Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Betty Cooke, 2004 July 1-2

Funding for this interview was provided by the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America. Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

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

Transcript

Preface

What follows is a DRAFT TRANSCRIPT, which may contain typographical errors or inaccuracies. The content of this page is subject to change upon editorial review.

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Betty Cooke on 2004 July 1-2. The interview took place at in Baltimore, Maryland, and was conducted by Jan Yager for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Interview

JAN YAGER: This is Jan Yager interviewing Betty Cooke in the Radisson Hotel at [The Village of] Cross Keys adjacent to The Store Ltd. in Baltimore, Maryland, on July 1, 2004, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disc one, session one.

Betty, could you give me your name and birth date and birthplace?

BETTY COOKE: My name is Betty Cooke. My formal name, birth name, is Catherine Elizabeth Cooke. I was born May 5, 1924, in Baltimore to a very happy family.

MS. YAGER: Can you tell me the names of your mother and father?

MS. COOKE: My mother was Catherine Cooke and my father was Francis Cooke. And I had two brothers, Bill and Connie—older brothers.

MS. YAGER: Can you tell me a little bit about your father?

MS. COOKE: My father died when I was very young. But he was—he worked with the B & O Railroad and he loved to paint. So he did watercolors and every Sunday we'd go out in the park and he'd paint and I'd have my little easel and I would paint. And he was a very creative person, always having us make things. We made baskets, we made pots; we made all kinds of small things as a child.

MS. YAGER: What did he do for the railroad?

MS. COOKE: He was a clerk, a very simple job. This was 1930s.

MS. YAGER: Staying in Baltimore?

MS. COOKE: Staying in Baltimore, mm-hmm.

MS. YAGER: And your mom?

MS. COOKE: My mother was a professional singer before she got married. And since she was married in 1904, as soon as she was married the profession stopped. It was not thought of as the thing to do. She sang in church choirs and continued doing that. She was also a teacher—taught elementary school for years, taught adults for years—very creative—also a creative person.

MS. YAGER: Where were they born?

MS. COOKE: They were born—all of us were born in Baltimore. My father was born on the Eastern Shore. So we're all Maryland. I've lived here all my life and they lived here all their lives.

MS. YAGER: And your brothers?

MS. COOKE: My brothers were both engineers, worked for Glenn L. Martin. So I guess I have a combination of engineering and creative background there that is kind of important. They were methodical and perfectionist older brothers, so they were of course wonderful.

MS. YAGER: How much older?

MS. COOKE: Eight and nine years.

MS. YAGER: I read that you started your business with a tool kit that your brother had used in high school.

MS. COOKE: Yes.

MS. YAGER: What sort of things were in the toolkit?

MS. COOKE: Oh, very elegant things like a pair of pliers and a hammer and a saw, and that's about it—maybe a screwdriver—

MS. YAGER: For—

MS. COOKE: —and a file.

MS. YAGER: For a shop class?

MS. COOKE: For a shop class.

MS. YAGER: Did you have shop class as well?

MS. COOKE: No, I didn't have shop class. No I had—what did we have? We had cooking, I think. Girls didn't do shop then.

[Audio break.]

MS. YAGER: This is Jan Yager. We're restarting on track 5.

Betty, can you tell me, where did you attend elementary school?

MS. COOKE: That was also in Baltimore, about a half a mile—oh, a mile and a half from our home. And of course in those days you walked to school and home from school. And high school was about four miles from home and you walked to school and from school. That was the best part. It's quite a nice time to talk to people and be with people.

MS. YAGER: What was the name of the high school?

MS. COOKE: The junior high was Forest—Gwynns Falls Park Junior High. And then I went to Western, which was a women's school—girl's school, excuse me. And that's where I became very interested in art. Had a good art teacher and she was good to me and it was the beginning of—I know that's when I decided that's what I wanted to do, to go to art college.

MS. YAGER: With what sort of things did she inspire you? How did she inspire you?

MS. COOKE: Oh, I got to do all the posters and all the announcements, and I was the prime person for volunteering to do anything that was art oriented.

MS. YAGER: So they recognized early?

MS. COOKE: Yeah.

MS. YAGER: Can you tell, do you remember any really unforgettable experience in school, art related?

MS. COOKE: Not really.

MS. YAGER: Do you remember the high school art teacher's name?

MS. COOKE: No.

MS. YAGER: Did you have any exposure to metal work or woodwork or any of that?

MS. COOKE: Not at all, anything like that. The exposure, I think, to other materials came—I was a Girl Scout and my brothers were Boy Scouts, so I got very involved in that, went to camp and was very active with many troops, volunteered to help and so forth. And of course we had all kinds of projects, and that's where I got involved in making all kinds of things: leather, wood, baskets. I thought it was all wonderful.

MS. YAGER: And then for college, where did you attend?

MS. COOKE: I went to the Maryland Institute, College of Art [Baltimore, MD]—or at that time it was the Maryland Institute, period. It wasn't accredited at that time. Therefore, the only way to get a degree was to become a teacher, and we had to go to Hopkins [Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD], so that the two colleges were involved. So I decided to teach. Somehow along the line I knew that I had to get a degree. I don't know how

that—families instill that in you, but they do, and it was good.

MS. YAGER: Was there an option—did you have to get a teaching degree, or was there an option to be a fine artist at that time?

MS. COOKE: There was an option. I could have been a fine artist but I felt I had to earn a living. At that time my father had died and I thought that I needed a profession.

MS. YAGER: Your father passed away when?

MS. COOKE: I was 12.

MS. YAGER: And your mother was—

MS. COOKE: Yeah, my mother took in boarders and started teaching and was quite an active young lady.

MS. YAGER: Do you remember any of the students—fellow students at the Maryland Institute?

MS. COOKE: Yes, I remember all of them. Well, this was during the war [World War II] so they were all girls. We had one male and 75 females at that time.

MS. YAGER: Tell me the years that you were at Maryland Institute.

MS. COOKE: Forty-three, 4, 5, and 6. And I was on scholarship and actually got paid. We really didn't have money to send me to college because, you know, my father had died. And I had scholarships. And I earned money teaching and that's when I took a job doing metalwork with a lady who did pins and so forth. She was a jeweler, excuse me.

MS. YAGER: Now that was Ms. Carruthers?

MS. COOKE: Right, mm-hmm.

MS. YAGER: That was the first apprenticeship that you had?

MS. COOKE: Yes.

MS. YAGER: Now, where do you think she got her training?

MS. COOKE: I don't know—I don't know. It was very traditional, very simple.

MS. YAGER: Do you think she was American?

MS. COOKE: She was American. She had a little studio on Charles Street, which was, at that time, the street to be on. Very simple—she had clientele come in—and it was all new to me, of course, I mean, to be making things and have somebody buy it and specify—I mean, I enjoyed all that.

MS. YAGER: Was that common or unusual for a woman to have her own business at that time?

MS. COOKE: I thought it was very unusual, very unusual. I didn't know anybody else who did except there was a jewelry teacher at the Institute. I didn't work with her; she came later. And she had her own business but nothing quite the level that this woman did. It wasn't big but it was her own little—I mean, I was the only help.

MS. YAGER: And what was her business name?

MS. COOKE: I don't know, probably just her name.

MS. YAGER: And how did you hook up with her? How did you find her to—

MS. COOKE: There was a little notice on the bulletin board—"Jeweler needs help"—or "apprentice," so I of course went. I did everything. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: Now, as an apprentice were you paid or—

MS. COOKE: No.

MS. YAGER:—you went and you learned and helped and—

MS. COOKE: I don't think I was paid. I really don't think I was paid. Money wasn't even thought about then.

But I got to do the very simple part. She did flowers, quite ornate, and I would do parts of them. And I always enjoyed it before it was engraved and decorated and embellished. I saw the simplicity of it in the beginning and that's the way I still am.

MS. YAGER: What material was this?

MS. COOKE: She was silver.

MS. YAGER: I read somewhere that you had been an instructor at—and then director of East Coast Summer Camps.

MS. COOKE: Yes, mm-hmm. Not a—well, I was a counselor.

MS. YAGER: Okay. This would have been an outgrowth of your—

MS. COOKE: Scouting.

MS. YAGER: —scouting. So what years did you do that and where was that—where were those camps located?

MS. COOKE: They were the same years—'46, I guess, on. As soon as you were old enough you became a counselor. I mean, that was part of growing up. It was Camp Whippoorwill in Baltimore and then Camp Asquam up in New Hampshire. I was head of the art and craft department, which was very humble. We're talking about camp, but it was fun, it was exciting.

MS. YAGER: And the materials that you were teaching children—

MS. COOKE: Everything—clay. We built a kiln. We worked in—the only metal would have been wire, not soldering. It would have been construction.

MS. YAGER: And what material were the wire things?

MS. COOKE: Probably copper and brass.

MS. YAGER: And this was during the war years? This was after—

MS. COOKE: During the war. I think during the war, mm-hmm.

MS. YAGER: Now, you also taught at the Maryland Institute. What years did—I have down 1946 to '49?

MS. COOKE: It was longer than that. I taught there like 20 years: '46 to about '60—what would that be?—about '66, '67, in there—mid '60s.

MS. YAGER: What were some of the subjects that you taught?

MS. COOKE: I taught—I developed a course—well, let me say this: first we were—as I said, it was all women and one man. But then the vets came, so then all of a sudden we had classes of like 65 young men, and 75. The school was just inundated with these veterans, which was wonderful.

And I developed a course called Design and Materials. Design was my main and has always been my primary interest. Now, I was teaching jewelry at the time to some women, but when the guys came in, they wanted to do bigger things. We did furniture. We used wood, we used metal, we used fabric, we used leather. So it was a combination. They were basically designers, and this was a course for basic design using materials. And it was very interesting.

MS. YAGER: This was in response to the GI bill, I'm assuming?

MS. COOKE: Yes, yes, yes.

MS. YAGER: Oh, so they came tuition-free?

MS. COOKE: They came—yes. Materials, everything was offered them. It was great. Some good people came in.

MS. YAGER: Do you remember any of the students that you taught?

MS. COOKE: Yeah, sure.

MS. YAGER: Did any of them pursue careers in design?

MS. COOKE: Oh, yes. Yes.

MS. YAGER: Do you remember any of their names?

MS. COOKE: Well, I married one, Bill [William C.] Steinmetz! [Laughs.] So, another was Jack Gimble, who had a great, great sense of design, did sculpture. And he taught for—what do you call it?—public education—not public education, Department of Recreation. And there were quite a few; another is Bill Schneider, who got into advertising. A lot of them started their own businesses. See, it was sort of right for those things then, I mean it was easy—not easy, but the option to start your own businesses was there, and a lot of them just did that. And some of them are still in business.

MS. YAGER: So you met your husband there?

MS. COOKE: Yes.

MS. YAGER: And what—did he start a business right away, after that?

MS. COOKE: Well, he also taught. He taught basic design. And this is when I lived in a little house down on Tyson Street, the slum area that we redeveloped, and he bought a house down the next block. So we were all developing these little houses—10 feet wide, 20 feet deep—that kind of thing.

And at that time I was doing jewelry, and I was wholesaling some jewelry, so I had a lot of the students that I taught helping me—four or five of them. We had a good time.

MS. YAGER: How many floors did the Tyson Street have?

MS. COOKE: Two and a half. And the last half you could hardly stand up in. They were slum houses, they were slave quarters—

MS. YAGER: The last half would have been at the top or the bottom?

MS. COOKE: A little—oh, there was a basement that had a dirt floor, and I laid brick on that. And then the second floor was my shop, and then the third floor—again, were 20 feet deep; I lived on the third level. And then there was a little tiny space above. That's where I did watercolors and painted. But I had to sit down because it's too small! [Laughs.] And that's where it started; I had this wonderful little shop, a little fireplace.

MS. YAGER: In Philadelphia houses like what you're describing, they call them Trinities. Is that what they called them?

MS. COOKE: No, they didn't. But I've heard that.

MS. YAGER: Was it a stairway, sort of—

MS. COOKE: Pie-shaped stairs. But I loved it. I mean, the little stairs were only about eight inches at the most, and tapered down. You couldn't fall down, you had to go straight up or down! [Laughs.] And—

MS. YAGER: Did you purchase that or rent it?

MS. COOKE: I purchased it. It cost me $2,000. It took me years to pay for it, but I bought it.

MS. YAGER: And what year was that?

MS. COOKE: This was ‘46, as I got out of the Institute.

MS. YAGER: Now, that address, I think I had that. Was it—

MS. COOKE: 903 Tyson Street. The thing that made it work was that it was in the antique section, there were a lot of antique shops there, and there was a wonderful bakery, and a few nice stores. And it became the place to go, became a tourist place. And every year we'd open house for the Children's Guild or for the handicapped, for some purpose, and people would line up at the doors to get in to see these little tiny houses. It was quite a nice community. There were about three artists; there was an architect, a decorator, museum director, and a couple of unusual people. [Laughs.] And it was a great community. That was an important part of my life because I got to meet people, and they liked what I was doing, these very simple things.

MS. YAGER: And how often were you open for the public?

MS. COOKE: Every day. I was there every day, six days a week.

MS. YAGER: And most of these places were open for business?

MS. COOKE: No, most of—they were all residential. I had the only shop. They were open once a year for community—you know, for charity, and we charged to go through. We'd earn like $30,000, $40,000 a day open house, and we had lemonade outside, all that kind of stuff. A street festival, I think it was.

MS. YAGER: How many years were you at Tyson Street?

MS. COOKE: Stayed there until ‘65.

MS. YAGER: A long time.

MS. COOKE: And that's where I met some of those important people in my life. There were a lot of doctors in that area. I met Jim Rouse, who became very important to me, and Howard Head, who owned Head skis and Prince rackets. Howard Head was about six-feet-something tall, and he would have to bend to come into my shop! [Laughs.] But he loved it. They loved it. It was intimate and interesting.

MS. YAGER: Now tell me what some of—describe the interior of Tyson Street.

MS. COOKE: Okay. Fifteen feet or 12 feet wide.

MS. YAGER: And the visual.

MS. COOKE: And you'd walk in, there'd be a little fireplace on the right. Of course, I had taken it down to the brick. And the other side it was just—it was plaster with chair rail sort of around, and that was painted pure white. Had a wood floor, which I would change colors very often. I'd stripe it like orange stripe, white stripe, orange stripe, white stripe. And the fireplace worked. In fact, part of the first year I lived there I slept in a sleeping bag in front of the fireplace because there was no heat. And my mother almost died! [Laughs.] But I just had to be there, I was in business. You know, it was very important to me.

And the second room—there was a little window to the second room, which meant that when the houses were built, they probably were just built one room deep. And I had a little backyard 10-feet deep.

MS. YAGER: So you were 22 years old.

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

MS. YAGER: I read a quote—your mother was quoted in a newspaper article—

MS. COOKE: Oh! [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: —and I was very impressed. I'm not going to find it right now. She was very—she seemed to be very, very supportive and understanding—

MS. COOKE: She was.

MS. YAGER: —and said that she felt that you were there all the time, but that she was rewarded by seeing your work there, and seeing it in America House in New York, and that you were “a very sincere artist” [from an article entitled “Designing Young Woman,” Margot Doss, ca. 1949].

MS. COOKE: Well, she appreciated it, yeah.

MS. YAGER: She had a deep understanding.

MS. COOKE: She was good, and of course—oh, I'm going to cry. My father would have too, I know. She didn't like the fact that she had lived in this nice house that she fixed up, and I lived with her, and then I went to the slum house! [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: To sleep in front of the fireplace.

MS. COOKE: [Laughs.] My little fireplace with brick floor, and everything! She was very worried about that. But she would come down and—but she backed me all along. She had a spunk of trust in her, I think, that was very important.

When I was a scout, I used to hitchhike all over the place. I hitchhiked up to Nova Scotia, [to] Maine. And she let us—me do that with my friends. Never a question. I don't know how she did it or why she did it. I often think, "Why did she let me do that?" I went up to Maine one year and slept a week by myself in Lake Mooselookmeguntic waiting for my friend to come up. And it was always fun. We had a great time.

MS. YAGER: Was this unusual?

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm, it was unusual.

MS. YAGER: How did other women respond to your original way of doing things?

MS. COOKE: I suppose I only knew women who responded positively. [Laughs.] This was all through scouting. And at times, several of us went on a trip. Originally we started on bicycles, and we'd go up to Pennsylvania, that kind of thing. And apparently we were all capable people—girls. But we dressed as scouts—or we dressed as campers. I mean, we wore jeans and had knapsacks, and I had always had a sheath knife. I mean, this was serious. We weren't out there to be picked up, and it was pretty clear we were outdoor people.

And our trip to Nova Scotia was just unbelievable, you know, what we went through and did. And people were delighted to see two girls that had that—were visually really in with what they were doing. We were professional campers, I guess, scouts. And that was it. We were—I was—I guess when I went to the Institute there were teachers that knew all this, and they respected it because it was interesting.

MS. YAGER: Now, beyond Mrs. Carruthers—apprenticing with her—or Ms. Carruthers—what other training, jewelry training, do you remember having? Was it all self-instruction?

MS. COOKE: Self-instruction.

MS. YAGER: And did you—how did you do that? Through books, or did you have other friends that were involved with metalwork?

MS. COOKE: Well, some of the men that I taught were very good—I mean, we—I guess we taught ourselves. I mean, they were making larger pieces and doing sculpture and furniture, so to speak. And it was mostly self-taught.

I did have a class called crafts, and I remember that the teacher, Mrs. Dew, was an excellent teacher. She was a former occupational therapist. And these are the people that became teachers of crafts at the time, so you can imagine the—I mean, we did weavings, traditional loom techniques, and baskets, and did a form of woodwork—very classic, traditional. I'd do chip carving. Of course I had to make a table. It was big and just carved all around the edge, which I really didn't want to do because I didn't think it needed it. [Laughs.] I thought the table was fine without the carving! But that was the crafts. So she was an excellent teacher as far as general crafts go.

But I didn't have any more training than that. I wish I had.

MS. YAGER: Did you attend workshops or demonstrations later on as the years went on? Or was that not even available?

MS. COOKE: It wasn't available. I guess once I got in and got going I just—no, it was not available.

MS. YAGER: Now, you opened Tyson Street. At that time there seemed to be—from the news clippings that you gave me, there seemed to be an interest in placing design objects in a home interior somewhat.

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm.

MS. YAGER: Now, from one of the sheets that you gave me, that you, I think, had written at the time, you were selling leather bags, belts, jewelry, bells, fireplace equipment and household furnishings and accessories.

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm. Small.

MS. YAGER: The leather bags, you just showed me a couple—pretty astounding.

MS. COOKE: Yeah, they were nice.

MS. YAGER: Very—how would you describe them? They—I suspect they were not like the typical fare.

MS. COOKE: Well, at that time leather was an important craft. I mean, you can imagine in New York and all the leather that was being done. But it was more complicated. Again, my simple approach came out in these bags. I mean, that's just the way I am; I approach everything in a structurally simple as possible and least amount of decoration or trim. It really wasn't trim; it was part of the working of the bag, the metal part.

MS. YAGER: And they incorporated—the ones that you showed me were brass. So the fittings were brass fittings and very simple, like one long, thick bar of brass as a closure or a simple—

MS. COOKE: Round button.

MS. YAGER: Yeah, pretty wonderful.

MS. COOKE: Yeah, lots of time I used big rings, like harness rings, that I thought were wonderful. I had to refinish them a little bit because they would rust. But—

MS. YAGER: That one bag that you showed me, the really tall bag, with the brass bar across the top—

MS. COOKE: Right.

MS. YAGER: —it was probably a foot and half, two feet tall?

MS. COOKE: Yes, easily.

MS. YAGER: A foot and a half wide, and sort of an oval shape—

MS. COOKE: Curved—

MS. YAGER: —at the bottom and then tapered up. You had to unhook the bar and—

MS. COOKE: And lock it in. It was very clever, very smart.

MS. YAGER: Beautiful.

MS. COOKE: The base was wood. You didn't see that, but the base was wood and the leather was attached to the wood, folded around, so you didn't notice that. But then the use of the brass on the side was a very direct way of closing two pieces of leather, and it was all simple, but perfect. I mean, we spent a lot of time refinishing the cowhide. Of course that was wonderful; that was a nice material to work with; it smelled good and it felt good.

MS. YAGER: Where did you even get the cowhide?

MS. COOKE: I'd drive up to York, Pennsylvania, and get the cowhide. I had a Jeep at the time, so I would go up and—or a Jeepster.

MS. YAGER: Tell me about the bells.

MS. COOKE: That was just an idea that I had. And they were accepted through the Museum of Modern Art [MOMA] for the “Good Design” show; simple wires with little brass domed bells—domed, and then you'd—the wires came out of a steel shaft, and you spun it around and the bells clapped, the brass clapped. It was like a large piece of jewelry, really. And I made those. We had little tall stands—

MS. YAGER: I'm trying to picture the tubing.

MS. COOKE: Well, a metal rod like two feet tall, thin, thinner than a pencil. And then we'd drill holes, which wasn't easy, maybe three holes, and through those three holes we'd have a steel wire, and on the end of each wire—I have a picture of it—were brass discs that I had done that were about an inch and a half in diameter, and we domed them. So they sort of hung there. And you'd spin it around, and all these discs would clatter each other. Clatter. I have a picture.

MS. YAGER: Now, they're from the—in the permanent collection at the Museum?

MS. COOKE: You know, I don't know whether it is or not. But it was in the “Good Design” show. That started, I think, in the ‘50s or ‘60s at MOMA [1950]. You see, what was exciting then is that was the beginning of what we called the Design Revolution. I mean, Bauhaus had come over, and Herman Miller, Charles Eames—all these people were producing these wonderful things—George Nelson. Those were exciting times. So I was thinking in those terms.

MS. YAGER: How were you introduced to the Bauhaus idea, through periodicals?

MS. COOKE: Books. Books.

MS. YAGER: What books? Do you remember any of them?

MS. COOKE: Not really, no. But I'd just go to the library and see everything they had that was—it wasn't introduced through school or anything. I guess periodicals. I used to get *Art and Architecture*. It was probably in there. I don't know, but it was all in the wind.

MS. YAGER: And then fireplace equipment, andirons. Can you describe those?

MS. COOKE: Well, there again, let's see, a bar in the back, and then they were radiating three, or in some cases five radiating bars with brass rods at the ends. And you could move these back and forth and adjust them to suit the logs.

MS. YAGER: And these were made in your shop in Tyson or were these off site?

MS. COOKE: These—the first ones were made in the shop, but then we made them off site because we didn't have that kind of equipment. I mean, the brass rods where they connected to the steel had to be threaded, and we weren't into that.

MS. YAGER: So who did that work for you?

MS. COOKE: There's a company in town, they're still in business—Krug. They do ironwork.

MS. YAGER: How do you spell that?

MS. COOKE: K-R-U-G.

And at that time, other than the shop, I was getting commissions to do other things, like screens for somebody's house, or a table for these people that I met that, as I say, were so important to me, would ask me, “Oh, I want a new table, would you design something for me?" This is how I got into—

MS. YAGER: Now these were then people that had come into Tyson Street and you started conversations—

MS. COOKE: Customers, mm-hmm. And then, it would lead you into something else—we were asked to do a restaurant. Then I married—Bill and I married—

MS. YAGER: What year was that?

MS. COOKE: Married ‘55.

MS. YAGER: Is Bill—

MS. COOKE: Bill Steinmetz.

MS. YAGER: When was he born?

MS. COOKE: He's younger than I—‘29.

MS. YAGER: 1929?

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm.

MS. YAGER: And is he a Baltimore person as well?

MS. COOKE: Yes, he's Baltimore. And he has a very good design sense. And he paints. He's good, very good.

MS. YAGER: Now, you started a partnership, and what did you call it?

MS. COOKE: Cooke and Steinmetz. And we were on Tyson Street at the time.

MS. YAGER: In the same space or—

MS. COOKE: The same space.

Oh, in the meantime—it got crowded, so in the meantime, I rented the house next door, and we knocked a door through, so we had two houses, a total of 20 feet wide! [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: Now, Bill was teaching at the Maryland Institute.

MS. COOKE: He also taught at the Maryland Institute.

MS. YAGER: And both of you were also working as design consultants?

MS. COOKE: Yes.

MS. YAGER: For what sort of—

MS. COOKE: Well, the first—I think the first big job we had was a restaurant known as Michantons in East Baltimore. And it doesn't sound new now, but it was new then. I did some trees made of wooden iron—they were made of steel on wooden trunks, so to speak. It was all planned, it was simple. And we had these in the front of the restaurant and we trimmed them by seasons. And as I say, it's not new stuff now, but we would go down at Christmas and trim these trees, or we'd take things for spring and trim the trees, we'd do all kinds of things.

MS. YAGER: How tall were these?

MS. COOKE: Oh, they were about eight feet tall.

MS. YAGER: And the trunks were wood? And then—

MS. COOKE: The trunks were wood. And then these, again, radiating branches came out, very stylized, very simple. And we did the whole restaurant. We did a wall in the back that was made of the panels that you could turn around and have photographs on one side and clean color on the other side, so they were like a series of big blinds so that they could change the feeling in the restaurant. And it was very successful, very attractive, I think—of course! [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: What year do you think that was?

MS. COOKE: That was in—I have to think, it was in the ‘60s. Could have been the ‘50s. I don't know.

MS. YAGER: And how do you spell the name of the restaurant?

MS. COOKE: Michantons—M-I-C-H-A-N-T-O-N-S. It was Greek.

And I got a call one day from a gentlemen with a wonderful voice—I almost fell in love with the voice—and he said, “I saw your restaurant, Michantons.” And he said, "We would like to hire you to work on some bowling lanes.” Well, they ended up being Fairlane Bowling Lanes, which was the biggest chain of bowling lanes in the ‘50s and ‘60s.

MS. YAGER: What was the name of the man with the wonderful voice?

MS. COOKE: Herbert Freeberg (sp). There was a family of Freebergs (sp), several brothers. This was when bowling was usually something in the cellar with pool rooms and men, and pretty bad looking things. He took us around to about five bowling alleys, or whatever you want to call it, and said, "What can you do?" And that was our test. So what we could do was paint and camouflage, and we fixed up these alleys. We painted the equipment orange and yellow, we painted the walls white with—you know, we went through and did the whole thing. I was very interested in color.

So we converted these alleys into something fairly respectable, and then they started to build what we now know as bowling lanes with children's centers, with restaurants, with offices. And we got to pick all the furniture, so this is where we got involved with Eames and Herman Miller. And we designed the carpet for them. They took us up to New York and we did the carpets. And we did the whole—we did a total of 50-some bowling lanes all over the country.

MS. YAGER: My goodness!

MS. COOKE: It was quite a thing. It was a wonderful job.

MS. YAGER: Tell me what years.

MS. COOKE: This was in the ‘50s and ‘60s. It was wonderful, it was the greatest—

MS. YAGER: And Herbert Freeberg (sp), was he Baltimore?

MS. COOKE: He was Baltimore, mm-hmm. He just liked our style, and he let us do everything. I mean, it just worked.

MS. YAGER: And this was just the two of you, your—

MS. COOKE: The two of us. Well, we worked with architects. We're not architects. So he had a very good group of architects, very simple. Everything was very contemporary, modern, so to speak, if you want to use the word. And it was exciting when I think about it because the playrooms—we'd do animals, cut animals out and have, you know, fur tails and rabbits and all kinds of things. But they were good, they weren't corny. None of our things were ever—shall I say cheap or corny somehow? They were good.

MS. YAGER: Wow!

MS. COOKE: That was a big job. That could have lasted a long time, except we got involved in retail.

MS. YAGER: Now, you said you did 50—how many bowling—

MS. COOKE: Fifty-some. I've forgotten.

MS. YAGER: And over what time period?

MS. COOKE: Probably 10 years.

MS. YAGER: Over a 10-year period of time? Wow!

MS. COOKE: When I say we did them, the first one's in Baltimore because we were very involved, and then it became paperwork, you know, designing. Some of them had bars in them. We did the menus. We did the whole concept. In those days, architectural firms did not have designers in house. I mean, now they have their own. But see, this was before. And we were lucky.

MS. YAGER: What do you think prompted—well, Mr. Freeberg (sp)—how had he been interested in wanting modern things for his businesses?

MS. COOKE: He had an innate taste. I guess taste is something we're talking about here. He collected Milton Averys. His house was beautiful, a simple white Baltimore house. Of course we checked all this out! [Laughs.] And he and his family were musical, very important in the community. It was quite a relationship because he liked almost everything we did and had it done the way we wanted it, and it worked. It worked for a long time.

MS. YAGER: Very successful.

MS. COOKE: Yeah, it was successful.

MS. YAGER: And the first restaurant, how had that come about?

MS. COOKE: I'm trying to think how that had come about. Customers suggested us. We hadn't done anything like that. See, they'd see this little tiny shop and feel something, and gave us a chance. Of course we had to submit drawings and models and mock-ups. I mean, we got all into that. We weren't trained to do that.

We also worked with another wonderful man, Fritz Gutheim, Frederick Gutheim, from Washington.

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

MS. COOKE: G-U-T-H-E-I-M—Gutheim—Gutheim. He worked for the American Institute of Architects, and we got involved with an exhibition with him that traveled all around the world. We did the big AIA, I think it was the centennial --

MS. YAGER: The USIA?

MS. COOKE: AIA—American Institute of Architects.

MS. YAGER: And what did you do for him?

MS. COOKE: We designed an exhibition for their—I think it's the centennial of the AIA. And he got us into using—he wanted new materials, and we ended up with Glenn L. Martin using honeycomb structures that we cut, and honeycomb panels—we personally didn't—which held all the photographs for the exhibition.

We worked with the two sisters—Corita—do you know Sister Corita [Kent]? [Sister] Mary Magdalene from Los Angeles who started doing the great banners, collage banners? Oh gee! They're so wonderful. Before you were born! [Laughs.] I have wonderful pictures of all this. They were very creative—two nuns. In those days they wore habits. And they—Los Angeles—I've forgotten what community it was. And they worked with Charles and Ray Eames, and Girard, those people. And we worked with them [Grosse Pointe, MI]—

MS. YAGER: This was Alexander Girard? Is that—

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm. So these banners were made—they were collage, and they all had messages. And it was a stark difference between that and the architecture. So the show was a contrast of art forms, so to speak. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: It's pretty wonderful.

MS. COOKE: And all this time I was making jewelry.

MS. YAGER: Yes. Now, the jewelry, I read something at one time that—what were some of the first designs that you did? What sort of themes were you using?

MS. COOKE: I guess a little star, and a ring that was square on top. I thought it was the most wonderful thing in the world! [Laughs.] It was a flat top just wrapped around, so you didn't have to solder too much. The star, and I've always done the forged pieces. You see, they were always those simple shapes that I still do.

MS. YAGER: What was typical of jewelry at that time?

MS. COOKE: Well, Art Smith was pretty important, and he was more organic and complicated. And there was a lot of that. I guess he was the best of that group. And [Paul] Lobel, I mean, you know, it was a big group. But they were all pretty complicated to me—they seemed that way. I remember telling Art Smith I thought his things looked much too complicated! Margaret De Patta was just perfect; I thought her things were just magnificent. She was Bauhaus trained.

MS. YAGER: In Chicago, I think she went to Chicago and trained with—

MS. COOKE: Yeah, I don't know. Nagy [Laszlo Moholy-Nagy]?

MS. YAGER: Yes. Yes.

MS. COOKE: I think so.

MS. YAGER: Now, did you ever meet her?

MS. COOKE: Yes, I did. I went to her studio on one of my camping trips.

MS. YAGER: About what year—

MS. COOKE: Just stopped by.

MS. YAGER: About what year did you go?

MS. COOKE: This was—let's see, my friend and I went out West—probably the ‘40s. That's when I went to Walker Art Center [Minneapolis, MN]—‘45 or ‘46. We had an old car and we camped across the country. And my purpose was to stop in at all the shops—stores that sold contemporary furniture because I was going to try to get them to open up jewelry departments for contemporary jewelry, good design.

MS. YAGER: The Walker shows were 1955 and 1959.

MS. COOKE: '55 and '59? Well, I guess—

MS. YAGER: According to my notes, but that's—I can double-check.

MS. COOKE: It had to be in the ‘40s—something. We can look that up. It wasn't that because I was married in ‘55. It had to be the ‘40s—‘45, ‘46 [“Modern Jewelry Under $50” 1948-1950].

MS. YAGER: Okay.

[Audio break.]

MS. YAGER: So tell me about her—meeting her. You knew where she lived and you just—

MS. COOKE: I had her address.

MS. YAGER: —knocked on the door?

MS. COOKE: And I just walked up, we knocked on the door. And at that time I had a little wooden box that had my jewelry in it, so I was, of course, proud to show it, showed it to her. We talked. And it was very nice.

MS. YAGER: How old do you think she was?

MS. COOKE: Oh, I don't know. I don't know. She looked young to me, but she was older than I, of course. Just walked up.

MS. YAGER: Did you see any of her work?

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm, yeah. Saw her studio and workbench.

I also saw Maria [Martinez], the potter. We went to the Indian reservation and walked up to Maria's little house, saw her sitting on the floor and bought some pots for five dollars.

MS. YAGER: Do you still have them?

MS. COOKE: Yeah. They're little. They're not—I guess they're not worth too much because they're small. But that was a lot of money. But—and who else did I see? She was the main jeweler that I respected a great deal. But I went to all the museums, of course. And then I met somebody in Los Angeles that was involved in the Los Angeles Farmer's Market, I think they called it. And he thought I was good, too, so he helped me and I got some outlets through him for my big jewelry line! [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: Were these places that Margaret De Patta at was selling as well?

MS. COOKE: I don't know that she sold there. I don't know where she sold.

MS. YAGER: Now, you wanted to go to furniture—places that showed high design—

MS. COOKE: Right. Right.

MS. YAGER: —which at that time was furniture and lamps and mostly home things?

MS. COOKE: Right.

MS. YAGER: And then, but they—

MS. COOKE: I thought they should have jewelry because the only place to sell jewelry was jewelry stores, and it didn't make any sense there. And the only other place would be like in New York, American Craft—what was it called?

MS. YAGER: America House?

MS. COOKE: America House. And that—I shouldn't say that, but that to me was too crafty. I thought it should be a design presentation connected with contemporary design. So that's what we were trying to—I was trying to do.

MS. YAGER: How do you distinguish—what did it have that made it appear to be more of craft than design?

MS. COOKE: Visual, I guess. I guess I was a little pompous in that. And they had dogwood blossoms, and that's okay, but the dogwood blossoms --you can spend your life doing dogwood blossoms that could be magnificent, but these weren't design, they were --

MS. YAGER: You wanted sleeker—

MS. COOKE: I wanted the clean cuts—

MS. YAGER: —more pure—

MS. COOKE: Pure. Structural. Whatever. It was a look, the look that the furniture had, what made the furniture different than Hepplewhite or anything else—they're all good, but it was a new look, a new concept.

MS. YAGER: Were you aware of Harry Bertoia?

MS. COOKE: Oh, yes. Very good.

MS. YAGER: Did you ever have a chance to meet him?

MS. COOKE: I didn't meet him, no.

MS. YAGER: Where—did you ever have a chance to see any of his work anywhere?

MS. COOKE: Yes.

MS. YAGER: Where?

MS. COOKE: I don't know, I guess in magazines, some of the magazines I had. And then, when he did a sculpture in New York, I was up there the first day, at one of the banks. You can hardly notice it now, but it was

just stunning. And he did—

MS. YAGER: What was—describe the sculpture.

MS. COOKE: Just a maze of wires that cross at the right places, sort of a mist of wires.

MS. YAGER: But was sound involved with it?

MS. COOKE: No, not this. That came later, I guess.

MS. YAGER: And what was it that you liked about Margaret De Patta's work?

MS. COOKE: Well, it had that design element that I so respected and somehow thought that's the way—I just respected it. And that's the way that I think. I don't look like Margaret De Patta, but I think in those concepts—you have a stone, you set in relation to the stone, and you keep it simple and pure. It's just a way, one way, that's all.

MS. YAGER: Were there any other jewelers that you respected, beyond those, that you can remember?

MS. COOKE: Well, Calder, who wasn't quite as design-oriented, but I certainly think he was—he did a very good job! [Laughs.] He was fun.

MS. YAGER: Did you ever have a chance to meet him?

MS. COOKE: No, but I have a—he has a belt of mine, or he had a belt of mine. Somehow he found out I made belts, and ordered a belt. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: And did you mail it to him or—

MS. COOKE: Yeah, I did. I have a note someplace. And I followed him. Of course, I guess he was published a lot. I thought he was wonderful, his circus and everything. But he was a more creative—creative in a different way. I mean, it was more intricate and complex, but still had that spark that was new and different.

The other person, there's a Phil [Philip] Morton, I think, that—I didn't know him, and we didn't know each other, but we'd overlap at times. So he had a similar approach. Just—you know, just a personal expression. So he had the same thought, although we never met.

MS. YAGER: Now, he came out with—I'm trying to remember when his book came out. It was maybe the early ‘70s or late ‘60s? I'll have to look that up [*Contemporary Jewelry, A Craftsman’s Handbook*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston; 1970].

How would you have known of each other?

MS. COOKE: I didn't know him. I would see it published, I guess, someplace. Maybe I saw it in a shop or something, I don't know. But he would inlay ebony the same way I was inlaying ebony. It's one of those things you think, “Oh, wait a minute! This is like I think!” And yet I know he was—I mean, I've had a lot of people copy my work, but you can tell when it's copied and when it's not copied. He and I think alike on certain things. But there's a difference still, they're different.

MS. YAGER: Now, were you aware of metals programs that were popping up around the country?

MS. COOKE: Yes.

MS. YAGER: Which ones were you aware of?

MS. COOKE: Cranbrook [Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI]. And one summer I went to Cranbrook. Actually, I wanted to go to Cranbook after I got out of the Maryland Institute, but I didn't have any money, and I thought I'd earn a living so—I'm still doing it! But I went to Cranbrook for a summer and—

MS. YAGER: Who was teaching there?

MS. COOKE: Oh, I have to think of his name—

MS. YAGER: Dick Thomas?

MS. COOKE: Dick Thomas.

MS. YAGER: And tell me about that experience. Who else was—

MS. COOKE: It was all right. I guess what happened is that it was a summer school and everybody was having a good time, and I was so dead serious on learning everything that it wasn't as intense as I thought.

MS. YAGER: Didn't meet your expectations.

MS. COOKE: Yeah. But—because it was very laid back, and it was wonderful. I did techniques that I hadn't done before. I mean, I did some—you know, I did some bowls and some forging. I made a wonderful lead bird with inlaid—I thought inlaying brass into lead was wonderful. And I did some things like that.

MS. YAGER: Inlaying brass into lead?

MS. COOKE: In lead. [Laughs.] I formed like a bird, and it had wing marks and detail. I guess the really beautiful thing is when you inlay steel, but we weren't into that in that class.

MS. YAGER: What year do you think that was?

MS. COOKE: This must have been—again, I wasn't married, so it had to be—I guess it was late ‘40s, early ‘50s.

MS. YAGER: Who—do you remember any of the other people in the class?

MS. COOKE: No. No, I didn't associate with any of them because they were playing too much. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: And where did you stay when you were there?

MS. COOKE: One of the dorms. But I did—I got to see every classroom. I mean, the ceramics department was wonderful, and there were some people doing these—I mean, just these gigantic pots. And, I mean, the whole environment was quite exciting, obviously. And of course, they had a good architecture department. I mean, that would have been the school I would have liked to have gone to, had I had a chance, you know, or taken the chance. It was great.

MS. YAGER: And did you have a chance to go to the Detroit Institute of Art?

MS. COOKE: Yes.

MS. YAGER: Anything you remember about that?

MS. COOKE: No, just being excited—you know, the whole thing. The whole experience was exciting in a quiet way, as I say, because I thought I was really going to do like four years work, you know, in a summer! [Laughs.] But it was great.

MS. YAGER: Now, the—I have the understanding that there was a lot of metal going on in the Detroit area at that time. Did you feel any of that energy?

MS. COOKE: Yes. Yeah. But, mainly sculptures. Yeah, really I always thought I would get into sculpture, and that was going to be my introduction at Cranbrook.

MS. YAGER: And how did you aim away from sculpture?

MS. COOKE: Just didn't. I just kept doing what I was doing in Baltimore. Maybe still—I have some more time.

MS. YAGER: Do you have—do you remember any of the shops that were in the Detroit area at that time?

MS. COOKE: Sure. Peggy deSalle had a wonderful shop [Little Gallery, Birmingham, MI]. She sold my jewelry for a long time.

MS. YAGER: What was the name of it? Was it—

MS. COOKE: deSalle's Gallery, I think, or Peggy—maybe it was just called Peggy deSalle Bloomfield Hills. She did a good job.

MS. YAGER: Yeah, I think Fred Fenster mentioned her.

MS. COOKE: She did a good job.

MS. YAGER: Did you sell any work in that—

MS. COOKE: Yes. Yes, I sold work for years with her—to her.

MS. YAGER: And what was the—was that a good relationship?

MS. COOKE: Oh, yes, I liked what she had. I mean, if I hadn't liked it, I wouldn't have—

MS. YAGER: Who else would she—did she have at that time?

MS. COOKE: I don't remember. I don't remember. But she presented it well. She displayed it well. She had a good-looking gallery. I mean, there are times you see people, see a shop that doesn't display it properly. And I usually feel pretty bad if I see somebody's beautiful pieces that aren't treated as beautiful pieces. So I wouldn't send my work anyplace unless I was sure it was going to look nice—even though we're talking about inexpensive pieces—they were $5, $6, $10, $15. But there was a pride in how things looked.

Ursell is another one that had a shop in Georgetown—Eric Ursell. And he sold a lot of my things. I have some catalogues from his shop. And he would have the Natzler pottery, ceramics.

MS. YAGER: How do you spell Ursell?

MS. COOKE: U-R-S-E-L-L. Eric. In Georgetown.

He was kind of on the Scandinavian edge, Scandinavian furniture, which was of course important then.

MS. YAGER: What was the business relationship? Were you selling work outright, or it was on consignment?

MS. COOKE: It was wholesale, outright.

MS. YAGER: So outright sale?

MS. COOKE: Oh, I would do anything they wanted. If they wanted to have some pieces wholesale or they would want to buy 4 and send 12, or whatever. This wasn't a big market, but it was what was there, and that's all there was. And, you know, we have all the galleries now that, hopefully, are doing a better job than that.

MS. YAGER: Some of the other places that I have listed as outlets that you had work at—Frasers (sp) in California.

MS. COOKE: Yeah.

MS. YAGER: Can you describe that one a little bit?

MS. COOKE: Well, that was a furniture store. They had all the proper furniture, proper carpets, the [Isamu] Noguchi lamps. You had to be associated with a group that was upper level.

MS. YAGER: And Eric Ursells—did he have similar—

MS. COOKE: Yes, he had a good collection. As I say, he would tend toward Scandinavian a little bit. He'd have a lot of the Christmas ornaments, which were still nice; they're classic, good-looking, good design. And then Knoll Fabrics were important—pillows, upholstery. There was a whole environment.

Another very important place was Design Research. That was later. Design Research began in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and was started by Ben Thompson. He was an architect, a very fine architect. And he was the one that brought Marimekko to this country. And it was a beautiful place. And he opened up a shop in New York—a store in New York on 57th Street, and they sold my jewelry. And I wanted to get very involved with them with that. In fact, I sold him one of my cases, and had a whole setup of just my things for a few years.

MS. YAGER: I also have noticed that you sold work through Georg Jensen?

MS. COOKE: A little bit.

MS. YAGER: And Tiffany?

MS. COOKE: No. MOMA—Museum of Modern Art. I was in a catalogue one year and they sold the jewelry.

MS. YAGER: What do you think you had in the catalogue, what sort of—

MS. COOKE: Oh, I have a wonderful neckpiece in the catalogue. I'll have to come across that—made of many discs that hang—discs maybe an inch and a half to two inches, inch and three quarters, all different sizes, that attach to a neckpiece. It's quite a piece.

MS. YAGER: How many pieces do you think you sold of that?

MS. COOKE: Not many. Maybe 12, something like that.

MS. YAGER: It was a mail order catalogue?

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm. That was enough for me because it was a difficult piece to make. And probably didn't charge enough! [Laughs.] But it was quite an honor, and it was nice.

MS. YAGER: I also have the Hirshhorn [Museum, Washington, DC]. Did they have a store?

MS. COOKE: I had some thing in their store once—not many.

MS. YAGER: And Keegs in Washington.

MS. COOKE: Keegs, yes. That was another furniture store.

MS. YAGER: Now, the furniture stores would have a display of—

MS. COOKE: A case, a nice case.

MS. YAGER: And would you be the only jeweler?

MS. COOKE: No.

MS. YAGER: Would there be other jewelers?

MS. COOKE: No, they would have some other jewelry.

MS. YAGER: And who else—

MS. COOKE: I don't know. But they were good. It was design oriented again.

MS. YAGER: Do you think it was American do you think it was—

MS. COOKE: Americans, it was Americans. I didn't always get out there to see this. I'd see photographs of the store. I did see it when I went on this trip; I mean, I picked all these stores on our camping trip.

MS. YAGER: Alexander Imports. Stieff.

MS. COOKE: Oh. Stieff is a local silversmithing company.

MS. YAGER: Was Kirk Stieff one time—

MS. COOKE: Kirk—well, it's Kirk Stieff the second go-around. It started as Stieff and Kirk. Samuel Kirk and Son Co. was another silversmithing company, and they merged and became Kirk Stieff. They are now—the company is closed, the Stieff family, again, a fine Maryland family. And I thought that—I got involved. They wanted to do a line of gold jewelry, so I worked with them for a while. And they manufactured it. I would design it, and they produced it. And it was all right, but it didn't last too long. I guess they were into bigger things with the silversmithing.

MS. YAGER: The—with purses, you used brass. Did you—and I noticed one pin that had a marriage of metals—

MS. COOKE: Yes.

MS. YAGER: —brass, copper.

MS. COOKE: Yes.

MS. YAGER: Did you do much jewelry that was copper?

MS. COOKE: Yes, in the beginning it was all brass and copper, a little bit of silver because of the money. I would go to the brass and copper and get the scrap and use that. And then I used wood a lot—like, wood and leather. See, I would mix wood, leather, and brass and copper.

MS. YAGER: What types of wood?

MS. COOKE: Well, a very dear friend of mine, who was on Tyson Street, really is the one who got me started in all this. He was a cabinet maker, so I would get scraps of wood from him - rosewood, cocobolo, walnut, ebony. I mean, I would get little pieces and he would - and then I would inlay them or marry them, or whatever. He was

very important to me.

He—this is interesting. I was walking; I was trying to get a studio. I didn't know what I was going to do but I wanted a studio—this was before the house—and I kept walking by this window and I saw in the window folk art that I didn't even—had never seen before. I didn't know about folk art. I didn't know about these wonderful German ornaments and decoys, and I could look in the window and see a bookshelf with all these wonderful books on it and I kept passing this window and finally this man came from down the basement and introduced himself and I, you know, was a kid and I just thought these things were wonderful.

So he knew I taught—I was at the Institute and he taught there at the time. He was a cabinet maker teaching at the Institute, and so I told him I needed a studio and he found me a place on the fourth floor and I paid $10 a month for about six months and then these houses started to come up for sale. So that was the beginning, my introduction to that thing. And he knew all the museum people. He was good friends with Eric Douglas from the museum in Colorado, Denver [Denver Art Museum], and Balboas (sp), who was at the Bulmon (ph) Museum. So I met all these people through this man and through being on Tyson Street. It's quite a hub of interesting people, and they are still here. I'm still involved with all those families and everything. But it was—I had forgotten—I hadn't forgotten it, but just see all these things that I had never seen before—it was wonderful.

MS. YAGER: What sort of—describe the folk art a little bit.

MS. COOKE: Well, they were decoys and there was a—

MS. YAGER: Ducks and birds.

MS. COOKE: Decoys, birds, and there were some antiques. He had—they collected antiques like the wonderful pear box. I mean, we know of these things so well now but I was not aware of the antique market. I came from a family that had flowered china and crocheted things and it was very nice, but this was a whole different thing.

It was the design, you see, that was all new to me and a lot of German imports, some ceramics like the redware from Pennsylvania—I mean, that to me is—I collected that, I did all these things. It's a whole different group of objects.

MS. YAGER: And one that was pretty radical if you grew up with floral plates.

MS. COOKE: Yeah, yeah, right. I mean, it is funny how your innate sense—it's there. You know, you just—I was so lucky to meet that in that situation, and I'm sure I would have picked it up some other place but it was—it was very funny. Even his doorknocker was good, the door was painted a good red—you know everything about it made sense to me. And again, we are talking about taste.

MS. YAGER: Did you have an opportunity to do any travel overseas or any other countries?

MS. COOKE: No. When I was young, you mean?

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: Not when I was young, but—

MS. YAGER: So the antiques—

MS. COOKE: —when I got old. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: —became—

MS. COOKE: The antiques were—

MS. YAGER: —the window into that world.

MS. COOKE: Right, and then we were in the antique section—area, as I said—now, antiques is a broad thing, too, but I related to country and to folk that end of it—not to the chandeliers and so forth. And then we would go up to Pennsylvania and get in the jeep and go out and buy all these things. Went to New Hope a lot and saw [George] Nakashima and—

MS. YAGER: Did you know him?

MS. COOKE: I met him. I just knew him—you know, I went to his shop a couple times.

MS. YAGER: So you were at the shop and—and what did you think about his work?

MS. COOKE: I thought it was exciting. I thought it was more complicated [laughs], but exciting. Very exciting—I mean, great, big handsome pieces. It was wonderful.

And my friend, Mr. Delahunt (sp), who made the wonderful—he also was a good designer. He made a lot of beautiful things. I have a picture someplace of a table he made for me for my shop. There's a oval—an irregular shape because the shop was so small you had to walk around it—I mean—not much space for a table so this table fit within the walking area. So he had a same—the same approach of that.

And then I got very involved—or very fond of Shaker and Amish quilts—I mean, all these things.

MS. YAGER: What about Nakashima's work was complicated?

MS. COOKE: It's wonderful but—I don't know. It's just struck me as—but it was wonderful. It is wonderful.

MS. YAGER: There was another wood person up there—I couldn't remember his name [Wharton Esherick], but you may have come across—

MS. COOKE: I don't remember anybody else, but—oh, it was exceptional—planks of wood six and eight inches thick, big burls and knots in them, the bark showing, you know. It was exciting.

MS. YAGER: Your work is—it has a real pure, simple—but then you do put natural elements in—the use of pebbles or inserting wood. What other kinds of found objects have you used?

MS. COOKE: Not too many, actually. I think of the things you have done with found sand objects and often I have thought, well, maybe I should get off of—you know, more off gold and things get—gold gets pricey after a while—[laughs]—when you want to do something big and show it.

I would say that is probably it—wood, stone, I did some glass pieces at one time, natural crystals. When I worked with Geoffrey Beene that year, I—he wanted something big and I went to a rock shop and got big quartz crystals and big pieces that could be grasped in a very simple way.

Oh, I like—I'm very fond of natural forms—seeds, everything.

MS. YAGER: I want to go back to Geoffrey Beene in a little bit, but I have a note here that you were involved with designing a church or churches?

MS. COOKE: Bill and I were—a church.

MS. YAGER: Where?

MS. COOKE: All Saints Church up in Pennsylvania, and we did this job through an architect, Alexander Cochran, who was very influential in Baltimore and appreciated what we did.

MS. YAGER: Where in Pennsylvania?

MS. COOKE: Oh, I don't know. I'm sorry. Next to the Utz factory [Hanover, PA]. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: The potato chip factory?

MS. COOKE: Who knows?

MS. YAGER: I can find it.

MS. COOKE: I don't know. I can find out for you. It was All Saints Church and we had the job of doing the furniture or the—yes, the furniture, and it ended up—

MS. YAGER: Like pews?

MS. COOKE: Like the pews and the baptismal font and—

MS. YAGER: And the altar?

MS. COOKE: The altar. And it ended up being square brass rods, tall, thin with horizontal members that would have different saints carved out of wood with material on them—glass and so forth. So we had all the saints as patterns along this panel up on these tall, thin, brass legs.

MS. YAGER: Did you carve the saints or—

MS. COOKE: We did. We ground them and did all kinds of things—collage—all kinds of interesting things.

MS. YAGER: And tell me about the concrete mural.

MS. COOKE: Oh, that was a job I had—we had a program in Baltimore that—they had endowment to do some art for schools, and I was lucky enough to get one. And it's in a rather rough part of the city so I thought—and it was a concrete building—very simple, stark thing. So I thought, well, why not—instead of adding something to the building, why don't I work with the concrete itself? So my sculpture was cast within the concrete and they really were depressions. There were five panels and each one had a different kind of impression.

Like, when you are a little kid, you are three feet tall, whatever—as you stretch your hands out and push a hole in it and then you stretch up and stretch up and as you get taller and taller the holes get higher and higher. So I based it all on what I thought little kids would touch and feel because it's concrete, and they could. And it turned out very well and it's still there and it has never been mutilated. And so it was kind of a nice solution to the problem.

MS. YAGER: What was the name of the school?

MS. COOKE: Don't know. I have to look that up for you. It was a public school on Frederick Avenue [Frederick Elementary School]. There were five big panels. The way we did it was to make the Styrofoam molds and then they in turn cast that.

MS. YAGER: Did you ever have any children?

MS. COOKE: I had a son but we lost him, he died.

MS. YAGER: Oh no. How old?

MS. COOKE: 26. It was not good. He was brilliant, wonderful, young boy, but he is gone.

MS. YAGER: What was his name?

MS. COOKE: Daniel. Daniel Cooke Steinmetz [September 1, 1955—July 10, 1982]. And he was a computer whiz. He was in a total different area. [Laughs.] All computer and music. He started with piano and then went to the organ, then went to computers—really logical progression there.

So it's too—yeah.

[Cross talk, inaudible.]

MS. COOKE: —by his work.

MS. YAGER: So—so for many years you balanced a child and—

MS. COOKE: Uh-huh. Yeah, yeah, he liked all these funny things we'd get into because when we'd go to like Michanton's he was a baby and—or little, you know. I'd take him with us and then he sort of grew up in some of these places, running around, playing with—it was nice because there were all those people there that enjoyed having, you know, a young child. Doesn't always work, but in this case, he was very careful and you know, had a good time.

MS. YAGER: And you were able to have him around you while you were working.

MS. COOKE: Yeah, because we worked at home. The two houses on Tyson Street got to be too small, so we bought a third one and—around the corner, so we had a big backyard in the third house, and we had studios and living areas and a shop and a workshop—all that.

MS. YAGER: Goodness.

MS. COOKE: And then Cross Keys came up.

MS. YAGER: Yeah, tell me about that. Your—what year did you leave Tyson Street?

MS. COOKE: Sixty-five [1965].

MS. YAGER: And you came directly to Cross Keys, where we are now?

MS. COOKE: We don't live here, but—

MS. YAGER: Right, but I mean, you are at the retail location—

MS. COOKE: The business.

MS. YAGER: —and you are still here. It's 2004.

MS. COOKE: That is 39 years. [Laughs.] We are the longest—we often have trouble with the Rouse Company—I'll put this on tape any time, and I said to somebody that we have been here longer than anybody in the Rouse Company has been in the Rouse Company. [Laughs.] But Jim Rouse was one of my customers downtown and I did all kinds of things for him—Christmas cards and I developed andirons for him. He wanted some kind of andirons that were interesting so I did that, and then Bill and I did his windows one year. He did a Christmas card that—he had a new building on Saratoga Street that was relatively modern at the time and it had a lot of series of tall windows so we designed the Christmas card and did colored stained glass in these windows from the card. Then he of course wanted the building to reflect the card so we took colored tissue paper and did the windows so that you could all through the city—you know, these bright windows.

And then when he developed Cross Keys, he wanted us to open a little shop there because he wanted—and then there was only shops that were owned—managed by the owners.

MS. YAGER: Now Willard—not Willard—

MS. COOKE: Jim.

MS. YAGER: Jim Rouse was noted in Baltimore for urban development of many—types. For people who might not know, what are some of the other things that he was involved with in Baltimore?

MS. COOKE: Well, he started with the Rouse Company—the first mall he built was Mondawmin Mall, which was a breakthrough mall, and it's in an area he had hoped—he always wanted the community to work. It's in a neighborhood that was black, Jewish, Christian, everything you can think of, and his idea was that this mall would bring all these people together—shopping and they had activities, they have concerts. He did a lot to start the malls. He did—

MS. YAGER: This was in the early '60s?

MS. COOKE: This was in the early '60s, and I did designing for the mall, you know. We did the parking lots, which sounds simple now, but we did them in color so you knew where you were because it was the first mall—you know, you would get lost. So we did that, and then he opened another one on the Eastern Shore in Talbottown, which was a strip mall, and then he opened Cross Keys, which is in a private club. This was a club and a golf course that Cross Keys is on, and this is a prototype for the city of Columbia, which is one of the first built cities. So Cross Keys—

MS. YAGER: Columbia, Maryland.

MS. COOKE: Columbia, Maryland. So Cross Keys has the center which is called the village. It has high-rise, mid-rise, townhouses, tennis club, swimming pool, has all the—and the inn. And before Columbia was built—of course you had the property and it was all planned—all the architects and designers from all over the world came here, and that is why we were here because it was the epitome of taste and good design in this field. So we were—felt we were a part of that even though we weren't part of the Rouse Company, but it rubbed off. And we stood up for it all these years. We have seen it change a lot, which hurts.

MS. YAGER: At the beginning, what were some of the other types of businesses that he invited to come?

MS. COOKE: He had it very well-rounded. He wanted anything anybody needed. He had a grocery store, he had a shoe shop—what do you call it—shoe repair, he had a barber shop, he had a deli and he had a tobacco shop. He had everything you needed—and a pharmacy, and then there was another dress shop, shop for young teenagers and we called it The Store Ltd. because we weren't sure what we were going to do but, we just said, well, we will do everything. So we did everything. We had Marimekko fabric—

MS. YAGER: Didn't pin you in.

MS. COOKE: [Laughs.] They said, "What are you going to sell?" "Well, we don't know." So that is when we started with good design. We bought everything that we thought was good design, and this is before MoMA had their store.

MS. YAGER: When I came one time to visit your store in the early '80s—

MS. COOKE: Oh.

MS. YAGER: —and I think it was still the original interior—

MS. COOKE: That's true.

MS. YAGER: —shockingly, shockingly modern and refreshing and—

MS. COOKE: Yeah, it was pretty.

MS. YAGER: —even at that time, this must have seemed like an alien that dropped modernism—

MS. COOKE: I know, we just sat here and did it.

[Audio break.]

MS. YAGER: This is Jan Yager interviewing Betty Cooke in a Radisson Hotel at Cross Keys near The Store Ltd. in Baltimore, Maryland, on July 1, 2004, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disc number two, session number one.

Betty, we were talking about the experience of walking into your store for the first time. When I was preparing for this interview—the director of this project, Dr. Liza Kirwin, is from Baltimore, and she described—I said, "Oh, do you remember the store?" And she got very excited and, "Oh, yes, you know, when I was nine years old I remember going in and it was just like nothing anywhere in Baltimore." And she described just how cool and hip and very modern—she started describing little colorful plastic boxes and—which I noticed you still have.

MS. COOKE: We still have.

MS. YAGER: Marimekko fabrics—she was talking about just the experience of being surrounded with very, very different modern design unlike things that were available at the time.

Can you talk a little bit about—were there—how did that come about? How did you decide—and you opened the store in Cross Keys in nineteen-sixty—

MS. COOKE: '65.

MS. YAGER: —five. And tell me the design of the interior. How did you decide to build the interior?

MS. COOKE: Okay. Well, the first thing we did is—we wanted all modular. We wanted to be able to move things around, so there was a series of panels four by eight feet and they were connected to the beams with special iron hooks that we had so we could connect it parallel to the front or vertical to the front—in different directions. And at that time, we didn't have much merchandise because, again, we didn't have much money. So we would have a panel and it would be a—maybe a bright orange—that panels—some were covered in felt and some were wood. So it might be a bright orange panel with a few objects in front of it and then there would be a magenta panel with a few more objects, and then there would be a white panel with maybe some shells. And all these could be shifted around as we got new merchandise or wanted to change the look of it.

So it's actually sort of like a big toy—well, no, it's not a big toy, but it's a modular system which we thought was very intriguing. And then we weren't sure what all we'd buy and sell or what was available in the market. That's the whole thing—you can think you are going to find something exciting and new, sometimes you can't always find it. But there were enough contemporary good design objects at the time that we found and they happened to be glass or it was china or it was wood—all different materials again. But we weren't out for any specific thing except it had to have a look about it. It had to be good design. It had to be fresh and fun, exciting, or crazy like the little plastic boxes.

And some things were playful. We had things we call in and out. You would have it maybe a few months and that would be it. You know, it would be—people would say, what is new? Well, we have this little easel—something—for a few months and then it would go, and of course some things we kept. We have some glass now, jenna (ph) glass—a wonderful teapot, and some cylinder line—things that we have carried all these years—38 years. And they were new and fresh back in '65, and they are still good. They are still—now in the Museum of Modern Art. So somehow we selected these things that we thought were good and they are good.

MS. YAGER: Where did you find things?

MS. COOKE: New York. Most of it's in New York. Gift shows. We would go to all the gift shows, and the toy shows at times, and we don't have many toys but the toys we had, of course, we thought were the best on the market of course. Again, well-designed and good for—[inaudible].

And then another thing—there were some wonderful magazines out then. I mean, we got *Arts and Architecture*,

Interior Design. We would write for things—write for catalogs and buy through the magazines. One year we went to Italy and saw a furniture show which was pretty exciting. But there wasn't much that would relate to what we have in this country, would use, or could use, or the prices were so much more so we had traveled and brought some things back.

MS. YAGER: I read somewhere that you carried paper lamps and was it Noguchi—

MS. COOKE: Noguchi's, yeah.

MS. YAGER: —the Noguchi lamps and—

MS. COOKE: Right.

MS. YAGER: —Japanese folk toys.

MS. COOKE: We even had those in that little tiny place on Tyson Street. We also had the Japanese—the origami birds that I think everybody knows now, but then, they—a lot of these things were not imported or maybe they were imported but they weren't on the market that stores could easily get them.

MS. YAGER: And what percentage of the inventory would have been your own work, whether it was leather or wood or jewelry?

MS. COOKE: Well, jewelry has always been a big part of it. Even now it's probably more than a third of the business because—but then it wasn't that much, but it was—we always had a lot of jewelry. I mean, jewelry has been an important part of it.

MS. YAGER: And how large—square footage would you describe the store is?

MS. COOKE: Not much. Oh, the store was 3,340 square feet. That is the original—or that is what we had.

MS. YAGER: And originally—I mean, you just recently had some shifting around of property, but until this time, the jewelry section was about one-third of it?

MS COOKE: It was always where it is now. Well, not that much, you don't need that much. It's only maybe a quarter of it because you don't need—jewelry per square foot is much better.

MS. YAGER: Now talk a little bit about the types of jewelry that you have done. There was a—one quote that you had written was that you produced in as large a quantity as possible, but what would a large quantity have been in your terms?

MS. COOKE: At one time, 12. So it was pretty small.

MS. YAGER: Some things, I'm assuming, would have been a one-off and then other things might have been—

MS. COOKE: Two or three, and then maybe I would be off on something else. And the things that might be 12—we often joke, if I had thought 30 years ago how many we would sell, I could have made a lot because we would go 12 six by six. Very seldom do we make 12 of anything. It's usually three at a time, four at a time, five at a time. That may not be smart, but that is how we do it.

MS. YAGER: And how many people do you have—have you had producing things for you? I'm sure that has fluctuated over the years. What would have been the largest amount of people making the actual jewelry?

MS. COOKE: It's not many. Right now I have four people but they don't work just for me. I had somebody that just sets the diamonds because I'm not—I don't want to do that, and then I had somebody that does a lot of the basic, which is a lot of sizing and polishing, and then I had somebody else that would help me with the stringing—all these intricate things. And then of course I would do them all, too. And then I have somebody that helps with special orders. But they are not—they don't work all day for me. It's job work.

MS. YAGER: Do they work in their studios or your studio?

MS. COOKE: They work in their studios because I have never had the space in the store. I had one person that would work with me in my studio at the store, but it was crowded.

MS. YAGER: Now your studio has always been at the store?

MS. COOKE: The main studio. I have another space in my home that I work in, but that is more design and cut paper and concepts and ideas and some equipment.

MS. YAGER: Now what are some of the—you talked—well, there are so many things I want to get into, really. Let's see—did you ever have any partners beside your husband in the business?

MS. COOKE: Not really.

MS. YAGER: You also—I—and you did some jobbing out with local machine shops and things of that sort to do certain processes. I have a note that you carried the Marimekko fabrics. Also pottery?

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm. [In agreement.] We've had some ceramics.

MS. YAGER: And I mean I think that your design sense seems to permeate everything and that it's in the presentation, it's in the—I suspect it's in the packaging.

MS. COOKE: And then a lot of things are—design concept is one thing but now we're into a lot of animals. We found a company that brings in wonderful animals from the Philippines that are wood, carved wood painted. And they're fun. It's the kind of thing where—I mean we are known for our eagles, there are hawks, there are otters and animals that are very—maybe that goes back to the folk art part of it. But to us it relates to the design element because of course, we pick the best ones. And it's a variety. I mean it's—I think a lot of people do mix concepts and everything isn't stark—contemporary steel, glass, and chrome, and so forth. I mean, you have a kangaroo in the middle and a kite, and folk art.

MS. YAGER: While walking up to your store today there was a large sheep—

MS. COOKE: The sheep. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: —greeting me. What was that sheep made out of?

MS. COOKE: He's fiberglass. The main thing that isn't here now because of the construction is we had a lot of actual-sized cows, black and white. And it's become the trademark for the shop. We had a cow, we bought a calf, and we have different kinds of sheep. And we have sold about eight of those cows. One is in Roland Park, one was shipped to Florida, two are in somebody's big estate out in the valley, and it's become—

MS. YAGER: And it's fiberglass?

MS. COOKE: It's fiberglass.

MS. YAGER: Now where are these made?

MS. COOKE: They're made—I think they're made in Florida. They come from Florida, but where they're made—I don't know. But they're actually—I mean, they're real. It's not like the cow in Chicago that's painted all different. It's black and white and she has beautiful eyes, udders and everything. [Laughs.]

And the kids love it. Bill takes pictures of kids—you know, a whole book of kids on the cow. And he'll take a picture and send them to the customers. You know, it's become quite a thing. Like not too long ago the Harley Davidson had a big promotion in town, the motorcycle people? And they came in the store—they stayed at the inn here—and they came in the store. Well, they thought the cow was the most wonderful thing. So we took pictures of them with the cow. So it becomes a kind of pleasure. It's a surprise that people enjoy. They don't buy it; they just like to see it. And of course the children love it.

MS. YAGER: Now you've had many years of being an educator, both you and your husband. The retail store is another form of education in a certain way. You said at one point to me that you were providing the community with an opportunity to experience the very best of design.

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm. [In agreement.]

MS. YAGER: And you've been—

MS. COOKE: We feel that.

MS. YAGER:—very loyal to that concept.

MS. COOKE: We feel that and of course, we're on the second and third generation now. You know, when people bring their grandchildren in to show them The Store, and talk about it, and the color and the shapes, it's an exciting part of it for me. I mean it's an important part of it.

MS. YAGER: Can you describe one of your most popular pieces of jewelry?

MS. COOKE: Popular? [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: Well, most—

MS. COOKE: Well, you see, I'm so old now. They call it "vintage." And there's people who come in and say, "That's your trademark, isn't it?" But there'll be somebody else who'll pick another one and say it's your trademark and another one and another one.

So I guess there's several concepts that are known to me. One is the star pin. And I happen to be very fond of circles, disks in all proportions, and there's something wonderful about a disk to me. So there are a lot of things I do with circles that I think are important. And it's amazing how many people come in and say, you know, I was in Paris and somebody asked where I got my earrings or whatever because it has a mark that, oh, that must be a Betty Cooke because it looks whatever way it looks. And yet I like linear things—the forged linear pieces are also one of the trademarks. I don't know that I have one piece; it's past that.

MS. YAGER: What do you call the necklace that you have on right now?

MS. COOKE: Oh, it's my favorite.

MS. YAGER: It's different lengths of tubing and it's sort of a loop around your neck but then there are cascades of tubing coming off at certain points. What do you—do you have a name for that because to me, that's your trademark. I remember these—people wearing these pieces when I was doing the [American Craft Council] Baltimore Craft Show and seeing those walking around and they were striking, pure, and beautiful.

MS. COOKE: They're kind of like drawings. I think of them as line drawings. I call these tassels, by the way, those little pieces—would you like three tassels or five tassels— [laughs.]

MS. YAGER: Is there a name for that kind of necklace?

MS. COOKE: No, it's just a—we call it a chain, a tube chain, but made of tubes. And of course they're not the same size. They're cut irregular so they catch light in an interesting way and I think that's the main part of it. There's not a pattern.

MS. YAGER: And when do you think that piece—that idea—first came out?

MS. COOKE: It's a long time ago. Probably, yeah—as soon as Hoover and Strong made tubing. I bought it—which could be—oh it's more than 20 years; I bet 30 years. I didn't do this 30 years ago but—

MS. YAGER: Right, right.

MS. COOKE: —I found a tubing in a catalog and I was one of the first people to use it. In fact I called Mr. Hoover and told him how wonderful it was. And then I thought of stringing, and this is very basic. We make simple ones, just one strand. But again, the fact that they're cut different and the proportions are different—

MS. YAGER: And flexible and—

MS. COOKE: —and it's relatively inexpensive and people like it.

MS. YAGER: And how—is it chain inside or thread or what?

MS. COOKE: It's thread, mm-hmm. [In agreement.]

MS. YAGER: A nylon or a silk or—

MS. COOKE: A nylon—and sometimes we put a plastic in it, plastic coated thread. Can't use chain because it's too thin and it snaps. And these can break. I mean, we've had people get them caught in something and we restring them. So everything can break but, I mean, you know, you can get it caught.

MS. YAGER: I'm always fascinated by strung things because when it does break it sort of loses its whole life all of a sudden.

MS. COOKE: Then what do you do? [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: Yeah. But then you put it back and it regains itself.

MS. COOKE: Of course people will bring them in, just loose tubing, and I'll have to say, "How wide was this?" because I've done so many different things. But a lot of them are very—as I say, like drawings. I do a lot to like crossover and meander, complicated stringing actually.

MS. YAGER: Wonderful.

MS. COOKE: But it just was a happy thing to find and use.

MS. YAGER: And what would you consider sort of the bread and butter pieces? Margaret De Patta, her husband was referring to sort of bread and butter pieces that she had. Do you have any that are sort of reliable?

MS. COOKE: Yes.

MS. YAGER: What would they—

MS. COOKE: There's certain earrings that I think everybody in the world must have them by now.

MS. YAGER: And what do they look like?

MS. COOKE: We call it the double disk. It's one size circle at angles to the other. So simple and yet everybody likes that earring. It's strange. I've had people say, "Please do something else, because I've had it for 20 years and I want something new." So I do something else but it just appeals. And you know, it's great.

MS. YAGER: Do you think the fact that you wear your own jewelry that that is factored into its wearability? The fact that you understand jewelry from the inside sort of?

MS. COOKE: I don't really think so. Of course, because I really wear almost always the same thing. I mean, this ring I've worn—it's the only ring I wear. I have two chains—this chain and another chain. And when I go out, I don't like to wear anything else because I always think that if you go to a party the people at the party should have the pieces that show—I mean I sort of go incognito. I very seldom wear a special piece if I go in public. I might, you know, go to a ball in a museum or something but then I wear something I know that no one else has or I usually often have made things up for that. Like the flag that I made—we were invited to a big party in Columbia, Maryland with the Rouse Company—and it was in honor of—it was 1976, so I thought well, I have to have a flag. So I made the first flag pin—necklace—just for that, which of course is very nice. And people see me with it but most customers have a lot more of it than I do.

MS. YAGER: Do you always wear a piece of jewelry?

MS. COOKE: In the store. But at home—

MS. YAGER: For instance, the ring that you have on with the two large gold disks. They're probably three-quarter of an inch or maybe even an inch disks.

MS. COOKE: They're almost perpendicular.

MS. YAGER: Yeah. And is it open? Is the ring—

MS. COOKE: Yeah, they—yes, they don't meet. It's just open, sort of a round shank. Very simple—just a wire with a disk on one end—

MS. YAGER: A U-shaped round wire in a sort of a U-shape and then one—beautiful. Now would this piece be one that you would wear at home? Or do you—

MS. COOKE: No, I don't wear—I just—I don't wear jewelry at home.

MS. YAGER: You put it on when you go out and leave the house?

MS. COOKE: But I wear it all the time. It happens to be—it's become a trademark and—well, there's a story. Howard Head, who invented Head skis and Prince rackets, was a friend of mine and a very good customer. An engineer, and he was very—he was always right, okay? So he would come in—he came in the store one day and he said, "That's not a good design. Nobody can wear that." And I said, "I beg your pardon?" And so we had a very wonderful relationship because I would tell him when I thought he was wrong and he would tell me when he thought I was wrong. So I said "I'll wear it and I'll show you." And haven't taken it off since. [Laughs.] And that's been years. Every time he sees me he says, "Oh, my."

But the reaction to this is very favorable. It's interesting. All kinds of people will say, "Look at that. Does it close? Does it open?" Kids will say, "Does it close? Does it open? Or does it do different things?"

MS. YAGER: And how do they respond do the necklace?

MS. COOKE: People notice it.

MS. YAGER: Do they want to touch it?

MS. COOKE: Yeah. They always do. Because as it moves it becomes something—

MS. YAGER: It sparkles and catches the light.

MS. COOKE: It's just a simple thing—it's only stringing, you know?

MS. YAGER: And it's nice to touch.

MS. COOKE: It's only string. But, you know, I do put things on some of them. I put circles on them and offset diamonds or I've made it more a piece of different kind of jewelry. I've made some that have lots of tassels on them—some that go down the back and the front, over the shoulder.

MS. YAGER: And how about earrings? Do you wear earrings?

MS. COOKE: I don't wear earrings. I don't like decisions like that. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: And what's the other necklace that you wear? It is—

MS. COOKE: The one that doesn't have any tassels at all. It's just a plain chain but it's square tubing, and it's a little thicker so it's stronger.

MS. YAGER: And also gold?

MS. COOKE: Yes.

MS. YAGER: 18 karat? 14 karat?

MS. COOKE: I believe it's 14 karat. I think 14 is better for this; 18 might be too soft because it might bend. They do bend if you get it caught in—and it maybe isn't necessary to put 18 in this kind so—

MS. YAGER: Let's see. In *Messengers of Modernism* [*Messengers of Modernism: American Studio Jewelry 1940-1960*. Montreal: Montreal Museum of Decorative Arts, 1996] Toni Greenbaum refers to you as an outstanding exemplar of the American limited production jeweler. And these kinds of formats lend themselves to some degree of quantity. They are still handmade but you know—how many pieces do you think you have made in your career? Do you have any sense of that?

MS. COOKE: I don't know. [Laughs.] I've always wanted to count the number of boxes we bought because it's the only way I can tell. Now personally, I mean, we meaning the people that help me, but oh it's been thousands by now. I've been around a long time. Since '46, we're talking about 50 years. So if you make 100 a year—that's, what is that? I really don't know how to answer that.

MS. YAGER: It would be many thousands.

MS. COOKE: I mean, I make more than 100 a year. I know because we need that to be the business. But I don't make 100 of these and I don't make 100 of these. I probably have 100 different designs that could be made in one or two quantities of one or two, three or four. And I do a lot of one of a kind, special orders.

MS. YAGER: Yeah. I wanted to talk about that. I remember you discussing that. Can you talk about some of the commission work that you've had?

MS. COOKE: Well, I guess the one that you would remember from the exhibition was with Jim Rouse, who was married one year—his second wife—and he wanted a gift for his first anniversary. So I made a very simple silver one with a little gold seraph on it. And then her birthday came. So I forged a pin that was—her name was Patty—so it looked kind of like a "P," if she had imagination. So this continued for 30 years—20 years, 20 years. I made 40 pieces of jewelry each year with symbolic—year one, two, three, four. When she was 58 I did something that was a five and the eight. It sounds corny but it wasn't corny because it was just right. So it was two pieces a year for 20 years. And then I made her a book of it—you know, photographed them all. So she has this collection of these pieces. And a lot of this was done by phone. He was a very busy man. He would call and say I need something for our 15th anniversary that she's never had before and something I've never seen before. So this is how the thinking would go. And I do a lot of drawings and sending drawings. And then we talk back and forth.

MS. YAGER: How involved would he be in the design?

MS. COOKE: He wouldn't design anything because I wouldn't let him. But he would be involved in the concept.

Like I think she needs a necklace—something that would be up tight, or loose, or whatever it would be. And then I would often give him many choices. I'd put three or four things that we could come up with but no one would dare tell me that it would look a certain way or even, you know, Howard Head would say I want something.

One of the nice things I made for Howard was for a sister, a nun. And they usually don't wear jewelry. He said, "I want the thinnest, simplest piece of jewelry with a cross on it." And I did one of these tube things—pieces with a cross this simple. And she wears it every day. And, you know, the idea was as simple as you could get it—almost like gold hairs.

MS. YAGER: I would love a photograph of that.

MS. COOKE: And it worked.

MS. YAGER: Wow, wow.

MS. COOKE: It might not photograph well because it's so simple.

MS. YAGER: Does she wear a traditional outfit?

MS. COOKE: She doesn't wear—no, not anymore. They did but not anymore. But she loves it.

But a lot of people have done that—anniversaries. I have one gentleman who when he became 70—he has five daughters—he gave each daughter a piece of jewelry and they all had to relate in some way to the year 70, not look like a 70 but some symbolism within it. And they were to be different because he had different daughters. So that's the kind of thing that I enjoy working on those projects with the customers.

MS. YAGER: Do they know that they can ask you that? How do people—do you advertise? Or do you—is your business built on word of mouth?

MS. COOKE: Word of mouth. That's one advantage of being here a long time. I mean, it gets around.

MS. YAGER: The enumeration pieces—you did those for commission work. Did you also do that in your normal line of jewelry? Did you have things that people could go to the case and get, you know, a piece with a number five in it or something—

MS. COOKE: I've always thought to do initials, which would be—I mean the alphabet, in a way. Just haven't gotten to it. So it's still in my head. If you'd like it, I'll do you A to Z. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: At some point, every artist has to get around to the alphabet.

MS. COOKE: Yeah. Yeah. [Laughs.]

And—but the years—it can get tricky, because sometimes—there was one I did for somebody. He wanted—something was to be 25—for earrings, so I broke it down in Roman numerals and put the two on one ear and the five on the other. You know, you can do things like that. But different lengths—I mean, the customers will accept all these offbeat, unusual things that are well designed, you know.

MS. YAGER: Now when I was in your office just a couple hours ago, you had pinned on the wall, you know, little note pads, and there was a sketch on it. Was that an order? Was that a—

MS. COOKE: That was somebody's thinking about it in that room. I have another wall that are orders. And I can just sketch it and accept it.

MS. YAGER: So you do it in a drawing form—

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm, drawing form. Sometime it's more elaborate than others. I mean, if it's a piece that involves stones and a type of setting, I give them the front view and a profile view, and how it's constructed, because—especially like rings, I mean, how thick it's going to be.

And—but if they're in the store, I can use examples in the case to explain all this, and then I'm pretty much on my own. I mean, it goes easily.

It's not anything I want to do from mail, I found out, because often people will call—you know, they moved to San Francisco, and they want a piece, and they want me to send them drawings. And it's harder to do that way, because unless they really know the jewelry, there's this gap here—you make a black line and somebody has to visualize that that's a piece of platinum or 24-carat gold, whatever it might be.

MS. YAGER: Do you work in other media now besides the jewelry?

MS. COOKE: No, not really. Nothing. No, I don't work in leather or—I of course buy all the clothes for the store, so I have a hand in that, in the color. I mean, I'm equally—not equally, but I'm interested in fashion.

MS. YAGER: The jewelry that you make—what percentage of it is gold versus silver?

MS. COOKE: That's a good question. Probably more gold than silver, or maybe it's half and half, because I try to have things of all price ranges, because we have a lot of people that want teacher presents, and that's when we get into silver. And it's a weaning process. [Laughs.] So—and then I do a lot with silver and gold mixed, which I happen to like.

MS. YAGER: What do you mean by a weaning process?

MS. COOKE: Well, when people give gifts to people who haven't had the jewelry before, they get a nice pair of silver earrings, and you come in—

MS. YAGER: So you're sort of introducing them.

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. YAGER: Do you feel a responsibility, as a designer, to have that range?

MS. COOKE: I do, mm-hmm. I do in the situation we're in, because we have—I mean, have a store and I have obligations, so I know that there are X number of dollars I should earn.

But I like the idea that somebody can buy a $40 pair of earrings and they say, “It's a Betty Cooke and I'm giving it to my granddaughter.” And I think that's nice. It's personal to me.

But I don't wholesale—now if I had to send something out to Neiman Marcus, I don't think I'd want to do that. And I just don't—

MS. YAGER: Some of it wouldn't work—

MS. COOKE: It would be a lot of trouble when I don't know the people and I like to know where it's going, and then it's a personal thing, because it is a lot of work. I mean, it's a lot of detail in jewelry, as you know.

MS. YAGER: What price range do you think—today, for example, in this store, what price range would the work be, the lowest and the highest?

MS. COOKE: The lowest—I have some little, tiny button earrings that are like $25, that I really don't like to make, but I'll make them for that purpose.

And then I guess the highest we have is like $5,000. And that involves some South Sea pearls, or of course it could involve diamonds. I don't have many large stones right now. I keep them in stock for certain reasons. But we certainly have handled them.

MS. YAGER: The—I want to talk a little bit about some of the exhibitions that your work has been in. You were in the show at the Walker Art Center. “[Modern] Jewelry Under Fifty Dollars” [March 1948] was the title of the show. Was that—was fifty dollars considered a low amount of money at that time?

MS. COOKE: No, that was a very healthy price. I wouldn't say low. I'd say middle range. And most of the pieces were silver and wood, and it wasn't—I don't think many of them were precious stones.

MS. YAGER: Why do you think that they focused on the price of the work as the theme of the show?

MS. COOKE: I don't know. I think it was an unusual thing for a museum to do. Maybe it introduced a lot of people—it was a big show, and maybe it was a way of introducing a lot of jewelers, which I think it did.

And often there are exhibitions that—I've often thought maybe in the store you'd have a case—everything is under a hundred dollars, because it gives people a way of relating things and saying, “Well, you know, I can afford this,” and “I can afford five of them.”

MS. YAGER: Can you talk a little bit—now you said that you were on sort of a camping trip across—cross-country, and you sort of stumbled into that show. Can you talk about that experience a little bit?

MS. COOKE: Well, I'd heard of the Walker Art Center because I got their magazine way back, before I was even on Tyson Street.

MS. YAGER: Oh, this was *Design Quarterly*? Was that their—

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm, *Design Quarterly*.

MS. YAGER: Yes.

MS. COOKE: That somehow—I guess through the library—I found that magazine. And I think it cost 50 cents a subscription [In 1948 it was called *Everyday Art Quarterly* and it cost 20 cents]. [Laughs.] So I got it.

MS. YAGER: How do you pay that? Do you send a check for 50 cents?

MS. COOKE: Wrote a check for—yeah, I don't know what you do. But I know I was living with my mother then, so that was pre-Tyson Street. So I had some kind of an idea that these were interesting things.

And their magazine wasn't always jewelry. It was furniture. There were lighting fixtures and textiles, a different category each time. Architecture.

And I knew we were going out there, so I knew I wanted to go to Walker Art Center to see all this. And I had a box of jewelry and didn't know they were doing this show. I just walked in and talked to somebody. And they saw the jewelry and then showed me around to the cases that weren't finished yet. They had it all laid out in a big room. There was an exhibition before it was installed. And they were very nice. They took a picture of me, took a picture of the jewelry. [Laughs.] And it was fun, you know.

And we slept out in the fields at night, camped, outside camping. And then we went on from museum to museum. We went to Denver and then—that's when we also went to all those stores around.

MS. YAGER: How long a trip was that?

MS. COOKE: Oh, probably just a month. We had a car. We didn't hitchhike.

MS. YAGER: You were 25 years old, said that there were 31 artisan—there was a very—pretty wonderfully good-sized article about it in Baltimore [Carol Wharton, "Pathfinder in Jewelry," *The Sunday Sun* [Baltimore], December 4, 1949]. So at that time you were able to get press about these accomplishments in Baltimore. Has that remained the same? You know, has the media—

MS. COOKE: It's different now. Back then it was—they came to me; I was never one to go after all that. And I was a young woman doing these things, and it was good for the media to, you know, use that information. And they were very nice to me all through the years. But once we have a store, we become commercial, and it's a different thing. They wouldn't advertise the store. I've had articles since on the jewelry, but it's tough to get an article advertising the store—or on the store.

MS. YAGER: Now we spoke about the show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York—"Good Design," 1954. It's hard to—I'm not aware of design shows at the Museum of Modern Art at this point, but I think they were very conscious of jewelry for many years.

MS. COOKE: Right. But this was design—not just jewelry, this was the whole concept of design. And as we say, they had the right kind of furniture and the fabric and the whole revolution, as I like to call it, because it did really change things drastically. And course they should have supported it, and they did.

But they really aren't into objects, exhibition-wise, as much as other museums, like—like what? Cooper Union [Cooper Union Museum for the Arts of Decoration, New York] and other museums. But their store reflects it.

MS. YAGER: Yeah. Yeah. Let's see. I have marked down some of the other exhibitions that you participated in and won some awards with. One was the "Fiber, Clay and Metal" [St. Paul, MN].

MS. COOKE: Oh, yes. Mm-hmm.

MS. YAGER: That—do you have—did you go out and see that show, by any chance?

MS. COOKE: No. Mm-mm. Mm-mm.

MS. YAGER: That was an annual show. I'm trying to remember if that was—

MS. COOKE: I can't remember. I've forgotten, too.

MS. YAGER: —somewhere in the Midwest?

MS. COOKE: Yes, I think so.

MS. YAGER: It may have been Kansas, but I'll have to look it up.

MS. COOKE: Could be.

MS. YAGER: There was also a Los Angeles fair—

MS. COOKE: County fair, mm-hmm. I didn't go to any of these. I simply sent things to them. I was invited.

MS. YAGER: And what would you have sent to that?

MS. COOKE: That would be jewelry. They would all be jewelry.

MS. YAGER: And the “Young Americans” show—

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm, that's jewelry, too.

MS. YAGER: That was what's now known as the—

MS. COOKE: In New York.

MS. YAGER: —the Museum of Arts & Design was the American Craft Museum. Before that it was something—it's had a couple names, but I'll have to look and see what it was at that time. I have marked down here this was in 1951 in 1953 that you won awards there.

MS. COOKE: Yes.

MS. YAGER: Do you remember the pieces?

MS. COOKE: Oh, I can't say that I do. No, I'm sorry. [Laughs.] I can't remember.

I remember what I—the piece I won for DeBeers, the Diamonds Today Award at DeBeers. I won two of those, actually.

MS. YAGER: Yeah, 1979 and 1981. What piece—

MS. COOKE: One was a big forged necklace with a diamond, just a big sculptural scoop, which at that time was very good and very forward, so to speak. And the other one that I thought was exceptional that they chose was a bracelet that had a beach pebble and—a large black beach pebble. I simply wrapped it in gold and put a diamond on the one end of it. And I was appalled that they selected that, because they weren't selecting that kind of jewelry at that time. A pebble—I mean, that was a pretty humble thing to combine with a diamond in those—

MS. YAGER: Why do you say “appalled”?

MS. COOKE: Because usually prize winners at that time were not into rocks, and it would have been more cut stones and just diamonds.

MS. YAGER: But wouldn't that have been exciting?

MS. COOKE: Oh, yeah. It was exciting. But I was surprised, very surprised that they picked it. And it was nice, yes. Extremely simple piece. I still—I kept it, just because I did—I liked it. Might wear it someday. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: You've never worn it?

MS. COOKE: No. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: Now do you remember going to that show? Was it in the U.S.—

MS. COOKE: It was in the U.S. It was in New York. I went to both of those openings, and it was a big to-do. Big presentations, models and champagne and speeches and awards. Big time.

MS. YAGER: Do you remember any of the other artists that were—

MS. COOKE: No, because—I'm shy. I just went and came—I went, and I don't socialize too much at these things.

MS. YAGER: Was there a monetary award or a plaque or a ribbon or—

MS. COOKE: No—oh, of course you got a lovely plaque or a poster. And you're honored, and you have a piece of paper, and it's in a couple magazines. There was a catalogue for the one. And it was exciting, because it was a whole different thing. And I thought, oh, maybe I'll find somebody to design for, a company, and be able to do all these things I want to do and have somebody else take care of the production. That's, I guess, what I was after or I thought would be nice, but it just didn't work out that way. It was fun.

MS. YAGER: So did any pieces sell of that design or similar—sort of variations?

MS. COOKE: No, not there. I mean, that wasn't a selling exhibition. I mean, I've sold pieces similar to that, because it's—they're the forged necklaces that I made quite of a few of. But they're all slightly different.

MS. YAGER: And did that work—did it travel in exhibitions?

MS. COOKE: No—one of them did, I think. I think the one did. I'm sorry. Forgot.

MS. YAGER: Tell me if—do you remember anything about a Syracuse Decal Competition?

MS. COOKE: [Laughs.] You're really finding all these things. That was to design plates, decorations for plates.

MS. YAGER: So tell me what it looked like.

MS. COOKE: Little, tiny stars floating in this plate, very orderly and organized.

MS. YAGER: Was it a china company?

MS. COOKE: China. It was a china company. Mm-hmm.

It was good to see all these things, you know, advertised in competition. It was fun to do. A big circle and you design it, and it won a prize. That's nice. And they produced it for a while.

MS. YAGER: Oh, they did?

MS. COOKE: Yeah, sure.

MS. YAGER: What company was it?

MS. COOKE: It was Syracuse China.

MS. YAGER: Oh, okay.

MS. COOKE: Uh-huh. I'd forgotten that one.

MS. YAGER: Let's see. You were also—

MS. COOKE: Nothing like royalties or anything; that wasn't part of all these things. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: Do you think it should be?

MS. COOKE: Probably now it should be. It didn't matter then.

MS. YAGER: Tell me about—let's see now. In 1987 you were recognized as—with the Medal of Honor as an alumni of Maryland Institute College of Art.

MS. COOKE: Nineteen-ninety—

MS. YAGER: Nineteen-eighty-seven. Is that correct?

MS. COOKE: Eighty-seven? As an alumni. Okay.

MS. YAGER: Your husband presented the award.

MS. COOKE: Oh, that's right. Yes. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: [Laughs.] And he was very articulate.

MS. COOKE: Yes. I'm sorry.

MS. YAGER: He described you—he is a—both of you are very involved with the institute.

MS. COOKE: The school, yes.

MS. YAGER: And he described you as—and I thought this was so beautiful—"You are a brilliant sculptor of small forms. Your sculpture is designed to be worn." I thought that was such nice way of saying that.

MS. COOKE: A very nice—yes.

MS. YAGER: And I'm sure that he has seen more of your work than anyone else has.

The American Craft Council also—didn't they recognize you?

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I was honored as a fellow—

MS. YAGER: Yes.

MS. COOKE: That was fun. That was nice.

MS. YAGER: When do you think—do you know the date on that? I didn't—

MS. COOKE: Let's see. That held—was in Seattle. I can tell you—or maybe it's 15 years ago, something like that. I can find out exactly.

MS. YAGER: I can look that up [American Craft Council, College of Fellows, 1996].

MS. COOKE: Because I bought an Issey Miyake dress to wear. So I should remember. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: And what piece of jewelry did you wear?

MS. COOKE: What piece of jewelry did I wear? A chain, a simple chain.

MS. YAGER: Can you tell me about public collections that your work is in?

MS. COOKE: Public collections. I'm not sure it's in too many.

MS. YAGER: Museum collections—

MS. COOKE: I'm in the Baltimore Museum [of Art]. I have a piece there. And I'm not in too many museums that I know of. Oh, the museum in Canada, Montreal Museum of Decorative Arts [Montreal Museum of Fine Arts], in Canada, and, I think, in the Boston museum [Museum of Fine Arts, Boston]. But I'm not—

MS. YAGER: You have a lot of work in private collections.

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm. In a great many.

MS. YAGER: Yeah. And some, like Mr. Rouse, have 20 and 30 pieces or—

MS. COOKE: Right.

MS. YAGER: What's the most—the largest collection of anyone you think might have—

MS. COOKE: I know somebody who has probably 70 pieces then some.

MS. YAGER: Really?

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] She's been collecting a long time. And she has an eye for the newest ones. Sometimes I'll have something new, and I'll put it out, and I don't want anybody to buy it for a while. I like to get a comment. I like to get feedback on it. But sure enough, she'll come in and find it. [Laughs.] She has quite a collection.

MS. YAGER: And who's that, or—

MS. COOKE: It's Judy Albright.

And then there's someone else that has a wonderful case on her wall, that has my things in a case. I had a case built to hold it. And she probably has 30 pieces in that big case. It's nice.

MS. YAGER: So that's some pretty significant validation.

MS. COOKE: They buy it as sculpture, I think. These people also collect sculpture, and they think it's small

sculpture. Of course, she wears it, too.

MS. YAGER: Let's see. I wanted to talk a little bit—these are—some of these things are going to be—let's see. Let's talk about your work environment, where you design things. I know that right now you're in a—there's some disruption.

MS. COOKE: Transition.

MS. YAGER: But until things were disrupted this year, what—how—what's a conducive place for you to work and get inspired and get ideas?

MS. COOKE: Well, I have a big conflict, because having a retail store is not a learning situation. And I apparently am devoted to it or dedicated to it, whatever it is, because I feel very responsible for everything that's going on there. And I cannot concentrate while I hear, you know, "So-and-so had a problem." And I hear everything, more so than most people. So I have a problem there, having the store. Now—but when we had the other store, the fuller store, I had a space in the back. I could close the door and be very quiet, but still—so often I come in early in the morning or stay at night when the store is closed. I work best when nobody's around, when it's quiet. And I just feel it better, and I love it.

MS. YAGER: Do you work better in the mornings or at night?

MS. COOKE: At night.

MS. YAGER: And do you need music on—

MS. COOKE: No. I don't—I have that trouble with my husband. He likes music, and I don't like music. I like music, but I mean I can't work with it. I get involved in the music.

MS. YAGER: So you need silence.

MS. COOKE: But I can—or I can go home and sit outside. I have a big table out on a porch, sort of. But—and I just like to be outside and be alone, or I can often—in the store, if it gets too busy, I'll go in the car and go out on the parking lot. I have a nice space that overlooks the falls. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: And sit in the car—

MS. COOKE: So I'll sit in the car, where nobody can find me. I'm definitely a loner when it comes to that.

MS. YAGER: And so when you're trying to design a piece or think about something, do you need to have a pencil in your hand, or a sketchbook, or do you need to just be in your thoughts?

MS. COOKE: I like a pencil and paper, because I enjoy the process of—you know, people say you have all these computer programs for designing jewelry. I like to touch the paper and the pencil. And I'm always sketching. I mean, if somebody—or drawing. Telephone conversations—it's a matter—I guess you can call it doodling at some times. But it's a pleasure. And if I do something for somebody, I do a lot of pieces for auction, like for the Walters Art Museum and for the Baltimore Museum of Art—

MS. YAGER: For benefit auctions?

MS. COOKE: —Daily Bread, I mean, all these people asking me to do things, and I do a lot of that. But I'll get very involved with an idea and a concept, and that's when I like to be by myself. And I'll cut paper and draw and do all these nice things.

MS. YAGER: So pencil, paper. Do you have a sketchbook that you go page to page to page?

MS. COOKE: No. No.

MS. YAGER: Single sheets of paper?

MS. COOKE: Single sheets, all kinds or all sizes. It could be this napkin. Anything I can find.

MS. YAGER: And then do you save them, or do they sort of float around or—

MS. COOKE: [Laughs.] I do save—unfortunately, I save—sometime I cut a lot of them up and Xerox it so I don't have so much paper, because a lot of them are ideas that I think, "Gee, that would be nice someday." But you know, you can't make everything you think of.

MS. YAGER: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. COOKE: And the selection process is always not easy. You have to feel how it's going to be made and is it going to be too costly, or is it going to be for a certain person, or is it really going to sell and, you know, all these —

MS. YAGER: Now do you ever design things in metal at the bench?

MS. COOKE: Oh, yes, because I keep all the little pieces of metal that to me suggest things. And I try to keep it organized, like all the straight lines together and the triangles or whatever it is that I know eventually could be incorporated in some way, especially gold. When you have gold left over, you think about—it's nice to use it.

MS. YAGER: There are three-dimensional sketches, too, you know—

MS. COOKE: Sure. Sure.

MS. YAGER: Do you ever make a piece and then—I mean, I find that I'll make a piece, and unless it sells, it's not safely done. I may go back and change it. You know, I remake pieces. If it's still in my hands, it's always evolving. Do you find that? Do you do that? Do you alter pieces, or do you have a piece return from a customer and then go, "Hmm, I think that piece doesn't—you know, doesn't work"? At least I'm projecting my own things —

MS. COOKE: Right. Right.

MS. YAGER: Does that come up with you?

MS. COOKE: Not really. [Laughs.] I mean, if I do it, it's done.

MS. YAGER: You've already resolved it.

MS. COOKE: But often people will come in and don't forget they may have a piece that's 20 years old, and their style has changed, and what can I do with it to reorganize it or change it, which of course I'll do. Or sometime I'll say it's better just to start over.

But now and then—I mean, only think of a few pieces—there's something in the shop, the store now, that I think, “Yeah, maybe I'll just take that apart,” because it's been there long. But that very seldom happens. But I would do it. I mean, if, you know, the material's still there, you can still do something with it.

MS. YAGER: Because you have a store, you've never had—have you ever done any of the craft fairs or the trade shows or any of those other venues for showing work?

MS. COOKE: No, because I—I go to all the craft shows and go to all the trade fairs. I think if I got into that, I'd need another—I'd need a partner or somebody to be in it with me, because if you end up with a lot of production, then it's another thing. And I really don't want to wholesale and figure the prices out. And the whole thing is a different thing. I can't do that.

MS. YAGER: Now you did do wholesaling for a while—

MS. COOKE: Years ago, mm-hmm.

MS. YAGER: How long of a period of time do you think you did?

MS. COOKE: Oh, probably 10 years, and I hated it because I had—I was the one that had to figure out everything.

MS. YAGER: And you also had your own store at that time as well—

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. YAGER: —but it was not—

MS. COOKE: It was little.

MS. YAGER: It wasn't meeting your production abilities, obviously.

MS. COOKE: Well, I guess it did. I mean, I was fine. I just thought it might be exciting to have things in different areas. I just did it out of interest.

And I guess it's nice to be wanted. [Laughs.] I mean, if the gallery calls you and wants something, you feel pretty good about it. And I'd want to do it. And then I'd want to do it, and I do. I guess maybe I need confidence

—not confidence; it's like when the charities come. I think, oh, please. I have three things now for different groups in town—Special Olympics, something like that. I think, well—and of course, all of them know me. "Oh, everybody's going to love your jewelry," and "I'll bid on it myself," and that sort of thing. So it—and it's nice. So I do it—

MS. YAGER: And you would rather do that than write a check to these charities?

MS. COOKE: I could do that, too. [They laugh.] So much for—so many—no, but it is—if you do something for a person, and you know that person, and you want it to be the best thing you've ever done, that's the hard thing, because you keep searching for something you've never done before. And you want it to be so good and so right, and that's hard. That's—you know, if someone—I have a—well, Martha Head, Howard's wife—Howard is deceased. But she will call me and say, "I want you to do a museum piece for me." Well, I mean, that takes—

MS. YAGER: A responsibility.

MS. COOKE: That takes something, you know, because—and so I go ahead and then do something, and we'll see. But I get very involved in that, and it's sometimes painful, because you keep going and going. You have 40 things, and which one is the best of the 40? And if the customer doesn't help, sometime you're in dilemma, because you'd like all 40 if you designed them. But to pick the best one—

MS. YAGER: But a patron who asks you for your best work—as much as that's, you know—

MS. COOKE: An honor, in a way, but it's—

MS. YAGER: It's an honor, it's a challenge, it's hard work, but it's wonderful to have—you know, you seem to have had a number of, you know, really—people that have influenced your—the direction of your career in real active ways. So that's wonderful that they're asking you to do your best work. Do you have some of those commissions right now on the bench?

MS. COOKE: I have one that's—not on the bench; it's still in my head.

MS. YAGER: It's in the car. It's by the—[Laughs.]

MS. COOKE: It’s in the car. In the glove compartment. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: Under the tree—

MS. COOKE: But then I have it myself, because, I mean, our store has been complicated for this year, and I would love at Christmas to have a whole group, so that when the gentlemen come in and say, "Look, I've been buying from you for 20 years; what do you have I've never seen before?" And that's what I want to come up with —a group that no one's ever seen before. Me either, you know. And that's—[laughs.]

MS. YAGER: Does this happen every year, or is there—

MS. COOKE: No—

MS. YAGER: —is there a particular pressure this year for that?

MS. COOKE: I just keep trying to do it every year, and then this year I think it would just be fun and exciting, and they would be delighted.

I mean, I do keep records of some. There's some people that have many daughters, and it goes on for year after year. And sometimes they bring it back and say, "He gave me this five years ago" or last year, whatever. So you do—I started keeping records of what everybody bought. In 50 years—

MS. YAGER: It's quite a long time.

MS. COOKE: It's a long time.

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: I mean, you know, this is—

MS. YAGER: Does it feel like 50 years?

MS. COOKE: No. No. I can't believe it. No, it doesn't—

MS. YAGER: You look the same. All the photos—you sent clippings from the last 50 years.

MS. COOKE: Yeah. Yeah, that's amazing.

MS. YAGER: And you look the same in all of them. [Laughs.]

MS. COOKE: It's amazing. It's funny. It's almost funny. You think, wow, either—and everybody tells you not—don't stop, even with this move, in the store, they'll come in—"Oh, I thought you had moved. Don't—please don't leave. Don't leave. What am I going to do for six graduation presents and all the young girls that want your jewelry?" And I think, well—

MS. YAGER: Now what would be a typical graduation gift? What—because this is a significant—this is, you know, one of those—

MS. COOKE: Right.

MS. YAGER: —one of those times that people use jewelry to mark a moment.

MS. COOKE: Right.

MS. YAGER: What would be—

MS. COOKE: I guess it depends on what you're graduating from, but I mean, earrings seem to be the easy thing. Not too many people are doing pins. Well, maybe—I can't say that. But I guess earrings and bracelets. I don't know. I don't know. Or—you know, you go—

MS. YAGER: Yeah. Now you—let's see. I have read that you also do watercolors, you work with watercolors.

MS. COOKE: Oh, I used to paint a lot, yeah.

MS. YAGER: And you—in some of the early clippings, you're described as a painter—

MS. COOKE: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. YAGER: —and a craftsman who happens to do jewelry.

MS. COOKE: Right.

MS. YAGER: And you also talked about sun prints.

MS. COOKE: [Laughs.] Oh, I used to do that because I didn't have a camera. So we'd do those prints of the jewelry.

MS. YAGER: And that was a way of documenting the pieces that you had—

MS. COOKE: Right. And it was fun, and they were interesting graphically, because it was black and white and—I mean, it was interesting to fool with.

But I did do a lot of watercolors, and I won some prizes. And that's still something in my mind and something I love. And I love color, which of course you don't get much in jewelry. So I collect papers and—anything of color I collect.

MS. YAGER: Do you document the pieces that you make? Do you lay them out on the photocopier or photo all of—photograph all of them?

MS. COOKE: I Xerox everything.

MS. YAGER: You Xerox—

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. YAGER: And do you use color Xerox now, or—

MS. COOKE: No, I don't have a color Xerox. Metal doesn't come out too well. You—maybe you've tried it. I mean, your pin, being black—

MS. YAGER: But color Xerox, I think, is incredible.

MS. COOKE: Can you do it?

MS. YAGER: Yeah, it's amazing.

MS. COOKE: Because the only ones I've done—or had done, even, the metal usually comes out black.

MS. YAGER: Yeah, but technology seems to be changing. But—so you—so do you mark the date and—

MS. COOKE: I don't mark the date. I just keep Xeroxing. Even though it's something that might be slightly repetitive, like, you know, a pin—might be a different pin, we still Xerox it, in case somebody buys it and brings it back in 20 years. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: For a repair or something, yes, that you can place it—the same positioning and stuff, yeah.

MS. COOKE: Right. Right.

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: But also, before the Xerox was invented, I used to draw them all and have all these little diagrams that.

MS. YAGER: Yeah. Yeah. All my invoices have drawings.

MS. COOKE: They're just drawings. Even our sales—all the staff, they draw everything.

MS. YAGER: Yeah. Speaking about community, you know, in Tyson Street, that seemed to be a very important community that kept you going as an artist. Who would be the community now? Do you think that it's your clients and the customers? Do you have a circle of fellow artists and designers?

MS. COOKE: Okay. I think customers—we're invited socially, obviously, to be with the customers. We're both probably loners. And sometimes the Cross Keys itself can be—I mean, obviously we know all the vendors—I mean, all the merchants, the independent merchants. We're not real close, but we feel sympathy and everything for them. [Laughs.]

So I guess—but nothing is quite like Tyson Street was. I mean, that was a living thing, constantly. I think it's—I mean, we live in a house that's sort of isolated, so we don't have a neighborhood to speak of.

MS. YAGER: Do you live out in the country?

MS. COOKE: No, I live four miles from here, but it's in the woods. And it's like—it's in a very nice section, wonderful section. But we've simply been—I guess we're just independent, not deliberately. It's just the way, you know—

MS. YAGER: Do you—

MS. COOKE: —because we work all day. We get home 7:00 and 8:00 at night and eat and—

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: And we must like it. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: Does your home look like your store?

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] But a little bit more collective, a little bit more eclectic, more antiques, more folk, more things. I mean, we'll pick up tools or objects that look interesting—lots of rocks and stones and plants. Clutter. Creative clutter. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: It's important.

MS. COOKE: And yet there are areas that are very simple, you know, so it's a combination of the starkness and clutter.

MS. YAGER: Yeah, simple, elegant and engineered, they seem to be, and a keen awareness of material. They seem to be things—I'm wondering now about—now as far as—you don't seem to have a problem with using new materials, old materials, natural, synthetic. But there was one quote where you said you would never use a coin. [Laughs.] Remember that?

MS. COOKE: You mean a real nickel or a dime?

MS. YAGER: Like a nickel or a dime—

MS. COOKE: Yeah.

MS. YAGER: —because it was “already designed.”

MS. COOKE: Yeah. [Laughs.] I think they beat us to that.

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: I would do one. I mean, if somebody wanted a—I'm not sure how I would do it, but if someone wanted a symbol. I've done things for organizations, like the Women's Initiative, which is in Baltimore. I do pins for them every year—a simple silver pin with a pearl. And they have it engraved. Now I don't usually like people—often people say, "Well, I'll have that engraved." And I'll say, "Well, don't tell me." And they show it to me.

But I do this for them. And I've done a lot of trademarks and things. I've done things for Enterprise Foundation, which is another group that Jim Rouse—you know, EF. And I've done logos with that. So I—you know, I will take a trademark and adapt it to my design.

MS. YAGER: Now how about travel? Have you had any opportunities to travel? And how has that influenced—

MS. COOKE: In all these years? Sure.

MS. YAGER: In all these years, yes.

MS. COOKE: Sure. Years and years ago, on Tyson Street, we took two months off and went to Mexico, across the country. And that was in the ‘40s, so it was nice. And we've been to Egypt, and we've been to Morocco, which was wonderful, and London. I went to—there was a—oh, you went to London at times, for a Rockefeller—wasn't it? That—

MS. YAGER: I didn't go to that one.

MS. COOKE: Yeah. I went over by myself—

MS. YAGER: Barbara Rockefeller—

MS. COOKE: Yeah.

MS. YAGER: —were you involved with that show?

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. I wasn't in the show, but I was in an exhibition, in coordination with—they coordinated the show. But I'm never—

MS. YAGER: Where was the exhibition?

MS. COOKE: In—I don't know London that well. The gallery section. Where is that? There's a little gallery—

MS. YAGER: Was it—it was in Electrum [Electrum Gallery, London]?

MS. COOKE: It was a little gallery. I'm sorry.

MS. YAGER: So—

MS. COOKE: I went over because I wanted to see the coast and out into the—[inaudible]—plus see the museum, of course.

But that—yes, we've traveled, not every year. I mean, you know, every year I would have been 50 places. But we've been—Morocco was wonderful. We've been to China.

And lots of times people ask if we buy when we—I mean, we—our accountant is wonderful. He'll say, "You don't spend enough on travel. You should go and buy things, you know." But there are countries from which you just don't buy any—and you know, there's nothing from China that we would buy unless we saw it—often you can find things in New York that you couldn't find on your own trip someplace. That sounds silly, but I mean, it's—

MS. YAGER: What did you like about Morocco?

MS. COOKE: Oh, the color was wonderful. We rented a car and just drove all around. It was—I loved the color. I

loved the land, the variety. The people were nice to us. Children were nice.

We took balloons and pencils, and every time we'd see a shepherd, you know, we'd blow up balloons, and the kids would come from all over the place. And it was beautiful.

And we were there at a great time, when a lot of the Berbers were in town or in—around the city. We did buy some rugs. And—but it wasn't the kind of thing that we can sell in the store. Different.

MS. YAGER: Tell me about China a little bit.

MS. COOKE: That was a tour, a very nice tour. Very nice. Beautiful country.

MS. YAGER: And have you traveled in the U.S. much since your—

MS. COOKE: Since hitchhiking? [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: —since your cross-country—

MS. COOKE: I've been to Alaska, which was wonderful, not too long ago. It was great. Sure.

MS. YAGER: What's your—

MS. COOKE: I would like—I love this country. I would like to spend more time here traveling.

MS. YAGER: What are some of your favorite museums?

MS. COOKE: Oh, my. The Folk Museum—Museum of Folk Art [American Folk Art Museum, New York, NY].

MS. YAGER: In New York?

MS. COOKE: Uh-huh. Plus MoMA [Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY], of course. And Cooper-Hewitt [Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, New York, NY]. I like Noguchi Museum [Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum, Long Island City, New York]. That's in Brooklyn, is it?

MS. YAGER: I haven't been there.

MS. COOKE: Oh, my.

MS. YAGER: Yeah, that's supposed to be wonderful.

MS. COOKE: That's beautiful. Mm-hmm. That's beautiful.

Of course, our local museums. We have the wonderful Walters Art Museum [Baltimore, MD]. Beautiful.

MS. YAGER: Can you think of a particular experience in a museum or a particular piece that just like altered you somehow, that you just never got it out of your mind or were really grateful you saw?

MS. COOKE: When I was a little girl, they took me to Walters Art Gallery, it was called then, and I remember seeing an Egyptian hippopotamus, blue. I'll never forget that hippopotamus. I don't know why. It's still there. But you know, you thought, oh, it must have just been—maybe that's the only thing I could see, because I was little. But that was important.

And then the Russian enamels, I thought, were wonderful.

MS. YAGER: At the Walters?

MS. COOKE: At the Walters, mm-hmm. I remember thinking they were wonderful. But—oh, but now there's so much. There's so much in sculpture that's exciting.

MS. YAGER: What do you think was the very first time you handled metal?

MS. COOKE: As a child, wire.

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm, wire. And then I remember cutting up screen one time, making sort of shapes out of the old screen that we had. In fact, one year I did a fire screen for somebody with screen, and I cut patterns into it and wove things into it. Oh, my. But—a commission.

I don’t know that—it's the metal that—I mean, metal's—it's hard.

MS. YAGER: Yes, I realize that that's one facet of your interests.

MS. COOKE: It's—I mean, there's something wonderful about it being resilient and polishing it and feeling it and everything, but then you think how wonderful it would be to work in clay, too. Maybe that's why I like watercolors so much. It's a completely opposite thing.

MS. YAGER: Have you had a chance to work in clay or—

MS. COOKE: No. I mean, I've tried it, but there's just not time for that either.

MS. YAGER: Yeah, you have to narrow it down.

MS. COOKE: There's plenty to do.

MS. YAGER: Can you talk about—are you involved with any educational institutions? I know that you're involved with the Maryland Institute of Art, but have you had any contact with any of the ones that are devoted to craft? For example, Penland [Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC] or Haystack [Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME]?

MS. COOKE: No, the only involvement in—I've never been to—I mean, I've been to—visited Haystack, and I contribute to Haystack through—I don't know whether you ever knew Mary Nyberg (sp). She's a good friend of mine. And—

MS. YAGER: Yes. Yes. She was at your opening.

MS. COOKE: Yeah. And she is a big supporter of Haystack. So I've been to visit and see what they're doing. I think it's wonderful.

I'd love to go. I mean, you know—

MS. YAGER: Did you ever attend?

MS. COOKE: No. I'd love to. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: Yeah, it doesn't work out that way.

MS. YAGER: How about Arrowmont [Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN]?

MS. COOKE: No.

MS. YAGER: Pilchuck [Pilchuck Glass School, Stanwood, WA]?

MS. COOKE: No. I mean, I know them. You know, I've read about them and seen them, but—I mean seen of them, but I've never been involved.

MS. YAGER: You've just been busy working all the time.

MS. COOKE: Yeah, I'm pretty much at the store.

MS. YAGER: Yeah. Yeah. Are there any area craft centers that I'm not even aware of? These are national ones. Are there any—

MS. COOKE: We have a very good clay works in Baltimore [Baltimore Clayworks]. In fact, the—next year, the conference is going to be—international conference is going to be in Baltimore—

MS. YAGER: The NCECA [National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts].

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm. It's going to be in Baltimore. And that's right around the corner from Cross Keys here. And I've seen that grow from a little, tiny—I mean, that's been exciting, to see that develop.

And of course MICA or the Maryland Institute College [of Art] has a jewelry department. And I mean, I keep up with what they're doing.

MS. YAGER: Who's teaching there right now?

MS. COOKE: Shana Croy (sp), doing a very good job.

MS. YAGER: I remember she introduced you at the gold smithing conference.

MS. COOKE: Oh! [Laughs.] I forgot about—

MS. YAGER: And she is a Baltimore fan of yours, yeah.

MS. COOKE: Right. Right. Right.

MS. YAGER: Talk about the Maryland Institute. I know that you're—how—you know, are you involved in directing things or, you know, having any influence in any of the --

MS. COOKE: Bill is a trustee, so he's on the board. And I think we decided one of us is enough because there are lots of meetings, and there are lots of decisions and things like that. So I'm just a supporter. I get—oh, we keep—we go to all the shows. I like to see what the students are doing. And I do have a scholarship in my name there, in my honor, through Martha Head.

MS. YAGER: Wonderful. Wow! Wonderful. How nice!

MS. COOKE: And so I get—yeah, that's very nice.

MS. YAGER: How nice!

MS. COOKE: So every year we get to see the slides and select the person, which is very nice. And—

MS. YAGER: Do they have to be a jewelry student?

MS. COOKE: No. It's—no, it's dimensional, any dimensional work. It can be fibers or ceramics or—jewelry has never entered. That's interesting. I'll have to find out about that.

We've had a lot of sculpture, and of course those things that are just —any dimensional work. But it's limited to that.

But they have a—Fred Lazarus IV is the president, and he's been there 20-some years. And he's wonderful. I mean, not many presidents stay that long. And he has just turned that into a wonderful thing. I don't know whether you've seen—I'll drive you by the building. They just put up a new white glazed building. It's wonderful.

But I had no part in—I'm just a firm supporter, a contributor, and been there so long. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: An alumna.

MS. COOKE: Yeah. No, we're important.

MS. YAGER: Now you attended there.

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm, the '40s.

MS. YAGER: When did it open? When was it established?

MS. COOKE: Oh, gosh, in the 1800s [1826]. It's an old school. It was applied arts and engineering, and then it got into the fine arts. Yeah, it's an old school.

MS. YAGER: Now in terms of validation, we talked about commissions, customers, patrons. Tell me about prizes and awards. How much impact have they had on your career? And first, could you tell me the earliest award you ever got in art?

MS. COOKE: The earliest award I ever got—for North American Van Lines, I designed the signage for a truck. I was a student at the institute, and a competition came up, and I tried. And I won $25. And every time I see one of those trucks, it's funny, you know, because—[laughs]—a great, big white truck with red, white and blue on it.

MS. YAGER: And your design was implemented?

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. YAGER: Is it still—

MS. COOKE: In big form.

MS. YAGER: It is still around?

MS. COOKE: You know, I don't even know whether it's still around anymore. I forgot what it looked like. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: Well, how wonderful. Now was that a Baltimore company?

MS. COOKE: Yeah—no. Uh-uh. No, I don't think so. North American.

MS. YAGER: Did you win any competitions or awards even earlier than that?

MS. COOKE: It was through the Girl Scouts or school. I don't remember. Oh, gee. Uh-uh. I was president of the Senior troop, things like that. But I don't think I—I really didn't enter many competitions.

MS. YAGER: Do you think that the—I mean, that's pretty interesting, to think that the truck company would commission that. And you know, I'm sort of stunned by the higher design awareness of business people at that time. I don't really feel like—I don't know; maybe it's just not visible to me.

MS. COOKE: Well, see, at that time, I think a lot of companies would come to the school for ideas, and—which is okay. I mean, it was an incentive to the students, and of course they got a whole 20 ideas for trucks or whatever, 200—I don't know how many. It couldn't have been many, because there weren't many of us there. And the work was right—

MS. YAGER: Do you think they're still doing that at the school?

MS. COOKE: Not to—no, I don't think so. It's a different kind of pressure. And I mean, they're there to do what they're doing, because I've often thought, well, you know, we have students—I think of things like wouldn't it be great to have an exhibition in the square of student sculpture, but they're pretty intense in their studies.

MS. YAGER: It should be perhaps after—

MS. COOKE: It's an extracurricular thing.

MS. YAGER: —after graduation. That's the most challenging time anyway.

MS. COOKE: Yeah. Now there is one course they give at school, which is museum—a museum course—you know, how to run a museum and do the catalogues and the whole thing, exhibitions. And the art of exhibitions, of course, is extremely important. I mean, it's really sophisticated there.

MS. YAGER: Yeah. How—I mean, you seem to have a real keen interest in how your pieces are presented. Did you try to have—were you able to have any control over the way things were exhibited when they went out, you know, to different stores or exhibitions?

MS. COOKE: Often I would send diagrams of how they should be arranged. And the stores I sent to, I trusted. You see, I only—I picked the stores. And I had taken—one time I sent some things to a department store in New York, and I didn't like the way it was shown. I took them out, because it was just massed—there were some belts, and they were just thrown in with a lot of commercial belts.

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: And I'd worked hard on those belts, you know. So I took them back, which was okay.

MS. YAGER: So they must have been on consignment.

MS. COOKE: [Laughs.] They must have been.

It's interesting, because when you buy in New York, you know, you—

[Audio break.]

MS. YAGER: This is Jan Yager interviewing Betty Cooke in the Radisson Hotel at Cross Keys, near her—the Store Ltd. in Baltimore, Maryland, on July 1, 2004, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disc three, session one.

Betty, during the break, you were—you had a lot of—you've been at this location for a very long time, since the mid-'60s.

Just recently your landlord or your new landlord has made some changes and—so could you talk a little bit about

the transition that's going on? And then also you mentioned something about this stone barn that you are—you and your husband are renovating for studio space. Can you talk about some of those things?

MS. COOKE: Sure. Well, yes. We've been with the Rouse Company in this location for 38 years, and we've loved most of it. The company's changing now, and it's becoming more of a mall situation, with chain stores. So we're rethinking.

But we still have our customers and what we're doing here. But in the meantime, we found a piece of property, 10 acres of just wonderful grassland, with a stream and a stone barn and a stable and a corncrib.

MS. YAGER: And where is this located?

MS. COOKE: This is located in Maryland, in Hunt Valley. It actually is off of the Hunt Valley Golf Course. So we look out on this wonderful green golf course with very few golfers.

And the barn is typical—like a Pennsylvanian barn—thick stone walls, timber frame. And it needed everything. So we thought, of course we can do this. And it's been a lot of decisions and a lot of time. But it's a beautiful object, and I guess we're approaching it like you approach other objects. You do it as simple as possible, which isn't simple, but as simple as possible.

And we hope to have just a big open space. The first floor is like 60 by 40 feet. And we're not used to a lot of space. And I think we're going to keep it just as a studio gallery situation. We don't have couches and the usual kind of furniture. So it's going to be an open—big tables and big benches and studio and objects. So it will be a different way of living, completely.

MS. YAGER: This is a long way off from 10 foot by 20 foot on Tyson Street, isn't it?

MS. COOKE: [Laughs.] That's true. But it's as old, and it needs as much work.

MS. YAGER: Do you have a date on the building? Do you know how old it is?

MS. COOKE: We don't know how old it is. We know it's turn of the century. And we know it used to be a farm for black Angus, because years ago we'd pass and see these beautiful cattle in this big green field. And oh, I thought that was so beautiful. And then the person that bought it was a developer of golf courses, so the big beautiful field became a golf course. And we just happened to go up—drive up the driveway one day and saw that the barn was for sale.

And they were going to tear it down and destroy it to build small castles, as we call them—you know, these big modern houses.

MS. YAGER: McMansions. [Laughs.]

MS. COOKE: And so we saved it. So we saved it, which has been an enormous amount of work, mixed in with everything else. But it's a beautiful thing just to see. And we'll have all that space for material and equipment and do whatever one wants to do.

MS. YAGER: Well, I know it was very hard getting you to agree to be interviewed—

MS. COOKE: [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: —because you were sort of in such upheaval.

MS. COOKE: Yes.

MS. YAGER: And you were feeling very—you know, you didn't have, you know—

MS. COOKE: Don't have space.

MS. YAGER: —studio space, office space. Everything is sort changing outside the building you're in.

MS. COOKE: Yes.

MS. YAGER: It's all a construction zone and there is lots of change going on.

MS. COOKE: Well, we had two offices in that other space, and when you move two offices you've been in for 20-some years—or what—how many years? You know, some people can move their offices easy, but we collect, you know, and it's all these memories and collections. And so it's interesting. But we'll get through it.

MS. YAGER: I wanted to talk about some of the motives of your work. A little of this we've touched on already. But does the function of objects play a part in the meaning of your work? I'm thinking of function in lots of ways. One of them is wearability with jewelry. Is that—you know, the ring that you have, you know, put on and not taken off in some ways is a challenge at—or stretching wearability. But is that an issue for you and when you design things, that its function, that its—

MS. COOKE: It is. I think it's very important. I look at a lot of the European jewelry that is quite sculptural and wonderful. And I believe in that, from a design standpoint, that objects on a body can be quite extreme. But maybe it's because I'm in Baltimore, and I know the people who are wearing this. I know what they can wear. And they're not going to wear things that are uncomfortable. And I think it's very important.

And too, in rings, I mean, rings can be dangerous, or they can be, you know—it has to be something that—very often a customer will tell me she's a nurse and she has to have something that really doesn't have anything extending. And I think that's part of the design process, that it should be wearable and comfortable.

MS. YAGER: And part of the design challenge.

MS. COOKE: It can be uncomfortable for me. I have a couple necklaces that—sometimes I'll be at a social gathering, and somebody will have one on, and it's crooked, and I will go up and straighten it—[laughs]—because it annoys me. It should fall right and look right without a customer having to worry about it. And so I do believe in that, yes.

MS. YAGER: There are not a lot of examples of asymmetric jewelry, I don't think. I mean, you definitely are a leader in that way. I think Margaret De Patta—but—and you know, some of the art nouveau work was that way. But quite often jewelry tends to be, you know, very symmetrical. What's your thought on that?

MS. COOKE: I think so many—well, what is my thought on that? I—there are a lot of creative people who wear jewelry and possibly will wear things that most other people wouldn't wear and like the asymmetry. I guess everybody's done earrings that don't match and are extremely different. And on the right person, it's kind of fun and exciting and does attract attention in a nice way.

I think the neck pieces that are asymmetrical have to be carefully—more carefully—with—it depends on the clothes and the wearer. Again, you don't want it to be uncomfortable. But I like things that maybe could be diagonal and cross over and—but it would have to be the right person. It has to be the right customer, or it's a failure.

But I know that—I mean, I feel that most people prefer circles and curves to straight lines, generally speaking. That's a pretty general statement, but it's hard for a lot of people to wear straight, hard lines and—

MS. YAGER: Do you think that you—I mean, I think that women designers bring something. You—do you think that some of—that your unique qualities have anything to do with being female?

MS. COOKE: I think so, mm-hmm, because I've seen—I've come up with things that I feel are too severe and need to be warmed up somehow and to be more subtle and really more to the body, not that you can't—I mean, I'm not—I've done things like a big square. A big square's a wonderful thing, but it's harder to handle than a circle. And it doesn't have the warmth and the—yeah, it is more feminine. Yeah.

MS. YAGER: So you—when you design things, you're designing the metal, but you're also responding to the body or to a particular—

MS. COOKE: A person.

MS. YAGER: —client. And that's an important facet for you.

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. YAGER: You also design somewhat in relation to the market. I mean, that's a sort of realistic—

MS. COOKE: I guess I do.

MS. YAGER: —saying that you have to sometimes, you know, respond to that. There's—

MS. COOKE: Well, I don't know about that.

MS. YAGER: I mean, I don't think there are compromises. I don't feel like you're—

MS. COOKE: I mean, I'm sort of in a position to say that I designed some of these things so many years ago, the

same type—I think it's wonderful when young people come in and say, you know, "I want to buy something for my grandmother. Do you have anything that an old lady would like?" Well, I ask how old she is, and maybe she's 10 years younger than I am. So I—I have an edge, and I can say, "I think an old lady might like this," or "What kind of old lady is she? Is she spirited, or is she really infirm, or what's the problem?"

And it's kind of fun having younger people to see it as a young, contemporary thing, not coming from somebody that is a different—age is important in all this, because I have a lot of customers that are as outgoing and forward as any young kid can be. And it's fun.

Now I know a lot of these people have been influenced by what I do and other people do. I mean, I do think I've influenced a lot of people locally—

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: —and made them think, well, gee, this is simpler than I ever thought, and I happen to like it, you know. And it's—to me, that's successful.

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: So I don't know what "the market" is. One year I did some things with [*Harper's*] *Bazaar* and *Vogue*, and it was difficult, because I'm in Baltimore, and they would call and say, you know, "Gold is in." "What do you have in gold?" [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: [Laughs.] Yes, yes. Three thousand years. You're right.

MS. COOKE: Or "Red is in. What do you have in red?" And I would go work myself day and night, coming up with red things, run up to New York, and by the time I got there, it was blue or something. I don't know. [They laugh.] And I would say, "What's the market this week?" "Oh, we're pushing cerise," you know. And—but of course fashion changes, and things change. But some things don't change. You know, some types of jewelry are—a Tiffany diamond ring has been around a long time.

MS. YAGER: Sometimes I think that fashion thing is more, you know, the monthly magazine deadline.

MS. COOKE: Yeah.

MS. YAGER: It's not necessarily jewelry—

MS. COOKE: It's a different kind of jewelry.

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: There's costume jewelry, which is good.

MS. YAGER: Do you—I wanted—let's see. I have a couple other questions. Does religion or a sense of spirituality play a role in your art?

MS. COOKE: I don't think so. I mean, I'm in a way a religious person, but I don't know how that—except that I, I guess, like to always feel I'm worth my salt, so to speak. It's not part of the art, but I do feel that one must do something creative if they have the power or the ability. And I guess that goes way back, when, you know, I was a kid. I knew I always had to go to college and I always had to work—not had to, but that was a goal, that you do these things. And I do enjoy the fact that I'm making things that people like.

MS. YAGER: Was there ever—did you always just assume that you would go into business for yourself and be an independent artist? Did you—was there ever any question about that? And did you have any examples of other people that had done that?

MS. COOKE: No, I just knew I would do something, but—and I have close friends I mentioned from the Scouts. We still know—I mean we still meet each other. And one of them became president of Barnard College, another one's a provost, two doctors, and an engineer who worked on a wind tunnel back in the '40s. I mean, they're the kind of women I knew, and they were all independent. There wasn't any question. You just—you did what you do.

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: That's a simplistic answer, but—

MS. YAGER: Well, they were focused and—

MS. COOKE: Had drive and energy—

MS. YAGER: —just had their vision and—yeah.

MS. COOKE: They weren't sure how it was going to come out. I didn't always want to be a jeweler or any thing; I just knew that I would be involved in what I call beautiful things, design.

MS. YAGER: Now you talked about, in one newspaper article, that from a very early age that you just would naturally pick up what you call beautiful things—

MS. COOKE: Yeah.

MS. YAGER: —rocks or seashells, things—maybe leaves; I don't know. So you've always been drawn to nature—

MS. COOKE: Yes.

MS. YAGER: —and recognized something in that. And you've often incorporated the beach rocks. Have you incorporated seashells and—

MS. COOKE: No, because they have a design factor that is an interesting—I mean, to me they're beautiful as they are. I know you can do things with them, but it doesn't appeal much to me—

MS. YAGER: That's not a—because it's not a pure form if there's also some ornament on it?

MS. COOKE: Right. Mm-hmm. It's already done. I can't improve on it. I could set it. I mean, I've been asked to set things. And of course people have brought me part of the Berlin Wall and all kinds of things like that that I've worked on.

But it's difficult when you get something—I have some crystals that I've bought, that I thought I would set, but I really realized that I love them just as they are. And that doesn't mean you can't do it, but --

MS. YAGER: Now rocks—and we share, you know, this—I don't know that I was really aware of your work or Margaret De Patta's, and yet I definitely am part of the continuum of all of that. Prehistoric, you know, people have also used rocks.

MS. COOKE: Sure.

MS. YAGER: What do you think? Why do you use a rock? What is it about the rock? And does it need to be from a certain place? Does it have to look a certain way?

MS. COOKE: I think there again it's a matter of selection, like you go on the beach and who picks—everybody picks a different kind of thing. And I guess I would pick it—if I thought I was going to do something with it, I might pick it up and say, "Oh, this would be beautiful this way," whereas another one you just might pick up because it's beautiful in itself and then come up with a way.

I—what am I trying to say? Do you know Andy Goldsworthy?

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: I mean, to me, he has—he came across a wonderful solution to this business of loving nature and doing something with it that doesn't destroy it.

MS. YAGER: Yes, it's harmonious—

MS. COOKE: It is.

MS. YAGER: Yes, yes, I see.

MS. COOKE: And it—I'm personally a little bit jealous—I'm very jealous. I mean, I already got—I save pine needles and I save all kinds of things. [Laughs.] And I have little piles of pine needles in an area, and I can't do it now without thinking, gosh, that's like Goldsworthy. But you know, you do that all your life. You arrange things of nature without destroying them. And—but he takes it to the height, I think. He's wonderful.

I'm off the subject.

MS. YAGER: No, you're not.

MS. COOKE: Where were you? [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: No, you're not. That's great.

Is there an element of play in your process or in the finished works?

MS. COOKE: Well, I do sometime—the play comes out. I do some of these little funny creatures, birds and things. And it sounds corny. We're on tape. But I mean, I—they get whimsical, and they're fun, and people like them. And they have a style about them that's okay. You know, it doesn't go too far.

Now often people ask me, "Do a giraffe," something like that. Well, I'm not going to do a giraffe, because it's going to look just like a giraffe. But there are certain forms, like birds and fish and things like that, that you can do your own concept of.

So I guess that's the most—that's whimsical. And I've always thought that way, because I'm fond of animals and things like that.

But some of the jewelry, I think, is playful. I mean, some of the necklaces can be fun, can be as if they are so simple, they just sort of fell that way or they're moving with, you know—

MS. YAGER: And the designs change with the positioning—

MS. COOKE: With your moving—

MS. YAGER: —which is a really wonderful quality.

MS. COOKE: Which is fun.

MS. YAGER: Yeah. It's a wonderful quality.

Let's see. Humor. Do you get—

MS. COOKE: But when you talk about play, I guess I'm talking about design. I mean, I imagine when you do something, you probably make drawings or maybe you just start out and do it. But I assume you have it sort of planned, what you're going to do, sometimes.

MS. YAGER: Some—it depends, yes, depends on what it is.

MS. COOKE: But then it works its way and becomes something else.

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: But I don't know. Sometime I'll just draw a line so simple, and I'll think, that's just beautiful, just that way. But then you have to translate it into your material. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. COOKE: —which is the tricky thing, because it can be really clumsy, or it can be delicate, or it can be like wispy, like something that just blew by, like a pine needle or something.

MS. YAGER: Yeah. There was mention of—that you had an interest in things that had metamorphosis or that changed and transformed. This may have been years ago. [Laughs.]

MS. COOKE: Not scientifically.

MS. YAGER: Movements? Moving parts?

MS. COOKE: Movement. Movement. Sure. I like things—I like the jewelry that moves.

MS. YAGER: Have you gotten involved with joints and moving parts?

MS. COOKE: Sure. I love joints and moving parts. I used to give classes on hinges and hooks and moving parts. I love all of that. It gets expensive sometimes, the fabrication—

MS. YAGER: You mean because of the amount of time—

MS. COOKE: Right.

MS. YAGER: Yes, yes.

MS. COOKE: I mean, I'd done many an earring that has all kinds of motion to it. They're tricky, but it's fun.

MS. YAGER: Describe the earring.

MS. COOKE: And I like—well, a series of hinges, but—or pins. It goes through flat wire and pin. But they have to look—you have to know what it's going on—you—I like to see the pin. I like to see the joint. I mean, the joint itself is a beautiful thing. And you want it to move this—one vertical and then horizontal and different ways.

This ring that we were talking about—I've made these that flip down, because it's the first thing a child will say: Does it move? And I did at one time—somebody had a big diamond, and she wanted to wear it to New York a lot, but she wanted it covered. So I made a door that flapped over it, which is all fun. It gets expensive, unless you buy.

MS. YAGER: I remember I had a class in antique jewelry. They had something similar called coach earrings—

MS. COOKE: Oh.

MS. YAGER: —and they had— no, they were called “Coach Covers,” and they were black enamel caps that went over your diamond earrings so that you could wear—

MS. COOKE: Safe.

MS. YAGER: Yeah, yeah. The robbers wouldn’t come and steal them while you were traveling by coach to a party.

MS. COOKE: I see.

MS. YAGER: What do you call the ring that you are wearing? Does it have a name?

MS. COOKE: Oh, my. No. Maybe it’s a sun. Maybe it’s the sun and the moon. I have got it in white and yellow. But this is white.

MS. YAGER: Let’s see. Do—let’s see, other interests—space, structure, spatial things. I mean, those always—those seem to be real significant interests.

MS. COOKE: Yeah, yeah.

MS. YAGER: And I was really—oh, you know, one thing I wanted to talk about—I remember coming to your retrospective which was in—

MS. COOKE: ‘95 [“Design Jewelry: Betty Cooke,” June 2-25, 1995, Maryland Institute, College of Art].

MS. YAGER: Thank you. And I read somewhere—were there about 800 people at that opening? Or was it during the—

MS. COOKE: It was that opening. I have forgotten how many, but they had to put a tent after tent. They didn’t expect it.

MS. YAGER: It was pretty astounding, and of the 800 I think about, I don’t know, was it five or six hundred that had your work on?

MS. COOKE: [Laughs.] It was a walking exhibition.

MS. YAGER: It was very wonderful and each person had their own necklace and they had the story that came with it. They all had a story with their piece, at least the ones that I spoke with, and there was such a palpable feeling of sort of, you know—

MS. COOKE: I didn’t expect that. That was wonderful. I mean, I don’t think I’m vain. I was a little embarrassed at first but then I had not thought that they would all wear the jewelry and fortunately, it was all different.

MS. YAGER: It was. Yeah.

MS. COOKE: It was very different concepts.

MS. YAGER: Yeah, yeah.

MS. COOKE: It was funny.

MS. YAGER: Yeah, it was definitely not people walking around with the same piece on.

MS. COOKE: And they would admire each other—"Oh, you got that one, I remember seeing that one." Or, "You got the other one!" And it was quite a thing unplanned. I don't know whether you could plan that or not but I thought, gee, that would be a wonderful retrospective for anybody to have somebody's—or all of your friends come in with your jewelry on.

MS. YAGER: Yeah. It was a pretty wonderful experience, and the show was—that was Martha Head that was involved.

MS. COOKE: She sponsored it. And I wrote Howard and she published the catalog and it was extremely well done, and the photography was wonderful, and the catalog was wonderful. I had—was in on the planning of that. I knew it had to be square with a gold circle and all white, so—and so she in turn did that and then sponsored a scholarship for the students. So I was very honored.

MS. YAGER: And the inserts—the sort of translucent pages of your drawings and then the photographs is the pieces underneath. It's pretty special. Yeah.

Let's see. One issue—do you ever barter? A lot of artists talk about exchanging their work for different things.

MS. COOKE: Would you like to? [They laugh.]

MS. YAGER: Well I meant—

MS. COOKE: I have been asked to do that with a store, of course. A lot of people want to trade things for things. I would but I guess I have never been asked to. I guess I have done it with some friends. Of course I have friends and relatives—that sort of thing. I guess I would. Like right now, I mean—

MS. YAGER: I have heard of people trading for suits and—

MS. COOKE: Right.

MS. YAGER: —dental work and—

MS. COOKE: Right. Well, I can think with this barn we are doing, I would love to trade somebody for landscaping and bulldozing and—[laughs]—all kinds of things. I would do that.

MS. YAGER: Yeah, well, it will come up now.

MS. COOKE: That would be an interesting ad in the paper.

MS. YAGER: You would probably get a lot of people.

MS. COOKE: Yeah, I think I—

MS. YAGER: Tell me about Geoffrey Beene. Can you talk about the story of when you met and then talk about some work that you did—

MS. COOKE: Did I tell you that, or—

MS. YAGER: I read it.

MS COOKE: Oh. It was true. I went to—I'm not sure why I was in New York—maybe for the jewelry show. I mean, I always went for a purpose, and I went to—oh, was it Bergdorf Goodman? It was a big store. Of course, Geoffrey Beene was having a show and I didn't know him personally or anything, I just always respected his design. I think he's a very good designer.

And I saw this short, good-looking man and he had a nice suit on, and I went up to him. I said, "Gee, I like your suit," and he said, "Thank you, I'm Geoffrey Beene." He said, "And I like your jewelry," and I said, "Thank you, I'm Betty Cooke," and it was funny. It was a nice—you know, it was a very friendly, warm sort of thing and then we got to talking and he wanted to know if I would design—needed to have other things. So of course I made the appointment and took my little boxes of jewelry and belts and bags, all sorts of things, and went to his showroom and then we got involved. He was having shows come up for New York and Milan when I would—wanted to do some things for the shows. So I did. And I would give him drawings. The only problem was he didn't realize it was all good material. I mean, I'm using silver and gold and they have costume jewelry. So he would say, "Can you make it bigger?" And I was thinking, oh, I can't make it bigger. You know, and I wasn't at that point—investing in these big gold pieces. So that's—

MS. YAGER: What year—what year?

MS. COOKE: This was about '78-79. It was a few years I did it.

So that's when I got into big crystals and glass. I even had some big glass discs that I mounted with silver tassels and chains and things. And he loved the belts. He liked the way—you didn't see the belts, but I have a lot of belts that hook and hinge and he liked that fixture.

And then we talked of—he talked of going into business—possibly I would design things for them, but it would be his name and I didn't want to do that. So it wouldn't be Betty Cooke for Geoffrey Beene, it was just Geoffrey Beene. So that was fine, but it was very nice at the time.

MS. YAGER: So a particular collection, how many pieces would you have had to create?

MS. COOKE: Probably had 10 or 15 pieces, maybe more.

MS. YAGER: And then would you make more of those designs—

MS. COOKE: No.

MS. YAGER: —or was this for the—specifically for the fashion show?

MS. COOKE: It was for show. It's—they—well, maybe some of them with the big crystals I did make and sell, or sold them. But it's back to wearable. They were heavy and they were just too clunky for my style. But for the purpose, it was fine.

MS. YAGER: Because, actually, one of the things that I remember at your opening was the way your work reads from a distance, you can be across the room from someone and it reads and so I can see where in a fashion show, that must have been pretty wonderful.

Did you go to the shows and see your work?

MS. COOKE: I went to the New York shows, but I didn't go to Milan. But then I did things—I used leather so a lot of things were—it didn't look like leather, but it's a form of leather because it is flexible. And some things, you know, they walked—would sway back and forth. It was interesting to do. I mean, I could have gotten very involved in that at that time—a whole different facet of jewelry, but I didn't want to make those things. It started to get into machinery and production-type of things. But it was very original and it had got into *Vogue* and *Bazaar*, and that always helps—had some good photographs.

MS. YAGER: Let's see. Do you think of yourself as part of an international tradition? I mean, I think you do. I think you feel—or, you know I'm assuming that you feel an affinity to the Bauhaus and modernism and—

MS. COOKE: Yeah.

MS. YAGER: Is that—I guess I'm answering my own question.

MS. COOKE: Yes I do. I mean, it wasn't a deliberate thing. It's the way you work and it fits in its category.

MS. YAGER: Do you think that you are also part of an American tradition in any way?

MS. COOKE: I hope so.

MS. YAGER: What do you think of as uniquely American about your work or different than in your opinion—other parts of the world?

MS. COOKE: That's hard to say now because everybody is doing everything, don't you think? I mean, well, no. It's—I mean, when I mentioned European jewelry, I was thinking of the architectural—the design concepts that some people are doing, and I shouldn't say that because maybe it's being done in this country, too. I'm not sure that—what an American—I feel I am of course because here I am. When I first started, some people would say, "Oh, that looks like it's Scandinavian." Well, I didn't know what Scandinavian jewelry looked like at the time, so I go to Georg Jensen and think, oh, my goodness, this is what they are talking about. But knowing that it's your honest expression, you have—I would proudly say, "No, it's from Baltimore—[laughs]—and it's U.S.A."

I'm not sure I'm answering your question.

MS. YAGER: You know, one of the things that I—for, you know, in the 1980s I was doing work with rocks, and also in the 1980s, I went on a trip to Morocco, and one time, we were on this road in the middle of who knows

where, and we stopped the car. We were the car on the road, and there were a few women and children and they were crouched down getting something. We were thinking, what would they be getting? So we sort of motion with each other, what are you doing? They were gathering rocks for jewelry and I had a necklace on with a rock on it and I pulled out of my pocket some more rocks. And so there was this—

MS. COOKE: Good.

MS. YAGER: Instant sort of—

MS. COOKE: Communication, good.

MS. YAGER: —connection, and it was—but—and they were very interested in how did I make the hole in the rock, and, you know, they motioned with their hands did I use a friction sort of drill? There was this connection with this ancient continuum, but also, they were interested in trading for my watch, my purse—all kinds of modern things, but they had no interest in my rock necklace.

MS. COOKE: In jewelry. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: It was truly not of interest to them. So I did feel like –

MS. COOKE: I'm from a different country.

MS. YAGER: Yeah, yeah.

MS. COOKE: Interesting.

MS. YAGER: And so we are of our culture.

MS. COOKE: Well, it's like when you see ethnic jewelry which is so wonderful. I mean, that's a big word—I mean, a broad statement but, you know, I love the Egyptians, I love Greek, I love Africans—are doing some wonderful things—these big things. Of course Mexico—that's the first country I guess I associated with jewelry and the development of all that, which is relatively recent, you know.

Now, I guess the first group I really admired were the American Indians because I've always loved turquoise in the Indian jewelry. The first book I bought was this Navajo silversmith, and I'm not even sure I was into silverwork at the time, but I just thought it was—maybe I thought the pictures were good—great big belts and the leather and the silver and that was a exciting combination. And I guess it all influences you somehow. But that—

MS. YAGER: I read a reference that there was an exhibition of Native American jewelry at the Museum of Modern Art. Do you remember going to that show?

MS. COOKE: In New York?

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: No. Recently?

MS. YAGER: No, a long time ago.

MS. COOKE: I have been to their museum—the American Indian Museum, and I get—I used to get a magazine called *Arizona Highway*.

MS. YAGER: *Arizona Highway*—yes.

MS. COOKE: And Native Americans—I do send my little contribution for that because I still—still a soft spot for that.

MS. YAGER: What were some of the—your favorite magazines? You mentioned –

MS. COOKE: *Arizona Highway* is one, and I got that when I was in high school.

MS. YAGER: It was so visually rich. Yeah.

MS. COOKE: Right, the scenery and they always had jewelry. I wasn't into jewelry then but it was beautiful.

MS. YAGER: Charles Loloma.

MS. COOKE: Yeah. It was beautiful country. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: Did you get *National Geographic*?

MS. COOKE: Oh, yes. Yeah, we always got *National Geographic*.

MS. YAGER: And *Life* magazine?

MS. COOKE: *Life*.

MS. YAGER: What were some of the others?

MS. COOKE: And—well, I used to get *Architectural Digest* and *Walker Art Center* [*Design Quarterly*] and something else. What was it? Of course, the craft—I have got more craft magazines than you can imagine.

MS. YAGER: Did you get *Craft Horizons*?

MS. COOKE: Yes. I had—that was way back.

MS. YAGER: That was started in 1941, I think.

MS. COOKE: I probably have all of them.

What else was there?

MS. YAGER: You have—you archive, you save everything. You must have a lot of things.

MS. COOKE: I saved too much. Hard to get through some things.

MS. YAGER: That's interesting. Have you—

MS. COOKE: I don't know why. Oh, and then we even had a fire in our house one year—burnt the whole second floor off—we live on Tyson, and the whole second floor went and one whole room of magazines and books, which was horrible—and clothes. But even then, I thought, oh, well, now I will be clear, but you would be surprised how many more magazines you have downstairs. But *Life* was wonderful—*Life* magazine—publishes it still as strong as it was.

MS. YAGER: You know, I as a child reading *Life* magazine—they covered artists a lot, and there was a sense of respect at being an artist through the presentation in *Life* magazine.

MS. COOKE: You know what is good now is the "Sunday Morning" television programs—Charles Kurault.

MS. YAGER: Yeah, yeah.

MS. COOKE: I mean, they always have an art or music or a combination, and it's always positive. But, so—that's American.

MS. YAGER: Has there been a—do you feel that there is—there are changes in how the general public perceives artists or even if they are aware of artists?

MS. COOKE: I think they are. I think so and I think one of the most outstanding art forms is sculpture. I mean, thinking way back, I was interested in sculpture and I thought, well, what do you do with it because there wasn't any sculpture around in Baltimore then. For other areas, I guess there were. I mean, there were some pieces, but when you think how much is accepted now, and used. I mean, there's tremendous opportunity for somebody in sculpture.

MS. YAGER: You were talking about the newest sculpture that is installed at the Baltimore train station [*Male/Female*, 2004]. Is it Jonathon Borofsky?

MS. COOKE: Yes.

MS. YAGER: Tell me about that.

MS. COOKE: [Laughs.] Well, there's an art panel in Baltimore that selected that and great hoopla in the paper because the public was against it. A man and a woman—you know, we have enough problems with men and women, and the fact that our station has just been refurbished—it's a very pretty train station, by the way, and it has been refinished and looks very nice and classical—golden lights and brass and so forth, and then this figure—this sort of –

MS. YAGER: It sort of references the “Invisible Man” and the “Invisible Woman,” I think, does it? In flat metal.

MS. COOKE: Yes. It’s big, it’s a statue. It really is. I mean, it’s gigantic, and it’s interesting to see it from different parts of the city. Like, we can see it from Maryland Institute. You know, you can look down and see this above the station, even.

I think it will take a while, and it’s good to be talked about. Yeah, sure.

MS. YAGER: These are points of conversation and communication.

Do you ever wish—do you ever think about doing any of your pieces on a large scale?

MS. COOKE: I think it would be—I think it would be interesting. I don’t know whether—how much time I have for all that. I have been to a couple foundries and realized that I wouldn’t have to do it myself, which is a big asset. And—but see, I think I would want to know that it was going someplace. I’m not just going to do it for me—I would do it as a commission.

MS. YAGER: And you would want the placement—you want the—

MS. COOKE: I would want it to be meaningful to—for a purpose, but it would be surely exciting to do something because a lot of my things would be very good on that scale, I think.

MS. YAGER: Yeah, I think so, too.

MS. COOKE: They would be free and—

MS. YAGER: Yeah, yeah.

MS. COOKE: —sort of flying and moving. I think it would be very good. So we’ll see. Maybe somebody like Mr. Herbert Freeberg (sp) will come by. But all those things—you know, you can dream a lot, too. That’s a good—you know, project.

MS. YAGER: What do you think some of the—what are some of the biggest design challenges for you in jewelry?

MS. COOKE: To do the best I have ever done.

MS. YAGER: And is that always the next piece?

MS. COOKE: It’s really a challenge to do something that is completely fresh and different and yet—I mean, it will look like me just like yours will look like you. I think when we are always professional as we are, we can’t do anything that would look like anybody else. It just doesn’t come out that way. I often say it’s the way you sing—it’s just what happens, but to me, the best thing would be to have some time to be alone and to have time to come up with things that I know are there, it just has to evolve and be solved how to produce them and what and why.

MS. YAGER: And some of that can’t be rushed.

MS. COOKE: No.

MS. YAGER: It just has its own soul.

MS. COOKE: It has to be good because, you know, we are our own critics so—it’s hard. I was going to get drawings together for you and I realized how many drawings I have. And I thought, well, no. Decisions make—to pick out what I considered the best of the group, which is a job because a drawing can look good to me because I know what it’s going to be like finished, but to you, it may not look as good. And you are probably that way, too. See, I can draw something and see it all finished and maybe I don’t have to do it because I know what it’s going to look like. [Laughs.] It's done in my mind. And I'll do it if somebody wants it or if I need it.

MS. YAGER: Well, you've captured it in another dimension.

MS. COOKE: Right.

MS. YAGER: And if you have time, you can go into even another dimension.

MS. COOKE: Pretty selfish.

MS. YAGER: Can you name a couple unique innovations, things that you've contributed to the field? I mean, I think you've had influence in the field.

MS. COOKE: I think it's unusual that the jewelry, my jewelry or other people's jewelry, is so recognizable. I mean, people are always telling me that people recognize it as—they use the name and the make of jewelry, whatever. And you don't make it for that purpose. You just make it. You do it. But I think it's amazing.

Somebody called the other day. She was in Santa Fe. And she wears a lot of jewelry. She's just coated with jewelry, all kinds of ethnic jewelry. And she has some of mine. She asked me, "Do you mind if I mix it?" I said, "No, of course I don't."

And she called me, had just got back from Santa Fe, walking down the street, she said, and "I felt this man next to me, this tall, dark man in boots and a black hat and silver jewelry all over him." He was Indian. And he admired her earrings. And she said, "Here I am with your turquoise earrings." I don't do many turquoise earrings. And she said it was the strangest feeling. All this jewelry all around and he picked out her earrings. And she said, "They came from Baltimore."

And it's just unusual. I think it's interesting that people focus on objects like that. They do it with clothes, some women, some people. And men do, too. You know, they like it. The men appreciate it. I don't know whether that's a contribution, but you've put something out that people recognize that is consistent.

MS. YAGER: I've even seen references when I was doing some research on you. There are, you know, some of the websites that are selling jewelry in the secondary market. Sometimes it will be your work, and then sometimes it will be an unsigned piece, and they'll say --

MS. COOKE: "Maybe."

MS. YAGER: —"like" Betty Cooke. [They laugh.]

MS. COOKE: I would know. I've been called and asked, "Is this yours?" "No, it's not mine. Gee, I could have done that, but I didn't." And some things, you know, you realize, gee, I should have done that.

This book on minimalism and the rings, there are a lot of rings in there that "gee, I could have done that," or I think that way. But you just can't get it all done.

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

Can you define good design? What do you think it has in it?

MS. COOKE: There are lots of books written on that if you'd like to read them. [They laugh.]

MS. YAGER: You'll give me the bibliography. [Laughs.]

MS. COOKE: Good design. Things that are made usually for a purpose or they're made—well, design isn't made for a purpose. It doesn't have to be a purpose. Form follows function, I think is the quote. There's a purity about it, an honesty about it, a simplicity so you're not all cluttered and miss the point. I guess that would be a way of saying it. I mean, if it's a beautiful glass, it isn't so encrusted that you don't know what to do with it, which is an extreme. And it should have wonderful color or contrast or elements. The material should certainly be honest and handled properly and not all bashed up.

MS. YAGER: "Handled properly" would mean what?

MS. COOKE: Well, I happen to be a person that doesn't like to see cowhide turned into alligator, but it's all right because that's the way you do it because you're not going to use alligator. We should just forget alligator and do cowhide. But a sincerity in material, I suppose. But you have to give in a little bit. This table [indicating the table she's sitting at] is maple. It should look like maple and maybe not be mixed up. But that's not—

MS. YAGER: It's not a hard-and-fast rule.

MS. COOKE: Yeah. Then you could get into crafts or folk art and you could paint it all different colors and it would be a different thing. But if you're designing a product or an object, it has a reason for being, and I think all these things should be thought about. If it's a hinge, it should be a beautiful hinge and not just covered with something that doesn't show you that it hinges, it works.

But there are other descriptions.

MS. YAGER: Could you discuss the difference, if any, between a university-trained artist and one who has learned his or her craft outside of academia?

MS. COOKE: That's a big subject. We have in Baltimore—I don't know whether you know it or not—one of the

biggest and best museums. I don't know whether you've been there or not [American Visionary Art Museum, Baltimore, MD].

MS. YAGER: Yeah, the outsider. Yes, yes.

MS. COOKE: And there was great discussion about that because there are a lot of professors that feel that it's not the thing to do because we train these students X number of years in college and there's no place to exhibit, and yet you can be an outsider and go through --

MS. YAGER: Yeah, it's almost a catch-22.

MS. COOKE: Right. Well, I think there's room for everything, and I think there's room for that. Now what the difference is—that's not the answer to the question, is it? I guess an outsider—not meaning mental problems or anything like that, but someone untrained could conceivably come up with products as well as one that's trained. It might be a long way to do it, but some people have pretty strong direction, that it could conceivably be. But that person in this generation might also want to go through training, realizing the value of it in addition to what he or she has.

I don't think I answered it. I don't know that you can just line them up and tell the difference. I hope so.

MS. YAGER: Has the market changed for American craft in your lifetime?

MS. COOKE: Oh, yes.

MS. YAGER: In which direction or in what ways?

MS. COOKE: Oh, well, it's so expanded now. Gosh, just everything. I mean if somebody wants to—whatever area of craft, I mean, there's so many opportunities. There are so many companies that will reproduce it if that's the direction you want to go. There are so many galleries, there are so many magazines, there's so many possibilities. Just amazing, I think.

I know the craft shows have done a great deal for a lot of people. That's one way to go. Think of the number of galleries. You've got *Metalsmith* magazine, and the whole front is—I look at those and think, gosh, isn't that wonderful, if you can get in. But if you can't, think how many shops and stores. The gift market is crowded with what we might call crafts or variations on crafts.

MS. YAGER: You know, you talked about hinges or things like that being more expensive because of the time involved that has to be invested in that. Do you think that handwork is in danger of becoming out of people's reach?

MS. COOKE: I don't think so, because I think there are a lot of sophisticated people that appreciate it. I mean, I'm sure they're your clientele and my clientele. A lot of things I have I know could be reproduced for almost nothing, and sometime it worries me. I'll see something and I think, my goodness, this could be stamped out. And I've done things that are now on the market. I used to make little, cute earrings, where you can buy them—I was going to say in a 10-cent store, but we don't have a 10-cent store. You see things that—

MS. YAGER: Yes, for six dollars.

MS. COOKE: Right. And hoop earrings. You can't afford to make anything like that. But that's good, because they're good-looking and we have to come up with the better ones.

MS. YAGER: Yeah. I feel like some of those things set new challenges because then it's like, well, okay, now you really have to do something unique.

MS. COOKE: You have to do something different.

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: A bangle bracelet. I used to make a lot of bangle bracelets. Of course I had brass and silver, different things, and plain ones, and we still have some old ones that have never sold, and they say, "Why don't you put them out?" And I think, well, because you can buy a bangle bracelet. But they look different. The finish is different or I'll do something that makes it different.

MS. YAGER: Yeah. There are a lot of things on the market now that were not out there 20—

MS. COOKE: And they're good.

MS. YAGER: They are, yes.

MS. COOKE: Good-looking things.

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: And you can get copied, too, you know. Yeah, there are. You get, I'm sure, lots of jewelry catalogues. I get them from all kinds of companies trying to sell me charms and chains. And I guess part of what I enjoy is looking at everything and knowing that I can pick the best. [Laughs.] You look through a catalogue and you can pick out six things that are really good that you couldn't afford to make.

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: They may not look like you, but you can realize that somebody else might be working so hard to make those and have to charge so much.

MS. YAGER: So would you try to incorporate those things into your work, you mean, or—

MS. COOKE: I don't do that, no. No, I shy away them. To me that's off bounds.

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: I've been asked to because I—there are a lot of rubber neck wires and things like that, and I really should use them because they make sense, but I notice I don't. I'm a purist.

MS. YAGER: Why do you feel you stay away from that?

MS. COOKE: I don't know. I just feel like it's somebody else's idea.

MS. YAGER: Okay. Has copying been an issue?

MS. COOKE: It has locally. There are some people that copy them with the prices on them. But I can tell. I mean, if a customer comes in and has a copy of my ring, she'll know it. I'll tell her. [Laughs.] I'll say, "I bet I know where you got this." I say it nicely. But I think that's a terrible thing to do. That's gross.

MS. YAGER: It's interesting. There were some people who were doing some things that were somewhat like my work, and I asked this one art historian about it, and she said, "Well, you know, good things always have echoes." And when I was at the V & A [Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England], in order for them to acquire a piece it has to have had an influence in the market. So that actually puts a positive light on being copied.

MS. COOKE: But influence, yes—

MS. YAGER: But yes, I see what you're saying. Yes. Yes.

MS. COOKE: But it scares me. I get *Modern Jewelry*. I get a lot of magazines. And I look through them, and I realize I'm looking hoping that nobody has done what I'm doing. I mean, I have some things that I know would be mass produced beautifully because I know the success I'm had with them, and I just cross my fingers that nobody picks them up and does it. But I used to be really sensitive to that. I'm not that sensitive anymore because I can always think of something else. But it is a problem.

At a lot of the craft shows, you know, a lot of the jewelry is not all handmade. A lot of it is—

MS. YAGER: More and more so.

MS. COOKE: —part production, which is all right, but some of it is really produced. I must admit I buy circles. I used to saw circles out.

MS. YAGER: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. COOKE: It was a waste of time. [Laughs.] They were crooked then. Maybe they were nicer. Maybe I'll go back to crooked circles. That's a good idea. I'll think of something --

MS. YAGER: You don't have enough time with your stone barn—[cross talk]—will give you lots of spare time.

MS. COOKE: I'll think of something. I'll call Mr. Hoover and say, "Can you give me some"—when I went to Hoover and Strong—you know, I buy a lot of circles. And I'm always interested in the positive, and I asked him if he would sell me the sheet with all the holes, and he wouldn't do it! Because I had some wonderful ideas of how

to use that. You know, the perforated sheets?

MS. YAGER: Yes. Yes.

MS. COOKE: But he said, no, you can't do that.

MS. YAGER: Huh!

MS. COOKE: Maybe he'll start selling it and then I'll buy it.

MS. YAGER: That's interesting.

Now, Hoover and Strong, that's in Richmond, Virginia.

MS. COOKE: Yes.

MS. YAGER: A refining company.

MS. COOKE: Yes.

MS. YAGER: Let's see. How has studio jewelry changed? I guess we sort of talked about that. How has marketing changed? Have you made any alterations in how you market and sell your work over the years?

MS. COOKE: Well, see, I still have my own retail, so I think that would be it. The only thing I've changed is I'm more aware of what my customers want, and I know that I can do that. Like I say, they would like a whole new collection. And that's a marketing thing. I mean, that would take a while to do and it's something I think would be exciting to do.

MS. YAGER: Do you have a mailing list? Do you keep in touch with your customers?

MS. COOKE: Oh, it's not organized. We have names from way back. It's not organized, but we could do that. I could use those.

MS. YAGER: So you don't do any mailing at this point?

MS. COOKE: No.

MS. YAGER: Do you do any telephone calls to particular people when you have, you know—

MS. COOKE: Not for jewelry.

MS. YAGER: —a few pieces that have come out that they might be interested in?

MS. COOKE: No.

MS. YAGER: So they have to come.

MS. COOKE: They come.

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: Well, no, I should say sometime I would do that. Like I have a list of people that want maybe —"Next time you do an opal earring, give me a call," that sort of thing. I'll follow up on that.

MS. YAGER: Where do you think American craft and design, metalwork, where do you think they rank on an international scale?

MS. COOKE: In relation to other crafts?

MS. YAGER: You know, American jewelry versus European. Where do you think we stand?

MS. COOKE: Oh, gosh. Oh, you would know that more than I would know that. It's a pretty small group, I think, unless—you're not talking about manufactured jewelry, also?

MS. YAGER: Well, I guess just any similars. I mean, are we better or worse, or improving, or losing ground? [Pause.] It's very—

MS. COOKE: I'm not sure I can—

MS. YAGER: This is a personal judgment. [Laughs.]

MS. COOKE: Yeah, because how can I answer that? I'm impressed—you know, you get the European magazines, and of course they're more sophisticated and they're more exciting and they're more advanced than we are. I mean, the Italians are doing some wonderful things. And maybe it's exciting because I know what we're doing here. We have big mass markets of jewelry which are kind of mediocre.

MS. YAGER: You're referring to things like—

MS. COOKE: To chains.

MS. YAGER: —QVC or—

MS. COOKE: Yeah. The chains and everything. I haven't been in Tiffany and the other stores lately. I don't know whether they have changed or not. I don't think they've picked up on contemporary jewelry like they should have, myself. I mean, they have a chance, the opportunity to really make a big thing out of it, including us in with it. I mean, I've tried Tiffany. Someone took me at one time, somebody that thought it would work, and they "just weren't ready," was the expression. And they really haven't done much to of anything.

MS. YAGER: It's incredible.

MS. COOKE: I mean, you know, I've done this plus a lot of other things that I could do. I mean, Elsa Peretti was fine. I think she married somebody at Tiffany. [Laughs.] I told Bill, "Oh, take a couple years off. I'll see if I can marry the vice president or something." [Laughs.]

But just think what they could do.

MS. YAGER: It's unfortunate. It is unfortunate that they have not—

MS. COOKE: Sponsored all of us, like they do in Finland and Sweden and other countries.

MS. YAGER: Yes. I mean, they're kind of reintroducing their good designs from before, and the fact is that they have an opportunity. There's a huge, wonderful field of designers here.

MS. COOKE: Well, you know, we buy things from Finland, Iittala glass and other things, ceramics. And we've been there a couple times, and we're aware of all the promotion they do and the exhibitions they give all the designers. And that's what we should be after.

You organize that. I'll help you.

MS. YAGER: Even government sponsorship.

MS. COOKE: Yes.

MS. YAGER: I noticed in your resume there was reference of State Department exhibitions and USIA [United States Information Agency] exhibitions.

MS. COOKE: Yeah.

MS. YAGER: What were those all about?

MS. COOKE: That was just through somebody that happened to like what we were doing and got us. It was a personal—it wasn't personal, I mean it was somebody that understood what we were doing and used it. And if you applied for it, you'd never get anyplace. It was the personal contact. He was an architect who happened to know us and thought we would be great for that, and that's what it was. That was unusual. But maybe it happens. There are some big companies that are sponsoring ceramics. There's a company that manufactures utility sinks and bathtubs.

MS. YAGER: Kohler [Company, Kohler, WI], yes.

MS. COOKE: Kohler. I mean, they have quite a program, I think.

MS. YAGER: Yes.

MS. COOKE: I'm not sure what it does, I mean how it's come, but I know they—

MS. YAGER: They have artists in residency.

MS. COOKE: They take them in.

MS. YAGER: They definitely are trying to, you know, introduce artists in industry. There's a gap in this country between that.

MS. COOKE: I don't know whether you've ever looked at fixtures, but do you know who [Philippe] Starck is, the designer architect?

MS. YAGER: Yes. Yes.

MS. COOKE: Well, you can buy a Philippe tub for $7,000. I know all about this because I've looked at them all. [Laughs.] And that's wonderful except that we'd like some of our graduates to be in a position to design things like that that would be more of a level that people can afford. But they've been doing that for years.

MS. YAGER: Yes. Ruth Kohler came to the craft shows all the time.

MS. COOKE: That's great.

MS. YAGER: Let's see. What place do you think universities have in the American craft movement? Do you think that that's the way to go?

MS. COOKE: I think it's terrific. I think so. They have the facilities now, a lot of them. I mean, the techniques. You went to school long after I did, but there are techniques and equipment and experiences that are just wonderful, whether you do something with it or not. I mean, I would like to go and take a few classes just to feel it and to see it and to know that all these possibilities are there. I mean, one could do that, but we're talking about students that are exposed to all that; not only metal, but everything. The Institute has a big fiber department that is fascinating. I mean, fibers can be anything, if you think about it, environments and all kinds of sculptures. It's all there. I think it's exciting.

And there are a lot of students there, too. There are a lot of people out there, you know. That's why I said we can always be supported.

MS. YAGER: I don't understand.

MS. COOKE: There are so many people that are aware—I mean, we're in a small category, or I know I am, I'm just a little person, but there are just so many people that relate to it that I think there are always going to be enough people to support the individual even though all these centers say no. I mean, there's always going to be a Las Vegas, but there's always going to be a little corner store someplace that people will love. Oh, that sounds corny. I shouldn't have said "corner store." There's always going to be studio jewelry that people will love.

MS. YAGER: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. COOKE: Because people want the individual.

MS. YAGER: The human connection.

MS. COOKE: They often think they're part of the creation. I've had people say to me, "I designed that." You know, they'll bring a friend in and, "I designed this." And I think, whoops, wait a minute. [Laughs.] Because they felt they were part of it. And that's important.

MS. YAGER: Yeah. You talk about it as a point of communication, and I think as more and more things are larger and larger companies, there are less opportunities for that direct connection. So it actually could become even more precious.

MS. COOKE: People would crave it. You know, they want to know their dressmaker or their cabinet maker or whatever. We know somebody who's having a table made and it's been, like, two years. And I think once he gets his table, there's going to be a big celebration. But having that table made just for him by this person has been just an important thread for a couple years. And it's wonderful. And it's going to support the guy for a couple years, too, making the table.

MS. YAGER: Right. Right.

MS. COOKE: I guess we need creative customers, that's what it is.

MS. YAGER: That seems to be a real clear story in your life. You've had creative customers, creative businesspeople that saw something in putting you with what they had in mind.

MS. COOKE: That's right. But think about how many—we were talking about universities—how many students would go through a university and take a course and never use it but would maybe relate to somebody. I mean, somebody might take a course in jewelry and it's of no value to them, but they respect it enough that they would come to you because they know what you're talking about.

MS. YAGER: Yes. Right.

MS. COOKE: You're on the same plane, even though they can't do it.

MS. YAGER: What's the situation in Baltimore as far as art in the public schools?

MS. COOKE: Not good. It's bad. We have a bad—unfortunate school system right now.

MS. YAGER: When you were a child, was it that way?

MS. COOKE: Oh, let me think. The best thing I ever did was make a sphinx out of soap. [Laughs.] We had art—

MS. YAGER: Was it Fels Naptha soap [brand of heavy duty laundry soap]? [They laugh.]

MS. COOKE: When I was a child? You mean elementary? I'll have to think. I'm sure I mentioned high school, which was very good because I had a good art teacher. Oh, I'm sure we had nice things, pictures and crayons, milk and graham crackers. We had everything.

MS. YAGER: Milk and graham crackers.

MS. COOKE: [Laughs.] We did, I think, and there was music. But see, then there weren't many sports, but it was more music and art.

MS. YAGER: That's interesting. I wonder what the proportion of sports versus art and music was.

MS. COOKE: It's a big way to earn a living now, so it's a different thing to be in sports.

MS. YAGER: Yeah. Let's see. Some of these topics are a little bit big. We did talk about periodicals, what role periodicals have had in educating you.

MS. COOKE: Yeah. Great.

MS. YAGER: Were there any particular writers that you noticed that you appreciated their insights? I mean, how significant is an arts writer or a critic, or do you think it needs to be written by a peer?

MS. COOKE: I'm afraid I don't have any special—I'll pass on that. I guess I read a lot of magazines and scan a lot of books. I mean, I can't say that I've read every page in those books. I would scan it. Not scan it, I would focus on what I want. But as far as knowing the writers, I wouldn't.

MS. YAGER: And more for the visuals?

MS. COOKE: I would be more visual than context.

MS. YAGER: Do you think that the role of the media—I mean, we talked about a lot of these magazines that were significant. Do you think that there are equivalent magazines to inspire people now?

MS. COOKE: Sure. I've seen amazing magazines, especially in the architectural field. And dare I mention Martha Stewart? [Laughs.] I mean, when you think of how the homes industry has improved, I'm sure it's improved a lot of middle class—

MS. YAGER: She's made a major contribution, let's say.

MS. COOKE: —to the environment, really. Not just her, but I mean the magazines are fantastic. And they're beautiful. The photography's beautiful.

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: I mean, there are a lot of good graphic designers out there that are part of this whole—

MS. YAGER: She in particular, I thought, really had an eye for photography and placement.

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm. You can get catalogues now that are beautiful. I have to think of one. But a lot of money has gone into, fortunately—these are also graduates from college who are designing all these things,

magazines.

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

All right, let's see.

MS. COOKE: A short one.

MS. YAGER: Yes. How has your work varied, early to recent? What things are similar and what things are different?

MS. COOKE: Well, my eye is the same, except that I can come up—well, I use a lot more stones than I used to use, precious stones. I mean, I set customers' stones if they have them. I guess you do—I don't know if you do the same thing or not. But I'm not always in a position to buy a 4-carat diamond, but it's great to have one to work with. And that can be very meaningful as far as the ideas and the look of it.

MS. YAGER: A 4-carat diamond. That's pretty large!

MS. COOKE: It's a big diamond. [Laughs.] I thought you'd pick up on that.

MS. YAGER: Goodness! I mean, have you set—

MS. COOKE: We set a three. I haven't personally set it. I had somebody set it for me. I had to take it down myself and insure it.

MS. YAGER: It almost makes a completely different design element. It could be pretty fun.

MS. COOKE: Well, the setting becomes very important. I mean, a little diamond, you can use a Tiffany setting and it doesn't make any difference.

MS. YAGER: And it sounds like your work has gone from copper and brass more to gold, more to higher-value stones.

MS. COOKE: Right.

MS. YAGER: And then, similarities?

MS. COOKE: Similarities. Well, I'm amazingly constant, but not the same thing, but it always looks like mine. I mean, you know, you just can't help it. I mean, I've done some complicated things, you know, multi-faceted things with many units and everything. It's not exactly like me, but it comes out being organized in some way that's okay.

MS. YAGER: Sometimes I look at a sketch book from 20 years ago and there will be a design that I just did.

MS. COOKE: [Laughs.] Whoops!

MS. YAGER: I'll think, boy, I only have seven ideas, and I've had them since day one.

MS. COOKE: It's embarrassing. I found some I was going to show you, and I thought I'd show my staff and say, "Why don't you pick out what you think we could sell?" But the way you put it together might be different than you would have done those years. Maybe, maybe not.

MS. YAGER: Have you changed the way you exhibit the work at all? Is there any difference between the way you did things years ago and now?

MS. COOKE: Yeah. It was clean-cut years ago, but it's a little better now. It's different now. But I would like to change it. I'm not sure I'm going to at this point. I'm always thinking of different ways of showing it. But I think basically it's been the same for a number of years, because it's hanging up in the hanging thing. I've always thought it would be fun to have a room that you walk into, like a big cage, and you'd frisk everybody on the way out. I mean, you can't do it, for security reasons, but I would like to see everything suspended from the ceiling so the light hits it, and the shadows on the wall, that sort of thing, which would be fun.

MS. YAGER: Creating it almost as an environment.

MS. COOKE: Yeah. Maybe I could do that sometime, have this area that we would let somebody into. I mean, not a case with glass. The glass would be way out here and you'd walk in.

MS. YAGER: The necklaces, the way you have them now, they're hanging on walls and you really are sort of

confronting them almost at the height that you would wear them.

MS. COOKE: Right, as if you're wearing them.

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: But they're crowded. See, I would rather they be spread out, but we can't do that.

MS. YAGER: Yeah. I remember going to the Basel Jewelry Show [in Switzerland].

MS. COOKE: You went?

MS. YAGER: And it was so pure. Some of the display cases would have three pieces. So I thought, okay, that's how I'm going to do mine.

MS. COOKE: That would be great.

MS. YAGER: So I came back and I put, you know, three pieces, five pieces, and everybody thought I was sold out and that I had no more inventory.

MS. COOKE: [Laughs.] "Don't you have any more?"

MS. YAGER: It was a very different aesthetic than the American aesthetic.

MS. COOKE: That would be wonderful. Oh, I'd like all new lights, and everything pure white and everything ethereal. I'd love that.

MS. YAGER: It is still pure white, isn't it, your gallery?

MS. COOKE: Pretty much, but it should be even whiter. And the rings shouldn't be down in like that, they should be up on little—oh, yeah, all kinds of things. Next time.

MS. YAGER: I think we can wrap this up. It's going to expire in just a minute.

This is Jan Yager interviewing Betty Cooke in the Radisson Hotel at Cross Keys near her The Store, Ltd., in Baltimore, Maryland, on July 2, 2004, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disk number four, and this is session number two.

Betty, we had a nice dinner last night. I had a chance to meet with your husband, Bill Steinmetz. And you also brought me a pile of books and periodicals and things that I was able to take a look at. I had some observations and some questions, and I want to ask you about some of those things before we get into some of the other material.

One of the journals that you brought was the *Everyday Art Quarterly*, and it was referred to as a "guide to well-designed products." It was put out by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis [MN], which describes itself in this journal as a "progressive museum of the arts." It was Winter 1947. It was 20 cents, and $1.00 to subscribe for the year. I was interested in a number of things in the magazine because I feel that there was a real strong sense of advocacy at the Walker. And I wondered, was that unique or common to museums at the time?

MS. COOKE: That was an outstanding museum. I mean, it was one of the forerunners, I think, of—I mean, their publication crossed all lines. I mean, it was architecture, furniture, fabric, the whole game of good design—not the game, but the gamut of good design. And it was a small publication but we thought they did an excellent job of doing this. The only other ones were, like, *Interior Design* and the architectural magazines, but this covered everything.

MS. YAGER: In the back of the magazine, I was really—let me see if I can grab one of these. I was interested to see that in the back they listed—"Everyday Art in the magazine" they listed magazines throughout the country that had done something interesting in interiors, in furniture, in industrial design, construction, homes that were being built, and different magazine articles. They also listed exhibitions that were going on around the country. And there seemed to be a wonderful array. The Newark Museum, under $10 suggestions for Christmas gifts. "Newark of the Future." At the Brooklyn Museum, "The Artist in Social Communication." The Cooper Union. They have the Philadelphia Museum of Art, "A Pageant of Fashion, 18th to 20th Century."

I'm a little envious. I feel like there were a lot of things going on. It must have been sort of an exciting time.

MS. COOKE: It was wonderful because as we said before, there weren't many publications at the time. And of course I was extremely interested in this because I'm interested in all phases of what we call good design, which

is maybe a cliché now, but it was a very important term then. And to me, this little magazine represented a good review of all that's being done in all areas. And maybe there were others. I mean, the Walker Art Center. I don't know whether there were other magazines that that were that clear and precise.

MS. YAGER: One of the things I noticed in one of the journals that you have from 1948, you've underlined some of your favorite jewelers, and it looks as though you may have been planning your trip out West. And you have marked some of the jewelers. One of the things I thought was very interesting was that in the back of these magazines and in the back of the show catalogues, they would always list the person's name, address, and encourage the reader to contact the artist and purchase their work. I'm not as aware of that now, of museums and art centers taking that role on in the same way, real strong advocacy.

Let's see who you've marked for your trip. Harry Bertoia in La Jolla, California.

MS. COOKE: Oh, yes.

MS. YAGER: Margaret De Patta in San Francisco. Claire Falkenstein in Berkeley. Keith Monroe in Sausalito. And Caroline Rosene in San Francisco. And then you had circled some of the stores that obviously you thought might be worth a detour on your trip. You have Robert Kasper and Pacific Shop in San Francisco.

MS. COOKE: That's right.

MS. YAGER: Alexander Girard is listed in here, Grosse Point, Michigan. And then the Baldwin Kingrey, Inc. in Chicago, and New Design, Inc., in New York.

They really show interiors, with furniture and the household wares. And you were trying to insert jewelry into this. Actually, it looks as though there was jewelry exhibited. For instance, Baldwin Kingrey had Harry Bertoia, Martin Bennett jewelry. Sculpture and painting by Ward Bennett. Hugo Weber, Robert Tague, and Moholy-Nagy, Serge Chermayeff and others.

MS. COOKE: That's a powerful group. I mean, that's a beautiful collection.

MS. YAGER: So they had an enduring eye. And the New Design in New York had Morton and Farr jewelry; you had underlined that. I just thought that was kind of interesting and worth pointing out before we moved on a little bit more.

And then another thing I noticed in *Craft Horizons* magazine. This is autumn 1951. You seem to be sort of a natural archivist. You have all these. They're in wonderful condition. There's a full page for acknowledgement of prize-winning entries of the annual “Young Americans” competition in 1951. There are three pieces pictured by you. There is sterling silver and ebony, two brooches that have—well, I'm thinking bird motif, but maybe you should talk about them.

MS. COOKE: Yes, there's bird motif, abstract. Of course, it doesn't necessarily look—they even have it upside down, but that's fine because it's good either way you turn it. But this is not ebony, it's recessed, and that's oxidized in through there, so it's kind of a built-up box.

MS. YAGER: Ah, yes.

MS. COOKE: And, you know, with cross panels. And this is Plexiglas. That was one of the early uses of Plexiglas that I did. And we sawed it and drilled the holes all the way through, which wasn't easy because they're long pieces.

MS. YAGER: And they're curved.

MS. COOKE: And then we curved it. And it was interesting because I sent this to one exhibition and they took a picture of it, and they had the lights too close and the Plexiglas straightened out. So they returned it to me with these straight pieces, which was sort of interesting. So we had to, of course, heat it and curve it back. But Plexiglas was a nice thing to use. This happens to be ebony. So there are three ways of getting a black area, and the simple contrast and differences of proportion is important.

MS. YAGER: Today you're wearing black and white. It would suit these pieces.

MS. COOKE: It's my professional attire. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: And also, in the advertisements of the magazine there seems to be an awful lot of attention paid to fiber and textiles and weaving and sort of some shift in the demographics a little bit.

MS. COOKE: Well, the emphasis on contemporary furniture and the home is so strong, you know, that the fiber

was a natural. Jewelry was way down the list.

MS. YAGER: Yes. That was one thing that I was a little curious about in that there was such a strong emphasis of placing the work within the home, and yet when you see the jewelry presented, it's presented in a beautiful, formal way, but detached from the body and detached from humans. You display your work that way, and yet you talk about such a strong bond with the people that you make the work for.

MS. COOKE: Well, we try to let everybody try so many things on. We have a big mirror so they feel the—it looks fine in the case, but it looks much better on a person as it moves and so forth. I remember saying to somebody in one of the stores that I went to—because I thought that the fashion, furniture, textiles, home environment should coordinate with what one is wearing, what clothes one is wearing or the style of the jewelry, and so it kind of all goes together. Shouldn't coordinate, but I mean if somebody has a strong taste, it all ties in. We were talking about having mannequins around the store with the jewelry on the mannequins, showing the relationship to a person in relation to the furniture and the fabric and the glass, sort of the whole environmental unit, you know.

MS. YAGER: Yeah. Sometimes I wonder, if more women were involved in the exhibit and design of things if there might be more awareness of the wearer in that.

MS. COOKE: Well, you know, Bard [The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture] did that exhibition of women designers [*Women Designers in the USA, 1900-2000: Diversity and Difference]*. You probably saw that.

MS. YAGER: Unfortunately, I didn't. Did you go over to see it?

MS. COOKE: I have the catalogue. Mm-hmm. I wanted to see it because I was in it.

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: And it brought out a lot of women who worked for, let's see, Jack [Lenor] Larsen. I mean, he had some women designers with him and so forth. But it was interesting—pretty conservative way back in 2000.

MS. YAGER: Who were some of the other—

MS. COOKE: I don't remember. Of course, Florence Knoll was there. But her name was known. No, I don't remember the names. But the point of it was to credit the women that possibly were behind a company or a partnership.

MS. YAGER: Yeah, and that it introduced a different perspective to things.

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm.

MS. YAGER: I'm looking at one of the catalogues, *Fiber, Clay and Metal*, 1953, and I'm really struck by the long list of prizes and the long list of purchases. I'm assuming that because this is in the catalogue, that maybe by the purchases they mean things that the institution purchased for display. There seem to be, I don't know, 30, 25 purchases and awards, an awful lot of strong validation for and encouragement for artists that were active at the time.

MS. COOKE: Well, somebody saw what was happening and thought it was valuable to collect all these things at the Walker Art Center. I wonder who's behind the whole concept, the big push they gave to modern things.

MS. YAGER: I know that there were some early advocates. There was a woman [Elsa Ulbricht] responsible for inserting design into the WPA [Works Progress Administration] program on handcrafts and design. She was coming out of Wisconsin. And these were, you know, much earlier things that really set a tone, especially in the Midwest. But they clearly felt the need to spread the word across the country, and it worked.

MS. COOKE: Yep. We're here.

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

Let's see. One of the things that I wanted to talk about is, in your exhibition in 1995, in your retrospective at the Maryland Institute College of Art, Richard Martin, who was a curator—the late Richard Martin, unfortunately—spoke at the opening of your exhibition. He was from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

MS. COOKE: He was in the Fashion Department.

MS. YAGER: And he brings up an issue that I often wonder about. You know, he very candidly—I mean, his first

line is, "Basically, I hate jewelry. I hate to admit that I approach jewelry with some anxiety." And he's clearly struggling with how to relate to jewelry. I've noticed that often when people are trying—"Is it like architecture, is it like furniture? Maybe if I think of it as art or maybe if I think of it as sculpture, I'll get more comfortable with understanding it." I don't know if any of those mysteries will be completely articulated or solved, but how do you try to describe jewelry? What do you relate it to closely?

MS. COOKE: Let's see. I think of it first as—well, I won't say first, but I think a lot about the people that I may be doing it for if it's a special order, the kind of person, whether they're sedate or they're perky, or they're tall or thin, because I think it just is a way of starting; that I'm going to present something that will hang on or be with this person. At times I think it's very important to know what the person is wearing related to the jewelry. Not that everybody has a piece of jewelry for every dress, but there are styles in each individual, and I can see that. You just know your customer well enough. Or even when somebody walks in the store, you can tell exactly what—you know which clothes to pick out for them and you know what jewelry you think would relate to them.

I'm not sure that's answering your question. But the fact that people notice jewelry is important in the first place. And some people don't. I mean, some people don't notice much at all, visual, and I'm always intrigued with how many people do notice what somebody is wearing and say something about it, which becomes a compliment, usually. And it's nice. You know, you see hundreds of people a day, and you have the sight to say, "Gee, this really looks good on you," or "That's an interesting piece."

MS. YAGER: Richard Martin spoke about that your work was of a scale, that it was body scaled, and that it sharpened our sense of the person who wears the jewelry and sharpened our sense of the definition of art.

It also is a vehicle for your expression as well as the wearer's. Some of your work has been described as action pieces. And he's got some really wonderful descriptions in here, you know, referring to your work as “buoyant” and “having a romp.” It is a way of expressing yourself more. And yet your work has a restrainedness. I don't feel like it is as intrusive as some jewelry could be. It also doesn't often—I mean, I guess you did mention a 4-carat diamond, but normally speaking, I don't think it's—

MS. COOKE: Well, I did it a very subtle way. [Laughs.] It wasn't flashy.

MS. YAGER: More as a punctuation point.

MS. COOKE: Right.

MS. YAGER: I mean, sometimes jewelry has been used, you know, for status, for value, for wealth. And those don't seem to be issues that really concern you.

MS. COOKE: It is very light, my jewelry, light meaning kind of free. Maybe that's why a lot of men like it, because it's not a heavy thing to think about. I mean, it's a very simple statement and it's clear what it is, and they'll say, "Gee, I like that; I don't have to worry about it." You know what I mean? Because some jewelry is very complicated, and wonderful, but this just happens to be not complicated.

MS. YAGER: So do you have men wearing your jewelry?

MS. COOKE: No, I mean the men that buy it. They will tell me, "I'm so glad you're here because it's easy to buy this. I enjoy buying it. I like it myself." And of course his wife or girlfriend, whoever, likes it. But they're at ease buying—maybe they're at ease buying all jewelry, I don't know. I just see the ones who come in our store. But they will say, "I'm glad you're here, because every Christmas I know what to get." And they like it. You know, "Oh, I like that."

MS. YAGER: So most often it's worn by women?

MS. COOKE: Yes.

MS. YAGER: And how often is it purchased by women versus purchased by men for women?

MS. COOKE: A lot of it is purchased by men. Maybe, what, not 50 percent, but close to it; 30 percent. And they do a lot of special orders for their friends, too. I have another customer that has a birthday, an anniversary and—what's the third thing?—three things right in a row, and he's been doing this for about six years now. And she loves them all. She has a lot of jewelry now, three pieces right in the same month. And he enjoys it because he feels like he's part of it. He comes up with the idea that either she wants a ring or a bracelet or whatever it is and she wants something chunky. That's all he will tell me, she likes chunky jewelry. Well, I don't make chunky jewelry, but I make my version of chunky jewelry.

MS. YAGER: So if you have clients coming back to you repeatedly year after year, that would make you continue to have to vary the work.

MS. COOKE: To be different. And I, of course, keep a record of what they have. After a few years. I mean, you don't know how long it's going to last, but it's important. What did I give her last time? What did I give her the time before?

MS. YAGER: So you would pull out the file?

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm.

MS. YAGER: And then do you show that to them or do you just remember and then you can guide them?

MS. COOKE: I would show it to them. Well, most of these pieces we would have an appraisal for, which we write—we would have the appraisal, a Xerox, and drawings. I keep it all together.

MS. YAGER: And the over-the-top collector would have how many pieces?

MS. COOKE: Oh, I don't know. I think I said 50 yesterday?

MS. YAGER: Yes, I did ask you that.

MS. COOKE: I hope she doesn't wear them all at one time. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: I read a quote from you saying that—I think this may have been referring to when you were wholesaling work—"I realized I didn't want to sell them because I didn't get to know who bought them." You know, I think you were referring to that it was too removed from the customer.

MS. COOKE: Right. I guess maybe that's an "out" because I really don't want to get into heavy wholesale unless somebody else takes care of it. But it's nice to know, when people call from out of town and ask for something. You know, they moved out of town and we don't have a catalogue, so I can communicate with drawings. But it's hard.

MS. YAGER: And Richard Martin also referred to some of the roles of jewelry that he felt that you really capitalized on, which were time and memory and affection. A lot of your work, as you mentioned, are markers of events or years or time gone by. You had said on the phone one time that jewelry was the communication point for you with your customers and then for your customers with the receiver. Is that unique to jewelry?

MS. COOKE: I think it is. Don't you? I mean, certainly all the advertisements play on that. "A diamond is forever." And anniversaries and so forth.

MS. YAGER: It seems to be more of a repository of emotions.

MS. COOKE: Right. I guess it's hard to give a chair for somebody's anniversary—[laughs]—or a lamp for a birthday. Maybe it would be very nice, but you'd have to be sure of the recipient. But a ring or a piece of jewelry is pretty nice for some people. Now everyone, of course, doesn't appreciate jewelry that way.

MS. YAGER: Now another thing that you have referred to was transforming the wearer. And I remember one time I was at someone's house and she was a very passionate jewelry collector, and she had a basket of sort of old costume jewelry that she didn't really care about so much anymore. She put it all in a basket, and any time kids came over, they could play with the jewelry in this basket.

MS. COOKE: That's nice.

MS. YAGER: And I was really intrigued to see these little kids go up and—you know, this one little girl, she was probably three years old, and she would put that necklace over her head and around her neck and it altered her. Do you see that?

MS. COOKE: Yes, I see it. You mentioned children, and you see it in children a lot. Somebody will come in with three daughters. And one will go over to the one area; and the other one will just glue herself to the jewelry case to the extent that, you know, I'll pull out diamond rings and let her try things on because she's so attached to it; and another one will just, you know, ask to go outside and play.

Maybe you were always interested in jewelry. I wasn't. I didn't wear it, adorn.

MS. YAGER: I was always interested in small things. Didn't have to be worn.

When you talk about pulling them out of the case, I'm interested in—there seems to be an importance about touching it, being able to hold it. Maybe being able to put it on. But I think just touching it's a big thing. Do you have any idea why, what that is?

MS. COOKE: Well, they're small things and they're things that you may like to see all around. I mean, if it's a ring, just the feel of a ring on your finger. And it looks so different, of course, on your finger than in the case. And then it's an immediate—often I'll suggest people go to a mirror to see a ring on their finger. It's a funny thing because, you know, you have a little finger with a ring on it, and I'll say, "I'll do this, move my hand around," and they move their hand around. It becomes something important.

MS. YAGER: For a moment they become the viewer instead of the wearer.

MS. COOKE: Right. "What does it look like?" And then, "Oh, that looks good!" Well, all the neck pieces look so much better on, and it's surprising how many people say, "Well, yeah, I like that," but they put it on and then it becomes, like you say, something you really like or you decide that, no, it's too long or too short.

MS. YAGER: I was always struck that I could have an array of necklaces but people would gravitate to one. Do you find that?

MS. COOKE: Yes, their favorite. Yeah.

MS. YAGER: And they're unwavering in whatever they're drawn to.

MS. COOKE: Right. Well, that's why it's important to be with customers, I think, because you get reactions to things. You know, why do you like a circle better than a square? You know, or what is it about a circle as opposed to an irregular shape? That sort of goes back to school: like, which one would you all pick as the finest; which arrangement is the best; and why do you arrange—like I arrange those discs in sporadic ways. I just do what I think looks good. But why isn't it every two inches or three inches, and why isn't it done another way?

MS. YAGER: And why are people drawn to it in one way and not the other?

MS. COOKE: Right.

MS. YAGER: And actually that is a huge advantage having your work on display, having people come up and see, and then you learn from what they're drawn to and what they never notice.

MS. COOKE: The only difficulty I have is I think of other ways it could be that aren't there. And I shouldn't do that because I get myself into something. I'll say, you know, it could be this way, that way, and I'm onto another whole piece and they're standing there with the original. [Laughs.] And it can be very awkward sometimes. You know, that could be done in three metals and on two sides and go around the back, it could hang over your shoulder, it can do all these things.

MS. YAGER: Yeah. I remember that there were a number of pieces you had that hung down the back.

MS. COOKE: Down the back. Sure. I like that. And I like things that can be worn different ways; you can double it over and get a different effect.

MS. YAGER: And some were diagonal—did they go shoulder to the opposite?

MS. COOKE: Right.

MS. YAGER: So the body became a—

MS. COOKE: Display.

MS. YAGER: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. COOKE: I was at a fair one time and somebody had one of my chains on. And I had a chain, and it was different but just for fun, I turned mine over my shoulder diagonal because I didn't want to repeat her chain, so I wore it a different way. And she said, "Oh, that's a nice way to wear that!" A lot of people are creative, certainly, with what they put on.

MS. YAGER: And these allow creativity without getting involved in the design. I mean, there's some flexibility that empowers the wearer but still keeps your—let's see. So the wearer takes on an active role.

MS. COOKE: Very much so.

MS. YAGER: Now, I'm trying to think of what some of the critical parts in your career have been. One of them clearly has been visionary patrons. You showed me just a little while ago a news article with Mr. Rouse. And in his office on the back wall was—because he was, you know, a city planner or developer, I'm not sure exactly what title. Can you talk about the piece that he had behind his desk?

MS. COOKE: Sure. He wasn't a city planner; he was a developer, except he was planning to build one of the first new cities. But his whole interest was in cities and how they work for people. And he had moved into a new building on Saratoga Street here and he wanted something for his office. That's how it started. And he said, "How about a map?"

Well, that was the key to the whole thing, so I had to think "map." And "map" can be anything, if you think about it. Of course, now we have so many more materials. See, I'm off on what it could be. It could be plastic and glass and light. But at that time I made this map of brass square tubing with steel wires that came out. The main arteries of the city were the heavy brass tubing, and the secondary roads were steel, and the third were copper, I believe. But from a distance it just looked like a piece of sculpture, a maze, a combination of different kinds of wire going in interesting directions. But they were accurate. I had Charles Street and I had North Avenue and I had the Harbor. I had it all there. But you wouldn't see it as that unless it was in his office and you knew what he was all about. It was a success because it was an interesting panel and it had some meaning behind it. It was symbolic of him and the city.

MS. YAGER: And there seemed to be a circle of energy of different people who think, oh, this could go here, this person with this person. Is that happening now, as well, or was that a unique time?

MS. COOKE: Well, the gentleman we're talking about, Mr. Rouse, was unique. It may happen in this company now. I don't know. I'm not aware of it. But sure, there are creative patrons out there. There have to be or we wouldn't be getting anyplace. I mean, I am only involved with a few of these people, but—like we know Walter Sondheim, who happens to be 95 now, one of the finest city planners in Baltimore. And he still has a spark of —"You know what we could do? We could do this, we could do that." Dreamers, I guess. They were and we all are. Visionary, as you said.

MS. YAGER: I saw a film called "My Father the Architect" [“My Architect,” 2003.]

MS. COOKE: Oh, yes. Wasn't it good?

MS. YAGER: It was wonderful. And I loved the one part where there were two construction managers at a museum and they were talking about when Mr. Kahn was—he would say, "Okay, okay, here's how I want you to do this, and I want this wall—and "Oh, come on. We did that yesterday. It's already done. It's done." And they were referring to him as, "Well, you know, he is an artist! They just never stop." And then the other guy said, "Kind of like the Eveready battery rabbit."

MS. COOKE: Right. Here we go, on to the next one before the first is finished.

MS. YAGER: But that's also an energizing thing.

MS. COOKE: Well, we mentioned before that sometime you do something, make a drawing for something, and the drawing itself is satisfying even though you don't get to make the piece. I mean, I have a lot of pieces I would like to make, but I can't make it all, physically, but someday a customer will come along and I'll think, that's the piece for that customer. And it works, usually.

MS. YAGER: Do you have all of your drawings in one area over the years? I think we talked about that a little bit, some were on napkins and things. Do you put them in books to show customers?

MS. COOKE: I'm afraid I don't. I have them all over the place. But yes, I have some that show types of jewelry. In fact, I draw a very strange, like, neck, and have drawings around it to show where it could go and how it could be. But I've thought of working from drawings because then you give the customer more variety. They can pick what they want.

MS. YAGER: I also have read that you design with paper, cutting it, I'm assuming.

MS. COOKE: Oh, yes. Cut and curl. It's funny how impressive that is to people. I'll draw something and—when I say draw, I'm talking about very simple drawings, because they have the jewelry to relate to. I show them a piece of jewelry and say it could be this kind of thing, only these proportions. And some people still don't get it, so I'll get out paper and cut pieces and hold it and give some dimension to it. And, "Oh, that's very exciting!" [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: Do you ever work in any other kind of—like clay or wax or—

MS. COOKE: No, I'm not a clay, wax person. Sometimes I have to work in wax if it's a built-up piece. But it can be paper and glue, Styrofoam, stick pins in it.

MS. YAGER: Do you save those?

MS. COOKE: I have some of them. Some of them are just little pieces of sculpture, really.

MS. YAGER: What's the best advice anyone ever gave you?

MS. COOKE: The best advice? Related to what?

MS. YAGER: Artistically or businesswise.

MS. COOKE: Do what you like. Make sure you like it before you let anybody have it, because it will come back to you sometime—[laughs]—and you might not be happy. No, just do what you like and feel that these are your own. I mean, it has to be your own thinking, right? I knew somebody once who liked to copy. You know, she'd see something that's a good idea; "I think I'll do that." I couldn't understand how her thought process worked that she would think to take something from somebody else instead of doing it herself and feeling good about it.

MS. YAGER: Well, I think that copying, it's sort of like a shortcut, and it's really easy.

MS. COOKE: Sure.

MS. YAGER: Creating and inventing, it's hard work. Do you think it's hard work?

MS. COOKE: Sure it's hard.

MS. YAGER: I mean, it's something that you really have to hone and develop.

MS. COOKE: You have to find something that you personally think of that is—as I say, I'm always waiting for the surprise. I can't wait to come up with something that I've never done before. And it will be mine. Of course, you might be influenced, because we do live in a big world, but you know when it's yours and you're sincere about it.

MS. YAGER: Do you seek out historical models of—

MS. COOKE: Not really.

MS. YAGER: —whatever you're looking at? Do you—so you—

MS. COOKE: No. I can get very excited, like when I go to Walters Museum and see some things that I'll think are wonderful, whether it's a Greek mirror or what it might be. And I often think, "Gee, I wish I'd thought of that"—[laughs]—if I'd been back in those days. Or maybe I would have, if I'd lived in that period. But it doesn't—often somebody will say do you get your inspiration from something. And I don't—I don't think I get my inspiration from anything, you just do it.

MS. YAGER: What kind of things inspire you or give you pleasure to look at?

MS. COOKE: Well, I'm very close to the world of nature. I mean, I can be outside—not that I do clouds—but I guess clouds to me are a very exciting thing to see, which has nothing to do with my jewelry. But there's a freedom about it and a motion and an excitement. I also like storms, I like lightning. I like all that kind of thing.

MS. YAGER: Constantly changing things.

MS. COOKE: And I like little things, little insects, little—I like all the world of nature.

But that wasn't the question. What gets me excited?

MS. YAGER: Or gives you pleasure.

MS. COOKE: Obviously art in all forms, whether it's Shaker or whether it's Amish, or whether it's Calder or whether it's Noguchi.

MS. YAGER: Do you collect things? Do you have any type of collections?

MS. COOKE: Things—I collect all kinds of things! [Laughs.] Precious things and non-precious things.

MS. YAGER: Give me some examples of things that you collect.

MS. YAGER: Well, of course I collect rocks and pebbles and grasses and seed pods. But I don't draw them or anything like that; I just like to look at them. And then we collect—my husband and I have a big collection of decoys.

MS. YAGER: Fish decoys? Duck decoys?

MS. COOKE: We have fish and birds. And then I'll collect interesting things, like I have a little wonderful sheet of brass with holes in it, in fact, two sheets of brass with holes in it that spin around and overlap. And what it is, it's a stencil or a form that you put around buttons. The British, when they had to polish the buttons on their suits, they had this little gadget that goes around to keep the polish from getting on the suit. And it's the prettiest piece of—it could be jewelry. But it's something that works and hinges and moves.

MS. YAGER: Now, where do you find these things?

MS. COOKE: Antique stores, junk shops, sometimes I see things in catalogues. If I see something in a catalogue, I might cut the picture out and never get the object because objects take up space.

MS. YAGER: And that would be somewhat satisfying?

MS. COOKE: Right.

MS. YAGER: Do you need to keep it visible to you? Do you need it on the wall or do you have it in a file?

MS. COOKE: Well, they go in piles—especially architecture. I mean, I have so many clippings of details—stone walls, heavy beams, rocks, steel structures that are beautiful. I guess that's all sculpture, really. I mean, just—I collect wood too. I have big timbers and things that I can't throw away.

MS. YAGER: Big timbers?

MS. COOKE: They're beautiful. This barn we had, had a lot of timber taken down, and obviously planks of wood. I have a wonderful sheet of walnut, another sheet of maple burl—I mean, all these things.

MS. YAGER: How large are they?

MS. COOKE: They're not like exhibition, they're just stacked against a barn wall. Eight feet tall, a foot wide. I've sort of got that as a collection. It's not a serious collection. We haven't documented it.

MS. YAGER: Yes, no—

MS. COOKE: It's a pleasure to walk by and say, "Gee, that's nice."

MS. YAGER: Things that you just have to have around yourself.

MS. COOKE: That's right. And somebody else might say, "Why don't you get rid of all the junk?"

But, of course, some things are very nice. One of my favorite things is a little ivory box with little tiny gold dots in it, you know. And just to know how somebody made that beautiful little ivory box, it used to hold toothpicks, with little velvet lining, I mean it's a very fine little piece—a little gold hinge.

MS. YAGER: Where do you think it's from?

MS. COOKE: Probably Victorian. It's a pretty little thing. You know, little things like that, and big things. Another thing we have that's very nice is—came from Baltimore Street. They used to have a shooting gallery, a big steel structure with all the little birds on it that you'd shoot at and the birds would flip over. So it has like 55 doves, little white doves. We collect birdhouses, Victorian birdhouses. All kinds of things that are interesting. Some design items, and some are just somebody's expression, whether it's a little Mexican clay piece or --

MS. YAGER: Describe—you're in transition right now. Describe your ideal studio.

MS. COOKE: I guess it might be in two pieces. One piece should be stark and pure and open, so that if you wanted to work on something that it was right there and all yours and you were completely involved with it. And the other place would be full of all kinds of ideas and clever pieces. I mean, how many pieces of metal do you collect that you want to use someday? I mean, I still have brass and copper and all sorts of things that, to me, would be something that could be something, and I enjoy them. And stones, of course, lots of stones. Good stones.

MS. YAGER: Pebbles or cut stones?

MS. COOKE: Well, some are cut stones. I like black opals. I have a collection. Not a big collection, but I have some black opals that are waiting for the right customer. And pieces of other material. Pieces of wood; little pieces that would turn into jewelry, not the planks. That's a lot for material. [Laughs.] But they're all in drawers

and they're all safe, and you open a drawer and you have this vision of things that could be.

MS. YAGER: You were quoted as saying one time at—I believe it was at the Maryland Art Institute—that it's the big steps that give life real meaning. What do you consider some of the big steps that you have taken?

MS. COOKE: Well, I think when I was in college the big step was when I went out on my own and actually had space of my own. No reflection on the family, but it was something I had control of and enjoyed just being in, and that was a big step. And I guess getting into retail was a big step because it changed our lifestyle a lot. Not sure if it was for better or for worse, but it changed.

And I guess it's time for another big step, which could be very interesting in not having as many physical responsibilities and staff and things like that. I mean, I look forward to it.

MS. YAGER: When you talk about the decision to go into retail, so many people that have—I'm just trying to think of how many examples there are of—you know, there—the academic route is one, the retail route is another, and then another would be sort of manufacturing and making things and letting someone else take care of the retail. How would it have been if you did one of the others? What do you think would have—

MS. COOKE: Well, I guess when I was doing it I'm not sure who would have taken care of it. You know, as we said, there weren't that many galleries or places to send this, and I was doing rather humble things. I wasn't doing expensive pieces that would go into, quote, a "jewelry store." That's where I got on this tangent of other stores should carry jewelry. But I've often thought what would have happened if we didn't have the store; you know, how it would have developed in a different way. But I probably would have gone the route of maybe having exhibitions periodically myself, which I still might think of doing because then—you know, now that I have a mailing list of people that I know would be interested in seeing it in a different environment and a different way, and pieces they have never seen before. That could be very satisfying.

But, see, the retail, we thought it would be easy. We were each teaching two days a week and thought, well, you have somebody take care of the store two days a week, and then you have a day off. But it just didn't work out that way, because—it may be not the store's fault as much as especially my approach. I wanted to see the people that came in. I wanted to be there, to explain it, because we feel we have—when we started, it was almost like a gallery for us. You know, we wanted to show people these wonderful things we'd found. And in a small way, it was a way to educate or to get people to like the things that we liked. Of course, we knew they were good, and that that was the main thing.

MS. YAGER: I often think that the artist—you know, when you have—when the client has the opportunity to speak to the artist directly, they get undiluted understanding of the work. And that's hard when there are layers of other people in between.

MS. COOKE: Yeah.

MS. YAGER: But it's not—not everyone has chosen that. I mean, the balance of people that have chosen to be academic and how—what advantages or disadvantages are there in choosing those different paths, from your perspective?

MS. COOKE: Well, I think the combination of teaching—not for me—but to teach and produce at the same time on your own. I don't know; I think that would be wonderful. I mean, I was not—did not want to be a teacher after a while.

MS. YAGER: What was the—

MS. COOKE: I mean, I had done my time, and I thought, I can do other things better than teaching. It was fine while—I was there like 20 years.

And—but I of course know a lot of teachers at the Maryland Institute who have sabbaticals, and I'm always jealous of their sabbatical. [Laughs.] And they have the summer off. A dear friend that I camped with was an educator. She was the provost, University of Oregon. And she always had summer off to go to Europe or do whatever she wanted. But no, I had to be tied to the business. But I think that's—that would be the best way to go, where you had a time period completely on your own.

MS. YAGER: But do you think that focusing solely on one thing has enhanced the—I mean, sometimes I wonder how people balance all the different things.

MS. COOKE: Well, my balance is complicated, because I'm interested in areas other than jewelry, which is not—there's nothing wrong with that, but I've become very interested in—I mean, now we're restoring a barn. That's a completely different thing, except it's a design solution to something. And it's designing space—

MS. YAGER: It's a design challenge at this point.

MS. COOKE: Right. And I'd better hurry up. But you know that you can be interested in all these different things, and of course that's exciting.

MS. YAGER: Well, and actually you had spoken last evening about—what was it you had said? That in addition to designing the bowling alleys and the church and—that you had also done the interior of a boat and—

MS. COOKE: Oh, yeah.

MS. YAGER: You know, I think there's probably been some real pleasure in continued pushing of growth, in doing so many different things.

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm.

MS. YAGER: It seems to me, after meeting your husband, that there's a real—there's a formula of success in the partnership that the two of you have formed. Is that—

MS. COOKE: Well, we're independent, in a way. And yet I think we both have a similar taste and style and design approach. And that's the real strong part of it—like when we did a boat, you would know that we had done that boat. I mean, even though we had never done a boat, I mean, it's—the principles are all the same. Have you seen a teak boat without any decoration, without any color, without anything? It's the most beautiful thing in the world. You know, we had the opportunity to go inside this teak boat. Everything was beautiful. And at first I didn't even want to touch it, because it was so pure. But then you do what has to be done, and you approach it the same way. What is the simplest form and what can I do to enhance this form? And so that's what you do.

But he's a designer on his own. He does advertising. He likes graphic design. And he also paints. And he doesn't get involved with the jewelry at all, except he'll do the advertising. But now and then, I will say, "Gee, I have four things, and I have to decide which one." I will ask him, but often he doesn't even want to say. I can tell. He'll say, "Well, whichever one you like," which means he doesn't want to be part of it, or he'll say they're all good. That's a big help! [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: I also got the sense from him that you're somewhat strong-willed and that, for instance, when there's a commission, that even if people have an opinion, that they're not going to be able to get you to do it unless you know it's good yourself.

MS. COOKE: That's true, yeah.

MS. YAGER: I mean, I think—

MS. COOKE: I would be ashamed—

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: You know, it usually works its way out. Nobody is going to ask you to do anything you don't want to—well, I guess they do, but I don't have to do that. I don't think anybody's asked me to do anything that I couldn't work it around so that it becomes something that I would be pleased with and they would be pleased with.

MS. YAGER: So it has your mark.

MS. COOKE: Yeah. I might suggest—often somebody will come and ask me to copy something. They'll come in with a piece of paper, and I'll refer them to somebody that would do that. But you know, I don’t have time for that.

MS. YAGER: Do you repair your own work?

MS. COOKE: Oh, I'll say I do. [Laughs.] Fifty years, things happen to it.

MS. YAGER: I used to not charge for repairs; then finally I started thinking it was just like, you know there's too much work out there in the world.

MS. COOKE: Well, they get driven over in the dishwasher and they get broken. And the most difficult thing is when somebody loses something and they want me to make it again. Like somebody lost a star pin. Well, I have showed her Xeroxes of—I must have done hundreds, and they're all a little bit different. But she can't find it. [Laughs.] So I—said, "Tell you what, I'll make a few, and you see how close we come."

And sure, I repair it, and if they come in the store and their jewelry is tarnished, I'll polish it too because it makes a happy situation.

MS. YAGER: And would you prefer that you were the repairer rather than them bringing it to some other jeweler, or—

MS. COOKE: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Now I have somebody that does a lot of soldering and repair for me—have an earring back break off, that sort of thing. And if it's a simple thing to do, I have somebody do that. But it—and the stringing, eventually some of those pieces. But I could do all that.

MS. YAGER: The engineering of how the pieces are strung is really pretty wonderful.

MS. COOKE: Well, sometime they'll be unstrung, and they bring a pile of tubes in and they'll just say do what you want. [Laughs.] So I'll do something else.

MS. YAGER: Let's see, I have a quote here: "The simpler they get, the more I like them." That's sort of one of your design philosophies.

Let's see, I'm going to go through my notes a little bit and see if I—oh, I wanted to know what magazines, journals and newspapers you subscribe to today.

MS. COOKE: Well, I think I get all of the jewelry magazines. I get the European one—what is it called—*European Jewelry*?

MS. YAGER: There are a few of them.

MS. COOKE: I forgot what it's called.

MS. YAGER: *Gold and Silver*?

MS. COOKE: *Gold and Silver*—

MS. YAGER: *GZ*? There's an awful lot—

MS. COOKE: Yeah, I've forgotten—and then also, I've forgotten what it's called—it's a handsome magazine. And I get your jewelry magazines, just because I like to see what's going on—and often have good articles on pearls or, you know, materials. And then we get a lot of—we get *Architectural Digest*, and I get *Nature Conservancy*. That all comes in too—*Sierra Club*.

But a lot of the other magazines we don't—we'll pick up, like some antique magazines or art magazines, *ARTnews*. It depends on what's in the magazine. We used to subscribe to those, but it gets too powerful, you know, because we keep them all. And even *National Geographic* we stopped because we have—[laughs]—40 years of it, but it's a wonderful magazine. But—

MS. YAGER: How about newspapers?

MS. COOKE: No, we just read the daily newspaper and the *New York Times* now and then. Then we get a lot of trade magazines through the store—you know, the designer magazines and merchandise. And of course, I get SNAG [Society of North American Goldsmiths].

MS. YAGER: *Metalsmith*—

MS. COOKE: *Metalsmith* and *Craft Horizons*, and I'm using the folk art—I think it's called *Folk Art*, that's all it's called.

MS. YAGER: And *Craft Horizons*; that would be *American Craft* now, yeah.

MS. COOKE: Sure, sure. Get all that.

MS. YAGER: *Ornament*?

MS. COOKE: No, I don't subscribe to *Ornament*. I pick it up. But it's a very good magazine. I have over the period, and I've even subscribed to, like you said, *Arizona Highways* and *Native Americans*. There are some wonderful magazines out there. And we do—get something called *Dwell*, and *Nest*. These are way-out sort of interior magazines.

MS. YAGER: Yes. Yes.

MS. COOKE: And there are local magazines, *Style* and *Baltimore*, that are very good. We get those.

MS. YAGER: Let's see. Where do you get your ideas for your work? I think we've talked about that. Have your sources of inspiration changed over the years?

MS. COOKE: Not really. It is strange how you think of things all the time, in the car, and sometimes I'll just think of something that, gee, that would be nice. You can't stop it. It just happens. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: It's the Eveready rabbit.

MS. COOKE: Yeah.

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

MS. COOKE: Not too much.

MS. YAGER: Well, I was trying to think about this. I mean, I do think social, as far as a certain statement that—you know, status or wealth or, I guess in some ways, but you don't do narrative, you don't do—

MS. COOKE: No. Well, with a flag I did.

MS. YAGER: The flag and the animals.

MS. COOKE: I guess I would if someone asked me to do something. I mean, I think I mentioned I've done trademarks and symbols for people, for organizations.

MS. YAGER: And just one thing that I wanted to—we had talked a little bit about the plastic boxes that were in your store.

MS. COOKE: Oh, yeah.

MS. YAGER: And that they still are in your store.

MS. COOKE: Yeah.

MS. YAGER: And you mentioned something about a special commission.

MS. COOKE: Right. Well, we bought so many of those plastic boxes, and it's just a pure, simple, inexpensive item, but I guess I like them because it stirs the mind a little bit. You know, what do you do with a plastic box? One, you can look at it; and two, you can put things in it. We used to have a list of about 400 things you could do with a plastic box. You can group them and make a centerpiece. You can put one in the other and put it by the window. You can do all these things—I mean, you can do a whole thing on what to do with these colored plastic boxes. And they were so new back in the '50s—'60s.

So we had them so long that the fellow, Alan Spiegelman (sp) in New York, said to us—the man who made, I think, his millionth plastic box—he asked me to do one in gold. So we did a gold sheet fabricated, quote, "plastic box." And it was fun—matte and shiny. You know, did different surfaces on different areas.

MS. YAGER: And that was to mark the occasion of—

MS. COOKE: It was to mark the occasion of his—and he treasured that. He said he kept it in a case. Maybe it was in another plastic box, I don't know.

MS. YAGER: It's a wonderful story.

What involvement have you had with national craft organizations? Ones that come to mind are the Society of North American Goldsmiths, SNAG.

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm. Well, I, you know, keep up on what they're doing. They're a wonderful organization. I don't get to all their conferences, unfortunately, but I've been to a couple. And I did speak at one.

MS. YAGER: And you spoke at one, which I thought was wonderful.

MS. COOKE: I just think it's great what—I admire people who go to them all and participate, but I guess our business keeps me from that. I belong to ACC [American Craft Council], of course, and have been honored to be a fellow. But there again, I simply keep up with that they're doing. I'm not a group person, I guess.

MS. YAGER: And then locally, I think the Washington Craft Guild—no, it's the Washington Guild of Goldsmiths.

MS. COOKE: Guild of Goldsmiths. They just did their exhibition. They went to Moscow, which is very nice—was very nice.

MS. YAGER: And it's called "Two Capitals"?

MS. COOKE: "Two Capitals," Washington and Moscow. I was honored that they asked me to do that, and it was fun to think of it there. I did not go. I don't think anybody went. But it was a nice opportunity.

MS. YAGER: A wonderful catalogue.

MS. COOKE: Yeah.

MS. YAGER: It's great.

Let's see. Working processes. Do you prefer to work alone or do you like to have other people around? Have there been times when you've had a studio where people have been at another bench in the room?

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm. When I was in Tyson Street I had four or five people. At different times, not all—I mean, sometimes it was all of us, but it got crowded. And then I also have for many years had somebody that would come in every Friday. He would do—we'd string and we'd do some assembly; you know, just devote that day to get all the parts out. But it's kind of fun and creative. I would lay it out. He just would do—whatever I would lay out he would string up. Now I do all that.

MS. YAGER: What are some of your favorite tools and processes?

MS. COOKE: I love to—well, I like a lot of it. I even like to file. [Laughs.] I tell you, there's something nice about filing and polishing. And I love my pliers. And I have a tool, a shear, a small shear that I love because I don't know how many times we've sawed circles in half and quarters, and the shear is just wonderful. And my tools are very simple. That's about it. The grinder. I have a grinder and a sander and, of course, a torch. But—so I don't know if there's a favorite. There are favorite pliers, of course. You always get attached—

MS. YAGER: Yeah, yeah.

MS. COOKE: —to a certain one because of what they do for you. [Laughs.] And I even like my little vise.

MS. YAGER: What kind of torch do you use?

MS. COOKE: Well, I haven't actually—I haven't soldered for a long time. At first, I had an old acetylene torch, which I loved, you know. And what else did I have? I hadn't thought of a favorite. I guess the pliers are your favorite because it's a direct-hand thing and I do so many things with them. And a saw. You still use a hand saw. I mean, at one time we had a power saw, but it didn't do as well. So a little old hand saw.

MS. YAGER: I noticed when we were in the Store Ltd. that the fixtures for closing and locking all the jewelry cases were brass and clearly hand-made by yourself or someone.

MS. COOKE: Right. We made them. Sure, we made them.

MS. YAGER: Yeah. It's—I think that metal—jewelry and metal skills are so useful. I always feel it would be great if everyone knew how to do --

MS. COOKE: —knew how to do that. It's surprising how many people don't even know what a little bit of polish does, yeah; toothpaste, even. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: The cases—I designed those cases, of course. And when we first opened, they had little white porcelain knobs on each drawer, and the business and the customers were such that they'd open the drawer and it—not exactly self-service, but they were open. And then, of course, we found out that's not what you should do. [Laughs.] So then I designed the locks that we have now, and they were very obvious. I mean, it's a lock, and it is—(cross talk, inaudible).

MS. YAGER: It's a brass ring that slides through a ring in each drawer.

MS. COOKE: Right, right. With a big—it's a simple lock.

MS. YAGER: With a wonderful brass disc, with a real thick brass disc at the top, and they have a nice substance to them.

MS. COOKE: Right. See, originally we got into, well, maybe it should be a lock that's hidden, meaning you turn a key at the bottom and goes all—and I said, no, let's just make locks. It's going to be a lock. And kids like—children like those. So many boys and girls go to that lock, you know, while their parents are looking at rings, and I often let them play with it. I take the bar out and give it to them. They're intrigued with the simple hole and the lock in it and the—I mean, that's simple stuff, but it stirs the imagination a little bit, I guess.

MS. YAGER: Let's see, we talked about commissioned work.

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm.

MS. YAGER: You said that it's important to me and it's important to them. You've often talked about this deep appreciation that you have for your clients, and that it's been sort of a mutual bond. And I guess I just wanted to make that comment.

MS. COOKE: I guess—you know, I have strong, nice feelings about that. I guess some of them have it about what I do for them, too, which is—I guess I need that. You know, it's nice when people tell you, "I'm glad you're doing this," or, you know, "Please don't stop." Because some of them are my age, and they say, "You're not going to stop, are you?" And I say, "No, I'm not." And that is—you know, I don't expect to. But they truly—I guess we've been there so long, that's one of the things, you know, you truly appreciate even the simple things you do, like polish and resize and put a pearl back on, all these quick things you do for people.

MS. YAGER: At different times I—you know, I remember reading about in the Middle Ages the metalsmith was really important, and they would be kidnapped and brought to the battlefield and—

MS. COOKE: Oh, my. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: —kept, you know, because they were so important to the strength of the chain mail.

MS. COOKE: For what they did, sure.

MS. YAGER: And sometimes I think, well, we've lost our role. When George Washington died, I remember reading a reference that people flocked to jewelers and engravers because they wanted to capture a memory of him in some way, whether it was through mounting a lock of his hair in a glass broach or wanting to engrave his name or, you know, render his profile. And so the role of the jeweler and the metalsmith has continued adapting to modern times. You seem to be a good example of that.

MS. COOKE: In a simple way. I do treasure it when—often I'll have someone bring their collection in, they'll call and say can you restore it all or revive it all, whatever you want to—what shall I call it? Not restore it because it's there, but—

MS. YAGER: Preserve.

MS. COOKE: And then they have 30 pieces. And it's kind of exciting for me to see what kind of pieces—30 pieces one person might pick. You know, I line it all up and I say, "Gee, they look just like you."

MS. YAGER: It is—it is a reflection of the collector often—

MS. COOKE: Right. Right.

MS. YAGER: —what do they gather.

MS. COOKE: What have they gotten together. And, of course, since a lot of it's silver, it does need some care, and everybody can't take care of. And when it's all fixed up and presented like new, it's quite exciting for them. I've got all my—the other day somebody sent me a strand that—she caught it in something and it broke. And I had it a day—she's from Boston. It arrived one day, she called the next day and said please do it as soon as possible because I feel like I'm lost without it. Well, now maybe she tells that to everybody, I don't know. But it's nice.

MS. YAGER: I have heard that from numerous—

MS. COOKE: Yeah, I feel lost without it.

MS. YAGER: Yes, I've heard that. One woman, I remember a necklace that I had made and it was—she brought it back for repair. And she called me, you know, a few days later, "It's part of my skin. I feel like I'm missing part of my skin."

MS. COOKE: [Laughs.] That's nice.

MS. YAGER: I think it does have a lot of importance.

You also mentioned that you're making things that last.

MS. COOKE: Oh, yes. And that's a nice thought too. At one time I traded jewelry for clothes when I was on Tyson Street. And of course all the clothes are gone—well, not all of them. I've kept some. But, I mean, that's 60 years ago. I still have a couple of pieces of clothing. And she has a wonderful collection of jewelry! [Laughs.] And it's going to be there.

And you mentioned barter one time, as well.

MS. YAGER: Yes.

MS. COOKE: Barter for something that lasts. But I certainly didn't think about that when I started. I just did something. You weren't thinking, "Oh, this is going to be here forever." That's why it has to be good, as I tell my students; it's got to be good because it will be here forever. If it isn't good, then fix it.

MS. YAGER: What do you think are some of the challenges that artists face today?

MS. COOKE: Well, I guess the main thing is how to make it so that you can afford to live on whatever you can do, which can mean a lot of different concepts here. I guess a lot of artists today are funded in some way. That isn't the best way to do it because it limits your opportunities. I mean, we see the students come out of the Institute, and the big question is what are they all doing.

But fortunately, there are more opportunities out there. I mean, there are a lot of companies that want designers, they want craftsmen, they want sculptors, they want graphics, of course computer art. It's a creative world out there.

MS. YAGER: For you, meeting the challenge of meshing your life with your art, with your income, has that been a smooth road or, you know, detour maybe? I mean, has it been difficult or easy?

MS. COOKE: It's been difficult, especially in the retail, because some time at the end of the year you see what one has really made, and it can be pathetic when you think of the amount of time you spent on it. And that can happen in jewelry too, but not as much as in—I think in the retail thing. I think it's been very difficult because I'm always feeling I have to make sure that everything is earning enough to cover everything. I have that kind of mind, whereas Bill doesn't. He assumes it's all going to be all right. But I have to—if it isn't all right, I have to fix it.

MS. YAGER: What are some of the things that have—I mean, has your work supported your other retail interests? Or have the other retail interests supported your jewelry? Or do those things keep shifting and changing all the time?

MS. COOKE: I keep it all together. I keep the jewelry—what the jewelry does for me is separate from what it does for the store. I don't know whether that's clear or not, but I—

MS. YAGER: What do you mean by that?

MS. COOKE: That isn't very clear. I have all this jewelry in the store, but the store has not bought the jewelry. The store only pays me for what we sell from that jewelry. So basically it's on consignment—

MS. YAGER: To yourself.

MS. COOKE: —to myself. [Laughs.] And someone said, "Well, you really don't have anything, because you can't prove it's there.

MS. YAGER: That's why you—

MS. COOKE: Yeah, I do have something; it's there. But if something happens to it, you can't prove it's there. So it's on consignment, which is fine for me, because I can make things and put out—and don't worry whether the store would buy it or not. I know where it is and what it's going to do, and I can play with that.

So—but I mean, in my head, I keep what the jewelry makes and the store makes all separate, to make sure they all make enough to pay for what's being charged—payroll and rent and all those good things.

MS. YAGER: If you were starting out today, would you start it out in the same formula as you have right now?

MS. COOKE: I think I would start out and find a manager or somebody that—another kind of partner. And a

good partner is another important thing, because—I don't want to get into that, but I—it seems like if we had a manager—some years we've had good managers and some years it's difficult.

You know, some people can do that. I used to tell Jim Rouse that one of the best things he does is—one of his most beautiful assets is that he can hire the right people to build that kind—I saw that company grow to be what it is now. And it's hiring people. But see, we're both stubborn and independent and strong people. We're individuals running a small business.

MS. YAGER: A friend of mine—Jack Lenor Larsen had given her some advice, and he told her that if—according—what I remember her saying was that if you wanted to be an artist, you had to hire a secretary and a house cleaner.

MS. COOKE: [Laughs.] Now he's made it very well. I mean, he's certainly formed a big organization, because he's an organization person. But I mean, we're kind of unique in what we've done.

How would I start again? I'd probably force myself to spend half the week doing what I really should do best, which is design objects.

MS. YAGER: And so advice that you would give to someone starting out, just as they graduate from art school or university as an art major, what would you—I mean, I find that what they do the first two years is so critical as to whether they will continue or not. So what advice would you give or do you give?

MS. COOKE: I think what happens—what happened to me is, I got involved in something, and it just gradually grew. So I saw it growing, so I kept with it, instead of saying, "Oh, gee, hey, I really wanted to go to Cranbrook and be a sculptor." And—but I got involved in and interested in what I was doing and interested in people and just kept going.

But I guess you have to know what you—how you work best, whether you work best with people or when you hire people—I've hired a lot of people in my day, and you can tell what advice you would give them. Some people come in and in two days you realize they don't want to take care of the public. So—or they do, or they don't want to—how many people have I hired that want to work five days a week and then after about two weeks they say, you know, "Could I just have three days a week? Because I miss doing whatever I was doing." So I guess—if they're creative, they have to know what they want to do and what it's going to cost them, time-wise. It's time, the main thing.

That's not very good advice, I guess. Well, anyhow—

MS. YAGER: It's hard. I think it's probably the best you can give.

I think this tape is just about to wrap up.

MS. COOKE: Okay.

MS. YAGER: This is Jan Yager interviewing Betty Cooke in the Radisson Hotel at Cross Keys near her Store Ltd., in Baltimore, Maryland, on July 2, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disc number five, session number two.

Betty, just before we took a break, there were a couple things that I wanted to ask you about. You have made reference to masculine versus feminine jewelry. Can you talk about that a little bit? You brought a couple examples of pieces.

MS. COOKE: Right, because I—you realize you have many directions, and I think we brought it up yesterday, the two of us, and I hadn't really thought of it that way. I guess I would use the word tailored or more feminine, or feminine and masculine, but I like the variety. I mean, I like the concept. I think there are certain—again, it's what clothes it's worn with and what type of person. And some women do have a masculine—using a—meaning they can wear jewelry that is straight-lined and more angular and more—crisper, perhaps, than some other that are soft, or—

MS. YAGER: Now, the piece that you describe as masculine, it's a more tailored piece. It has straight lines.

MS. COOKE: Right. Mm-hmm.

MS. YAGER: It has some ebony inserts or—segments that seem to be square, tubular forms, and then a couple pieces of ebony placed in between the square tubing in silver. The piece that you think of as more feminine or more airy or more whimsical in a certain way, it's—the—it's round, tubular—round tubes. And then circular discs are soldered on edge onto the tubing in—at varying angles so that when you lay the piece flat on the table, there are certain discs that are projecting straight up, some at an angle, some are flat on the table. It's got a

wonderful, delightful quality to it. That one's in gold. Can you talk about that piece a little bit?

MS. COOKE: Well, I think your word "delightful" is good because it is. It's playful. It's dressy. It's more something you would wear to a party. Or if you're a delicate person, I guess you would wear it all the time. If you had little yellow curls, a nice neck, and a beautiful face, you could wear that all the time, whereas the other one would be hard on that kind of person. It's geometric and—it's not hard, but it would be hard if it was on a delicate, very feminine person.

MS. YAGER: What about the issue—sometimes I have jewelry that—there are times when I want to not be noticed, so I'll have a very quiet piece with—you know. And then there are other times when I can pretty much predict that the person that takes the ticket or that I buy the ticket from in the train station or—you know, that you'll be getting comments. Do you—do people—can you control the quantity and length of the comment by the piece of jewelry that you wear?

MS. COOKE: Oh, I think so. I mean, we know the beginning was to attract people, so right there you're doing it. And as I said before, I'm amazed how many people notice. But I'll go to the checkout counter in a big grocery store and the little girl will ask all about the ring, whereas she might not ask about a neck wire that I would be wearing because it wouldn't strike her. Yeah, sure, some of it's more attractive.

MS. YAGER: Also last night, when we went to dinner, the first place that we walked into was at the art museum. And there was a woman sitting at a table, and she had a Betty Cooke necklace on in a cluster with other necklaces that I didn't get a real close look at. But do you find that—and so, it—to me, it identified her as sort of in the tribe of high design.

MS. COOKE: She knows what's good. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: And she also—you know, another ethnic necklace reflected that she was a traveler.

MS. COOKE: That's different. Mm-hmm.

MS. YAGER: So these are ways that people identify and signal to other people what their interests are.

MS. COOKE: This is what I am or this is what I was. Well, I think diamonds are the most obvious thing, too. I mean, there are some people that do or don't like diamonds, but the attraction to a diamond is in itself. The same way it can be a little tiny diamond, but --

You know, I'm not as into diamonds as most people. I think they're beautiful and wonderful and all that, but the attention a diamond gets is just unbelievable, regardless of the size—"Oh, you have an engagement ring; let me see your diamond," or whatever. And—

MS. YAGER: And some of the—and that also, if it's an engagement ring, it would speak of—it would signify a relationship that had been formed and your jewelry signifies a relationship that's been formed in some ways as well.

MS. COOKE: Yeah. Mm-hmm. It is a tribe that's very interesting—[laughs]—because they—it's fun when you see a lot of people in the same room with different pieces on, and it does mean that, "Oh, you like that." "You're in, I'm in, we're all in." [Laughs.] It's embarrassing. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: Sometimes, yeah. Do people notice your necklace but not know that you made it?

MS. COOKE: Yes, mm-hmm.

MS. YAGER: And how do you respond?

MS. COOKE: Oh, I usually tell them it's by a designer in Maryland [laughs]—when I'm in New York—I mean, you know, all the shows and everything I go to. I usually wear something that is simple, which again, is a laid-back piece. But it is noticed, and I'm intrigued with the kind of people that notice it, because they have an eye for this. And therefore, I might look at what they're selling, because they have a—it is, like you said, a communication thing. I'm always surprised at how many people notice something just simple.

MS. YAGER: And you don't tell them often that you were the designer—

MS. COOKE: Not usually.

MS. YAGER: —because that's a longer conversation?

MS. COOKE: Not usually, unless I see a reason to. I think I mentioned it's sort of fun when people come in the

store. Or maybe I didn't mention this—a man came in. He said, "Oh, I knew Betty Cooke when she was"—talking to me—"I knew Betty Cooke when she was on Tyson Street. Is she still around?" I said, "Yeah, she's around." And he started—"She must be really old." I said, "Well, yeah, she's up there." [Laughs.] And it went on and on. I just let him run because he was good natured at the end, you know. But I guess that means people are interested in who designs whatever they're seeing. I mean, they would ask, is, you know—"That's Jan's, and how's Jan?"

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: So they do care about if you're alive or dead. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: I know a woman through my daughter's school, and one day I saw her—and we never knew each other's last names. And one time I saw her at a restaurant, and she had—

MS. COOKE: Your pieces.

MS. YAGER: —one of my pieces of jewelry on, and I said, "Do you know anything about that piece of jewelry?" And she started to tell me about it—that I was dead and I was a well-known jeweler who died. And I was a man. [Laughs.]

MS. COOKE: Oh, isn't that funny.

MS. YAGER: So I had to—normally I let those things pass. That one—because I was going to see her many times more—

MS. COOKE: That was a good one.

MS. YAGER: —I had to actually tell her.

MS. COOKE: Well, I guess when they know the name, it gives an extra sort of clout to their story or to their being. I mean, I can get embarrassed to hear about Betty Cooke a lot because I'm really not vain about my name or anything, but it's sort of like, you know, you know that that's a hydrangea, and it makes you a little bit smarter and a little bit wiser. [Laughs.] So it's a feather in your cap, I guess.

MS. YAGER: Can you talk about pricing a little bit?

MS. COOKE: Oh, my. I hate it. I hate the fact that you have to sit down and figure it all out, but you do have to do that. And it's hard to equate, of course, because originally you have the amount of time you put in it, and you have the original amount of thought that went into it. Sometime it's easy, sometime it's not. And you really can't charge a customer if it took you a long time to think about it, I don't think. So after that is off the board, you get the—and of course, the material and time to actually produce.

MS. YAGER: And then do you ever factor in magic?

MS. COOKE: Magic, yes. If it's something I happen to think is really an exceptional piece, then it has another addition in some way. But then the difficult thing, I find—in the stores I'll have many pieces, and some—a pair of earrings, which is $200, and then you have a $400 necklace. So I equate the two earrings to the necklace, and you can get very—have to be very careful that it all makes sense. In fact, sometimes I put prices just to have somebody else look at it and say, "Do these things relate?" I mean, the necklace might look like it's eight times the price of two pair of earrings, but it's only the actual price. It's hard.

MS. YAGER: There are often thresholds that people don't want to go past with various formats—you know, a ring or earrings.

MS. COOKE: Often I used to be asked to make tie slides. Well, you can't get much money from a tie slide.

MS. YAGER: What is a tie slide?

MS. COOKE: It's like a lanyard thing.

MS. YAGER: Oh, yes.

MS. COOKE: I didn't do it, but that used to be a very important thing, that you make a lanyard slide. Well, you know, is it $1.98 or what are we talking about? And it's basically a ring. Of course, if you make a ring, the price is different.

MS. YAGER: Oh, yes.

MS. COOKE: And I'll try to keep things all prices, for that reason, so people do have a break. If they don't have $1,000, maybe they have $500, or maybe they have $250. But there obviously should be a big difference in—of course, there's a big difference between silver and gold. Just the concept of gold, people expect it to be a lot more than it's real relative value in relation to silver. Sometimes that's difficult, because you don't want it to be higher priced just because it's gold.

MS. YAGER: Some of these things have been—the roads have been paved by the commercial jewelry world, and certain perceptions are out there.

MS. COOKE: Yeah. We made some neck rings, just simple neck wire. Well, it's a big difference between 20 gauge and 18 gauge and 16 gauge, but they really don't look like anything except a neck wire. But it's, you know, something one has to do.

MS. YAGER: Yeah. And the after-market issue, which is coming up. When I was doing research on you I typed your name into "Google" and different things started popping up, there are different websites that are dealing in Modernist jewelry. And how do you feel about all of that? Here's a piece, Betty Cooke. Sometimes they actually do have the markings and they're clearly identifiable. Take a look at this one and tell me a little bit more. You were saying you were unsure sometimes about how accurate the dates are.

MS. COOKE: I think the date's incorrect on here, but maybe it doesn't matter a whole lot. They have 1970, and it could be 1980. It could be 1990. I could find out, because obviously I have a record of it.

I'm a little concerned because of the prices. It doesn't mean that it sells for $1,200. I mean, that's what they're asking for. I'd like to know sometime if it did. I don't want everybody to think that what I do is out of sight, because maybe I'd lose some customers that way. I am on the antique market, though. There are about four dealers that buy things from me, and they are in the big antique shows in New York. And I have somebody that goes up and tells me what—and I know the people, of course, that buy from me. And they increase it to whatever they can do. It may be four times of what they pay in my store retail. I don't give them a discount or anything because I don't think it's fair, because they up it so much.

MS. YAGER: There was a gallery in New York—was it Fifty-Fifty?

MS. COOKE: Yeah.

MS. YAGER: —that I remember seeing some of your beach pebble pieces at.

MS. COOKE: Right. But they had logical prices. They weren't exorbitant like this on the Web and that. What is it, the Web?

MS. YAGER: Do you do things on the Web?

MS. COOKE: No. No, not on the Internet. I have a piece in the case that I sell for $150, and it was the one that was in the Bard catalogue, and they were asking $2,500 for it just because it was in the Bard exhibition.

MS. YAGER: Yeah, the added provenance.

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm. I guess, you know, you can't control that.

MS. YAGER: It's just the natural evolution of things.

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm.

MS. YAGER: As they become more rare. Also I noticed there was a wonderful—an additional interview with you, Marbeth Schon's, for *Modern Silver*. And that she has recently come out with a book called *Modernist Jewelry, 1930-1960* [Modernist Jewelry 1930-1960: The Wearable Art Movement; 2004]. I think it is—

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. YAGER: —that you have some pieces in. That's got to be kind of reaffirming to—

MS. COOKE: Yes, it's nice.

MS. YAGER: —to have people continue to be interested.

MS. COOKE: And it's interesting that they're priced in the book. It's unusual for a book to have—well, they may have prices in the back, where to get it, and so forth. And they're priced high. They're priced triple, three and four times or so.

MS. YAGER: Well, you know, in some ways it's almost full circle because the very earliest catalogues from the Walker and that, a lot of those do have prices.

MS. COOKE: Oh, that's true!

MS. YAGER: They were $10 and $20 at that time.

MS. COOKE: Yes, that's true.

MS. YAGER: And then they're—

MS. COOKE: That's true.

MS. YAGER: One of the issues—I know that you referred to this a little bit yesterday, about craft. How do you describe yourself? If someone says, you know, what do you do, how do you describe yourself?

MS. COOKE: I would say designer first.

MS. YAGER: And what would you say after that?

MS. COOKE: Well, it depends on what they're asking—

MS. YAGER: I mean, do you include—

MS. COOKE: —whether it be in relation to architecture or something. I would say I'm a jewelry designer or I do designer jewelry because I also, you know, do it. But I always use the word "designer."

MS. YAGER: Do you include the word "craft?"

MS. COOKE: No, I don't. And it goes way back because in the beginning—my beginning—I thought a lot of the craft was in a different visual category. It's hard to describe. Designer to me implies it's planned and it's organized and it has a clarity about it, whereas a lot of crafts are spontaneous and have a different feel. And I just use that as a division, not one is good and one is bad. But you know, it could be more whimsical. It could be more anything. It's more spontaneous.

MS. YAGER: And what about art or artist? Do you include that in your description, or—

MS. COOKE: Of me? No, I wouldn't too much unless—well, if somebody asks me I say I used to paint, but I'm not—right now I'm not doing that. I consider myself an artist, but I would say designer and designer jewelry. And—but I, as you know, design in all fields, and I would still. And I love colors, so I could be a colorist at times, which I have been. So—

MS. YAGER: What museums do you have the closest affinity to, that you would like to see your work in?

MS. COOKE: Well, I've never been to the Montreal Museum of Decorative Arts, but I guess I like what I hear from them. And the fact that they included me in a show one time that I wasn't supposed to be in, they must have—and I have contacted them. At some point, they might want to buy some more pieces, and at one point I'd probably give them some more pieces because I see what they're doing. And because of your interview, I'm thinking of what Walker Art Center is doing. And I think the Boston Museum is another good museum. That might be interested. I've never approached museums, but as we were saying, it's a nice thought that things should be allocated.

MS. YAGER: Have any of the people who have collected your work—have any of them donated pieces to a museum collection?

MS. COOKE: They must have because the Baltimore Museum has a piece that was donated. And that's the only one I know of, but obviously this book has, I mean, I know who purchased all those pieces in the book. But I guess—maybe I should tell some of my good customers here who have big collections to think about what they would do with it. I mean, they could be thinking about that, too; sending them to the museums instead of just having them auctioned or whatever happens.

MS. YAGER: Well, we did agree that these things have a longer life than any of us—

MS. COOKE: Yeah, yeah.

MS. YAGER: —and there's a certain—I always—you know, the V & A is one of my favorite museums. I loved—in 1971, the first time I went there as a jewelry student, I loved having a chance to look at, you know, centuries of

work and the inspiration that offered. So you know, I think it's wonderful if some things stay in a public arena.

MS. COOKE: But does anything compare to that in this country?

MS. YAGER: For me, coming from Detroit, Greenfield Village and Henry Ford Museum have a lot of rich, wonderful things. But yeah, how do you compare them? There may not be—maybe we're too young of a country.

MS. COOKE: Maybe we have to think about museums—like the Denver Museum [Denver Art Museum] is a wonderful museum. I don't know whether they have anything on jewelry. But we knew the director of the Denver Museum back in the '40s and '50s, and he would bring the Indian costumes and jewelry to Baltimore to do a show at the Baltimore Museum. And I remember feeling all those things and trying them on and wearing them, all these magnificent—and—

MS. YAGER: Do you remember his name?

MS. COOKE: Yes, I will think of it. Oh, I do know his name. It'll come. Sorry. Douglas. Eric Douglas. Eric Douglas. He was back in the '40s and '50s. And he established, I think, the beginning of the Indian—or the real display of the whole thing. Yeah, he was something.

MS. YAGER: I know the University of Pennsylvania Museum [of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia, PA] has pretty in-depth collections of the American Indian, and now contemporary American Indian artists are going to the museum and looking in their, storerooms to get inspiration and see the authentic interpretations from a hundred years earlier, 200 years earlier.

MS. COOKE: So what we want is a museum that is collecting American jewelers, right? Not especially Indians, but—

MS. YAGER: Yeah.

MS. COOKE: —include them, but not—

MS. YAGER: Yeah. Where are they?

MS. COOKE: Yeah.

MS. YAGER: There is a jewelry—there's a solely jewelry museum in Germany [Schmuckmuseum, Pforzheim, Germany]. There have been calls for that in the U.S., but it hasn't happened yet.

MS. COOKE: Well, you mentioned the Renwick [Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC]. Maybe that's—I don't know. We'll have to solve that.

MS. YAGER: Yeah. I wanted to talk about your—you recently had a birthday.

MS. COOKE: Oh, yes.

MS. YAGER: You had a party. Can you talk about that? What birthday was this?

MS. COOKE: Well, it's embarrassing, because I was 80 years old. And I think it's amazing, because when one's in good health, you don't feel 80. You just feel like you're still here. And I'm impressed—like when I sort of know your age, and I think, "Gee, you have all that ahead of you"—and you know, 80 is wild.

But in this day and—it's—you know, there's hope for another 20 anyhow. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: How many people attended the party?

MS. COOKE: Oh, I guess there were 75 or 80 people—75, maybe—all kinds of people. And because everybody had jewelry on, again—but it was family, friends, and professionals. There was a cross-section. And a good friend I camp with came from Oregon. There were a lot of people—

MS. YAGER: The woman that you had taken the trip with?

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And she's, as I say, a Girl Scout friend. So that's a bond, and they're good people.

But it was fun, because, I mean, you are what you are. [Laughs.] I mean, you hit 80—I'd say I—"if I ever get to be 80, I wanted to have a big party and a dance." And so somebody gave me the party. We didn't dance, because we didn't get to do that. When I'm 90, I'll have the dance. It was good.

MS. YAGER: So you mentioned that you jog or run.

MS. COOKE: Oh, I—no, I just—I run a little bit, not a lot. I mean, I easily get up and run. I'll go—I'm very active.

MS. YAGER: Do you still have any of your Girl Scout campfire uniforms?

MS. COOKE: I gave them all to the Girl Scouts.

MS. YAGER: You did?

MS. COOKE: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] I had badges and hats and belts. And see, I had a belt, and I remember doing beadwork on the belt, because I was into Indians and the beadwork. And that wasn't legitimate. I had this Indian beadwork on my belt, and of course I had a hand-made tie. But I gave that all to the Girl Scouts, who were another group doing a really good job. They have a big group in town.

MS. YAGER: That was an important way of transmitting crafts to young people, wasn't it?

MS. COOKE: Yeah. Mm-hmm. That's interesting, because—I've forgotten what year it is we decided—a friend and I said, "Let's get together and have a reunion of Scouts." And we had a 60th reunion of Girl Scouts. And I rented the camp. And we did campfires. We did all those things that one does. And we had 30 people come from all over the country that had been Scouts in this camp, and I think that was amazing.

MS. YAGER: What camp was this?

MS. COOKE: Camp Whippoorwill. It was the first Girl Scout camp in Maryland. And I mean, it was interesting. Now most of them were professional people. They all were lawyers, doctors, whatever. They raised families, many of them. But to get that many people together from—with that connection, which is a very sensitive connection—you have songs to sing. And then we invited some of the leaders of the programs now and some of the younger people so they can see what it was like. And it was wild, it was fun. We camped in the camp-outs. It was interesting. So it was a combination of people.

Should do that with jewelry. Well, no, you can't. But it was a type of reunion, and it hit the papers. They did a big article on it, which was nice because it—who knows, it might have encouraged some kids to get into scouting. You know you don’t get that now. But they played it up quite a bit.

MS. YAGER: Can you talk a little bit about—do you think artists have—artists and designers have any responsibilities or obligations or privileges? I mean, it's, I think—I don't know. I'm just—to the public, I guess.

MS. COOKE: Well, I know that one year I had to speak at Goucher [Goucher College, Baltimore, MD]. Had to, or they asked me to speak at Goucher to the graduates with a group of other women. And I was the oldest person, again, but this was 30 years ago. [Laughs.] But they were talking about what it's like to be a woman and how do you break into business or whatever career and what are the handicaps, and they got into all that part of it. And I must say that I never felt that at all. Now maybe because I was an artist whereas my friend was an educator, and she always had the battle of she got less than the men on whatever college she taught in. But being an artist, you were completely free of all of that, and I thought that was interesting that you didn't even think, well, I can't do this because I'm a girl or a young woman. You just did it. And there wasn't any competition.

I know when I got involved with the Rouse Company, they had all women, their whole business. There were no women. And my first meeting, I thought, how shall I dress? And so I had a sweater and I had a skirt. I had a gray flannel skirt and I had a cuff put on it. So I was sort of in between. You know, I wasn't sure what was going to happen. I didn't have a little dress on. I had a gray skirt with a cuff.

MS. YAGER: Any kind of neck treatment?

MS. COOKE: Oh, I had—I must have had a necklace. I've forgotten what I did wear. Oh, yes, a black and silver collar that you saw at the retail. And I remember sitting in the room with all these men and I was the only—but it wasn't anything complicated. It was kind of nice, actually. You know, so there was—because, I think, I was an artist or designer or craftsman, whatever you want to call it. And that's an asset, and I think we all have that asset because we're creative and we can fit in ways that nobody can suspect.

MS. YAGER: I remember an interview when I was still a student, and this woman was interviewing Georgia O'Keeffe. And she said, "How was it?" You know, "You were in all these shows and you were the only woman in all these shows." And she was sort of inferring that this was groundbreaking or something. And she [Georgia O’Keeffe] responded with sort of matter of fact: "I had to show my work."

MS. COOKE: It doesn't matter.

MS. YAGER: It was just fact. And that was very inspiring to me to just—you know, obstacles are invisible things. And when you have a goal and, you know, an intention.

MS. COOKE: But I guess it's probably not so bad now because there are so many women in, you know, high offices in everything. But this was probably the '70s and this was a women's college. It was Goucher. So there was great concern of what's going to happen in the men's world. But I—yes, I think, being an artist, you can use your creativity and feel comfortable.

MS. YAGER: In some ways, society gives some permission as well. They almost don't know what to make of it. So that's definitely a privilege. Is there some responsibility in there as well, in the obligation for—

MS. COOKE: Well, I feel responsible. I guess most people do, most artists. I don't know whether—I can't speak for others. I would think if they're trained and they're professional and they're serious about what they're doing, then they should be responsible. I mean, they reflect on other people, and their work reflects on other work. You know, if something is gross, it's going to affect somebody's opinion about, "Well, we might not do this again because of the last experience."

MS. YAGER: Well, I guess there's a role as a sort of mouthpiece, interpreter. A designer has the ability to influence things.

MS. COOKE: But there are a lot of things done out there in the name of art that maybe should be criticized. There's an awful lot if you think of some of the shows.

MS. YAGER: Do you think there's more stuff than there used to be?

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm. I do. I think—well, I don't want to get too much into it, but years ago there used to be "Happenings," but now there are all these room settings and environmental things, some of which are wonderful and some of which I think are gross and depressing and deteriorating and certainly don't help society at all. Not that it has to be pretty. I mean, we're never going to get over that hurdle. But it should be something that improves one's life and not tears it apart, I think. I used to like Käthe Kollwitz years ago. I thought her drawings were so wonderful. And this was before the war, and I didn't know anything about Hitler and all that at the time. I really didn't. It was pre-college. But I just thought they were so sensitive and so beautiful, even though they were sad and horrible and foreign. But they meant something.

MS. YAGER: They spoke.

MS. COOKE: Yeah. I'm probably not answering any of these things. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: I think you're doing an incredible job. I think we're just about—what other things, what haven't we talked about that's important to you?

MS. COOKE: Well, let's see. We've talked about the work you do, the people you know, the people you work for, the environment you work in, how you wish you could change more than you change. It would be wonderful to be able to change more things. When I walk into a restaurant or in this environment in Cross Keys and you see things that could make it much nicer and you don't have anything to do with it, you see improvements that would help people, and it would be great to be in a position where you could facilitate all this and be of value to more people. And that's not my jewelry making—

MS. YAGER: Yes.

MS. COOKE: —but I mean I see beyond that into—

MS. YAGER: Overall, yes.

MS. COOKE: Just like in nature. We have a big problem in the city with invasive plants. I've been taking pictures of trees that are completely covered with plants and they're going to die because they're being killed and strangled by these monstrous things, and they're getting to look like monsters. And it's something nobody has solved yet.

It's a concern to me. I think these are all going to disappear in 10 years and it's something we can't solve. I know that's not as important as crime and education and other things, but there are things that are easier to solve.

MS. YAGER: I'm kind of struck by the amount of artists that I've spoken with that so many at a certain point do come around to environmental issues because they're big, broad issues and they affect the long term.

MS. COOKE: And we talked about waste and all that. And how many people still waste? You know, the simple

thing of how many people still let the water run for no reason, or pollute the air, other things. It's a big world. And that should be part of elementary education, I think, how to take care of your environment and uplift it, if anything, not tear it apart.

MS. YAGER: If you were writing the curriculum for elementary schools, what would be the big things that you would want?

MS. COOKE: Oh, you'd have art and music. [Laughs.] And dance and sports. And taking care of your environment. I don't know what it would be called. But when we lived downtown in the slum area, we thought it would influence some of the people that were still there, some families with five and six children, who threw bottles and trash around. We thought it would influence them, and it didn't. We could never influence them. The only influence I think we had was on a couple of the little ones that played with our children, and you would sort of help them. You know, "Do this," or "Don't do this."

MS. YAGER: So do you think that changing things has to be on a one-to-one basis?

MS. COOKE: I always thought in elementary school it would be exciting to have little children learning the value of taking care of everything. I mean, seeing how things fall and what happens when they fall. And of course some of them do automatically because they're raised that way or they do it in their families. But if it's strong enough, it might influence some of the families. You know the buildings we're losing because they weren't taken care of. We imploded all this housing because—they had other problems, but basically, it was not taken care of. I think it's exciting to make things more attractive. I mean, it should be fun.

MS. YAGER: Have you ever gardened?

MS. COOKE: Oh, yes.

MS. YAGER: What kinds of things? Flowers, vegetables?

MS. COOKE: Anything that would grow. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: Grapefruit seeds?

MS. COOKE: Yes. Oh, goodness. Yeah, I've always—I come from a gardening family, too, so that's important. We're in a shaded woods, so about all I can do is raise ferns and impatiens, and moss and lichen and things like that. But I love it all.

MS. YAGER: Sometimes I think that if you have the opportunity to witness the growth of something, you have a profound respect and understanding for it.

MS. COOKE: Mm-hmm. I planted, on this property we have, I planted 400 trees, little baby trees that are no thicker than your eyeglass frame.

MS. YAGER: Which is quite fine.

MS. COOKE: I must say not many of them survived, but the ones that survived, every little leaf, I think, "Oh, my gosh, how wonderful!"

MS. YAGER: Tell me what type of trees.

MS. COOKE: Oh, they were ash and hickory and some dogwood. And as I say, it was a program for the Department of Natural Resources. I'm saving the bay --

MS. YAGER: Were they domestic, native?

MS. COOKE: Oh, yes. Oh, goodness. Of course. Nothing but natives. And there's a stream, so these are planted as the watershed project, and you can impact the land with things like that. It doesn't amount to much, but the point is that—you know, they're so beautiful, even the few that survived, some of them are six feel tall now, and some are still trying to make it, way down low. And all that's important, too. You think about how some things grow some fast and some things just don't make it.

MS. YAGER: If you could do one thing to help artists or increase their voice or influence, what would be a couple things that might—

MS. COOKE: I might ask you to do it! [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: You'll delegate that one.

MS. COOKE: You could do it better than I.

Well, you mentioned how important that one little magazine was. Maybe the magazines, maybe they could do more. I don't know. I mean, publications. Like all the students that graduate, they all have a chance for a show, but that's just at school. After that, they need galleries for these people. We need galleries, more galleries, and more publications.

MS. YAGER: And then how to get people to come to the galleries.

MS. COOKE: They do it in Finland and Sweden. They take care of their people.

MS. YAGER: How do they do it there; do you know?

MS. COOKE: Well, the government sponsors so much. They help set them up in factories and, you know, all the Iittala glass, and Marimekko. I mean, it's all properly advertised and promoted within the country. We're too independent for that, I guess. And then, like you say, what happens to it all after we make it is another problem. A museum would be—everybody isn't good, but they still deserve a chance to show some places.

MS. YAGER: It's Darwinian in this country, isn't it, what will survive?

MS. COOKE: That's a big question. I'll have to think about that one.

MS. YAGER: I'm going to go through my notes and see if there's anything else.

MS. COOKE: Okay. We haven't mentioned birds. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: Tell me about that.

MS. COOKE: Well, no, it's just how many things you enjoy, you know, and are important to make you feel good about yourself and the world and do something nice.

MS. YAGER: What is it about birds?

MS. COOKE: Well, I just love birds. We go to the shore in the wintertime and see the migrating birds in the snow—wonderful.

We have good friends who know every song and every voice. And they're sensitive creatures. I mean, these little tiny things that have survived all these years. That's what I like about them.

MS. YAGER: And they can walk and swim.

MS. COOKE: And they can—[Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: No, they don't swim actually, they fly.

MS. COOKE: Some of them can swim. [Laughs.] But it's all part of the world, and it's just wonderful—it goes with the trees and the whole thing.

MS. YAGER: I have a quote here from you, and I don't know where I got this quote. But it says, "I have warm feelings for the many friends and customers who have, over the years, expressed their enthusiasm and pleasure in wearing, selecting and giving my jewelry. We have communicated through this jewelry, and I am awed by the generations who have been touched by these simple, expressive statements in silver and gold."

MS. COOKE: That's true. That's perfect. That came from the catalogue from '95. That was my closing remark and it holds true. It's very nice.

MS. YAGER: Shall we close with that?

MS. COOKE: And I will continue to do that. [Laughs.] Yes, that's very good.

MS. YAGER: We'll have to check back in a few years.

MS. COOKE: Yeah, I'm going to keep going, so—

MS. YAGER: The one quote that I—Richard Martin has said also, I thought, was so wonderful. He felt that your jewelry was “the human soul evident on the human body.”

MS. COOKE: That's beautiful. That's very nice. He was an eloquent person. And the thing is he really liked it.

He came into the store and saw it. He said, "Oh, this isn't too bad," you know. He really had a good time with it, which was important.

MS. YAGER: Betty Cooke, I want to thank you personally and on behalf of the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, for agreeing to this interview, and more importantly, for your long and ongoing contributions to the fields of art, design and jewelry.

MS. COOKE: Thank you very much. I'm honored, and I'm so glad that you interviewed me. And keep doing it. We all need this. [Laughs.]

MS. YAGER: It's been my honor. Thank you.

MS. COOKE: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated...March 6, 2006