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Oral history interview with Earl Krentzin, 2002 August 30-31

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a digitally recorded interview with Earl Krentzin on August 30 and 31, 2002. The interview took place in Grosse Pointe Farms, Michigan, and was conducted by Jan Yager 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.

Earl Krentzin and Jan Yager have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JAN YAGER: This is Jan Yager interviewing Earl Krentzin at the artist's home and studio in Grosse Pointe Farms, Michigan, on August 30, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Earl, when and where were you born?

EARL KRENTZIN: I was born in Detroit, Michigan, on December 28, 1929.

MS. YAGER: Can you describe your childhood and family background?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I had two brothers and two sisters, and they were quite a bit older than me. My next brother, the next child, was 12 years older than I was, and they ran up to about 20 years older. And so I, sort of, had a mother and a father and a whole bunch of close people who were more like mothers and fathers than brothers and sisters to me.

MS. YAGER: Was anyone in your family an artist?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, one sister, sort of, as a young person did do some artwork. You know, she took classes, never anything -- I don't think she was really serious. And then later on in years she began doing all kinds of things: painting and stained-glass making and needlework, things like that -- quilting and stuff like that.

MS. YAGER: Can you describe some of your early childhood and what guided you in your career choice?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I was always interested in drawing and painting and making things. I remember we used to save the cardboard that came inside of shirts when they came back from the laundry, and using those and straight pins I would make little three-dimensional objects. And my one sister, I think, encouraged me, of the whole family, more than anybody else, you know, as far as I think she projected being an artist onto me, because she decided not to do it professionally.

MS. YAGER: Tell me about the type of education in Detroit at that time, your elementary and -- elementary school training.

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, the Detroit schools at that time had something they called the Platoon System, in which you went to homeroom for a part of the day, where you studied things like reading and arithmetic and spelling and a few, sort of, basics, and then you went to different classes, like an art class or a music class or science class, gym class. These were separate things, and I don't remember how long they lasted, probably at least a half-hour or so. And sometimes it was set up so if you were going a full day, you would spend, say, the morning or the afternoon in the homeroom, which did the basic Three R-type things, and then the other half of the day in the special classes.

And some years you spent, like, half of the morning and half of the afternoon in the Three R-type things, and then the other half of both the morning and the afternoon in the special classes. And you didn't go to the same special classes every day. You would go maybe twice or three times a week, say, to art, and then the other two-fifths or three-fifths of the week would be, say, music. And things were divided up like that, so you really covered a lot of different subject matter. This was from first grade to the sixth grade.

MS. YAGER: What made you go to -- now, Cass Technical High School [1945-48], that was a well-known high school for many different subjects. Can you talk about that school?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, that had been around for a long time before I got there. I don't remember when the school started, but I know my older sister graduated from it, I think in 1924. She graduated in pharmacy. At that time people could go to a school like Cass Tech and become a registered pharmacist. But the problem with her is that when she graduated, she was only 16, and you had to be 18 before you could work in a drugstore, so she never

became a pharmacist. But it had, sort of, different technical subjects that they taught, besides the regular English and math and history and things like that.

And it also -- it wasn't what you would call, like, a vocational or trade school. It was a college preparatory thing, too. You did -- at least when I went to it; I don't know how it was earlier on, but this was, like, in the -- I was there from -- I'm trying to remember -- '45 to '48, and it had been this way for a long time before that and continues to be that way now. Besides these, sort of, technical things that you -- classes that you took -- you took the regular English and history and sciences.

MS. YAGER: Did you study art or --

MR. KRENTZIN: No.

MS. YAGER: -- metal or something?

MR. KRENTZIN: No, I didn't actually. When I went there, I was thinking of possibly becoming an engineer or something like that, and I took what was called at that time the mechanical drafting curriculum, where you learned about things that would be, sort of, pre-engineering. You learned about mechanical drawing, and you learned about using different machines, and you took courses in metallurgy and things like that.

And, you know, there I learned a lot about working with tools and with metalworking machinery, although the stuff was so outdated then that I remember they were just getting things from the federal government, you know, that had been stocked up for the war, but then when the war finished, they were giving these things to the schools. But we never got to use them. They were going to install them. We were using machinery that must have been given to them after the Civil War, I think.

But, anyhow, I mean that -- you know, I was always interested in working with machinery and learning about it.

MS. YAGER: And then you went on to Wayne State [Wayne University, now Wayne State University, Detroit, MI, attended from 1948-1952]?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah. And I went to Wayne, and I really wasn't sure what I wanted to do then, and I sort of floundered around for the first semester and then decided to go into art with an idea of doing something, I didn't know exactly what. And I was doing more or less the basic fine arts-type curriculum, you know, painting and drawing and sculpture and -- printmaking -- I became very interested in that because I, sort of, liked the processes involved. You know, you were actually working with tools and materials other than just paper and paint and pencils. And then I took some metalwork classes and, you know, just went on from there.

MS. YAGER: Who was teaching metalwork at that time?

MR. KRENTZIN: At that time it was a man named Robert Eaton, who had been, I believe, an industrial design major at Wayne and had gotten a master's there, and he was hired to teach metalwork. And it was one of these things, you know, where he was, like, one page ahead of the students. But he was a nice guy. I don't think he knew an awful lot about working with metal, but he was sensitive to good design.

MS. YAGER: And from there you went directly to Cranbrook [Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, 1952-1954]?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yes. Actually, I was at Wayne in grad school for one semester, in art again. But I really -- I wasn't sure exactly what I wanted to do, but then I decided that I would go to Cranbrook and major in metalwork.

MS. YAGER: And who was teaching at that time?

MR. KRENTZIN: At that time it was Dick Thomas.

MS. YAGER: And did you take sculpture classes as well as --

MR. KRENTZIN: No, no. You had to minor in something, and I think for one semester I minored in ceramics. But I really didn't like it, so I went into painting and printmaking and more or less specialized in printmaking for the rest of -- I was there for three semesters, and the last two my minor was in printmaking. But you really did very little there. You only went to that for, like, one day a week, and I was really so interested in doing as much as I could with metal that I used to sort of fluff off that minor. Most of the kids did, you know.

MS. YAGER: Who was your most memorable teacher over all those years?

MR. KRENTZIN: I don't know. I mean, you know, I was exposed to Dick Thomas for that year and a half that I was at Cranbrook, and as far as spending more time with somebody, he was the one. But I've always been someone

who, sort of, got things out of books and digging around on my own. I never really became a disciple of anybody. I mean, not that I'm trying to say anything against any of these guys.

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MR. KRENTZIN: But I don't know, I just never -- because, you know, I've had kids in my classes when I've taught, you know, who've become -- you know, they just want to get inside of you -- do you know what I mean? And I was never that kind of person.

MS. YAGER: What do you think was the most rewarding educational experience you had, in school or out -- something that altered you?

MR. KRENTZIN: I don't know. That's hard to say. I really -- I don't know that anything altered me. I think I've always been the same. Not that that's necessarily good, but --

MS. YAGER: Did you know that you wanted to be an artist very early on?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I don't know. I think maybe -- you know, all kids, I think, go through a stage when they want to be something. But it just sort of happened, you know what I mean? I just -- this is what I want to do and have to do and like to do. And I've been lucky to have family, you know, that always supported me in what I wanted to do, you know? It wasn't a question of being an artist is okay but you'd better learn something where you're going to be able to get a job. Do you know what I mean?

MS. YAGER: Mm-hmm.

MR. KRENTZIN: They probably would have been more smart to have said that. Maybe I would have listened; I don't know.

MS. YAGER: Do you remember any of the students that you studied with at those times, and have any of them remained in the field?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I remember a few at Cranbrook, but I was never really close to them. See, the situation at Cranbrook was most of the people that went there lived there and they became sort of closer, and I used to just commute. And there were a couple of people who went there the same time I did that had been at Wayne University, and I remember them. They weren't in my classes. One was in ceramics, one was in -- I think two were in painting. There were a couple of others, and some of them have continued. I don't know. Did you know Lillian Wolock Elliott?

MS. YAGER: No.

MR. KRENTZIN: She was from around here. I've known her -- well, she died about a year or two ago. But we had known each other since, I think, around the seventh grade in junior high school.

MS. YAGER: And she became a metalsmith?

MR. KRENTZIN: No, she was a -- she got her master's at Cranbrook in ceramics, but she ended up mainly doing things related to fiber and textiles. She was very big on basket making and things like that. She had been living out in California for, I would say, the last 30 years or so, and I might see her occasionally. And there were a couple of other people that I know are still functioning because I see their names sometimes, but they weren't really people that I would consider friends. They were more like acquaintances that just happened to be there at the same time.

But as far as metalsmithing or jewelry or anything, I can't think of anybody -- well, there's Stanley Lechtzin, but he was a few years younger than me and I really didn't know him until after I was out of Cranbrook, and I think he was too. But he was from this area, and actually at one time, when we had moved back to Detroit after I had been teaching at the University of Wisconsin, we lived on the northwest side of Detroit and he lived within a couple of blocks of us at that time, and we got to be a little more friendly.

MS. YAGER: Can you tell me your wife's name -- her maiden name and when you married?

MR. KRENTZIN: Lorraine Wolstein was her name: W-O-L-S-T-E-I-N. I think that's how you spell it; I don't remember. We were married in 1954.

MS. YAGER: And what year was she born?

MR. KRENTZIN: Thirty-one -- August 13 of '31.

MS. YAGER: And you have one child together?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yes.

MS. YAGER: And his name is?

MR. KRENTZIN: Alexander.

MS. YAGER: And what year was he born?

MR. KRENTZIN: 1960.

MS. YAGER: Now, Lorraine is also an artist?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah, she was an art teacher for most of her teaching time. She also taught occasionally in the grades when the millages would fail for a while, you know, and they decided to get rid of the art teachers. But she taught out here in the Grosse Pointe schools for I think 32 [27] years, until she retired.

MS. YAGER: And your son Alexander, is he an artist?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah. Not -- it's not the way he earns his living. He's a children's librarian in Berkley, Michigan, but he does glass and photography.

MS. YAGER: Have you had opportunities to travel?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah. We spent a year in England. I had a Fulbright in 1957 and '58 to the Royal College of Art in London.

MS. YAGER: Can you talk about that?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, we had a good time there, I think, generally. I wasn't impressed with the school, but I really didn't expect to be. I mean, it was -- you know, they gave me a place to work and, sort of, treated me as a colleague, because I had been teaching at the University of Wisconsin at the time I got the Fulbright, and so they accepted me as a fellow teacher. And I was a member of the Senior Common Room, which sounds very impressive when you tell anybody about it, if they've seen any English movies, and you eat lunch there and it was very posh.

But there was very little instruction being given in -- I don't know about the other parts of the school, but as far as the jewelry and silversmithing, they were, like -- I shouldn't say back in the Middle Ages because I think in the Middle Ages they had a better system of teaching people how to work with metal. They just -- I don't know.

MS. YAGER: Do you remember --

MR. KRENTZIN: They spent more time designing things than actually making them. And if they had trouble making them, they had a silversmith there that would actually do it for you, you know, if you had a sort of complicated part of this thing that you were working on.

MS. YAGER: The silversmith was not a fellow student? This was an on-staff person?

MR. KRENTZIN: No, the silversmith was not even a staff member, not a faculty member. He was one of the peasants. He didn't eat in the Senior Common Room.

But it was interesting. There was a guy there who had been sent for the year. He was the official silversmith of the Sultan of Brunei, and they decided to send him there to learn, sort of, the Western techniques. And I think he knew more than the teachers there, by far.

MS. YAGER: Who was teaching there at that time?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, the professor who was the person in charge of the silversmithing studio and the glass department -- and I think there might have been one other department, but I'm not sure -- his name was Godden. That's spelt I think with one O, but it was pronounced Gooden: G-o-d-d-e-n. And, I mean, he would walk through the studios, like, every week or so, and everybody would, like, bow down. But he really had nothing to do with the students, as far as I know.

MS. YAGER: Was there anything that you found very inspiring in London?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I think the museums were wonderful. Like, the V&A [Victoria and Albert Museum, London], I think, is -- you could go there every day for a year and not see everything, and many other places like that, I

mean, the antique shops and the street markets and the galleries. We had a nice time there, although we practically froze to death over the winter. You know, it's so cold and we had this little tiny kerosene heater that we would carry from room to room. But just the general experience was very interesting, just to live in a country that you think the people will be speaking the same language and acting the same way, and they're really very different from us. We enjoyed it. In fact, we've gone back several times and spent time in London for three or four weeks at a time.

MS. YAGER: Where else have you traveled?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, that year that we were in London we, sort of, would -- during the school vacations we would go to several different -- one of these really, "If this is Tuesday it must be Belgium." You know, that type of trip. We did that at the first Christmas vacation, but then during Easter vacation we decided to just go to one place, and we went to Copenhagen and we stayed there for about a week. And since then, when it's come to any kind of a so-called European-type trip, we've gone back to London, because there's really so much that we never got to do that we wanted to when we were there for the whole -- well, it wasn't a full year, but it was, like, 10 months, I think, the school year.

And we've lived in different places in the United States. As I mentioned before, I taught at the University of Wisconsin. Actually, I was on the faculty there for four years, but one year we were in England on the Fulbright. And then I was at the University of Kansas for a year and a half as a visiting professor in metalsmithing, and I spent -- that's in Lawrence, Kansas. We spent a spring quarter, I guess it was -- not a semester but a quarter, they call it down there -- at Florida State University in Tallahassee. And we've been to cities around the country.

MS. YAGER: What's your philosophy about teaching and learning?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I don't know that you can teach anybody to be an artist. I think you either are going to be one or you're not. I think you can teach people techniques, but I don't think you can teach them the, I don't know what to call it, taste or aesthetics or whatever you want to call it.

MS. YAGER: Did you enjoy teaching?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah. I rather more enjoy not teaching, but I didn't mind it. I mean, there were lots of screwballs that you had to deal with, but I'm sure they said that about me too. No, I'd rather be working on my own artwork.

MS. YAGER: Did you ever apprentice with anyone?

MR. KRENTZIN: No.

MS. YAGER: And did you have any jobs that were related to the auto industry?

MR. KRENTZIN: I worked for Chrysler for about a year as a model maker -- not a clay model maker. That's what you always think about, but we were a department where we made, like, the knobs on the instrument panel and the emblems that said Plymouth or something.

MS. YAGER: What material did you use?

MR. KRENTZIN: Metal, usually plated brass. And sometimes we did things in plastic. Sometimes they would make something in clay and then have it cast in some kind of plastic, and then we would, sort of, finish it off.

MS. YAGER: What year was that?

MR. KRENTZIN: Nineteen-fifty-five, I think. It might have been part of '55 and part of '56. It was a time of a big recession in the automobile business and a whole bunch of us were laid off. But I was going to go on to teach at the University of Wisconsin anyhow, so it didn't make that much difference. But that's the only thing I've had to do with the auto industry.

MS. YAGER: What's your earliest memory of working with or seeing someone else work with metal?

MR. KRENTZIN: I can't really remember; I don't know.

MS. YAGER: Do you remember the first time you made anything in metal?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, it depends on -- as far as anything significant, I think I remember making a little ring out of a piece of silver that looked like a belt with a buckle. Not real original, but I saw that someplace. It might have been like in *Popular Science* or something, and I think I was in either junior high or high school. I remember going down and buying a little piece of silver and just cutting it out and filing it. It didn't include any soldering or

anything. That's probably the first thing I can think of besides straightening out nails or something -- [chuckles] -- which is working with metal.

MS. YAGER: What initially drew you to metal?

MR. KRENTZIN: I don't know; it just seemed like an interesting thing to work with. You know, you see all kinds of things made out of metal and it just appealed to me. I like it better than working with wood. I work with wood occasionally in combination with metal sometimes, and I've made a few pieces of furniture and things like that, but I'd much rather work with metal.

MS. YAGER: What is it about metal that has kept your interest all this while?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, it just feels good when you're working with it. I don't know how else to say it.

MS. YAGER: Do you -- we're going to get back to that in a little bit.

MR. KRENTZIN: Sure.

MS. YAGER: Do you recall the first prize you ever had -- ever received?

MR. KRENTZIN: I don't know if that was the time I won the Founders Prize at the Michigan Craft Show [Ninth Annual Exhibition for Michigan Artist-Craftsmen]. It might have been before that, I can't remember. I'd have to like check the dates.

MS. YAGER: You won the Founders Prize [The Founders Society Purchase Prize, 1954] a couple of times, didn't you?

MR. KRENTZIN: No, I think I just won it once.

MS. YAGER: That was a very important prize to win.

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, it was important as far as that particular show. The Detroit Institute of Arts used to sponsor a Michigan Artists Show and a Michigan Artist-Craftsmen Show. And I used to show in both of them, because in the craftsman show I would have some kind of an object that was either a piece of jewelry --

[Audio break.]

MS. YAGER: This is Jan Yager interviewing Earl Krentzin at the artist's home and studio in Grosse Pointe Farms, Michigan, on August 30, 2002, for the Archives of American Art Smithsonian Institution.

Earl, you were talking about the Founders Prize and the Michigan Artist-Craftsmen Show -- the two different shows that you showed in.

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah. I don't know how much of this I'm repeating, but I'll say it again. As I said, they had the Michigan Artists Show, which was, like, for painting and printmaking and photography and sculpture, and then the Michigan Artist-Craftsmen Show was for more or less usable objects in metal and clay and fabrics, wood. You know, the usual craft-type things. And I used to show in both of them, because I would show, like, a metal box or jewelry or something in the craft show, and I would have submitted little silver sculptures of one kind or another, nonfunctional pieces, in the Michigan Artists Show. But the Founders Prize I won in the craft show. That was a purchase prize from the museum, when they would buy the piece and put it in their collection.

MS. YAGER: Do you remember the price of the piece?

MR. KRENTZIN: I really don't. Is it in there?

MS. YAGER: It does mention the year. That was 1954.

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah.

MS. YAGER: That must have been pretty exciting.

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah, it was.

MS. YAGER: You received a Louis Comfort Tiffany Award [Louis Comfort Tiffany Grant in Creative Metalwork, 1966]. What year was that?

MR. KRENTZIN: I think that was '96 -- not '96. Maybe it was '96.

MS. YAGER: I can look that up. Can you talk about that award?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, it wasn't for anything specific. But I don't know if that award is still being given out. Do you know?

MS. YAGER: Every other year.

MR. KRENTZIN: Do they?

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MR. KRENTZIN: But it used to be they would give a prize -- or I think they gave more than one each year, but each year would be a different craft. You know, one year would be metalwork and another year would be ceramics and another year would be weaving or woodworking. It's crazy, I can't -- I think it was '96, but then, I don't think -- it couldn't have been '96.

MS. YAGER: Did this have a substantial impact?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, it happened the year that I was teaching at the University of Kansas, and I was there replacing somebody who was away for a year. And then the award came up, and Alexander had just started kindergarten that year. It wasn't -- I just can't think of the date. It must be on that stuff that I gave you. But, you know, he was in --

MS. YAGER: Was it around 1966?

MR. KRENTZIN: -- because we'd started -- yeah, it must have been '66. I don't know why I kept saying '96. He had just started in the -- we went there in the winter, and we started, like, the end of January, beginning of February, so we were going to go home in the middle of -- and he had started kindergarten in June. And we worked out a deal where I could teach part-time for the next semester and stay there until he was finished with kindergarten, so he could start first grade when he came here. And there wasn't any particular requirement that you had to do something. You know, they just gave you the award and it's up to you to do whatever you want with it. So we, sort of, like, used it for eating money, because I wasn't getting very much for that. I think I was just teaching one class. But we were already there and --

MS. YAGER: Do you remember the amount of the award at that time?

MR. KRENTZIN: It wasn't an awful lot. I think it was $2,600. Today it doesn't sound like much of anything, but --

MS. YAGER: Let's see, we have to go -- if anyone had the good fortune of sitting in your home, this question of, "Do you collect anything?" would be so obvious. You know, we're sitting surrounded by wonderful, very dense clusters of very focused collections. Can you talk a little bit about your interest in collecting and how that may have had an impact on your life or on your work?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I think it's had a big impact on my work. I think my work is more inspired by things that I've seen -- not necessarily things that I own but things that I've seen that have been made in many different cultures and in many different times, from prehistoric times to the present, and all kinds of people from the most sophisticated so-called Western Civilization-type people to very backward, primitive people. Backward isn't a good way to describe it, but you know what I mean.

But anyhow, so much of what I've done in my work has been inspired; not that I copy things, but, you know, you'll see something that someone made 300 years ago in Africa and it inspires you to make something. You sort of -- I don't know if it's the same feeling that the person had when he made the original piece, but it does inspire me very much. And then I may look at some piece of modern art and be inspired in that way too.

And Lorraine and I have been collecting since -- I think the first thing we bought was on our honeymoon when we first got married, and I'll show it to you later. It's a little African sculpture of a zebra. And it hasn't stopped. It's slowed down a little bit, but it hasn't stopped. And the only reason it's slowed down -- two reasons -- you have to be a little more aware of where you're going to put it, because there isn't much room left, and it's just harder and harder to find anything, you know, which there's two reasons for that. One is that there aren't as many things around, plus you see something that's nice but you know you have a nicer one at home, so that keeps you from getting it.

But, anyhow --

MS. YAGER: Where have you collected pieces? Have you traveled, or you go to markets of some sort?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, we found things while we were -- a few things when we were in London on the Fulbright;

fairly inexpensive things because we didn't have -- not that we have a lot of money now, but we didn't have much of anything then. But, you know, street markets and the antique shows and --

MS. YAGER: So --

MR. KRENTZIN: I used to go to garage sales a lot. I don't go as much any more, but I still go to house sales around the area. There are a lot of them around here usually. There weren't any this week -- well, there was one, but it wasn't any good.

MS. YAGER: Just from the chair I'm noticing African brass. Can you describe some of these different -- just within the view of this table, what some of the topics of collecting are?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, those are, as you mentioned, African brass. There are also some African iron pieces, or steel, like that bird. And on that shelf are pieces in bone and ivory. They include Alaskan Eskimo pieces; there's a Canadian Eskimo piece; there are pieces from India; there are pieces from Africa. This is all in the bone and ivory and tortoiseshell sort of category. There's a piece of something -- or a couple of pieces made by French prisoners of war that were kept in England on these, what they used to call, prison hulks, which were, like, boats that were, sort of, not seaworthy anymore, and they just used them as jails in order to keep the prisoners. And they would make things out of ivory or wood and straw, things like that.

Okay, to the right of that is a collection of Louis Comfort Tiffany metal objects, trays and boxes and inkwells. That was inspired by the -- Tiffany grant, we always say. Then there is a little case with a lot of little Ashanti gold weights. They're not gold; they call them gold weights because they were used to measure -- they would weigh gold dust. That was their -- instead of money they would barter gold dust for things, and they're made out of brass or bronze. There are a few other metal dishes and trays. These are all boxes of all kinds and cultures and materials. There's some American Indian and Pre-Colombian pieces up above there, plus a couple of 19th-century English or American majolica, pitchers in the shape of little bears.

And behind me is a collection of Reginald Marsh prints. There's a couple of lithographs and some etchings and metal engravings. This is a Miró lithograph. This is a silk screen by a German artist by the name of Alt, A-L-T, which was done for the 1972 Olympics. They had a whole series of artists from all over doing these posters, and they made them in three different ways. They made, sort of, a hand-screened or lithograph signed piece like that, and then they had an unsigned lithograph, and then they had just a commercially printed poster. So you can see the same thing in three different -- and that one -- I mean, he's not a real well known artist. There were other more prominent people, but I just, sort of, liked it and I thought it was funny. And this one we liked because the title is *Cat* and you can see these -- this one -- I think, that fills up this room.

MS. YAGER: And that's just a taste.

MR. KRENTZIN: I forgot, that's a little African wood carving of a bird, and it's on top of a Japanese little chest. And that thing in the corner is an old smoking stand from the '30s, American, with the airplane. And it lights up, actually. There are little lights in the -- you know, those little windows in the airplane.

MS. YAGER: And then a beautiful carpet on the floor. So, richly layered, richly textured environment.

MR. KRENTZIN: And that table, which is actually a tea cart, is something that I made when I was teaching at the University of Wisconsin. I was teaching a class where they sort of -- I think they called it materials workshop, you know, and the kids made things out of wood and metal and things like that. And some of the people wanted to make pieces of furniture, so I, sort of, worked along with them and I made that. One of the students came with a whole bunch of cherry wood. He lived on a farm outside of Madison, and they had chopped down some of the cherry trees, and he was going to use some to make a cabinet. And he asked me if I wanted some, so I said, fine, and I used it on that. And then -- originally it had those little glass square mosaic tiles, but then I was able to get some Pewabic tiles, and took the mosaics out and put those --

MS. YAGER: Pewabic is the art pottery in Detroit?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yes, yes. Oh, and those are some Pewabic dishes going up the wall there.

MS. YAGER: Can you tell me when your first major show was?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, again, I'm not very good on the dates. You'll have to look on that list that I gave you. But I had one here in Detroit. It was in the early '60s at what was called the -- well, actually then it wasn't called that. I've forgotten what it was called, but it became the Donald Morris Gallery [formerly called Park Gallery], which was active in Detroit for a while. They've since closed it up and I think they're just working out of their house. But that was the first, really, that I can remember a one-man show. And I've had several others around here, and I had some in New York.

MS. YAGER: Can you talk about the Detroit Artists Market?

MR. KRENTZIN: Oh, yeah, I had a show there. I think that was before the Donald Morris one. Well, the Detroit Artists Market was started during the Depression by a number of people who were interested in the local arts, and it was to promote originally, like, the younger artists. And originally I think they -- it had a connection with the Society of Arts and Crafts, which was the school that now is called the Center for Creative Studies, but for a long time everybody just called it Arts and Crafts School. And then they moved into various places in downtown Detroit, and they would have volunteers that would, sort of, do a lot of the work, you know, and they would have a jury, and people could -- [audio break] -- taking things. When I was still a student at Wayne, I think, I started taking some of my prints there. And we -- Lorraine and I were both active as far as submitting things there and helping out around there.

I never joined it, because I didn't really feel -- they always encouraged the artists to join, too, and it wasn't very expensive, it was, like, $5 a year to join, but I just felt that it was sort of a conflict of interest to belong to something like that and also submit art there because, you know, it just didn't seem right to me. But, anyhow, we used to help out. And the lady who for a long time was the gallery manager -- and she was, like, the only person who was paid -- was a very good friend of ours. You know, we got to be good friends after a while. And she retired a few years ago, and she's still living in Detroit but --

MS. YAGER: What was her name?

MR. KRENTZIN: Margaret Conzelman.

MS. YAGER: How do you spell her last name?

MR. KRENTZIN: I think it's C-O-N-Z-E-L-M-A-N.

MS. YAGER: And she was there for a very long time?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah. There was another lady before her when we first started going there, a Mrs. Alexander, who when she retired, Margaret took her place. I guess originally Margaret worked part-time with Mrs. Alexander. But then it sort of changed, and we really haven't had much to do with it. Lorraine had something in it. She was taking some of her weaving down there, and she had some paintings in the show a couple of years ago. But since then we haven't -- I haven't been down there. They moved out of downtown, I'd say about five or six years ago, to a building that used to be, I think, part of the Parke-Davis Pharmaceuticals on the River. I don't know if you're familiar with it. Around --

MS. YAGER: Is it near Pewabic Pottery?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, it's more towards downtown. I think it's -- the cross street, I think, is Joseph Campau or Chene Street, one of those. It's like about a mile up from the Renaissance Center. And that wasn't very successful at all, because people just didn't want to go there. You know, they should really be -- you know, when they were downtown originally, that's when downtown was really going, and people would go there. And now they've moved to a place near Orchestra Hall on Woodward, which I don't know if you know, but the Detroit Symphony is now using that as their auditorium, and they're trying to make it a little bit of an art-type place, but I don't know how they're doing. I haven't been there.

MS. YAGER: Can you talk about Hirschl and Adler [Hirschl and Adler Galleries, Inc., New York, New York]?

MR. KRENTZIN: I really don't know anything about them. I had a show there, obviously, but this was all the doings of Lawrence Fleischman. He thought I should have a show in New York and he was friends with them and he arranged for it.

MS. YAGER: Was he a dealer or a patron of yours?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, he was a big collector in the Detroit area and then moved to New York and became one of the owners of the Kennedy Gallery [New York, New York]. But this was when he was still in Detroit.

MS. YAGER: You had a number of shows in New York at James Graham & Sons and Kennedy Galleries.

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, James Graham -- and then there was another place, I don't know if I ever mentioned it; I may have forgotten it. G-Gallery [New York, New York], was that one of them? But anyhow that one also. And the James Graham & Sons, I just one day, sort of, contacted a number of galleries, and they were interested. And then after that -- shortly after that -- Larry Fleischman became part of Kennedy, and once he got organized there, he called me and wanted to know if I would become one of their artists. And it was -- my stuff was nothing like any of the other things they had there, but he really liked them, and I had several shows there.

MS. YAGER: How was the work received?

MR. KRENTZIN: People liked them and bought some of them.

MS. YAGER: They made catalogues for a number of the shows --

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah, yeah.

MS. YAGER: -- which is wonderful to have that document. Did you also continue to actively show in the Detroit area at that time?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah, a little bit.

MS. YAGER: How frequently did you work with galleries in selling your work? What percentage of work do you think you sold through galleries versus individual contacts and things?

MR. KRENTZIN: I don't know. It wasn't that much being sold either way, to be perfectly honest. [Laughter.] But I would say it was about half and half. I've never been one for art fairs and things like that. I think that's the wrong way to go, for my things, at least.

MS. YAGER: What do you think is the right way to go?

MR. KRENTZIN: I don't know. I think these things should be treated the way serious works of art are treated, because I think that's what they are.

MS. YAGER: That doesn't happen as much in our field, does it?

MR. KRENTZIN: No.

MS. YAGER: What would solve that -- how to do that?

MR. KRENTZIN: I don't know. I really don't know.

MS. YAGER: Do you think the gallery system is working for artists?

MR. KRENTZIN: I don't think it's much of a solution for them. I think there should be another way, but I don't think there's going to be. I mean, there is so much junk around, and it has nothing to do with whether the work is important or good; it's just a matter of more public relations and lobbying and things like that, which is true, it seems, about everything in this country now.

MS. YAGER: Did you have any -- you've mentioned Lawrence Fleischman. Did you have any other close relationships with customers or patrons that helped you in your -- continuing in your career?

MR. KRENTZIN: Not really. I've really -- I've never really tried to get that close to them, you know what I mean? I mean, if people are interested in my work, whether they want to buy or they just want to come and see it, they're welcome to come any time. But I'm not going to go out and look for them. I'm just not that kind of person.

MS. YAGER: Was there one particular show that you considered particularly important in your career?

MR. KRENTZIN: I don't think so, not one more than another.

MS. YAGER: Did you try to determine the positioning and arrangement of things in the gallery? Or, you know, how much did you have a say in how things were displayed?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I think I could have had much more of a say than I did, but I always felt that they're the ones that are supposed to know how to do it, and let them do it, you know what I mean? I wouldn't want them to tell me how to make my thing, you know, and I wouldn't want to tell them -- insist on them doing something the way I wanted it to be done as far as displaying it. I mean, fortunately I don't think I ever ran across a situation where I thought they were doing it in such a way that I didn't like it, you know what I mean?

MS. YAGER: Did you go and see the -- you were in the "Young Americans Show" at the American Craft Museum at one time, and also at the "Fiber, Clay, and Metal Show" in St. Paul, Minnesota. Did you go and see those shows, or send your work?

MR. KRENTZIN: We went to see the "Young Americans" one. That was -- I think that was before they even had the Craft Museum. It was in the -- what did they call that? No, it was in the Brooklyn Museum, that's right. Yeah, we saw that.

MS. YAGER: Can you talk about that show?

MR. KRENTZIN: It's so long ago I don't even remember what I had in it.

MS. YAGER: Must have been exciting to be in it and go there?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah, it was fun. The best thing, I think, we discovered the Brooklyn Museum had this wonderful museum shop. I don't know if it's still like that. The last time I was there, which was a long time ago, it was going downhill. But they used to -- well, there was a man there by the name of Karl Fox that ran it, and he used to bring things in from all over the world. A lot of the stuff that we had came from there originally. He ended up being in charge of the museum shops at the Smithsonian.

MS. YAGER: In Washington or in New York?

MR. KRENTZIN: No, in Washington. This is a long time ago, I'm sure he's no longer alive.

MS. YAGER: Did you go up to the Brooklyn Museum more than that one time?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah, whenever I was in New York, I always used to make a point of going there.

MS. YAGER: What were other favorite places in New York?

MR. KRENTZIN: I don't know. New York is not one of my favorite places altogether. If I had a choice of going somewhere, I'd rather go to London.

MS. YAGER: I would, too. The "Wisconsin Designer-Craftsmen Show" at the Milwaukee Arts Center, did you ever travel to that show?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah, I think I went to see that once. But it was just a show.

MS. YAGER: Do you do your work -- is people's response to your work important to you? Or do you -- are you aware of the customer or the patron at any time when you're doing your work? Or isn't there --

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, only in the rare cases when somebody asks me to make something for them. But otherwise I just do what I want to do, and if people want it, fine.

MS. YAGER: And how have people been aware of your work in the Detroit area? Through the Detroit Artists Market? What other places might they be aware of your work here?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I just had a little show at a little place in Birmingham last fall, I guess it was. And I don't know. I mean, not an awful lot of people -- whether they know about it or not, they don't express themselves. But I guess people just find me.

[End of Tape 1.]

MS. YAGER: This is Jan Yager interviewing Earl Krentzin at the artist's home and studio in Grosse Pointe Farms, Michigan, on August 31, 2002, for the Archives of American Arts, Smithsonian Institution.

Earl, this is the second day that we're talking. I have a couple of questions about things from yesterday, if we could just do that before we start the next set of questions. I wondered how long you've lived in this house.

MR. KRENTZIN: Since 1967.

MS. YAGER: And I wondered also did you spend summers anywhere in particular? Did you go on summer vacations anywhere at all?

MR. KRENTZIN: No.

MS. YAGER: Any of the artist communities that are in the Midwest?

MR. KRENTZIN: No. I'm not very community-oriented.

MS. YAGER: And I also wondered if you had any favorite books or magazines over the years that you've subscribed to on a regular basis?

MR. KRENTZIN: Not that I can think of. I mean, there are a lot of magazines that I read, but I usually get them out of the library.

MS. YAGER: Well, which ones would those be?

MR. KRENTZIN: I'm trying to think. I've become addicted to *Country Life*, the English magazine, which goes against all my political feelings and things, but it's interesting to read. They have a few interesting parts to it. There's something called "In the Salesroom," or something like that. But, anyhow, it's about -- usually about different auctions of art objects in England, usually London but other places too. But then sometimes they'll talk about shows like the Grosvenor House Antique Show, or something like that. And there are other things in there.

There used to be a really great man that wrote that page, that salesroom page. I can't think of his name [Frank Davis], but he retired at a very late age. I think he was in his nineties by then, and I think he's since died. The guy that writes it now is okay, but this guy he was so -- for one thing, he had a great sense of humor, and he also was very well informed. He'd been around for so long. You know, he'd mention that he remembered this particular object when it was sold another time, like, for seven shillings, or something, in the '30s, and now it was selling for a million pounds, or something like that. But that's one of the magazines I've been reading.

MS. YAGER: And I also wanted to ask you your parents' names and what their interest or occupation might have been and where they were born.

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, they were both born in Kiev, which is in the Ukraine, but at that time was part of Russia. They were both born in the late 19th century and came here -- actually, my father came here first and sort of paved the way, and then my mother and my two sisters came about a year later, when the two girls were -- one I think was -- the oldest I think was, maybe, four and the youngest was two.

MS. YAGER: What year would that have been?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, my mother came here, I think, 1911, and my father previously.

MS. YAGER: And they came directly to Detroit?

MR. KRENTZIN: No, they came to New York City, actually lived in Brooklyn. They never lived on the Lower East Side, where most immigrants, sort of, started out. They went directly to a different slum in Brooklyn at the time, and they lived there for a few years and then they moved to Detroit. And my father was in the wholesale fruit and vegetable business for most of his life.

MS. YAGER: And how did they pick Detroit?

MR. KRENTZIN: As I remember, there was a relative here that convinced them. I can't remember; I think it was one of my father's cousins or something.

MS. YAGER: So do you speak Russian or --

MR. KRENTZIN: No. I wish I did.

MS. YAGER: And I wondered if you could tell me your favorite place to go in Detroit, as far as inspiration or finding wonderful objects?

MR. KRENTZIN: Unfortunately, I can't think of anything.

MS. YAGER: Well, you talked about --

MR. KRENTZIN: Probably, to make the best of a not-too-good recommendation, the Royal Oak Flea Market is -- of all the flea markets around here, it's probably the best. Although I haven't been there for a while because, with this business of the expressways being worked on all summer, you have to go there on surface streets, and it takes 10 times as long. And we used to go to the Ann Arbor-Saline Antique Market, but again we haven't gone there for a while, mainly because I've had bad arthritis in my knees for the last several years and there's an awful lot of walking involved and it's all on, sort of, not very smooth --

MS. YAGER: Hard, yeah.

MR. KRENTZIN: -- ground to walk on.

MS. YAGER: And I wanted to ask you, the shows that you had in New York at Kennedy Gallery and the other gallery, you have beautiful posters and beautiful catalogues for those shows. Can you talk a little bit about whose idea it was to do that, and how all that came about and who -- what the arrangement was, who paid for that even?

MR. KRENTZIN: You mean for the posters and --

MS. YAGER: The posters and catalogues.

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, the gallery has always done a nice job. I don't know if you've seen any of their other catalogues, but they've always been a really nice job. Even if it was just a little foldout thing, you know. But usually they've been several pages and many of them very scholarly when they've been about older works of art. But the idea of having the catalogue -- I mean, it was their idea usually. And the poster idea started with them when that -- as I mentioned to you yesterday when we were talking, but not on the tape, about -- it was the Mourlot Brothers, I think is what it was called, a lithography shop in -- originally in Paris and they opened a branch in New York City, and the gallery was having their artists, if they wanted to, do a poster to go with the show.

And I can't remember all of the ones that did them, but I know that before I did mine for them -- one show that I had that big silver-colored poster; Ben Shahn had done one, and in fact I have a copy of it. It's, like, a little boy balancing on his hands on a tricycle. But, anyhow, Larry Fleischman, who was one of the owners at the time, asked me if I would come to New York and do a lithograph. Actually, the work was done as far as the drawing right in the -- at the Mourlot shop, drawing on a lithograph stone. I'd never done that before. I've made woodcuts and etchings and silk-screen prints, but I'd never done a lithograph. I thought it would be interesting.

You know, and I, sort of, wanted the idea of having something metallic to represent the sculptures, so we decided to just do a black linear drawing and print it on a, sort of, a silver -- it's not real silver, but, like, a silver-colored surface, the paper, and then it has, sort of, a -- I don't know what you'd call that background. Sort of a spattered, kind of, cloud effect in white.

MS. YAGER: They're quite beautiful.

MR. KRENTZIN: I had a lot of fun doing that. And then I did a little sculpture of these people printing lithographs, and Mourlot bought it. That isn't why I did it; I just -- it just -- you know, sometimes you are involved in something and it makes you, sort of, want to make a piece that goes along with it. That's been one of the things I've been every once in a while doing is a, sort of, craft. You know, a little representation of someone at a craft or an art. Say, somebody doing something working at a machine, like in a factory.

MS. YAGER: Many of them seem to be related to how people interact with machinery.

MR. KRENTZIN: Yes.

MS. YAGER: And also transportation. Seem to be a lot of --

MR. KRENTZIN: You know, anything, sort of, mechanical or scientific or related to the visual arts in some way. I've done, as I think you've seen, some little sculptures of a painter at work. There was a series I did -- I should have showed you that one yesterday and forgot -- with Aaron Bohrod, who was the artist-in-residence at the University of Wisconsin when I was there, and we got to be very good friends. And we did a series where he did the paintings, little tiny miniature paintings in his very, sort of, super realist style, and then I did the sculpture. One is, sort of, a portrait of him painting a self-portrait. And another one was sort of like a maintenance man, or whatever, hanging a picture on the wall of a gallery, or something like that. And there were, I think, four all together. Most of them were sold, and we, sort of, shared the price of them, but I kept the one with the self-portrait of him there, and I kept that.

Then I did another one like that, but I used a type of semiprecious stone called Picture Jasper, or Landscape Jasper, as the painting. I have that one here and I'll show it to you. That's the story about that poster. Then for other shows -- that Mourlot lithograph place didn't last too long in New York. I guess it was -- they just said it was too expensive to work there, that it was easier to just -- if people wanted it done -- have it done in Paris and send it back here. Because there is a process, as you may or may not know, with lithography. There's a special kind of paper that you can draw on with the lithograph crayon, and then they transfer it to the lithograph stone by, sort of, putting it through a press, and it becomes the surface of the lithograph stone.

But, anyhow, I went back to making silk screens of the posters, because I had always done things with silk screen, even if it was just printing Christmas cards or something, you know. And those are a lot of fun too, and I like to do them.

MS. YAGER: And I wanted to ask you about the Fulbright and the Tiffany grants. Did you apply for those, or were those --

MR. KRENTZIN: Yes.

MS. YAGER: Were you nominated?

MR. KRENTZIN: No, no. Those were ones that you would apply for.

MS. YAGER: Okay.

MR. KRENTZIN: And the Fulbright grant was funny, because I applied to go to Denmark, because I thought as far as working with silver, that that was a good place to go. And then I got a call from someone from the Fulbright office in Washington, or wherever it was where they do it, and they said something about, "If you change your request from Denmark to England, you're in." So I guess they didn't have anybody they wanted to go to England that year.

But, anyhow, I figured, well, it was worthwhile going to. I wasn't too impressed with what I knew about contemporary English silver work, but they certainly had a great tradition of it. And so we decided to change it. I didn't have to change anything much on the application except the country, and that's how I ended up there.

MS. YAGER: And you referred a few times to trades and barters. Before we had the tape on, you mentioned trading a suit to Fred Fenster for a wooden box that needed repair. And you talked about Reginald Marsh prints that you traded for building -- was it pedestals and frames?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah. Well, little --

MS. YAGER: Was that --

MR. KRENTZIN: -- bases for African sculptures for a gallery in Detroit. I've done that occasionally. I'm trying to think.

MS. YAGER: Let's see --

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I think it was in 1964, Stanley Lechtzin organized something for that World Crafts Conference that was held at Columbia University. Are you familiar with that?

MS. YAGER: No, I'm not. What year roughly?

MR. KRENTZIN: I think it was '64.

MS. YAGER: Okay. I think I might.

MR. KRENTZIN: You may have seen things about – oh, get out of here, kitty [Mr. Krentzin's cat jumped up on to the table where the tape recorders were placed].

[Pause.]

MS. YAGER: You were talking about the World Crafts Conference.

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, as you had asked me about trading. And Stanley Lechtzin had come up with this idea of having a, sort of, little workshop on electroforming. He had gotten very interested in it at that time, and he invited several people from around the country to come to his studio at Temple University -- I forgot the name of the arts school.

MS. YAGER: Tyler [Tyler School of Art].

MR. KRENTZIN: Tyler, that's right. And he had all this equipment and it was all set up, and we were to experiment with it and then give a little presentation at the conference, which was held a few weeks after that, I guess, in New York City. And I remember at the time, I traded with Stanley for something he had made, for a little thing that I had made. That's one of the times. And there have been others, but I just can't think right now.

MS. YAGER: Did you involve yourself in national or regional artists and craft organizations? Let's see, the American Craft Council [ACC] for example, or the Society of North American Goldsmiths [SNAG]. It sounded like -- you've mentioned a couple of times that you really didn't like to join things too much?

MR. KRENTZIN: No, that's true. You know, I participated in that World Crafts Conference thing, but not much more as far as the American Craft Council was concerned, except I have been in some shows that they have sponsored. And also in this area, you know, the Midwest, when I was teaching at the University of Wisconsin, I think I went to a couple of regional things.

MS. YAGER: The Wisconsin Designer --

MR. KRENTZIN: No, no. But these were things that had to do with the American Craft Council. They had

something in Chicago that I remember that we went to. I really wasn't that interested in it, though. I mean, I figured I should go just because I was there --

MS. YAGER: And the Michigan --

MR. KRENTZIN: -- was going.

MS. YAGER: [Laughs.] The Michigan Silversmiths Guild, what's your recollection of that group?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, that was a group of people who were interested in silversmithing, and occasionally they would sponsor a talk or a demonstration by people in the area or out of the area. I remember I gave a little talk for them down at the Detroit Art Institute. Actually, it was while I was still teaching in Wisconsin, but we had come back for -- I don't remember if it was specifically for that, or just come back for a little visit. And occasionally they would become a little more active than others. Sometimes they didn't do much of anything -- or at least I didn't hear about them doing much of anything.

And as I mentioned to you I think on the phone one time, the organization had been started mainly by a married couple by the name of Kenney-Eagans [Marion Kenney and Fred Eagan]. They actually -- each one took part of the other one's name and became a hyphenated name. And they ran classes for people who were interested in silversmithing and jewelry making, and they, sort of, started this thing. And I would say that most of the people who belonged to the Michigan Silversmiths Guild were either students of theirs at the time or former students. But there were a few people that were, like -- you know, that were teaching in the area at the various arts schools or universities, who would for a while get interested in it.

MS. YAGER: Mike Vizzini was a name that has come up.

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah.

MS. YAGER: Do you remember --

MR. KRENTZIN: Yes, I remember him. He taught at the Arts and Crafts School, or what's called now Center for Creative Study, for a while. And I had known him before that. Actually, when I was saying yesterday about taking metalwork classes at Wayne when I was there with Bob Eaton, Mike Vizzini was in one or two of those classes. He was just taking those classes. I don't think he was ever really permanently or regularly enrolled in the university. And I guess he had -- I don't know what other training he had had, but fairly capable silversmith. I guess -- I said he taught for a while at Arts and Crafts.

MS. YAGER: What would be your favorite museum in Detroit?

MR. KRENTZIN: If you're talking about Detroit per se --

MS. YAGER: Well, metropolitan.

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I still think the Detroit Art Institute is nice.

MS. YAGER: How about the -- can you think of a favorite piece in the museum?

MR. KRENTZIN: I can't really. There are so many things there.

MS. YAGER: How about the Henry Ford Museum?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah, that's another place that -- yeah, I would consider that a very interesting museum. I mean, just about anything you want to look at, they have one of.

MS. YAGER: I would think that a lot --

MR. KRENTZIN: And Cranbrook.

MS. YAGER: Right.

MR. KRENTZIN: Both art and science museums. And the Detroit Historical Museum I like to go to. That covers them all.

MS. YAGER: All right, let's see. Can you describe your studio a little bit?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, it's full of a lot of junk. [Laughs.] Well, I work in my home. I have basically two rooms in the basement that were here when we came. It was one of the selling points to us of the house, that the studio area was, sort of, pretty much there. And it has the usual tools and equipment that you need for silversmithing,

nothing very technical. I don't think I use anything that wasn't used 100 years ago, or maybe 1,000 years ago, except that some of the things are attached to electric motors instead of having to work them with your hand or foot.

MS. YAGER: Out of all the processes that you use, are hand fabrication processes in general --

MR. KRENTZIN: Yes, yes. Basically the same thing -- you know, the same processes and basically even the equipment is pretty much the same as was used in Egyptian silversmith studios or Roman ones or ancient Chinese ones. It's just that we have -- instead of having to use a certain amount more of hand power, we do -- as I said, we have electric motors and we have piped-in gas or tanks of gas, rather than using the charcoal and having to pump air into it to make it hot enough.

MS. YAGER: And your favorite material seems to be sterling silver, and you would acquire that in the form of sheet and wire?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah, sheets, wires, and sometimes tubing. At one time I was able to buy a little round -- hollow round balls of silver in various sizes with just one little hole in it. But it, which saved me a lot of time when I was making little heads for things sometimes. But as far as I know, whoever was manufacturing them doesn't do it any more, so I have to make, like, a ball out of two, half balls, and it takes a little more time.

MS. YAGER: And your favorite technique would be -- or your favorite tool. What tool do you use the most?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I don't know if I could say which one particular tool. There are several that I use: a hammer of one kind or another, a jeweler's saw, a file. Those are --

MS. YAGER: And the surfaces on all of your pieces seem to be very distinctive.

MR. KRENTZIN: Yes. I like to get a, sort of, textured surface that will work well with oxidation of the silver. In most cases I know that some people don't agree with me, but I don't like real highly polished silver on my work. That doesn't mean other people shouldn't do it. But I like the idea of a, sort of, textured surface, and then I -- when I finish the piece, I oxidize the whole thing, which means that it turns sort of a black color. And then using a fine steel wool, I'll go over it and clean the oxidation off the surfaces so that it remains just in the background and the crevices.

MS. YAGER: Have the processes -- the pieces that I've seen yesterday and today in your home, are the working processes -- have they changed over time? They look to me like they've gotten very refined. Are pieces that you started making 30 years ago very different from things that you're working on at this point?

MR. KRENTZIN: I wouldn't think so. I think maybe they get a little more complicated, and I think they've gotten a little bigger. I mean, when we're talking about a little bigger, we're talking maybe in quarters of an inch. I don't mean that they've gotten really big. But originally things were a little smaller. But as far -- you know, occasionally I've done things that are more -- I don't know what you would call them, but not quite as detailed. And originally I did some like that, and others were more -- even now I do it.

But I used to do a lot more casting, you know, lost-wax casting, where you make an object in a certain kind of wax, and you put it into a mold that's made of a plaster that can stand a lot of heat. You melt out the wax so you have a hollow there, and you basically pour the molten silver in. It's a little more complicated than that, but that's basically what you do. And I occasionally would do some very intricate and detailed things in that casting process, which you can do. But more and more I've been happier just working directly in the metal itself, rather than --

[Audio break.]

MS. YAGER: This is Jan Yager interviewing Earl Krentzin at the artist's home and studio in Grosse Pointe Farms, Michigan, on August 31, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Earl, you were talking about your studio practices. Did you ever have assistants or interns or employees?

MR. KRENTZIN: No.

MS. YAGER: Did you ever work with -- now, you mentioned that one of -- you had a large commission where you had certain things that you had formed --

MR. KRENTZIN: Yes, that was for a sculpture for Westland Shopping Center in Westland, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit. And it was several little figures balancing on a bicycle, like acrobats standing on each other's shoulders, and it stood about 10 feet high when it was done, which is a lot bigger than most of my other work has been done by far. And naturally it wasn't made out of silver, it was made out of a bronze mixture that came -- I used

sheets of the metal and wires and rods and hollow tubes, and they were all fabricated into making the bicycle and the figures. And I did have the basic heads and bodies of the little figures made at a metal fabricating shop in the Detroit area, because it was just a matter of saving time.

Then the pieces were all soldered together and -- first, before being soldered together, all the details and everything were made. And then the surface was put on by using a sort of a paste of ground up tin in a, sort of, liquid material, and you can just paint the stuff on and then heat it with a torch, and it sort of melts into the surface and makes a kind of surface related to the kind that I get on my silver pieces by hammering and filing them and texturing them in many ways. Then a patina was put onto it which turned it black, the way I do to the silver, but it used a different chemical for this, and then rub it down with steel wool so that you get the highlights back to the metal color and the black more or less in the crevices.

MS. YAGER: What would that technology have been used for before that surface treatment?

MR. KRENTZIN: I don't know that it was ever used for that. The material that I was using was actually used as a solder on, like, dairy equipment or food equipment, you know, made of stainless steel or other metals like that where you didn't want any lead. Ordinary soft solder is made of a combination of tin and lead, and lead is not -- obviously not good to have in places where you have food or anything like that. So this pure tin, which melts at a slightly higher temperature but still is able to be used, and it's used basically for that. But I thought it would work well for this thing, and it did. But I don't know, maybe other people have used it too. You could use it -- you know the way people have copper pots and they have -- and they're tin on the inside? Usually a way that has been done in the past is they just have, like, a big bar of tin, and you heat up the copper and just, sort of, rub the tin around on it.

MS. YAGER: How did that commission come about?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, the architect for the Westland Shopping Center was Lou Redstone, who was a well known architect in the Detroit area. He died just last spring, as a matter of fact. And he always tried -- one of the few architects that I've known about or know -- I knew him personally, but many others that I know about, most of them really aren't interested in having any art in their building, or whatever they're designing. He was always one that always tried to have something. And the shopping center, they -- at that time it was being built by the J. L. Hudson Company, which was the big department store here, and they were interested in having these sculptures and other decorative things like that in their centers. That was like, I don't know, the fourth or fifth one they had built in the area I think.

MS. YAGER: Did the change in scale -- did you get advice from the architect on how to change the scale of your work so dramatically? Or was that something you were able to adapt?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, he had seen my work. In fact, I think he -- by that time he had a couple of pieces of it that he had bought. No, actually I had traded with him? I've forgotten. Some of those Pre-Colombian Indian ceramic pieces came from him. He was a big collector of those, among other things. But, anyhow, he wanted something 10 feet tall and he thought -- you know, he had seen that one of those acrobats and he thought that would be a good one, and I did too, so just decided to go ahead and make it.

MS. YAGER: And you kept to your style. The scale didn't seem to alter --

MR. KRENTZIN: Yes. No, no, I don't think so.

MS. YAGER: Did you do other large-scale commissions? Or was that the only opportunity?

MR. KRENTZIN: That's the only commission. I've done a couple of other -- not 10 feet tall, but using that same scale of the individual figure. You saw the one little musician that I had here, and that one -- actually I had two of those because at the time I had those basic body shapes made, I had to make a couple of extra ones just in case I messed up on some of them. But then I didn't, luckily. The three that were supposed to be on the sculpture worked out fine, so then I decided to do two others. I had this one and I have another one sort of like it that was holding a bow and arrow. I recently sold that one to somebody.

And then just on my own, just for fun more or less, I decided to do a couple of others. Not all consecutively, this was over several years. I have one of an astronomer. I had made a little one like that. As I mentioned before, I've done some with arts- and science-type things. I had this astronomer looking through a telescope, and there's, like, a little table there with different astronomical instruments and things, and I decided to make a big one of that. And also I have one of a man and a machine like that. But right now those are both disassembled and packed up in the garage because I don't have any room for them.

MS. YAGER: When you worked on those large-scale pieces, that was at this home?

MR. KRENTZIN: I'm trying to remember. Yeah, I think -- not all of them. The last one, the man at the machine, I think was done here. Maybe the astronomer. I think that was done here too. Those two -- actually, I made those -- the two little men, the musician and the guy with the bow and arrow -- I shouldn't really say I made them. I assembled them, because I had started making them while I was in Kansas. Because, actually, after I had finished the sculpture for Westland, before it was ready to be installed, we went to Kansas, where I was visiting professor for a year and a half, and I took those two -- you know, the parts for those two little guys with me. I thought it would be interesting for the students to see me working on that, which I did.

MS. YAGER: How do you describe what you do to people?

MR. KRENTZIN: I usually say you have to see it. [Laughs.] But I make little things out of silver. Sometimes they're boxes, and sometimes they're little cups or things, and sometimes they're just little sculptures that just stand there and don't do anything, and sometimes they're little sculptures that don't just stand there, but they do something when you turn a crank or move them around or something. And I say you have to see it to really know what I'm talking about.

MS. YAGER: The posters describe it as silver sculpture.

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah.

MS. YAGER: You mentioned yesterday that you would sometimes enter a piece of jewelry in an exhibition. I haven't heard you mention much about jewelry. Did you do some?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I still do some once in a while, but they're all basically in style related to the three-dimensional pieces that I do. I mean, the jewelry is three-dimensional too, but I mean -- you know, related to the sculptures or the --

MS. YAGER: Can you talk about the most recent piece you did? I think that was the piece you did for your son's library.

MR. KRENTZIN: That has nothing to do with this.

MS. YAGER: No? All right -- [laughs]. I'm sure it was in your style.

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, not really. It was more in his style, as I worked from his picture.

MS. YAGER: Describe one of the most important pieces. Like, is there a piece that you consider, sort of, a very significant piece for you; it's very important in some way? Can you just describe that one piece on the tape?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I would say they're all important and significant, and if I think they're not, I either don't finish them or I just break them up. But why don't I describe -- actually, that's, I think, probably -- the last significant piece that I finished is that one I showed you yesterday, and I think if I take a second to get it, I can describe it better while I'm --

MS. YAGER: Yes.

MR. KRENTZIN: Okay. Now, what I have in front of me is an object made out of silver [*Reversible Spinning Creatures*], various little semiprecious round beads, but not with a hole that goes all the way through them like beads for a necklace. These have a hole that only goes halfway through, so when you attach them to something, you attach them to like a little peg that's soldered onto the piece of silver, and it also has wood in it. I think this is walnut or mahogany, I can't remember, because it's --

MS. YAGER: Very black at this point.

MR. KRENTZIN: -- dark. Yeah, it has been stained and textured with a -- by going over it lightly with a torch and charring the surface, and then --

MS. YAGER: To emphasize the grain?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yes, and then you go over it with a fine wire brush, which brushes the charred part away, and it leaves you with, sort of, a grainy textured surface. And then it's stained and waxed. But, anyhow, this thing -- to describe it, the base is a flat piece of a square of wood with a sort of -- something that looks like a turned-over Dixie Cup shape. And there is a spiral of silver that goes up from the top of that cup shape about -- I don't know. I think it's about 14 inches or so. And attached to this is a circular construction made of flat silver wire that's about, I don't know, a sixteenth of an inch thick and about six inches in diameter.

And then there are three, sort of, little poles coming out from the center that, sort of, have a bamboo-like feeling

on them, but they are silver also. And then at the end of each one is a different semiprecious stone. There's a piece of lapis, a piece of epidote, and a piece of carnelian. And hanging onto the piece of bamboo-like rod that comes through between the outside edge of that ring and where the ball of semiprecious stone is attached is one of my little guys. I don't know what you want to call them. They're creatures, I guess.

MS. YAGER: They're creatures. One looks sort of monkeyish and one looks sort of perhaps rat-like and --

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, they all have, sort of, muzzles with teeth in them and big, sort of, tusks. Well, he hasn't.

MS. YAGER: And somewhat bird-like hands.

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah, and --

MS. YAGER: And little dresses – [laughs].

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah, they're wearing, sort of, little dresses.

MS. YAGER: And holding flags or pennants?

MR. KRENTZIN: And each one is holding a different-shaped flag or pennant in one hand, and holding on to that pole with the other hand. And what you do to make this work -- I forgot to say it; it is something that's moveable. You take the stick -- this twisted stick of silver -- out of the hole in -- [audio break] -- and the circle on that flat piece of wire that I mentioned is attached to it. So everything comes out and you put it in -- you turn it upside down and stick the other end into the hole. And the little guys, I forgot to say, are attached to the pole in such a way that when you turn it upside down, they turn so that they're all right side up.

MS. YAGER: And it spirals down this --

MR. KRENTZIN: And you let it go, and the circle with the little guys hanging onto it, which had been up at the top of the spiral, spin down. They follow -- that spiral has a track and they come down to the center -- to the bottom -- and are stopped by the top of the base. Then you can again, if you want to, put it in the reverse way again, and they'll go down again like that.

MS. YAGER: So it probably takes about one minute or so for the whole thing to rotate down?

MR. KRENTZIN: Oh, no, it's not that long. I would say it's more like --

MS. YAGER: Thirty seconds?

MR. KRENTZIN: Thirty seconds or so. I never timed it.

MS. YAGER: It's pretty delightful. It's a maypole sort of concept. Many toys have been based on this, the mechanical idea.

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah. Actually, I've always been interested in a lot of -- you know, finding these, sort of, simple mechanical kind of movements. And I ran across an old book from -- I think from the 1930s -- at a used book sale a couple of years ago that had been put out by -- I can't remember if it was *Popular Science* or *Popular Mechanics* magazine, and it was things that you could make as Christmas presents in your own little workshop. And the basic idea for this was in there, and they had -- they twisted two pieces of wire together to get that spiral, just ordinary iron wire, and they cut out little -- you were supposed to cut little -- I think they were elves, like Santa's elves, just as silhouettes out of copper or brass or something. But the mechanical thing was the same -- they -- spiral down this pole and then you picked it up, and when you turned it over, they were facing the opposite way and they spiraled down again.

MS. YAGER: It moves very silently but with a lot of delight, a lot of whimsy. You seem to have a large collection of everything, really. But the toys and things. It seems as though you surround yourself with this visual library of mechanical movements and then you translate those things into your own very distinctive style, in a really refined way. I think they're just delightful pieces. Movement seems to be a very important thing in much of your work.

The other thing that really struck me, the little boxes that you have on the shelf with the face looking up at you, the very circular face and the eyes. And then you lift up the box and you turn it upside down, because that's the natural temptation, and although their little bitty toes were pointing out, underneath you saw their complete foot. And I think it's those kinds of very fine little details. These figurines have every button, little belt detailing, their hair, the little hats they're wearing, tongues. They have -- some of these facial things are -- they follow in ironwork traditions that I've seen, gargoyle traditions. You also have a large collection of African bronze castings that seem to have some of the delight and figurative -- you know, they reflect your interest in figures and

movement. And they're wonderful pieces. It's great to be able to touch them and see them.

What do you consider the most unique aspect of your work?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I would say -- although I'm not the only one, nor has there not been other people long before me and in other cultures. I think the idea that I try to get a little bit of fun into my pieces. So many people, whether they're working in metal or other materials or whether they're painters or printmakers, they're so afraid of doing something that somebody will look at and smile. You know, that just -- for some reason people just don't think that's right that art should be that way. I don't say everybody feels that way. But so many people, whether they are the artists themselves or the people who write about art or people who just look at art, they always have this idea that art is too important to use to try to make somebody enjoy it and smile at it and have a good time looking at it or using it.

MS. YAGER: Well, I think it's one of the human emotions that's been neglected by many contemporary artists, but I'm -- it's always going to be with us and people will always be drawn to it. I'm intrigued by your home, because I look through one doorway and I see all kinds of toys on the wall that you can pull a little string and the legs will pop up or push a little ledge and the piece will collapse on itself. And you seem to have used a lot of those ideas in your own work in really wonderful, wonderful ways. A lot of the things don't come alive in a photograph, because they do rely so much on movement and tactile qualities.

Are you aware of any concentrated collections of your work, either public or private? You know, I suspect you've got some collectors that have -- that one piece is not enough.

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, the only one I can think of was --unfortunately he's dead, was Larry Fleischman. And his family still have a number of my pieces.

MS. YAGER: How many pieces do you think he acquired over time?

MR. KRENTZIN: I would say -- I'm just making a stab at it. I would say at least 25 or 30, from very tiny little things to complicated things. And he was very supportive, you know, not just with buying them but trying to arrange for their being exhibited, before he had his own gallery, you know, in other galleries, and contacting people that he knew that he thought would like them. You know, this was before he was in the business. But I don't know, there may be some other people that have one. As I said yesterday, I don't really know unless I've sold something myself. Most of those galleries don't tell me anything.

MS. YAGER: You mentioned you have a piece at the Hirshhorn?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yes.

MS. YAGER: That was purchased by Mr. Hirshhorn?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah.

MS. YAGER: Are you aware of other museums that might have pieces?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I know the Detroit Museum has a couple of pieces and Cranbrook has a piece. And I'm trying to think. I think the American Craft Museum has a piece. They did have, I don't know. I mean, you never know what the museums have.

MS. YAGER: Do you archive your own work?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yes, I always photograph and keep a record, file cards. I don't have a computer. I don't want a computer because I don't have enough time to do the things that I do now. If I had a computer, I'd spend too much time looking at things and --

MS. YAGER: [Laughs.] At the Internet.

MR. KRENTZIN: Buying things on eBay. But, anyhow, no, we do keep a record. As I said yesterday when we were talking about it, I know there are a few things that haven't been numbered and recorded yet. And that doesn't mean that everything I ever made that I do have a record of. But I would say 95 percent of the things I do.

MS. YAGER: And you thought you had about how many pieces that you've made over this time period?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I know in these records that we have, there are over 600. But, again, there might be some that we missed.

MS. YAGER: Is there a community that has been important to your development as an artist?

MR. KRENTZIN: What do you mean?

MS. YAGER: I mean, you mentioned yesterday that you felt that your family was important, that that was -- that they were supportive of your being an artist. Some people might have a collection of friends that, kind of, keep each other's spirits up in the difficult parts of -- I mean, I think it's a challenging --

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I think I mentioned yesterday -- if I didn't, I should have -- that I think the most important person as far as encouraging me and taking care of me is my wife.

MS. YAGER: Lorraine is an artist in her own right, as well as an art teacher for many, many years. Did you meet at Wayne?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yes, we did.

MS. YAGER: And she was studying art education?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yes.

MS. YAGER: She's a wonderful lady. I enjoyed meeting with her.

Have you followed -- I have a feeling that you are more of a -- you're more interested in the history of things and the ethnographic. You seem to have collections of African art and Peruvian and Eskimo, and I think that -- I suspect that contemporary writers -- am I wrong in assuming that you don't follow any particular art writers?

MR. KRENTZIN: I don't think I've even looked at an art magazine for, maybe, 10 years, not even to leaf through it. I'll be honest with you.

MS. YAGER: I believe it. But I suspect that you're a very, very committed and passionate student of many types of art forms that are not in --

[End of Tape 2.]

MS. YAGER: This is Jan Yager interviewing Earl Krentzin at the artist's home and studio in Grosse Pointe Farms, Michigan, on August 31, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Earl, we just spent a little bit of time going upstairs and observing and in other rooms of your home and seeing an astounding collection of toys of every nature, I suspect, every time period. It looks like a little V&A, to tell you the truth.

MR. KRENTZIN: [Laughs.] Very little.

MS. YAGER: [Laughs.] I think that this has filtered into your work in so many ways, and it just shows an interest and complexity and joy and whimsical. You have a collection of Noah's Ark boxes with the ark and the animals inside. Paintings and prints of all types, robots, animals, dolls, figurines. You name it and it seems to be here. I wish we could capture that all.

Let's see, I have some -- what are the most powerful influences in your career: people, art movements, money, technical innovations? I suspect that a very powerful influence in your career has been your passion for collecting and your astute eye. Would you agree with that?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah, I think so. I think that -- I think it does show and it works both ways. I think my work makes me more interested in the things I collect, and the things I collect show up in my work. And as far as influences, I think I'm much more influenced by not only things I've collected, but things I've read about or seen in museums or in other people's collections and -- more than, say, any particular artist or philosopher or movement that has happened has influenced me. There are certain artists of many different periods that I enjoy looking at their work.

I think maybe the two favorite, if you're considering so-called fine artists, are Paul Klee and Hieronymus Bosch. A strange combination, but I like their work very much. I'm not concerned about what Bosch's subject matter was as far as being a moralist or trying to threaten people with those pictures of what's going to happen to them if they're bad boys and girls, but I just like the little people that he uses, little monsters, and I think -- although, before I even heard of Hieronymus Bosch, I was already working, sort of, in this -- the way I work now, really.

MS. YAGER: Do you know what -- the first little creature that you did, how long ago was that, and do you remember what made you come up with that idea?

MR. KRENTZIN: Are you referring to that one that I showed you that was the first casting that I made? Or are you

talking about more the little --

MS. YAGER: I guess I --

MR. KRENTZIN: -- strange little guys that I --

MS. YAGER: Well, the casting was when you were a student at Wayne.

MR. KRENTZIN: Yes.

MS. YAGER: But the little figurines, at what point did they enter in?

MR. KRENTZIN: I would say probably when I was, maybe, at Cranbrook, or after I left there, I started doing things like that.

MS. YAGER: Were other artists doing similar -- was there an interest in animal forms and small humanoid, sort of, forms at that time? Or do you feel like you really stood apart?

MR. KRENTZIN: I think I stood apart when I first started doing it, although there may have been other people doing things like that, but I had never seen them. But then later on there were a number of people who have done things, sort of, related to what I've done. Maybe if you suggested it to them, they might not agree. They may say that theirs are different than mine, and I might say the same thing about somebody else. But I think people have been doing more, sort of, idiosyncratic things in metalwork than what was being pushed as the norm. You know, nice, slick, smooth, shiny surfaces and utilitarian things rather than just making something that's just -- it's just what it is and doesn't necessarily try too hard to be a functional object. Although a lot of the things I do can be used, but that's not the most important thing. The important thing is the object itself and what it looks like and the feeling that it gives.

MS. YAGER: And the emotions it, sort of, draws out of a person.

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah.

MS. YAGER: Does religion or a sense of spirituality play a role in your art?

MR. KRENTZIN: Only a negative one, in that I consider myself nonreligious.

MS. YAGER: Were you raised in any religion?

MR. KRENTZIN: Not really.

MS. YAGER: In what ways do political or social commentary figure into your work?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I don't know. I mean, I think you're affected by everything around you that happens. I mean, if you're living in a certain type of political or social climate, it's going to affect your work. But I don't think I've -- I can't remember ever having made something with a particular message. I mean, the work is the work. And I mean, I might agree or disagree with a lot of things that are happening, but -- and I'm not saying that artists should not do that sort of thing if they want to show that they favor something, or that they're against something and they want to put it in their art, that's fine. But so far I don't think consciously I've done that.

MS. YAGER: Do you think that you've been influenced by Detroit?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, as I said earlier on when we were talking, that I've always been interested in mechanical and technical things, and I think living in an area where that has been very important, you know, as far as the economy is concerned and the way people think -- I think it's changing a lot, you know, as the automobile industry is changing and moving away from here. But still, you know, I think there's more of a feeling when you're brought up in a city that depends on technology and manufacturing and things like that, that it would affect you more than if you were like living in a farm community or something.

MS. YAGER: Do you think of yourself as part of a historical, international, American, or Midwestern tradition?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I would say historically silversmiths have always not a lot of them at one time. But there have always been people in many different eras and in different cultures that have done, sort of, crazy things like mine. So I think I'm just, sort of, doing what has been done. But as far as saying I consider myself a Cubist or a Surrealist or a Magic Realist or an Impressionist, things like that -- I don't know, people might see something in my work and say it. But the experience I've had with people that talk and write about art, that they don't know what they're talking about -- [laughs] -- and they just -- they're more concerned about coming out with an essay

that looks and sounds good than in making any sense.

MS. YAGER: Do you think that your gender, race, and ethnicity are reflected in your work?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I'm sure that's true of anybody. I mean, you're a product of your environment and your genes, let's face it, and what you're going to do is going to depend on those. Whether they react negatively or positively, you're still going to have some kind of -- do something that way because of who and what you are.

MS. YAGER: You have a lot -- I've noticed in your collections you have the little golliwog figurines from the U.K., and you have a lot of African sculptures of different types. Is race an issue? It seems to be something that you're conscious of in your collecting. Do you think that that ever enters into your work as well?

MR. KRENTZIN: I don't think so. And I don't think it enters into my collecting. It isn't because a piece is African or because a golliwogg is based on a black person -- that isn't why I collect them. I mean, the golliwogg is an historical thing. I don't know if you know what the -- where the golliwogg came from, but that was a series -- he was a character in a series of children's books in the very early 20th century. And he was a very nice, benign, and positive person. I mean, he wasn't there in order to make fun of black people, if you read the books. It was a series of books about the Dutch doll and the golliwogg, and it was a very calm, sort of, pleasant series of adventures that kids enjoyed reading.

MS. YAGER: And those were from England?

MR. KRENTZIN: Actually, the author was American but they were more popular in England, for some reason [Bertha Upton, *The Adventures of Two Dutch Dolls and a Golliwogg*, Florence Kay Upton, ill. New York: DeWolfe, Fisk, 1895].

MS. YAGER: Let's see, we talked about the commissions. Have you done commissions for individual people, where they may request a particular topic or theme, or anything of that sort?

MR. KRENTZIN: Occasionally. Occasionally. I'm trying to think. I can't think of a specific one right now, but it's not too often. Usually people will just say that they would like something -- you know, it might be similar to something they've seen or somebody else has this. But very rarely have I done anything, like, to order, do you know what I mean?

MS. YAGER: Mm-hmm.

MR. KRENTZIN: Like, I'm sure I have in the past. Especially with jewelry, occasionally I'll make a little character doing a particular thing, like maybe stirring a pot or something with a spoon for somebody who was interested in cooking, or maybe a little guy -- I mean, these are very trite when you tell about them without showing the thing. Or like an artist holding a palette and paintbrush or something.

MS. YAGER: And most of these -- most of the pieces that you've sold would have been through word of mouth and recommendations of --

MR. KRENTZIN: Either that or the galleries, you know, if I have shown at various galleries and more or less both ways like that.

MS. YAGER: Do you think that's a good mix, to do some gallery and some private?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, to be honest, I'd rather have somebody else handling the buying and the selling, do you know what I mean? I'd just rather be -- just stay home and make the things. And in many ways it's become that, because there isn't that much people pounding down the door to buy something, which I think is true with most people working this way.

MS. YAGER: Where would you -- I wanted to talk about your view of the field, sort of. Where would you rank American craft and American metal on an international scale?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I would say as far as the skills of the makers, I would say they're as good as any other place. I think some places have a little more imaginative things, but I don't know that that's really true. I really have not kept up ever with knowing exactly what everybody is doing and who's doing it. But from what I've seen around in books and magazines, going to shows --

MS. YAGER: What do you see as the place of universities in the American craft movement and for artists working in metal? You studied at universities. Do you think that that is a structure that works for --

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I think it works pretty well. I don't know what would work any better, because I think the fact that you're in a university and exposed to different subjects, not just your craft, and at least be forced to

take a few of them, I think you're a lot better off. And I think the bigger the university, the more diverse it is, the better off you are. I would sooner recommend, if a young person is interested in becoming an artist craftsman or a painter or a sculptor or whatever in the arts, that they do it in a university, at least their basic education. If you want to say for their bachelor's degree, or whatever.

I don't approve of kids going straight off to an arts school from high school, no matter how great the school is, whether it's RISD [Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island] or Cranbrook or any place else like that, because I don't think the exposure that they would get in the university -- I mean, a lot of kids go to university and they might as well have stayed in their bedroom and watched television, as far as what they get out of it. But at least they have the chance of getting it. But if you go to some place, like in this city, to the Center for Creative Studies, you can now go enter there as a freshman as you would go into a university or a college.

And they tell you, "Well, we have the finest people that come in to teach them history and to teach them English." Well, they do. But, I mean, they don't have any choice. I mean, they have a guy that comes in there and teaches one history course to the first year people, and maybe another one to the second year and the same with the other, you know, and you don't have this exposure of being able to pick and choose and to see what's going on. And I think once you're at the point where you want to really specialize in something, say if you're working for the equivalent of an MFA or something, I think going to an arts school is fine, and I think specializing in one particular field, if you know that's what you want to do, is fine. But you've got to be exposed to some of this other stuff, because you leave there, you'll never get exposed to it, if you're like most people.

MS. YAGER: Do you consider art criticism important to the field? I think we already talked about that a little bit.

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I think it's important. I don't know if I would say art criticism as much as the art history. But, I mean, the fact that one critic or a group of critics decides that what this one artist is doing, or this one group in this one particular city, that this is art and the rest of it, forget it, I think that's crazy. And I think that most of these guys that write art criticism have never had anything to do with making art. A few of them have. But they think they're more important than the artists, and I don't think that's true. If only -- and if it wasn't for the artists, they wouldn't have anything to write about. But I think art history is important. But I think all these theories in art history, where they're trying to prove something else about what the artists are doing, I think that's a bunch of baloney.

MS. YAGER: I'm suspicious of some art history as well, but – [laughs] --

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, it's true. I am too. I'm certain with certain people it's -- certain schools of it.

MS. YAGER: Is the field moving in any obvious direction, or not?

MR. KRENTZIN: I don't think I'm qualified to say, because I really don't pay that much attention. I would say, without having any facts to prove it, that I think it's getting -- that people are getting more interested in technology. And I don't think there's anything wrong with that, but I think that they'd be better off if they just stuck to the basic techniques and tools and did as much as they possibly could with those before they started looking for some machine or computer or something that's going to take all the work away to make it easier. Because let's face it, nobody needs a silversmith, and unless you're going to more-or-less propagate the old methods, but try to put something new into it, I mean it's just not important otherwise, I think. But, I mean, this is my opinion and --

MS. YAGER: Whose metalwork do you respect among your contemporaries? Or even people that you've glanced at their work in this book, which is *Messengers of Modernism* by Toni Greenbaum [*Messengers of Modernism: American Studio Jewelry 1940-1960*, Martin Eidelberg, ed. New York: Montreal Museum of Decorative Arts, with Flammarion, 1996].

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I find them all interesting. But I really -- I hate to pick somebody out, because if you asked me tomorrow, I might pick out somebody else and not even think of these.

MS. YAGER: [Laughs.] Well, was there anyone that when you first saw their work, you found it very exciting?

MR. KRENTZIN: I don't think so. I really don't think so. I mean, I've liked things, and looking through this book I see things that I like and I know I would have liked them 20 years ago, too, or 30 years ago or whenever they were made. But --

MS. YAGER: Now, you talked --

MR. KRENTZIN: -- I don't get that excited.

MS. YAGER: You talked about --

MR. KRENTZIN: Except for --

MS. YAGER: Oh, you know what I wanted to ask you --

MR. KRENTZIN: -- my own things.

MS. YAGER: [Laughs.] I wanted to ask you, you went up to New York. How many times do you think you've been up to New York?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I haven't been there for a long time. But I used to go -- you know, when I was showing at Kennedy, I would go maybe twice a year or so. But then I kept figuring out better and better ways to pack the stuff so I could just send it. So towards the end I was just shipping it.

MS. YAGER: How did you get up there? Did you drive or fly?

MR. KRENTZIN: No, I used to -- sometimes I would go on the train for a while. There was a good train you could get on at night and come in in the morning. And especially if I had a lot of stuff that I was taking, because you could take the stuff with you, check it through, and you wouldn't have to drag it the way you would on an airplane.

MS. YAGER: Now, you spoke of -- when we were off tape, about having gone to see -- did Sam Kramer have a shop?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yes, he had a shop on [West] Eighth street in the Village. I don't remember exactly where. I think it was between Fifth and Sixth Avenue. And it was on the -- that would have been the north side of the street, right? Where's north and south?

[Door bell rings, pause in interview.]

MR. KRENTZIN: -- you're free to solicit people like that. But when they get these kids that are peddling something or collecting money for their school or something, they give them a rough time, especially if they're not white.

MS. YAGER: All right.

MR. KRENTZIN: Sorry that we had an interruption.

MS. YAGER: That's all right. What metalwork do you admire historically?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I like some of the sort of Medieval European things. I'm trying to think. I think it was -- some of it was from, like, what is now a part of Belgium and Holland. Some of the things that were done, like, for the churches -- these animal things, aquamaniles. Do you know what they are? Well, they were shaped like an animal. They were for holy water, I believe, or other liquid. You know, and they would have them and they have a spout. They were usually about this big and cast in brass or bronze. In fact, I have a candlestick that's made sort of like that, which I don't know if it's an old one. I think it's a reproduction, but that's one of the things I like.

I like a lot of Japanese metalwork with their use of different metals and also the kind of things they've done as far as the subject matter. Everything wasn't so rigid. And, I don't know, I like Early American silversmithing and English. I think the English did nice things. I like a lot of the Scandinavian so-called modern things. I mean, it's not a style that I want to work in, but I admire what they -- and things that were done in the Bauhaus. I think the Bauhaus by long distance has been a big influence on me. You might not think it to look at my work, but when I was a student in basic design and things like that, that's the kind of training we got -- or at least that's what they were trying to do.

You know, I think the instructors were very much influenced by the Bauhaus and the Institute of Design in Chicago at that time. I don't know if they even teach anything about them now. It's probably, like, in ancient art history or something. But I think they had the right idea in many ways. I mean, it didn't work out as far as making things for the masses. I don't know how many of the masses ever bought Barcelona chairs and things like that. But I bought two of them -- [laughs.]

MS. YAGER: They're beautiful. You have very high design furniture throughout the house.

MR. KRENTZIN: The first one we bought when Alexander was -- I don't remember how old he was. About two years old, maybe a year and a half. And then we got it through a friend who had -- was an architect, got a good price on it. And then the second one I bought used at that modernism show that we were talking about. But that

was something we always wanted.

MS. YAGER: This was a question I had before I came here, and it might be really hard and unfair at this point. But if you could own one piece, what would it be?

MR. KRENTZIN: A piece of what?

MS. YAGER: Well, I guess a piece in your home. If you could only -- if you were leaving and you could only take one piece with you, is that even possible to --

MR. KRENTZIN: I don't know.

MS. YAGER: What would render down, you know?

MR. KRENTZIN: It's hard to say.

MS. YAGER: That might be impossible.

MR. KRENTZIN: It really is. I mean --

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MR. KRENTZIN: -- I could pick something out, but I don't know how true it would be. I don't think that's something you can answer until you really have to do it.

MS. YAGER: [Laughs.] Right, and hopefully you'll never have to.

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah, but then you'd probably pick something that a year later you'd be sorry.

MS. YAGER: What helped you get established in the field?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I think it was important to show -- I think at that time there were many more shows that you could enter and --

MS. YAGER: Yes, there were.

MR. KRENTZIN: You know, the way when we were talking about the Michigan Artists Show and the Michigan Artist-Craftsmen Show. Well, most of the big museums in the bigger cities had shows like that, you know, that for the – [momentary audio break] -- but in the area there were lots of things in a lot of the little museums. You know, there were cities in Michigan would have shows.

MS. YAGER: They also seemed to have awards and they produced catalogues. There seemed to be a lot of encouragement. I also noticed that the shows at the Detroit Institute of Art, that more than half the work was metalwork in many of the years. So it seemed to be an extremely popular --

MR. KRENTZIN: I think there were a lot of people entering, and I think a lot of it had to do with those Kenney-Eagans, because they had a lot of students, and a lot of those people that would enter and get into those shows were some of the students. Now, how much they did and how much the Kenney-Eagans did to finish it is something that --

MS. YAGER: Where did they teach?

MR. KRENTZIN: They worked in their house. They lived, actually, not far from here. I don't remember what street, but on the -- just on the other side of Mack Avenue, which is Detroit. And they lived around there and they had --

MS. YAGER: And they taught from their home?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yes, they had a setup there. And they were both handicapped. One -- the husband was -- I think he was -- his last name was [*sic*] Kenney, I think. I get mixed up with one or the other. But the husband was on crutches and the wife was in a wheelchair, and they were both able to do things. I don't know if they had anything in that show --

MS. YAGER: It's interesting that in this catalogue that I'm looking at from 1963, the *17th exhibition for Michigan Artist-Craftsmen*, it notes in here that in 1950 and in 1961 they won the Founders Prize. And it refers to them as "the Kenney-Eagans" so they were --

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah, that's how they --

MS. YAGER: Their work was jointly done?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I don't know. Probably, I don't know.

MS. YAGER: Interesting.

MR. KRENTZIN: This guy on the cover, [E. Dane] Purdo, did you ever run across him?

MS. YAGER: I've heard -- I --

MR. KRENTZIN: He was at the Royal College on a Fulbright the year before I was there, and he'd been to Cranbrook. I think he was -- but he left there before I got there.

MS. YAGER: You know, another thing that I wanted to be sure and get your memory of was you had mentioned that the Archives [of American Art] were -- that they originated from -- that they originated in Detroit.

MR. KRENTZIN: Yes.

MS. YAGER: Do you have any recollection of what prompted that?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, Ted Richardson [E. P. Richardson], who was the director of the museum --

MS. YAGER: The Detroit Institute of Arts?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah, the Detroit Art Institute. Edgar P. Richardson was his official name. But he and Larry Fleischman, I think, were really the two big pushers behind it.

MS. YAGER: Now, Larry Fleischman, he gave an award [The Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence Fleischman Prize], and Arthur Fleischman also gave an award [The Arthur Fleischman Carpet Company Prize].

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah. Well, Arthur Fleischman was his father and they had a carpet and floor covering business. And I know they gave a thing for textiles usually.

MS. YAGER: Yeah. They seem to be $100 and $150 awards in 1963, which would have been a very sizeable amount.

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah, that wasn't bad.

MS. YAGER: What do you think -- it started here, people started gathering information and became aware of the importance of collecting information, and then at one point it moved, I guess, from Detroit?

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I think -- you know, it was in the museum but not of the museum. But I think they gave them free office space or charged very nominally for it. And then it was a question of finances more than anything, I think. But I think the -- I don't know how it came about that it became part of the Smithsonian; I really don't know. I might have heard at one time, but I really don't remember. But I don't think they were sorry about that. I thought that was -- you know, they felt that was great that --

MS. YAGER: A perfect fit, yeah.

MR. KRENTZIN: -- the Smithsonian would be in charge of it. And I know that Bill Woolfenden, who was the head of it for a while, he had been the curator at the museum. He was the education curator. You know, he was in charge of Saturday classes that they had for the kids, and various other things. You know, they had a very active education department. There were several people that worked in it. Most of them were, like, part-time art teachers or even students worked there. But Larry Fleischman was very enthusiastic about art, especially American art. He had a tremendous collection and he started this group of people that started collecting -- you know, being more or less coached by him and they would get together and do things.

He was really interested in -- I would say in the historical aspect of the art more than anything else really. I mean, he appreciated the aesthetics of it, too. But he was very strong and there were a lot of collectors that he, sort of, led into collecting. And, you know, they were always doing things at the museum and inviting people to speak and having shows of American art. And they would get dealers in, you know, and talk about their artists.

MS. YAGER: I remember reading about one of the directors of the Detroit Institute of Arts, that he wanted people to come there -- he wanted it to be the city's living room, sort of, that everybody would feel good to come there for all kinds of things. And I remember as a child coming nearly every weekend to Travelogues, a show that George --

MR. KRENTZIN: Oh, yeah, I used to --

MS. YAGER: -- Pierrot --

MR. KRENTZIN: -- yeah, yeah.

MS. YAGER: And, you know, my parents --

MR. KRENTZIN: What they called the World Adventure Series.

MS. YAGER: Yes, yes.

MR. KRENTZIN: Oh yeah, the museum was very active. There was one guy there that hated that, though. I've forgotten his name. He was a French guy with a French name, and he hated the idea that school groups would come in and they were doing all these things. I can't think of his name. He left finally and went to Virginia, I think, and became director of one of the museums there.

MS. YAGER: My parents -- you know, I grew up in the suburbs. My parents had no knowledge or exposure to art, and came for that. And out of the corner of my eye I would see all these hallways we would walk down, and it definitely had a huge impact on my becoming an artist and just experiencing that building.

MR. KRENTZIN: Sure.

MS. YAGER: What do you consider the greatest challenge to metal artists today? Especially since you've said nobody needs us. [Laughs.]

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, I think that's the challenge, that you've got to really want to do it, because I don't think anybody else cares. And I think it's more that way now than it was, say, 20 or 50 years ago.

MS. YAGER: What advice would you offer someone just starting out?

MR. KRENTZIN: I don't know. Probably get a day job. [Laughs.] Really, I don't know.

MS. YAGER: It is a --

MR. KRENTZIN: It's something that I'm glad I don't have to give anybody any advice.

MS. YAGER: What haven't we covered that's important to you that it be recorded?

MR. KRENTZIN: I really can't think of anything.

MS. YAGER: Let me just review and see if there isn't something I've missed. Yes, I wanted to ask you about in your visits to New York. You had talked about going to Sam Kramer's shop and also -- was it Arthur [Frank] Rebajes?

MR. KRENTZIN: It's pronounced Ra-ba-he.

MS. YAGER: Ra-ba-he.

MR. KRENTZIN: But I remember going into that shop with Lorraine.

MS. YAGER: Which one?

MR. KRENTZIN: Rebajes. And as I said, he was in these two different places originally. I know that -- I think maybe she had discovered him before I did. She'd been in New York with her mother one time, and they -- those Rebajes copper pins were prevalent all over. I don't know if they sold them in the dime store, but I know they sold them in the city and people had them. He was really mass-producing the stuff. And, you know, he's become, like, one of the big metal artists from the '40s and '50s, I guess. I don't know, to be perfectly honest with you. But you can say that about a lot of things that people are collecting.

MS. YAGER: One of the things that I forgot to bring up about your work: I notice that there's this incredible refinement in the surface and the details. And then you also -- another characteristic seems to be that you use semiprecious stones and pearls, all kinds of other sorts of materials in what I consider uncommon ways, although historically I'm sure there are some precedents. You have these little birds that have -- the body of the bird is a pebble, and then you've attached legs and head and wings, and you'll have a little figure where the purse will be made out of stone. Wonderful mixes of metal and mineral. That seems to be a really distinctive part of your work. I think I just wanted to mention that.

MR. KRENTZIN: No, I've always liked the idea of using natural objects like stones or different types of wood or -- I know it's very -- what do you call it? -- unpolitical -- politically incorrect.

MS. YAGER: Oh, some of the more --

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah, ivory --

MS. YAGER: -- exotic woods now?

MR. KRENTZIN: Yeah, and ivory, things like that.

MS. YAGER: Yes, and materials.

MR. KRENTZIN: But I mean, the stuff is just laying there. I didn't chop down the tree and I didn't kill the elephant.

MS. YAGER: Well, many of these materials were very commonly used. I mean, they were --

MR. KRENTZIN: Yes, yes.

MS. YAGER: -- very popular. People didn't think about those issues at that time.

MR. KRENTZIN: No, and I didn't either, I'm sure. I remember when I was in England at the Royal College and I needed some ivory, and they told me where to get it. And I went down -- there was a place near the Tower of London. You went into this, sort of, nondescript building and explained what you wanted, and they took you down in the basement. And I'm sure in that place alone there was more than enough ivory there in tusks that went up to, like, 20 feet -- I don't know if it was 20, but 10 feet -- that if everybody made something out of ivory for the next 500 years, they couldn't use it all up.

MS. YAGER: Huh!

MR. KRENTZIN: So why people are still hunting that ivory, I don't know. But it was just amazing to see that, you know. And I just needed something for a base for something, and I just showed them how much I wanted and they just sliced it off this thing the way you buy a piece of cheese or something.

MS. YAGER: Now, this would have been -- this was connected with the Royal College of Art or the government?

MR. KRENTZIN: No, this was a place that sold it.

MS. YAGER: Oh, I see. Goodness.

MR. KRENTZIN: You know, I had seen it here. People -- you go to a place that sold silversmithing supplies, maybe like C. R. Hill in the Detroit area -- I don't know if you've ever had anything to do with them. But they'd have, like maybe, a little piece of tusk at one time. Or you would go to a gem show or something, and they would have some. But when I saw that -- can you imagine how many elephants that represents? And they probably weren't the only one. And I don't know about in this country, but I'm sure in any real big city in Europe there were probably other places like that. They probably had places in New York like that too. That was really something.

MS. YAGER: Well, I think that -- if you can think of anything else that we should capture?

MR. KRENTZIN: I really can't think of anything.

MS. YAGER: Well, I want to thank you personally and on behalf of the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, for agreeing to this interview. And, more importantly, for your ongoing contribution to the metalsmith's art and to the passion of art in general.

Thank you very much, Earl Krentzin.

MR. KRENTZIN: Well, thank you for coming and putting up with me for two days. I enjoyed it. I think I'm getting a little hoarse from talking. I don't usually talk this much in a week. But I enjoyed it very much.

MS. YAGER: Well, it's been a pleasure. Thank you so much.

MR. KRENTZIN: That's okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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