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Oral history interview with Jere Osgood, 2001 September 19-October 8

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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 Jere Osgood on September 19 and October 8, 2001. The interview took place in Wilton, New Hampshire, and was conducted by Donna Gold 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.

Jere Osgood and Donna Gold have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written prose.

Interview

MS. DONNA GOLD: This is Donna Gold interviewing Jere Osgood at his home in Wilton, New Hampshire, on September 19, 2001, tape one, side one. So just tell me, you were born in Staten Island.

MR. JERE OSGOOD: Staten Island, New York.

MS. GOLD: And the date?

MR. OSGOOD: February 7, 1936.

MS. GOLD: And you were raised in Staten Island, right.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah.

MS. GOLD: I was wondering whether you felt that you had the -- well, did you go into Manhattan frequently?

MR. OSGOOD: Oh, yeah.

MS. GOLD: Were you influenced by the architecture and style?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I realize that I was, and it's hard to put it into words. It's a very big city, and you come to expect the scale of things there. And so, it's the architecture, the music, the museums, the scale of all that is tremendous. And after a while, I really didn't like the city too much. I was glad to leave Staten Island. But then, as the years go by, I realize that it sort of set the feeling for me. It's not that every place else in the world is second; it's hard to explain it.

You really have to have lived there to understand everything is on a large scale, whether it be dimensional things like building, or whether it be music, or things you're into in museums. And I like that; I like having that to reflect back on. But yes, I did go over to the city a lot. It was a fairly short trip across on the ferry.

MS. GOLD: Did you live within view of the skyline?

MR. OSGOOD: No, we lived fairly close to the water, but we couldn't see the skyline. It was close enough so I could hear the foghorns and the ships going by. There was an aunt that lived closer to where the ferry docked and up very high, and I used to like to go to her place, because there I could see the whole harbor and see the ships coming. When I was really small, I really liked that. She had binoculars, so I could entertain myself for a long time watching things.

MS. GOLD: And that would have been in the middle of World War II. Were ships coming in and out of –

MR. OSGOOD: It would have been before, during, and after, yeah. I remember that a lot for odd reasons that struck me at my age level. I mean, there were always relatives coming by to stay with us that were in either the army, the navy, the coast guard, or whatever. If they had a day's leave or something, they'd come over and visit us, because being in New York, they had a lot of the military. And then, the other odd thing is, like there was shortages of everything, sugar. I used to let my uncle -- I always gave him my sugar portion.

MS. GOLD: You did.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I didn't eat much sugar. And then, I remember the other thing during the war, my father couldn't get gasoline for his car, and he discovered that it would run on cleaning fluid. So on Saturday mornings, we'd drive around and pickup odd gallons of cleaning fluid so we could use the car. They don't make engines like that now. They're a little more sensitive, I think.

MS. GOLD: How amazing. Did he keep trying fluids, or did somebody tell him that?

MR. OSGOOD: Well, he was sort of mechanically inclined. He used to work on cars. I mean, I think he sort of figured that out. The chemicals like that, gasoline, paint thinner, and so forth, they all run in a scale of volatility -- I can't remember what it's called. I think other people know it too.

MS. GOLD: I've never heard of that. That's great. So he was the son of an architect?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, my grandfather was an architect, yeah.

MS. GOLD: And what kind of work did your grandfather do?

MR. OSGOOD: He was a stone architect. In other words, he specialized in work with stone. And he just worked within a larger firm. I don't think he actually designed any buildings himself, but he was one of the -- it's a team that usually does work on buildings. So I was always hearing all these great stories from him, be sure to visit Grand Central Station and some post office -- that I've forgotten the name of now -- and the big railroad station in Washington; I believe he worked on that.

MS. GOLD: That's Union Station, isn't it?

MR. OSGOOD: As I say, he wasn't one of the designers, but they had to have a team of skilled people to take over. And at that time, he lived in Vermont, because he worked at one of the major quarries in Vermont where the stone would have been cut.

MS. GOLD: Would that have been Barre?

MR. OSGOOD: It could be; I'd have to look at a map. They lived in Northfield, which may be near Barre. So he was an architect. That was the reason I went to architectural school. I decided I would study to be an architect. Well, I may be getting ahead of your questions, but anyway, that was why that followed through, that I went to study architecture. I soon realized -- well, it took me three years almost to figure out that I was more interested in the detail work on the interiors of buildings, in other words, the furniture. They did ask us to draw in furniture and interior shots.

So I felt more comfortable with that scale rather than the large scale of the buildings that I was designing. So I left there and went to the School for American Craftsmen, at RIT [Rochester Institute of Technology].

MS. GOLD: I do want to ask you about that in a little bit, but I was just wondering, it seems like you have sort of a line of craftspeople in your family. Your grandfather was an architect and your father did a lot of woodworking.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, he had his own workshop in the basement where I, of course, worked as soon as I could walk around.

MS. GOLD: Really, I mean, were you very, very young?

MR. OSGOOD: Oh yeah, I was making things when I was really small. But this was true of everybody in the family. We'd go to visit anybody, the first thing my father and I would do, we'd have to go see what they were making in their shop. That's just true of the whole family. That's the way it was.

MS. GOLD: Was it both sides of the family?

MR. OSGOOD: No, not my mother's, my father's side. My mother's family was from the South, and so we weren't visiting them. I never went South with my mother. But all these relatives that I used to go to, none of them were doing this professionally. Nobody did. My father did eventually start selling some things, and he liked doing upholstery or re-upholstery, so he did that for friends. It wasn't really a business, but he did. And he turned things for a shop in New York City. He did quite a bit of work for them, actually, in his spare time.

MS. GOLD: What was his job?

MR. OSGOOD: He was an industrial traffic manager, which means when you're -- it's an awful job, but it's a very responsible job. When you're in a large factory making things, then they have to be, somebody is in charge of planning the route and the trucking to where they are supposed to go for manufacturing, re-manufacturing. And so that was what he was doing, he was organizing all of that. And he never liked his work at all, and I've said more than once that that was one of the reasons why I stuck to what I wanted to do, because he indirectly told me how to decide what you want to do with the rest of your life.

And I know I said to myself many times, I didn't like the idea that he was very unhappy with what he did. So I liked making things out of wood, and I did very well at this school there in Rochester. And there's a career. But I

was really ignoring, to a big extent, whether I could make a living from it. And I didn't care. It may have been at the right time for that; you see, that would have been the sixties. It was a more romantic notion to do what you wanted to do, but it was also part of my makeup at the time.

It wasn't easy then, and it isn't any easier now to make a living making furniture or related wooden things. But, as I say, it started with my early years there. And actually, I remember the enthusiasm my grandfather had for what he was doing, but when I knew him, he had long ago retired. The age difference was broad there. He was elderly when I was getting to be 14, or 15, or 16. And he worked in his little shop all the time, but not doing a lot.

MS. GOLD: Was he making wood things too?

MR. OSGOOD: He did mostly turned things, and he did some smaller things. But it was always interesting talking to him of the different woods he was getting in and that he was working with, and the differences between them. And I remember that now. At the time, it didn't make much of an impression on me that, oh, this is a really hard wood, and this one is very aromatic, and this one tools easily. And that's what we talk about now.

MS. GOLD: So your grandfather created this sort of generation of kids who loved to work in wood, and that came down. I mean, do you see that as a generational line, or am I imposing that?

MR. OSGOOD: No. I think what I inherited was an interest in, I guess you'd say, dimensional things rather than mind things, because I think in pictures and think in three dimensions, rather than thinking in words. But that seems to be the case. So I inherited all of these, what would you call them, physical traits that would help me; in other words, a person that works with his hands. And my grandfather was also, I think, sort of a mathematical wizard or genius, but I can't say that I am. My son inherited that. Maybe it shifts to other generations.

MS. GOLD: But you also have this very familiar, I mean, woodworking is just a familiar thing. That's what everybody did.

MR. OSGOOD: Everybody made things, yeah, at varying degrees of complexity, big pieces, small pieces. My father's brother made some very large pieces, I think, most of them after he retired. But he was doing some pretty elaborate work.

MS. GOLD: Making what kinds of things?

MR. OSGOOD: Well, cabinets. And I can remember him one time saying that somebody wanted to make a piece like Nakashima had made. It was either a chest or a large sideboard; I can't remember exactly now. But he did things like that. But another interesting thing, and I think I've said it before, is it was a sort of family ethic, and I don't know whether it is the way the family was being New Englanders, or whether it was because of the 1929 recession. Because in the family, there was always this, if you didn't say it, you could feel it. If you want something, you make it. So go down to the basement and make it in your shop, and it extended to anything or everything. You repaired things, or you made things work, or you made new things.

So I grew up with that as a concept, and so I think that's a good lead in for anybody that's going to be designing, to have that as a thing lingering in the background. Maybe you know: is that a New England ethic or is it --

MS. GOLD: I'm a New Yorker. [Laughs.]

MR. OSGOOD: Oh, you wouldn't know. Even though I grew up in New York, everybody there [family members], they considered themselves New England. Some of them had really heavy accents that were accents from around here, Boston, or New Hampshire, or whatever.

MS. GOLD: So where did your father grow up?

MR. OSGOOD: In Northfield, Vermont. And then, when he was in his third or last year of high school, they moved to New York City. So he always said he was from Vermont. See, that's where his father was working.

MS. GOLD: And how many children were in his family?

MR. OSGOOD: In his family, there were seven. I have a lot of cousins as a result of that.

MS. GOLD: And you're an only child.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I'm an only child.

MS. GOLD: What were the things that you were making as a young boy?

MR. OSGOOD: Oh, it's hard to say. I made boxes. I did make a lot of my own toys.

MS. GOLD: Oh, really.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, various kinds of boats and cars. I'd go down to the basement, and I remember making one that took a CO2 cartridge, and that was kind of exciting. It would go shooting along the water.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.] That was a boat.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah. And then, as I got older, probably 12 or 14, there's a workbench in the other room that I made about that time. I know I made things for my bedroom, for my room, you know, bookcases, or desk area, or cabinets. I mean, that seemed like just a natural thing. I mean, I just did it. I needed those things for my room. So it was mostly practical things. Well, when you were younger, toys would have been a practical thing, but as you got older, bookcases or things like that would come along there.

At that point, you see, I wasn't planning on studying making furniture. I was thinking I was going to study architecture, so I did spend a lot of time making drawings. My grandfather had given me a lot of his drafting equipment and told me I had to practice, and practice, and practice. So I just copied various drawings of things out of books or magazines. For some reason, I thought that was an interesting thing to do. I don't know why.

MS. GOLD: This was as a teenager.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I was just doing mechanical drawings. Looking back on that now, it doesn't seem a very interesting thing to do, but I did it anyway.

MS. GOLD: So as a child, you were really gaining vocabulary and skills that you needed, extraordinarily.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, that's what I was doing. I think that was very important. I mean, if I look back on it, it all fell into place later. The other side, I guess you'd call it my being in New York -- we were talking about that before -- both my mother and my aunt took turns taking me places. This is when I was really small. I can remember going to the 1939 World's Fair and being very impressed with the buildings. I still remember the forms of the buildings. But I can also remember that I thought there was a man down in the grating in the ground because there was a voice coming out of it.

And so, I would have been three years old, but I still remember that the forms of the buildings made an impression on me, as well as this funny business with my mother saying, "No, there isn't a man down there in the grating," and I kept looking. But then they also, starting at three, four, or whatever, kept taking me to museums. My mother was taking me to the -- you know, New York City is famous for its museums. And I liked that for some reason. I liked looking at these things.

I really liked the, when I was smaller, I really liked the Egyptian section of the Met, [Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City] so we'd spend a lot of time there. She took care of that aspect of my life, then my Aunt Emma took me to music, the opera and concerts. I can't remember her ever taking me to a museum, but she was always getting tickets for this or that. She was a very unusual person in that she traveled somewhere every year.

MS. GOLD: On her own.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah. So we'd always get these stories of where she had been and where she was going. And every year, she took a long trip, but then, she lived on Staten Island near us. So as I say, I got an education from her, the way an Aunt Emma can do it. And then, my mother from the other angle there.

MS. GOLD: Did your mother work?

MR. OSGOOD: Yes, my mother was a pharmacist. When she went to school and when she worked, they had a much wider education than they do now. She did other lab work also and what would be called a compounding pharmacist now that can make up medications from the raw ingredients. So I was always asking her questions, anything related to chemistry, inorganic or organic, or anything in between. She was very knowledgeable.

Her father had studied to be a doctor, but his health -- I mean, his eyes failed and so forth. So he had a pharmacy, and they were called the chemists then, so she grew up with that and became a pharmacist. That seems a little foreign to me. I've never had any inclination to go into that field. There were a lot of nurses in the family, and her mother was a nurse in the Civil War, or the end of it. So my mother would always be able to answer any medical questions.

MS. GOLD: That's useful.

MR. OSGOOD: Very useful, yeah.

MS. GOLD: Did you find yourself reading magazines too, and looking at style?

MR. OSGOOD: You mean, when I was younger?

MS. GOLD: When you were younger, yeah.

MR. OSGOOD: Yes, I liked the things like *Popular Science* and *Popular Mechanics*, and then, I think it was called *Wildlife* magazine. Yeah, I think that's what it was called. So I liked that.

MS. GOLD: And you spent vacations in Vermont.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah.

MS. GOLD: Long vacations, or just --

MR. OSGOOD: No, no, it was every year; it was two weeks we'd go up, and mostly to go fishing. And my father really lived for those vacations, and it was very important to me. You thought about the two weeks all year. And even though it was only two weeks, he really liked it. But it was really great, because if it was raining or something, we'd visit other places that he knew of in Vermont. It was a good time.

The interesting thing, though, after he died, I've never had any real interest in fishing. And it seemed to be it was more time together rather than fishing. And I didn't think about that at the time.

MS. GOLD: So you must have had a very close family.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I guess you'd say that, yeah.

MS. GOLD: And I guess I read somewhere that you were in an academic field in high school, even though you had this great mechanical interest and fascination.

MR. OSGOOD: Yes, I couldn't take a typing class because I was on the academic track.

MS. GOLD: And had you any desire to take shop, or was that just something you did after school?

MR. OSGOOD: I couldn't do that either, because that was for the people that weren't going on to college.

MS. GOLD: And you were going on to college.

MR. OSGOOD: Yes. When you're in high school in New York City, they have you -- I don't know what they do now -- but you're categorized, academic track or not.

MS. GOLD: Did you go to school in Staten Island?

MR. OSGOOD: High school? Yeah.

MS. GOLD: And it was clear early on in your teenage years that you were going to be going into architecture.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah. Well, it'd be the same as now. I mean, you start thinking about it at the end of your third year because you're supposed to be starting the paperwork. Yeah, I pretty much made up my mind then that that's what I was going to do.

MS. GOLD: So it was sort of doing the academic track of building, in a sense. You weren't going to actually build things with your hands as an architect, but you were going to --

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, as an architect, you wouldn't be building with your hands. That may be another reason why I'm better suited for making furniture, because I like working with my hands. And you see, if I had stayed in an architectural firm –

MS. GOLD: -- If you had stayed on an architectural course you would have been working in an architectural firm.

[Audio break. Tape change.]

MR. OSGOOD: I didn't like the way the architecture school was going. I was at the University of Illinois, and they didn't stay with residential work very long, which I liked. It shifted over into larger commercial buildings, and I wasn't as interested in doing airports, heliports, and things. And that wasn't the major reason why I decided to stop and study furniture making, but I didn't see that as a very interesting future. I was thinking, well, I would have to go back and re-study the work with residential work if I was going to continue with this -- I mean, going to another architectural school.

MS. GOLD: Now, when you stopped, had you known anybody who was a furniture maker or who was a craftsperson?

MR. OSGOOD: No, I just saw an advertisement for the School of American Craftsmen at RIT, to study furniture design and making. And I don't think, at that point -- it would have been sensible probably to talk to my father's brother who had more experience making furniture than my father did at that point, but it didn't occur to me.

MS. GOLD: It didn't.

MR. OSGOOD: No, I just made that decision on my own.

MS. GOLD: Did anybody turn around in shock and horror that you --

MR. OSGOOD: Oh yeah, they thought it was kind of odd that I would stop a career of architecture to -- furniture making was a little questionable. But I just read that between the lines.

MS. GOLD: Oh really, nobody actually said, "How could you leave this program in the third year?"

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, no one ever actually said it. The one that was most encouraging was my mother. She thought that if I felt this was a better thing for me to do, then I should do it. I think she also had feelings about the fact that my father really didn't like his work and that I'd really better pick out a career that I liked. I don't think she said that in those words, but she was definitely encouraging about, yes, if you want to switch, switch.

The family didn't have much money, so my continuing on, they could send me a little money, but not much. And so, they said I had to get a scholarship. So I did, I applied for them, and I managed to get them. And I think they were able to send me enough money to cover rental and food, but not tuition. I was able to get scholarships for the time I was at the American Craftsmen.

MS. GOLD: So this was in the late '50s, right.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, it would have been late '50s.

MS. GOLD: Were you also on a scholarship to the University of Illinois?

MR. OSGOOD: No. At that point, I was relying more on my academic skills, which I'm not up in the upper parts of any high school class.

MS. GOLD: So you had to pay for tuition.

MR. OSGOOD: Oh yeah, it was a struggle for me. I'm one of these people that get mostly grade C with the occasional B, and I did well enough in enough things so I was able to go on to college, but nowhere near the top of my class.

MS. GOLD: So they already had been struggling sending you to college.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah.

MS. GOLD: What kind of program was this at RIT?

MR. OSGOOD: I entered as an undergraduate.

MS. GOLD: As a first year undergraduate.

MR. OSGOOD: I don't know that I could figure that out. Because they looked at all my background from architectural school and they just lumped things together. So I did four years of credit in three, and actually, I was finished before the three years was up. I had already put three years in-in architectural school, so they transferred a whole lot of stuff in and gave me credit for it. So I didn't have to take as many academic subjects.

So consequently, I did very well in the upper parts of my class, design classes and things like that. The classes in furniture making, I got excellent grades in. But then, I distinctly remember a logic class I had to take and by some miracle managed to survive that with, what is it, I think D-plus they'll record as a grade and you can still graduate. I'm a waste of time in things like that because I have no concept of logic the way it's understood by the rest of the world, and it was very evident in that setting.

I also took public speaking, which I did better than logic, but not too much better. Looking back on that now, I recommend anybody take public speaking, because if you accidentally have to start teaching, it's good to have that background.

MS. GOLD: When you were either at Illinois or RIT, did you begin to think of designing as an exciting thing to do?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I did. One of the things that architectural school did for me is they, in the course of the instruction and the classes, and so forth, they set up a system for designing. And I can't really explain the system to you easily, but it's meant to lead you through the initial concept, sketching, and then elaborating on the sketches and then the actual finished architectural drawing.

And when I left architectural school, I knew this was a really good way to think and everything. And when I got to the School for American Craftsmen at RIT, I was able to use that. And that really helped me move faster than I would have otherwise, and I could see the difference with the other students there. They didn't have a step-by-step procedure for working through a thought to a sketch, to a loose design, to finalizing it, and then, in the case of the School for American Craftsmen, you would actually build it. See, in architectural school, you didn't do that. So it was exciting. I worked my way into that very easily, and it did workout very well.

MS. GOLD: When you were working at home before you went off to college, were you creating your own designs? Were they innovative designs, or were they --

MR. OSGOOD: No, I was, but we didn't use the word design. [Laughs.] Things happened and you made them. Nobody in the family would know what the word meant, really. We didn't talk that way; we didn't talk about designing or whatever. It's kind of funny.

MS. GOLD: So can you recall an early unusual piece that you made as a teenager?

MR. OSGOOD: No, I don't think there are any. No, I just made things. As I said before, toys, and then later on, practical things like bookcases, or cabinets, or things for my room. This incidentally led to getting work around the neighborhood. People discovered I could do this, and so I can remember a friend of mine -- you know, it was a friend of my mother's -- asked me if I could rebuild this bookcase in a smaller scale, in other words, take all the parts out of it.

It was a built-in bookcase, and I had to take it apart and then reassemble it as a freestanding bookcase, smaller. So I brought all this stuff, parts back to the family basement, and I probably was only about 14. And it had all these funny moldings on the top and stuff, but it was quite big; it was like six foot by six-foot or something. And I distinctly remember, when I was done with it, I delivered it to her on my sled. It was winter, so I went hauling this sled up the street. And there wouldn't have been any other way of getting it to her; I mean, nobody in the family had a truck. And then, she found somebody to help me carry it in.

Then, at the same time, there were other kitchen rebuild things around the neighborhood. So as word got out that I would fix things or rebuild parts of kitchens, they were calling me. Later on, in my summers between school, I got jobs doing whole kitchens and things like that, which I suppose are a good lead-in to making good furniture, because it got me started buying a few more tools, which I still have today that I bought in the early '50s, I guess -- old stuff now.

MS. GOLD: Yeah, they're getting to be antique. So were you working for yourself, then, or did you ever work for a company?

MR. OSGOOD: No, I never did. I always worked for myself.

MS. GOLD: Then you must have gotten a good sense of finish.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah.

MS. GOLD: So as a teenager, that's what you did in your spare time.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I repaired things and built things for people, yeah.

MS. GOLD: And did it help you go through school? I mean, did you use that money?

MR. OSGOOD: Well, when I was younger there, I had a tropical fish collection, so I spent probably a lot of my money on that, or I was buying tools. Later on, when I had transferred out of architectural school, at that point, I was doing a lot of work. This store in New York City that my father had discovered called America House, which is, anybody that's my age or older knows about --

MS. GOLD: Was that on 6th Avenue?

MR. OSGOOD: It was on 53rd Street, I think.

MS. GOLD: Near the Museum of Modern Art.

MR. OSGOOD: It used to be east of the Museum of Modern Art, but it moved to sort of across the street from the Museum of Modern Art. But anyway, in its earlier version, my father did work for them, then I started doing work for them. And when I went to RIT, I was doing production work for them, bookends, bookends, and more bookends. And I used to hide them under my workbench and work on them evenings, just polishing them back in my room, and all sorts of stuff. So I made a lot of extra money as a student.

MS. GOLD: Oh, you were using the studios to make things.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I'd work evenings at the school.

MS. GOLD: Sort of sneak it in between assignments.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I'd sneak it in sideways. When my teacher left, I'd pull it out and work on them. I made, in my first ten years there, millions of small things.

MS. GOLD: Were the bookends a particular design?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, in those early years -- I don't have one here -- the ones I did, they were walnut bookends and they had a tile inserted in the face, so I had to rout it out and glue in a ceramic tile. The tiles had designs on them.

MS. GOLD: Where were the tiles from?

MR. OSGOOD: The store had another craftsman that made them.

MS. GOLD: Did the store design the bookends?

MR. OSGOOD: No, I designed them. They relied on me for that. Yeah, they were very, very nice. They were drawings of animals. And later on, I did some other ones that had ceramic -- I at one point studied ceramics to a small degree, so I had glazed pieces that inserted in the face of a block. So I did hundreds of those too, and this is while I was a student. Oh, we made paperweights too. It was a block of wood about two by three, three by three. It had a copper disk that was enameled with a design.

They had the idea that if they combined two craftsmen, they could present a unique product to the public. That made some sense, and so they were sending me enamels and then ceramic tiles that I had to insert in these blocks. And as I say, I earned money from that while I was a student, but then I continued probably through the sixties, about a ten-year period. You know, I left New York and moved to Connecticut and got a shop there. And in those days, really, all you needed to make was about $1,000 a month. I mean, I did it.

MS. GOLD: You did it with bookends.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, and other small things like letter holders, bookends, and little boxes.

MS. GOLD: Was America House later the American Craft Association Store?

MR. OSGOOD: No. There is a store there now in the museum, but that's the museum shop. America House itself closed I don't know how many years ago -- 20, 25 years ago, sometime ago. As I say, they were east of 5th Avenue, then they moved west so that they were on the same street as the Museum of Modern Art.

MS. GOLD: I remember it as a child.

MR. OSGOOD: If you were in New York, you'd probably remember it. But it was the only place that had work by craftsmen, except the Appalachian Handcraft Guild. And I used to go there with my mother because she liked those things, and she explained to me that these were made by people, they weren't made in factories. That was in a street of shops that's in Radio City that leads to the skating rink, those expensive little shops there. And the Appalachian Handcraft Guild was there for years. I mean, as long as I can remember, it was always there. And they deserve credit for keeping the Appalachians alive and well.

MS. GOLD: Did you have things like that around your house, or were there things mostly that your family made?

MR. OSGOOD: Oh, my mother had very good taste; she did get some things there.

MS. GOLD: So I read somewhere that you used to work on these bookends and things in the dark. You had to keep the woodworking shop lights off, sort of clandestine.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I've mentioned that before. I used to lock the fixed lock on the machine room door at the school, when I was at the School for American Craftsmen. I used to fix the locks so that when the custodian

locked everything up for the night that it wouldn't lock properly. And I could get into work in the workbench room, where we could work by hand in the evening. But when I came back, I would go in the machine room and not turn on the lights, because if I did, the security guards outside would see it. Now, why they didn't hear the machinery running, I don't know, but nobody every caught me. [Laughs.]

Yeah, there were two ways to go in: I had to either put tape or pieces of wood in the lock in that door on the main floor, but then there was another way in. I had to climb over a partition and then climb up a trap door, and that was a little harder to do -- that was meant for transferring wood.

MS. GOLD: Well, I was wondering whether that gave you a more -- whether you gained anything from working in the dark, a more intuitive sense of the material.

MR. OSGOOD: No, no, I'm just lucky I didn't cut my fingers off. [Laughs.] No, I wouldn't say I did this all the time, but I know I did it enough. It was really kind of stupid, I suppose.

MS. GOLD: So I wonder if you can remember when you first realized that you were making designs, that you were making original pieces, and when it first got exciting for you?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, that would have been in the early years with America House, that I was the designer. But at that point, you see, I had already given myself the blessing of having been to architectural school, where you would have been taught how to design. But, yes, I was getting the idea that yes, I was designing these things and they were selling. So I don't know if that clarifies it too much, but there was sort of a point there.

MS. GOLD: And was it something that you really cherished?

MR. OSGOOD: No, I considered it a practical skill, and I didn't look at it as anything other than just a practical thing. It just goes back to my family ethic of, if you want something, make it. And whether this was actually a good design or not, I mean, it wasn't the question. Well, it's only as I've gotten older, and older, and older, and my things have sold well, and I've got work now in I don't know how many, several museum collections, that it finally dawned on me that, well yes, I guess I am doing all right as a designer.

But in the early years, that wouldn't have been a thought at all. I mean, that's the way you did it. Somebody wants something, you do it. That was the way I approached making things for the store in New York City, for America House. And they expected me to design them. They weren't going to give me any designs. And it's sort of just a standard thing: well, we'll see how it sells. And if you think you can make it for a low enough price for us to sell it, then we'll carry on from there.

MS. GOLD: And your father was also working?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, he was making things for the store also.

MS. GOLD: What was he making?

MR. OSGOOD: Well, he made turned things. And one of the interesting things that he did was a chess set, and that he did design. It was one that they had at the store, and the person had made two sets for them and then had gone back to Hungary, or wherever he was from, so they asked my father if he would like to make it. And a lot of it was turned, so he thought this was great. He didn't have the idea that he would want to design it. He did salt and pepper shakers for the store also, turned things like that.

And as I say, that was one of the first things I did for them was turn bowls. And I remember distinctly, I used to make the bowls on parabolic and catenary curves, because I liked these curves. From architectural school, you know, you're given a lot of assorted math classes. You have to. It amounted to an engineering degree. So you see these rounded forms, and so I was just using them at a small scale.

MS. GOLD: But that's almost foreshadowing your work now with the interesting curves that you use.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, but the difference there, I was looking at that as, well, if it use a pure mathematical form, it will be really accepted as a good piece. And now, I realize that we as people can make irrational decisions when we're curving a line, and it's these irrational, subtle things that really make a big difference. They may make a piece look like, yes, this is a very creative piece. And mathematical forms are pure, that's true, but just because we're people, we're a bit irrational, some people more than others. And as an artist, that's really an important trait, to encourage this, I guess you'd say.

Now, I wouldn't use too many. I do on some of these desks, I do use an ellipse now and then, or it will be an elliptical cut section, because it's really the, I guess you'd say, practical way to make some of the parts. The cutting angle would be too hard to figure out because they were freehand. But for the most part, my lines, they're done with curving spines or curving sticks that I lay on the drawing table. And they're my own lines, they

aren’t from a pure mathematical point of view.

You will see it in some of the titles for my pieces -- *Elliptical Shell Desks*. So some of them are and some of them aren’t pure.

MS. GOLD: That’s very interesting.

[Audio break. Tape change.]

MS. GOLD: This is Donna Gold interviewing Jere Osgood on September 19, 2001. This is tape two, side one. I don’t think I’ve asked you about your influences and your teachers there. Who did you study with that made a difference for you?

MR. OSGOOD: Well, I’m eventually piecing all that together too. My teacher was Tage Frid. He was a Dane who had come over in about 1954. And it was really good that I got him. We didn’t get along that well at first, because I had the good luck or the misfortune of entering as a first year student, while I already had a piece that I was exhibiting in a show called “Young Americans” in New York City. So I always felt a little funny about this coming in as a first year student and already exhibiting.

MS. GOLD: What was the piece that you were exhibiting?

MR. OSGOOD: It was a little desk.

MS. GOLD: And how did it come to be that you were noticed?

MR. OSGOOD: Well, it was a show called “Young Americans.” You had to be under 30.

MS. GOLD: And you were about 20.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah. And you see, I had left architectural school, but in that time span there, I had started turning plates and other things for America House. And then, when they told me or I read about it that this exhibition for people like me that are under 30 was coming up -- do something. And so I did, and it was a copy of a piece, not a copy, but a redesigned piece that was in my Aunt’s living room in Connecticut.

So anyway, he was a big influence. Tage Frid was terribly important to me. He had so much to offer, and I realized this, and I learned a lot of very, very important things from him. I also had a teacher called Michael Harmes. There were two teachers. Michael Harmes was from England, and they were a good team. And actually, I felt more comfortable with Michael; I didn’t get this undercurrent of, here’s this smart, in brackets, student. Michael challenged me, and he was very good. It was good to have the two of them as teachers.

Also at the time, I had made a good friend there at the school, Daniel Jackson. He was at school with me then. And I realized that his enthusiasm for making things, designing things and making things -- and at that point, he was an accomplished designer, he was more involved with antiques -- but this enthusiasm that he had for this career helped cement, in my thinking, that yes, I was doing the right thing. It’s not that I had conscious doubts about it, it’s just he came along, and in our discussions and so forth, you know, talking about what we’re doing in the school shop, that I realized that he was also an important factor.

I mean, he was a student, he wasn’t faculty. But in early years like that, I think things like that are important. Yeah, I mean, if I had generated a lot of doubts about what I was doing, I don’t know, I would have gone away and studied to be an insurance adjuster, I don’t know.

MS. GOLD: Wasn’t there a crafts movement, though, in the '50s that American House --

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, the '50s and '60s, we were riding on the carpet of a big crafts movement, and it was still going strong in the sixties. And it was also this romantic era that you could do whatever you wanted and never mind.

MS. GOLD: That began in the '50s.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, '50s and '60s. If you were around in the '60s, well, it was a special time. I’m glad I was there. And School for American Craftsmen was thriving then. I mean, there were students from all over coming in there -- I guess full enrollment. And all the students that were as impractical as I was that were thinking that they’d go out and set up shop and earn a living from this. And not too many of them are around. Some are -- there are some of us that have stayed with it.

MS. GOLD: But most moved on to other things?

MR. OSGOOD: Well, you could then. I'm jumping ahead of it, but '75 to '85 I taught at Boston University. When we started that program, there was still this great romantic movement, that students never asked about, can I make a living. But by the time we were closing in '85, they were saying, in initial interviews, can I make a living at this. And I never asked them whether they were asking that question or their parents asked them to ask us. But in the sixties, you see, we were going strong. I mean, you could go out in the bushes and start weaving, and be a success and sleep under a rock, and like it. So I think it was a good time. I picked a good time to get started.

MS. GOLD: So now, Tage Frid, he was from Scandinavia, right?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, he was Danish.

MS. GOLD: So was that in itself an influence on you?

MR. OSGOOD: I didn't think about it until I met him. I mean, I realized then there was always magazines and things around the school. But yes, there was all this good stuff coming out of Scandinavia, good furniture, and some was Danish, and some was Swedish, and Finnish, and Norwegian. Because prior to that, I was in architectural school looking at architectural magazines, but when I moved on to the School of American Craftsmen, I started looking at magazines directly related to furniture. And yeah, that was a very important thing, just seeing what was going on there.

MS. GOLD: So that had already been part of your awareness?

MR. OSGOOD: Well, it became part of it, yeah. I mean, like I said, it really didn't exist until I enrolled there. I mean, if you asked me something about it, I don't know how I would have responded then.

MS. GOLD: You mean, you didn't know about it.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I just wasn't aware of it.

MS. GOLD: Was that still the prevailing style that you were working in, in any case? I mean, when you were making the bookends, was that sort of simplified?

MR. OSGOOD: No. But I think probably some of the things I did at school had a Scandinavian flavor to them, because my teacher was Danish, and I had been looking at magazines and pictures. But things I did for the store in New York City, I don't think they had any benefit of that.

MS. GOLD: And what about Michael Harmes' work? What kind of work did he do?

MR. OSGOOD: Well, he was from England and very, very orderly in his approach to everything, and very precise and he wanted nice, accurate drawings, and very careful in his work. Whereas Tage Frid was very informal, gruff at times -- "All right, so you do a drawing." [Laughs.] But it was a more careful procedure with Michael, and I just use that as an example. But I was doing good drawings anyway because I came prepared to do them with my drawing background from architecture.

They were quite different in personalities. Tage was very informal, and while Michael was extremely friendly, it was obvious that there was this English background that was a little more orderly than the Danes.

MS. GOLD: So when you look back at the School of American Craftsmen, what was it that you got from there?

MR. OSGOOD: Oh well, probably pretty much what I said before: it clarified my direction. From the minute I started there, I knew I was home. In the shop, we were asked to make things, we had to learn how to use all hand tools correctly. Tage Frid said I was using them all wrong, the joints I was doing were all wrong, and so forth. So I realized, yes, here it is, this is what I've always wanted to do.

MS. GOLD: Who was he?

MR. OSGOOD: Tage Frid was my teacher -- that yes, I was making the right decision. And this never stopped. As I said, my conversations with my friend Dan Jackson, at the time, also made this solid decision in my mind. So the three years that I spent there, they just really guaranteed my course. Now, the other continuing thing on this was that after I left there, I did go to Denmark for a year, and all that did was make it even more definite in my mind.

I met another furniture craftsman there, a Dane that I would like to have had as a teacher. I mean, at that point, I couldn't do that easily. But he was another case of just proof that you were doing the right thing. So the three years just guaranteed me the beginning, and I could just see myself working with this for the rest of my life. And then, the time spent in Denmark sealed it up or something. I mean, I wasn't going to think of doing anything

else at that point.

MS. GOLD: Did you study in Denmark? Did you apprentice?

MR. OSGOOD: No, it was an organization called Scandinavian Seminar, and they used a total immersion concept. And you were meant to go live with two different families and then go to a school or study related to your field. Now, some people, I think, did get apprentices, but there were no studio craftsmen in my field. They don't exist, really, except this one person that I did meet. So for me, it was living with the families, it was the total immersion with the culture, and then I did visit endless businesses and exhibitions, small factories.

I just made it my business to see everything I could possibly see relating to furniture making while I was there. And I think I would like to have apprenticed with somebody, but they operated on a different system. This is probably true in other European countries now. In Denmark, there are furniture designers and furniture makers. Here, we combine it. I'm a studio craftsmen: I design the things and make them. But they didn't, and as far as I know, it isn't too much different now.

They are very definite to vision. There's really fine places that would make furniture, and then there's a really good designer. And I endlessly had to answer this question when I was there. They would say to me, "Er det din egen mønster?" And I would say "Ja." And what they were asking was, "Is this your own design?" And I'd have to say, "Yes, it is my design. I also make the things too." And it was just endless. I needed a recording or something to say, yes, it was mine, because they didn't think this way.

Whereas if you came here then or now, people would almost expect you to make it yourself. And so, I go into another culture or system where it's funny. But I don't know that it hindered too much of what I wanted to see there. I mean, I really benefitted from my time with the people that I stayed with. And I'm now doing the background work to try to get a trip back next spring or summer. Years have gone by, but I think I can do it. We'll see.

MS. GOLD: When you were there, were you mostly looking at designers or makers, or both?

MR. OSGOOD: Both. Yeah, I kept meeting people and they'd take me to visit a small shop. Yeah, I was looking at everything.

MS. GOLD: And you went to a folk high school [Folkehøjskole] that they had there.

MR. OSGOOD: I went to a folk art school, yeah. It's like a junior college, and they sent me to this particular one because it did have some courses related to crafts. Well, I took two of them: I studied bookbinding and weaving. And consequently, I can't talk to anybody about bookbinding here because the terms I know are all in Danish. So it's kind of a funny arrangement. But anyway, while I was there, I made a chair in the shop, and I had, in some cases, to make the tools. It really wasn't equipped for woodworking.

But in those days, if I needed to cut something or a special joint, it didn't seem funny to me. I'd just go out and look for a shop, and I'd go in and ask them, could I explain what I was doing, could I do this, or would they do it, or whatever. And they were all so helpful. They would always let me in. I guess you can get away with things as a student.

MS. GOLD: So you didn't have to pay.

MR. OSGOOD: No, I remember one time I'd done quite a bit of work in this place; I had been underfoot for a while, and I asked them, do you want me to pay you for my time here, and he said, "Nieba boss, sei tag." He said, "Just thank you is enough," or something like that. So I said thank you many times. The people were like that, very warm, friendly people. I had a good time there.

And I did meet this Danish craftsman who was a maker. And so, that was very interesting, and I got familiar with his work. And he was really the only one that was -- he was designing his own things and making them. And he had been thrown out of the guild because of this. They thought he was peculiar, so he sort of worked on his own. He was a teacher at a folk school, but he did make things and sell them.

MS. GOLD: What was his name?

MR. OSGOOD: Peder Moos.

MS. GOLD: And this is the person you would have liked to have studied with.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I would have liked to. My friend Daniel Jackson that I had met in school, he had gone and been there for a year and had worked with him, and so I got everything firsthand, so to speak, because we continued writing or he would see me, and I benefitted from his time with this craftsman. And I've got some

pictures of his work, and I'm going to try to get some more if I can get back next summer. People here do know about his work, so it's not too well known, but they're interested in it from a historical point of view. It's a little different approach to Danish furniture.

MS. GOLD: Do you think of him as an influence on you?

MR. OSGOOD: Well, yes and no. I mean, he's part of this same picture that I was drawing, that there were just events and people that really solidified my direction. Because he was somebody that was really intensely involved in his work, a very intense person. And I saw that, and I could feel it. Also, his use -- I can't put it in words easily, but the joinery that he used, the way he used it on the furniture kind of made an impression on me, the way things were put together. It was part of his whole, I guess you'd say, his whole philosophy, which I can't get into easily. But he was part of my whole early picture of helping me get a strong direction for myself.

MS. GOLD: Is it important to have a philosophy?

MR. OSGOOD: Yes, I guess it is, but I don't really like to use that word, because to me, it sets up a whole miasma of things. And there may be an easier way of saying it, that it isn't a philosophy, it's a state of being. Maybe that's a simpler way of approaching it. If you do a lot of writing, maybe you know what I mean.

MS. GOLD: Maybe, although you wouldn't care to put it in --

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I'd hesitate to ask somebody exactly what their philosophy was, because I would think of how awkward it would be for me to be confronted with that as a question. So I drop the word now and then, but it doesn't necessarily mean I picked the right word.

MS. GOLD: You were talking about a time when you were just starting out as a furniture maker, and yet, you had this tremendous amount of success. I mean, you were in the "Young Americans" exhibit in New York and you were selling already. I mean, did that help you have confidence?

MR. OSGOOD: Oh, yeah.

MS. GOLD: Was that hard for you with your relationship to other students and teachers?

MR. OSGOOD: I never thought much about it at the time. I mean, I was selling things, but I wasn't hearing from other students that they were trying to sell things and didn't. So yeah, it wasn't anything that I thought about at the time, but it was definitely an important thing to me, because it did give me confidence.

MS. GOLD: And you were actually selling things also in Denmark, or were you just making?

MR. OSGOOD: No, I couldn't there. I mean, I think the store in New York City would have liked to have had me keep working over there and ship things back, but they sort of hung in midair for a year and waited -- hope you're coming back sort. I did hear about it now or then through my father or mother.

MS. GOLD: And it was just a year program.

MR. OSGOOD: It was a school year, yeah.

MS. GOLD: And you were in the north of Denmark.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I was on the mainland in northern Jutland. It's pretty close to Norway, actually. But that was where I was initially, but I did stay with a family just outside of Copenhagen, and that was a marvelous thing. Every morning, I got up and got on the train to go into the city. I went somewhere new every day, I think.

MS. GOLD: And so, you were just traveling and visiting, and no obligations.

MR. OSGOOD: Well, by living with this family outside of the city, they entertained me a little. I mean, they took me to a few places, but not much. They realized that what I wanted to do was go to the showrooms, and the museums, and all the things in the city. I mean, other students had stayed with them before, and that's what they were doing. So they were great. Trains were good, right on time, fast.

MS. GOLD: And then, you came back. And did you think of yourself as part of like an international movement or international tradition, or did you think of yourself as yourself?

MR. OSGOOD: No, people knew I had studied in Denmark and they knew I'd had Tage Frid as a teacher. And I know to this day, people will say, oh well, I can see a Danish flavor in your work. I think it's kind of bewildering. And they would say that at the time -- oh, you're making Danish furniture -- soon after I got back. And I'd say, "No, I'm making my furniture." But I didn't give it any thought that I was part of any big movement or anything.

You have to think of those things years later when you're doing a historical analysis or something.

MS. GOLD: Was modern contemporary furniture at that time Scandinavian influenced?

MR. OSGOOD: Heavily influenced, yes. When I was there in 1960, it was the waning years of the influence of Scandinavian furniture.

MS. GOLD: Waning?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, it was on the way down. We didn't know it at that time, but that's considered now by historians or something that was sort of the tail end of their best period, you know, Denmark, the four Scandinavian countries.

MS. GOLD: And so, then you came back to the United States.

MR. OSGOOD: I came back and I immediately got to work in my father's basement and worked there. And within a month, I had ordered a machine from Denmark that I really liked, that I had used a lot when I was there. And I just started making money.

[Audio break. Tape change.]

MR. OSGOOD: I'd have to do some careful research, but I think I moved to Connecticut in '63 or '64. Immediately, I started looking in a circle around New York City: I wanted to moved out of the city. When I left for college at the age of 17, I was, in many ways, glad to leave Staten Island and New York City. And so when I came back to work in the basement, okay, this is wonderful, but I know I didn't want to do it for very long. So I was looking in a circle, and I finally found a place, 83 miles I think it was, from Manhattan in Connecticut, and bought an old creamery for some absurd price like $6,000 and set to work renovating that, and lived there until '78, I think.

But it got me off in a good direction. I got my own place. It was a large room, large shop with high ceilings and kind of primitive in some respects, but it was my base for many years. And it was a really good move because it was important for me to have my own place that I could work on the way I wanted to. So it was an important move.

MS. GOLD: You said that when you came back you started making money. And I was wondering, how did people know about your work?

MR. OSGOOD: Oh, I had been selling things through American House, the store in New York City, and now and then there'd come an exhibition at the American Craft Museum, and so the same people were involved with the store as were involved with the museum. And so, they would either tell me or I'd just get the stuff automatically in the mail, like something's coming up. So I always had the policy, and I told any students, every student I can now, take every possible chance to exhibit your work.

So in those early years, I was taking every opportunity. I mean, if some show was in New York City or wherever, upstate New York, I was going to have a piece in it, and I would. And that really helped me get my name out. And in the years I worked for America House, my work was advertised in all the big magazines -- you know, like what was it, *House and Garden*; there was another one, *American Home*; there was a review of my work in the *New Yorker*.

MS. GOLD: In the *New Yorker*.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I had work in a show on Staten Island and they reviewed the show. You know, when I was in school, I made this big effort to get exhibited everything I could possibly do, and it paid off, I think. I mean, I was starting to become well known. It's very important. I tell people that now and well, okay -- I don't know whether they hear me, but it worked for me.

MS. GOLD: And what were people seeking you out for?

MR. OSGOOD: What?

MS. GOLD: Can you describe the elements of your work that was making you well known?

MR. OSGOOD: I don't know; that's a hard thing to say. Yeah, because I was doing chairs and tables, but I don't think I could say there was any one thing. I'd have to think about that. I tried for years to get -- I don't know if I tried for years -- but I soon realized I didn't want to make small accessories forever. And so, in the ten years I was producing them, I was also trying to get larger pieces of furniture out and shifted to that. So that by about 1970, I'd completely, yeah, '60 to '70, I'd completely stopped the accessories. And there's a bookend up there

behind you. Do you see the circle in it?

MS. GOLD: Yeah.

MR. OSGOOD: That's the bookend that I made during that time. And I was trying to not make bookends anymore, and I'd get orders for like 100 or 144 pairs of those, a gross. So finally, I said, "Look, I have higher expenses now. I'm no longer going to charge you $16; they're going to be $32." And initially, it didn't stop the orders. [Laughs.]

MS. GOLD: And you said, "Why didn't I --

MR. OSGOOD: Why didn't I do this years ago? I made money at $16, and I made twice as much at $32. But they kind of got the message that I was trying to get out from under the thing, and I think that things were changing at the store too, so we were both sort of changing our ways.

MS. GOLD: Well, while we're talking -- this might move us forward a bit -- but while we're talking, I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the market and just the economic issues of being a craftsperson. Has the market for American craft changed?

MR. OSGOOD: No, I think the difference is you need more money now than you did in the sixties. I use the figure that I could get by on $1,000 a month. And generally speaking -- this is the way other people explain it to me -- okay, they're making a living, but they're not making very much. And so, I think the prices that, generally, people can charge for their work doesn't really give them a really good living. So that hasn't gone up enough.

MS. GOLD: That hasn't changed.

MR. OSGOOD: Whereas, maybe in the sixties or the '50s, it might have been more equal, more possible to make a better living. And am I explaining it right? Yes, there are lots of people working now, making lots of furniture, but they're not making very much money from it.

MS. GOLD: Do you see a greater interest in crafts?

MR. OSGOOD: Oh, there's a huge interest, and I've ridden along with this. I mean, it really didn't exist when I first started working in the late '50s. Yeah, people know now that they can get things directly from a craftsman or they can ask to have things made specifically for them. But there's a price limitation. This group I belong to here, the New Hampshire Furniture Masters' Association, generally does pretty well, but I feel that in general, the prices are low for their work. And the position I'm at now in my career, I get good prices for my work. It's because I'm well known and the gallery that I have is very aware of this, and they could get what would be good prices for my things.

MS. GOLD: So you were saying that there's more people able to make a living, but they're not necessarily --

MR. OSGOOD: But it's not a great living, yeah. Yeah, there's a lot of people out there making furniture now, and it just doesn't pay well. Every once in a while, somebody does really well with it, but I'd like prices to be higher for everybody.

MS. GOLD: And it seems like you've managed to have a few dealers that you have long-standing relationships with. You've always worked with galleries. Is that correct?

MR. OSGOOD: Well, yeah, more so now. I did a lot of work, more direct, before, but I don't really like selling my own work. I've been happier letting them share the income, because I have to give them a percentage. I used to work through several galleries, and I've now pretty much eliminated it down to one.

MS. GOLD: And that is --

MR. OSGOOD: Pritam and Eames on Long Island. And they're wonderful. They take the time to understand what I'm doing, and also, they take care to understand what all of us are doing. They treat the customers very well, they understand what we're doing, and they also pay promptly. And you probably have heard this from other people, that galleries don't pay. It may take a year to get paid. They pay within, oh, I don't know, certainly within 30 days, sometimes even faster. If it's a customer that's bought things before, so they know their checks are good, they'll pay me right away. And I don't ask for it, they do it.

MS. GOLD: Do they have a wide range of people that they sell to, or -- geographically, I guess I'm asking.

MR. OSGOOD: Well, they're out at the end of Long Island, so they're mostly New Yorkers, and that's probably a benefit, because the New Yorkers expect everything to be expensive. [Laughs.] So that part is a good deal. And East Hampton isn't an inexpensive place to live, so that part is good. They'd be okay anywhere, I think; they're

just very friendly people that take a strong interest in all aspects of our work.

MS. GOLD: And you've had other galleries in the past, but why have you decided to --

MR. OSGOOD: Well, in some cases, it was okay, but others, it's a standard procedure not to pay, and we know that. That's the major reason. And they've been working, operating since about 1977 or something, well, '79 maybe.

MS. GOLD: So when you first moved out to Connecticut, you were working –

MR. OSGOOD: When I was in Connecticut, I was working with America House in New York City. I worked direct to people that would find me.

MS. GOLD: And did you have the ability to make whatever you wanted to make?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, well, when I was younger there, I did work for architects occasionally. I would never do that now, but it's a good way to keep the shop busy or make extra money. I did work for -- a church had burned down somewhere between Connecticut and New York City, and it had all these huge beams that were all charred, and they wanted me to make new pieces for the church. So the architect drew them up, and I attacked the beams, because they were all burnt, smoked, and full of nails.

I made these very heavy things. I wouldn't claim them as my work, but I did them and they came out well. I even carved some grape leaves and grapes, which I don't normally do now; I'm not that kind of carver. They had to come down the front of the lectern. And there was a lot of lettering on this altar. I wouldn't do that now. I mean, I'm past that age.

MS. GOLD: But it seems like you've had the ability to create --

MR. OSGOOD: Yes, for the most part, I've been expected to do that and free to do that. Yeah, I've been asked to do things because they expect me to design them. That does go way back, even though at the time, I didn't realize it. To me, it just seemed like a natural thing.

MS. GOLD: I wonder if you could somehow talk about how your designs have changed, maybe by talking about some special early pieces and how that evolved.

MR. OSGOOD: Well, probably one easy thing would be to say that maybe the earlier furniture looked more like furniture. And people do say now that my work does look more like sculpture; its influence is more from sculpture. And I have said that myself, that I don't feel terribly influenced by furniture makers now. I'm looking to furniture as a sculptural form, although it must be functional furniture. I'm not going to make non-functional furniture. So yeah, it's changed. The pictures in the other room on the wall I showed you, they're sculptural forms.

That's the direction I'm more interested in now. I'm not interested in reassembling dead furniture makers' body parts -- you know, a leg here [laughs]. This is expected in the traditional furniture field. I mean, you usually have a Hepplewhite leg and a Macintosh shoulder -- this is the way it's done. If I have a Hepplewhite leg, it's purely accidental. It's something in my subconscious.

MS. GOLD: Was there any resistance as you got more sculptural?

MR. OSGOOD: No, no. This is considered a creative bent. That's okay, particularly now: a lot of furniture is becoming very sculptural, much more so than ten years ago, maybe. And I think a lot of them are going so far that it's no longer furniture. It's sculptural things that have some allusion to furniture, once in a while. So it's a trend, and I would fit in a sense, because yes, my forms are becoming more sculptural, but I'm insisting that they be very functional.

But a few years ago, I was thrilled I had a piece in an exhibition, and this woman came by and said, "Well, it's very nice, but what is it?" And I was thrilled, because what I was trying to do was get away from these associations. It was a desk, but it didn't look like a desk to her.

MS. GOLD: Was it one of your --

MR. OSGOOD: No, it was a flattop desk with curving legs, but it just didn't occur to her. I don't know whether she thought very much about it. But wow, that's great, I've got a piece that somebody's asking, what is it. I've finally broken through the associative barrier. People like to do this. They like to look at something and say to themselves, this reminds me of something else I like. And I'm trying in my thinking and feeling to get to a pure form that's not going to ride on this associative thing, but be strong in its own context.

I mean, in music, it would be like a fugue. If you listen to it, you wouldn't necessarily have a melody there, you would just appreciate it because of its pure musical form, and there wouldn't be an old folk remedy or song that it reminded you of. Do you see what I mean?

MS. GOLD: And yet, you want it to be useful as an object.

MR. OSGOOD: Definitely. I want the function. It may not be clear -- I mean, in the case of this woman that saw it and didn't know it was a desk -- but if you'd just take a second look, you'd see that it was a desk with a drawer, you could sit at it and write letters.

MS. GOLD: How important is comfort?

MR. OSGOOD: Oh, comfort also, yeah. I've done a lot of chairs, many chairs, and that's where you talk about comfort, because you sit in a chair, you don't sit on a cabinet.

MS. GOLD: But when you're talking about function, you're not only talking about the fact that it's useful, that you can put things in it, but also that it's efficient --

MR. OSGOOD: If it's a chair, it has to be comfortable to sit in; if it's a desk, it has to function like a desk; or if it's a storage cabinet, you have to make sure the cubby holes are big enough to hold the folders or things like that, just lists of practical things. This settee you're sitting on is reputed to be very comfortable. It sold very well. I don't even make them now anymore. They keep selling. I kept one. And I have very little of my work here; I don't know whether you've noticed, but there's not much.

Well, I have that cabinet. This is a piece I did as a student, so it's not a now piece, it's just one I'll always keep. I have no intention of selling it. It's a piece I did when I was a student at school. But there isn't a lot of my work here. There's two chairs in the other room. But some woodworkers' homes you go in and there's all sorts of furniture in there that they've made. I've never been able to afford to do that -- number one reason.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.] That's always an issue, isn't it.

MR. OSGOOD: I mean, I just kept this one because -- it's time you had one. And the old couch I had here was a wreck and it had to go out. But it cost me $7,000 or $8,000 to keep it.

MS. GOLD: That's an expensive couch.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah. And then, last year, the person who does the cleaning here ran into it and gouged the arm out. That doesn't make me happy. I've got to get it in the shop and let Niki work on it. She does all the finishing work.

MS. GOLD: When you started to get more sculptural, was that when you moved here to New Hampshire?

MR. OSGOOD: No, I don't think so. That's come along of its own accord. The one thing I do know is when I left the basement on Staten Island, the work got bigger. I had a 16-foot ceiling and a room that was 24 feet square, way out there, and I was very aware of that. The ceiling was like six foot nine or something, or maybe it was seven feet. I used to hit some of the pipes in my father's basement. I expanded my horizon or expanded my world when I moved to my larger space. But as for the other change, that's taken place slowly over the years. It's a mind set or something that has to grow or change as time goes by.

MS. GOLD: It seems that, when I was looking at your other pictures, that hasn't changed from looking at it in three dimension. There's an organic quality to it and almost like a dancing quality. There's a movement to your work.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I've tried to do that. There's a feeling to these little tables, which I spent a long time studying things like that, the way it sort of, it's not moving, but it's got a stance to it that's important to me. And there's years of thought left on that; I mean, that's just something I'll move along with.

MS. GOLD: When you were gesturing, you were looking almost like a cat.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah.

MS. GOLD: And I was wondering if you watch your neighborhood cats a lot.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, that's funny. The leg forms that I use here -- and there's a table in the other room that's covered up -- those are root forms. My pedestal forms are root forms. And this goes back to, do you remember I said we went to Vermont every summer with my parents? Well, I used to spend a long time, afternoons, just walking by myself along the shore of the lake or in the woods, and there were always these great cedar trees

and other things, and water would come in and wash the roots clean. And I know I was influenced by the feeling in these root forms.

So later on, when I got to laminating these curving leg forms, I know I was drawing on these images of the root forms. And on the other hand, I have a feeling for water also, the way water falls down in a slight curve, and I have used that. If you see water coming down a waterfall and the wind is blowing, the stream of water will have a definite line to it. And I know I have that occasionally.

[Audio break. Tape change.]

MS. GOLD: So you were talking about the movement of water.

MR. OSGOOD: Oh yeah, I've noticed that, you know, when I'm doing sketches. The same thing could be said about wind as a form line too. I mean, it's pretty abstract to say you're influenced by falling water or the wind, but it's almost easier to say I'm influenced by root forms from trees, and that's understandable, at least I think that's more understandable than saying I'd see some wind forms or some water forms in my work. And I don't mind. In fact, that's why we have a sketchbook. We're supposed to jot down either words or sketches.

And I see it as an influence; I don't know what to do with it. I wouldn't want to set out to design a piece that was -- at least not yet, anyway -- that was only influenced by water, or something like that.

MS. GOLD: But you know that you're self consciously trying to get that shape.

MR. OSGOOD: I just did a -- well, I didn't just do it -- two years ago, a table, well, the wave table; there may have been a picture of it in something you saw. And I had a lot of difficulties with that in its initial stages. I couldn't come to an answer, so I went back to the original thought that it was for a house by the sea. And as soon as I started thinking more about the ocean and the way the waves moved, I had it done in half a day or something -- I mean the drawings, not the table. It took form very quickly once this idea took over, the water, and the reeds, and the sand. It was the way the water would move.

I let those things happen, at this point, just happen of their own accord. I suppose it's a design problem. If you're in school, you'd be given an assignment -- make something that's influenced by water. And I wouldn't be interested in that. Maybe that would be influenced by something else. I'd be forced to do it as an assignment.

MS. GOLD: But as you have developed over the years as a furniture maker, you find yourself increasingly influenced by –

MR. OSGOOD: Well, just other things, organic things that are occurring out there, which would be water, wind, and things that aren't dimensional. Like a tree root is very dimensional, and we can definitely be, as designers, be influenced by things that are not dimensional. You can't put a dimension on a breeze or a wind, and it's very important to be open to that, or the sound that comes along maybe at the same time. How does the sound affect what you're designing? Interesting.

MS. GOLD: How does the sound influence you?

MR. OSGOOD: I don't know.

MS. GOLD: There's a question here that says, "What are the most powerful influences in your career," and in parentheses, "people, art movements, technological developments?"

MR. OSGOOD: We'd have to talk about that quite a while.

MS. GOLD: The most powerful influences in your career.

MR. OSGOOD: Well, the important thing was making the decision to study furniture design and making in the first place. I don't know whether I mentioned it other places before or not, but one trigger I -- in fact, the major influence -- the one thing I do always mention, or influences in your life, I may just, if I'm giving a slide show, I may just say it anyway. It was when I saw Wharton Esherick's work. I don't know whether you've come across his work or not. He was a sculptor turned furniture maker in Pennsylvania, and he was selling and exhibiting his work in the early '50s in New York City.

And this is about the time I was going to start school, you see, which would have been around '56, '57. And when I saw his work, what it was was permission to do what I wanted to do in the way of furniture forms, and wow, you can really do that. Whereas before that, I'd been exposed to the furniture in department stores and furniture stores, and his work wasn't like that at all; it was very sculptural. And so, that was a big turning point. Now, you'll interview some other furniture makers and there's a lot of us that will say, well, he was a major influence.

So he's a very important figure. Fortunately, they've preserved his place as a little museum, so people can go there and see a lot of his old pieces. Okay, so that was a major thing. Now, how to define the rest of the stages, do you want it in stages or any big bang?

MS. GOLD: Actually, I realized I sort of jumped --

MR. OSGOOD: Because I think we've sort of covered a lot of it, I just hadn't put it in words. Like I said, Tage Frid was a very strong influence. Michael Harmes was a different kind of influence. My friend Daniel Jackson, I mean, he was manic, in some respects, just this amazing enthusiasm that surrounded me as a student there. So that keyed in. So then, we move along and I left for Denmark. To get this in stages, I don't really think there was a big bang, I'd say, unless you'd call the initial first months in the School for American Craftsmen. That would have been a big bang, or yes, I've come home.

But then, it moved along through my teachers there, the influence of students, and then my trip to Denmark was kind of solidifying of things further and meeting this amazing Dane. And then, as I started work back in New York, got going, and was able to get accepted sales for furniture by the seventies, this could be considered a turning point, because that was what I was going to do from then on. And a lot of those years were very difficult years because I was married then and it was not going well, and there's an amazing group of pieces that were done under what would be bizarre or stressful conditions. But I was able to retreat into the shop and work on them. So I continued doing the work that I really wanted to do.

But in a way, I think it's been a slow growth process rather than to say there was any big strong major bang influence. And I've been known to say a lot of the time I feel like I'm ten years retarded, but sometimes other people do it faster. I have said that.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.] And marital discord was a good influence in a way.

MR. OSGOOD: Yes, well, I don't want to give that a lot of strength, I just know at the time that it was probably lucky that I had the cocoon of the work or the cocoon of the shop to go into. And good stuff came out of that awful period there. So sometimes it works. Maybe you'd better rephrase the question or read it again, and I'll see if anything else occurs to me.

MS. GOLD: Well, the question is, what are the most powerful influences in your career, but I think you --

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I did say the right thing, and I didn't think there was any big, smashing bang; it was just a succession of things. And I did want to give Wharton Esherick a lot of credit there for the revelation.

MS. GOLD: So when you began working on your own -- I think I'm a little unclear -- you were creating accessories; you were creating pieces that were your own design, and those were a lot for shows and juried kind of exhibitions.

MR. OSGOOD: A lot of them were for sale in New York. I did sell furniture through American House in addition to the accessories. So they took pieces, or individuals contacted me directly.

MS. GOLD: Were those commissions?

MR. OSGOOD: I can't remember. Well, I remember I got an order for a dining table in there. That was as a result of an earlier sale of a chest of drawers through American House -- led to a commission for a dining table, and then after that, chairs. So those were private commissions. It's hard for me to remember now the balance of the work sold through galleries versus work that was directly commissioned. I can't remember. Like I said, occasionally, I did work that was for hire, so to speak; other people had designed it. But I only did that because it would kind of bring in some fast money.

MS. GOLD: Do you still do commissions? I mean, is that an important part of your --

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, there's one coming up right now for a big desk.

MS. GOLD: Does that differ from your other work?

MR. OSGOOD: Well, yes and no. We also have coming, through Pritam and Eames, another commission that we'll be working on here in the shop. It will be, I think, eight chairs and then a table, and that's a commission that's been set up by the gallery. The work won't go on the floor, it will go directly to them. But this other desk project I've got to do, it's kind of an odd situation, in that he knows I'm represented by the gallery, but yet, he came to me directly. And I told him about it, and well, all right, I'll do it. I'm getting kind of grumpy now, because in most cases, I'd rather the customers go through the gallery, because there's just things I've lost patience bothering with, and the people that run galleries do that as a business.

MS. GOLD: Is it beneficial to you, then, commissions?

MR. OSGOOD: Well, yes and no, because this commission through the gallery is a chair that I've made before. It's in a different wood. The table may be a new design; I don't know. And they would easily do this, because they would show pictures of my work or he had something there, and it means duplicating it again. Now, I've always said that it's not the commissions that move me ahead, it's the pieces done free and clear for exhibitions. It could be a museum exhibition or -- what was I saying?

MS. GOLD: That the commissions move you ahead, from the gallery work.

MR. OSGOOD: Okay, the gallery piece is done without any restrictions. I'm designing the piece in the air, so to speak. And the piece I did this spring for Pritam and Eames was also done with no restrictions on it. It was for a big opening, so it was a totally new piece. Those are the pieces, over the years, that moved me ahead, that don't have the specifications that a customer might give. And some people don't mind this. I mean, they feel it's part of the whole project to work with the customer. And yes, I agree with that to a certain extent, but I also know that my pieces, for the most part, that move me along the way. I did it on my own without the customer.

Sometimes, they can be a real nuisance, or something, I mean, sizes, and colors, and forms, and shapes. Maybe I'm just getting grouchier about it now or something; it just doesn't always excite me to do things exactly the way they want them.

MS. GOLD: How about repeating designs? Do you mind doing –

MR. OSGOOD: A certain amount of that. Like this table we've been making for quite a while, and a certain amount of it's all right. And also, it keeps the shop going. I've got to have enough work going for Niki. So yeah, a certain amount of it's all right, but I don't want to do that all the time. I have another person that comes two days a week, and she's more of an apprentice. Mickey's no longer an apprentice. So these repeat things are important just to keep things going in the shop.

MS. GOLD: Have you always had an apprentice?

MR. OSGOOD: Usually, yeah, over the years, I've either had an apprentice or somebody that would come in and work part time, or full time, or whatever. Yeah, it was just a succession of people.

MS. GOLD: And so, it's comfortable for you to work with other people.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, that's okay. In the case with Niki, I wanted her to work for me because she had worked for another woodworker here, Jon Brooks, and so I knew she had an understanding of sculptural form. So what happens now is that I'll give her parts that have been shaped by a machine, which I'd be doing, and I give them to her and she takes over and does the hand shaping. All of this forming of the parts on the chairs and so forth, she would be doing that.

And she and I had initially done it with pine models and things, so I know that she knows we're thinking the same. So we've developed a pretty good working relationship over the years. I don't need to explain things very much to her, and that's ideal. Other people I've had, they can handle the joinery and things like that, so I might not be doing as much of that. Now I do all the joinery. Although, the second person now that's coming along is very good at that, so I may give her more responsibility. But she, I don't think, will be here very long.

MS. GOLD: You now make designs, and you've always done your designs on your paper, and then made a model.

MR. OSGOOD: I make full-size, pine cardboard models, not model models, but full-size mock-ups.

MS. GOLD: In pine and cardboard.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, it's usually the white New Hampshire pine, and it's pretty easy to shape. What I'm after is seeing how the form affects me and how it affects the space in a room. And while I can visualize this very well, I'm always trying to double-check it: Do I see it right? And so, by doing this pine model, it won't be in the fine wood -- it wouldn't be in the walnut or the cherry -- but I can get a good feeling for the form. And the size, you know, if a dining table is going to be four by six feet, we've got to see how that affects the space, so I can get a good understanding of how that's going to work.

The pine model, the added thing there is it may be the time where I'll do the final decisions on the form and then go over it with my helper. So she knows exactly what it's going to look like, but if it's all wrong, we'll just scrap it and do another one that's correct. I don't do any miniature models, like some people do little chair models, four inches high. And I absolutely refuse to do that. It all goes back to years ago when I was thinking of working on a graduate degree, which was going to be on perception, and I strongly believe we perceive small

things differently than large things.

It's because of our eye span. We can see 15 degrees -- if we can see this much that's on this table, but if it's a table this long, it means we either have to move our eyes or our head. We're scanning it. And if you stop in the middle of a six-foot table, then we're looking at -- or something there, and our peripheral vision out here and out here is influencing how I appreciate this large piece. And if that initial analysis on my part is done only on a small model where I can see the whole thing, I can't see that I'm going to get the right impression back.

I can't really say I've got anybody else working on this as yet, there's a perception thing going on there. But I'm finding there are a lot of people that do-do the full size mock-ups. They won't admit that they don't like small ones, they just like the full size ones. So I've got to try to get them to say why approach it this way.

MS. GOLD: So can you say how your work has changed over time? I think we started to talk about that.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I don't know that I can add too much to that, other than I feel it has gotten more sculptural. And it's gotten more sculptural; in my case, it may hopefully be a better understanding of three-dimensional form that's happened to me over the years. So as I see more things and more things happen -- I refer to it as building a vocabulary of pieces or a vocabulary of images. And as a student, you don't have this in your early years, but as you've made piece, after piece, after piece, what we're doing is seeing the whole development chain.

You have the idea, then make some sketches, and then if those work out, then develop them a little further, then maybe some larger sketches, then, probably at the same time, make a full-size mock-up and crude drawings, and then the next stage would be to make some final shop drawings or construction drawings. And then, the final stage would be seeing the completed piece, and I've lost track of how many times I've done that. So if I'm smart, I guess I've been able to remember what, if I do this in the early stage, what it's going to look like in the final piece. So hopefully, I've gotten a better understanding of this form and the way it develops.

MS. GOLD: But at some point in there, you began to work with this lamination process.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, but that was a lamination technique. That was to prop up my form that I was doing. That's how that came about. And I drew these legs, I made the legs in the normal manner, and they were weak and there were cuts through glue lines, which you just don't scarf glue lines, so that gave me the idea of laminating it in tapers. And so, it's a method or a technique -- it's a support for my design ideas. And it just happens that I'm doing these shell forms and these curving leg forms, and I like those forms, so then it would follow that I would laminate them.

MS. GOLD: I see, I see, it didn't come the other way around.

[Audio break.]

MS. GOLD: And you were also teaching.

MR. OSGOOD: Yes, I taught two days a week in New York City. I went down to the Craft Students League and taught there. My mother was living on Staten Island at the time, so I would stay one night there, and after I got married, I cut that back to one long day rather than the two nights. So I taught for, I think, eight years at the Craft Students League.

MS. GOLD: Where was that located?

MR. OSGOOD: Well, at that time, it was on the West Side around 50th Street, I think it was, and it was still safe to walk around New York after dark. Yeah, that would have been '62 to '70, or something like that. What launched me on my academic career was a friend of mine who was teaching at the Philadelphia College of Art wanted a spring term off, so I was invited to fill in his time there. And I was made an instant assistant professor, and I had been teaching, of course, in New York City, so I had teaching experience.

Anyway, that led to me being invited to teach back at my old school up in Rochester. So they interviewed me while I was teaching at the Philadelphia College of Art. It's called the University of the Arts now, I think. And because I was there with the status of an assistant professor, they had to give me the same title when I moved on to RIT, and I was there for three years. It was a smart move on my part: I hadn't sold the old place up in Connecticut when I went up to RIT. After a while, we just decided that we really liked Connecticut, didn't like upstate New York too much.

The climate there is sort of an exaggerated version of New York City, cold, wind, rain. And New York is bad enough, but there, it's on a grander scale. And it's just a different atmosphere in Connecticut, so I retired from teaching. Within a year, I was back starting all over again. In 1975, this new school was founded in Boston at

Boston University, and they wanted me to teach there part time. And I said “No, I don’t want to teach,” and they must have called me three times, and I finally concluded, well, every time he calls, the salary will maybe go up. So he called once more, and so the last time he called, I said, “Okay, I’ll do it.”

So that was the beginning of my career at Boston University. My marriage was starting to fall apart again at that point -- at that point, we had two sons. And so, in some respects, I just thought, well, maybe it would be better to be away a lot in Boston.

MS. GOLD: This was the same marriage.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah. And it’s about a three-and-a-half-hour drive, I guess. And so, the marriage didn’t survive this, and we were divorced in ’78. And we had to sell the place in Connecticut, and I just lived in several apartments in Boston for a while and had a shop at the school, which was kind of quaint. It was in an elevator shaft, but I still wanted my own place.

MS. GOLD: It was tall.

MR. OSGOOD: [Laughs.] High ceilings, yeah. I was really a little pinched. But it was all right. Those were ten good years there. And President Silber finally figured out that we weren’t ever going to make a lot of money for Boston University, and we were expected to really rake it in, I guess. But we managed to make it break even, was my understanding. But arts programs at a university level don’t pay; they have to be supported by an active board that helps raise donations, and we were never able to get that going. And anyway, it was ten good years.

I moved up here sort of accidentally. My older son was at school -- well, you didn’t come that way, but High Mowing is just down the road, and he was at school there, boarding.

MS. GOLD: What school?

MR. OSGOOD: It’s called High Mowing. It’s a Waldorf school, and it’s the only resident Waldorf high school. So I wanted to move up closer to where he was, and so I kept looking around the neighborhood here. And also, my younger son, he was living with me by that time, and I wanted him to go to the lower school, so he started second grade when I moved here. So that worked out very well. I’ve been very productive since ’85; a lot of good stuff’s been made here after the school closed in ’85. And they’re off on their own good careers.

MS. GOLD: Your children.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah.

MS. GOLD: Not a carpenter, not a furniture maker among them?

MR. OSGOOD: No, I’d like that, but I’ve got the equivalent almost. My older son is an artist. He studied photography and he does that, and then painting. So he’s involved with that, and he lives in New York City. My younger son is a developmental physicist that does all these things that I can barely understand. And it’s very interesting because what that means is that he’s given an assignment, we’ll call it, and it’s, in a way, similar to the way I approach an assignment to design and make a special cabinet in my shop. He has to follow a lot of the same creative directions that I’d be doing making furniture. And I think this is very interesting that he’s inherited this, that he really likes this; this is what he does. And he’s got a very good job developing things.

MS. GOLD: So do you have a typical day in your work? You’re not designing every day.

MR. OSGOOD: Yes and no. It’s very important to keep an open mind. It may be a day where I am working at the drafting table all day, but that may not be creative work. It may be work that’s just doing the drawings because of previous work. And other days or weeks, I may just spend making parts which have been drawn up. But what’s very important is the thinking time is left open enough so that if I have some idea that’s for a new piece, that I’ll stop the table saw and I’ll go over to the drawing table and either make some sketches or draw something that will suddenly become clear to me.

I do a lot of thinking. The machine work is very automatic. My hands can work and my brain can go somewhere else. And so, yes, there’s a typical day, but the typical day, I guess you could say, would either be machine work or drafting work. But the open thing is to keep an open track there, that I’m able to stop and jot down things either on drawings or sketchbook, and then I can go back to them later and develop them.

I have a pace in the shop. I try to start work between 8:00 and 8:30, and then I work until 6:00 every day. And usually, this is frequently seven days a week. And then, I may take four days off. I can take my weekends in the middle of the week. And this started years ago. I’m not tied to the corporate world. And I like that idea, and my doctors like it too. You’ve been working all this time, seven days a week, that’s what’s kept you in good shape for all these years. You’re not sitting around. So I’ll expect to continue that. Does that describe a typical day?

MS. GOLD: Yeah, that's enough. But as opposed to the Danish designers, you find yourself thinking through your designs as you're doing the handwork, or as you're doing the other work.

MR. OSGOOD: Well, it's probably, at that point, I'm thinking of the next one, the next project, not the one I'm working on.

MS. GOLD: Right, that's what I mean.

MR. OSGOOD: I'm working ahead. Like I said, there is a certain amount of creative work that has to be done for the drawings, and then it's developed through loose, full size sketches, and then I need final shop drawings, which, in many cases, have to be very accurate. And so, those might take me two or three days of drawing for different stages. It's just that more creative stuff, that I've got to see it when it comes by. And I think there's a lot to this business of left brain, right brain. We just don't quite understand it. The creative work is done with the right brain, and you relax and try to stay open. Like things just flow by there, and if you strain too much, it shifts over into the other side, which is more mathematical and too orderly. A typical day: I take care of breakfast and then I water the plants and feed Max.

MS. GOLD: Your studio seems very open to light and spacious. That's important.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah. That window faces south, and it can get really hot, but it's also wonderful for so many months of the year that the light just comes in there and rattles around the shop. It's great. I recommend it. It gets hot in the summer, so I shut the shades. In the winter, and fall, and spring, it doesn't get hot when the light comes in. In the winter, the leaves are gone off the ash trees outside. So it's a light, sunny shop. In this other section of shop here, there are skylights in that too. See, there's windows on the east and skylights on the ceiling, and it's pretty good light in there too.

MS. GOLD: I've got to ask you something that I meant to ask you before, and that is, do you see a difference in craftspeople who are trained in universities and those who are working outside? Would you consider yourself a university-trained craftsperson?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, because I worked with Tage Frid.

MS. GOLD: Do you see a difference between people who are trained within the university and those without?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah. I think it's better to have had the training. Sometimes -- and I can't bring to mind a lot of examples of people that are self trained -- they're self trained slightly wrong, and they're working too much off some of their experiences. And I'll tell them, this is going to trip you up sooner or later, but they take great pride in the fact that they're self-taught. So it isn't always successful. You could probably go through the books and lists of people, get some statistics on that, but my feeling is that traditional, formal education in technique and design is important. It gives us the basic groundwork to carry on yourself. Then you can say, I'm self-taught, but I did have three years of school.

MS. GOLD: Well, that's what you had, right.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, well, I was self taught to begin with, and then my teacher said, I'm doing it all wrong, got to unlearn all this [laughs].

MS. GOLD: Do you see universities as creating different schools of furniture making?

MR. OSGOOD: Well, yes and no. It's always been that way. For example, RIT has a fair amount of design work going on there, still does. Now, it's a more contemporary approach, definitely. Now, there's another school in Boston called North Bennett. It's a very excellent school, however, their orientation is totally towards traditional pieces called antiques. And so, they do not teach design per se. You would make a chair or a mackintosh – whatever, they are right off from the old masters. And so, they're getting excellent technical background.

People would come from there, you would hire them because you'd know that they're very well practiced, trained. But that's a particular niche. And so, if you were looking for someone with more design training that would create their own new pieces, then you wouldn't go there, you'd get another type of person that had a background from a school that was more open.

MS. GOLD: Do you see universities as influencing the nature of furniture making?

MR. OSGOOD: No, I think it's happening outside of the universities. There's so many people out working now. That's a good question for the next furniture conference to answer. Who's making the influence: the schools or the people out working?

MS. GOLD: Well, also the people out working, like yourself in the past, are teaching.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, occasionally. I don't do much now. But I did just get back from Hawaii, and I'll do things like that again. I'm teaching again next summer at Penland.

MS. GOLD: Oh, that's one of the questions I have here to ask you. Have you ever been involved with Penland, Haystack, Arrowmont?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, all of those.

MS. GOLD: So you've taught at those places?

MR. OSGOOD: I've taught at almost all the schools around the country.

MS. GOLD: Can you describe your experiences there? Are there any exceptional experiences that you want to talk about?

MR. OSGOOD: Well, they vary a lot in the quality of the surroundings and the types of students. For the most part, the student body is going to be mixed. There may be a few that are really total amateurs, and then a few in the class that have obviously got some professional talent. And most of the classes, I considered the week or the two weeks sort of my vacation or time off. So I enjoy working with both types.

Obviously, I like working with the more professional student that's got a lot of skill, but some of these people with no training and little skill, they're a lot of fun to work with and they're interesting people. So they're more in the category, of okay, it's a good vacation sort of thing. And if I can help them make something useful for their life, okay, but it's not moving me ahead. I mean, it's just sort of entertainment, in a way.

And I don't mind that now. I mean, it's not full time. It's a week or two twice a year. Haystack seems to get a lot of good students. And I haven't been to Penland too many times, but that appears to be the case there, a higher percentage of people with a lot of skill. And they're filling a very important niche. There's a lot of people that want some short classes and, in many cases, can't take anymore. They can't take a year off, but they can take two weeks off.

Now, this last summer, I was at Peters Valley Craft School, there was one student there who, I think he's going to go on and do some good work. He's about 20 maybe, and really very enthusiastic and involved in what he's doing. He doesn't have a lot of skill yet, but he's showing all the signs of somebody that -- like if I was teaching at Boston University, I'd want to drop a big scholarship on him so we could have a good time working together. I mean, that sort of a student.

MS. GOLD: So as a teacher, in the past, it's really exciting for you to work with good students.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah.

MS. GOLD: Do you learn from them, yourself?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, a lot of the students that I got at Boston University, it was more a pure group thing. It wasn't like the teacher who had to spoon-feed the students every dumb thing. They were really people with excellent backgrounds, highly skilled; some of them already had four years of apprenticeship, or they had prior degrees. And the average age was 26, which is a little high. And it was really an amazing astrological occurrence, if you want to put it that way, that we had so many good students. So many of them are out working still. I mean, it started in '75, and they're doing good work. And that was good.

Those ten years that I was there, there was a lot of good work that never got made in my shop because I was busy there. But I don't really mind. I had a really good time working with them, and we talk about that now and then. I see some of them frequently. In fact, this group I belong to here, we've got three of them in our auction group this year.

MS. GOLD: The New Hampshire Furniture Masters' –

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, they're contributing pieces to that. And my recent trip to Hawaii was because of another student. He had been to Hawaii on the same thing and recommended me. So communication continues.

MS. GOLD: Are there other communities that have been important to you as a craftsperson? You talk about the New Hampshire Master Craftsmen.

MR. OSGOOD: What do you mean communities, though?

MS. GOLD: This question that the Smithsonian's asked me to cover, and that is, is there a community that has been important to your development as an artist?

MR. OSGOOD: No. I don't know how to answer that.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.] Okay.

MR. OSGOOD: If I could figure out how to answer it, I would. Communities, yeah, it's a group, but I've never -- no, I've been part of the group of furniture makers, that's the community. But it's not a residential community.

MS. GOLD: I think that's what I meant, not residential, but sort of a community of groups and connections.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah well, I guess if you put it that way, I mean, I am a part of the community of furniture makers. That's clear.

MS. GOLD: But have you had involvement with national craft organizations, American Craft Council?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, from the very beginning, I've been a member of the American Craft Council. I feel it's very important to be a member of that, just to be part of that. Yeah, you could say that's a community, and my name listed as a member there. And they have their ups and downs. I think that development fluctuates in a way, or whatever, but yes, they are still representing a lot of us, in some ways.

The Furniture Society has come along now, and I feel that's very important. That was an important membership move. That's national or international at this point, and the furniture makers never had this. The potters had it, and the metal people had national organizations, and I think fiber had national organizations, but this is the first time -- and it's taken four years or so, they've developed now into coast-to-coast representation. I think that's very important.

[Audio break. Tape change.]

MS. GOLD: Donna Gold interviewing Jere Osgood on September 19, 2001. Do you feel like you have any kind of political or social commentary in your work?

MR. OSGOOD: No, I don't really. I find myself politically independent or more in the middle, so I'm free to choose either side as it comes along rather than definite alignment. But I wouldn't say that there's any connection in my work.

MS. GOLD: How about technology? Has that had any impact on your work?

MR. OSGOOD: Well, in a sense, it has, because what I'm doing now wouldn't have been possible years ago. All of the good glues were developed after or during World War II time, so these lamination processes that I use just wouldn't have existed prior to 1942, we'll say. So I came along at the right time wanting to do these things, and so I'm able to create these forms using that lamination technique, which is dependent on the glue. So technologically, that's right in there.

Otherwise, I don't use any lasers for shaping. Most all my techniques are very traditional standard shop techniques, except the lamination techniques, which get me rides around the country, because I'll demonstrate my new techniques.

MS. GOLD: Maybe it was in the article that you wrote. You talked about this a little bit when you were talking about the miniatures, the sense of stance and then eye movement and detail, how you want to detail close-up and the stance may be further away. Am I misunderstanding you?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I think you're running a couple of things together. The stance that we were talking about -- like this table was an example, the way it's about to move, and that other big desk that I did, I spent a long time with that trying to get the position good on that, just the stance. That's one thing. The other one was the way I explained the viewing of furniture, and I don't know whether I wrote that in either place, and I can go through that roughly.

When you come into a room or a gallery space from 15 or 20, look at the piece of furniture, and you can see it in an easy view, you're back far enough from it. Then you walk closer, and as you get closer, say, maybe six feet or four feet, you'll start to see more of the detail, and you'll know by that time what kind of wood it is, you'll have an idea of how it's finished, of how the light's reflecting off it because it's finished. And you can pick that up from, you know, eight feet, six feet away. And your appreciation for form, when you're at 15 feet, you're seeing silhouette and able to start to get a feeling for the mass of the piece. We'll say it's a chest of drawers and how this volume affects the space.

So if you move closer together and you get to 10 feet, you can start to have more of a dialogue with it; you'll get a better understanding for the strength of this form. And this, I feel, is very important, to be able to get people to look carefully at furniture. Just give it a chance: it will work almost both ways. You'll see things happening there

in the strength of the form. It's hard to put a figure on it, but maybe around eight or ten feet, you can get a pretty good sense of the form -- is it well balanced here, and is it in an easy line in another area, is that correct. And you pick up the weak spots or the really strong parts in a design.

Now, as you move closer, those things will move out to your peripheral vision. And when you get really close to the piece, then you will start seeing the details in the joinery, the details in the special hardware, you'll see the birds in the marquetry in clear detail. If there's marquetry –

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.] With birds.

MR. OSGOOD: With birds. All of these things that will be right there close to you, and the rest of the piece is in your peripheral vision. But when you're really close there, you're probably not able to say whether this piece is an example of very fine sculptural form because you're too close to it. So that's my journey: from distance out, you need to get these views of it as you move in. You'll get your understanding of the form between 15 feet and nine-and-a-half feet, or something.

And as soon as you pass that, you may not be able to see the form, the good balance or the bad balance as well. You'll start seeing the very close-up things. You know, bad workmanship will show when you're close. There's a lot of stuff, a lot of things in museums, I think it's a trick. They spend so much time on these carved birds and silver details, and other funny close-up, small things, I think sometimes they're trying to trick me into thinking this is a very fine piece. Because if I back up, you'll see that the actual, the basic form of the piece is just abysmal. I talk about this if I'm teaching, and I try to get students to see this.

MS. GOLD: And then, when you're dealing with a desk, for instance, then there's the inside as well as the outside.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah. Most of the inside, you'd see it only close up. That's been a problem with my desks: Do they display them closed or open?

MS. GOLD: And the shells, at least from the photos, when you open them up, they do have the same sense of a skeletal structure that's so beautiful. Another concept that I think I read about, and I think you mentioned it, and I thought you might want to talk about it a little bit more, is the sense of three lives of a piece, one being the design and the other being the process of making it, and the other being the actual piece.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I probably have talked about that. It's important to me to be involved in those three; it's terribly important. What I have, though, when I'm done, is the design and the process. I don't normally have the piece, and in most cases, I don't need the piece. I mean, I don't have any use for it. But to me, the experience of working on a design and being with the piece through all its process of creation, I can't sell that. It's not that I wouldn't sell it. It's just what I have and it's what I really get from making the pieces. I'm not trying to accumulate unsold pieces that I didn't want to sell, I just wanted to make it so I could have a piece. I don't work that way, and I don't think I ever have. I've always been happy with the concept of coming up with a design, developing it, and then helping it get made. This, to me, is the excitement of the piece.

Now, it's really nice if this piece can be sold, because it brings in some money. And if people really like it, that's even a bonus. So it's not that that doesn't matter to me. I mean, I like to see a piece go to where people enjoy it and they'll say to me six years later how much they like it, and this happens a lot. You might hear other sculptors say this too. I didn't pick it up from anybody, it's just been my way of development over the years. Other people are also involved in processing.

MS. GOLD: I think that's part of being an artist, isn't it. It's the making, not the object. But when you're making something, it's such a tactile process. Is there any one part of it that you most love to do?

MR. OSGOOD: Oh, it's the visual. Yeah, I make these great parts. The legs on this desk, they were a marvelous revelation when I pulled them off the machine, and they curve in three planes. Anyway, I looked at them for the longest time, and I really enjoyed that form. Actually, I hadn't completely seen that. I had made a pine one, and I don't know, I felt it was kind of crude, but I went ahead anyway, feeling that I was right -- I didn't fine sand it and shape it as far as I should have.

But when these came out of the templates, that was exciting. This is a visual thing. Yes, it's sort of tactile. And it's true, many of the parts of pieces like that, in the shapes, they may suggest new forms, another piece, a curving door, or a back panel, or something. It may give me another idea that I should go and write down, either as a few words or a sketch. And it's pretty much a visual thing that's happening there during the process. You may get a different response on that from fiber people.

MS. GOLD: Oh yeah, that's interesting.

MR. OSGOOD: Because a lot of that is tactile.

MS. GOLD: You know, in talking, you seem to have a sense of vision and also organic environment, environmental interests. Would you say that there's a spirituality in your work, in any sense? Is doing expressive work a part of that greater sense?

MR. OSGOOD: I've never really thought that. If someone said, "Your work is very spiritual," I really wouldn't know how to respond. I don't know [laughs]. People have said pieces are very sensual, and they do say they're tactile -- they have to touch them -- and that does come up. But spiritual is a --

MS. GOLD: Maybe not in the piece, but in the creation.

MR. OSGOOD: It's one of those things that I almost feel that I don't have a good enough command of the language, because this may very well be what's happening with my better pieces or other people's better pieces, that the pieces shift over into a new dimension, into this spiritual dimension. But I don't think I could tell you how they got there. If this occurs to people, this is wonderful, but it's not something that I guess I can plan on or think about myself. I think I'd have to have somebody tell me that that's what I did when I did the piece. And I certainly have good feelings about that, but I don't feel I'm directly participating in a crossover to a spiritual understanding. Is there another way you could ask the question? Maybe I'm not coming at it from the right direction.

MS. GOLD: I actually think that you've answered the question. The question actually is, Does religion or a sense of spirituality play a role in your art? But I think what I was asking was, when you are in the creative process, is the creative process to you a moment of sort of moving out into another plane?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, if you want to call that spiritual, that happens all the time, yeah.

MS. GOLD: I don't know if I want to call it spiritual or not.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, sure, that's exactly true. I lose track of time and sensation, there's no doubt about that. I can go off in my sketchbook or my drawings and I might not hear you come in, or I might not hear the phone. I know my hearing's gone, but that's beside the point. Time stops and you just sort of flow in with it if you're going with it, with an idea or a feeling that's developing. Sure, yeah, I do that. I also, over the years, I can hallucinate or drop down to the next level, which I've forgotten the name of very easily. Is it Delta? I don't know; I do that very easily. And it's sometimes alarming.

I have gone to a couple of therapists for my neck -- I have a problem with the bone there -- and sometimes I'm just gone. Then I realized it, it's sort of the same thing that I get if I'm drawing or I'm developing an idea. And I don't know that I've ever thought of that as spiritual. It's some kind of another dimension or another place my mind goes, but that place has always been there. I mean, I'm just able to move in and out of it. The birds outside do this at night. I finally figured out that's where they go. You know there's all these little birds flying around during the day: you don't see them at night. They go in that other space. You wait; they'll tell us that's what happens years from now.

Yes, it's true, designers lose track of time. I'm probably not the only one. And that's what it's called, also. It's great. You can start drawing -- so it's 8:30, oh, it's 11:00. How did it get to 11:00? Sure, I like that. That's why I said, I like being part of the process and totally absorbed in it. I can't do it every day, though. I mean, it just doesn't always happen. It's not part of the routine kind of day.

MR. OSGOOD: I hadn't thought to mention that to you until you made me think of it. That's very important to me. I think a lot of people are misled, so I did one to mention that. And I think you've covered a lot in my early background that may not have been asked before. I'm not sure. That's frequently a favorite topic, but I may not have brought it up.

MS. GOLD: I think I covered enough of your earlier years.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I think that's important. I hope my ideas about New York City were clear enough. You know, I was talking about it as a really amazing place that has such a large scale. And what I don't want to say is that nothing else can come up to it, because I might make somebody feel bad that -- can't ever equal the grand things in New York. That's not so good. I didn't want that to come across, but it's an exciting place, and I had a good beginning there. And as I said, I really wanted to leave it when I went away to school, and I can go there anytime now, just step right back in, even though they changed the designation of the subways.

MS. GOLD: And now, it's a little bit changed.

MR. OSGOOD: Forever, yeah, what a mess. It won't be the same for everybody. It all changed.

[Audio break. Tape change.]

MS. GOLD: This is Donna Gold interviewing Jere Osgood at his studio on the eighth of October, 2001.

MR. OSGOOD: That's years ago. There are two pieces that I could say were landmark pieces, I guess. I did a chest of drawers in about 1967. It was quite innovative in that it incorporated this major technique that I had been working on, and I don't think there was anything major before that. I've developed these various lamination processes, and one of them is called compound stave lamination. And it's a system where I'm bending staves to create the form in a cabinet or a chest of drawers. In other words, if I want the sides shaped curving outward, or in this case, I also wanted the drawer fronts shaped so they swung out.

And I had always felt that there was a terrible waste of wood in the traditional bombé chests. They get their curves by just removing pounds, and pounds, and pounds of wood. And I, in this chest of drawers, was trying to do it just using bent staves and bent stave construction in the sides and the fronts. And I did that, and it was in a national exhibition and collection that traveled around the country for a while.

I'd almost like to get into an explanation of the technique, but I don't think I can do that, except to say that it was a major step for me. I saw the result of it in front of me and I was pleased with what happened. I've been using that technique for things like desk forms or chest of drawers, or cabinets and whatever, ever since then. Let's just say it's complicated, the bending of the things, because the individual staves will have one curved formula on one edge, and then can have another curved formula on the other opposite edge, and that entails making special forms for each part.

So anyway, I've developed that. The other piece, which was done around the same time, maybe three years later, 1970 or a few years before, was a shell desk that I did. It was for a show in Philadelphia, and it used, for the first time, my use of tapered laminations. Usually if I show slides or somebody's doing a long article, that desk will be mentioned as the place where I used the first tapers in my tapered legs. So that was a landmark piece, too. That was a time where I had stopped doing smaller accessories -- we talked about that the other day -- and was trying very hard to just get into strictly furniture. So in many cases, things I did then were experimental or new pieces.

MS. GOLD: I wanted to ask you about the shell desk. How did you originally conceive your form of it?

MR. OSGOOD: Oh, that's easy. We may have talked about that the other day, but I've talked to other people. I was teaching in New York City and I had a student that made a lute. And the lute shell is a rounded form -- well, it's not a good analogy, but it might look like a big watermelon. So I worked with him for a long time making this lute. Now, the lute is not necessarily symmetrical. It does change in its curve. And it took a long time because I'm one of these teachers that won't do the work for the student. So I had to show him, and then he would try to do it, and then I would try to show him how to do whatever it was again, and so it took us a long time.

All during this time that it was taking shape on the workbench, I was saying, this is really a nice form. I like the feel of the volume of it, and it might look good four feet long instead of the two feet that a lute is. So that was how it got started. Now, the first one I did was the desk that I just mentioned before, the shell desk with the tapered, laminated legs, and it was also the time I used that shell form. I made it symmetrical, whereas the lute is not. It has a sharper curve at the neck end.

So that's how it came. As I say, I was around this shell form for such a long time, I got to like it. I thought, well, I could use it in my work for furniture forms. That is what it's really about, is trying to discover or see new forms and to try to be alert to those things. I mean, that's a simple example of how that can happen.

MS. GOLD: And we haven't talked about that before.

MR. OSGOOD: We haven't, all right. Well then, it's the article coming out Thursday. [Laughs.]

MS. GOLD: It's interesting when you talk about it that you didn't name it the lute; you named it *Shell*.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I saw it as a shell form, and I wasn't meaning seashells. I meant it in a more generic term of shell, and that's pretty much stuck over the years. I've done several versions of them. This one here in the shop is related to it too, because it's going to acquire the stave forms in the upper half.

MS. GOLD: While we're here in the shop, can you talk about sort of the design problems of creating something that was, as you were saying before, creating something larger?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, this desk was probably 38 inches, maybe. So you can see the end over there, the scale of it, and then if you turn, you can see this one. You see the difference. It's sometimes an alarming thing to do because we don't perceive things the same, at least that's my thinking. When they change in size or scale,

they’re going to come back at us differently. And so, while I very carefully shifted these dimensions so they’re larger, now I see it and I realize there’s too much mass there, I have to take some off.

So it loses its harmony, I guess you would say, once it’s enlarged. And while it will look like the original smaller version, there’ll be a number of small changes in the details, just so that the whole form looks right in its larger shape.

MS. GOLD: Do you see the -- as being lost from the base of the desk, from the writing surface, or from the sides?

MR. OSGOOD: Well, the main focal point in this piece is the end forms, and so they’re sort of, I’ve got to focus my attention almost to the point of getting them as close to perfect as a sculptural form separate from the desk. And then, of course, they’re incorporated in it. That was what happened with that piece. I liked that just as a form itself without any desk around.

MS. GOLD: Did you create the piece before you created --

MR. OSGOOD: That’s the same process. I made a full- sized mock-up, and only the full-sized mock-up is out -- it’s out in the garage. But this end panel over there, I carried a little further than the two ends in the mock-up, because I wanted to see how you can see this planing done on it. And I thought that it worked very well just as an individual form away from the fact that it was a desk. I think it’s a little risky to get into that sometimes, because it just might not work when it’s into the form of the desk. But in that case, it did.

MS. GOLD: You mean it’s risky to get sculptural with one portion.

MR. OSGOOD: With an individual piece. Because when it’s assembled into the whole thing, it may not -- because all the parts have to be worked together.

MS. GOLD: Have you ever been tempted to lose the function and just go for the sculpture?

MR. OSGOOD: That’s a good question. I’d have to totally change my personality or thinking, or position on this planet, or something, because one of my major points is, I do want furniture to be functional. And if it’s not functional, I may not call it furniture anymore. I know there’s a lot of people now that are doing things that are more sculptural, and sometimes I question that it’s not going to be very usable as furniture. And I’m all the time checking heights and clearances, depths and so forth so it would relate to using it. So probably, in this lifetime, I may not get to that.

MS. GOLD: I’m actually talking about even going beyond the dysfunctional furniture, if you wanted to say, to actual sculpture. I mean, I’m looking at the sides of the desk and it looks like you could form --

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, you could just sculpture. Yeah, it’s sort of almost a primal form, seed form or something, and I think that’s great. I don’t refer either directly or indirectly, I don’t relate too well to other furniture makers. I don’t. I mean, I like looking at catalogues and going to exhibitions of furniture, but I don’t feel that’s where I draw my forms from. I’m moving into a position of rarely referring to sculptors and their work. So that would be maybe where my inspiration would lie now, even though I’m insisting that I’m doing functional furniture.

MS. GOLD: Do you still go to galleries and museums a lot?

MR. OSGOOD: Oh, yeah. I like [Isamu] Noguchi's work, and I’ve seen, I guess, two separate exhibitions of his. There’s a lot there that I can sense or pick up on. It’s not something that I could use directly in my work or would want to, but there’s a pureness to the form that I see. And at least one of my goals is to try to get the furniture so that it’s not instantly associative. In other words, when somebody looks at it and they say, “Oh, it looks like a fish,” or a something like that, they’ll immediately try to put it into something they’re familiar with. And I’d like to think that we could get away from that and just see things as pure form and appreciate them just for that.

And as a designer, I mean, that’s a milestone. I guess I’m talking as a furniture designer; as a sculptor, maybe you’d be expected to do that. It’s a goal, anyway.

MS. GOLD: So your goal is for someone to look at your work and not see a desk also.

MR. OSGOOD: I don’t mind that, that’s fine. I thought the one time that happened, I took it as a compliment when somebody asked me what it was. That’s great.

MS. GOLD: So you’re looking for both a pure form, but also an innovative form.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah.

MS. GOLD: And I wonder how difficult that gets as several generations of designers and artists are creating pure

forms. Is there a sense of a limitation? Is that question clear?

MR. OSGOOD: No. Say it again.

MS. GOLD: When I think of pure, I think of simple, and when I think of simple, I think of perhaps natural and that there might be a finite number of pure forms, like there are a finite number of elements.

MR. OSGOOD: No, I don't think so. I think it's wide open. I think it's wider open than if you just went through all the museums and catalogued everything that was there. There would be a finite number of pieces which you could refer to, but if you're just developing pure forms that didn't have any reference points, that looked like a folk story or something, I'd see that as unlimited.

I mean, this occurs in music. There's times when it's just written as music. It doesn't have a melody or a folk song in its background, or something. It's hard to equate the two, because music is not three-dimensional -- it has another dimension. Yeah, to answer your question, I think it's wide open. But do you realize how hard it is, as people, to break out of all the things that we've seen over our lifetimes? That's what's difficult, because everybody seems to be influenced by this and that, and everything. And you'd have to be an alien individual or an alien from outer space that would have none of our visual history to not draw on these things. It's difficult.

MS. GOLD: And yet, you seem to have succeeded. Do you feel that you have?

MR. OSGOOD: In some pieces, yeah, I have -- not everything, but yeah, I think so, in some cases. I'll wait for an analysis 100 years from now, but it's a goal.

MS. GOLD: Do you want to talk about another piece that you think has succeeded and how you got that?

MR. OSGOOD: No, I almost need that from you. I don't know where to settle.

MS. GOLD: I'm still fascinated by your desks and the skeletal nature of the insides. That's where I see the shell as being the underpinnings of a shell on the inside. So that's where I think you have succeeded.

MR. OSGOOD: Well, the inside areas of the desks, I did realize -- and I don't need to be specific about that -- but I realized early on that there were two separate compositions going on: the desk when it was closed and the desk when it was opened. And some of the early desks that I did were really boring answers to that inside -- just provide a little drawer and a little shelf, and a place to put papers. Somewhere along the way there, I spent a long time working on the insides as a definite form in itself.

So it was an important decision, and it was important that I realized this. And I don't think I'm finished with that yet. Now and then, I look at my work and I see an awkwardness in the interior, and it should relate better to the outside than it does. Maybe some of the interiors that I've done are too separate. You know, when you cut a seed open, there's a structure inside there. It's itself very strongly, but it's also very much in harmony with the outside form of the pod, of the seed. So I think I have more studying to do there.

MS. GOLD: So you're continuing to --

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, it's a continuing thing. I think it's important that you did mention the interiors, because that's been a major effort on my part to get more content to them and treat them as a sculptural space in its own right. Of course, then it does get confusing when the pieces are displayed. People setting up a gallery or exhibition have to decide whether to display the desk opened or closed.

MS. GOLD: Well, you've made two.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah.

MS. GOLD: Do you make repetitions of the same piece over?

MR. OSGOOD: I have. Some of the desks I have done, maybe two. I think one in there, I did three. I'm not really anxious to promote that. If it happens, fine. Looking at those on the wall over there, that shell desk on the right, I did two of those. And on the upper left, the desk below the chest of drawers, I did a second version of that. And then, on the left, is this desk here. And so, while it's not the same, it will be a second one of it. And I'm busy all the time with what's coming next. And I think if I needed income, then maybe I'd go after trying to make two, three, four, something.

Obviously, I need income, but if there's other work coming along, like develop a new desk, or there's another case where I'd be really working as a designer, then that would be more exciting to me than just repeating a piece that I had done before. I really like the shop work -- I like being dusty and all that -- but I also like the chance to work on a new design, to move on. So I won't deliberately run after these things. It's probably

something that happens through the gallery that represents me.

MS. GOLD: I was going to ask you what excites you most when you go to work. What most drives you to it?

MR. OSGOOD: Well, I'm really interested in the design work, so that would be number one. Number two, some of the techniques I do, or use, or need to use, are really very interesting. I have to work them out and make them usable. The ends on these, the desk is done from a plaster cast that goes in my vacuum press. So sometimes, I have to develop a technique to carry out my design, and that to me is exciting.

Now, this start frequently starts the night before. I've found over the years that if I spend a few minutes before I fall asleep reviewing what I'm going to do in the morning, changes to this design or this machine work that I have to do, that it sort of gets started then, start the thinking process then when I'm relaxed and I'm not in a hurry to do anything. And then, it's already there when I get up in the morning and come in here. I'm usually not one of these people that comes into the shop and, well, I wonder what I'll do today. It's pretty definite. That doesn't mean that I'm always amazingly efficient, but it's get to work time because I've figured out what I'm supposed to be doing.

MS. GOLD: Do you want to talk about the *Chest of Chair*?

MR. OSGOOD: Well, it's interesting maybe to do it, because I don't feel that this is a very developed piece. It was done very early.

MS. GOLD: The date is 1971.

MR. OSGOOD: It's very early in my career, in a sense. I had been working plenty of years. But then, if I go to this, to me, there's a world of difference.

MS. GOLD: And that's the semainaire that you did in 1998.

MR. OSGOOD: It was a nice story, actually, I came home [this is when I was living in Connecticut], and opened the mail. I'd been away for about a week, and in an envelope -in a letter- was a check saying, "Do whatever you like. Call us when you're done."

MS. GOLD: Who was it from?

MR. OSGOOD: Some people on the West coast. The had written to me a while before, six or eight within a couple of months, asking me if I'd be interested in doing something. And I had written back to them and said, yes, and sort of gave them an idea of what I might do, or whatever. I get a lot of things like that; I still get them now. And you never hear from them again. So this just came out of the blue. So this is sort of a gimmick, making the chest so you could sort of sit in it.

MS. GOLD: Could you sit in it?

[Audio break. Tape change.]

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, it was relatively comfortable. You could sit there to put your socks on or put your shoes on.

MS. GOLD: This side slopes down. It feels like a slide.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, right. So you could sit here. It sloped back quickly, but it did work to some degree. But I always thought it was sort of a gimmick. And this piece had awful handles on it. That was a period when I didn't like making handles because I felt I couldn't have any chance of getting a good decision. So I did a lot of pieces without handles. But this one, for some reason, it had to have handles, and so I didn't think much of it.
MS. GOLD: A good decision about the handles? You felt like you couldn't --

MR. OSGOOD: I don't know. I worked on them a long time and they worked as handles, it's just that they're sitting there on the surface like extraneous bugs, or something. They don't seem to be part of the piece. But it's a delicate situation. It's quite different. If you put a knob on a Shaker piece, you have a reference point. You know, it's a Shaker piece and it would call for a certain knob, and so you almost don't have to make a decision. But if it's a piece that's been designed itself out of the air and it's not referring to another furniture maker or something, it means that the handles and the poles, they have to be a little composition in their own, because we can't put Shaker knobs on a piece like that. This piece, at one point, I was designing it not to have any knobs.

MS. GOLD: And this is the semainaire, right?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah. The drawer fronts at first were to overlap each other a little bit so you could reach underneath. And I even made some things in the model. I had a cardboard mock-up of this thing doing that, and

I really felt that it needed the counterpoint of the white spots. I mean, in the distance, you'd just see them as white spots.

MS. GOLD: Did you design the shapes of the handles?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah.

MS. GOLD: They look almost like little bones.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, they are. But I thought it did look like a plant form, to some extent. It was another case -- we were just talking before, or I was mentioning anyway, about it being a composition by itself that had quite a lot of strength to it. You know, visually, it worked. But yeah, it was really meant to be part of a larger piece.

MS. GOLD: This is about five feet high.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, it's quite narrow. It's only 15 inches, or something.

MS. GOLD: And was that a commission?

MR. OSGOOD: That was a commission, yeah.

MS. GOLD: Somebody had asked you to make a chest of drawers of some sort.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, that was a commission. And I don't always work well with commissions. This desk is a commission, but he's referring to a piece I had done previously. But in this case, there wasn't any previous piece. Sometimes, with clients, there's a lot of meddling that goes on, and I don't always like what they suggest. After this piece was done, they wanted me to do another piece, and I never could make any sense of it. I mean, I'd make sketches and then, no, that isn't what they meant, and then, here, this is what I mean, and he'd throw out another idea. It just went in circles.

I mean, customers, they aren't deliberately trying to be difficult, but sometimes I've found that awkward. But in this case, it worked. They came and looked at the mock-up and the full-size model and liked it, and said, "Fine, go ahead with it."

MS. GOLD: Now, did you ever try to make the *Chest of Chair* in something that you would be more comfortable with, or is that just a form that you felt was too --

MR. OSGOOD: I don't know. I've never had any big desire to make anything like it again. I've been there. And I have made sketches for pieces that weren't symmetrical that started rolling over in my thinking, because there isn't any major reason why a chest of drawers has to be symmetrical, or a desk for that matter, because we don't move in symmetrical patterns, which is one thing that feeds furniture design, is how the piece is used. So, yes, it got it going, but I never got anywhere past sketches. But who knows. It may happen yet.

MS. GOLD: And I read somewhere that you like to think of your pieces as having fronts and backs and being three dimensional, not sitting up against a wall.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I have said that. Usually, I mention that. Yeah, I didn't do it yet with this piece because I have to take this apart again. But I'm going to put this on wheels.

MS. GOLD: And this is the desk.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, it's going to go on wheels so that it can be moved easily, so I can see front and back of it. And no matter what I do here, whether it's a chest of drawers or a desk, very soon in its construction and in the construction of the mock-up, it goes on a dolly there, ready for something to sit on it. And that isn't necessarily so I can sweep the floor under it. It's so that I can continually see the different sides of it. It's sometimes a slow process, because my comings and goings in and out of the room, I'll see it. And that's, to me, almost a better way to do it. Each time I see it, maybe I'm more definite that yes, you've got the form right on the back or the end, or something. To be able to see all sides of it just in a slow-paced way. I see it a little differently each time I come in the shop, and it answers a lot of questions.

MS. GOLD: So if you're uncomfortable with what you see, do you go to the design board or do you start shaving off the mock-up?

MR. OSGOOD: Probably both. Well, in this case, I've got to make these legs lighter, because they've got to be about an eighth of an inch in. And the drawing will be changed, but I probably wouldn't change the drawing until I had changed this. And I would wait to change the drawing until I knew this was right. And the reason there is that there'll be details in the joinery that have to have the exact dimensions that it's going to be. And so, those

details are worked out on paper. And to make cuts, and templates, and so forth, I need the accurate drawing of the way it's going to be.

Now, if I try to put those lines down on the paper too soon, they may not be right. This is a result of doing the shop drawing, what we see now. This is three-dimensional; the shop drawings are two-dimensional. So I'd alter this and then correct the drawing.

MS. GOLD: So if you shave off an eighth of an inch, or if you shave off, let's say, if you shave off a quarter of an inch, then you realize that you should have shaved off an eighth of an inch.

MR. OSGOOD: Why not just do it on one end?

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.] Oh, okay. So it doesn't absolutely have to be perfect to do the mock-up.

MR. OSGOOD: No, in a case like that, an eighth of an inch off that, probably, my customer is not going to pick it up. It's more for me getting to know it's right. In a case like this, it may be an eighth of an inch at the top and a sixteenth at the bottom. So it's sometimes pretty subtle. Right now, it's too hefty there, and the upper form is too light. I've got a pretty good feeling of how it's going to look. It's going to be done in wenge, which is very, very dark brown, and that's white now; it's pine.

So the mass is going to read differently when the color changes. Well, I was talking to Nicky about it the other day, and we said yes, I'm going to stain it brown as soon as we've got a reasonable handle on the shape. Because once I stain it brown, we'll get a confirmation of, is it the right lines there.

MS. GOLD: So you'll go as far as to make --

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, we'll make the changes and then stain it brown. I think it will look right. If it doesn't, then I'll just go back to it again.

MS. GOLD: But at this point, you have enough experience to --

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah. And she's pretty good at interpreting what I say, so it will probably be all right.

MS. GOLD: When did you begin to work with the three dimensional aspect of your work?

MR. OSGOOD: You mean in this piece, or anything?

MS. GOLD: In your pieces, when did you start putting them on dollies?

MR. OSGOOD: I don't know exactly. It's something that I realized early on. And some of that goes back to being influenced by Wharton Esherick, who was a sculptor turned furniture maker. And in the '50s, I really liked seeing his work. Also, I did teach sculpture. I have no idea why, but I did teach a sculpture class. And there, we were moving the pieces all around. A lot of pieces, they were large figures, and that was good training for me. I didn't really have the background to teach sculpture, but they didn't necessarily know that. I was learning from them.

But when I lived in Connecticut, I went into New York City two days a week to the same place where I talked earlier about making the lute. Prior to that class making the lute, I had worked with these ladies that came in every week to work on their wood or stone sculpture. And that's probably where I got the feeling of, yes, you have to move all around it, because in most cases, they were working with human forms, which obviously, you need to, unless you're doing a shallow relief. But they weren't; they were doing busts, shoulder, head forms.

MS. GOLD: So this is a carving.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah. I don't know anything about stone carving, but that didn't matter. They did.

MS. GOLD: What school?

MR. OSGOOD: This was the Craft Students' League in New York City. I remember I developed a new trick for them.

MS. GOLD: Oh, right, you said I was to ask you about the mirror.

MR. OSGOOD: The glass mirror. It's just a funny story. I was having trouble explaining to them about certain parts of their work was not shaped correctly, and they couldn't see it. And so, I remembered from years back, we had used a mirror. And so if you hold a mirror up here and you look at the pieces in back of you -- so if you turn around and look at your piece backwards in a mirror, why, it looks like a new form, and you can see the lumpy areas or the areas that need to be shaped differently.

And so, I remember showing them that. Maybe it was my biggest contribution, I don't know. Anyway, I moved out of that. I felt they were teaching me a lot, I guess is what my point was. And so, that would have been the early sixties -- a good time anyway. That's when I was starting out with many things. And somewhere in there, the real pieces of furniture I did after that, I'm pretty sure that's what keyed me into that.

Prior to that, I did have the feeling that if you made a bookcase, it still had to have a neat and clean back so that it would look all right, even though it was going to be against the wall. And now, I don't do any pieces that are exactly -- well, that chest of drawers, I guess, but I don't do too many pieces that have flat backs and so forth. Now, like in the case of that large desk in the other room, the back on that has a very, very slight outward curve, even though it's going up against the wall, more than likely.

And while I wouldn't necessarily do that on a bookcase, something like the desk form, I would do it because I feel it's important to be able to move around it. And you could sense the way this back is done, maybe even if you didn't completely see it. And so, in its early stages, it leads to putting the piece on wheels so that it can be spun around or moved around the workshop.

MS. GOLD: Does that also help you see the piece anew? Like the mirror helps to be able to understand it.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, only I don't use the mirror myself. [Laugh.] I always thought it was a trick. I rely on seeing the piece every day. If I see it in a relaxed state -- me I mean, not the piece -- I'll pick up the thing. Sometimes, if I stare too long at a piece of furniture wondering what's wrong, why can't I get it right, I try too hard or I just can't see it. So it needs to be done in a more informal way.

MS. GOLD: Walking around it is actually treating your work a little bit like sculpture.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I think that's important.

MS. GOLD: You were saying before that sometimes it's difficult to work with commissions. Do you find that you work best when you're creating those innovative pieces that you're just going to put in a gallery?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, generally speaking, the innovative work is work I've done purely on my own, whether it be for a show, or a gallery, or whatever. Generally speaking, those are the ones that move me ahead. That walnut semainaire that we were just looking at, that's probably one of the exceptions, because that did work all right, working with the people.

MS. GOLD: And you have the luxury to be able to do that because you have this good connection with the gallery, or are you just creating?

MR. OSGOOD: Usually, they don't -- we talk about, well, maybe it would be good to make a chest of drawers this spring, or oh, you're going to make another desk this summer for us. It's conversations like that. They wouldn't necessarily enter into what kind of wood it is, or how big it is, or the shape at the end. That would usually be my thinking.

MS. GOLD: Is that typical in a gallery relationship?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, as far as I know it is. If they're commissioning the piece and they're going to buy it, which would be kind of rare, then yes, they might well be making some pretty strong suggestions, like don't use walnut because our customers like light-colored woods. So it's not so good if you have a walnut thought and they change it. [Laughs.]

MS. GOLD: When you have moved ahead sort of in your reputation, has it been through the gallery, or has it been through these exhibitions, these national exhibitions that you're invited to?

MR. OSGOOD: Oh, I think it's a combination of both, yeah. I know that the work through my gallery on Long Island has been very helpful. They will publicize pieces or they'll suggest to a magazine or something that the work be covered. But the same thing happens with major exhibitions. I'll get in a catalogue or I'll get automatic publicity because of being in the things. The things all work together.

The one thing there which you'd think would be a given, and that is the photography. There's another thing that I learned years ago, and that was, spend money on good professional photography, don't do it yourself. And so, I have always done that over the years, and it's paid off. Because if Pritam and Eames says that there's a national magazine that needs a shot of your piece, then I can call up my photographer and he'll print color eight-by-tens or good black-and-whites and send them off.

So material ready for publication is really a necessity. I've discovered that over the years. And it's costly. I mean, it may be $350 to shoot a piece, plus the day that it takes to transport it to the photographer. But over the years and years time span, it's been very important to have the good shots available. I mean, that's not like

talking about how to design furniture or how I design furniture, it's just a housekeeping thing. It's the support.

MS. GOLD: Have magazines been important in your development?

MR. OSGOOD: I think so, yeah. I'm reasonably well known -- so they tell me -- and it's because of how long I've been working and the fact that over the years, I mean, there's stuff going out all the time in magazines. And some of it's good, and some of it isn't so good.

MS. GOLD: What about museums? Have they been important to you?

MR. OSGOOD: I think it's part of the whole picture. Because I meet people that say they've seen my piece here or there, or wherever. Yeah, it's part of the whole picture, really.

MS. GOLD: And do you have relationships with curators?

MR. OSGOOD: Well, other than the fact that they know me, yeah. I have a piece here in New Hampshire at the Currier Gallery, and I've gotten to know the curator there, and he helps us out now and then with things for the New Hampshire Furniture Masters' Association, for our jurying. And he's been very helpful, so it's good to get to know him. But that started somewhere in there, working with getting a piece.

MS. GOLD: How about the craft magazines? Are there any writers that you think are particularly apt in writing about what you do?

MR. OSGOOD: Oh, it's hard to say, really. I think Amy did a very good job on this article for *Woodwork* magazine -- Amy Forsyth. And one of the reasons for that is because she has an architectural background, but she's been studying furniture making.

[Tape change.]

MS. GOLD: Donna Gold interviewing Jere Osgood. This is the second tape, on the eighth of October, 2001, in his studio in Wilton.

MR. OSGOOD: You were asking about writers. The other one that was good was Rosanne Somerson. She's not doing that now. She's very heavily involved in work around the school of design. But she's a very good writer because of her interest in furniture, the understanding of it, so it's easy for her to get her thinking into the same way. Because unlike an interview, the writer of an article, they have to reinterpret what you say.

MS. GOLD: Before, I started to ask you about the -- you said, if you had a walnut thought, and it just stayed with me. Do you have a sense that certain woods are better for certain designs?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah. Fairly early on, I may feel that a certain wood would be the wood that I would want to use. And sometimes, it's just thinking a darker shade; other times, it's more definite, like the grain pattern in walnut would be the best for -- I have orders for two small tables that I have to fill this fall, and one of them has to be a light colored wood -- no more specific than that. One of them has to be dark and one white, so, I mean, that's up to me to settle that. So neither one of us had any definite thoughts on that, other than just light and dark.

MS. GOLD: Do you keep experimenting with woods?

MR. OSGOOD: Oh, yeah. The table down at the other end of the shop has legs made of -- and I really wanted to try using that wood. It's a very hard, cream colored wood, and it's a tree that grows here in New England. And I had the feeling that it would work well as a sculptural form, a very rounded leg form, not so many corners. Like these legs have corners. And other legs, while they do have corners, they don't read quite as strong as these. And I felt that because of the hardness of that wood and the way the pore structure was, it was something I really wanted to try. Try it: let's see how it takes to that. And I think it came out very well. It's a wood that isn't used very often. It's not common for one thing. It's a little unusual. So, yes, I'm still experimenting.

MS. GOLD: Did you ever experiment with another medium besides wood?

MR. OSGOOD: I studied ceramics. I've also taken some classes in weaving and bookbinding. Oh, I also have done a fair amount of metalwork. Well, this particular desk has got a lot of brass on it. I didn't have very many formal classes in metal, but I did in the other things I mentioned. And it's interesting what it did for me. It eliminated doubts I might have had that, yes, you're doing the right thing working with wood, was the end result. I enjoyed it, and the ceramics, it's a different way of forming things. It's very fast, and the clay, it's the forms you get from the clay, of course, but it doesn't have the grain structure that wood has. And that, somehow or other, affects my thinking. So there are definite clay forms to my way of thinking, and there are definite wood forms to my way of thinking. While I can't identify those easily -- and I think other people would also say the same thing. Well, it looks like a metal form or a clay form.

So it was just stay with what you're doing with the furniture, don't go out looking for other fields. So I've never wanted to do anything with those things, really. Except the metal has been an ongoing thing. I learned more about that. I do use a certain amount of hardware on the furniture, and I'm tending to make it myself, frequently. So that's a learning process. It, again, is a different medium. There are forms with the metal -- they're metal forms, whether they be brass, or steel.

MS. GOLD: It seems to me that you have a particular relationship with nature, and I wonder how important it is that you are among trees. You are living among your material.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, that's very important, extremely important. I know that's why I had to get out of New York City. I moved to Connecticut, it was a place out in the country there, and lots of nice trees there. And it's very important to me. Nearly every day, I take a walk on this path that goes around my property. And that, to me, is just a nice quiet time to walk through the trees. And I can't say how it exactly affects my work. I'm not making twig furniture. I mean, if I was, the people would see it as a definite relationship to his woods around his workshop.

But I think it's more subtle, and I don't feel -- well, I don't feel I'm articulate enough or even understand myself well enough to explain it. I just feel it's very important to me. Just to go for a walk in the woods at the end of the day is very relaxing. It's sort of a renewal point. I would also get some of the same, but different feelings, from being by the ocean. I've always wanted a house by the edge of the sea. And I feel like I am a part of this natural landscape whether I'm here or visiting the ocean.

And that "partness" or that sense of being with the things that are going on with the things outside, that's very important to me. I don't have that in the city. The city, of course, would have all sorts of wonderful things, particularly New York City or Boston, the buildings, the things in the museums are priceless. They're the result of other persons' profound understandings of thinking. And it's important to me just to get out, maybe where the basic things are, and to be out in nature where things are in a formative stage, whereas we see the complete collections at the Museum of Fine Arts. They're completed or finished, whereas it's an ongoing, living process being with the trees and the plants.

MS. GOLD: That's interesting. That sort of gets back to your sense of purity and innovation, doesn't it.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, it's very important to me. To continue on that, I actually find it easier to design in the winter, for some reason. And I have said at times, it's because of all these growing things going on around us in the summer. They make my thinking fuzzy. So when it's all cold, they're all asleep; they're dormant until spring.

I was just in Hawaii, and I should have heard this great clattering going on there, but I didn't. I wasn't there long enough. The things never stop growing in a climate like that. And I wasn't trying to design anyways, but I guess what I was trying to say was that if I was sensitive to this, going to a tropical climate would be impossible for me. So maybe I'm just making it up.

MS. GOLD: You know, I do sort of want you to give me the biography of one other piece, something that you choose to talk about. Is there a piece that you're most proud of?

MR. OSGOOD: I like several of these a lot, but this one, it's *Writing Desk*, 1986.

MS. GOLD: And it's a desk without a top, without a cover.

MR. OSGOOD: Well, this view is from the side you do not sit at, and it's probably in there because that's all desks. That one was done in 1986. That was *Angels in the Snow*, this form. And other people would have titled the desk *Angels in the Snow*, but I just considered that a personal thing. That was its origin, and I wouldn't use that for the title. That was my personal connection with it.

But if you want a history of a piece that I like, that was a piece that I did really like. It was very, very simple. I don't see that as a complicated piece, but yet, it doesn't, to my knowledge, refer -- it's a pure form. It doesn't refer to other furniture forms, and I like that. That part of it was very important to me. It did use my lamination techniques, but that's incidental. They were used because I drew the lines on the paper, so they would naturally play; in the techniques.

It's a very simple form. And the other thing about that, I have two slides of that desk that I show when I show my slides. And they are of that desk when the top is not on it, and they haven't been published in any magazine. But when I show my slides, I always show that because I want to explain to people that I'm talking to that the process of making the piece is terribly important to me, and that it's this designing and then the actual making in the shop that I'm so much involved with.

And it's not something that goes along with the finished piece. The customer or client can't buy the experience

of creating that piece, and I can't give it to them. And I had a good time making it. It worked out very well. And as I say, it had this interesting form without the top. So I have that memory of the piece, and that's important to me. It wasn't a particularly innovative piece. Maybe that isn't the right word. It is innovative because it was a very simple form. That's something that I would strive for. It was in "Poetry of the Physical," which toured around the country.

MS. GOLD: Another exhibition.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, it was done for that.

MS. GOLD: Can you tell me when you saw kids playing angels in the snow? I mean, how did the idea --

MR. OSGOOD: I don't recall myself going out and jumping in the snow. That's not it, but it may have been one of my boys. I really can't remember that aspect of it. I just know that is what inspired me for the form, with the arms and the legs.

MS. GOLD: But, you know, it's interesting. There's a split, so there's not a torso.

MR. OSGOOD: That's all right. Sometimes, when there's a negative form, it may actually be meant to be a solid. It's a hard thing there.

MS. GOLD: It's sort of referring to --

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, it may have another form in a different light. So I don't necessarily see that as two halves.

MS. GOLD: You've said it's not a very innovative piece.

MR. OSGOOD: The reason I said that -- and it isn't the right word -- is because I feel it's a very simple piece. And to me, that's a goal to strive for, the simplicity of the piece. So automatically, you could say, well, it's not very innovative because it's not very complex. So it's almost better that somebody else talk about my work and refer to it, because I sometimes don't have the right definitions. But do you understand my meaning? There is a goal of simplicity. There's a simplicity of form that we can achieve. This one is jingly, whereas this one -- it isn't a particularly good shot of it -- but it's a simpler form; it's a better piece than this, in some ways.

MS. GOLD: The better piece is the guild desk, and that's better than the laminated ash desk.

MR. OSGOOD: It looks somewhat like this on the other side. That's why we didn't use that shot. But it doesn't have the wings on it and the arms.

MS. GOLD: Now, is a desk something that you have an affinity towards because you work on a desk yourself? I mean, because you work on a desk to make your drawings.

MR. OSGOOD: Oh, no. I think that the desk is a good place to work with the sculptural forms that can be used in furniture. And there are all different types of desks. It can be almost just a simple table, or it can be a desk with a more elaborate upper carcass or great ranges of drawers. There's all sorts of almost endless possibilities as a furniture form, so that, to me, is a rich field that I can draw on. So it's for that reason.

Many times, you just give me a choice and I'll say, well, I'd like to do another desk, because I see it as a rich place to just go after the possible forms that could be done there. If someone says, make a chest of drawers, it's a more, usually anyway, it's a more definite mass to it. It's almost a solid form, whereas the desk can have areas that are very open to balance off, and you know, negative areas around the legs or the end forms -- to balance off the solid areas and the upper carcass. Sometimes -- maybe it's a limitation of my thinking -- but I've felt freer with the desk form than a chest of drawers form.

MS. GOLD: But you gravitate more towards that than towards a table. I mean, I know you do your tables, and they're wonderful.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, well, I've done just plain tables too. If somebody wants a dining table or a desk that is just a table, my thinking is probably quickly going to go to the idea of a plane, and what will I do with that -- you know, the level area of a table. Whereas the desk, the immediate thinking of the desk is, it's going to be three dimensional, or more three dimensional than the table, which may almost read two dimensional, because it's just this dimensional -- yeah. So it seems to be a richer feel there. If you asked me to pick, I'm maybe more likely to pick a desk.

MS. GOLD: So it's more of a challenge for you.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah. On the other hand, I'd like to work on a chest of drawers in the spring. I haven't done one

for a while. I don't know whether there will be anything major new in it, but it's time.

MS. GOLD: Are you always striving for something new when you think of a design?

MR. OSGOOD: I'm always working months ahead, yes. See, this is almost done already in my thinking, so I have to be thinking of way ahead. If I'm saying now that I'm thinking of working on a chest of drawers in the spring, that's what I'm doing: I'm thinking about it now.

MS. GOLD: And when do you think this will be ready?

MR. OSGOOD: Oh, probably not until the end of the fall. It may be ready in December, I don't know. This particular case, he said it's not critical. And it's good because I've got a number of things going on this fall which will slow me down. So it's not going to get done in a month or anything.

MS. GOLD: Have you worked with an apprentice?

MR. OSGOOD: Well, Niki, she's no longer an apprentice, but she does come to work every day. And I did have another person who was coming two days a week, and she hasn't been here for several weeks, but she's planning to start again next week. And, in many respects, she's past the level of being an apprentice, but she wanted to do it to get some change and experience. So it's okay with me. So yes, she's written down as an apprentice.

MS. GOLD: I know you taught for a long time, and was wondering whether its important to have that feeling of continuing to teach?

[Tape change.]

MR. OSGOOD: No, not as important now. A little bit now is fine. I like working with people, and you meet some very interesting people, but it's not a major thing now. I really have got to work here. And a week or two weeks or something during the course of a year is enough. I did a one-week class at the Peters Valley Craft Center this last summer, and then in September, I was in Hawaii for 11 days, and that's enough. The only thing coming up now until the end of the year is I have a one-hour class in demonstrating the band saw, which I have to do. I'm not sure why they asked me to do that, but they did.

MS. GOLD: Is that here in New Hampshire?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, it's up in Enfield. I'm a member of the Guild of New Hampshire Woodworkers. They said, would I do that, and I said sure.

MS. GOLD: When you teach, what is it that you feel you bring most? Why do you think that they call on you?

MR. OSGOOD: A lot of people need confidence and a little bit of technical help. You need to be able to tell them that you can do it, and here, I'll show you. That's about the way it is. There aren't a lot of profound experiences in these one-week or two-week classes. Occasionally yes, but for one thing, it takes a while to get it going, and also, it's a different type of student, too. When I was teaching at Boston University, and at RIT, the students there were more like a group of peers. It wasn't spooning of knowledge or how to cut joints. It was a group of us working together.

Yes, I was the teacher, but there were a lot of really very capable students. A lot of them had come from long apprenticeships, and it was just a great group to work with. And that's different. I mean, you can get into some more complicated work. They know where they've been and they know where they are, and they know where they're going, and it's a question of getting a community set up, a place for them to work and develop things, and just occasionally nudge one way or another somebody into some new areas. And that's rewarding when you see the results from that.

I get people that take my summer classes that will say they're always going to keep coming back to take my summer classes, so yes, that's rewarding too.

MS. GOLD: What is it that they say? Why do they want to keep coming back?

MR. OSGOOD: Well, they may just like the way the class ran, or they may feel they learned a lot, and probably both. It's an ongoing process for a lot of people. They usually aren't full-time furniture people that I get now, whereas when I was teaching at the college level, that was the major goal, to be full-time people. In some cases, now, they do come by, but not too many.

MS. GOLD: Another thing that I wanted to ask you about was this concept of making a plaster mold. Just tell me about that. You make a form, and then you use a plaster mold.

MR. OSGOOD: Well, you can see the end of this. It curves outward, it swells outward. The way they're made, they're not symmetrical. So when you go from that piece to this one. That one's left-handed and this one's right-handed. That dimpled end form and also the inside is a form that, it has to be glued in a vacuum press. It's a veneering process. There's a marquetry panel on the outside and a plain piece of veneer on the inside panel. It's because of this convex panel that's left handed and right handed, I had to develop a way of being able to duplicate that exactly.

It related to the way the joinery and the technical reasons why they had to be exact, at least I felt that they did, anyway. And normally, the form for something like that would just be another piece of plywood bent over some curving ribs. I tried that and I felt that I couldn't get the duplication that I needed accurately. So that led me to the idea of, well, I can do this in reverse accurately if I make a casting, which, what do you cast? Well, the easiest thing is Plaster of Paris.

So sure enough, I made the forms and they seem to be mirror images. I have one left handed one and one right one. Now I've got to make them all over again for this larger version.

MS. GOLD: That's akin to making a boat, isn't it.

MR. OSGOOD: Well, maybe. It might be. I've never made a boat. [Laughs.]

MS. GOLD: Have you ever longed to?

MR. OSGOOD: No, I've used the stave construction in a lot of my pieces, and well, it would follow naturally that I could make a boat without any trouble, but it's just never come along, or whatever. I don't think anybody, at this point, is going to commission me to do a boat. There are more furniture commissions lined up.

MS. GOLD: So when you design something, you have a concept that's in your head and you put it on paper, and you don't always know how it can be achieved.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I think that's a very important concept, is the idea of doing the design work and then figuring out how to make it. And I don't feel that we should be limited by a certain number of techniques. I don't spend all my time inventing new techniques, although I have perfected a couple. But to me, it's a very important concept. You will hear this the other way around. People will say, design around the available techniques, and I don't think that's right. I think if you have something important to say in your design work, there's an obligation to find some way to make it. So I have always followed that.

And doing that, it led to the work with the compound stave lamination and the tapered laminations, and so forth. Technically, they're not too big a deviation from the normal, but it does help achieve the forms that I've been trying to get.

MS. GOLD: And those are the two essential innovations.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, there are sort of three different lamination processes: tapered, double tapered, and compound stave, are the three ones that I'm responsible for.

MS. GOLD: Have those gone on, and are they taught in the woodworking classes?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, there's a trail that goes along behind me. If I've been there, why then, some people at that place will continue doing it, in some degree or another. But they're not in general usage everywhere. I mean, that may be slowly changing, I don't know. I've given classes in my lamination techniques all over the place, so it's interesting to see the results of that. I just mentioned I was teaching in Hawaii, and one of the things I had to do there was be one of the judges in an exhibition, and there turned up there in that show two tables with this tapered lamination process that I know started with me.

And it took me two or three days, but I finally found the person who had made them, because he was in my upcoming class. I just waited for him. And he had been a student at RIT for two years. Now, I haven't taught at RIT since the seventies, but yet, people there will continue. You know, one or two a year may use it, and so that's enough for it to be transferred along the lines. And many of the people that I had as students when I taught at Boston University, they would continue using my techniques.

And they're not always obvious. In a lot of my work, it's pretty obvious. It stands out as a tapered leg. They may be the less obvious use. It's just the way they design things. They come out differently.

MS. GOLD: That's interesting, because it's a somewhat complicated, innovative technique. But what it does is give you a much more organic form.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah.

MS. GOLD: I think at one point, we were talking about it as a root form.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I see it as a root form.

MS. GOLD: I'm getting to the end of my questions. I'm wondering whether there are areas that you feel like we haven't covered.

MR. OSGOOD: Well no, I think it's good if you came back today to talk more about the specifics in the certain pieces. It's a little hard for me to keep a survey in mind of, did I cover this or that. I don't feel I'm lacking any big area that we didn't get into. I think you've caught most everything.

MS. GOLD: Or is there anything just in general that you wanted to talk about?

MR. OSGOOD: No. Well, I think we talked about it, but maybe the one thing is what's coming next.

MS. GOLD: Actually, that is what I was going to ask you.

MR. OSGOOD: Did you ask that question, or did we talk about it?

MS. GOLD: You talked about the bookcase. What are you looking forward to?

MR. OSGOOD: My thoughts are, for the spring, I wanted to get back to the chest of drawers form. I feel it's a little more limiting than the desk forms, but I haven't done one in a while, and it might be good to revisit that again and see what came of it. But, in a way, I'm in sort of a channel. Given the opportunity, I'll probably start working on another desk next year. I mean, I just see them as a perfect avenue. So it's not something we can have a big, long discussion about, this change in my direction or something coming up in the future. It's good to reiterate that I'll continue business as usual. It works well for me and, as I say, the desk form is a haven for sculptural form. Whatever sensitivities I've got yet to develop, I think it's a good place to focus on.

MS. GOLD: Whatever sensitivities you have left to develop?

MR. OSGOOD: Oh, sure, that would have to be ongoing in all of us. It's a growth process. You know, I'd like to think I keep learning. I feel now I've got a better understanding of the forms that I'm working with than I did 25 years ago, or even 10 years ago. So there'll be a race against biological time to see how the next 10 or 20 years -- the pieces may have to get smaller because maybe I can't lift the large planks 20 years from now. But I'd like to think that I'm getting better.

MS. GOLD: When you say sensitivities, do you mean like to visual senses?

MR. OSGOOD: Sensitivity to form.

MS. GOLD: So you keep on honing your senses.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, right. What am I really doing there? Is this the way I want this line to read, and does it read that way to other people? How am I seeing it, wherever it is? It's a slow process, in a way, compared to clay. I mean, you can make many, many things in clay and see how they look, but furniture making does take a little longer.

MS. GOLD: And do you do all parts of it, or what part do you give to an assistant?

MR. OSGOOD: Well, yes, I do all parts of it. This end panel, I made these parts for these legs, and then I band sawed the lines on them, and then there was still more material to come off, so I put layout lines on there, front and back, and gave them to my helper, and she then followed those lines. And so, it's exactly the way I drew it. She sanded these. And if I had done them, they probably wouldn't be sanded, they would just be done with a -- She likes to rough sand. It's just done roughly. She thinks we can get a better feel for it. So she's responsible for the shaping, but I've given her the lines.

MS. GOLD: And in the final desk, you will work on that with her, too.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, with the final material. This edge has to be v-shaped, and this is a good place to do it here. I'll try it out and see if I like it, and then I may ask her to fine sand. And if it looks right, then we'll do it that way on the real one.

MS. GOLD: Do people work at your desks?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, some of them. Yes, this one is an attorney in Philadelphia, and he says he uses it all the time. Well, that one doesn't get used, but this one will. This is the bigger version of this. This one is in a museum

collection.

MS. GOLD: What museum?

MR. OSGOOD: It's at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum. This one is in the Renwick Collection, but there's two of them, so one is getting used.

MS. GOLD: And what do you call that one?

MR. OSGOOD: It's *Cylinder Front Desk, 1989*. This one, I've done a number of these, probably in different woods, actually. There are maybe six or seven of them, and they're all in use except one. I know one is in the collection of the American Craft Museum, but all the others are working desks.

MS. GOLD: And that's the writing desk that generated the interest.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, it's a personal space; it's not a big desk, five feet, sixty inches. This one, a doctor in Florida has this one.

MS. GOLD: A dome desk.

MR. OSGOOD: A dome desk, yeah. To me, it's important that they be used. It's flattering, of course, if it goes in a museum collection, but I design the things to be used. So if you just want to look at it, okay.

MS. GOLD: I have a second part to that question, which is, do people who use it have a different approach to their work because of the attention you've given to this space?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, it does happen. People will come up to me, but they don't comment on that, though. They'll say how much they really like the form. They see it every day, and they like that part of it, how much they really like my desk, sort of comment. So that's good to hear that. These people are scattered all over the place. They're not the type that you meet all the time.

This one desk in New York City that is in use all the time, and he's always telling me how much he really likes it. And then, I get there to put a little finish on it for him, because he says it looks tired.

MS. GOLD: Is this an attorney?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, so I've got to touch up the finish a little bit, and he's always very complimentary.

MS. GOLD: So from start to finish, how long would you say this desk, which is a redesign --

MR. OSGOOD: Oh, this is probably going to be two-and-a-half-months of work, something like that.

MS. GOLD: And is this sole work, or are you working on other --

MR. OSGOOD: Well, it might be three months because I'm liable to be working on other things at the same time.

MS. GOLD: So three months.

MR. OSGOOD: But that's why I say two-and-a-half months because its not unusual for me. Like these two little tables are going to happen, then there is a little bench over there that should be worked on. I was planning to make a tray upon the thing here behind me, which I wanted to re-design. The are not major things, so I'll work on them off and on and get to this.

MS. GOLD: And is it important for you to have that coming and going?

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, I actually , in some ways, prefer that. Some of the decisions that have to be made here, like I said before, it was important to have it on wheels so I could move it around and get view points each time I came in the shop. Sometimes there are decisions I have to make on a form or something or other; How is this going to be shaped here, or how thick this is or whatever. Sometimes I don't like to rush that. I might start to do it and deliberately stop so that I can get a fresh look at it the next day, and if there's a deadline ten days away, there is no luxury for that, it has to go right along. I'm perfectly capable of doing that, and I can get in a rhythm there also, but in some cases I might rather have the longer time. I assume he meant it, he wasn't in a big hurry for this.

[Audio break, tape change.]

MS. GOLD: This is Donna Gold interviewing Jere Osgood for the Smithsonian Archives at his home in Wilton, New Hampshire, on October 8, 2001. This is day two of our interviews. I know when I was asking you questions, I

think the more specific detail about -- I think it's very useful to hear that.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, sometimes it's hard to remember. Other times, it's crystal clear. Like that desk is *Angels in the Snow*, and that's very clear to me. I mean, that's where that one came from, so it's not something I have to think about.

MS. GOLD: You know, sitting here in your workshop is a very different experience from sitting in your living room. In your living room, I'm looking at that beautiful stained desk, and that's sort of the finished product. And so, you're looking always towards that sense of purity, but here among stacks, and blocks, and sheaths.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah, in many ways, I'm more comfortable in here, but I might just automatically assume that the other room's the place for an interview, without thinking about it. Yeah, the feeling in here is different, I know that.

MS. GOLD: So when you have to choose the comfort of things around you, it looks like you actually have three areas that you live in.

MR. OSGOOD: Well, I don't use that living room. I watch the news there and sit down and have a drink. I spend more time in here. I mean, that's a place if I have family or friends, we sit around in there and talk. But if I've got the *New York Times* to read or something like that, I'd bring it in here.

MS. GOLD: Oh really, you bring it right in here.

MR. OSGOOD: Yeah. Well, in the winter the stove would be going, but in the summer, I'd still sit in here. It's very pleasant. The light comes in through the window and there's usually some birds there in the window behind you.

MS. GOLD: So on a normal daily basis, you're not sitting among any of your furniture.

MR. OSGOOD: I wouldn't sit in the living room and live in the living room.

MS. GOLD: But you will go outside.

MR. OSGOOD: Oh yeah, I go outside occasionally, yeah. I go out in the morning to see if it's still there, then at the end of the day, I usually take a short walk. This business of space is very interesting. I worked for a while in my father's basement on Staten Island until I could save up enough money to move. It took me about two years, I guess. But I worked there anyway a lot.

And I bought this place in Connecticut, and it had ceilings, like 18-foot ceilings or something, and it was this great release when I got out of the seven-foot basement. It really helped my thinking. Yeah, I very deliberately made this ceiling high, partly because I need space under the lights, but also partly because I remembered what happened with that place I got in Connecticut. It's confining being in a low space, and it has something to do with a mental state.

MS. GOLD: Shall I let you get back to work?

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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