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# Oral history interview with William Harper, 2004 January 12-13

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## Transcript

### Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with William Harper on January 12 and 13, 2004. The interview took place in New York, New York, and was conducted by Harold B. Nelson 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.

William Harper and Harold Nelson 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

HAROLD NELSON: This is Hal Nelson interviewing William Harper at the artist's home in New York on Monday, January 12, 2004, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, and this is disc number one.

Bill, good morning.

WILLIAM HARPER: Good morning.

MR. NELSON: Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood? Where and when were you born?

MR. HARPER: I was born on June 17, 1944, in a very small farm town in central Ohio – Bucyrus, Ohio. But after my mother took me home from the hospital, I spent the next six and a half years on a farm. And I was thinking about this experience – I think I sublimated it for a long time. I was absolutely alone in terms of any playmates until I was four years old, and at that time my brother was born. And of course, as an infant I still didn't have a playmate, and as a brother I didn't – [laughs] – particularly like him. So I quite honestly spent my childhood in isolation, until we moved from the farm to the small town Bucyrus when I was – well, when I was going to go into second grade.

So I, needless to say, spent a great deal of time entertaining myself, and what I seemed to gravitate towards was making things. I especially loved carbon paper, when I could get my hands on it, much to the horror of mother, who would find blue tracings everywhere of what I would find. [Laughs.]

MR. NELSON: On the walls, or just on sheets of paper around you?

MR. HARPER: Just on sheets of paper, but it always left a mess. Now, I was – I've always been almost fastidiously neat, so that was a not a problem, and I took direction well. I minded. But I loved making things out of colored paper, out of wood. I would make little houses, trucks. You know, I've always made things. I actually did that, I think, far more than I ever drew. I do remember drawing, but I don't remember drawing ever to the extent that a lot of painters or sculptors say that they drew heavily as a child. I made things.

MR. NELSON: What about art experience in school? Did you have any instruction in elementary school or secondary school, and was art something that was supported, or making art something – it sounds like it must have been supported in your family, and your parents must have encouraged you.

MR. HARPER: My parents were supportive. I can't think of an art curriculum being any worse than the one in the schools that I went to. And consequently, I was able – I guess about eighth grade – to start private art lessons with a lady who lived in the town who was an "artist," and I'm putting that in quotes. You know, she drew and she painted and she was head and shoulders above anybody else who lived in a farm town in central Ohio.

And she had a nice little studio her husband had built her behind her home, and she would give lessons. And I think it was a dollar a week that I had to pay, or my parents had to – grandparents, whoever was paying it. Same thing they paid for my piano lessons, but I got far more out of the art lessons. Unfortunately, the lady – her name was Alice Tupps, and she was – rigid is not the word, but she was not terribly efficient at bringing out people's creativity. She had a way of bringing out your tightness. And while from her I had experience drawing and painting, I never I had the kind of experience that a really great creative art teacher would be able to bring out of the student, and that later came to haunt me.

MR. NELSON: How many other children were involved in these classes? Was it a small group or fairly large?

MR. HARPER: There were six or seven of us.

MR. NELSON: So it was a fairly small and –

MR. HARPER: Oh yeah, yeah.

MR. NELSON: – kind of direct, work with the teacher –

MR. HARPER: Yeah. I think they lasted an hour, an hour and a half, and we all got a lot of attention. But there was a lot of – I still remember what the first lesson was, which was to draw a single clay flower pot straight ahead with charcoal, and all the ellipses had to be perfect and it had to be completely symmetrical and the shadows had to be right. It was the least creative thing that you could imagine, and it went along that direction. But at least I was doing things.

What was more, I think, important to me developmentally was that I continued making things. So whenever the school needed anything in the way of scenery or costume design or anything like that for plays and skits, I was always the one they called on. Or if a club needed floats for a parade or a homecoming, I was the one who did it. And I've always had – ever since I can remember, the only kind of committee to me that was important was a committee of one, which consisted of me. So I was a demagogue, simply said, this is the way we're going to do it, and that's how we plunged ahead. And nobody else really challenged me on it, so I was able to make things on a bigger scale.

MR. NELSON: And three-dimensionally also, which is interesting that –

MR. HARPER: Yeah.

MR. NELSON: – because costume – you had your designs, costume designs, and –

MR. HARPER: Yeah, yeah. I actually wanted to be a theatrical designer. That was my – well, originally I wanted to be an architect. And considering I hated physics, I knew that there was no way I was ever going to be able to do that. And then I decided I wanted to be a theatrical designer, and my mother and father decided that there was no way I was going to do that, because they didn't want to support me, nor would they have supported me the rest of my life, so that was quickly ruled out.

And I really decided on the college program I went to – it was just – I think the stars were in the right place, because I was able to find a situation with an art education program between what was then Western Reserve University – it's now Case Western Reserve [Cleveland, Ohio] – and the Cleveland Institute of Art, where you had to be accepted at both schools simultaneously so that all of your liberal arts and art history courses – which were all taught at the Cleveland Museum, incidentally – were through the university, and all the studio courses were at the art institute. It was a five-year program, including one summer, and when you finished it, you came out with a master's degree – actually an M.S. with an emphasis in art education. And it was – my parents approved of that because I would have a job. [Laughter.]

And I really don't – I do not regret it at all, because I think if I had gone solely to the Art Institute, which I had an incredibly difficult time getting into because of my lack of preparation in good, solid drawing and painting – if I had not had that liberal arts education at what is now Case Western Reserve, which is a very tough university, and all the art history at the Cleveland Museum of Art, which was as important, I think, in my education as anything else that I can account for – they all fell together just to be absolutely perfect for me. And the humanistic element from the museum and the university taught me how to think, to take an intellectual approach to things.

I think that – I'm positive that the kind of intellectual stimulation that I had to look at at the university, which was on such a much higher, challenging level than anything I got from a small-town high school education – there was this big transition, and a lot of people have remarked about the depth of thought in my work; not just technique, but there's something there intellectually and conceptually. And I think that's completely because of the university/museum experience.

MR. NELSON: And a knowledge of art history. I mean, you very clearly are well trained, and you understand the breadth of art history very deeply. And you can see that in your work, and probably much of that comes from your early experience at the Cleveland Museum.

MR. HARPER: Absolutely. And the other thing about the museum that was very important developmentally for me was that it was one of the very first museums – major museums if not the first in the country – that did not come to think that there was a difference between the so-called fine arts – painting and sculpture – and the so-called decorative arts: the ceramics, metalwork, and enamelwork, of which they had a fantastic collection. Textiles could be included sometimes, but because of the light resistance they were often in their own galleries.

But the decorative arts and the fine arts were integrated into the same galleries, so you could see the interrelationships of what was happening at any time period, as sometimes the same artists moved back and forth between media. It was not – the decorative arts were not a dirty word then like they seem to be now. In

fact, when I entered the real world, I didn't realize that anyone who was interested in the crafts was viewed as a second- or third-class citizen. [Laughs.]

MR. NELSON: It seems that a lot of that philosophy at the Cleveland Museum of Art came from the longtime director, William Milliken, who was trained in the decorative arts before coming there and supported the decorative arts as well as all areas of art, contemporary art and traditional art. Was he around when you were studying, and did you know him at all?

MR. HARPER: I never met the gentleman, but I found out after the fact that the first piece of my work that entered the museum's collection was actually purchased by Mr. Milliken for the museum. And it was a mirror rattle that he really loved because it did combine very interesting metalwork with what I think is one of the most beautiful enamels that I've ever done. And he took a liking to it and purchased it from the May Show, which is a long-running annual exhibition. This annual show no longer exists, but I think probably there were between 40 and 50 of them at the Cleveland Museum over the years, and that again was a great showcase for anyone interested in any of the decorative arts, which were exceptionally strong, at any event, in the northeast Ohio area.

But this [May Show] was a competition every year for the artists from this area, and there was always a chance for everybody, especially meaningful for students to see what the best artists in the area were doing in terms of not only painting and sculpture, but often more strongly ceramics, metalwork, enamel, textiles. The Cleveland Art Institute had what was probably, at the time I was there, I would say their golden period in the faculty that they had in these areas. So the work was just absolutely extraordinary, and I got to see it firsthand every year not only in the faculty show at the Institute, but then they would bring out their absolutely best stuff for the May Show. And they had students in the area who had continued, so there was this vast amount of really first-class work of the contemporary decorative arts that was available to be seen, probably more so in Cleveland than I would guess any place else in the country at that point in time.

MR. NELSON: Were advanced students at the Institute encouraged by their teachers to submit works for the juried annual May Show?

MR. HARPER: That was up to the student. There was a rule, though, at the museum that anything that a student entered had to be completely done outside of the regular classroom time. So you had to go in at night, weekends, back in your dorm room or wherever you lived, have access to what other equipment you needed to do work that was absolutely independent from anything at school. And yet an immense amount of work was done by students.

First of all, it gave you a great deal of status at the Institute if you could get into the May Show. And then considering such a huge number of things always sold, there would be money for next year's tuition or living or whatever. And the name would start to become known in the area, and actually people might call and say – or come around at Christmas time, for instance, and say, I saw your work last May; what do you have that I can get for my spouse as a Christmas present or a birthday present?

MR. NELSON: Did that happen for you? Did some people come and ask for –

MR. HARPER: Yes, yes. And actually when I was a senior, it was the first time I got into the May Show was when I was a senior, which would have been 1966, and you were allowed to enter a maximum of three things. And I had all three things accepted, and I won two awards, and somehow that just jump-started the career. I was very, very fortunate.

MR. NELSON: You mentioned that there was a marvelous faculty at the Cleveland Institute. Talk about some of the people you studied with there who you feel had a significant influence on you as a developing artist.

MR. HARPER: I think essentially there were two gentlemen there. One of them, certainly, who had an immense influence on me both as a personality and encouraging me to be as absolutely creative as I wanted to be and was a great technician, was Kenneth Bates. The father or dean of American enameling, he liked to call himself, and his workshop ladies from around the country dubbed him that.

But he was. He took me under his wing in a freshman design class, I think mostly because we could tell – [laughs] – dirty jokes to each other, and he thought I had an incredible sense of color. And he used to tell me, in fact, that he envied my sense of color, because I do seem to have a natural ability to just put things together without really thinking too much about it, and the color always seems to work, and that's not immodesty speaking, I don't believe. Critics and observers over the years have constantly remarked about the sense of color that I'm able to bring to a medium in which developing interesting, rather off-key color is very difficult. And I just seem to have this natural inclination just to toss it off, one after another.

And Kenny [Bates] really encouraged that, whereas he was very, very tight in the way he would do his work. He

would render everything in tempera, for instance, for his enamels, and then he'd put a piece of glass over it to see how it would look while it was shiny. Well, I was exactly the opposite. I always jokingly said I was a painter who had gone bad. My mind is one of a painter, but I didn't have a big studio or big facilities to be able to do it, and I looked at enameling as being able to do similar things, but on a very, very tiny scale versus the huge scale that fashionable painting seemed to be at that period of time.

Also, it began my fascination with the concept of preciousness, and I think that again goes back to looking at a lot of the objects that William Milliken selected for the museum's collection, that precious could be a negative word from the standpoint that it's meant only for the elite or that it's overdone or that it's decorative without having any substantial depth of information about the time at which it was made. Or I like to view it in a very positive manner. I always spoke to people. Matisse was an incredibly decorative artist, and a lot of Picasso is incredibly decorative. So the term does not need to be pejorative; it can be a very positive role model, and that was the one that I chose to hope to be able to emulate.

MR. NELSON: You mentioned a second teacher at the Cleveland Institute. Who was that?

MR. HARPER: Oh. The other one was John Paul Miller. I first had him as a teacher of second-year design, and he was absolutely the most aesthetically intellectually challenging teacher that I ever had in any art class. Most students at the Art Institute – [laughs] – were afraid of him, frankly, because he was so tough and he had such a perfect eye for composition, color, for manipulating elements within a composition. And I was able to play to those strengths. And so again, he took a special interest in me as a student, and I was able to get that much more out of him as a teacher, because we related.

John Paul's never been a warm, fuzzy kind of person, but if he saw in a student the ability to really go beyond what was the norm at the art school, he was immensely supportive. He also taught beginning jewelry, and unfortunately all I took in terms of metal classes was one jewelry class before I got married so I could make – [laughs] – our wedding rings.

So I really didn't enter the real world with any metals education whatsoever except for basic knowledge of how to solder really well, and that came to be a great, great asset later on, surprisingly enough, because I had to teach myself everything, and I did not have the problem of falling under the spell of a college instructor who forced his or her style and method of working on the student and then the student would labor the rest of his or her life to get over it. I never had that problem. I taught myself – [laughs] – so I improvised.

MR. NELSON: You mentioned that Kenneth Bates was teaching introductory design and that John Paul Miller was teaching design and jewelry. Who was teaching enameling at the time, and did you study with them?

MR. HARPER: Bates was the sole teacher except for the very first year that I was able to take it. I knew that this was something I wanted to do, and managed to start taking it as an elective when I was in my junior year. So I really had three years of it: junior, senior, and then my year of graduate school, where I really concentrated on it.

But the very first year, to my disappointment, Kenny took a sabbatical. So I had a different teacher, Mary Ellen McDermott, who had been a former Institute student. She was one of those people who went back to school after her children were grown, and she moved back and forth between painting and enameling. She's now deceased, unfortunately. But – well, her work – [laughs] – wasn't very good. She was a free spirit mentally, and not an especially deep thinker. But she just loved the students and allowed them to do whatever they wanted to do with the material, which was a little different than what Kenny was. I think maybe Kenny was able to put up with me being the way I was because I had developed my habits, whether one wants to call them good or bad, through a year with Mary Ellen, who just was happy when "wonderful things" came out of the kiln, is how she used to say it. And it was a year of experimenting with a rather painterly type approach to enamels that I would never have been able to do as a beginning student with Kenny.

Kenny was an immense technician and could inspire you to go ahead once you knew those techniques. Mary Ellen should have lived in San Francisco at that period. She was a bit of an airhead, although an incredibly kindhearted one. She just let me do whatever I wanted to do and thought everything was marvelous.

MR. NELSON: Was there an artist named Mildred Watkins? Are you familiar with that name at all? She had taught earlier at the Institute.

MR. HARPER: I have seen the name in old accounts of both the early years of the century for the museum and the Art Institute, but to tell you the truth, I know virtually nothing about her work whatsoever.

MR. NELSON: Were you still thinking of yourself as a painter at this point in your development, or were you really beginning to focus on enameling?

MR. HARPER: I focused on enamel as the medium, but I was trying to paint with it, which for several years thereafter would be a very negative thing on the development of an early career. And as I look back on it, there's no reason to think that I should have been able to have an immense career even in northeast Ohio as soon as I got out of graduate school, especially being a high school art teacher.

But after my initial success at the May Show, I had four or five years of completely being rejected from that exhibition and virtually every other one that I tried to enter, because I was doing these, for me, large, sloppy, secondary generation – maybe tertiary generation – abstract plaques. Maximal size would probably be 14 [inches] by 18 inches because that was as big as anything that could fit into a kiln to which I had access. And some of them were fired as many as 100 times to try to get effects that I wanted, and I think that's an important word in trying to define what they were, effects. I think I had stopped really thinking about what I wanted the material to do, and I was just trying to get it to do things in the kiln that were a surprise and that could rival paint.

And it took four or five years for me to realize that if you wanted to paint, paint; and if you wanted to work with enamel, then work with enamel on the scale to which it really is historically and – I think still to this period, our own period, it basically has to be small. It has to be on a precious level, an intimate level in order to succeed. It's not a big medium.

I can only think of one person in the history of American enameling who has done – who has used material on a large level really successfully, and that was a Clevelander, Edward Winter. And he did the things [murals] – I think essentially in the '40s and '50s. He did a huge mural for the train station, for instance, in Cleveland that was absolutely magnificent. But it was not painterly; it was design that was able to be moved to a very large scale, and it usually had an Art Deco kind of feeling, although I don't think I was sophisticated enough at that point to realize what the roots were. And somehow his style at that scale of material – [laughs] – excuse the pun – fused – [laughter] – in the right way. But frankly, he's the only person I can think of who was ever able in this country to use it successfully on a large scale.

And I had to come to grips with the fact that I either had to be a painter and work with paint on canvas or paper, or if I was going to work with enamel, then use it in the way that brought out its best qualities. And that's why in 1967, I decided that – or no, it was later than that. It must have been about 1969 or '70 that I decided that I had to give up the experimentation – which had continued in various ways, sometimes three-dimensional objects using welding, for instance.

I had a lot of success with those, electroforming objects with enamels in them. But in all of these things in terms of enamel, I decided to give myself two years to explore cloisonné for everything that I could get out of it. And I still haven't – I'm not done with the exploration yet, which is at least 30 years, so I guess it was a wise choice for me. And I made some conscious decisions about what I wanted to do with the technique that I think were essentially different from what most people were doing with it, and that was important in terms of establishing a style, an identity with my work that no one else seemed to have.

MR. NELSON: Were there other artists, perhaps outside of the Cleveland or Ohio area, who had an influence on your work, whose work you might have been familiar with at the time?

MR. HARPER: In terms of the decorative arts, probably the biggest influence on me was June Schwarcz, strangely enough, because I saw her one-person show at the old American Craft Museum a couple buildings ago. [Laughs.] And I think this was in – the winter break from the college in 1966, which was my very first trip to New York City. And besides going to see MoMA [Museum of Modern Art, New York] and the high point being *Guernica*, a couple Picassos that I adored, and a Richard Lippold sculpture that's not been on exhibition for years, the other high point was wandering very innocently into the Craft Museum [now called the Museum of Arts & Design, New York] and seeing an exhibition of June's work. At that point she was using enamel in a way that I had never seen before.

And I was just completely enticed and really profoundly moved by it, because she had invented a way of working with the material that I had not seen in any of the work being done in the Cleveland area, which was tighter and more traditional because of the museum influence. I think June was in a situation where she had to teach herself, so she didn't have any of those inhibitions of you can't do it, it's just not possible. Everything for her was if I want to do it, I'm going to find a way of doing it.

And seeing her work enforced that kind of undiscipline, if you want to use the word, in myself. But I just refused to think that within the confines of the material that there wasn't anything that I couldn't do with it if I set my mind to it. Now, I did find that I couldn't use it the way paint is used, but it was a great learning experience, and I think everybody has to go through that kind of learning experience when they're young.

MR. NELSON: Describe what her work looked like at the time. Was this the basse-taille series or was the electroforming work?

MR. HARPER: There were a lot of basse-taille pieces that seemed to have this depth that went on and on and on. And then she had started to make vessels, combining the electroforming and very, very simple coatings of enamel. If the enamel was not used in patterns or drawing or for making decorative forms on a surface, it became a decorative surface in and of itself, that it enhanced the vessel and made it – they were incredibly organic and very rough, very gutsy pieces.

MR. NELSON: Talk a little bit about your early exhibition history. I know that you mentioned earlier that you were included at a very young age, when you were still a student, in the Cleveland Museum of Art's annual May Show. But I know also several institutions in the northeastern Ohio area showed your work, such as the Butler Institute of American Art, and in Massillon [Massillon Museum, Massillon, Ohio].

MR. HARPER: I'm a rather aggressive person in terms of my career. I didn't think about it that way. I thought I was going to be a very good high school art teacher for the rest of my life, with a side – hobby is not the right word because obviously I didn't view it that way, but that I would have a second career as a maker of enamels, for want of a better word, in the Ohio area. You know, I was an Ohio farm boy. I had only been to New York once. I never remotely considered that I would have a national prominence with it.

But I did quickly realize that if one could get into these shows, one could sell one's work fairly easily. And I had just been married at that point, and we wanted to eventually buy a house, and have children, and still have the good life aspects that one would not be able to get just from a high school teacher's salary, and I knew I could supplement it, if not surpass it, through selling independent work.

So the best way of getting established was to enter these small shows regionally, and they were all over the country at that point. Crafts had blossomed into its golden age, and smaller and mid-sized museums were extremely receptive to having the decorative arts exhibited. And sidewalk shows had not developed yet, so the work had not been run down to the point that most of it has become now. And I just was very aggressive, and when I saw a chance to enter an exhibition, I did. And I was kicked out of most of them until I really started concentrating on cloisonné. And once I hit cloisonné, it was smooth sailing from that point on.

MR. NELSON: And at what point did you move into cloisonné? When did you first start doing that technique?

MR. HARPER: Well, I had always done it, and I was trying to balance it for the three years I taught in high school, which was from '67 through '70. I was trying to balance it with these other things, mainly the big painterly plaques, which I phased out of probably about 1968, '69. And then I became involved in welding techniques and putting enamel on these forms, and that was absolutely a direct influence from June Schwarcz. I was trying to get the kind of rough elegance that she got, without imitating her work.

I think that I am very good at being influenced by other things throughout the history of art, from Neolithic-period sculptures and paintings to what's being done today. I let art influence me, but I know when it's happening, and I know that I have to Harperize it, that I have to look at things and assimilate what they're about physically and then try to attach my own aesthetic and my own technique to bury it, and that's what I was doing with the welded pieces.

And when I started just restricting myself to cloisonné, which must have been, as I said, 1970, I believe, I decided that I was not going to use the cloisonné wire to trace around preexisting drawings, which is what just about everybody did who worked in the material. And I simply took the wire and a pair of tweezers and manipulated it in the air, and thought of the wire as line.

I started out being a very weak draftsman. It was very hard for me to get into the Art Institute because my drawing abilities were so substandard. But I caught up in my own way in the five years. And I came to realize that drawing in one form or another, up until the advent of photography being the chief material in one way or another in the arts for the last 15 years, but drawing has always been what one needs to fall back upon for real structure and work. And I wanted to use the wire as that kind of intuitive drawing line rather than just a line that would separate one color from another.

MR. NELSON: I wanted to ask you a little bit about national exhibitions. You've talked a bit about exhibitions in northern Ohio where your work was featured. I know also about the same time in that period, maybe 1968 to 1972, you started to submit work for national juried exhibitions, the Everson [Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York] being one and the Wichita Art Center being another. Can you talk a little bit about that and what it meant for you to have your work included in the Everson national exhibition, which I understand was an enormously prominent exhibition?

MR. HARPER: Yes it was, and I had no idea when I decided to submit to the exhibition. I was so naive at that point. I was allowed to enter two things, and it did not occur to me that the two things should be similar conceptually in order to reinforce within the judge's mind that something was going on in the work besides just technique. It was the one and only time I've ever entered an Everson show. They eventually stopped showing

enamel along with ceramics – it was essentially a ceramic exhibition; the enamels were simply sort of a half-brother or -sister that was tagged on because it used vitreous technique.

But I entered one of the sloppy welded pieces and then a piece called *Bone Box* [1970], which was one of the very first times that I was starting to work towards the three-dimensional drawing in the air with the wire in order to establish an image, and it had a really, really beautiful finish to it. It was very matte, unlike most enamels, which were shiny, and I've always – except for the situation of June Schwarcz -- I've always hated that really shiny surface in enamel that keeps the viewer from really entering the piece. And I simply started using a matte finish. That piece was accepted. It got mentioned in a few reviews around the country, and it was just a great, great ego booster. For a young artist that can be extremely important reinforcement; at least it was for me.

MR. NELSON: Let's talk a little bit about the Wichita Art Association's annual decorative arts exhibition in 1972. I know that you were included in that exhibition and you received first prize in enamels, and I believe that your work was acquired for the collection.

MR. HARPER: Yes on all counts. That was a show that I was familiar with through legend – [laughs] – for want of a better word because, I believe in the '50s especially and very early '60s, that it was a biennial event of great importance in the country because it was one of the few, maybe the only exhibition that drew together all objects that might have been made in what we now call craft materials.

But anyway, it was an exhibition that I knew about. It had taken a hiatus for I don't know how many years and then announced that it was going to resume. I believe it resumed for one exhibition. I don't think they had anything past the one that I was in.

And I was a little afraid of what might happen to it, because one of the judges was my old teacher, John Paul Miller. And I knew that there would be absolutely no fraternization, for want of a better word, on John Paul's part, in favoring my work over anybody else's, because he'd been a teacher, and he knew how much I admired his work and the influence he had been on me. But John Paul's not the kind of person for whom that would mean a thing. And he may be the toughest eye in the business, so to speak.

I entered one of the pieces from the long series I was doing in that period – cloisonné block pieces -- called *Geography* [1971-1972]. And it was accepted, and it won the first award in enameling, and it was purchased. So it was a high for me in many different ways.

It was to some extent also a culmination in a whole string of these things that I had started to get about 1970. And it would seem that I had gone from being rejected in everything that I was entering – the old non-cloisonné pieces, every exhibition I was entering was not very favorable with those things – and once I concentrated on cloisonné and really started to develop a Harper style that people could immediately identify, it just was so smooth sailing from that point on that it becomes almost ridiculous, as I look back on it, how quickly, in a three-year period, that I went from being a high school art teacher in northeastern Ohio to a national figure.

I was doing a lot of lectures and workshops at that point, because I'd just had a book published, *Step by Step Enameling* [New York, Golden Press: 1973], and as a result of that, I was doing workshops all around the country. And when I would get off the plane, I was almost never recognized in the airport. So many things had happened to me in such a short period of time – before I was 30 years old – that people expected me to be 60 or so. I haven't even reached that age yet – almost there. But it was amusing to me.

And as I look back on it, I'm not sure I even appreciated it to the extent that I should have.

MR. NELSON: You mentioned 1970 being an important year in your career also. I think that was the year of the exhibition in St. Louis, wasn't it?

MR. HARPER: Yes. The St. Louis Art – I think it's called the St. Louis Art Alliance, I believe, sponsored a national exhibition of just enamels. And the judge was a gentleman from Cleveland – where else? – Charles Bartley Jeffery, who did incredibly fastidious work, much like John Paul's, from the standpoint of intricacy. And he really pushed the concept of preciousness maybe a bit over the line. And I wasn't certain how he was going to react to my work, which was very definitely looser in drawing line than his cloisonné was.

And I also entered one of the welded chalices. I entered the same two pieces in that exhibition that I entered in the Everson, where one was accepted, the other kicked out.

In the enamel – I believe it was called the "Enamel '70s Show" – I won the first award – and I was just overwhelmed, completely overwhelmed – for both pieces, which, in a way polarized me, because I wasn't sure which direction I should pursue. But thankfully, I pursued the cloisonné direction, although I think doing the other stuff was the reason my work is what it is now.

It was a very important exhibition, from that standpoint. I don't think that at that point I realized exactly what it was.

MR. NELSON: I'd like to talk a little bit about some of the one-person exhibitions that you've been in. And I know they, too, started fairly early on. In Ohio in 1967 there was a one-person exhibition at the Massillon Museum of Art in Ohio. And then in '69 you had an exhibition at the Philadelphia Art Alliance. Can you talk a little bit about that and what they meant to you?

MR. HARPER: There's no way to describe the excitement that was in that exhibition and the naiveté that was that exhibition. Massillon – the Massillon Museum was essentially – I'm not sure what it is now, even if it exists now – in 1967 this old mansion that had a historical society in the basement and an art museum/gallery on the top two floors. And it had a wonderful, wonderful director, Mary Merwin, who incidentally about a year after the Wichita show bought the *Bone Box*.

But Massillon every summer did their version of the Cleveland May Show. And I entered it, I guess in – it must have been 1966. I again won the Purchase Prize; they purchased a couple things. In fact, I won the first prize in enamels. I might have – I think I won the best in show in that exhibition.

And Mary just loved me, and I loved her. And she wanted me to do a one-person exhibition. [Laughs.] And it was – as I look back on it, almost funny, because it was anything and everything. It was drawings, a group of textiles that I had done as a graduate student, metal – well, no, there weren't any metal pieces – there were a few welded pieces that I had done, but no jewelry, because I had not remotely gotten into jewelry yet; of course, a lot of enamels, maybe a few paintings. I mean, it was a real mishmash.

But it was one of those things that was incredibly reinforcing for me. I knew somebody had faith in me.

MR. NELSON: How about the 1969 Philadelphia Art Alliance exhibition? How did that come about?

MR. HARPER: That was a show I went after. And I don't really remember a great deal about how I did it. I do know that I was – excuse the expression – aggressively ballsy with it.

My then-wife – her home was across the river in New Jersey, and when we would go visit her parents, we would always go into Philadelphia to galleries and museums. And I discovered the Art Alliance, and they had an exhibition that I looked at. I don't even remember who it was. And I looked at it and proudly said to myself, "If this person can have an exhibition here, I'm going to have exhibition here."

So the next time I went to visit my wife's parents, I took a suitcase full of enamels, and I just went there and showed them to them and said, "I think you ought to give me an exhibition." [Laughs.] And I don't know if they really liked the work or not, but they gave me the exhibition! [Laughs.]

MR. NELSON: [Laughs.] They agreed.

MR. HARPER: Yes. By that point, the aggression was starting to come out.

MR. NELSON: That's great. The Renwick Gallery at the Smithsonian American Art Museum gave you a rare honor in presenting a solo exhibition of your work a bit later, in 1977, '78. Can you talk about what that meant for you and how that developed?

MR. HARPER: I think that show was the single most important thing that has ever happened in my career. I remember how it came about – which was a total surprise. I was one of the speaker panelists at the John Michael Koehler Art Center in Wisconsin. It was a group of people in metals, enamels, and ceramics who had been drawn together to discuss the state of the art craft through lectures and tours of the Koehler Center, which was trying to get artists interested in working on that scale.

But in any event, Michael Monroe was attending. He had just become the associate curator at the Renwick. And I believe it was the first time we met – no, it was the second time we met. The first time was at a goldsmith conference in Washington. I would guess it was 1971. And it was just a very cursory meeting.

And at this Koehler conference, somehow we just became friends the way people click as friends sometimes. And he had actually purchased a piece of mine from an exhibition he organized when he was a gallery director in his previous job at a university in central New York; I forget which one it was, but it had an invitational metals exhibition. And he purchased a small piece of mine, which was part of – obviously, he liked me because of the work, and I liked him because – besides the personality clicking -- he had purchased something, and I considered him a very important person, quickly realized that he had an impeccable eye.

And the second day we were there, sitting over lunch, he just casually said, "Bill, you may be excited to know that we at the Renwick are starting a series of one-person exhibitions, and we want you to be the first one." And

I don't remember finishing my lunch, I was in such a state of shock. I mean, it was just – I think it was one of the most exciting moments in my life. And he and I curated the show together. It was a defining moment for me, because between the book and that exhibition, things just started rolling. There's no way I can express how important the show was to me and how beautifully he installed the show.

In doing research, trying to remember my past life – by that, I mean 30 years ago in my career – I was going through boxes, looking at old press clippings and things, and I came across a whole group of letters that I had received from people who'd seen the exhibition, and how much it seems to have impressed them. Actually, tears came to my eyes reading them. At that point in my life, I was able to make something that was moving to people, especially in a material that's not supposed to be moving. And it was a very touching moment, 30 years after the fact.

MR. NELSON: Well, congratulations. An honor well deserved. And it was critically very well received also, wasn't it?

MR. HARPER: Oh, yes. That's when I truly became a national figure.

MR. NELSON: So it's really served as a confirmation of the direction that you had chosen for your work and took you to a national arena.

MR. HARPER: Yes, and the entire exhibition was cloisonné. And it was also the first time that a group of my jewelry pieces had been exhibited, because I resisted doing jewelry until I was hired at Florida State [Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida], which I believe was the latter part of 1970.

And that came about because of the gentleman who had been teaching metals – I use that term loosely, the teaching part – had suddenly resigned in September, two weeks before school was supposed to start, in order to make Mickey Mouse jewelry for Disneyland out of pewter. [Laughing.] Florida State desperately needed somebody to teach metals, because they even had a graduate program.

So as I understand it, the chairman, whose name was Ivan Johnson, contacted three different people. I know one was Paul Smith, who was then director of the American Craft Museum [New York, New York]. One was Bob Ebendorf, who was incredibly important then. He was the president of the American Goldsmith Society and had a huge presence and influence on American jewelry at that period of time. I don't remember who the third one was, but the question was asked, "If you had to hire a young person with great potential to do something with a program that's essentially in shambles, who do you recommend?" And all three of them, I understand, recommended me.

I got this call from Ivan Johnson. I had just moved my family from Kent State, where my visiting professorship had come to an end, to live near my in-laws in Lindenwold, New Jersey. And basically, I didn't have a job. I was self-supporting at that time, based on doing workshops around the country. I spent about two weeks a month doing those, and in the other two weeks I was grinding out small enamels that the workshop participants wanted to purchase. So I was able to make a living. At least I thought I was going to be able to keep going. And this call came for this job, and at first I resisted. And then I thought about it a little bit, having a family. And there was an oil crisis at that time, and Nixon was president, so I thought, "Maybe I'd better look at a job that's got some permanency to it. I don't have to live in Florida forever, but this is going to get me back onto the university teaching circuit."

And I flew down, and of course I took the job. But I was very honest with Dr. Johnson, and I said, "Look, this is a metals job. I've had one semester of jewelry making. I think I'm a great enamelist, but I don't think you want a whole program in enameling. I certainly wouldn't if I were in your position. And I have to be honest that I don't think I'm up to teaching metal."

And he said, "Well, three people have said that you have the potential of being not only a wonderful, inspiring teacher, but a role model because of where your work is already. And we want to offer you the position. Just keep two weeks ahead of the students and you'll do okay."

And I said, "All right. I'm willing to do that, if you give me a semester to start prepping."

So he said that was fine with him, and I went back to New Jersey. We took a trip into New York. I bought every book I could find on jewelry making or on metalworking. I devoured them. I took the job at the beginning of the winter quarter, which would have been in January. So we're making a jump from September to January. That's how much time I had to cram.

I think maybe I was three weeks ahead of the students, but I had to teach myself. And it was one of the healthiest things that's ever happened to me, because I was not beholden to anybody else in terms of what to do with metals.

I didn't know there were bad things to do, wrong things to do, so I did anything that I wanted to. And if it didn't come out the way it should have, according to what was considered the norm of metalsmithing, I would just plunge on and make it come out.

I had greatly admired the jewelry of a lot of people – my peers and the next generation. Obviously there was John Paul, whose work I knew I could never attain the delicacy and the intricacy and the finesse. I mean, I had an admiration for him, and knew that my work would never reach the point that his did.

But then I had a great admiration for peers like Eleanor Moty, Albert Paley, especially, Bob Ebendorf, and then Paley and Moty's teacher, Stanley Lechtzin, who was doing electro-forming at that point. And that great – I had been working with that technique, and I was immensely moved by the spontaneity that he was able to get from metals.

And then I guess the other person I admired greatly was Richard Mawdsley, again, whose work is so intricately done that I knew I could never approach doing that kind of thing. But he had an imagination that was totally unlike anybody else's.

And somehow I just took these people as role models, in terms of what they had done, and decided I'm going to do something that is Harper in jewelry, that's not like anybody else's. I'm going to use enamel, because the only person doing anything significant with enamel in jewelry is John Paul Miller. So I had a whole wide field open to me where I didn't have much competition – I didn't think. And that started the ball rolling with jewelry. Because I was going to teach jewelry, my integrity said I better know how to do it! You might be able to fake it with undergraduate classes where it's an elective, but when you have the responsibility of having graduate students, you can't fake it. And from that point on, I started making jewelry, and I haven't stopped since.

But essentially, I just made up the rules as I went.

What I was getting to – the Renwick exhibition was the first time any of these jewelry pieces had been shown. There was a group of pieces called *Pagan Babies* [1977-78] that were the best received things in the exhibition. And they really propelled me on. And in that series, I started mixing enamel with gold and silver and nonprecious materials. By nonprecious, I mean things like squirrel hair, chipmunk teeth, raccoon vertebrae, rattlesnake rattles, little stones that weren't precious.

And that's when I started seriously thinking on a more profound level about what preciousness and nonpreciousness can mean and how they can be opposites, and yet they can intertwine in that sort of yin-yang situation and become a whole by being different.

MR. NELSON: I want to return a bit to some of the additional honors that you received about this point in your career. You received a National Endowment for the Arts craft in research fellowship twice around this time, I think first in 1974, '75, and then again in '78, '79. And I think also that on one of the grants – I believe it was the second one – that you were doing research on an unusual or rare enameling technique called en resille. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

MR. HARPER: Well, actually the en resille technique was on the first grant. I believe the award was for $3,000. The interesting thing to note at that point in the National Endowment grant was that if you were working in the crafts and you won an award, you got $3,000. If you were working in painting or sculpture or photography, you got $10,000. So I'm just going to leave that at that. And whoever listens to this in the future can draw his – their own conclusions about what the state of American decorative arts was at that point and the battles we had to fight.

But anyway, it was $3,000 that allowed my wife and myself to go to Europe for the first time. And I knew that there were a lot of en resille pieces in London and Paris. At that time, I was only aware of one in this country, and it was the piece owned by the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Now I should explain what en resille is. It is an enameling technique whereby colored enamel is put on top of very thin gold, and the gold is allowed to not only be the under-metal of the enamel, but it's also allowed to come up around the edges, so it forms its own dam, as it were. So it resembles the most delicate cloisonné that you can imagine.

And these float on a clear background that in every book that I had read and in the identification tag at the Cleveland Museum said was rock crystal, which is why it was supposed to be so difficult.

And I only knew of one person in the world who was doing en resille. Her name's Margaret Craver. She's from Boston – incredibly wonderful silversmith and goldsmith. In fact, I believe she's essentially the American who's responsible for the resurgence and renaissance in silversmithing in the United States after World War II. And I greatly admired Margaret's work, which – there were not many of them to see. She did not do a lot of work.

And I thought: Well, here's an alternative to cloisonné that might be interesting to me, because there might be room for doing new things.

On my first day in London I had an appointment to go to the Victoria and Albert [Victoria and Albert Museum, London]. They took me back to the viewing rooms, and they had brought out everything they owned: a few pieces in storage and most of what was in the permanent display cases. It thrilled me that I could start touching these pieces and actually feel them and examine them and see what they were.

[Laughs.] And I mentioned to the curator the term "rock crystal." And he said, "Look, I don't know why you Americans refer to this as 'rock crystal.' Rock crystal is a mineral, and en resille is done on colored glass." And I don't know why, but instantly the magic went away for me, and I had no desire whatsoever to do en resille after that moment. There's no reason that I can consciously give you why that happened.

It turns out that Margaret Craver knew that all along. She just wasn't telling people. And I don't blame her for that remotely. She's another figure who's been very inspirational on both a personal and a professional level to me.

But I was in Europe, and I got to see a lot of things, both decorative and fine. And I saw a string of shiny old Chinese cloisonné beads. And that's what the trip did for me. It told me that I should come back and start making cloisonné beads. That was an area that I could really explore and find a lot of original thinking for myself.

So I did everything that a tourist is supposed to do, for two and a half weeks, in terms of the visual arts in London and Paris. And I came back not wanting to do en resille and more committed than ever to doing cloisonné, but taking it from being semi-three-dimensional to completely three-dimensional. And I'm still doing it.

[Audio break.]

MR. NELSON: This is Hal Nelson interviewing William Harper at the artist's home in New York on Monday, January 12th, 2004, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disc number two.

Bill, I wanted to talk a little bit with you about your teaching experience. I understand that you have taught both at the high school level and at the college/university level. You taught at Parma High School in Ohio from 1967 to 1970; at the Cleveland Institute of Art from 1967 to 1969; in the summer months at the Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina, starting in the summer of 1969; at Kent State University from 1970 to 1973; as an adjunct instructor in enameling and design at Case Western Reserve University from 1970 to 1972; and at Florida State University from 1973 until 1992.

Can you talk a little bit about your teaching experience and what you've enjoyed about that and whether it's been a rewarding experience for you?

MR. HARPER: I'm going to throw in two more that were very important to me. The first one was 1979 to '80, when I was a visiting professor at Parsons School of Design here in New York and lived in Florida. So I would teach two days a week at Florida State and then fly from Tallahassee to New York on Thursday, teach all day Friday, and then return to Tallahassee at some point over the weekend. And that was the point that I really, first of all, fell in love with New York, knew that at some point I was going to have to live in New York for both personal and professional reasons, and really strongly became acquainted with where art was going and what the best art was, seeing a whole new variety of things more often in museums, rather than just a casual visit. I could go every Saturday, if I wanted, to the Byzantine collection in the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City] or whatever. That experience was incredibly important to me.

And I did the same thing for two days a week in 1984, '85, for the Cleveland Institute of Art, where I was a visiting professor. So both of those experiences were incredibly important to me.

I have actually taught everything from kindergarten through graduate school. The kindergarten through junior high was student teaching. And then my first job, full-time job, was as a high school teacher. And during that period, my goal was to get out of high school and find a college job. And I jokingly say that I loved my first year of teaching high school, I tolerated my second year, and I hated my third year. It was just – I had higher aspirations. There are a lot of discipline problems. A lot of kids get thrown into art classes because it's the most convenient place to put them. And I was to the point I couldn't deal with that anymore.

But I would never throw away that experience, because it made me a very good teacher. If you can teach high school adolescents and get them to perform well, you can be a general in the army.

And in all the college teaching I did, I would see colleagues who had never had to teach anything but the college level. They thought they could rely on the tragic muse of art to come down and touch the students, because

they didn't know how to set goals, they didn't know how to plan a curriculum. They were just sort of floundering around, many of them. And if you teach in a public school situation, you have to be organized, and you have to know what your goals are in what you present to students. And I think if I had not taught that three years in high school, I would not have had that.

The first experiences with the Cleveland Art Institute and then Case Western Reserve were in night school situations. In the former, I was teaching adults, who were just taking enameling. Some of them had taken it as many as 12 or 15 years. It was sort of a hobby for them.

And at Case Western Reserve, I was teaching full-time students. I was not teaching enameling; I was teaching color, drawing, and design, and they were taking these as electives. They were all incredibly bright students, and they really were challenging.

Then when I finally did get a college job, at Kent State; it was for three successive years of visiting professorships. So the first one was in enameling, because the man who was teaching it then, Mel Someroski, went to Ceylon to – or Sri Lanka now – to work on a weaving project. He taught enameling, but he was really a weaver. I never have figured that out.

Then the next year an opening came up to be a student teacher supervisor, and since they liked the record I had as a high school teacher, I was hired for a year to do that, because the person who usually did it was on sabbatical.

And then the following year Someroski decided to go back to Sri Lanka. So I taught enameling again. And at the end of that year, there was nothing available coming up that I qualified for, so that's when I took the seven months off. My book had just come out, and I was doing a lot of workshops. I took the six or seven months off, initially not knowing what I was going to do. It was early on in that period that I was hired to teach at Florida State. I taught there, I believe, for 20 years. And then I resigned in 1992. And I started as an assistant professor, and I ended up as a distinguished research professor, it was called.

MR. NELSON: Talk a bit about the Penland summer experience that you had starting in '69.

MR. HARPER: Oh, well, that was a situation all its own. Penland occupies a very, very special place in my heart. I loved teaching there. I loved being around people who were completely involved in what they were doing in terms of the crafts or decorative arts or whatever you want to call it. It was a great setting. It was a great vacation for the family. It was just wonderful in every respect.

I met so many people with whom I still maintain friendships. I learned a lot of things from other people who were teaching there. It was a period that I really could take and experiment fully with my work in a way that I was not able to during the regular teaching year. The faculty was encouraged to work right along with the students, to set an example. The whole thing was just an absolutely marvelous experience.

And also during that period of time, Bill Brown, who was the director, I'm not sure what year it was, invited 75 instructors over the years to come together for a two-week retreat in the mountains at the school, all expenses paid, to just do whatever we wanted to do.

And it was at that period that I started doing my mirrors and rattles. So that was a very meaningful time for me, besides having a great time and getting to know a lot of people even better.

MR. NELSON: Do you think that experiences like the Penland experience helped to create a greater cohesiveness for the crafts and decorative arts community, the bonding among artists working in various disciplines, a deeper knowledge of one another's work?

MR. HARPER: Oh, absolutely. At that time, there were two schools that were the stars of the summer. There was Haystack, in Maine [Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, Maine], which I've never taught at, and then Penland. And Penland, at the time I was teaching there – I'm not really that familiar with it now, because it's been a long time since I've been there – but it would have the crème de la crème of people in the American decorative arts, summer after summer after summer.

And sometimes your students would be people who were already prominent in their field. I remember one summer one of my students was a very prominent Boston jeweler who's now deceased, Miye Matsukata. I had looked up to her work in metals for years and years, and suddenly she shows up as one of my students? [Laughs.] So – talk about something that is humbling!

And then another year one of my students had been sent by Bob Ebendorf because he thought he could benefit from three weeks with me. That was Jamie Bennett, who has gone on to be a very prominent figure in American enameling.

There were other instances that were the same way. And I think that I took as much away from it, if not more, than the students were able to get from me.

MR. NELSON: You published an important book on enameling techniques in 1973, called *Step by Step Enameling*. Can you talk a little bit about how that developed and what that meant to you?

MR. HARPER: That was something I aggressively went after. The publishing company – which is now out of business – Western Publishing, had already done a series of, for want of a better word, how-to-do-it books on crafts. There was one on jewelry. There was one on macramé, which was really big back then. There was one on ceramics. There were a couple others, but there was nothing on enameling. And I thought: Well, here is a niche to be filled, and I'm going to go after it.

And I knew quite well from Penland the man who had done the jewelry book, Tom Gentille. So I networked with Tom, and he put me in contact with the editors and publishers of Western Press. They liked what they saw in me. I did the book. One of my proudest accomplishments that I usually don't talk about is that I wrote it in one draft. [Laughs.]

MR. NELSON: Wow.

MR. HARPER: And the editors did all the – when I told them what I wanted in terms of pictures, et cetera – they did all the research for that.

And I know around the world – well, I know in the United States it sold over 100,000 copies, which is mind-boggling to me. Whoever hears this, it did not make me rich. I got three cents a copy royalty.

It was also published in French, in Walloon, which I guess is one of the languages in Belgium, and in Dutch. And it sold a number of copies over there.

And I wanted a book – well, Western Press wanted a book that could teach people anywhere from the hobby level through high school through college how to do some kind of technical work. And it gave very succinct but very thorough analyses of all the techniques that were available for, in my case, enameling. It did not present actual projects. It was not a book like that. It told you how to do the techniques, and it tried to encourage, through pictures, the reader to then take the information that was given to them and do something with it. And it was one of those things that just propelled my name in front of a very wide range of people very, very quickly, because at $2.98, you can imagine how many copies sold very quickly. At that point, enameling was very, very popular in the United States.

I do have one regret from the whole situation that I will have to carry the burden of guilt for eternity, probably. And that is that before I wrote that book and started doing workshops, cloisonné was a barely practiced technique, and once the book came and my work became widely known and I started doing workshops, there was more bad cloisonné in this country than one can imagine. And it still goes on. And I've been teased by a lot of people as the person who caused this anti-Christ of crafts, and I admit I have to take the blame. But I think some good came out of it as well.

MR. NELSON: Oh, I'm sure of that.

You mentioned that you've done a number of workshops around the country. Can you talk a little bit about that and whether you enjoyed doing them?

MR. HARPER: Well, initially, I enjoyed that very much, on several levels: I got to travel; I got to meet often very, very interesting people; I got paid for it. It was a venue to get people to see my work, and a lot of them started collecting from that. But I soured on it after several years when I realized that you could become a hypocrite doing those, because there were people that I came to call the "professional workshop goers," and they just went from workshop to workshop to workshop trying to suck the life out of the instructor about what he or she did on a very personal, expressive level, professionally. They wanted to learn tricks; they wanted a fast way – a lot of them. It's not 100 percent, but I would say the majority of them – wanted a quick trip to being successful with, in my case, enamels. And I could never convince most of them that they needed to learn to draw, which none of them could ever do; that they needed to know something about color theory, which is an absolute must with enamels, unless you're only going to work in black and white. They didn't want to go through the technical part of a good arts education. They had taken enamels as a hobby, and they expected the instructor to tell them how he or she did something, so that they could do it themselves. And when I finally came to the realization that that was what was going on, I just quit doing them, because I felt like a hypocrite.

MR. NELSON: I can understand that.

You've been represented over the years by several prominent galleries, from Helen Drutt in Philadelphia to

Kennedy Galleries and Franklin Parrasch here in New York. Can you talk a little about those various relationships and how they developed and what they meant to you over the years?

MR. HARPER: Well, they've all been meaningful in one way or another.
Again, I've been very aggressive in pursuing gallery affiliations. There were a lot of invitations that came to me in the '70s especially, and the '80s, to show at various places around the country. And at first I accepted just about anything that came through, and then as time went on I became far more selective in what I wanted to deal with. Frankly, a lot of that had to do with who else they were showing – which probably sounds elitist, but I felt it was very important if my work was going to be seen in a serious manner, I didn't want to be showing with somebody for whom I had no respect.

I think every situation has served a different purpose. Helen Drutt, for instance, is the grand dame of dealers for art jewelry. She started out in the Philadelphia area. She's now internationally known. She was immensely supportive in acquiring work for her own collection. I believe she owned, at last count, eight pieces, which were all just given to the Houston Museum of Art, which was a nice coup.

The Kennedy Gallery situation came about quite by chance because Larry Fleischman, who owned the gallery, had been the American organizer of an exhibition at the Vatican showing American crafts and how they could be used for a liturgical nature. And that group of people was selected by Lloyd Herman, who was then director of the Renwick. And Larry had been greatly impressed by the piece that I had in that show, which, surprisingly enough at the Vatican, was a Jewish Torah pointer. But he summoned me, as it were, to come to New York to meet with him. And I thought it was just to buy some work for his personal collection. And he not only did that, but he asked me to become an affiliate of the gallery. And he had exclusive representation for me.

I did two one-person shows while I was there, with really nice catalogues for the time. He introduced me to a lot of people in the fine arts world. Unfortunately, Kennedy was a rather conservative gallery in terms of what it showed in paintings and sculpture. And that's what it was – I was the only odd person out. I was the jeweler, because the Fleischmans really loved my work. They were like my Medici, and even though Larry's gone now, his widow Barbara and their daughter Martha, who is now the director of Kennedy, are still staunch supporters. A few years ago, I had another show with them, which instead of being jewelry, this time was books, which was a side road I took for a while.

I was with Franklin Parrasch, who started in Washington and then came to New York and did what I think was a very gutsy show with him – "The Self-Portrait: Sacred and Profane" [1990], which were pieces of jewelry that a woman really had to be brave to wear.

I then had what is probably my most important gallery affiliation in terms of visibility, the Peter Joseph Gallery, which was an incredibly well-subsidized, beautifully presented – exquisite catalogues came from the gallery. It was a hobby for Peter, who was an investment banker, and he entrusted it to a group of professionals who did everything first class. It, strangely enough, had some affinity with what happened at Kennedy – it was a fine furniture gallery. It represented people like Albert Paley and Wendell Castle, who did one-of-a-kind furniture. But Peter, personally, and his director also really liked my work and took me on again as the odd man out.

Unfortunately, Peter died in 1994, I believe. And that gallery came to an end – his widow was not interested in continuing it. And in the interim, I've just sort of floated along having enough former clients who would come to me for work. I've always wanted and tried to get a situation where the galleries were not "craft" galleries. I hate the word; I hate the connotation that it brings about in the public's mind. I've always really enjoyed and cherished being the odd man out in galleries that are extremely well respected. Franklin Parrasch, for instance, only deals with three-dimensional work, but some of it can be pure sculpture and some of it can be in that strange twilight-zone area of sculptors who work in clay or glass.

A decision I made early on when I was starting to do jewelry, which I think was very important and I've never discussed very much, is that I chose to work in gold when my colleagues in metalsmithing were exploring silver, copper, brass, bronze, nickel – metals that were not noble. And everyone thought I was elitist and crazy working with golds. And I felt that that was the only metal that would allow me to be messy and spontaneous and really expressive. Gold is such a noble metal and you can do so many different things to it that you, I mean the artist, can be as spontaneous and creative as you want to be; you can even make some mistakes and correct them, and the metal holds up. All you have to do is look at a crushed Mycenaean death mask from a tomb, and it may be in a mess, but because it's gold and something about the nobility of the metal, gives it a kind of integrity that still makes it a magnificent object. And I felt that early on and made the decision, even though it was an expensive one to do, to work exclusively in gold.

I also combined it with these other materials, and eventually semiprecious stones. But I have to a very little extent ever worked with silver except as a support for the enamel, which I still do, but you're not aware of it being silver. And I've never really done much with copper except for electroforming, and never anything with

brass or bronze or nickel or any of those things. And the work I think has held up better over the years than some of the stuff that had a shorter shelf-life, shall I say, because of the choice of metals. I was able to start working with gold because with my National Endowment grant I did keep out $500 that I used to buy materials, and I made a couple pieces of jewelry with that $500. And as I sold, I took the money and recycled into more gold, and it just propelled itself to the point that now I can buy whatever I want to and do anything with it I want. It was the best investment I ever made.

MR. NELSON: You left Tallahassee in 1992 and moved here to New York. Can you talk a little bit about that transition? And I'm assuming you found New York to be a very stimulating working and artistic environment.

MR. HARPER: All I had to do was get off the airplane at LaGuardia and the stimulation fell in. I mean, New York was then and is still the art capital of the world. I don't especially like or am attracted to a lot of things that are trendy right now, but I think time has proven that things that are often in style, as quickly as they go into style they can go out of style. And it's the really strong stuff that holds up over time. And in New York you're able to see the whole gamut, from whatever the latest craziness is in the galleries to magnificent things at the Met historically. For instance, I've of late been very influenced by Cycladic marble figures and Greek gold especially, Etruscan gold, Byzantine gold – and I'm also very influenced by American paintings from 1945 through, I'd say, 1990. And there's no better selection of those things than here in New York. It's been a great rejuvenator and continues to be – for my work.

MR. NELSON: I know that the artist June Schwarcz in San Francisco is a good friend of yours, and I'm wondering if you have many friends within the crafts community and whether you keep in touch with people like June and whether you consider yourself to be part of a community of American artists and craftsmen. I know you hate that word "crafts."

MR. HARPER: No, it's okay. I use it myself because, as I said, the Eskimos have any number of ways of saying snow, and we do not have a word to define that strange area that I seem to be one of the inhabitants of.

But to answer your question, no. Most of my friends are in other areas. I have a lot of acquaintances that I see once in a while. But I'm not part of the Goldsmiths Society; I'm not part of the Enamelers Society. I no longer teach at schools where these things are taught. And at this point in time, these disciplines are taught less and less and less anyway.

I seem to be happiest just working in my own studio at this point in my life. That's not to say it won't change. But amazingly, for one thing for New York being the art capital of the world, there are not that many people here doing what I do, so I don't even have that much of a chance to have friends in the area. I'm very happy to have friends in other areas. It's not the same thing. I don't have to bring my work life all the time into my personal life. I think one needs a break. That's one reason my family is so important to me. Now, both of my children are in the arts – my son is an architect and my daughter is the director of a very prestigious art gallery here in the city. So it has remained in the family. But when we get together, we don't discuss – well, we do discuss art to some extent, but it's more art gossip than it is anything on a more professional level going on in the field. I'm just not interested in that kind of stuff.

MR. NELSON: Is there anything else that you'd like to share with us in our conversation today on important developments in your life, throughout your career? I think tomorrow we'll be talking a bit more about the artistic influences on your work, including your great passion for African art and tribal arts. But if there's anything else that you'd like to share –

MR. HARPER: No, I think that was the hardest question you've asked me all day.

MR. NELSON: [Laughs.]

MR. HARPER: No, not at this point. I can't think of anything. Maybe tomorrow.

MR. NELSON: Great. Well, we'll look forward to tomorrow.

[Audio break.]

This is Harold Nelson interviewing William Harper at the artist's home in New York on Tuesday, January 13, 2004 for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. And this is disc number two.

Good morning, Bill. Today I'd like to talk to you a bit more about your work – where it began and how it developed over the course of your richly productive career.

First, can you say something about enameling? What, in particular, appeals to you about the medium?

MR. HARPER: I think it's the intensity of the color and its ability to convey a kind of intimate passion to the viewer

when it's done well. In my viewpoint, it can be as powerful, when the imagery joins the technique in a really colorful synthesis, as looking at a wonderful painting. I don't see any difference. I know a lot of people will say that painting, by its very nature, can be more expressive than any of the craft materials. But frankly, I don't subscribe to that, obviously. And I really am attracted to the idea of having an object that's incredibly powerful on a very small scale. I frankly think that's a far more difficult feat to accomplish than just getting bigger and bigger and bigger, in terms of painting or sculpture, which seems to be the norm today. I feel that oftentimes artists get away with scale and not really having much to say within it. And when you work on a very intimate scale, you're forced to do things that are going to entice the viewer to become involved both visually and intellectually. I've always taken it as a rule for myself that what I want to try to do with my work is get the viewer to really look, and then when he looks he'll see something. And the more he sees, the more he wants to look. If that makes sense.

MR. NELSON: It does make sense. So in a sense when you're looking at a large work, it's almost as though you capture the entire work all at once, whereas with the more intimate scale of enameling, you enter, you begin on a journey of entering the work and the layers of meaning to the work as well. It takes place over perhaps a slower, longer process, a longer period of time.

MR. HARPER: Yes, that's the way I feel about it.

MR. NELSON: From very early on in your career, you've also worked in series, exploring related themes, subjects, and motifs through a cohesive body of work. Can you talk a little bit about the reasons for this, your motivations?

MR. HARPER: I believe there are probably several different reasons – [laughs]. One is just obviously practical to the way I happen to work. And I think it's perhaps what sets me apart in the medium from most people practicing it. I am not a designer; there is no way that I can do sketches of what I want to do or paintings or renderings. My mind does not work that way. My mind is one that is very spontaneous, and I create as I think and I think as I create. I think the best comparison – not comparison, but the best person that I might be able to use as a similar kind of working artist would be de Kooning, who simply started putting the paint on the surface, and as things happened, he went with the flow, so to speak. And the work developed out of chaos. And that's essentially how I work on things. I start with a blank piece of metal and the gold that's going to become the drawing segment. And at this point I'm using both a thin wire and then I use 24-karat sheet cut into strips of varying widths as a line that wavers back and forth between thick and thin and can become very sensual.

I have an idea of where I want to go. Sometimes the idea is more concrete than at other times. There are times that it might be motivated by some kind of sensory perception. For instance, I remember doing a series of pieces called *Nine Sketches*, where each one of them was inspired by something such as a scent – the scent of cinnamon, for instance, was one impetus; or the deepness of the blue of a sapphire was another one; or the smell of musty moss was another one. Sometimes my motivation could be ideas as abstract as that. Or I could be working in a more, what I call intellectual series, such as the series based on Jasper Johns's paintings that I did in 1993, '94, which were very well thought out intellectually, and to some extent visually thought out. I knew there was a kind of structure I had to follow.

But it doesn't matter which kind of procedure I'm following, I start making things. And I'm fully open to the possibility that the parts I'm making at any one time are not necessarily going to go together into piece number one. I make things, and as they seem to fit together, for instance, the enamel part will be finished; that's always a given, and then I will – and I may do a series of those if I really get hooked into to the imagery or the color or the idea that I want to express in the enamel. And then I start making gold segments, and I probably at this point am also looking at the found objects, whether they be semiprecious stones and pearls or some of the stranger things I use like the flip-tops from beer cans or the ends of fluorescent light bulb tubes or broken bicycle plastic, whatever.

And I just move these things around on my desk, on my working surface, until certain juxtapositions start to fall into place. And when this starts to happen, I just naturally have more than one piece – I'll have two pieces or three pieces. And at this point I generally set in my mind how many pieces I think I'm going to need to explore all the ideas I have about that series. And sometimes I don't quite reach that number; I think the largest number I've ever had would be the *Pagan Babies*, where there are 13, I remember. Sometimes it's only a matter of three pieces that will complete the series. It just depends on how I'm feeling, how I'm working. But it's completely spontaneous. There's really not any great design that I'm looking for. I'm looking for something magical. It's a rather trite word to use, but that – it has to be magical to me. And if it's magical to me, I hope that it's going to have the same kind of mystery quality to the viewer.

MR. NELSON: So the completion of a series is as subjective and as intuitive as the initiation of the series also.

MR. HARPER: Yes, I think your word intuitive is probably the best way of describing how I work, the approach I

use, and what – [laughs] – I end up with.

MR. NELSON: I'm not sure if I was understanding correctly. Were you saying in some cases you will complete a series of enamels in succession, and then you may go back and add other elements in gold in some cases?

MR. HARPER: It just depends on what happens on any given day. Generally, I can say absolutely that I have never finished all of the enamels in a series before I've started finishing actual pieces. There's usually – I'll start stuff for piece number one. And in the process of working on things that will become piece number one, there will be elements that may become part of piece number two or piece number three. And at that point, maybe I'll finish piece number one while I've got parts of two, three, and four in progress. And then, on the other hand, there may be things that I make along this process that don't get used at all and remain on the desk and I use as starters in my mind perhaps to include in the next body of work. I quite honestly have had things like that hang around on my desk for as long as 10 or 12 years before I use them.

MR. NELSON: I know you've always used an enormously diverse array of materials in your work, from bird talons, bones, and teeth to precious and semiprecious materials and stones. First of all, I have a practical question: where do you find this material? And secondly, can you talk a little bit about what you like in particular about the combinations of precious and more commonplace materials?

MR. HARPER: Well, in answer to your first question, 90 percent of the time with the strange materials, such as the bird talons and the chipmunk teeth and that kind of stuff, people give them to me. My students used to bring me things, and then once my reputation became somewhat established – for instance, after the Renwick show when the *Pagan Babies* were first shown with all their strange materials – I literally got things in the mail from people I did not know who had gotten my address from the Renwick and sent me something saying, here's something you may want to use at some point in your work. I remember one woman sent me a package of her cat's whiskers.

MR. NELSON: [Laughs.]

MR. HARPER: I still have them. It's never quite gelled with me what to do with them, and I think they're a good example of what I consider something that's precious. I mean, those were very personal to her, and she related to my work on some kind of deep level that she wanted to give me something that was very personal and precious to her.

Now, when people usually think of preciousness in jewelry, they think of what I call the big-rock syndrome, which is Cartier, Bulgari, Tiffany – you know, the bigger the rock, the more precious it is. And my feeling about that work is somewhat cynical in that I feel that the society ladies, for want of a better term, who indulge themselves in this kind of thing on a very high level are usually doing so to impress their friends. And it says that my big diamond shows that my husband loves me more than your slightly smaller diamond shows how much your husband loves you. Now that's a very cynical approach to it, but combined with that is the fact that diamonds are not scarce. Between DeBeers in South Africa and Russia, there are enough diamonds that everybody in the world could probably have one for virtually nothing. You know, they're simply withheld in order to keep the market price up.

I like to think my work is more precious than that and more interesting than that because, first of all, I'm only producing one of a kind. I happen to have a great deal of self-respect for my work, so I hold it in – I'm at the point in my life where I hold it at a special level, and to me, getting a good Harper is far more meaningful than a lady receiving a 5-karat diamond from her husband, even if the cost is higher. That has nothing to do with its value, as far as I'm concerned. And that's a personal viewpoint.

The other situation that can develop when a woman acquires my work is that she is making a statement when wearing it that she has a certain bravery that perhaps the more fashion-conscious woman does not have. Anyone who wears my work has to have a great deal of self-confidence, because number one, people are going to question, what is that? They're going to look at it and they're going to see that there are probably beautiful elements to it, but it's also perhaps the strangest piece of jewelry that they've ever seen someone wear. And the woman also has to feel comfortable with people staring at her chest – [laughs] – and perhaps wanting to come up to her and actually handle the piece that she's wearing. And a lot of women are not that self-confident about themselves. So I'm trying to build into the work a kind of amuletic, talismanic quality that requires an element of bravery on the part of the owner in order to wear it – the work is strong and the wearer is strong.

MR. NELSON: So in a really marvelous way, what you create causes us to rethink how we value what we value and what is precious? That something that is seemingly commonplace can really be as precious to an individual if approached in a unique way as can be the most precious stone or metal or material.

MR. HARPER: Yes. The first time I ever consciously realized what I was doing was when my brother gave me his wisdom teeth. And he said, "Here, I think you could probably use them. I don't want them." And thinking about

the wisdom teeth, I thought, well, I love my brother; these are a part of him. I can use them in a way that will be meaningful. They're simply not going to go into a waste basket. They were used on a small mirror that was done early in my career. And using them that way gave them a kind of timelessness that I found very important. They were very personal to me, and hopefully the preciousness of that personal quality would be communicated to the owner and wearer.

I think this is probably the time when I should credit these ideas to African sculpture, because I'm completely enamored and engaged with accumulative sculpture from Africa. And these peoples were are often regarded – not so much today, but in the early part of the century, except among the cognoscenti perhaps – as unsophisticated and crude. But I look at it as exactly the opposite: that with African work we have peoples who do not have access to great technology, but they use their minds and the materials that they have at hand to produce art of an extremely high emotional level. And I think that requires an incredible amount of sophistication to be able to do that.

And I'm especially taken with the objects, the figures or the masks that include secondary materials besides wood, such as shells or teeth or burial cloth or little things that belonged to a person, such as European bells or locks, that have a curiosity to the tribesperson and they've held on to them for a number of years and they have a certain patina of age to them and then they're attached to a figure. That's exactly the kind of emotionalism I'm trying to bring to my work by the use of these secondary materials. I, in no way, try to tell people that this is an idea that's original to me. I stole it from African sculpture, quite frankly.

MR. NELSON: Well, your passion for African sculpture is apparent from sitting here surrounded by the most glorious examples of tribal art, African art here in the room. And I know that you've been a passionate collector of African art for quite a few years. Haven't you?

MR. HARPER: Yes, my ex-wife – we gave each other wedding presents on our wedding night, and she gave me – she didn't realize it, but it was a fertility figure – [laughs] – because she knew I was interested in African sculpture from our college days. And we slowly started to acquire things.

I'm especially, completely passionate about a certain kind of figure, bochio figures, which are the African precursors to what became voodoo figures in this hemisphere and in Africa they're called vodun, v-o-d-u-n. And basically they're supposed to capture spirits of the dead and bring this kind of spirituality to a figure, using elements that were owned by the person who is going to take possession of the object after the maker, or the shaman, creates it. So I like the fact, I'm very attracted to the fact that the, let's say, the owner of some shells and some teeth needs to accomplish something in his or her own life. Let's say they have bad headaches. So the shaman will take the personal objects or tell the eventual owner to go out and get something specific. I can never keep straight what is used for what. But it might be a dog skull; it might be a bill of a duck. That's a very potent object that is sometimes used in the figures. And these will be incorporated into the figure by the maker and then given back to the owner. And I like to think that I become both in the way that I make the pieces.

And I also am – my work to a great extent is about dichotomy, about opposites. I love beautiful things, but my definition of what is beautiful is probably not what the normal person's definition of beautiful is. I can look at a Faberge egg, for instance, and I can see a kind of superficial beauty that lies in the craftsmanship. But I'm going to look at a piece of very straightforward African sculpture that might be rather crudely carved and have dripped all over it sacrificial materials that show how it's been used in ceremonies over the years, and I find a much, much deeper beauty in what most people would find grotesqueness of the object. It's simply a very subjective way of looking at what is beautiful versus what is mundane.

MR. NELSON: Talk a little bit more, if you would, about that issue of duality in your work. You talked about beauty and its opposite as one element of duality. In discussing African art you've mentioned sophistication versus what might be considered a cruder approach – refined, raw; male, female. Talk about some of those issues of duality that your work juxtaposes.

MR. HARPER: Well, those issues did not really come into play in the early work, certainly not the work I did in college or graduate school, certainly not the work that I did the first few years I was searching for a personal identity in the work. They developed somewhere in the first couple years of really probing the cloisonné technique. And I think they really started to blossom or emerge as I was searching for forms that could replace wall plaques, in order to continue to use enamel and not have it be an ashtray. So I really think I started a level of maturity in my work when I was doing the blocks, for want of a better word. The *Dirty Dominoes* [1970-71], for instance, was the first block piece that I ever did. And from there they went into *Geography*. And when I got to the *Geography* series, they became about landscapes. At that point I was doing a lot of traveling to promote my book and to do workshops. And on an airplane looking out at the landscape as the plane was going down, landing, I looked out over the visual element of seeing the landscape from above and I thought about a quote that Gertrude Stein once made that – upon taking her first airplane trip and looking out the window, she finally realized what Picasso and Cubism were all about.

And somehow, recalling that quote triggered my memory – my imagination -- to try to integrate body forms which I had been exploring through a very early series that I called *Freudian Toys* and that were, frankly, rather sophomoric in some respects. They were my response to the hippie generation and that kind of imagery of album covers from the Beatles, and San Francisco pop culture, et cetera. And I wanted to keep a body element but make it more sophisticated, and I decided to try to merge the sensuousness of the body with the sensuousness that I saw in the landscape. And that's what the *Geography* series actually means. That's how I came up with the name for it.

And I after I did the first large one, actually the largest piece I've ever done, *A Personal Geography* [1971], which is a group of 49 different two-inch square tiles in cloisonné that can be mixed and matched by the viewer. So that there are tiles that have a single image, and then there are tiles that go together as duets or trios or quartets – very musical in feeling, obviously, not only in the way I verbalize it, but what the viewer, hopefully, experiences when he or she looks at it, and even more intimately is able to play with it and move the blocks around.

MR. NELSON: And each of these enamel tiles is mounted in a Plexiglas block?

MR. HARPER: It's a black Plexiglas block, and the tiles sit in a black Plexiglas carton. And that just triggered in my working methods -- after I did *A Personal Geography* – is where do I go. And I really can't tell you how the idea first started, but that's when the series really started, I think, and I would start to do two pieces that expressed opposite thoughts; for instance, a winter/summer piece, or the black pieces versus the white pieces, or the bright pieces versus the more subdued pieces.

And in addition to those, I was also doing sets of nine blocks again, that were rectangular in form, in which I tried to use the patterns from various individual cultures. There were four, I believe, from this series. The first one was called *An Ur* – U-R – *Geography*, and it was based on motifs from ancient Mesopotamia. And there was one based on motifs from Rajasthan in India. Another one based on Central African – desert African motifs, called the *Timbuktu Geography*. And in using these patterns, I – for want of a better term – "Harperized" them. And in doing that, I began to see the potential for what would become later work in which I could explore the duality situation even more.

And then there's always been this situation of maleness versus femaleness in the work from a very, very early point. In the early amulets, for instance, there's a pair called *Male Amulet* and *Female Amulet* [1976]. They're enamel forms combined with very sculptural, three-dimensional forms that have been electroformed. The enamels are flat and often patterned in some manner; very rich color that gradates, usually, from one tonality to another completely different one. That's one kind of opposite. And then there may be a protrusion, an almost phallic-like form or nose-like form that comes out of the male amulet, and there is a corresponding negative depression in the female amulet.

And somehow, I think in my subconscious, these things were all brewing together, and I began to, I think, take on the reasoning that in order to be an artist, you had to find both maleness and femaleness within yourself in order to create your "child" – the artwork. And that, over the years, became a stronger, more powerful metaphor as I went on, to the point that when I got to work in the '80s that were the jewels, it actually started with a piece called *The Temptation of St. Anthony*. And then there was a major neck piece based on alchemy from ancient Egypt. There were a couple of pieces that I called *Hermaphrodites*, and these all were generated from the cults of alchemy that started in ancient Egypt and had to do with trying to find perfection through opposites.

Now, when most people think of alchemy, they think of it as taking something that's very base, such as lead, and turning it into something very precious, such as gold. And that's just a very superficial understanding of what the roots of alchemy really are. But in all of these pieces, I have used both lead and gold as materials. The early alchemists, however, by the time the cults moved to Greece, felt that the ultimate manifestation of perfection would be an individual who was born a hermaphrodite, having the sexual features of both genders. And, obviously, they're very rare at any time, any place. But the shrines, such as the Shrine of Delphi, the oracles would be most valued by the culture when they were indeed a hermaphrodite. And the Greeks felt that a hermaphrodite could predict the future by interpreting the past, and anyone who was a hermaphrodite was a perfect figure.

So I think that was probably, when I got to that point, the ultimate in being able to use opposites. And in the work after that, everything became just a natural way of working. I basically don't even have to think about it anymore; it just flows.

MR. NELSON: I definitely want to continue to talk to you about the series of work that you've done throughout your career. But before leaving technique – and I know we touched on this a little bit earlier – I'd like to talk to you a little bit more about your unique approach to the line and to the cloison in cloisonné. And traditionally in cloisonné, the gold, the linear element, is used to contain the central element of cloisonné, which is the enamel,

the glass, the color. You have kind of broken away, to a large extent, from that tradition in a very innovative way and have begun to use the gold as a central linear element in your work. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

MR. HARPER: Well, as I stated earlier, when I started in art school, I might have been one of the 10 worst draftsmen in the world. I quickly realized that I had to learn to draw. Now, I don't draw well academically. My feeling about drawing, however, is that it is a means and perhaps the strongest means that an artist has of creating an image that has a personal mark to it that can convey something – in my case, a sense of emotional sensuality and mystery and wanting to explore the piece. That's what I think I'm most trying to accomplish in making them. And I'm using the cloisonné as my method of establishing a structure to the piece.

One of the reasons I think I gravitated towards cloisonné was because I needed this structure. In the enamel painting pieces I was attempting to do, they just became messy. The more you fired them – sometimes I would fire the pieces 75, 80, 100 times trying to get an effect. And I finally came to the realization that's all I was trying to do, get an effect, that the pieces became rather vacuous, amorphous, images that even I was not sure where they were going. And I had to set a definite discipline for myself. And I had learned through teaching, especially on the high school level, that for me to be able to produce successful work, I had to set problems for myself and then work towards that problem.

So one of the first problems I set for myself was what to use – it started out as silver wire. At some point, the silver started mixing with gold, and now the cloisons are all gold. But I had to establish how to bring a personal identity to that. And as I said, I'm not a designer, so it's impossible for me to draw something down on a piece of paper that's linear and then take the wire, the thin wire, silver or gold, or some pieces even in copper, and trace around it using a tweezer or pliers or whatever. That's just not me. I myself am a dichotomy; I'm full of opposites, because as fastidious as my work seems to people often, and as controlled as it seems to be when people look at it, that's not my working method. I'm very spontaneous, and I sometimes let myself go out of control, but the trick is to go out of control and know when to pull yourself back.

And I tried, and I think successfully managed at a fairly early point to use that psychological impulse towards creation in the way I handled the structure of the piece. So all of the – I'm not going to use the word "design" – all of the structure of what the viewer will eventually see is laid down by the metal wire, whether it be thin – and then I started making my own by cutting sheets of metal into strips that I could make as wide or as narrow as I wanted. And those elements could become very fragmented; they could be long, continual, sensuous lines, or they could be massed together like a texture, or they could be little accent points, for instance, that emerge out of another line.

Now, once I've done that, then I get to the actual inlaying of enamel, and for me, that's when the ultimate fun begins. And I may have some inclination of where I'm going with the color, but I prefer when I don't. And I feel best about a piece when I really get into trouble with the color that I've placed. And technically, the way I work is to – and it's the way I think anyone works with enamel – there are layers that are built up, and it's exactly the opposite if one is using transparent enamel, which means the viewer is seeing through from the top surface down to whatever the metal base is, and the metal reflects back and it gives the enamel that special character that it has. Well, if one's a painter, the most important part of the painting that is probably going to attract the viewer initially is what's on the top surface colors, what the last thing is that the painter has built towards. Enameling is exactly the opposite. The color building starts at the bottom and then subsequent layers will change it. But the decisions you make in the first or second inlays of color generally cannot be altered to any great extent with the third or fourth or fifth layer. I don't think I ever do more than probably five layers before I start the finishing process. And I really love the challenge of having the first two firings come out, and I look at the color and I almost gag at it, and I think, "Okay, Harper, you got yourself into a mess. Now how do you get yourself out of it?" And when that happens, those are my best pieces.

[Audio break.]

MR. NELSON: This is Hal Nelson interviewing William Harper at the artist's home in New York on Tuesday, January 13, 2004, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. And this is disk number three.

Bill, I understand that you very rarely use opaque enamels in your work. Could you talk a little bit about your choices on that?

MR. HARPER: Well, for those who do not understand exactly how the procedure works, enamel is glass that is ground down to a powder that can range from elements the size of rock salt to a texture similar to powdered sugar. And basically, I buy everything I use from the manufacturer already ground to a certain consistency. And this color – it's colored glass – this material does not mix together the way paint mixes. For instance, if one were to take some red enamel and add to it purple enamel – or let's say blue enamel, for instance, if you mix the two together, you're going to get a kind of purple that's similar to the kind of color that Seurat got in his pointillist

paintings. In other words, the material will visually mix together, but it will not physically mix together.

MR. NELSON: It's almost dappled, in a way.

MR. HARPER: Yes. And I really get very excited about the potential of working that way. Well, if you do that with opaque colors, color that you cannot see through, you're going to get a very interesting texture on the surface, but you're not going to get that kind of depth and magical quality that I feel to me the material of enamel best conveys. I think that's what it does best, and I want to concentrate on what it does best.

In the early pieces of using cloisonné, I did use a wide range of opaque colors. In fact, there were times – there were several pieces in which I set the problem for myself, "Bill, you have to use more opaque. You're relying too much on the inherent beauty that comes from transparent enamel." And I wanted to have a 50-50 relationship. But somehow, over the years, the use of opaques just became less and less and less, and they became an accent, or it was reduced down to using black along with all the transparents, or white with all the transparents, depending on what kind of value system I wanted to go to light – light/dark system in the piece.

And the use of the transparents just became far more interesting to me, because I incorporated into my work elements of basse-taille technique, in which I texture the metal or emboss the metal. Instead of using the thin commercial foils that most enamelers use, I make my own foil by rolling – I use a rolling mill that reduces the gold or the silver to as thin as I possibly can so that I can inlay it with textures on them. And if I did that and put opaque over it, you wouldn't be able to see it. But by putting the transparent over it, it combines and marries the enamel and the metal to a greater extent. So I just became more and more involved with it. It seemed the natural thing for me.

MR. NELSON: Talk a little bit about finished surfaces also, because I know you have a particular interest in the quality of the surface of the enamel.

MR. HARPER: I have been accused, rightly so, as being the enameler who hates enamel. I think for as beautiful as the material can be, it also can be as gross and banal as Christmas tree ornaments. And I'm afraid that's how I view most uses of the material. I don't like that shiny barrier that is naturally set up by the glossiness of the glass. There's a barrier between the viewer and what happens within the piece.

And I learned a technique that was rarely utilized when I was a student. I learned it from Kenneth Bates. And that is most people, when they do cloisonné, for instance, when all of the color is built up to the top of the wire, it's a very uneven, very nasty surface, and it's usually thicker than the artist wants to have when it's finished. So a carborundum stone, a grinding stone, is used to level out the surface and bring out all of the wire work, the linear qualities with the color and give it an even surface and a surface that allows the viewer to look through the glass and see it at what is probably its optimum clarity.

Now, most people who practice the technique will then take this evened-out surface and put it back into the kiln and have it come out glossy. Well, I learned from Kenneth Bates that that's completely unnecessary; that after you level out the surface, then there are grinding stones that can be used that are finer, and finer, and finer that will polish the piece to a kind of perfect surface that's matte, and allow the kind of warmth to come into what is generally regarded as a cold material.

And if one looks at anything that's enameled, even the great Limoges pieces from France in the 15th century, they're all glossy. And it's a wonderful use of the material, but there's no warmth to it. And I wanted to bring a kid of warmth to it that I could only achieve with what I call the matte finish. Now I've influenced a lot of people to do it.

The one problem that can happen with a matte finish is that little pits can occur in certain colors. And they're generally due to either shoddy craftsmanship or the fact that some colors utilize metallic oxides, which are the determinants of color, that naturally have little pits if they're not brought to a glossy surface. Now, that bothers a lot of people. I got over it very quickly because it seemed to me to be something minor that I could give in to in order to give the kind of warmth that I'm seeking. And also, perhaps it's simply rationalization on my point, but I also don't mind those little pits that can happen because it brings a sense of the fact that this was something that somebody really made and it has imperfections. And really, what constitutes an imperfection or what constitutes perfection? Sometimes in trying to attain an absolutely flawless surface, in doing that, one loses the life of the piece. And I try to stop working at the point that I hit the optimum point of life that I hope to generate from the energy of the piece.

Actually, I've done a series involved with this idea called *Le Fleur du Mal* based on the Baudelaire poem to a small extent. But philosophically, the poem is about the idea that everything reaches a peak and then goes down from there. So imagine a flower, a rose or an iris, for instance, that opens up, slowly revealing its beauty. It reaches a point of optimum beauty and then it starts to fade. It's a metaphor for our own aging process. Well, it's that peak that I'm trying to reach in all of my work, and if it includes imperfections, or what some people

might regard as imperfections, so be it. I would rather retain a sense of life than I would to have to continue working over and over and over to get something that's flawless, but in the process of getting it to be flawless, I might give up something that gave it a spontaneity that is its life force. I don't want the piece to look like a Christmas tree ornament, and enamel so easily does that. And that's the surface that most people use. And it's my dislike of that surface, which is widely known, that has given me the reputation as the enameler who dislikes enamel.

MR. NELSON: You told us a bit about the *Freudian Toys* series that you did roughly between 1969 and 1971. We talked a bit about the marvelous *Geography* series that you did in the early 1970s. Can you talk now a bit about the *Sistrums and Rattle* series that you did, I believe, starting around 1973, '74, with titles like *Rain Rattle*, *Summer Rattle*, *Rattle for Medusa,* and *Garden Rattle*.

MR. HARPER: Well, those are the large rattles. They actually are mirror rattles. They have enamels on one side, but it's usually regarded as the front side. There's some kind of handle, which in a few cases – three, I believe – where they were cast-metal replicas of bird legs and claws; there was a group that used deer antler as handles; and then there was a group of smaller ones that had forged, sterling silver handles, and they were the early ones.

I should probably mention that in the early ones, I believe the first two I did – I'm almost positive – I did at the Penland retreat. I don't remember the years of that. But I decided to take advantage of the fact that there were some metalsmiths there who could teach me a few things. I was not that sophisticated with metals at that point. And I was interested in the idea of twisting and forging silver, and then after I did that, what could I do with it? And it seemed to be a handle. And I had been playing in my mind with the idea of putting mirrors on the backs of the enamel. I had been electroforming, and the process of putting the two together by electroforming an edge joining the two was a natural solution of how to do that. And it was with this series – with these things -- that I did the first two, that were called *Sistrums for Persephone*.

Now, a sistrum – just to define that word – was a very primitive kid of rattle used in Egypt and Greece that involved little metal rings strung on a metal wire, attached to a handle. And they could be shaken so that they produced a sort of tingly percussive sound. And I don't know why – I had seen some in the Met Museum, and it was one of those things I was intrigued by, probably on a superficial level, now as I look back. But I wanted to utilize that as well as an element.

And I ended up doing a pair of mirrors that involved opposites – another example of it. And they're based on the Persephone myth in which she ate six pomegranate seeds when she wasn't supposed to. She had been married off, to her dislike, to Pluto, the ruler of Hades. And her mother was the goddess of Earth. And Persephone greatly preferred being on Earth to being in Hell, as it were. And her husband, Pluto, said, "Well, if you can resist eating any of the pomegranates, which is your favorite food, I'll let you loose from the marriage and you go back to Earth." And he put it beside her to tempt her, and she was seduced by it and ate six seeds. When he discovered it, he said well, he would hold up part of his bargain and she could go back to Earth for six months and be with her mother, but then she had to spend six months with him every year. According to the Greeks, that's why we have winter and summer.

Well, this was an early example of using mythology as an impetus towards whatever the intellectualization was going to be in my work. And the *Summer Rattle* has a great deal of color to it, very warm, very sensual. It also has an image of a flower floating between the layers that has – these flower images I used for a long time. And they intrigued people a lot. And there was no great technical skill in doing it. I discovered that commercial decals that were made for the ceramic industry could be layered in between the transparent enamels and it would be – was very diaphanous floating image within the surface.

And these were probably the two first most significant objects I made using the decals. And as I said, the summer one used the color very sumptuously. And then the winter one, I replaced the percussive parts of the piece with black-and-white quail feathers. And the enamel is very definitely black-and-white, but the black and charcoal come from opaque enamels – which refers to your last question. And I began to experiment with how to go as light as one could in value with enamel, which is something that I have not seen anybody explore – how you get what essentially is a clear, colorless, transparent enamel when put over silver. Obviously, it has to be over silver as a base, because over copper or gold you've got the warmth, the natural warmth of the metal showing through. And I wanted to try to attain a kind of neutral, white coloration or lack of coloration in the work. And that was also my first experiment within that framework, which has become more and more important to me as I've worked.

From those two pieces, I continued with the rattle – the small mirror rattle series. In fact, one of those was one that utilized my brother's wisdom teeth. And then I somehow decided to go bigger with them; I wanted to increase the scale. And someone gave me – I believe the first one used the deer antlers. And holding onto it, it just seemed natural to me that it had a quality that was not only visual, but it was so naturally tactile in the way

that it fit into the palm of the hand, and holding it made my mind jump to hand mirrors. And I simply increased the scale.

And then with each one I would set a problem for myself – an intellectual problem as well as a color problem that I wanted to explore, and most of them had some kind of mythology on either a very, very subliminal level, or in some cases, a very obvious level.

Probably the most complex and toughest one to do is the one that the Cleveland Museum of Art owns, called *Rattle for Medusa*. And in that piece, colorwise, I wanted to really reduce my palette to a series of warm grays and browns, along with essentially what I would have to call creams and whites, to attain a significant image and coloration to the piece. When anyone looks at my piece, anything I do, my color does not go all the way around the color wheel and include everything that's possible in coloration; I try to have some kind of limits to myself. And I think that was probably the most sophisticated use of color, certainly, that I had used up to that point, and one of the highlights, I think, of my entire body of work, because it was a very, very tough range of colors to successfully pull off in enamel. It's not really pretty. I think it very successfully managed to prove my feelings about the fact that something could be beautiful without being pretty. I think that piece certainly is.

And the idea came from the fact that, again mythological, that there was this horribly ugly creature named Medusa who had a head full of snakes, and if anyone looked at her, he turned into stone. And I believe it was Jason, if I recall my mythology, who finally put her to her own death by forcing her to look into his shield which had been polished highly so that it acted as a mirror. And that whole mythology suggested to me a kind of monochrome palette. It was just all of these various things that I wanted to accomplish that came together very well, I think, in that piece.

And basically, that's how I attack – for want of a better word – everything I do. There are a number of problems that I've set for myself, that may not be obvious to anyone who sees the piece or owns the piece after it leaves my hand, but are very, very important; I mean, they are the reason the piece is developed. The pieces don't develop because I especially love to enamel. There are some times I really don't like to enamel. But I realize I'm very good at it, and it's part of what I need to accomplish the goals that I want to accomplish.

But my work is not based on technique in any way. I quickly wanted to become very facile with the material so I didn't have to think about using the material and could put my mind to better uses, which was to come up with a content to the work. And content has always been the most important thing to me, and generally a rather complex content of juxtaposing things such as dichotomy, or opposites, with attitudes towards religion, cultural differences and similarities.

Everything that I'm interested in culturally, and intellectually, and that I read, I try to bring into my work consciously or unconsciously. I've been told by a couple of people that I'm the Joseph Campbell of jewelry and enameling. And I fully admit that I rob and steal and am influenced by everything that's come before me.

In fact, I think that might be the overriding importance of my work, if it has any, is that I decided as my work was maturing, that the overriding, important social element, technological element of the late 20th century was the advent of information systems, and that we as Americans, with the wealth that we have and the advantages of being able to get any information about just about anything we want – maybe not scientifically, but if it's been discovered archeologically or anthropologically – I coin the word – or if it's in a museum, we can easily find out about it and see it, enjoy it, be moved by it.

And all of these things are so readily available through books or now on the Internet. And I was thinking that there are images that have been done by disparate peoples from other places and other times that are very similar in many ways. For instance, the Congolese fetish figures, the wooden statues that are full of nails and iron pieces, and some of them have strings attached, et cetera; it's a figure that has been pierced with arrows or nails or whatever, has so much in common with the St. Sebastian figure, which came out of the roots of European Christianity. I love those affinities. And those people didn't know anything about each other. But I'm very lucky and I'm able to enjoy both of them, and I think that's something that I should take full advantage of. I think it's the most important part of my work.

And I think it's a very important element of late-20th-century culture and the movement of people forward. And that's what art is supposed to do. It's supposed to interpret the present based on what one can see from the past, and if you do it successfully, you've got something that will last into the future. And that's what I'm trying to do.

MR. NELSON: About the mid-'70s when you began a series of amulets, that we discussed a little bit earlier in our conversation, your work begins to become a bit smaller in scale, and you also start to do talismanic beads, body ornaments, and jewelry. Can you talk a little bit more about this transition in your work from the somewhat larger-scale object orientation to the talismanic beads?

MR. HARPER: I think on the primary level it has to do with the fact that I had taken this job at Florida State, and if I was going to teach jewelry, I better start making some. So that was just a practical reason.

MR. NELSON: And that was in '73, wasn't it?

MR. HARPER: Yes. Actually, I was hired at Florida State in the fall of 1973, but as I said, I told them that I needed time to catch up both on my commitments that I had for lectures and workshops, in which I needed a lot of time, and then I used the rest of the time to cram for my exam, which became teaching students, which I took very, very seriously. So I actually didn't set foot into the classroom until January of 1974.

MR. NELSON: And that's when you started to explore more the jewelry forms.

MR. HARPER: Yes. And there was a point that there was overlapping between jewelry and some of the late – what I call amulets. But it's hard for me now to remember exactly when I did what. I never thought this would happen, but I guess when one ages, it does happen. And I've also produced so much work. Someone estimated, who was doing some research on my body of work 10 years ago, that she could account for at least 375 pieces that I had made. I was rather overwhelmed by that. And I believe that count was taken 12 years ago, and I've produced a lot since then. I am very prolific. People are always amazed by that. And I think it's because I get bored very easily. Very easily. And I have a rather short attention span today. And that also accounts for the spontaneity my work seems to have, because it is rather spontaneous.

But that's why the jewelry took the direction that it did, and it just seemed natural in the jewelry to try to pull in the talismanic, amuletic quality, because for a long period of time that's why people wore jewelry. They thought it would give them not only decoration, but a kind of power and protection from evil, or being able to generate positive forces. And it can be a sign of power, as well. And from ancient times, people have worn jewelry. And usually, I think, it was for protection from something, which is what an amulet or talisman is supposed to do. And I simply tried to bring it into a contemporary thing.

MR. NELSON: What I'd like to do, if I may, is go through some of the major series of work that you've done and talk a little bit about each of them. In 1976 you did a marvelous series of fetish pins. Can you talk a little bit about those?

MR. HARPER: Those were the very first pins that I did. As I look back on it, there were five. And at this point in my career I'm sort of amused by them, because in many ways they're very naive. My metalsmithing jewelry techniques were really minimal at that time. These were the first brooches I did when I started teaching at Florida State. But I took the skills I had – enamels, electroforming, some rather primitive forging techniques of metal – and I decided that I could come up with something very personal and try to achieve a balance between primitivism and sophistication.

And I think partly I did that because my techniques were not very advanced, but my ideas were, and that seemed more important to me. And at that point I was very influenced, as I have been for years and years, by African works, the assemblage work, and somebody gave me some chipmunk teeth, and with the teeth came the jawbones, and I had some shells I liked, and I had a raccoon vertebrae piece that accidentally fell into some acid – mild acid water that had copper dissolved in it, and it turned blue. And so I liked it and I used it. And they were the first jewelry pieces. And also within the first jewelry pieces, I tried to combine enamel, metal, and the valueless secondary objects that I tried to give a precious quality to.

MR. NELSON: And that series was followed in '77, '78, by the *Pagan Babies* series. Tell us a little bit about that.

MR. HARPER: Well, by the time I got to the *Pagan Babies*, I'd had my first National Endowment grant. And as I said, I'd gone to Europe. I'd seen some thing in the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, at the Louvre, at the Victoria and Albert, at the British Museum, the Wallace Collection, that I took a new look at. I had always studied these things in the United States, but when I found out that the en resille project was kaput, in my mind, I looked at these pieces, and that's when, I think, I made my real decision to use gold to a considerable degree.

And almost all my colleagues working in jewelry and metal were avoiding gold completely. That seemed a good reason for me to use it. I've always been a maverick about things like that. And as I said, I took $500 for materials and I felt free to experiment with it. And I had these wonderful secondary materials of squirrel hair; as I said, the chipmunk teeth; some beautiful shells; rattlesnake rattle; and I wanted to use them in the work. And a friend of mine who had been a nun used, in a discussion, the term "pagan babies," which I guess – I never went to parochial school, but I think at one point, from what I'm told, it was a term that the nuns would use to refer to so-called primitive, unprivileged children, I guess in Africa, that wealthier little white boys and girls in the United States were supposed to feel sorry for and take collections and send them money to make their lives better, I guess. And it's a very cynical view.

But I loved the term "pagan baby," and it just produced in my mind an idea of these little objects that were

anthropomorphic in nature without really being figurative, and that there would be a top and bottom element to them, that the enamel would be at the top, and that the secondary materials would be generally a very complex compendium that was attached from the enamel element. And the pin stem from the brooch, the method of attaching it to the body always was apparent. And having the pin stem show and not simply be something that's attached to the back of the piece – I wanted to avoid that. I wanted a compositional element to the piece, and the spiral was very important to me. And that's simply my derivation of the ancient form of holding clothing together that was used from the ancient Greeks and Romans up through the Celtic culture. It's called the fibula form.

MR. NELSON: In 1978 you began a *Mystery* series, *Gray Mystery*, *Pink Mystery*, works in which the central enamel element seems almost framed by a really glorious and almost gold window-type device surrounding it. Can you talk about the *Mystery* series?

MR. HARPER: I wish I could. I honestly cannot tell you much about those because I don't know. I consider them a very, very important transition point in my work. I think I was influenced by the moss gardens in Japan that I had seen, the incredible Zen gardens that combined dozens and dozens of kinds of moss with incredibly rugged rocks and maybe a single gnarled tree. I was very moved by those gardens. And I think that's what generated the Mystery series. They're actually called mysteries because I couldn't figure out what they were about. And that was sort of a first in my body of work. [Laughs.] It's a mystery why I called them mysteries and what they're about. I'm going to leave that up to future interpreters, because I can't give you an answer to it.

MR. NELSON: It will remain a mystery for now.

MR. HARPER: That's right.

MR. NELSON: In 1980 – you touched on this a little bit earlier in our conversation, but in 1980 you began a series called *Nine Sketches*, some of which I believe were inspired by the senses. And this framing continues in many of these works. Can you talk more about the *Nine Sketches* series?

MR. HARPER: Well, as you said, each one was – the idea, the impulse was taken from some kind of sensory perception, be it an odor or smell or an acidic taste. The one called *Tongue*, for instance, is trying to capture the quality of an acidic taste; the smell of moss in another one of them. And I set the problem for myself of accomplishing an immense amount of energy in the imagery in a one-by-one inch square. So that was the physical limitation I gave myself. And another one was to try to capture the essence of whatever the sensory perception was in color.

After I made the first one, it established the kind of form, with the square being the central element, the gold fibula pin stem above it, and then this form that came out of the lower-right-hand corner of gold used in some manner holding or containing some kind of object, such as a colored shell. I believe there are some pearls on them. The tongue piece, for instance, has a piece of broken glass that I found in the glass studio at Penland one summer. And it comes down from the piece as – one can interpret it as either an arm reaching down or as a phallic symbol. Again, I'm going to leave that to the interpreter. It's probably both.

MR. NELSON: The figurative element that began to emerge in probably the *Pagan Babies* series and earlier works like *Boogie Baby 1* and *2* of 1978, *Pagan Mamu No. 1*, *The Serpent* of 1979, comes to fuller fruition in the *Saints, Martyrs, Savages and Archangels* series in 1981 and 1982. Can you talk a bit more about that figurative element and its specific relationship to those series?

MR. HARPER: Well, on a gestation level, that series happened because I was obligated to do my second exhibition at the Kennedy Galleries. And the first one, which had been received very, very well, was a motley assortment of things. There were beads and there were all of these series we've discussed thus far that I had made, basically everything that I had in my drawer of work that was available for sale, which was most of my body of work at that point, so that I could have an exhibition.

Well, the second one I wanted to be far more specific, and I had seen a book, walking along Madison Avenue, that was a large coffee table book of close-ups of New Guinea tribesmen whose faces and heads were decorated with body paint and piercings containing boars' teeth and feathers all over their hair and mud on their faces. They were just straight-on frontal photographs of these men in their tribal regalia for one kind of ceremony or another. And I was just completely enthralled with the book.

And also at that time, I was heavily involved in thinking about the interrelationships of various religions and how there are visual elements of Christianity that are meant to convey certain meanings to the congregants that are not unlike certain elements from primitive cultures, so to speak. I've already mentioned the affinity between the Congolese – or the Nkishi figures -- and the St. Sebastian imagery. And there are also Hindu figures that have the same kind of imagery. And as I said before, when I consciously came to the realization about the information systems being able to show me images and give me actual information about the cultures that produced certain

images, I was able to amalgamate all of those within my mind. And I started inventing images for my own religion, so to speak.

So I think the first one of the pendants is called *St. Aborigine* [1981]. I had started reading so-called histories or mythologies or derivations of some of the early saints, and I was intrigued by the fact, for instance, that some of them that were really the stuff of myths and legends that were meant to inspire early Christians, for instance, really didn't fit, St. Valentine, for instance. And St. Valentine was de-sainted at some point in my lifetime. So the figure with St. Valentine in that series with the heart upside down, that represents the way religions evolve and change, and sometimes that the symbols of a religion become far more powerful to the people who adhere to it than actual issues of morality and social conscience and that kind of thing.

I think from that comment you can pretty well interpret how I feel about organized religions; that I'm amused by them, I'm amazed by them, I'm intrigued by them, but I find good parts of all of them and I find bad parts of all of them. And I think sometimes the religions that the primitive peoples in Africa practiced, with forest spirits and ancestor spirits, are actually far purer than some of the so-called great religions of the Western and Eastern worlds. So that was one motivation.

And the other, which no one ever believes when I say it, but it was the disco era. And I was just so amused by men starting to wear jewelry with their shirts open down to their navels, often a hairy chest with this gold stuff that got mangled into it, and they went to dance. And it was often a cross or a Star of David. And the idea of taking a symbol of a religion and using it in such a secular, profane way was just so amusing to me that that also was at least a motivational factor in the body of work.

I invented my own religion. It was fun.

MR. NELSON: You've touched on, a little bit earlier in our conversation, the *Fleur du Mal* series and mentioned that the series of poems by Baudelaire influenced you. The series, which was done in the 1980s, 1985, seems to be a bit more free-form and nonrectilinear in its approach. Is there anything more you'd like to say about that series, the *Fleur du Mal*?

MR. HARPER: It was a conscious decision to do just what you said. I felt I needed to break away from the confines of an oval or a circle or a rectilinear form. If I was going to refer to flowers, for instance, they needed to be very organic in shape. And I needed the break in order to become involved in a different kind of framing structure. It's just as simple as that.

MR. NELSON: In 1985 you also did a glorious series of works called the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, followed in 1987 by a series called *Pentimenti*, that are like glorious little paintings. Can you talk first about the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*?

MR. HARPER: Well, the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* is a very, very cynical view of a legend that's attached to a very, very pious nun who was sainted by the Catholic Church. And it inspired Bernini, the great Baroque sculptor, to do a pair of figures in a small church in Rome called the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*. And the right-hand figure is St. Teresa swooning in ecstasy over something, and Catholic purists will say that she's having some kind of religious revelation. And then the angel, on the left-hand side, a very beautiful male figure holding aloft an arrow, that I in my mind read it as "shaft," is ready to throw it into her. And that's supposed to be what brings forth the ecstasy.

Well, I had done a series of quasi-pornographic pieces very early in my career. There's always been this male-female sexuality about the work. And when I look at the *St. Teresa* piece – and I actually did a paper on the subject when I was in an aesthetics class in undergraduate school – that I read the whole thing as St. Teresa, who was a nun and was – I'm going to assume she was celibate but that she still had fantasies of a sexual nature. And that's my reading of the piece. And since I've done it, I have read other accounts that say the same thing.

And if one goes through the series of four pieces, the titles essentially are a free-form poem that basically are the stages of an orgasm, and each one is meant to build towards that quality, to the fourth one, which is obviously the climax. This might offend some people, that jewelry should not deal with such things, but I don't see any reason why not.

Also, I find that I like the idea of art influencing art. It's a factor that was becoming increasingly important to me. I think this is the first time I really used it on what I consider a very mature level.

As for the *Pentimenti*, it's a word that means the underpainting in an oil painting that has bled through due to time. For instance, there's a Raphael painting of a Madonna and child in which he initially had angels, Cupid-type angels, hovering above the mother and child. And he decided he didn't want them there, so he painted over them, just sky, and that's how it appeared when he did it.

But time has caused the minerals within the paint to bleed through, so that there is this sort of ghostlike image that a viewer today can see in the painting. That's called a pentimenti. Well, Lillian Hellman wrote a book, an autobiographical book in the late '60s or early '70s called *Pentimento* that basically dealt with the concept that everything that happens in one's lifetime, no matter how banal, has the possibility of coming back into your life at some point to either haunt you or inspire you or do something to change your life after the fact that it happened. And she relates an incident in her life where that was an important factor.

MR. NELSON: In the *Pentimenti* series of 1987, there are wonderful subtitles also, to the work, such as *Gray Gardens*, *The Harem*, *Gemini*, *The Veil*, *Chamber of the Bride*. Can you talk a little bit about – *Horror Vacuui* [1987], I think, was another one. Can you talk a little bit more about some of the wonderful subtitles on the work?

MR. HARPER: Well, the subtitles, in one form or another, refer to the genesis from mythology or a situation that triggered the piece. For instance, *Gray Gardens*. I had this assortment of wonderful materials that I felt should be used together, part of which was a piece of aluminum, essentially moon-shaped aluminum, and it still had the flip-top on it. And it was just such a preposterous thing to use in a piece of jewelry, and it seemed so right to combine it with a piece of mirror. And I believe the piece has opals in it. And I had these things, moving them around, and I kept thinking "gray," "gray."

And after a certain point, that word triggered the story of *Gray Gardens*, which was a situation that happened on Long Island a couple decades ago, where Jackie Kennedy had – I don't remember if they were cousins or aunts, but these two rather eccentric ladies who lived together in this house that had just become overgrown with plants. It was like Miss Haversham's house. And they actually lived in this situation. I'm not sure if they were poor relations or not. But there was a documentary film made about them called *Gray Gardens*.

And the idea of a gray garden is usually a dichotomy. The only kind of gray garden I could think of is one that's basically dead, and that's not what a garden's supposed to be. Somehow that is a very complex semi-explanation of what triggered that piece.

It, like the Medusa rattle that I mentioned before, I think is one of the most difficult, most surprising color situations that I've ever developed in enamel. When people see it, they either love it or they hate it. It was probably the enamel that most got me in deep water of any I've ever done. It was very, very hard to resolve the mess I had gotten myself into colorwise. But I have to say that, having done it, and the way the whole piece came out, it is probably one of my four or five favorite things that I've ever done.

MR. NELSON: A luscious Orientalizing element enters the work in the mid-1980s and is particularly apparent in a series like the *Big Maharaja* of 1986, the *Odalisque* of 1987, *Pasha's Navel* of 1987, and the *First Real Maharaja* of 1988. Can you talk a little bit about that what I'm calling an Orientalizing element to your work that's lushly sensuous?

MR. HARPER: That's exactly what it was. And I had read an account about coffee coming from Turkey into Vienna in – oh, it was late 17th, early 18th century, and it just became all the rage. Everybody had to have coffee. And along with having the coffee, they would have balls or masques in which they would dress up in what they would consider the Orientalist fashion, with turbans and veils and harem pants and all of that. It was a Europeanized, romanticized vision of the Near East, really. And it influenced Mozart to write three operas. And I was very intrigued by this whole thing about how something like coffee can influence the way a society goes, and then the way a society is built can influence a genius like Mozart to interpret it in a certain way. And that was the initial genesis of the piece – or the body of work.

I had hoped it would be a show, quite frankly. That never happened. But it was conceived as a body of work in which each one of the pieces was an individual personality in a kind of playlet or small opera or masque or pantomime or whatever you want to call it. And the characters sort of get mixed up in terms of what the usual viewpoint is of gender.

So for instance, an odalisque, if one understands the word, I think probably what he or she would immediately think of is the Orientalist painting that's in the Louvre by Ingres of the naked harem girl, where the viewer sees her very sensuous back, and her neck is turned as far towards the viewer as she's physically able to do it, with this extremely erotic, "come hither" look on her face. And in the background I believe there's a pool and there are a couple other harem-style women. Well, an odalisque is a reclining figure, and that depiction is the ultimate reclining figure, and it's identified usually as being definitely female.

Then there are other figures that stand upright – or rather, that are curved, and they are the male figures. And that's why they're called *Fake Maharajas*, because in a way, they've been emasculated or they've been feminized rather than be boring in terms of the way they're dressed. This was addressing our own culture. I know it was different in the time that Mozart lived. Men were definitely peacocks then. Well, these pieces are definitely – the male figures are peacocks, but they're, for want of a better word, limp. They're reclining.

Obviously, if you've got the four fake maharajas, the culmination of the series is the *Real Maharaja*, and that is a very strongly colored, red, magenta pink, very aggressive color that stands upright. So there's this male-female, phallic versus container/vessel form that each of the figures takes in one way or another.

As I said, it was designed, conceived in my mind as being an exhibition in and of itself about this subject. But it's just one of those things that never happened, and yet I've considered it a very important series.

MR. NELSON: One of the most powerfully poignant series explores the artist's self-portrait, first as martyred saints, *Self-portrait of the Artist as Saint Sebastian* [1987], and *Self-portrait of the Artist as Saint Anthony* [1987], then the wrenching series, *Portrait of the Artist with a Migraine* [1988-1989]. And I know that you have experienced for many years problems with migraine headaches. Maybe you can talk a little bit more about the even more personal component of the series.

MR. HARPER: I think it's probably best to address two of the elements you mentioned. The *Migraine* pieces, for instance, I think you've already said it. I suffered from really debilitating migraines for over 25 years. They culminated in lasting as long as two weeks at a time when I was virtually unable to do anything, and then they completely disappeared, finally. But when I had them, I decided to try to explore what the pain felt like in a piece of jewelry.

Now jewelry, as I said, is supposed to be beautiful, but I wanted to make jewelry that in many ways was painful. I have never seen anybody wear one except for my ex-wife. Obviously, I think they're probably too potent for most people to feel comfortable with. But if you look, I don't think – I'm positive none of those have any enamel on them. This was a period that I had decided that I was sick and tired of being always labeled an enamel artist, and one way I could get past that was simply not to use enamel anymore, to try to build the form using various karats of gold, sterling silver, and, in the case of the *Migraine* pieces, as I said before, the ends of fluorescent light bulb tubes that have been crushed, and then out of the gold framing will come little gold nails; some of them hold teeth, some of them hold other little found objects that are not necessarily positive in the way one would usually identify with them. But I think they're the antithesis of what jewelry is supposed to be. I think that's their power, frankly.

The other thing you mentioned that's very important to me, it's a piece that I think is the most important thing that I've ever done, at least to me personally, and that's the *Temptation of St. Anthony*, which is a difficult piece for people to read or interpret unless they know the genesis of it. But St. Anthony, according to history and/or legend, retreated to the desert in order to rule out anything and everything in his life of a sumptuous nature or of a hedonistic nature. He felt that if he completely deprived himself, he could see God. And God observed St. Anthony and thought, "Oh, this is too easy. I'm going to send temptations his way by demons and really test him even further to see if he has the fortitude to withstand this."

I find it a very interesting legend, and I wanted to use it as a metaphor for what an artist has to go through; I mean an artist in the broad sense of the word and on a very personal level, very, very personal level.

I regard myself as an artist; I've always regarded myself as an artist, but as I've said many times in this interview, anyone who works in so-called craft material is considered by the broad spectrum of collectors, curators, critics, as being of a second or third rank, that they are merely technicians. Largely that's because much of the work is only about technique.

And the second thing is that the people – many of the people who regard the best of contemporary decorative arts still in a second ranking are simply ignorant, and there is not much that I as an individual can do about that except try to explain what my work is about and hope that they find it of some meaning.

Well, this was a metaphor for this piece, that I do live and have lived for a number of years a very, very comfortable life. I can't complain about that. I have always taken a completely noncommercial route in the development of my work. I do what I want to do. In my entire career I have only taken one commission that was really specific about how it had to look, and that was the collar of office for the president of Yale University, which is probably absolutely the most conservative thing I ever did. But otherwise, I won't even take commissions from people unless they're very, very open-ended so that what I want to do is – they have to have trust in me to give them what I want to do.

But in the process of having this attitude towards my work and wanting it shown in real art galleries rather than galleries that specialize in crafts, and reviewed and taken seriously by heavy-duty art critics rather than the little blurbs that you get in some of the metal and jewelry and craft magazines that are usually fairly superficial, I came to the realization that I was being tempted constantly to try to make the work more accessible – give up – the desert to me was the real art world because I kept trying to penetrate it deeper and deeper, and then there would be temptation to be lured back into something I knew that I did very, very well. There were demons inside me about these things, so that's the very personal attitude that started this piece. I think gives it a very personal strength and the piece I most identify with, obviously, in my years of work.

MR. NELSON: Talk a bit about the work that you've done over the past 10 years, and I know that there is a pretty major piece that you want to talk a bit more in depth about that was generated by your great admiration – affinity – for the work of Jasper Johns – I think it's called *Nine Tantric Amulets for Jasper Johns*.

MR. HARPER: Yes, it's a very, very complex neckpiece. It was done for an exhibition – actually the last major exhibition I had in a gallery, I believe it was 1994 – and it was an homage to Jasper Johns and an anti-homage to Faberge, as it were. But the Jasper Johns pieces, which this is the major element, were based on his painting – elements of his paintings – both intellectually, structurally, physically. And his paintings were derived from other art. There are a series of pins; the first six pins in the series come from a group of paintings that Johns did that are largely cross-hatchings that become a flat pattern – many people read it as a flat pattern. And Johns's painting was inspired by an element, which is a quilt or a blanket, on a bed in a self-portrait by Edvard Munch.

The Johns's cross-hatching pieces, which have many psychological, intellectual levels that are too extensive for me to go into at this point – I was intrigued by them and I was influenced by the actual physicality of his paintings, the structure. And then I was very interested in the idea that his paintings were inspired by an Edvard Munch painting, which is in the Munch Museum in Oslo, called *Between the Clock and the Bed* [1940-42]. It's a self-portrait of Munch with a grandfather clock on one side of him and his bed with a quilt with diagonal strokes all over the bedspread – or whatever the bed covering is – and Johns was interested in the whole idea of the pattern on the quilt and using abstract forms as a self-portrait rather than representational forms that Munch used. And then Johns has always been interested in trying to express time in his work and thus he related to the clock.

Well, I somehow related to both things, so the first set of pieces is called *Variations on a Theme by J.J. and E.M.* [1993]. The structure of each of the enamels was basically a triangle representing three artists, the last of which was influenced by the other two, the middle of which was influenced by the first one; which became an interesting idea to me – art built on art. Maybe it was presumptuous on my part to associate myself with those two great masters of the 20th century, but I did it anyway.

MR. NELSON: Bill, can you talk a bit about the work that you did in 1994, the three works called *Cicada's Ghost, 1, 2, and 3* that are related to the Jasper Johns piece.

MR. HARPER: Yes, these three pieces were triggered by a famous work by Johns called *Cicada* [1979] which is largely his cross-hatching patterns at the top and then these strange little images that range from a rendering of a cicada, to a skull and crossbones, some other little things that one has to look at and interpret. They're all representational symbols, but you're not really – the viewer really has to think about what the whole thing means – that's always been what Johns's work is about. Well, I've always been intrigued by that piece and also his famous beer can sculptures in which he had an actual Ballantine's beer can next to a painted cast bronze version of it, or the coffee can full of brushes in which he did the same thing. I mean those are two famous pieces. And I utilized both of those ideas in these three pieces.

For one thing, I found, fortuitously, these three free-form, incredibly beautiful tourmalines – slices of tourmaline – that were unlike anything I'd ever seen. And I really wanted to use them in a very significant way, because in their own right, they had the quality that – within themselves – that I was looking for with an enamel. And it occurred to me that since I was doing this Jasper Johns homage that it would be interesting to use the tourmaline within the piece and replicate them in enamel on the enamel surface. So that is one of the visual symbols that are incorporated. On each of the pieces there are two black pearls that are together, and that is a reference to a very famous painting of Johns's in which two wooden balls intrude upon two parts of a canvas and hold them apart.

And they also refer to a later pair or trio -- I'm not sure which – of works that he called tantric paintings. Well, they're balls, they're testicles. There's no doubt about that. And I represented them with these beautiful black pearls, and I wondered where Johns got this idea of the balls image with the testicle form in these paintings. I mean, it's just – it's just such a strange idea. And I did a lot of research about him and I discovered that he had a book on tantric art, and he was completely taken by one of the paintings – a Tibetan tantric painting – that is in the book of a god and goddess in the midst of intercourse. And in the tantric form of Buddhism, sexual union is regarded as the ultimate religious experience, the means of seeing God. And in this painting you see the back of the goddess, and she is embracing the god, and all you see are his testicles hanging down. And he's also wearing a long string of beads that have skull figures on them, and Johns has acknowledged that he loved the relationship between the round beads that the god was wearing and the testicles.

And when I read that, I – it just triggered this idea in my mind that he was influenced – here was a painter, maybe the most important painter alive today, who was influenced by the images of jewelry in another painting. And so that's a three-step relationship: the tantric painting, the image of jewelry within the painting, and then Johns's usage of the jewelry forms and the human genital forms in his painting. So I wanted to take it one step further so it was jewelry about his painting about jewelry in another painting. And that idea was the starting

point for what is the culmination in the Johns series called *Nine Tantric Amulets for Jasper Johns*. And one might look at it and say, well, it's a group of interesting amulets; I mean, that's the name I give it. But each amulet refers to a specific image or a specific philosophical idea that runs through Johns's painting.

For instance, there are two very crudely textured gold balls that are linked together, I mean, obvious reference there. There is one element that rather looks like the wings of an insect – cicadas had wings – that is one-half one of these tourmalines that I just mentioned and the other half is an enamel representation of it, so that's a double reference to his work: the cicada and the sculpture that I just mentioned. The central element is a rondelle that has a mirror image cross-hatching image on it referring to the painting that was based on the Munch, and when you turn it over, there is a completely different kind of image on the reverse side, which is a skull which Johns has used a number of times in reference to the passage of time and mortality.

And then there's this strange little square floating above the skull that has four – the square – it's hard to describe. The square is divided into four squares with a phallic form protruding from one edge so that they all link into each other. And Johns has used a similar form and that specific form many times as small elements in his paintings. He's often – in his later work – oh, that image also recurs in a more major form – it's definitely a quadruple phallic form on the front of the piece. There are numerous triangles; there are numerous uses of balls; there is a strange all-gold piece that consists of a triangle – which is a female form – two balls under it – obviously male – and then under that, a long form that has an opening in it that I would describe as being hermaphroditic. In the center is a skeletal body kind of figure.

Johns has done a lot of pieces that he's called self-portraits, but he's never done a representation of himself; indeed he very, very seldom used any kind of figure to reference at all. And when he has, it's been a shadowy kind of way. But he has used the skull motif quite often – on the beads, for instance, from the tantric painting from Tibet, each one of the beads has an image of a death skull on it. So there's a tie-in there. And it's a memento mori, which is an amulet or a talisman that's supposed to signify the passage of time – Johns was always interested in that. And also tied into that is a body form under the central element of the skull that has a sense of life to it on the front, which is all enamel, and then on the back, which is gold and silver merged together, it has a much more death-like quality to it. It's not skeletal, but it does not have the life that the front has. There are two arms dangling from this body form, and Johns has used the hand form with an elongated arm in some of his work, so I attached the arms to the body and then there are little extensions coming out from the arms that one has to really handle and examine to see what they are. But they – probably pretentiously – are letters that on one side spell out William Harper and on the other side spell out Jasper Johns. He is my hero. I've linked myself to him.

That's a cursory explanation of what the piece is about. It's very complex. There's more to it than what I've mentioned. Johns has always been very reticent about explaining or talking about his own work, and I'm going to leave further exploration of this work to some graduate student, hopefully, in the future.

MR. NELSON: So the piece is called *Nine Tantric Amulets for Jasper Johns* of 1994. And do I understand that this work is now in the collection of the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum?

MR. HARPER: Yes, it is.

MR. NELSON: That's wonderful. Thank you for that explanation of the piece. It really is a lusciously beautiful piece with deep resonant meaning throughout. I understand that, for the first time ever, perhaps, you have a waiting list for new work. Tell us a little bit about your current thoughts and what you're currently working on.

MR. HARPER: When I moved to New York, I was very encouraged by my family to take a hiatus but not to give up making jewelry and enameling completely, and explore what I initially started with, which was painting. Part of that had started already when I lived in Florida because of an incident in my personal, physical life. I had a retinal – a double retinal – detachment in 1990, which left me completely blind in my left eye, and I only have partial sight in my right eye. I call it the Beethoven syndrome; you know, he wrote the *Ninth Symphony* without being able to ever hear what he wrote. Well, I was afraid – during what was supposed to be a recovery period that only partially worked – I was deeply afraid that I would never be able to see again, which is a very sobering experience for anyone. And for an artist, you know, you have to think about what you want to do with the rest of your life.

But thankfully I came out of it with enough sight that I can do just about anything I want to except be behind the wheel of a car on a highway. I have no depth perception whatsoever, which does make doing the gold work very, very difficult for me, because reflections in the gold, in some of the forms I deal with, seem to cancel out the real from the reflective. And it has made working much more difficult for me. And with all these things in mind, and not being able to do any close work for at least a year after the operation – and yet having a need to do something, I started to do paintings. And it ended up being very complex collages in which I would do a painting and then not be satisfied with it, and do another one and not be satisfied with it. But not wanting to

throw the paper away, I would start tearing them up – the parts I liked – and I would glue them back together, starting to develop, hopefully, a facial image of one type or another and then tear those up and build on them, and I realized that I was doing the same things in my works on paper that I was doing in my jewelry work, which was very reassuring to me.

I had not consciously considered doing that, but it was necessary that I do that for a period of time because I couldn't do the jewelry. And they received some amount of success, and my family encouraged me to try to really get into the so-called fine arts gallery scene. But for one reason or another, it didn't work out, and I have returned to jewelry after my hiatus, and then what went on in the country with 9/11 and the shock of going through that – living in New York – the reality that even rich people had given up luxury items. It was a sobering experience in a world like ours – why even do something like I do, and if it's superfluous or not. But I did return to jewelry on a really intense basis with a real goal in mind a little more than a year ago. And I decided to completely restrict myself to something that I had not done for 10 years, which were strings of beads.

And I initially viewed them as being the least intellectually interesting of anything I had ever done – they were the most technically difficult of anything I'd ever done. They were absolutely beautiful, almost everybody agreed, but intellectually I never thought there was a lot to them. And yet when I looked back on them, I realized that they were slowly building on everything that I had brought to the rest of my work. And so at this point, I think I'm on the eighth or ninth string, and they're developing the same way my use of color developed or the same way my use of gold and metalwork developed. I no longer think about – think consciously – about what each element is. I've dealt with all of these things for so long that I simply make what seems natural to me. And they draw upon all of these cultural interchanges and complex color relationships, forms that refer to African jewelry or Indian jewelry, forms that might have a quasi-Christian element to them. And at this point that's what I'm involved with. It's very, very complex work; it's very challenging technically because of my eye problem, and I'm not seeing any brooches in the future as this tape is made.

MR. NELSON: Bill, I know for the past 10 years you have renewed your interest in two-dimensional formats: work on paper, paintings, and that's been related to boxes that you've done that are beautiful pieces in and of themselves that contain enamel and enamel elements. Can you talk a little bit about the relationship of those variants in related aspects of your work?

MR. HARPER: Well, the boxes are a subgroup within a larger big idea – big concept that I had – I've been mulling around in my mind for several years. I doubt that it will ever come to fruition. But the big idea was an exhibition that was designed not only to show my work, but to show it in a way that I don't think has ever been done by any artist that I'm aware of, and still relate to everything I'm interested in. And the idea was that I was not the artist who made the things – and I really was – but it was based on the premise that I had discovered an ancient culture – I had been led to the tomb in an ancient culture that was heretofore unknown. It was much like Howard Carter looking through the hole at what he would soon find to be Tut's tomb and saying, "I see marvelous things." That was the chief impetus behind it. And it was to be a group of objects that traced a culture over a 2,000-year period, from its very archaic beginnings to its culmination. And the culture the viewer, the visitor, the exhibition would find out – discover some place along the line of going through the exhibition – was supposed to be Atlantis and exist about 20,000 years ago.

And the religion of Atlantis was art and the chief figures – gods, kings, whatever – were a pair of twins, one of whom thought that the most important part of art was the concept or the idea, and the other thought the most important part of art was the technique and the beauty that it could elicit. And they fought back and forth, back and forth, and they started to emerge and became the conjoined twin as they started to see each other's idea, and then they eventually became one individual, and thus real art was born, and that was the end of the exhibition. And the exhibition was supposed to be made up of supposed artifacts from these cultures – or from this culture. So there was recovered a whole range of material and media; bronze and silver cast sculptures that were supposed to be the ceremonial nature that are clearly distorted figures of an almost mystical quality because you can't – the viewer isn't sure what they're supposed to be –back to that word, mystery, again.

There were a series of works on paper that are incredibly complex bits and pieces of collage paper trapped under Plexiglas with writing all over them – on the pieces – upside down, sideways, backwards, whatever you can imagine that actually are supposed to be the sacred documents telling the history of Atlantis. And I wrote and wrote and wrote until my hand was sore, and they really do tell the story of how Atlantis developed over and over again. I would never expect anybody to try to decipher them, nor can they really be deciphered. But I was influenced by – very clearly by – illuminated manuscripts in making these, in that they have a very fragmented – they're both sophisticated and primitive at the same time.

Well, to me the most important part of the exhibition was going to be the treasure room. And it was – I always wanted to see my work installed in an exhibition the way cathedrals and old castles in Europe will have a vaulted room that's very rough and stuccoed and very crude, holding all of these incredibly beautiful relics and reliquaries of an old time period – sometimes they're all medieval; sometimes they're Byzantine. Generally they

don’t go any further than the Renaissance period; usually they’re a mixture of all of these things. Probably the most remarkable that I’ve ever seen is the Treasury of San Marco in Venice. And if I can say I have an ultimate dream in my career it’s to see an exhibition of my work in a situation like that.

Well, I decided to create my own treasury and I started making these boxes. Generally when one thinks of boxes as an art form, two names come to mind: either Joseph Cornell or Lucas Samaras – both of whom I really admire greatly. So if an artist is going to do boxes, there’s got to be a fresh take on it, and after much thought, I came up with what I thought was going to be an idea that could be developed into a long series of pieces. And they’re basically wooden boxes covered with gilded leather and a lot of lead, full of nails and cheap beads from the jewelry district here in New York. They look like they’re simultaneously medieval and African and perhaps Chinese or Japanese. They’re a whole mix of cultures. Some of them encase insects – beautiful insects – reflected in mirrors on the outside. And they all have a very rough, very three-dimensional – people want to touch them; often they don’t even realize they’re boxes.

And then they open them, and inside there is, what I think, is a really beautiful jewel. And the early ones had no enamel on them; they’re very much like the migraine pieces were. I wanted to escape relying on enamel, and I had been to Greece and saw the archaeological museum and was especially moved by the gold that was there, that I’ve mentioned before, specifically, the Agamemnon death mask. And that was really the inspiration for these jewels – very, very crude use of gold, and as crude as I could make it. It’s almost a challenge, I think, for most people to want to take them seriously, and yet, I think, they’re very, very compelling pieces. And the only secondary material that is on any of them are some really luscious pearls. There’s one that’s got just a little bit of enamel on it, but it’s completely unlike anything else that I’ve ever done. It’s not cloisonné. There’s one that has some bits of Roman glass on it. But essentially, it’s – they’re a fusing of various karats of gold – from 14 karats to 24 karats – and they just float on carved Plexiglas within these boxes. So it’s a very magical effect when they’re opened.

And from those, which were all brooches – I made the comment before that I really hadn’t done any brooches for a while, but I was referring, I guess specifically to enamel brooches, because I obviously was very involved with these gold brooches. I think I was more involved with the boxes, even, than the brooches. And now that I’m doing neckpieces, strings of beads, I’ve started doing even more elaborate boxes for those. And I think that’s probably the direction I will sustain for a long period of time. I would like to try, from this point forward, never to let a major piece out of the studio that did not have its own box to go with it. That’s my goal: to stop doing less important pieces and spend the rest of my life only doing really, really important things.

MR. NELSON: Are there any other subjects or issues that you’d like to address in this conversation?

MR. HARPER: I don’t believe so. You’re an excellent interviewer.

MR. NELSON: Oh thank you. It’s been a joy to talk with you, and I thank you so much for sharing so much about your work and your life and the glorious art you’ve produced.

MR. HARPER: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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