involvement.

MS. FISCH: One of my questions was, are we going to make money on this conference? Everybody looked at me like, we just want to make sure it doesn't lose money. I said, no, no, no, conferences in other organizations are income producing, and this is what the organization can survive on. They said we don't want to charge more than we have to for our poor members. I said, stop thinking poor, our members are not all poor. This is a source of income, and we need to be realistic about this.

There wasn't anything to do for the Asilomar conference, more than to make sure that it didn't over-extend. It was a very successful conference. It was small, I think, about 200 people, which went very well. The next conference was to be at FIT in New York, and that was one where I saw real economic potential. It was very fortunate for me that FIT had a conference coordinator, an administrator hired by the school who ran conferences at their facility. And although he didn't deal with program -- Sam Beizer took care of the program -- this man took care of the financial arrangements.

He and I met early on, and he agreed with me that there was no reason why we couldn't make a substantial amount of money on this conference if we did it right. And, in fact, that's what happened. It was very successful, there were maybe 500 people in attendance. We're offering a conference in New York where you could stay at FIT dormitories for practically no money, so why wouldn't people want to come, and why wouldn't they pay a reasonable conference fee, and why wouldn't we be able to realize a profit? Which indeed we did, a substantial profit, which was very useful.

MS. CHURCH: Part of the turnaround.

MS. FISCH: Yes. But also, Metalsmith had been started, Metalsmith Magazine, which was very good but it was a huge financial drain on the organization. There just needed to be some oversight of the budget for that. That

wasn't always welcomed, but it was necessary. We also were able to write grant proposals, and we were successful in receiving grant assistance from the National Endowment, specifically for the magazine, which did relieve the economic burden on the rest of the organization.

By the end of two years of my presidency, I was only supposed to be president for two -- and then we decided to move to a system of past president, president elect, president, I agreed to stay on for an extra year so that that could go into effect. I actually was the president for three years. By the end of that three years, things were better, certainly, in hand, and the magazine was doing well -- it was not the economic drain on the organization -- and the conferences were producing some income.

There was, in fact, a light at the end of the tunnel. We could see that it was possible for us to do other programs. One of the other programs was the workshop program, which I could see had funding possibilities, and in fact, we did receive funds for that, over more than several years. That workshop program received funds from the National Endowment as a part of our educational responsibility to reach out to the community. I thought that was a very good, viable program, which I'm happy to see still continues.

MS. CHURCH: Given that the organization was in crisis, you were absolutely the right person. You had experience, and you knew people in Washington. I remember that you traveled for us and beat down doors, and you did get us the kind of support that saved the day. You turned things around. I also remember your putting a different pressure on the magazine. You wanted it to have a newsstand presence, to become bigger than it had been.

MS. FISCH: Well, it was difficult dealing -- I don't want to go into all of that -- but dealing with some of the people who had other agendas than I thought were not appropriate to the future of the organization. It wasn't that they were bad agendas, it's just that they didn't coincide with the organization, and that made for very difficult labor relations, I would say, which were not always happy. I'm pleased to see that the organization has prospered since that time.

[TAPE CHANGE, SIDE A TO SIDE B]

MS. FISCH: I was asked to make written comment on the hiring of an Executive Director for SNAG. I suggested that is was an appropriate and important thing to do, despite the difficulty of taking on that financial burden, that in the end, it would be beneficial. I think it ultimately will be, although they may be going through a bit of an economic problem at the moment. I was very touched and pleased to be awarded that honorary membership last year that you and Linda made such a wonderful presentation -- that was great. And it was very gratifying to be acknowledged by my peers, so I was very pleased about that.

MS. CHURCH: We thought it was totally well deserved.

MS. FISCH: I've served on the Haystack board probably longer than I've done anything else. Haystack has a nine-year board in three-year increments, and I served on the board in the seventies, when Fran Merritt was director. It's so funny looking back. The board has always been quite informal, at that time, it was somewhat smaller -- I can't remember how many members. I remember writing a letter -- I actually have a copy of the letter still -- saying, "I think Haystack needs a library, and couldn't we create a library next to the shop, next to the store?"

And it happened. We did create a small library. I think by then, Howard Evans was director, he found some money, and lo and behold, there was this library. When I was asked to go back on the board in the nineties, there was another opportunity to deal with the library, which seemed then, 10 or 12 years later, to be poorly maintained, inadequate, and sad, and I thought it would be wonderful if the library could be better.

Then, suddenly, there was money. A grant was given by David Becker and Lois Ludden, specifically for the library, to enlarge, and renovate, and do something with the library. But it was enough money to think about, what if? And that's what happened. I said, what if we didn't do that? What if we built onto the other end of Gateway, which was always in the original plan -- I knew that -- not that it was to be a library, but there was to be another wing, which didn't get built because they didn't have the money.

Suddenly, we had this money, and I said, let's think about that. Maybe it could become -- the wonderful part about being on the Haystack board is things happen, and they happen in a shorter time than things happen in most organizations. I remember Fred Woell thought it was a great idea, and he drew up some plans real fast to show that it would work. Then it had to go to Ed Barnes, the big architect. He was okay with it because he'd already designed that addition -- actually, it had been part of the original plan.

It was not hard to raise the additional money that it took to build that, and it was all built by the staff, with a few outside people. At the fall board meeting the next year, we all helped raise one of the walls [Laughter]. So I consider my primary contribution to Haystack to be the library.

MS. CHURCH: Well, there's a theme here.

MS. FISCH: Yes, I seem to like libraries.

MS. CHURCH: Yes, and you have a marvelous library.

MS. FISCH: I do. It's not as organized as I would like, but I do have a library.

MS. CHURCH: That library at Haystack is a marvelous addition to that whole campus plan, and it's very beautiful, just to add my own two cents worth. So, you have had a huge impact on the crafts community through all that you've done for the various organizations. You're getting the gold medal this year from the American Craft Council, and then you just received a phone call at lunchtime today.

MS. FISCH: Yes, I'm going to be an honorary member of the board of Haystack. That's wonderful, and I'm pleased about that, because it continues my connection with Haystack, which dates back to 1960.

MS. CHURCH: That's when you studied with Jack Larsen.

MS. FISCH: I don't remember whether it was '59 or '60.

MS. CHURCH : Isn't that wonderful? Arline, you appear to have maintained an independent status with regard to galleries, your affiliations with them throughout your career. Have you ever aligned yourself with a particular gallery? If you have, why, and if you haven't, why not?

MS. FISCH: Well, I have actually worked with certain galleries over the years, not any of them absolutely exclusively, with the possible exception of the Lee Nordness Gallery, which was in New York City on 75th Street, following "Objects: USA" During the seventies, that was a really viable gallery, and I learned a lot about what it was like to have a dealer. Lee was wonderful. He would call collectors, he would host dinners, he would introduce artists to clients, all the kinds of things that seemed, I'm sure, very obvious to him as the dealer, but certainly were not happening very often in the craft world with people who were selling crafts at that time.

So for me, it was a very educational experience and a very successful relationship. I liked working with Lee, and I was sorry when he decided to close the gallery. I've also had a very long term relationship with Electrum Gallery in London, which provides me with a wonderful exposure, a wonderful window for people to see my work. I must say, they don't sell a lot of my work, but they've been very supportive, always willing to have my work. I've had several one person shows there. They promote my work, but it's not easy work to sell in that particular environment.

However, they always continue to represent me there. And they've also been very generous when I've had an opportunity to show in an exhibition in Europe. They're willing to go ahead and send the work so that it doesn't have to come back to me first. They've been marvelously helpful.

Other than that, I have moved from gallery to gallery simply as the marketplace seemed to indicate. I don't do enough work to support a gallery full-time. I can't keep a constant flow of work, because I don't want to only work for the marketplace. I want to have time to do exhibition pieces, I want to have time to do just speculative pieces that don't belong in a gallery maybe, or aren't appropriate for a particular gallery. I'm not willing to commit to a gallery that wants a constant flow of new work.

So I work with only a few galleries at any give time, and not always the same ones. One of the most successful galleries for me was Artium in New York, because they weren't a walk in kind of gallery. They were, again, rather like Lee Nordness, they were dealers. They had clients whom they called and courted and presented with new work. Electrum, by the way, does not work in that way. They are a come in the door and see what you like kind of place.

But Artium was the first time I had a gallery since Lee had closed that actually worked in the way that I thought a gallery should work. But they closed, which was too bad. Currently, I deal with two galleries, primarily: Mobilia in Cambridge and Connell in Atlanta, both of whom I think have potential; that is, they do deal directly with clients, they do send slides out, they do really work at trying to place your work in the right situation, Mobilia perhaps more that Connell. But they both handle a lot of artists, as does Electrum.

I think that it's not possible for galleries that do that, that handle so many artists, to support any single artist very well. In fact, selling is not all that significant to my income needs, but I do make work, and I can't own it all. I would like people to wear it, so clearly, I would like it to be sold. I don't want to sell it myself, it's not something that I enjoy doing.

Locally, Taboo studio, which is owned by two of my former students, Jane Groover and Joanna Rhodes, provides a local place, a local market for me. If people say, "Oh, where can I see your work?" I can say, you can see it

there. And it's the first time that I've had that opportunity. They've been in existence ten years, but before that, there was really no place, if somebody locally said to me, where can I see your work, there wasn't any place. I wasn't willing to have people come here to the studio.

So it's very nice having a local location, and Jane and Joanna are very good about calling me and saying, somebody's coming in, would you like to bring over something? So that's working rather well.

MS. CHURCH: So your attitude is to have a sense of where your work is most appropriately placed or positioned, and to keep it spread out amongst a few galleries, and let the climate and the particular clientele sort the rest of it out for you.

MS. FISCH: Yes. I guess I'm not terribly proactive. I tend to be reactive. If a gallery approaches me, I want to know more about it before I'm willing to commit.

MS. CHURCH: I think of your work as being known through museum exhibitions. I am probably most familiar with your work because of those. How has that developed in your career? Have you developed relationships with gallery museum curators, are you entering competitively?

MS. FISCH: All of those things. I always have entered competitive exhibitions, and I always responded to calls for entries into or for consideration in exhibitions -- notice that that's in the past tense. I'm not so committed to doing that now. I sometimes will approach a curator, not with selling so much in mind as with an exhibition possibility in mind. But I'm perfectly willing to send slides when asked, and I feel like my whole life is labeling and sending slides, as with most of us. I think that's just part of the process of running your career, that you have to get your work out into the public somehow.

MS. CHURCH: Yes. What exhibitions have been particularly important to you? I would think "Objects: USA" would have been the first huge -- but maybe not. Maybe it started in Denmark.

MS. FISCH: Well, yes, "Objects: USA" came later. Probably the first major exhibition was at the Pasadena Museum of Art, shortly after I moved to California. It was when the Pasadena Art Museum was in its old building, which was a kind of chinoise wonder, but it had the most beautiful octagonal room inside that was painted kind of green and had wonderful built in display cases in some of the facets of the room. It was just a gorgeous place. Eudora Moore invited me to have a solo exhibition. I was absolutely overwhelmed, and that was my first major solo exhibition.

MS. CHURCH: When was that?

MS. FISCH: I think '62 or '63 -- I'm not positive about the year. But it was very soon after I arrived in San Diego. So it was either '62 or '63. And then, when I completed my Fulbright research grant, I mentioned that I had a major exhibition at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Copenhagen, and that was absolutely marvelous, very thrilling. Then "Objects: USA," and then in '71, I had a solo exhibition at Goldsmiths' Hall in London, which was invited by Graham Hughes.

That's something that I initiated inadvertently, I suppose, or subliminally. I made an appointment to see Graham Hughes because I was living in London and I wanted to talk to him about where I might possibly have an exhibition in London. When I went to my appointment, Graham was on the phone, and he seemed to be on the phone most of the time, so I got up and said, I'll be happy to come back at another time when you're not so busy. He was so stunned that I was going to leave that he said, "Oh, I'm terribly sorry. Let's go somewhere else."

So we went up to the banquet hall and sat in a corner where nobody knew where he was, and we could have a conversation, because there was no way to talk to him when he was on the phone. I said, "You know, I really wanted to talk to you about the possibility of having a solo exhibition in London and where could I do that?" And he said, "Well, I suppose you could do it here."

MS. CHURCH: Wow, you must have been bowled over.

MS. FISCH: I was. We arranged that it would happen in June of the following year, and it was a wonderful exhibition. I was very pleased and it looked beautiful. I don't know that huge number of people saw it, because Goldsmiths' Hall is kind of off the beaten track in London, but it looked wonderful. I was very pleased with it. Yes, in '68, I had a small exhibition in something called the Little Gallery at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York. Which was basically the work that I had done in Denmark. It was a scaled down version of the exhibition that had been in Copenhagen.

MS. CHURCH: I think I saw a Charles Laloma show there. It was small, but their cases glowed.

MS. FISCH: Yeah, it was a very nice little space. It was almost always jewelers who had shows. Irena Brynner had

a show there and Stanley Lechtzin had a show there. I don't remember who else -- Olaf Skoogfors, maybe. I was very excited to have that, invited by Paul Smith, who was the curator, the director at the time. I had a solo show after my year, my six months in Vienna, I had a show at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Vienna. And that was also a very exciting show, because it was the first time that I had convinced anybody to use mannequins.

MS. CHURCH: Oh really, because your work benefits from being seen on the body.

MS. FISCH: It does, but it was very hard to put mannequins in cases, so there's always the security issue about mannequins. That museum agreed to allow them -- providing that none of the work on the mannequins was made of precious metals. I was doing large anodized aluminum things, and those were the things that I put on the mannequins. Everything else went somewhere else, in cases.

I participated in the exhibitions organized in Pforzheim, at the jewelry museum -- where there were periodic exhibitions called Tendenzen, tendencies or trends. Those were really important exhibitions for me, because it put my work in an international context. They were highly selective exhibitionists, so I was always very pleased to be included in those. In the same way, the International Jewelry Exhibition that was held, that's still held, every year at the Munich Handcraft Fair. I won a gold medal at one of those exhibitions, I don't remember which year, but for a woven piece with feathers.

I participated in those exhibitions not necessarily annually, but periodically. And a lot of wonderful international exhibitions were things that I was always excited to participate in. There was a wonderful one in Switzerland called Creative Jewelry, which had a wonderful catalogue. Again, it was a way for my work to have a bigger audience than I could maintain in any one gallery.

MS. CHURCH: Now, a lot of these shows are invitational, and I'm curious to learn how they knew to invite you. Are you sending people slides, is this simply by reputation, how are you --

MS. FISCH: Well, in the case of the Munich shows, my recollection is you actually sent the piece, initially, the early ones, and then later by slides. And those were selected on the basis of submissions.

MS. CHURCH: So they were competitive.

MS. FISCH: In a sense, yeah. They weren't open competitions. That is, it seems to me. Well, that one was an open competition. I'm thinking that the other ones, you got a letter inviting you to submit possibilities, and from those, selections would be made. And a lot of the international exhibitions were like that. You were invited to send slides and a piece would be selected, and that would be the piece you would send.

MS. CHURCH: So that's by reputation.

MS. FISCH: I think so, because once you're in one exhibition and you're listed in a catalogue, then the next curator doing a show is looking at that catalogue.

MS. CHURCH: So you're building on your record.

MS. FISCH: Yes. It was why I never declined an invitation to participate, because I knew that it was like a domino effect, that if you participated in one, you might get invited to the next one. And if you skipped a couple, well then you were kind of out the door again and had to start over. So even though it was sometimes hard and sometimes expensive to send work, I always thought it was important to do that.

MS. CHURCH: True. Not only have you been in exhibitions, but you've curated exhibitions. You've curated "Jewelers U.S.A. Hats, Helmets, and other Headgear." You were involved with the "School of Fisch." What are your objectives as a curator?

MS. FISCH: I guess I don't really think of myself as a curator, and in each instance, the objectives might be different. Clearly, you want to have the best work possible. The "Hats, Helmets, and Headgear" was just an interesting opportunity to collect work that wouldn't normally be shown together. It involved people working in various materials, but all ornamenting the head. It was an interesting opportunity for me to look at work that I wouldn't normally have access to or know about, and invited it to come together and make a show. And that's, I suppose, the excitement of curating.

MS. CHURCH: Was "Hats, Helmets and Headgear" your idea, or did somebody have the idea and ask you to curate? How did that work? Do you remember?

MS. FISCH: I don't think I initiated it. I think it was an idea of the gallery, and they asked me, and it was interesting to do it, so that's how it happened.

MS. CHURCH: And do you think that these exhibitions like so many of your other involvements are about

educating a public, making the broader public aware of this particular artistic activity?

MS. FISCH: That's certainly part of it, but it's also an opportunity for me to broaden my horizons, to find out what's going on in this area and also to participate in it. I made hats for that exhibition because I wanted people in the gallery to have the opportunity to try hats on, but I didn't want the art that I invited to be subjected to that kind of wear and tear. So I proposed that I would make a series of anodized aluminum hats that people could just play with.

One little section had mirror tiles, and in between the mirror tiles were these anodized aluminum hats that people could take off the hook and try on, and buy if they wanted. So that was fun for me.

MS. CHURCH: So you were curious, you had fun experimenting at a level of involvement and humor.

MS. FISCH: It also brought together work that wouldn't otherwise be seen in San Diego -- this was for a San Diego gallery -- and then I wrote an article about it for Ornament magazine, so that it had a much broader exposure. I'm interested in the fact that you can ornament the head, not with hats, but also with other things. It seemed to me that it was an opportunity to expand artists' thinking about ornamentation, as well as to expand the public's concept.

MS. CHURCH: So in this, you were acting as curator and as artist --

MS. FISCH: And as educator.

MS. CHURCH: And as educator [Laughs], and as critic. You're covering all the bases.

MS. FISCH: Yes, I did it all.

MS. CHURCH: That's wonderful. Similar to the curating, you juried a lot of exhibitions all over the world, not just regionally and nationally. I think that's a pretty big responsibility. Do you bring to your jurying a set of personal values that equip you? I know that there's a Juror's Charge, and there are all sorts of responsibilities, but you must have some ideas about what's appropriate within the context of a Juror's Charge?

MS. FISCH: I think that you have to take on the responsibility of selecting an exhibition that is a viable exhibition of the highest quality that you can get out of what is submitted. I've known of exhibition competitions where there was no work at all selected by the jury. That happened here, actually, in La Jolla. The jury decided there wasn't anything worth showing, which was certainly within the purview of the Jurors' Charge, but it certainly didn't do the institution any good, and it certainly didn't do any of the artists any good.

I thought that was a very wrong thing to do, and I would never consider doing that. I try to be as generous as possible. I think that's probably the motivating force for me, to be as open minded and generous as possible, to make a really good presentation to a public, and not to have my own personal agenda of, well, if I look at the back of this, it's not really good enough, and this just looks like somebody else's work, and this is just terrible stuff.

It's very easy to be that kind of critic, but if you're a juror, you're not a critic, you're a juror, and you're being asked to select from what is presented to you. It seems to me that that's not an impossible task, and you have to put your mind to selecting what you consider the best that is possible and be as generous as possible in doing so.

MS. CHURCH: It's interesting that you make a distinction between the role of critic and the role of juror.

MS. FISCH: Oh, I don't think they're the same.

MS. CHURCH: Well, I think that's a very interesting point to bring up. The idea that as a juror you have a job to do, and the parameters are established by the work that's in front of you and the charge that you've been given. So I think you must be willing to take on slightly different approaches within each --

MS. FISCH: Well, yes. The most recent thing I juried was a crochet exhibition, and I juried by slides, which is not my favorite way to jury, and the slides were sent here. I was the sole juror. I don't mind being the sole juror, but I prefer doing it in a small team because you have a chance to discuss things. Again, that's more interesting to me than just doing it privately, but the responsibility is greater when you are a single juror. It was difficult, because the work was different from what I was used to looking at. It wasn't jewelry, and also, I couldn't see the work. I wasn't ever going to see the work, and that was a little more difficult. I felt a little less confident about my choices.

I took a long time and I thought a lot about it. And luckily, the exhibition space was not huge, so I was able to be as selective as I wanted to be, and I didn't take as many chances as I might have had I seen the actual work.

[TAPE CHANGE.]

MS. CHURCH: Sharon Church interviewing Arline Fisch at the artist's home and studio in Mission Hills, a neighborhood of San Diego, California, on July 30, 2001, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Arline, do you work on commissions, and if so, what have been your most important commissioned works? And what are the limits, liabilities, and freedoms that you find within the realm of commissioned work?

MS. FISCH: I almost never do commissioned work because I don't like the limits and liabilities within them, but I did do some work for Reed and Barton, which I'd like to talk about. I taught at Boston University in the Program in Artisanry for a year in 1975-76 as a visiting professor. On the board of that Program in Artisanry was Roger Hallowell, who was, at the time, chairman of the board or president, I don't remember which, of Reed and Barton. In the course of meeting occasionally during the year, he became interested in my work and suggested to Reed and Barton that I might do something with them.

Reed and Barton decided that they wanted to enter the jewelry field. Although they had made some pewter jewelry at the time, they had not ever made any silver jewelry, and they wanted to enter that market. They thought the flatware market was diminishing, and they needed to be thinking about expanding into another arena. There was a vice-president in charge of this operation named Dick Gillespie. They contacted me and asked if I would be interested to design a collection for them to enter the market in jewelry.

They didn't specify silver, and in my conversations with Dick, he wasn't sure whether it should be gold or silver. It was my contention that Reed and Barton was known as a silver company, and that perhaps it would be best to maintain that identification. I said I would be interested in working on a silver collection, but that I would not be willing to do it alone, because I thought that it was too big a responsibility to have the sole direction determined by me, and I didn't think my aesthetic was broad enough for that.

I made a proposal to Dick that I would put together a team of jewelers prominent in the field, with recognizable names, and that we would together design a collection for them. That's how Signature Five, which was the collection, was born. I invited the other artists. Glenda Arentzen, Linda Watson, Mary Ann Scherr, Ronnie Pearson and myself, four women and a man. You can see how I felt about women being the jewelry designers.

I contacted each artist and asked them if they'd be interested, and they were. We met together in Taunton at the Reed and Barton offices and factories, so that we could all see what the possibilities were for manufacturing; how did they manufacture, and what kinds of things we could be thinking about for them to do, adaptations of the technology that they already used. I took on the role also of design director, for which I had a separate contract. I negotiated all the contracts, which, in retrospect, I think was very nervy of me, because I did it without an attorney.

MS. CHURCH: Wow. But you knew everybody.

MS. FISCH: Yeah, I knew everybody, but here's a company that I think has a very good attitude and a good reputation, and I certainly should be able to negotiate something reasonable with them without having an attorney. They had attorneys, however, so although Dick and I kind of discussed this and worked out what we thought was reasonable, when the attorneys got a hold of it, it turned out to be quite something else. They sent me these proposed contracts, and I just said, "No, that's not what I want to do, and this is how I want it to be."

I made all the corrections and changes, and sent it back, and they accepted it, it worked out really well. My whole idea was based on something I had discussed with an industrial designer friend here beforehand, which had to do with a very high royalty percentage for the first 100 and a diminishing royalty percentage as the quantities increased. It turned out to be a very smart thing to do, because in the end, it was not a huge production. Had it been a flat two or three percent, which was royalty, on top of design fees -- everybody was paid design fees -- but a royalty on top of that, a very low percentage really didn't amount to anything unless it was a big production. In the end, it was not a large production, it actually worked out to our benefit.

It was a very exciting project. I had never done anything like that before, and the company really put everything into it. They did a beautiful PR production, with a wonderful launch of the collection at the Four Seasons in New York, and we had lots of press. Everything went wonderfully and the pieces looked terrific. The only problem was, the salesmen couldn't sell it. They didn't hire different salesmen, they used their silver salesmen, who only knew silverware buyers but did not know the jewelry buyers.

I kept to saying to Dick, you need to have a different sales force if this is going to fly. He was not able to convince the company to do that, so it only had this one manifestation, and it was a very nice collection. Everybody did more than one piece. I'd have to look it up again to see. Some people did several. I think Linda Watson did maybe the most number of pieces. I probably did maybe the smallest number of pieces in the

collection. Some pieces sold very well. Ronnie Pearson did some very nice things.

The other thing that didn't go well was that they cast almost everything, despite the fact that we had looked at stamping machines, and chemical milling, and all kinds of things that produced imagery. Things like Mary Ann's piece was very smooth surfaced. It wasn't heavily textured, and it required a certain kind of precision, which you don't get in casting. Some pieces had a lot of difficulty with porosity. They were very highly quality controlled, so nothing went out that didn't look very good, but they expended a lot of money that they, unfortunately, didn't need to do.

But they were loath to tool up for something when they didn't know the sales potential. It wasn't what I would call a great success, so we didn't continue with that, but they asked me to continue to do some woven jewelry, which I had proposed outside of the collection. I wanted to do it as a cottage industry, to use weavers in the Taunton area and provide them with fine silver to just make the stock, which then the metal people could take over and bend and make into pretty simple bracelets -- I think they were mostly bracelets that I had designed.

The company didn't see that they could do that for security reasons. They didn't see how they could control the silver, and I hadn't thought about that as a problem. I had volunteered to send Steven Brixner from here, as a sort of manager to supervise the quality of the weaving and help people who needed a little instruction on setting up and so on. Steven was interested in doing that, but the security was something I had not thought of as a problem.

Reed and Barton went on and looked for a company that could weave metal, and they found something called Woven Electronics in South Carolina, which wove strapping, and so they had looms that could weave narrow strips. I went there and worked with them, and Steven went there, because he was living in South Carolina at the time, so he could also be available. The prototypes looked very good, and I thought, yes, we're ready to go here, but security again defeated us, Woven Electronics said to Reed and Barton, "You have to build a secure room for this to happen in, because we're not going to be responsible for the silver." And Reed and Barton said, "Why would we build a facility for you. When we're only going to use a small room? Cancel that project."

MS. CHURCH: Oh, that's too bad.

MS. FISCH: Yeah, it was sad. I got all the prototypes back. I made some pieces out of the stuff they sent back.

MS. CHURCH: Well, what an interesting project.

MS. FISCH: Yes. And, of course, 15 years later or 20 years later, the Italians are producing woven metal jewelry, which I'm sure they're doing on looms.

MS. CHURCH: Oh, meanwhile, what has happened to Reed and Barton?

MS. FISCH: I think Dick then did try the gold collection, which didn't succeed either, and I think they gave the whole thing up. But I thought it was so adventurous of them to try this, and I felt really bad that it didn't work out better. But it was an exciting few years for me.

I also did a project for Alcoa Aluminum, which was not a production project, but a one off thing. It was in honor of the bicentennial in 1976. They wanted to honor American inventors. I did a woven loaf of bread to honor Cyrus McCormick, and I did a miniature aluminum airplane for the Wright Brothers.

MS. CHURCH: Woven.

MS. FISCH: No, sewn. I sewed it up with the sewing machine.

MS. CHURCH: Out of --

MS. FISCH: Out of very thin aluminum.

MS. CHURCH: That's great.

MS. FISCH: That was also quite adventurous. I ended up flying down to Pittsburgh to their tech center because I couldn't manage to solder aluminum. Soldering was the only way I knew how to put things together, I didn't know how to weld. I thought, well, if I have to weld, I guess that's what I'll have to do. I called and said, "You know, I don't understand why I soldered this thing together, then when I wash the flux off it just falls apart." They said, "No, no, no, soldering is not what you want to do. That's not what you do with aluminum. Maybe you'd better come down."
So I flew down to the tech center, and they suggested cold adhesive bonding, because soldering doesn't work and welding is not very strong. It seems that "glue" was the best solution.

MS. CHURCH: Glue is great. [Laughs.]

MS. FISCH: Yes, that was actually a wonderful revelation. I also learned about photo imagery on aluminum. There's photosensitive aluminum that you can develop images on and have photographs, so I actually used a photograph of Cyrus McCormick on one of the slices of bread. It was a wonderful project, and great fun.

MS. CHURCH: And the Wright Brothers piece, did it look like their airplane?

MS. FISCH: Yes, it did. That was their idea, it wasn't my favorite thing. I submitted a lot of different ideas for different inventions and how they might be portrayed. The Wright Brothers was not my favorite, but that's the one they wanted to do, and of course, they wanted it to look like an airplane, so I did an airplane. Not a replica, but my version of their plane. Those kinds of commissions have been very stimulating, because I've learned so much from doing them.

MS. CHURCH: But you don't take commissions for your jewelry.

MS. FISCH: Not very often. Occasionally I will if there's somebody who's really persistent and it's something that I'm willing to do, but mostly I deflect those requests.

MS. CHURCH: Arline, most recently you were involved with the very handsome publication, Elegant Fantasy: The Jewelry of Arline Fisch. Can you describe that project and your involvement with it? I'd like to know how the writers were selected, who directed the photography, how the works were collected, the funding and the distribution, and anything else that comes to mind. It's a very handsome publication.

MS. FISCH: It's actually a publication that is a catalogue for a retrospective exhibition, which was organized by the San Diego Historical Society Museum and curated by Denny Stone, who's the curator of their costume collection. It was Denny who found the publisher, which is Arnoldsche, a German publisher for the catalogue. She did so by sending out on the Internet a proposal. Actually, what she sent out was a request for proposals -- We are looking for somebody to publish a catalogue for this exhibition, and she digitized some images and sent them out.

Arnoldsche responded, and a publisher from Seattle responded, and a local publisher, and they all responded with quotations. I mean, everything is paid up front for exhibition catalogues. I was so surprised that Arnoldsche responded, because they hadn't done anything with American jewelers. They specialize in books on jewelry and design, and they are currently doing a lot with contemporary jewelers, but they hadn't done any Americans, and so I was interesting to them.

They knew about my work because of the museum in Pforzheim, Arnoldsche's in Stuttgart. So, I was not an unfamiliar name to them. They had seen my name in a museum catalogue, and I suppose they asked Fritz Falk, the director of the museum. I would think they did a little bit of homework before they made a proposal. Interestingly, that their proposal was that they would do a soft cover catalogue, which essentially the museum would pay for, and then they would do a hard cover version of the catalogue, which they would distribute without royalties, until a certain number were sold. That hard cover version would have a German supplement in the back and would be distributed internationally.

My eyes just lit up at that. The idea that a museum catalogue, which never has a really broad distribution, would have the possibility to be distributed internationally, was very appealing to me. The cost was way beyond what the museum envisioned doing as the catalogue for this exhibition, and I knew that. Interestingly, the other two proposals were not dissimilar in cost. I said, "If they're not dissimilar in cost, why wouldn't I want this one?" Still, the executive director of the museum was looking sort of shell-shocked.

I said, "Supposing I raise some of the money." Well, that would certainly help. I didn't know how I was going to do that, and I thought, if worse comes to worse, I'll ask my family. This will be an investment, and, in my mind, that's what I was going to do. Then, I went to a Haystack board meeting that involved a dinner party. Seated next to me was the hostess of that dinner party, and she said, "What's going on in your life," so I babbled on about all of this. She said, "I'll pay half. How much?" I just gasped. And I said, "Why would you do that?" She said, "Because I want to, and I can afford it." I was just stunned.

MS. CHURCH: You do well at dinner parties. [Laughter.]

MS. FISCH: I honestly didn't know what to say, other than to cry. The dinner party went on, and I'm thinking, what do I do about this, does she mean it. Will she remember? As I was leaving that evening, saying thank you to the host and hostess, she said, "I meant what I said, send me a letter." I still get choked up thinking about it.

I came home and I wrote her a letter. I had told her about the German publisher, and I wrote her a letter and explained how wonderful this would be and how enormously grateful I would be if she was to do this. She sent

back a check with a note that said, "I don't care what publisher you use, it's up to you." I decided not to show that letter to the museum. I used the check as leverage to say, this check is available if we use this publisher, because that's what I wanted.

MS. CHURCH: Right, and that was, of course, your option.

MS. FISCH: I took on the responsibility for both the writers and the photography as my contribution, my financial contribution. I selected the writers, who were not paid, because they didn't wish to be. But I also selected an editor, whom I did pay, to edit all three essays. The writers were selected because I wanted different points of view. Ida Rigby is the art historian, on the faculty of San Diego State. Ida's always been very enthusiastic about my work, and she also happens to be a collector of Native American jewelry, so she has a connection to the jewelry field.

She was a little bit concerned that she didn't know much about my background, but I provided her with photographs and written material, so she felt comfortable doing it. I was very pleased that she wrote about "rivers of memory;" it kind of provided the direction for the exhibition. Actually, the exhibition installation in San Diego was a kind of river of work.

MS. CHURCH: Oh, that's a nice metaphor.

MS. FISCH: It was a very nice metaphor. I asked Robert Bell, who was then Curator of Crafts and Design at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, because Robert knows my work very well, and because he himself was a textile artist. He has a real feeling for the connection of what I do with textiles. He's also married to Eugenie Keefer, who was one of my graduate students and also knows very much about my work. It was a natural and relatively easy choice, and he was very willing to do that.

David McFadden actually volunteered; he asked if he could write an essay for the catalogue. I was certainly very pleased to accept his offer. So that's how the writers were selected, and they, all worked really hard. Lois Moran suggested to me that I really needed to have an editor, and she recommended Beverly Sanders, who works for the American Craft magazine. So I engaged Beverly to do the major editing. The photography was all done by William Gillette.

MS. CHURCH: Can I back up and ask you a question? These three essays cover very different aspects of your work. Did these writers work together to --

MS. FISCH: No, but I specified what I thought they should cover, so that they didn't all do the same thing. I think if you have three writers, you don't want three versions of the same story.

MS. CHURCH: No. And they really are distinctly different in their points of view.

MS. FISCH: Beverly made sure that it was as non-redundant as possible. It wasn't totally possible, but as much as possible she took out some of the redundancies. The photography was all done by William Gillette, who has photographed my work since 1985. There were existing transparencies, since I needed to have four by five transparencies for publication, rather than slides. Everything that wasn't already photographed, he photographed; he and I worked together all one summer to photograph the work.

In some cases, Denny Stone was there as well, because the work was on loan from other people or other institutions, and she needed to accompany the work. We did all the photography in his studio. He had done work on two models in the past -- the models were all students -- I employed a third student, a current student, to model for the work that needed models that hadn't been photographed in that way before. So there are three different models in the group of photographs. All of the works in the exhibition are illustrated.

Everything was sent off to Stuttgart, and the rest of it was done by email, which was really extraordinary. Denny's a very accomplished computer person, and she was able to manage that. They eventually sent three possible layouts. Of the three, we didn't like any of them exactly, but we pasted it together, we like this one and that one, and sent them back. The second time around, it was just perfect. It was exactly what I wanted. They did all of the layout work, and then I flew to Stuttgart to do the color corrections on the transparencies. So that' s how the story of the catalogue.

MS. CHURCH: And it really is a book. It is more a book than a catalogue.

MS. FISCH: I got to choose everything. I got to choose the color of the cover. {Laughs.] The only thing that we had a discussion about was the image on the cover. I had selected another image, and I was not thrilled with the one they chose, but they were right, and I'm glad other people convinced me of that.

MS. CHURCH: So that's the only thing --

MS. FISCH: That's the only disagreement we had. And they won, but in the end they were right.

MS. CHURCH: And is it going to be distributed into the future?

MS. FISCH: Yes, they will continue to market the hard cover version in their various catalogues. It's not a huge run. I don't remember whether it's 2,000 or 2,500.

MS. CHURCH: Tell me about your family. Where and when were you born? Who were your parents? What did they do? Who are your siblings, and what do they do?

My father emigrated from Austria before the First World War, when he was 12. He was an only child. My grandfather had come to the U.S., I think, the year before, established himself, and then my father and his mother, my grandmother, emigrated. They lived first in Chicago and then in Cincinnati. My mother was born in Yonkers, New York in a German-Irish family. She and my father met, I think, in New York City where my mother was studying nursing. They were married, and I was born, I guess, a year later.

I have one brother and two sisters, all younger. I'm the eldest. We lived primarily on Long Island, but always within the New York City limits, in the borough of Queens. When I was very young, we lived in Jackson Heights. Then we moved to Cincinnati for two years, because my father was traveling a lot, and he wanted my mother and me to be with his parents, at least I think that's why we were there. My brother was born in Cincinnati. Shortly thereafter, when it was time for me to start school at the age of five, we returned to Long Island and settled in Bayside, where I went to public school, PS159. We moved several times in Bayside, and I went to Bayside High School.

MS. CHURCH: What did your father do -- he was in sales?

MS. FISCH: No, my father was in the flooring business, the tile-flooring business. He worked for a Chicago company. My mother was very active as a volunteer in the Girl Scouts and in local civic organizations. She had a large family. My father was an only child, but my mother had three brothers and a sister, all of whom lived on Long Island, and my grandmother, my mother's mother, who was a widow. We were a fairly closely integrated family all during my growing up time.

When I was very little we lived in Jackson Heights, in an apartment, but once I started school, we always lived in a house; we just changed houses. As the family got bigger, we moved to bigger houses. Bayside was a wonderful place to grow up because you could walk everywhere. I walked to school, I came home for lunch, my mother was there. I went roller-skating after school on the street; it was just a very pleasant, easy place to live.

It was very close to New York City. When I was in high school, that was very important to me, because I was allowed to go to Manhattan. Again, it was a time when life was not so dangerous. I was allowed to go, from the time I was about 14, I think, or 15 , I was allowed to go to Manhattan. Every other Saturday, my girlfriend and I went to New York City and did something. We would go in, go shopping, have lunch, go to the theater and come home. That was marvelous, and it was a great way to grow up. I feel very fortunate in that.

MS. CHURCH: And you were obviously interested in the cultural --

[TAPE CHANGE, SIDE A TO SIDE B.]

MS. FISCH: I had exposure to the theater. My mother and father took me to the theater. My father took me to the opera. My mother didn't like the opera, but my father did, so I went often to the Metropolitan with my father. And museums were common because that was something to do as a family. We also went to the Thanksgiving Day Parade every year. My mother stayed home and did the cooking, and my father took all of us to the parade. We were a very New York oriented family. My father also loved to swim and loved the beach, so in the summer time, that's what we did on weekends. We went to Jones Beach and enjoyed that kind of rural Long Island.

MS. CHURCH: Idyllic.

MS. FISCH: It was very nice growing up. My sister, Bettianne, became a model at the age of 17 or 18, so that was another aspect of New York City life which was fairly adventurous. She had lots of adventures as a young model in New York. My brother Bob went to Fordham University, then decided to study optometry and moved to Chicago, which he loved and has never returned, so he settled in the Chicago area. My youngest sister Nancy was born much later. She's about 13 years younger than I am, born on Easter Sunday. I wanted to call her Bunny, but luckily, I did not prevail, so she isn't stuck with that terrible name.

I was very involved in caring for her, because shortly thereafter, my mother decided that she would like to go to work, to be employed rather than only working as a volunteer. She worked very hard for the Girl Scouts, and all during the war, she was air raid warden and involved in civic associations. She was always busy, but it was

always volunteer work, and at one point, she just decided if she was going to work that hard, she might like to be paid for it.

She went into retail sales in a local department store, and I often had the responsibility after school for making sure that everybody was doing what they were supposed to do and for getting dinner started.

MS. CHURCH: When did you know you wanted to be an artist?

MS. FISCH: I won my first prize in second grade, and I thought, this is wonderful. I love being a success. So that's when I decided.

MS. CHURCH: What did you win a prize for?

MS. FISCH: A painting.

MS. CHURCH: Of --

MS. FISCH: I don't remember. [Laughter.] I just remember that I won a prize, and I thought, oh boy, this is a good thing. Then, as a Girl Scout, I worked with my hands a lot, and I really enjoyed making things -- dolls clothes, or baskets, or whatever.

MS. CHURCH: And you said you sewed your own clothes.

MS. FISCH: Yes, when I graduated from grade school, my father said, "Your graduation present is sewing lessons at Singer Sewing, because I'm tired of listening to you and your mother argue about your sewing." I had to make my graduation dress from eighth grade, and my mother never approved of my sewing. She had a higher standard than I did, and I never measured up. My father's gift was, you go to Singer and take sewing lessons, and your mother is never to instruct you again.

MS. CHURCH: That's a wonderful resolution to the argument.

MS. FISCH: So I had proper sewing lessons, and I continued to make my clothes from then on.

MS. CHURCH: Very good. Did your family support your becoming an artist?

MS. FISCH: My siblings have always been very supportive. I think they consider what I do not weird, but eccentric, but they're proud of my accomplishments, and they've always been very supportive.

MS. CHURCH: And you dedicated your catalogue to them.

MS. FISCH: Yes, they come to all of my openings, they wear my jewelry, and I consider them very important to my career.

MS. CHURCH: That's great. You have become a mentor to many women who seek a career in the arts, and you have received a lifetime achievement in the crafts award from the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Where does your self-confidence and self reliance come from? You entered a male art world early on. You triumphed. Are you somehow uniquely enabled?

MS. FISCH: I don't think so. My father always supported me and said I could do anything I wanted to do -- I think I mentioned this earlier. He gave me a great sense of confidence. Skidmore did the same. It never occurred to me that I was entering a male world that I wasn't supposed to be in, so it was never an issue. I never dealt with that issue. I just assumed that I could do whatever I wanted to do.

MS. CHURCH: That's a great gift.

MS. FISCH: I tried to encourage my female students to think in that way, not to think, oh god, I'm going into this negative situation. How am I going to deal with it? Don't think about that. Think about what you can do, and this is where you're going to do it. You just assume that you will be treated properly and fairly, based on your ability. And I think mostly that works.

MS. CHURCH: That works, yes. I think you're right. I know you are a deeply religious person and a practicing Catholic. Were you brought up in that faith or did you embrace it as an adult?

MS. FISCH: We were a Catholic family. I was brought up as a Catholic, and I've always practiced as a Catholic. I don't know that I'm deeply religious or terribly devout, but I've always been a practicing Catholic, and I believe strongly in the principles of Catholicism.

MS. CHURCH: Do you find that your art and your faith are connected? And to what extent does your faith and religious belief system inform your art, and vice versa?

MS. FISCH: I don't know that they're directly related. I think that my faith gives me the confidence to do with my talent, whatever that is, as much as I can do, that that's what God intended for me to do, and I try to do it as best I can. It's in that way that I express my beliefs. I try to be a good person, charitable in my thinking and so on. I'm not always successful, but I strive to be a good person.

MS. CHURCH: In describing your piece Guardian Angel in your catalogue, you say, "This angelic figure has a guardian spirit and provides earthly protection for the wearer." Do you believe objects can be imbued with spirits, and if so, how do you as a maker participate in transforming inert matter into that which embodies spirit?

MS. FISCH: There are certain iconographic images which suggest a spirit beyond the earthly, and wings, for me, is one of those iconic images, which I like using. It wasn't so much the angel idea as the wings idea. I think that wings are a metaphor for protection, whether it's earthly protection or spiritual protection. This particular piece that I call Guardian Angel seemed to me to have a kind of enigmatic quality, which suggested a non-earthly being, but that it was applied to an earthly person, me, and therefore it was guarding me, and so it became my guardian angel.

I've done other pieces called Spirit Houses, which I more deliberately thought about as being containers for souls. That was a very deliberate kind of imagery and connection that I was trying to make. I'm not sure that they are so successful from that point of view. I think they're successful pieces, as pieces of jewelry. I'm not sure how much they communicate that sense of spirit that I was trying to capture. They were inspired by aboriginal Australian spirit poles, which are burial poles. They're just cylindrical containers, usually carved and painted wood, which are meant to contain the spirit. I'm not sure if it contains, actually, the ashes, but certainly the spirit of the departed person.

I was very struck by that possibility, by that connection between the inner container and the inner spirit, and I wanted to try to do that. I continue to do that, I think, with some of the container pieces that I'm doing now. They're not overtly containers, so they have a kind of secret quality about them, which suggests a more spiritual containing than holding something real.

MS. CHURCH: They don't have a function beyond, the idea of containing something, perhaps the spirit or an idea. You mentioned the wings had an enigmatic quality. And certainly, those pieces that lacked the specific function opened themselves up to the metaphor of containing the spirit.

MS. FISCH: Lately, I've been making what I call scent columns, because they're columnar in form. But they actually are containers, and they could hold dry herbs that would have an evocative scent to them. That's what I intend for them, to have a kind of evocation of spirit that comes about because you're actually registering a smell that suggests something in nature.

MS. CHURCH: The ephemeral. When you make these pieces, you're creating an opportunity for someone else to participate in your idea.

MS. FISCH: Yes. And I hope people will. I've spent a lot of time making them so they open. I suspect that they will not always be used in that way, but they still are containers and they still hold something, even if it's only air.

MS. CHURCH: So really, the way they're received is kind of up to the --

MS. FISCH: That's sort of out of my hands, and it's up to whoever is wearing it to participate in it if they wish. I have created the opportunity for them to participate.

MS. CHURCH: Exactly, so you open up the possibility.

MS. FISCH: And that's all I can do. I can't go beyond that point.

MS. CHURCH: We're sitting in your beautiful home, studio and the gardens, in a world that you've created. When I was becoming an artist, I remember talking with, I think it was Walter Nottingham, who described a visit to your cabin at Haystack. He said it was like entering another world -- a world of Arline, hung with colors and objects that made this small, bare, almost Zen-like space into something vibrant, rich, exotic, and totally your own.

You create your own environment every day, whether it is in your dress, or your cabin, or your home, which has been photographed and published, and awarded. Care goes into the aesthetic selection of all that surrounds you. Your whole life seems to have become an art form. It seems totally appropriate that you were declared a

living treasure of California by resolution of the California State Assembly. Can you talk about how you make this whole life a bubble around you?

MS. FISCH: I think everyone surrounds themselves with the things they like. I'm not very disciplined about my space. It's, in many ways, cluttered, because it has all those things that I picked up that I thought I liked, and now they're sitting somewhere collecting dust because I'm not looking at them, but I can't bear to part with them. My environment is just very eclectic and, in many ways, not deliberate. I find that I don't care enough, I guess, to make deliberate choices about what color should the couch be, or where should it be, or should I move things around, and is this the best place to hang this painting?

I sort of put things where they look good and I'm happy with them, and they appeal to me, and I like their color. Color's really important, and I think that's probably the most defining feature of my environment. And my clothing is evidence is that I love color.

MS. CHURCH: And certain colors.

MS. FISCH: Well, I like most colors. I just don't like muted colors [Laughter]. I hardly own any black, or gray, or brown, or beige.

MS. CHURCH: This is unusual for an artist.

MS. FISCH: Because I don't think of them as very exciting colors. I probably don't look good in those colors. I think that does have a great deal to do with it. I look good in bright colors. It seems to be effective for me, that is, people comment on my colors. I look at them and they're wearing gray. Somebody will say, gosh, those are just wonderful colors you're wearing. I look at them and I say, well, you could wear these. Why are you wearing gray [Laughter]? I don't understand why people wear gray.

My sister Bettianne, who was the model in New York, of course wore black. That was the coat of arms. There was a period in my younger days when I did wear gray and black, because those were the sophisticated things to wear. But I really don't like them, they're not lively, they're not interesting for me. I don't even know that it was so gradual. I changed. I kept buying bright colors. My father loved red. We always bought him red hats and red sweaters. Maybe it comes from that, wishing to please him.

I love purple, I like purple and red together, and I've always liked that. I wasn't always as courageous, about what I would wear. But gradually, over the years, I just have eliminated all the things that seem to me dreary. People say, how do you find things that match? I shop in my closet is what I do. I buy things when I see them because I like their color. I shop by color. I don't care so much how it's cut, I don't care so much what it costs. I care about what color it is.

It may not, at the moment, be anything I can wear, because I don't have anything that goes with it. But I put it in my closet, and eventually, there is something that works. I just am attracted to color, and over the years, I've become more and more interested in that aspect of my life. I tend to buy things in the house also that are colorful. If I can choose between a California surfer fan that's multicolored and a white fan, why would I choose a white fan?

MS. CHURCH: Well, everything matches -- your closet, you furniture, your rugs, everything works.

MS. FISCH: If you only buy those things that you like, then eventually it all works together. The deliberateness is not there.

MS. CHURCH: You have developed such a strong identity that I've been with people on the other side of this country in a store, and someone will say, doesn't it look just like Arline? And it looks like your house is filled with gifts. People must delight in finding things that look just like Arline, and they buy them and give them to you.

MS. FISCH: Occasionally that happens. I open a box and there's a garment that somebody has found that they think I should have. It just arrives unannounced. My sister Nancy frequently buys shoes for me, because as soon as she sees a pair of shoes in a bright color, she doesn't call me, she just buys them.

MS. CHURCH: It's wonderful to be identified like that. I remember hearing you lecture on jewelry once; you were representing the field to an audience that was not knowledgeable. And I think you used this word often: celebration. You defined jewelry as a celebration. It seems like your life is a celebration of sorts. Do you find that those two things are connected?

MS. FISCH: Well, probably. I don't always think about my environment, I live in it, but I'm not always paying attention. If I had to come home to a house that was not colorful and interesting, it would be a different life. I like that I can look around me and enjoy the things that I see I'm trying not to buy anything more in my life, but

it's very hard for me to give things away, and it's very easy to buy things. [Laughter.]

MS. CHURCH: You'll just have to build another addition onto your home.

Much has been written about your work and your teaching. Is there anything that you want to talk about now that has not been discussed? What haven't we covered that's important to you?

MS. FISCH: Oh, I think we've done a very good job of covering everything here. [Laughter.]

MS. CHURCH: And then, last question: what in your mind is your greatest accomplishment? And I know that's hard, because you've done so many things, but I could even ask it differently. I could say, what is your greatest accomplishment as a teacher? What is your greatest accomplishment as an artist? And what is your greatest accomplishment as a member of a community?

MS. FISCH: I don't think I can choose to say this over that. It's the accumulation that I think is important, that I didn't just make one thing or I didn't just do one thing, that my life is an entity that includes teaching, and students, and publishing, and work, family -- that all those things go together to make a life. And I can't separate out this as being greater than that. There are things that were more fun, and there were things that were more successful, but in many instances, the things that are the most successful were supported by all the things that weren't successful that came before. I think it's really not possible to say that this is the single most important thing. I think my greatest legacy will be my students and what they do.

MS. CHURCH: Do you think maybe, then, I could summarize and say your great achievement has been to make a whole cloth of so many diverse, strong interests, and that you did everything, and still do everything, with commitment, and intelligence, and passion, and that one thing does not suffer because of anything else?

MS. FISCH: Well, it is a whole cloth, but there are always times when one thing suffers because other things are more important. That's just the way life goes along, that sometimes one thing is in ascendancy and other things have to go by the wayside. I can't maintain the same level of involvement and commitment to every single thing all the time. I don't think I can do that.

For one month of one year, it may be that I'm really focused on developing a body of work, and then the next year I'm focused on developing an exhibition with a catalogue, and that's very time consuming, and I can't pay attention to the other things the way I ought to be or would like to be, because there just isn't the amount of time and energy to do that. And that's unfortunate. Sometimes you don't like to pay that price, that you have to give up one thing for another thing, but you have to look at the bigger picture, and say, over a ten-year period, this is what happened, and it's okay, that I did enough in this ten-year period to feel that I've accomplished something.

MS. CHURCH: You've accomplished an enormous amount, and it's really great to people to hear about things that I had no idea of. I really appreciate that.

MS. FISCH: Well, thank you. It's been a pleasure.

MS. CHURCH: This is the end of this tape and of the interview.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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