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Oral history interview with Michelle Holzapfel, 2008 January 26 and March 1

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

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Michelle Holzapfel on January 26, 2008. The interview took place in Marlboro, Vermont, and was conducted by Josephine Shea 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.

Michelle Holzapfel has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JOSEPHINE SHEA: Once again, this is Josephine Shea interviewing Michelle Holzapfel at the artist's home, I think we could say and studio — [laughs] —

MICHELLE HOLZAPFEL: Yes.

MS. SHEA: — because they're connected by a —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: By a big pile of snow. [They laugh.]

MS. SHEA: In Marlboro. And did you call it Marlboro or Marlboro town?

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Well, we call it Marlboro.

MS. SHEA: Okay.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: I mean, it is Marlboro town, but Marlboro, Vermont.

MS. SHEA: Vermont, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. And this is disc number one, January 26, 2008.

And I guess we begin at the beginning, which is when and where were you born?

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Woonsocket, Rhode Island, 1951, December 9.

MS. SHEA: Ah. And that's not very far away from here, is it?

MS. HOLZAPFEL: No, it's not. It's about a three-hour drive. And my Mom still lives down in Warwick. So I still go down back to the mother country once in a while. But where I grew up was — I was born in Woonsocket, that's where the hospital was. But I grew up in the town of North Smithfield — it's right on the Rhode Island Massachusetts border. And in fact, our property — we even owned a few acres of land in Massachusetts as well, so where I grew up was right along the Blackstone River, which runs between Rhode Island and Massachusetts. And we could see the river from our house.

And even though Rhode Island is an extremely populous state — I think it's the most densely populated state in the nation, or it was, then — we had about 30 acres of land at the end of the dirt road and so it was extremely rural when I was growing up. It's not anymore. It's been developed, but we were out in the woods. And that was a really nice part of our childhood. There were six kids in my family, five girls and one boy. And he was the next to the youngest, so he came along rather late. And so especially my two older siblings and I spent a lot of time playing out in the woods, playing Indians, whatever that means. [They laugh.] But, you know, it was nice.

MS. SHEA: So you were kind of in the middle of the six?

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yep, yep. I was in the middle. And my grandparents also lived with us. It was quite a big house that my parents bought. It was a quit-claim deed and it was really quite an old place. And while we — I mean, we lived there all of my childhood. I guess maybe they moved there a few years before I was born. And they — I'm trying to remember. Maybe I was 20 when they — I was not living at home anymore. But I think I was probably around 20, 21 when they moved.

And so they were there a long time. And it was an old place and they were always fixing it up. My dad was always redoing the wiring or fixing the plumbing or some project like that, because it was an older house. And he — well, my grandfather had been a machinist and my father was a machinist, worked for the same company, Taft-Pierce Manufacturing Company in Woonsocket.

MS. SHEA: And was that connected to the textile industry, or —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: It wasn't connected to the textile industry, but there were a lot of mills of various sorts in Woonsocket. There was Woonsocket and Fall River and it was that Industrial Revolution hub of New England. There were a lot of textile mills and a lot of my family worked in the textile mills. My mother did — it seemed like all my parents' siblings worked in some aspect of textiles or other manufacturing in Woonsocket. So that was a big part of my heritage in that everyone made things for a living. And I feel that's a strong part of my heritage.

They were all French Canadians and in the previous few generations had emigrated from Quebec because there was a big diaspora of French Canadians who came down from Quebec. And in fact, Woonsocket was called Little Quebec. I can remember Woonsocket was the town where we'd go to get new shoes for school or whatever and I would be standing there with her on the corner waiting for the light to change and everyone was speaking French. The local radio station was French. You heard French all the time.

So although my parents spoke perfectly good English, my grandparents spoke perfectly good English, they only spoke French when they didn't want us to know what they were saying. [They laugh.] But it was definitely a bilingual situation. My parents were quite adamant that we were not going to speak French, so they never spoke French to us. And I'm sort of sad. I studied French in high school but never was particularly fluent.

But it's interesting now, in Vermont as well, there's a Franco-American pride movement. But at that time, you really didn't want to bring up that you were French Canadian. The French Canadians had been, I would say in the '20s and '30s, were the newest immigrants and so they were on the bottom of the totem pole. And I remember my grandmother being very flattered because someone thought she was Irish. [They laugh.] You know, the Irish had come to New England much earlier, so if someone thought you were Irish, you were flattered. [They laugh.]

MS. SHEA: Were their last names French? Your father or your mother?

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yeah, yeah. My mother's was Ferdinande Piette. And her mother was Odelie Noel [ph]. And my maiden name was Chassé, C-H-A-S-S-É, accent. We all had French names and everyone we knew were French Canadians and Catholic, too. So there were a lot of big French Canadian families. And as is often true, which is whatever milieu you grow up in, you think that's what life is, that's what everyone's life is like. So it was interesting when I came up here to go to college. It opened up a lot of the world to me.

My father had a shop in the basement of our house because he was just a really good mechanic, so he always fixed our cars and if anything broke around the house he fixed it and there was this ongoing renovation of the house. I became the first son. He was always looking for a helper. And my two older sisters just did not — they didn't work out somehow as — [they laugh] — assistants for him. But I was quite keen for whatever reason and really enjoyed helping him.

And I certainly learned a lot from my mother as well. I always liked to make it clear that she's very much part of the story as well. Because she was a really good seamstress and taught us how to sew, first by hand and then later on the machine. So we made a lot of our own clothes and she was very good at making things as well, cooking and sewing, the female arts. And she passed that on.

[END MD 01 TR 01.]

MS. SHEA: And so you were saying that it was very kind of rural upbringing and your father was doing a lot of things, but then there was also this textile aspect that your mother was very involved with.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yeah, yeah. And because we were a large family and I was in the middle and the spacing was fairly close with my siblings, so I think I found myself in a — well, it's the common middle child scenario where you get a lot of coverage because it seemed like there was always someone having some teenage problem and someone needing their diaper changed and I fell in the middle.

In a way I didn't get that much attention, which was a good thing in that I found my own way. Sometimes I think it was not such a good thing. But fortunately, my grandparents lived upstairs and so there were four adults around. And I spent a lot of time visiting with my grandparents who were wonderful.

I know I've mentioned this before about — because I really liked to draw. My mother tells me this story: when I was very little, she came into the room and I had taken some pencil or something and had drawn all over the walls, and she had the — maybe she was reading Dr. Spock or something — [laughs] — realized that she shouldn't just punish me for that and she got me some paper and some crayons and it began very early in my life that I loved to draw.

And so a lot of times I would go upstairs to visit my grandparents. And again, being very frugal, having lived

through the Depression, my grandmother saved the labels from cans. I have this strong memory that she had a little single-edged razorblade and she'd take the cans and slit and unpeel that piece of paper and put it under the table, this tabletop cover, slip it in there so it would get flattened out. And she'd save all those can labels for me to draw on and I would go upstairs, I would draw. We got along very well. And my grandfather was a very warm and really loving, demonstratively affectionate person. And so I got plenty of what I needed.

And my sisters were — I certainly remember moments of strife, but basically it was really like living at camp. Being a big family, we all had a lot of responsibilities. We had a lot of chores and stuff that we had to do. But because we weren't particularly well off and my father was just off to work every day and my mother was taking care of all of us at home; we didn't go places a lot. It's really not like today where people just jump in the car three or four times a day and go somewhere. Other than going to school and going to church on Sunday, we didn't go places very often. So we really did spend a lot of time in the summer when the weather was good and spring and fall out of doors, playing around, or playing inside.

But when we were inside, we were expected to be quiet. There was always a baby sleeping. So for me, somehow drawing and making things, constructing things out of old, you know, those cylindrical oatmeal cartons —

MS. SHEA: Containers, yeah.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: — and it seemed like making things in a quiet way was what we were expected to do. And reading as well, when we got older. So that was my life as I remember it, which was, I think, a very fortunate life. As in any large family, there was certainly strife. But I think it formed my taste and it formed my ability to work in a very strong way to concentrate, to focus, to take what was at hand and make it into something. So those were very formative years. I really liked school.

MS. SHEA: Did you have any art classes in school, or —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Well, I had a really good art teacher in school. Even in elementary school, we had art period from a very young age. And it's amazing in retrospect, but from first grade on, I remember my art teacher was Mrs. Blake, first through fifth. Then there was a middle school that was newly built, six, seven, eight, and she was the art teacher there. And then ninth grade — there was no high school in North Smithfield. It was a really growing town at that time. I guess up until that time it hadn't been big enough to have a high school. But in the course of my school years, the town grew and probably just due to my family, come to think of it. [They laugh.]

When I was in middle school, the town began building its own regional high school. But it wasn't done when I would have started there in ninth grade. It wasn't ready until I was in tenth grade. So my ninth grade year, I went to St. Clare's Academy, which was in Woonsocket, which was a parochial school run by the nuns who were of the order of St. Clare's, which was the female equivalent of Franciscans. St. Clare was a buddy of St. Francis there in Assisi.

So I was there for one year. My two older sisters were there throughout all of their high school, so they had the full indoctrination, but I just managed to have one year there. And that was an okay school, but all the stories that people tell about parochial schools and the nuns are true. [They laugh.] It can really warp you.

MS. SHEA: There's truth to that. Did they have art classes still in the Catholic —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: No.

MS. SHEA: That's why I was wondering if that would be part of —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Although — no, the only art I had there was we had a little school newspaper and I used to draw little illustrations for it. But that was just on the side. But I continued to be really interested — very much interested and was doing a lot of drawing at that point. But when I began at the new high school in tenth grade, there was my teacher, Mrs. Blake.

MS. SHEA: Mrs. Blake. [They laugh.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yeah, Audrey Blake. She was wonderful. And she was very — even when I was in grade school, she was very solicitous of me — she would like give me special projects. If there was a big bulletin board in the hallway of the school, she would let me work on it as a special project. So in tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade, I was able to arrange my schedule — even though I was college track — so that I had daily art classes with her. And because it was a new school, it was really well equipped. There was a kiln and all kinds of equipment. There was a special art room. It wasn't like she was traveling from classroom to classroom like in grade school.

So it was an excellent facility. And she had a great curriculum where we explored a lot of media and she gave us really good art history background as well. She was a very, very good and dedicated teacher. And she was very

good to me. One of the units that we did was printmaking and we started with linoleum block printing. Then because I liked that, she said, "Well, would you like to try woodblock printing?" And I said yes. So she bought me a little set of woodcarving tools.

MS. SHEA: Which are quite sharp, aren't they?

MS. HOLZAPFEL: They are.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] Yeah, they have to be sharp to carve wood.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yeah, in fact, my father used to sharpen them for me when they got dull. But she gave them to me as a gift. And I did a few woodblocks for printing, but I realized that I actually wasn't that interested in the printing part, but I really liked the carving. And so that is when I started learning to carve. And just like my learning to sew by hand before I sewed by machine, I learned to carve by hand before I learned to carve by machine. And that was a good education in that when you're carving by hand and you have only the power of your hand, you really feel the resistance of the wood and you really have to learn to understand the grain structure. And it's a really good grounding in the nature of material.

So after that we had some friends of the family who — he was an orthopedic surgeon or something. And he was quite well-to-do. He was buying a lot of property on Cape Cod and developing it, you know, building houses to rent. And he wanted each house to have a sign that said "Driftwood," or some Cape Cod-sounding name. And so he hired me to make signs for all these houses. And it seemed like there were dozens of them. Maybe there were a dozen of them. But I made what seemed like a fabulous amount of money for a couple of summers carving out of pine, the signs for these houses. And that was also a terrific lesson because I thought, boy, this is incredible, I can make money and do this thing that I like.

Mrs. Blake also — I just wanted to get back to her because she — maybe when I was in tenth grade, or it might even been eighth grade, somewhere in there, she told me about this program at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum which was called the Junior Curators' Club. And she said, "Would you like to try this?" And I said, sure, I'd love to. I asked my parents and they couldn't help me out with transportation, so she said, well, I'll take you.

So one Saturday she came and it was quite a haul to get to my house but she drove all the way out and got me and drove me all the way to Providence, to RISD [Rhode Island School of Design]. And I went to the first meeting and I realized that she wasn't going to be able to do that week in and week out, so I never ended up attending more than maybe that once or maybe a second time. But still in retrospect, I realize she was really helping me and encouraging me.

And when I was a junior in high school she informed me about a summer program, called the Governor's Institute, which was for high school kids who were gifted in the arts. And she encouraged me to apply for that, helped me to put my portfolio together. And I had to bring my portfolio to the University of Rhode Island. She may even have transported me for that occasion as well. But she really encouraged me to do that. And I got into that summer program as well.

And that was very valuable because the idea was to encourage students — to expose students to other media. So whether you were there for painting or for music or for drama, you took all sorts of classes. You took a composition class and a music theory class, and painting and three-dimensional design. And that was very exciting. It was probably a four-week program. And once again, it just gave me a taste for the world outside of my little home.

MS. SHEA: You said that you tended to kind of stay more at home. Did your family ever take you, for example, to Boston and when they did, would you go to museums? Was that an interest of theirs or —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: It was — my father — well, it was interesting because as tight as money was for my family, my mother always subscribed to *Vogue* magazine and they always bought the *Sunday Times*. I certainly remember my father, I'm sure it was both of them, I remember them sitting in the front seats of the station wagon. They took to the Rhode Island School of Design Museum. And I'm quite sure that's the first art museum that I ever went to.

I have a very vivid memory of going in and turning left and right and it's still — I mean, the last time I was there a few years ago, it's still in that same spot, this really huge —it seemed so huge at the time, maybe it's eight feet tall — a carved wooden Buddha, very old, very — you could just see all of the erosion of the grain lines. And I remember just standing there and being transported out of my body by that thing.

So they took us there at least once, but maybe more than once. That would have been before I had any way of getting there on my own. And there was a wonderful art supply store nearby called Oaks on the Hill. And it may

still be there. But I can remember being brought into there and my father buying me a little set of four Conté crayons which was the height of luxury at the time — it wasn't a box of Crayola crayons, it was real art supplies.

So in their own way, they were encouraging. At Christmastime, they would get me a paint-by-numbers set. [Laughs.] They were encouraging to me. Even my grandmother, if she was sending a letter, she would ask me upstairs to write the address because she said my handwriting was so nice. So in their own way, with limited means, they really did encourage me my talent and did not squelch it.

And I can remember being seven or eight and people would say, "What do you want to be when you grow up," and I would say an artist. I don't know how I came to that, but that's what I would tell them. Being very practical people — whether it was aunts or uncles or my parents or grandparents — they would always drop this hint that I could be a commercial artist.

MS. SHEA: Ah.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: And so just by force of that suggestion, I had this idea that I would be a fashion artist or an illustrator or something like that. So that connection to RISD was a really good one. In high school I can remember going with my mom and my aunt Rose, who was also an incredible needle woman. She could make anything, tatting, lace, crochet, knitting, everything.

Every year RISD's fashion department would have a show of student-designed fashion. We went to that more than once. And that would be a big, big deal, going to Providence, going to RISD. So that and the *Vogue* magazine and the *New York Times* fashion section, we would keep that, that wouldn't just get burned. And I was always studying the fashion illustrations.

So those were modest, but very strong, in my young mind, really strong influences. And when I was in high school, I used to sometimes — it was a trek because I'd have to get a ride to the bus station in Woonsocket and I could get the bus from Woonsocket to Providence and then I could take the train from Providence to Boston. But I did do that a couple of times and go to the MFA [Boston Museum of Fine Arts, MA]. But that's something that I might do with my older sister or a friend. But that was wonderful as well. The MFA was a really great museum. And again, Mrs. Blake encouraged me to do that, to go to the MFA.

MS. SHEA: When you were sketching, did you tend to kind of sketch from your imagination, or would you be sketching from real life or both or —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: When I was little, it would be from imagination and I would be drawing Mary and her little lamb or things like that. I've got some of my sketchbooks from high school. I would draw — I would just go out in the yard. We had this incredible Jeep — post-War I guess the government was selling off all these Jeeps and my father had this ancient Willys Jeep that he built and rebuilt and rebuilt. And I've got sketches of that, and of my siblings.

Sometimes I would draw from snapshots that I might like. Sometimes I would copy. I did a lot of copying. Even when I was in college, I used to love to go up to the library and get down the books of [Albrecht] Dürer and Leonardo [da Vinci] and open them to the pencil or ink drawings and just copy them. That was to train my hand.

So it was a little bit of everything. I drew portraits of my siblings if I could get them to stand still long enough. But everyone respected that. I was never teased or anything about it. And if anybody needed a drawing, they'd come to me and I would do it. Even for my younger siblings. And for my kids as well, just drawing. They'd ask me to draw something and I would draw little cartoons, just for fun. So it always surprised me that I ended up in this three-dimensional medium. But a lot of times, I feel like what I'm doing is making illustrations in three dimensions.

MS. SHEA: And I was going to ask — the early woodcarving that you talked about, it seemed like that was kind of on a flat plane. Did you start working more in three-dimensional?

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yeah, I mean, the lettering was always low relief. But I did some low relief carvings of flowers and that sort of thing. But I had never done any fully in the round carving. That didn't come till later, till we set up the business here and I started turning and then getting kind of bored with these polished turn forms. And then the light bulb went on and I thought it would be fun to carve on these; I liked carving.

Once I brought those two things together, the turning and the carving and the wood and the fabric motifs or the food motifs. Once I started bringing those two parts of my life — you could say those were the two parental zones or whatever you want to consider them, but when I started making those two things bump up against each other, I got all kinds of synergy, even emotional synergy.

It was like reconciling two parts of me. Because there was that tomboy part of me that liked helping my father

very much, that really liked puzzle solving. I was good at math. I really liked science. There was always that analytical side. But then I really liked sewing clothes and I really liked cooking and my mother's realm was very compelling to me as well. And I didn't — I mean, there's enough strife between the genders as it is and it's manifest everywhere.

I think a lot of my work was energized by wanting to reconcile them in myself and to make a record of the possibility of reconciliation in other people or in the bigger world. I think that's a very, very strong underlying motif in all my work. Those things can be so violently at odds with each other, but they can also be brought together and generate a lot of beauty or healing or whatever you want to consider it. But that's such an ongoing power struggle of those realms. And we're seeing it now in this election. [They laugh.]

MS. SHEA: Now, after your wonderful art education through, you know, coming from grade school all the way to high school and you saying all along, I'm going to be an artist, I would think your next step would be to go to art school.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yeah, yeah.

MS. SHEA: Is that what actually happened or —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Well, it's sort of — I think for a long time in grade school, I figured I would go to RISD. But then especially through high school — again, it was a new high school and there were some really excellent faculty and I loved biology, I loved math, especially geometry. I had a great geometry teacher. So when I got to my junior year and it was getting to be time to think about what school to go to, I really wasn't sure anymore. I was the valedictorian of my class. I liked everything. I liked writing. I liked history. I liked it all. And I didn't have that sureness anymore that I wanted to be an artist. I just wanted to be out in life.

My guidance counselor, interestingly enough, said — she definitely had me pegged, she said, you know, my daughter who's a flautist is going to this little tiny college up in Vermont called Marlboro College where there are 200 students and you call your professors by their first names and everyone wears jeans and it's very casual and there's a music festival there in the summertime. And I thought, that sounds pretty good; because I wasn't sure I wanted to be in a city.

I also got into BU [Boston University] because I was still thinking about Boston and there was that choice in my mind, do I want to be in a city and do that or do I want to be in the country? So I applied to Marlboro and to BU and got into both. But when I came up to Marlboro for the first time, I was so overwhelmed. As we drove up Route 9 and started getting to the top of the mountain where you could just feel the elevation, I looked around and felt like I had like arrived at my true home somehow. It was a totally irrational — it wasn't even a thought, it was a feeling in the middle of my chest, like, oh, I'm home, I'm home. And there was no question about BU. I thought, oh, my God, this is it. [They laugh.]

Even before I got up to the campus, there was something about the landscape. I'll never really understand what it was, but it was like a song in my heart or something, I don't know — [laughs] — corny like that. It was like love at first sight. And so — and then when I got up on campus both of my parents — we came up, it was the springtime, it was Parents' Weekend. We stayed at the Whetstone Inn, which was so — seemed so glamorous.

And the building right next door used to be a French restaurant, or the owner or the cook was French. And we went there for dinner. When I was a kid, I loved Julia Child, I loved watching the French Chef. I watched it every week. [They laugh.] And so we get to this little Frenchie kind of restaurant, and I had sweetbreads for dinner and felt like I was in the world at last. That I had broken out of the familial cocoon and that I was in this exciting new world of sweetbreads and inns.

And up at the college for Parents' Weekend the theater company was doing a performance of Marat Sade with naked students rolling around with each other — [they laugh] — up on stage. And I remember thinking my parents are never going to let me come here, why did we have to come to this. They didn't care. They were quite entranced also. I was, I can't believe they're going to let me be here. Because it was so — all the professors seemed to have bushy eyebrows and smoke pipes and it was so — [they laugh] — it was so glamorous in that sort of New England college way.

And that was back in the day, too, when a higher education was so much more accessible to low income people. I feel like it was part of the Cold War. The United States was really trying to enable any kids who were smart enough to go to college. That idea of the meritocracy was very strong and states, and probably the federal government as well, was putting their money where their mouth was. That was the beginning of Pell Grants. I got full tuition between the college scholarship and the work study grant and the state scholarship. I think my parents gave me $100 for books.

So that was really wonderful. I did take the drawing class, a life drawing class, which again was just naked

people. [They laugh.] But that was an excellent class because the teacher, Frank Stout, who's a wonderful artist in his own right, he had a very laissez-faire style. The best way to learn how to draw is just to draw and draw and draw and draw. So he didn't talk to us too much.

And there was a design course that I took that was taught by Gib [Gilbert] Taylor. And he was also an extremely good artist and painter, but also a very good woodworker and instrument maker. His main area was woodworking. Interestingly enough, I didn't do a woodworking design project. I made a quilt, which he wasn't that enthralled with — [they laugh] — but that's okay. Because we got to be really good friends with him and he used to bring his classes here to visit the shop when we were well underway. He just died a few years ago. He was a really wonderful great spirit and great guy.

But at the same time, I was taking a math course and a full range of courses. I really had that idea that this was liberal arts and that I was going to try everything.

MS. SHEA: Because that is the way the college is still, as I understand it.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yeah.

MS. SHEA: So your first year, do you do kind of general studies?

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yeah, yeah. You take some tests so that you can place. I didn't have to take the beginning writing courses. I could forego some of those basic courses. I took French. I can't even remember. I took a bunch of different things just to see what it was like. And because it's such a small school, the teacher-student ratio is seven-to-one, so every class was like a tutorial. It was a very luxurious learning environment.

And it's interesting because I liked it, but I think that after all those high school years of leading a really sequestered life — I didn't have a lot of social life in high school. I really studied hard because my parents had made it clear to me, to all of us, that they couldn't afford to put us through college and that if we were just going to do okay that we could probably go to the state college, which was not a bad school, but that if we really wanted "out," we were on our own. So I really worked at it in high school to get the very best grades I could because I knew that that was my ticket to have some choice in where I went. And so that's how it worked out.

But once I got there [to Marlboro College], as much as I still liked the classes, I was much more fed by my social life there. It's almost like those were the first friends I made as a young person. I had some high school friends, but not really close. And suddenly I was making friends there. I was having romances, and really having a good time, the way young people are supposed to have a good time, and being a little less serious and being a little less worried about — it's kind of like I had gotten where I wanted to go and then I had this let down like, gee, maybe I could actually have some fun. So I did. [They laugh.] I did have fun.

And after the first year, a group of the people who I was friendly with, we were — you know, this was the late '60s and there were a number of us who were macrobiotic or vegetarian or whatever and we all really hated the food service. And so we hatched this plan to start our own little vegetarian macrobiotic or whatever health food kitchen. And one of my friends went to the Dean of Students and said, "Can we do this," and the Dean said, "Yes, you can." Because each of the dorms had a little kitchenette and —

MS. SHEA: And when you say dorms —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yeah.

MS. SHEA: As I understand it, it's really an old farm —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yes, yes.

MS. SHEA: — so these are like white — [inaudible] — kind of

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Well, one of the dorms was —

MS. SHEA: What were they like?

MS. HOLZAPFEL: There were a lot of newer buildings as well.

MS. SHEA: Okay.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Really ugly, at the time Modern — [they laugh] — but ugly buildings. There were a lot of ugly dorm buildings. But there were a couple of dorms that were in, at that time, some of the original farmhouse buildings. That didn't last long because they got trashed and those are now just the administrative buildings. [They laugh.] Very handsome buildings. So these were just dorms.

MS. SHEA: A little more generic.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yeah, yeah. But they did have a small kitchen and the dorm that I was in had a fairly good sized kitchen, maybe 12 feet long by six feet wide. And it had a common room. So we wrangled with the administration and they said they would give us the list of all the incoming students and we could send out a letter and that if we could get, I don't know, 10 or a dozen of them to sign on to this alternative food service, with the understanding that that's where they would eat all their meals.

MS. SHEA: No going back to the macro — [inaudible] — [they laugh.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: No, exactly. Skiving for a couple of donuts in the morning, although many did. [They laugh.] So anyway, we've got this dozen people to commit their tuition — not tuition, but board fee, and pooled that money and were able to start this alternative, which we called Grazers. And I decided in the wisdom of my 18-year-old brain that I was going to drop out — I thought I was going to just defer for a while, but I basically dropped out as a student and the college paid me the ungodly sum of $500 for each of the two semesters and gave me room and board as well, all the brown rice I could eat, to run this. Which meant buying the kegs of miso and wheels of cheddar and the bags of carrots and onions.

We would make field trips to Boston to Erewhon, which was a very early natural foods store, and get 50-pound bags of brown rice and whatever we needed. And we bought huge pressure cookers and pots and pans and chopsticks and set up in the kitchen there. So I was in charge of ordering food. I cooked breakfast every day. I organized the students in rotation. They took turns making lunch, which was generally soup and rice and carrots. [They laugh.] And then I would make dinner every evening. So that's what I did for that year, and it was magic. [Laughs.] It was really a great thing.

MS. SHEA: What did your parents think about this?

MS. HOLZAPFEL: They were not delighted, but they were also — that's a time when they were — meanwhile back in Woonsocket all the industry was moving away and there was a lot of strife in the household because my mother felt like the company that my father had worked for all these years, Taft-Pierce, she felt like they were — she was a more intuitive person than he was and I guess he had a bigger investment in believing that they were going to keep going. But she saw the handwriting on the wall.

And sure enough things degraded quickly there and he was out of a job, so that was a time when they were moving from this place where they had spent so much of their lives. He was finding a new job, I think, and they still had a four-year-old and an eight-year-old at home. And so I think they always trusted me. They felt like I would land on my feet but I know they weren't delighted.

MS. SHEA: But they didn't drive up in the station wagon and —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: They did not. They did not.

MS. SHEA: — and take you back. [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Nope, nope. It wasn't like that at all. And frankly, at that time, too, I think there was still that feeling — I mean, even today, there's still that feeling that education is wasted on girls, they're just going to have kids. So it wasn't a big — it's not like I came from a big academic family. My mother was the youngest of eight and she was the first of the siblings to graduate from high school. My father never finished high school. So even though they had this idea that it was good to go to college, it was not like you can't do this, you're letting the family down.

When we solicited members of Grazers, one letter came and I think I probably had never seen this before, this thin blue paper. It was an aerogramme from overseas and I had never even seen it before, it's like an envelope and a letter all in one. I opened it and it was such an exotic thing. And inside it said the following, it was from Rome, or maybe it was from England, it said, "I can dig it" — [they laugh] — signed, D. Holzapfel, some name, I couldn't even make out the signature.

But that next fall, this person shows up with long red hair and total hippie guy, wire-rimmed glasses and it's David. And I always thought of him as "Mr. I-Can-Dig-It" — [they laugh] — for a long time. But he was one of the charter members of the Grazers and that's how I got to meet him. I've got to say, my first impression of him, was just eye rolling, like, oh yeah, I can dig it, you know, Mr. Cool. [They laugh.] But we got to be good friends. And my second year at Marlboro was basically spent cooking brown rice and vegetables every day.

After that academic year was done — so that was 1971 — the summer of '71, my best friend Katie Blair and I decided we were going to travel. We were going to get bicycles and cycle all around southern Ireland. And it turned out that David was also going to be visiting Ireland and he was going to be traveling through Europe that

summer. Because I had made all of a thousand dollars that year, which back in 1970 was a pretty good amount of money, and I had had no other costs, I hadn't had a car and I always bought my clothes at the secondhand store and I had had room and board, I had basically a thousand dollars in my pocket.

So Katie and I planned our trip to Ireland and we cycled around and we had a great time and David met us there. And the next thing you know, we were all traveling, the three of us and we traveled back to England and then took the train and traveled down with him back to Rome because he had been living in Rome when he was in high school. He had friends there; we stayed there. We stayed in Florence. We picked up a couple — another friend of his and his sister and we went to Greece and we went to a bunch of the little islands in Greece and came back to Rome. And then it was Fall. And David was going to be staying in Rome because he was on Plan at Marlboro College translating Italian poetry.

MS. SHEA: And plan is the senior — junior year project or the senior year project?

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Well, at that point it was senior year, but now it's junior and senior year. And it's really like graduate work. It's a Plan of Concentration where you pick a fairly concentrated topic and study it in depth. So it's almost like you've got undergraduate and graduate crammed into a four-year program. But he had transferred to Marlboro. And so this was going to be basically the fall semester of his senior year —

[Audio break.]

[Speaking again of her time at Marlboro College.]

— I did, I did. And I did a lot of drawing, a lot of copying, a lot of reading. And there were always wonderful things going on, drama productions. And it was a very rich environment.

I just, I think at that point — what I found the year that I was there, especially in terms of writing, I didn't have much to say. I didn't have much experience. I really enjoyed the reading, but I found that I didn't have much analysis. I didn't — I really didn't have much depth. And so I didn't get my bachelor's degree till 1995. In '93, I enrolled with the — Vermont College in an Adult Degree Program. They have a campus in Brattleboro and it's a wonderful program, which is very self-directed. And that's how I finally got my bachelor's, just a general Bachelor's of Liberal Arts or something the same year that our older son, Simon, got his bachelor's degree. [They laugh.]

MS. SHEA: So you were ready later, but in this moment, you were ready for the wonderful adventure of Rome.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yeah, Rome and romance. At the time, I'm sure the elders in my life thought I was crazy, but not exactly. I remember my mother saying she had always had this thing about Greece because I think the movie, *Zorba the Greek* [1964], had come out then and had been really popular and she had always loved that movie. And she said when she got postcards from Greece, she just cried because she thought, oh God, when will I ever get to go to Greece. So in some way, they had some kind of vicarious enjoyment of what I was doing and I think they knew I wasn't out of my mind.

MS. SHEA: Of your adventures.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Although if they knew some of the things I did, I think they would have been, but I'm sure that's true of my kids and me, too. There are times when our kids would come home and I would say, "I really don't want to know too much about that." Eighteen-year-olds do crazy things, you know, hitchhiking, spending the night in houses of people you don't know, all that kind of stuff. By the time David and I got back here for him to finish his last semester of his senior year back in Marlboro, I was pregnant and we decided we really liked it here, so we decided to stay in the area. And except for one little foray of living out of town for a couple of years, we've been here ever since.

MS. SHEA: Well, let's take a little break and then we can come back and here more about Rome.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Right, Rome. [They laugh.] I was just trying to think if I covered pretty much everything that I covered the last time we talked about it. I think I did.

[END MD 01.]

MS. SHEA: Once again, this is Josephine Shea, working on our technology, interviewing Michelle Holzapfel in Marlboro town, Vermont, on January 26, 2008, for the Archives of American Art. And this is disc number two.

We had just gotten you as far as backpacking around Europe on a shoestring.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yes. Right.

MS. SHEA: With David.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: With David and other friends came and went as well. But I feel as though that was a really important part of my education, as well, the Grand Tour on a shoestring, to see Europe. Because we would visit museums and — Europe is such an education. In Ireland, it was amazing how literate and — people would quote poems, and recite poems. And that was a really — it was an eye-opening experience.

In Greece as well, we spent time in Athens and went into museums there as well, absorbing the architecture and the culture. We finally settled down and came to Rome, and lived there together for nine months or so, because David was working on his Plan, doing these translations.

This was a tiny, tiny apartment. It didn't even have a refrigerator, it had a hot plate. So I would walk down every day — we were in Trastevere, walk across the river and go to Campo De'Fiori, to the open-air market and get groceries for the day, and come back.

And then in the afternoons I would just walk around the city — and sketch, and go to museums. It was also a wonderful education. And to be there for that length of time meant that — the fountains were beautiful, the door-knockers were beautiful —

MS. SHEA: Yes — [laughs].

MS. HOLZAPFEL: — you know, everything was — I don't know, that was a very vivid time in my life. And I think that that —

MS. SHEA: So was it from like to fall to —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: It was the fall to the next spring.

MS. SHEA: — Spring. Because Rome can be rather cold.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: It was cold. It was cold.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: We had to rent this little — it was called a bombola ["little bomb"], a little space heater. You know, everything is marble, and it was cold — it was very chilly. But we had a wonderful apartment — a walk-up, facing onto a little piazza. And it was right out of La Boheme — it was lovely.

We didn't have much money, but somehow it was okay. And well along in that time period, I found myself to be pregnant. And we basically decided that was okay, and we were going to stay together. So eventually we came back and our parents were vaguely put out by all this.

But, in a way, too, I think they felt like it was our life. And, I mean, at that point I was still 19. But we came back here because David was then finishing up the last of his work. He graduated, and we found a little tiny cabin and had our first child; and a couple of years later had our second child. And they're now well into their 30s and have gray hair.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: So in retrospect that turned out okay.

There were years there in the interval, but basically we were looking for something to do and some way to make a living. Now, I'll let David fill in that part, but this older gentleman — who was an amazing character, Roy Sheldon, had a business just across the street called, Fabulous Tables. And he was using slabs of burl wood and making these very simple tables.

So David was working for him, and — again, this is a story that I won't digress too far down the road of, but we ended up being able to live here. First we rented it, and then later we were able to finally get a mortgage and own it. And so we set up shop. We set up — because Roy died, and David worked for his widow for a couple of years. But she didn't want to continue the business, so she sold this small stock of wood, and a few grinders, and, most important, probably, was the contacts with loggers.

And so we set up shop here. We just opened those garage doors and — with our few little tools, started making stuff. And, in a way, it suited us very well because our kids were young. Neither of us wanted to be off at some job somewhere. We wanted to be around for the kids. And so, having our own business really fulfilled a lot of our needs then.

This was 1976 that we moved in here and started our business. And I think that the trajectory of our business and our career really matches the trajectory of, for want of a better term, the late 20th century American craft movement.

So when *American Craft* magazine began, and craft shows began, and the American Craft Council — the inception had been clearly before the early '70s — there was that rising tide that we, in our little boat, went along on the ride as well — as many other people.

And early on we did little dinky craft shows, and then we slowly got into bigger craft shows. And we learned how to — David learned how to do photography because all of that business was slide image-based. And we learned by the seat of our pants and by making friends with other crafts people.

That whole social aspect of the craft movement was wonderful, in that you would be at a craft show — and you might be next to a potter, or a weaver, or whatever, but you were all in the same boat of dealing with galleries, dealing with buyers — retail, wholesale. It was truly the marketplace in its most raw and honest form.

In reading Ed and Judy's [McKie] — that interview, there was this interesting — and I'm not making this black and white because there's plenty of gray in between, but there seems to be this interesting motif of, I could almost call it a class issue. But there were people who came out of the art school training, and went right to galleries, and never did craft shows.

The craft show route — although there were many people who did craft shows who also had been to art school, it seemed that there was a bit of a divide there, that there was a somewhat more elite group of makers who would always be in the magazines, who would always be in the — it was originally called the American Craft Museum, that now calls itself the Museum of Art and Design.

There were the stars, and then there were all the plebes who schlepped to the craft shows, and schlepped back. And, again, although it was not a black and white situation, there was an interesting dynamic there. At some point I had a foot in both worlds; would be doing craft shows, but slowly began — thanks to being at the craft shows because galleries would be —

MS. SHEA: Right — do go.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: — would go there — sort of, slowly worked my way up. But it was this funny catch-22 in that you wanted to be in a better gallery, but you could only get into a better gallery if you had to prove yourself as you went along, and hoped that a gallery was willing to take a chance on you, especially, at that point I was still very young.

But slowly we would get into better shows, get into better galleries. And then the ball really starts to roll. And those years are — there are millions of stories that could be digressions on those years and what we learned. Craft shows were very intimate affairs in a lot of ways. You're standing there naked, basically, with your work. And thousands of people go by —

MS. SHEA: Will go walking by.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: — and say the first thing that comes into their minds. And it's a really — I'm really glad for it because it's a very good way to get a lot of your edges knocked off, and to — the marketplace is a tough place, and you've got to just take it and roll with it. Because some people are saying very flattering things, and some people are saying cruel things.

And, in a way, it's all just opinions that can bump you around. But as you let them wash over you, it helps you center yourself in what you believe you're doing. And you get to talk to a lot of people. You get to hone your shtick down to a very fine edge.

Although it's something I would probably never have done on my own. I have to thank David for it; he dragged me to these things. But I'm really glad that we did them, because there was something very honest about that. You're dealing with someone; you're selling something to someone; they're giving you their hard-earned money. It's that same reciprocity, it's that same dialogue that you're having with someone, around this object.

And there was a lot of collegiality. And craftspeople would just dish the dirt about various galleries, and who not to deal with, and who to deal with, and the real serious buyers were all well-known. It was a weekend, or a week-long phenomenon that had its own ecology.

MS. SHEA: It sounds like a very small kind of community.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yes. Yeah. And every year we'd go to Baltimore [ACC American Crafts Council] — and we'd see some of the same people; we'd see new people; people would drop out, but it was a world unto itself. But it was

also very tiring, especially with young kids. Sometimes we'd drag them along, and they were —

MS. SHEA: That's what I was going to ask. Did someone stay here with children?

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Sometimes —

MS. SHEA: — or did they come along? And were they running through the booths completely bored, or — [laughs] —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: No, no. We wouldn't let them run around. Some people let their kids run around. They were pretty bored. We'd usually try and arrange some kind of childcare — even have friends stay with them, or sometimes it would be a visit to grandparents.

I think it was valuable for them as well because they knew where the money was coming from. And I think it gave them an awareness of how hard we worked, how hard it was to sell, how hard it was to make that income. So that when they couldn't get a new pair of skis, and we'd explain to them why, they knew. Neither of them are in crafts, or arts. [Laughs.]

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] Maybe it was that — [laughs] — any experience — [inaudible] — I'm kidding.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Although our younger son is a very good photographer, but ended up not pursuing that as his livelihood.

But I was then glad, when it came down to it, to stop doing shows — because I had gotten several good galleries, and the most important of which — I guess it was 19 — well, 1989, I had been dealing with galleries and doing shows and I felt like things were just not going well; and our kids were getting to high school age, and we were just thinking, oh, we can't go on like this, because financially it was just — we were just chronically undercapitalized.

And I decided to take — well, I really thought I was quitting, it turned out I was taking a year off — and went to Brattleboro and got a job at a company that makes really specialized optical filters for things like the Hubble telescope, and for laser surgery goggles. And that was actually a lot of fun because it was still fabricating, and it was science, and I enjoyed it.

But I wasn't working for myself, and I think I was spoiled for being a good employee — [laughs].

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: But I dropped out, and severed my ties with galleries, and I thought I was done. And then I had had one patron, Nathan Ancell, who had begun with his brother-in-law — I think — Ethan Allen furniture. And he used to go to the Baltimore show a lot. He was a huge collector, he was an amazing guy — [laughs] — a real character.

So I'm trying to remember which year it was — maybe '87, he came by my booth at Baltimore, and we talked. He didn't buy anything that year. But the next year he came back, and we had a conversation and, basically, he said, "You go ahead and have your show here, make whatever sales you can — retail fine. But everything that you've got left, I'll buy from you wholesale."

And that was just — the word spread like wildfire through the whole show, that I had sold out my booth. That would happen to people occasionally, but it was the Cinderella story. When we were done — I think we had the kids with us then — we packed up our crappy old van with all the stuff that was left, maybe 30 pieces, and drove up to Danbury where the [Ethan Allen] corporate headquarters were.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: It was so funny — backed up to the loading dock, unloaded the stuff, and met with Nathan in his big corporate office there. And he was the kind of guy who — we were there once having this nice lunch with him, all alone there in his big office. And suddenly he had to take the call.

And he's talking to some lawyer and was just — wow, I was so glad I wasn't having that conversation with him. He was, like, a tiger. And then he puts down the phone and turns back to us, just as sweet and grandfatherly —

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: — as you please. You know, he was a really sharp businessman. But he also had this soft side — as is often true of these captains of industry. They have this whole other side that I think they save for artists, for their grandchildren, for kittens up trees, you know —

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: — they have this sentimental side as well. And I experienced that quite a few times with people who are very powerful, but have this soft spot for the craftsperson or the artist.

MS. SHEA: Part of — the interesting to me in the story is that he — two things: I guess, kind of, one is that, obviously, he's in the commercial biz so he's, he wants it wholesale; and then also that he didn't, I mean, he obviously liked your work, otherwise he wouldn't have offered to buy the whole booth, but he didn't get involved with the selection.

I mean, it was almost like a random — his collection was going to be random because it was whatever you hadn't sold. And one might even think, well, maybe the really good stuff sells, or however you want to put that. So it's a very interesting interaction.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: It was extremely interesting. And we did business for quite a few years. Yeah, as funny as it is, because — Ethan Allen, it's furniture — and we'd visit him at his home in New Rochelle. And there would be three carved, ivory and ebony Chinese screens leaning against the wall over there; and a big, big pile of rugs. And then there'd be some Native American burl bowls all stacked up in a corner.

He was a collector. He had, he had these chests of drawers of Netsuke. Incredible. And then there'd be some of my stuff, and some of Mark Lindquist's stuff. And I think he collected artists, as much as the stuff, because —

MS. SHEA: The specific —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: — sometimes he'd refer to his collection — he'd say, "all this junk." I think he collected people, or collected patronees, or I don't know what you'd — what he — but he did. He liked us. He loved seeing the kids.

And he gave us a shot of capital. That was incredible. It enabled us to switch from, like, electric power tools to air power tools, which are so superior. That's a whole technical aside, but the switch to air tools added years to our lives. They're much easier on your hands, they're much safer.

But that took a big amount of capital to be able to purchase all new tools, and the compressor. So Nathan made that possible. But in spite of the fact that he was buying work, I still was quite discouraged.

And it got to be '89, and I decided to take some time off. And so I was working my job in Brattleboro, not thinking much of it. And one day the phone rang, and it's Nathan saying, "I heard you're not working anymore. What do you mean? You can't do that. It's a sin. If you have talent and you don't use it, it's a sin. What do you need? Just tell me what you need." So, for a year he bankrolled me. He said, what do you need per month to live? And I told him. And in retrospect, it was a really pathetic — [laughs] —

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: — amount of money. But I didn't want to push it. And he said, "You work for a year; I'll send you a check every month; whatever you make, I'll take. You just give it to me."

And so the interesting thing about him is he always got a really good bargain, you know. [Laughs.] It's fascinating to me. He got what he wanted. I got what I needed. And that's the symbiosis, the ecology of the collector and the maker.

I've done a lot of reading — the autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini — you read the stories of those makers, and it's always the same. The stories of dealing with patrons — they dealt with the same problems, and the same issues, the same asymmetry of power. It's fascinating to me.

And I've read a lot of the lives of the artists because I'm always interested in those relationships for various artists. And, unless the artist has an independent income, there's always — it is an asymmetrical relationship, but one doesn't have much choice in the matter. [Laughs.]

I was working for him for this year and, at that time I also got a call from Peter Joseph. I had been showing with Pritam & Eames [East Hampton, NY] out on Long Island, and had a good relationship with them. I really respect them very much.

But at that point in my career I still was not that well known and I really, really wanted a solo show. And they weren't really prepared. They were furniture. They had Judy McKie and Wendell Castle, and — furniture, and — this is a whole subtopic that I could go on forever about what are these objects that we put on tables, that we put on shelves? What are they for? What category are they?

All the galleries liked my work, but I felt like they weren't quite ready to make that kind of investment that a gallery makes to do a solo show. In that period that I dropped out, I felt like I had cut my relationship with galleries. So that when Peter Joseph came along — he knew my work because he had bought it from Pritam & Eames; and I had never met him up to that point but I knew of him, because whenever he would buy a piece of mine from Pritam and Eames, he would always have them get in touch with me because he wanted "a statement."

It was the first time that had ever happened to me. And I agonized over those statements. But it was, again, one of the best things anyone ever —

MS. SHEA: He wanted a new statement with each piece when one statement would do — [laughs].

MS. HOLZAPFEL: No — he wanted a statement. And that was — I mean, at the time it was, oh — [makes a soft sound of distress]. But in retrospect, it's like when you have that really good teacher who's strict, and at the time you're chafing but afterwards you realize that you learned a tremendous amount.

And, at any rate, he said, "I'm starting this gallery in Manhattan and I'd like you to be in the stable." And that era — I guess that gallery had about a seven-year run, because then he got ill and he died — and he was only a few years older than I. But he was a great patron in my life who — being with that gallery just changed my life.

I was the only small-scale object maker — I don't call myself a woodturner because I don't do that much woodturning, but I was making vessels mostly, and these still-life pieces, but not furniture. And, again, it was Wendell and Albert Paley, Rosanne Somerson, all those big names, and me. I always felt like the little, you know, those little birds that sit on rhinos —

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: — and they take the ticks off them? I was quite daunted. And one of the first group shows that they had — they always did beautiful publications, beautiful catalogues, and they got Witold Rybczynski to write the introduction. And he referred to me as "the only autodidact" — which was nice but also made me feel like, all right, I don't have any academic credentials. I mean, all these people are academic/woodworkers, or cabinetmakers, or whatever they're calling themselves.

And I felt really — I just always had this — [laughs] — inferiority complex about not having academic credentials. And it was a funny thing, I — Peter Joseph was very dedicated. He spent a tremendous amount of his personal wealth keeping that gallery going. And they did a splendid job — the staff, the promotional stuff, the catalogs, the gallery itself, it was being Cinderella at the ball.

And he helped me to raise my prices. And I tried new kinds of things — I made boxes. He really encouraged me. And he encouraged us all to continue to write as well. And I found that I really enjoyed that a lot — writing was like being able to take one eye out of my head and place it over here —

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: — and look at my work from this whole other angle. And in the mid-'90s, when I was still at the Peter Joseph Gallery, I also went back to school. Vermont College has an adult degree program; they have a little campus in Brattleboro. So, at that same time, I went back to school to get my B.A., which I did —

MS. SHEA: Vermont College in — it says Norwich University [Northfield, VT].

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Well, it's also — Vermont College and Norwich University were allied at that time. And so I got my B.A. the same time our older son Simon got his B.A. Which was nice, and for us to — we were all in college at the same time. And that was a very delightful time because it gave me a legitimate excuse to read, to write, to study. And this was the kind of adult program where you can design your own program.

MS. SHEA: So was it like a liberal arts degree —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yeah.

MS. SHEA: — where you put together — [inaudible] — so great, and they don't have a good, kind of, reputation —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yeah, I know.

MS. SHEA: — and I thought —

MS. SHEA: I know.

MS. SHEA: — and I thought there was this brief period in education where that, I thought, was kind of the trend. And then it really —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: I know. They don't have a high status, reputation. But, boy, it's what I needed. It was such a luxury to do that, and it helped me a lot. And some of the other students, people — they're all working adults, and it's a really rich environment — more than being with a bunch of 19-year-olds. I don't know — I thought it was really splendid, and I enjoyed every minute of it.

But a lot of the study that I was doing was background that I felt had been missing. Even though I've always done a lot of reading in art history, still it was a good excuse to fill things in a bit more. And I also did quite a lot in women's studies — for want of a better term; and some aspects of science that I was interested in; and math as well.

And it dovetailed well with my time there at the gallery because Peter was always encouraging us to write. And I was doing a lot of writing articles for the woodturning journals; I was doing, at that time, speaking engagements, and teaching. And so that all worked together to help me to clarify my thoughts about what it was I was doing because what I found was, I always — I sit there, and I think I know what I think.

But I find that it's not until I write it down that there's a discipline about writing and thinking, that's different than just the free-form kind of discursive thinking that we do day to day. And there's a real parallelism between writing and working in the shop — in that you gather material; you arrange it; you rough-out; you polish. Even the terminology is —

MS. SHEA: I've never — that's very interesting to see that similarity.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yeah, it's a very similar — and also respect for material. Really trying to listen to what it's saying, rather than forming too much of an opinion ahead of time; just letting — you're reading the words of other people, you ought to really listen to what they're saying.

So that was a time that I was suddenly — it was so great that our sons were in school, and they had interesting friends, and girlfriends. And so we'd sit around and — I was just reading [Michel] Foucault; I was just catching up on the history of ideas.

But, interestingly enough everything has its — you know that Robert Frost poem, "Nothing Gold Can Stay" [1923]; the gallery started having its own troubles — most of which I'll probably never know. I wish someone would write a history of the Peter Joseph Gallery. That would be interesting.

And then Peter got ill and it closed. And he passed away a couple of years after that. And he was — he was not a easy person —

MS. SHEA: I was wondering, did he ever come up and visit your studio here?

MS. HOLZAPFEL: He never did come up here.

MS. SHEA: It's almost, kind of, what I might have guessed.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. SHEA: And you're not really that far away.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: No. No. Yeah, he was not a easy person, but I always admired his dedication to this idea of promoting work made by living American craftspeople. For whatever else he may or may not have been — and he really put his money where his mouth was on that. And I think he really liked my work, and liked it for what it was.

So that was a funny thing, though, because I had come in as part of this phenomenon of woodturning, which is peculiar in its own right, that wood turners should — I mean, the Furniture Society I can understand, woodturning, I always think, why woodturning?

I mean, they're — it's gotten to the point where there are people working in relation to The Wood Turning Center, who don't really turn their work, and aren't necessarily working in wood, and not necessarily even making vessels; a lot of people who are also furniture makers, metal spinners. There are people who make spoons. It's become this catch-all category for things that just aren't furniture, but that are still made, but that aren't ceramics or glass or textiles.

So being with the Peter Joseph Gallery, I'm sure, especially from the outside, it seemed very rarified. I felt a little alienated from my woodturning colleagues, but I had always felt somewhat alienated anyway, for a number of

reasons, not the least of which is just the whole gender —

MS. SHEA: Right.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: — thing. But still I was — that was a tremendous experience to be with the Peter Joseph Gallery. And I would meet people; we would have a college reunion; or just talking to someone in the shop and saying, hi, you know, how are you; what are you doing? And I would say, well, I'm with the gallery; it's in Manhattan; oh, really, where is it? I would say, oh, it's at 57th and 5th. And people would go, oh!

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Suddenly they'd be so interested. And it made me think of that saying, "believing is seeing." What I experienced there more than anything was — and I don't mean to say this in a pejorative way, but it's the power of glamour. And I looked up "glamour." It's a Scottish word that means like when there's mist, how everything looks better with this mist, this romantic mist around. And it's like putting Vaseline on —

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: — the lens. And I don't know if it's my blue-collar background, or what it is, but I've always had — been ill at ease about this, realizing that — it's like the Joni Mitchell song ["He Played Real Good For Free," David Crosby] about the guy standing on the corner playing his saxophone, and he played real good for free, and she's getting into her limousine and going to Carnegie Hall.

It's just I feel like there's talent, and then there's luck. And there are talented people who don't have luck and, therefore, their work will not be known. And there are really lucky people who aren't that talented whose work gets to be very well-known. And then sometimes people get talent and get lucky —

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: [Laughs.] But I really saw that. I saw how: where you were, and who you knew would lend a great deal of weight to one's work. And that always bothered me because I wanted it to just be — I didn't want it to be instantly approved of, I wanted it to be considered, and looked at on its merit — as an object in a context of everything that's ever been made in the world, over all time.

One of these questions about influences; Oceanic art, Celtic art, Japanese tea ceremony, African tribal stools. People have been making stuff ever since there have been people. And, to me, those are all my forbears.

And so this whole vexed issue of art and craft, it just — it's so irritating. I feel like craft, as in making something skillfully. That's the mother of all. And it just so happens that one of her offsprings, which is really quite a noisy brat of the modern art world, often gets to represent — or, I don't know if it's the squeakiest wheel or the most glamourous wheel, or the most expensive wheel, but it seems to get to dictate a tremendous amount. And it doesn't seem fair, quite.

It irritates my sense of social justice, because if you've ever worn a really well-made pair of shoes, you know that the making of those shoes is tremendously respectable. Or when I would see a Gothic cathedral, the architect learned in a guild system, and learned from a master — and had been an apprentice.

But there would be many, many people — the stone masons, and they all had to work together. They all had to be — even if they weren't equally compensated in terms of money, to me. I respect them all equally.

However, here we are in the turn of the century and, unfortunately — or fortunately, I don't know — glamour can prevail over substance. You see it every day. But I'm not, I don't want to seem bitter about it or anything. I mean, I've —

MS. SHEA: Well, I think if you, you know — if you go through this path, and then you get to be in, you see that just, I would think, make it even more apparent how, in many ways, how random and — yeah, it's —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yeah, it is. It is. And in craft show years, I remember several makers who've made wonderful stuff, and then they kind of just disappeared. I often wondered what happened to them.

When it comes right down to it, I'm making luxury items. And early on, I remember when we did craft shows in the early days, glassmakers or potters would have their production line — and they'd hire people who'd make their production line, and then they'd make their one-off work. And when you have a material that's reproducible, you can do that.

MS. SHEA: So quickly.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yeah. You can — those materials really lend themselves well to an industrial process. And that's fine, I don't begrudge anyone, whatever road they need to make it, that's fine. But what we found was, our material was — we weren't using kiln dried lumber. Our material is so erratic. Every piece really is different. And we tried, a little bit, having the classic vase form — make it over and over again. But that was not possible because each piece of wood would suggest a different shape. I wasn't going to make three more of those.

And that has continued, even with some high-class galleries. Even though they are purporting to be selling fabulous, one-of-a-kind, they would say, oof, I could have sold four of those. And I'm thinking, I can't make four of those. I thought that was *not* what we were doing here.

So, in a sense, we didn't have a whole lot of choice. We have to make one-of-a-kind work because we have one-of-a-kind material. And so, when it's one-of-a-kind, you can't cut costs by having jigs, and semi-industrial process. We streamline and work as efficiently as we can, and get the best tools that we can, but it does not lend itself to that kind of production.

So then, by definition, we're making bespoke work — and that means it's expensive; and that means not everyone can afford it. Although we've had people buy stuff on time and take years to pay for stuff. We certainly — we don't own hardly any of our own work. [Laughs.]

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: But you can't escape the historical moment you're in. Sometimes I feel like a little bug pinned to a time.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: You know, you can't escape it. And from my readings, I gather, that it wouldn't be that different anyway. If you're Jackson Pollock, you're dealing with Clement Greenberg; if you're Michelangelo, you've got some popes breathing —

MS. SHEA: Pope — [inaudible] —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: — down your neck. [Laughs.]

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: And I think, in a way, what makes it sort of interesting is that even though I'm not — I mean, I hate nationalism. But I feel like I have this peculiar patriotic sense — and maybe all immigrants feel this way, of America. It's this idea that maybe we are — we can be — equal.

It's a very idealistic notion. It's this peculiar notion, these ideals of equality and justice. But in some way I really do believe in that. Although a craft show, or dealing with galleries, it's more like a study in primatology — rank, hierarchy, grooming, it's like all those things are happening. It's so non-democratic. And yet I maintain this idea that there's still this way that things should be, where everyone gets an equal chance. And sometimes it's, it's painful to try and keep those two — that ideal in your mind, along with that reality of the down-and-dirty marketplace. You know, the fact that it really is a dog-eat-dog world. It's just — it's just the way it is.

MS. SHEA: I guess one of the questions to talk about is — I think we've talked quite a bit about dealers, but more along the lines of education and — I think I saw on your resume, did I see Arrowmont [School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN] or if you'd been involved with —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Well, —

MS. SHEA: — obviously not Pilchuck Glass School [Stanwood, WA] — [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: In terms of — in terms of learning, or —

MS. SHEA: Either, either — right.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Well, teaching is learning as well. Yeah, I would say, in the — especially in the mid-'90s, I did what felt to me like a fair amount of teaching. I've been approached by Arrowmont, and Haystack [Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME] as well, and Anderson Ranch [Arts Center, Snowmass Village, CO], to teach. I remember, oh, really early on — what was her name, I can almost see her face from Arrrowmont, asking me to come and do demonstrations and teach turning. But I was using this machinist's lathe, and I would say, "If you've a machine lathe" —

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] You've got to — [inaudible] — can take this down there or something. [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: But there's no way I'm going to stand there with hand tools and make a fool of myself. And so, generally, they would say, oh, well, never mind. So I ended up not doing a lot of teaching because of that. But I — after that happened a few times, I started trying to figure out what I could do that was portable.

And so a lot of times what I would do — and let's see, I could dredge them out of my resume there I guess. But I don't think I ever did any more than once or twice. But I taught a weekend at Brookfield [CT], and at the Worcester Center for Crafts [MA], and this little group down in Maryland, at Maryland Hall, that was a self-organized group of people, it wasn't an institution. And then the Wood Turning Center would have these weekend events.

And what I developed were slide presentations. And so, in a way, I was lecturing. And I really felt as though that was much more needed in the field than another making-the-chips-fly kind of thing.

Now that's a — that's a whole other topic, is the makeup of the field. And Ed [Cooke] outlines this really well in his part of that Wood Turning Center Yale show — I can show you that catalogue.

The whole phenomenon of woodturning, as a sort of post-war pastime for gentlemen in their basement, I think continues to be the trend. The American Association of Woodturners has a huge membership — mostly amateur woodworkers, mostly middle-aged gentlemen, or older, retired — retired dentists, retired engineers. And they love — for them, it's about technique. They could watch someone stand there and turn all day long — and they do. And that's what they're about. And I did one AAW [American Association of Woodworkers] event, and I think I'd put together three different lectures. Because the question that I would often get asked is, where do you get your ideas from? [They laugh.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: And, in fact, I've just finished a manuscript that I've sent down to the Wood Turning Center that I worked on for the better part of a year, trying to answer that question.

So I would put together slide shows that would be like little mini courses in art history — sometimes they'd be comparative, I'd show a piece of my work, and I'd show a piece of South American pottery where sometimes there would be formal similarities, sometimes there would be functional similarities, sometimes there would be surface decorative similarities. Because my sense was that it was this very, sort of, incestuous — or, I don't know what you'd call it — solipsistic, or, there's some word for it, where they were just all looking at each other's work, and who could make the thinnest-walled vessel. And I was just trying to say, look out there, there's a world of — you do fly fishing? Try incorporating fish. But I realized that the emotional makeup of my audience was like talking to my dad. They didn't want to know about my special feelings about how this piece reminded me of my grandmother or something.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: But that organization has a huge center — it's a gravitational center and has a huge membership. And so they set the tone for the field. And then Albert LeCoff at Wood Turning Center, he's always tried to work the more — again, words are bad here — but the more artistic branches of the field.

So most of the presentations that I've given have been — Albert's world conferences where there would be woodturners and makers from Australia, and from England, and from Switzerland, and from England. And his efforts have always been to broaden it. I don't want to be bad-mouthing the AAW, they do a very valuable service as well.

But in doing teaching — and it was interesting, again, in reading Judy's interview she talks about how, when she was teaching, she'd teach for one day but it would take her five days to prepare. I always found that was true. That it would take — to get all the slides together, to get my slide scripts together, to prepare for one of these things — it might take an hour to give the presentation, but I would be preparing for days.

And I'd be getting paid $200. And, I'd come back and I'd be totally — because you give your presentation and then everyone wants to talk to you, you're having all these different fairly intense conversations with people — and I'd be really exhausted for a week. And I felt like I'm not cut out for this. I'm not cut out for teaching.

I've had groups come here; I've had individuals come here, and we've sat on the porch for hours. And I love to help in any way that I can. But those institutional settings — and those institutions all tend to be always strapped for cash. It sounds terrible but I feel like they just couldn't pay me enough at this point.

MS. SHEA: Right. Well, you're talking about — like, say, five days to prepare; a day to give the talk; maybe a day to travel back. I mean, that's probably a week of work for one —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: A few hundred dollars.

MS. SHEA: — small amount of pay for one day.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yeah. And I can appreciate, some people feel — if I was making really a lot of money with my work, I would say, well, this is pay-back time; I don't need to get paid. And, in fact, I've done a lot of — a lot of teaching gigs just pro bono as well, because I feel like, well, that's pay-back.

But there are times when I had a show down at our little museum, a very nice little museum in the old train station in Brattleboro, I had a little mini-retrospective there. And the woman who's in charge of community outreach and education asked me if some kids could come up here. And I knew it was going to be a hundred dollars or something.

I didn't care about that. I was really happy to do that for nothing. I understand that smaller institutions don't have the kind of budget to pay people. But some — oh, God, now here I'm going to sound —

MS. SHEA: Well, isn't there an aspect of what you are worth, and —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yes, and what the organization can pay. And I guess what I'm saying is, what they could pay is not commensurate with what they do pay.

Because I think sometimes they know that makers are just hungry to be there in the spotlight, to be in the scene. And I think sometimes the calculus is, you should be glad to even be here. This money is just to pay your expenses, but you're going to get your pay in the exposure that you're getting.

And a lot of organizations do that. A lot of museums do that. You should just donate this piece. This has happened to me: You should donate this piece because don't you want to be in this museum? Isn't it worth it to you?

I don't know, how do I say that when I'm trying to pay my kid's college tuition?

MS. SHEA: Do you go to the college and say, you should just donate his education. [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Or to my — or to my dentist, and say, "Hey, I'll smile all over town and everyone will want to come to have you fix their teeth."

And there, I think that's just part of a bigger picture of, still, this very romantic notion of what an artist is. You know — either this wild person, this wild womanizing, alcoholic person; or this person who will starve in their garret.

And I often find the most negative reaction that I would get over the years, either with a buyer or with a gallery, is when I'm being the most businesslike. I'm being totally businesslike — totally fair, totally by-the-contract. But somehow there's this feeling of, like, oh, artists don't do things that way.

When you've had a business and had to pay the bills, you can be pretty practical-minded about these things. You have to. You want to keep making stuff. You don't want to kill the goose that lays the golden egg.

And there have been some really wonderful, incredibly supportive and understanding people and institutions. And I would say, mostly, they outweigh. But it's been surprising to me as well. And I guess it just boils down to people — and some people are wonderful, and some people are just not so wonderful.

But it's often the smallest and most humble organization that will just bend over backwards and make cookies for you. And sometimes it's the most prestigious organizations that make you feel like you're part of the janitorial staff. [Laughs.]

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: It's pretty interesting.

[END MD 02 TR 01.]

MS. SHEA: Oh, that is funny because one of the questions is how do you get ideas for your work, but I think we've really kind of talked about that. And then maybe we can talk about it some more. It sounds like we've talked somewhat though — how have your sources of inspiration changed over the years?

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Based on what I come across. One of the wonderful things about the Peter Joseph Gallery is it gave us an excuse to be in Manhattan a lot, and museum and gallery-going there is phenomenal. And those influences are very strong, and not just in the buildings but the buildings themselves, the city itself, the park. One of my earliest influences that organizes my thinking or my — because the house that I grew up in was very

basic, not a lot of esthetic stimulus there, except maybe for books and magazines, but we'd go to church every Sunday. I'm certainly not a practicing Catholic in any way — [laughs] — but there was something about going into the building, the stained glass, the organ music, the vestments, the drama of the stage.

I say in my little video that I formed this hierarchy in my mind, that even though the building was the biggest thing, it was there as a shelter for furniture: the altar, the chairs, the pews. But the altar was the focus, so that the table had more importance because the church was protecting it.

But on that altar was this little tabernacle that was like the second little house or it was like a little stage. The one in our church had a curtain. The priest would open the curtain and this gold chalice would be inside, and inside of that, we all knew, it was the most holy thing. My grandparents were very pious, and it seemed like they were praying all the time. [Laughs.] I just remember them on their knees all the time.

But that affected me very much. When we've traveled in Europe — maybe five years ago, we went back, and although we did go to Italy, we spent a good amount of time in southern Germany because I really wanted to see those incredible linden wood carvings, those altar carvings from pre-Reformation. They didn't all get trashed during the Reformation and they're unbelievable. I was so humbled. I was just bowing down. These things are so virtuosic. But also, when we were in Italy, I just loved — all the things Italianate are just so strutting and so muscular and beautiful. Even the crucifix, even the Jesus, is kind of buff. He's really flexing all his abs and stuff. [Laughs.]

But those German carvings were wood, for one thing. They weren't the finer material. They were wood. And they were so gaunt and the Jesus always looked so suffering, and there was something about that sensibility, the more Northern sensibility, that was much more — all this stuff's made out of wood. It's not marble, it's not bronze, it's this humble material, and there's this pathos about it that was not so much the bravura of the Italianate. That more gaunt, spare look, really gets me in the heart, whereas the Italianate is like, you fall in love with it, but it's not in love with you, you know? [They laugh.]

So for me, to travel and to be able to be in a place long enough to really feel it, that kind of education has probably gone deeper than sitting in a classroom might have. But those were big influences and I feel like that's my tribe. That all art is tribal art, and that Northern Europe or Europe in general, that's still my tribe. As much as I am blown away by African tribal art, I'm not going to make stuff like that. I admire it tremendously, but I know that I don't have the seeds of that in me. I can't relate to it as something that I would — replicate isn't the right word, but anyway. And the same with Native American work. There are all these issues around appropriation that I feel like — I don't know.

Maybe I'm painting myself into a corner, but I really love doing representational work. I really love the genre of the still life. Within my work, this subgenre of the natural — I don't know how many images of my work you've seen, but sometimes, I'll take a piece and just try and emphasize its naturalness or carve leaves on it. There are these more nature-inspired pieces.

Another subgenre are these geometric or geometrically inspired pieces based on — I guess it moves into mathematics a little bit, but it's based on the three-dimensional geometry that is generated by the lathe, not just axial symmetry. But if you shift the wood, shift the axes, you start getting little parabolas and hyperbolas — yes, hyperbolas, parabolas. You get a lot of different geometry, based on how you spin that piece. So some pieces that I've made are really explorations in the mathematics of form.

And then there are these still life genre pieces, and I'm sure there are other pieces that straddle categories. Some work I have a very strong feeling for are pieces that are linked together. In a way, those are hearkening back to folk art, to whittling, to scrimshaw, where they would carve little links and then a pie crimper. Or there might be a set of burls that I carve, so that they're linked together: what I think are the sibling pieces.

There's an example where one, I'm trying to honor the integrity of the wood by keeping it together and carving it, but two, I'm talking about siblinghood, and making these sets of pieces. They're like whittling which goes back to that folk root, and yet, the whole sibling thing, coming from a big family, can be also a very personal message. So I always am hoping that the viewer can — if they wish — that I'm offering a lot of levels, a lot of strata of information with a piece.

I must say, my initial impulse is a plastic impulse. It's like, oh, I want to make a hole there. It's a very — it's from here [Holzapfel points to the center of her torso]. It's this very plastic impulse to manipulate form. It's only afterwards that sometimes I'll make stuff and I'm just like, whoa, where did that come from? And I'll look at it and afterwards generate a narrative around it, or any number of narratives, about what that piece has been about. But it really starts — the will is from here to form. And the more discursive thoughts are afterwards.

MS. SHEA: You talked about kind of three very general and often unrelated categories. Have you kind of worked along in those three streams continuously?

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yes. At some very early point, there was some bifurcation or trifurcation or some branching into these kind of motifs, and they've continued. And sometimes they drop off and sometimes I come back to them. But I'm very wary of sort of originality for originality's sake. I'm not trying to shock anyone. And I feel like if I have some idea, this idea of linked forms, I don't want to make the same one over and over again. But when I hit upon — it's almost more like a way of thinking about form that is rich and intriguing to me.

I like to stay with it until I've played out — in a lot of ways, I feel more like a scientist. If I had to call myself something, I really — I have friends who are scientists, I love reading about science, I really love science. And I feel like these are all experiments; they're experiments in form, and that's my lab, and I just like to keep running new experiments. It takes such a long time to make a form. Sometimes people say, well, you should try clay. But I don't like having my hands wet. I don't like that feeling, so clay doesn't appeal to me. But there are times that I wish that it were a faster medium because sometimes, you get to the end and it's like, oh.

MS. SHEA: And it is that way with scientific research. I was just hearing about that on the radio, how I don't think people know that much, that they can work along, work along, work on, one tiny mistake or one — and then there's nothing or it's —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yes, yes. And in a way, I'm just thinking about Nathan again. The patron you'll love with all your heart is the one who will buy everything because you've got to sell your mistakes as well, and in a way, those mistakes are more valuable. I learn more from my mistakes than from a — a successful piece just seems to happen. It's strange, but it's those more — it's like it's the vexing problem that really expands my mind. And when it's easy, even though it looks good and everybody likes it, I always feel, oh, it was too easy. This was my favorite child, the one that gave me a total pain in the ass, but I really learned a lot from it. But you've got to sell it and sometimes it's kind of the ugly duckling. But who's going to pay you? I don't have a research grant like a scientist would. And I know there are, or there were, grants. I guess the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] is still at it.

MS. SHEA: Have you ever thought about a Fulbright because it seems some of the things that you've talked about, you kind of did your own Fulbright, in a sense.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yes. I haven't. People have suggested that to me, Fulbright and Guggenheim. This is interesting. I got the paperwork for Guggenheim and it says, or at least it did a couple of years ago, no craft media, or no craft, or something like that right on it. And I actually called or wrote, and I said, what do you mean by that? And I didn't get a good answer. But the Guggenheim would be something that I certainly could pursue. I think I've just been lazy about it, because grant writing is a whole other job. [Laughs.] It's a big job having a business. We just — we did the façade here and I actually bought a — I've always wanted one and I finally, maybe five years ago, bought a Kubota tractor.

MS. SHEA: Is that what's underneath the drapery? [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Tractor and backhoe and that is sculpting on a grand scale, but I did all the stone work and redid the drainage and everything out here. There are so many things to do, I guess, that are more fun than what I imagine writing a grant would be. [Laughs.] But the backhoe, that is some big fun.

MS. SHEA: You talked about exhibiting in galleries, but what about your experience in museums?

MS. HOLZAPFEL: That's been very varied. Sometimes, it's a museum that's allied with a university. There are so many different kinds of museums, and some have schools of some sort attached to them. I just gave a talk on a Sunday afternoon at the MFA because there was a show there of the [Ron and Anita] Wornick Collection in their contemporary wing, and that was a lot of fun and I got to talk to some of the curators and that was very enjoyable.

One of the most interesting experiences I ever had, we were in [Washington,] D.C. for some other reason — I forget — and David and I decided to go over to the [Smithsonian American Art Museum] Renwick [Gallery], and Ken Trapp was the curator-in-charge then. And we just walked in and said, is Ken Trapp here? And we didn't have to make an appointment — [laughs] — and it turned out he was free. And he came bouncing out and we started talking, and three hours later we had walked around, we had the most wonderful conversation.

And I felt that was an ideal kind of moment of being someone who makes something. He knew my name, but we just talked like colleagues. With a gallery, it's a very frank, commercial relationship, whereas with a museum — it was so interesting to talk to Ken that day about what he deals with, with his committees. And it was just a very heartfelt and a very enlightening conversation because he was so frank.

And we talked about the field and a lot of things and I felt like this is the way it should be. Museums and curators and makers — there's a potential for great collegiality there, but there isn't always. And I understand very well that museums have their own constituencies that they're trying to satisfy their own funds that they're always

trying to raise, they're trying to get people in, they're trying to appeal on one hand to a large group of people to get a lot of visitors. They're trying to satisfy many masters.

But I think from my youth the museum was the temple, and sometimes, the keepers of the temple are a priesthood that seems to want to keep its knowledge and keep others away from that knowledge. And in other cases, they're just with open arms. So that's been very mixed. That's just a case of — people are — you have to sort of take them as you find them.

And when it comes to woodturning too — and this is an ongoing issue inasmuch as I really appreciated Peter Joseph's insistence that we write — a lot of galleries don't ask that of their artists. And I can see where a lot of curators could — especially in the woodturning field — form the idea that it is mostly a self-taught group of people. That it's a group of people that, in the main, are more interested in technique. It's perhaps short on theory or short on analysis, and definitely short on narrative.

I co-curated a show at the Wood Turning Center with a really wonderful gentleman from Nova Scotia, Chris Tyler — Canada has a whole other structure of support for the arts. [Laughs.] That's a side issue. Anyway, it was a wonderful experience curating a show, and Chris Tyler and I were very dedicated to the idea of encouraging the makers to explore their voices a little bit. Not only were they going to apply to be in this show with slides, they were going to have to reveal in words, reveal something, send in sketchbooks, talk about where their ideas came from, anything. It didn't have to be an academic treatise. They just needed to reveal, in some form other than the piece they had made, something about what they do. I was actually really pleased with that and there was a very nice catalogue and a show that all happened as a result of our efforts.

And this is a wonderful thing about the Wood Turning Center. It's such a small organization that Albert invited Chris and I back to work with the designer of the book, catalogue, so that the actual layout and the design of the book and the feel of the book would be resonant of that idea that this was not going to be what I almost think of as a form of pornography, this coffee table book where it's centerfold after centerfold of this finished, pristine background, glossy-lit object, object, object.

This was going to look different and there was going to be a little more dust and a little grit and a little bit more about the how of the piece, rather than just this subjectified object under a light. That was a very satisfying experience. But my experience of the makers was quite mixed. Many of them are very reticent, very, very reticent to work at thinking objectively somehow.

MS. SHEA: Working at communicating in ways other than the work.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yes. And I think again, it's a mostly male field. There's that kind of "don't complain, don't explain," kind of ethos there, "my work speaks for itself." "Shucks, I just" — whatever. And I don't want to disrespect that, but somehow, you can't have your cake and eat it too. You can't say — or maybe you can, maybe some people do, actually some people do — [they laugh] — of being like the cowboy, but still being believed by a curator or a museum or a collector.

I've always felt — maybe I've been wrong all this time, or maybe it's because of that experience with Peter Joseph — I always felt like talking about one's work, it's not like I'm justifying it, it's not like I'm convincing someone it's good who doesn't think it's good. It could be something as simple as letting someone know that there was something structural about this piece that caused me to make a decision, that structure X led to form Y in such and such a way.

It isn't obsessing about technique, but it is just educating someone. If your audience is someone who hasn't worked in wood, I never want to assume that they're ignorant, nor do I want to assume that they already know what I'm about to tell them. And so there's often a great deal that the maker can offer that isn't proscriptive, that isn't saying this is what this is about and I'm going to tell you, but it's just another facet of what a piece is about that is part of the story.

At any rate, I feel like the field has gotten a bit of a reputation for being kind of — again, if there's a hierarchy of craft media, I would say that glass is definitely at the top. And even within the medium of wood, furniture — maybe it's just scale? I don't know. Furniture really commands — and there's a huge — there are all these academic institutions that have programs for furniture making. They don't have programs for woodturning. Woodturning is just like if you want some legs, you can turn them. So there's not much academic gravity around woodturning.

And Albert LeCoff at the Wood Turning Center has certainly tried to generate that, so the big show that they did with Yale was helpful. And I think there are a number of institutions that have hosted woodturning shows, and there are people in the field who are writing and thinking about it, but it's very — I feel like it's still very undeveloped and will probably stay undeveloped. [They laugh.] I'm not sitting home waiting for the great tomes of — [laughs] — of woodturning philosophy to start rolling off the presses. But again, when I think of that

hierarchy, the vessel in the church, the vessel was — I don't know. Somehow I formed this opinion that the vessel was the most —

MS. SHEA: At the top, at the top of pyramid. [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: That's what I decided to do is — [inaudible] — this vessel and — and I'm a very domestic person, I love to cook, I love to have my garden, I love to sew. I'm not a grandiose person, and my expectations of life are modest. But I don't feel like just because they're modest or that it's humble subject matter, I still think that these things are due their respect as well, just that, just they're due some respect. And in a large measure, they have been well respected. I'm not — I guess I feel quite satisfied, but I think I do harbor a sort of — I often want to say to the field, come on, guys. Can't you just look a little deeper or reveal a bit more?

But again, I think there are definitely gender issues. I don't know — I'm just — [inaudible]. [They laugh.] But there are actually some wonderful women in the field as well, and I would say that a lot of them have really provided a great deal of the narrative, of the talking in the field. It's interesting. And so it's not like I've been alone in that respect and there's been some nice collegiality there as well, but I've been also very — I don't know — afraid of that sort of ghettoization that can happen as well.

The women's — there have been women woodturners shows. And I've shown in them and I don't — it's so vexing to me because their work is great and I'm happy, but I feel like, "Are the other shows called men woodturners?"

MS. SHEA: Or like white male woodturners?

[They laugh.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yes, right.

MS. SHEA: Or elderly white male woodturners.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yes, and if that were true, then I would say, well, fair is fair. We're just — we're making these categories and that happens to be mine.

MS. SHEA: It's been a long — as pretty much Charles Alston, an African-American painter, and he did not often want to participate in something that was billed as African-American or Negro back in his time period because he wanted to be judged as a painter or as an artist. So it's an interesting —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yes, it's true; it's true. And I've often thought — this is never going to happen, but if I had some magic lamp, I could have one wish, I would go back to 1979 and make my work just as I've made it, but never show my face and just let David be me and —

MS. SHEA: And what do you think would have happened, or what do you think would have been the difference or —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: I think he would have been a superstar.

MS. SHEA: That was the word I was going to use: superstar.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yes, yes, I do, because here's the moment that I've sort of been dreading of whether I even want to bring this up or not, but especially having spent the year really concentratively writing about my work and looking at it, when I look at the fields, the people who have been really the most successful have basically made — have a signature form and a signature style, and have worked within that, and it's very recognizable. And I have a good friend. He said, it's the old saying — I'd never heard this old saying — he said, it's the old saying, repetition is reputation. I know I never —

MS. SHEA: I've never heard that phrase either.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: And I'd say this can be true in the art world as well. When someone wants — if Chuck Close were to start doing miniature genre scenes, that's not a Chuck Close, but I love Chuck Close's work. His work is fabulous. All I'm saying is that within the field that I know best, I feel as though people have been very much encouraged to make the same thing over and over again. I think that's something that's somewhat driven by collectors. They want a fill-in-the-blank, and they want it to look like a fill-in-the blank. And so I can see where there's this sort of — not collusion, like an unconscious collusion between the galleries and the buyers and the sellers to repeat, to make that thing that's a signature piece that everyone knows, someone comes in your house, oh, you've got a Matisse.

But I just had a lot of different ideas of things I wanted to make, and although I've had people say, "Oh, I saw

that piece and I knew it was yours," I still feel like I've ranged more broadly in my subject matter and in my forms. And again, it's not a complaint, and I've sold lots of work. I've had shows, I've been — it's not about that fame aspect of it, but in a way, it's not that much about my work. I just wonder about — to me, it's a curious thing that the most well-known sort of household names in the field are people whose work, to me, is quite repetitive and maybe that's what it's about. I thought it was about experimenting.

MS. SHEA: Continuing to —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yes, I thought it was about — and again, not in the name of originality, just — I thought it was about curiosity. So I don't know. To go back to this idea of David being a superstar — [laughs] — he's got that personality too. This happened to me all the time when I would be at shows, and if we were in the booth together, even if it was just my work, people would talk to David. He's just — I don't know. You just want to talk to him. And I had a hard time making — he'd point to me and people would look at me like — [they laugh] — it's you?

MS. SHEA: A look of disbelief.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: And then it would happen, even if — it happened several times at openings at the Peter Joseph Gallery. I'd be standing talking to some very tall, thin, glamorous looking woman, and obviously, someone would have pointed to the two of us standing there, "Oh, Michelle, she's over there." And they'd start talking to this other person. [They laugh.] Like this, it's just — please, don't make me talk to her. She's too short, or I don't know. She just doesn't look like a woodworker, and it's really happened a lot. So it would have been good to have a front man who looked the part. [Laughs.]

MS. SHEA: Kind of like the women in England writing under male names type of thing.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yes, exactly. I've sort of been Michael, and I always got mail anyway for Michael. I could have been Michael Holzapfel, the reclusive woodworker whom no one's ever met.

MS. SHEA: Mysterious. [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Although, it could be that when I'm making a cherry pie out of wood, would anyone think that a man would do that?

MS. SHEA: Would do that, right, yes, I was wondering about that.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: But if a man had, they would say, oh, isn't that great? He's so in touch with his feminine side — [laughs] — and yet, if a woman does it, it's like, ah, she's just making what she's made 100 times. And that's what women are up against and will be, I'm sure, for the rest of my lifetime.

It's interesting to watch Hillary and all this. Somehow you're just always damned if you do and you're damned if you don't, and it's been a funny line to walk. I know from high school, like to be the smart girl is to be alone, to be — here I am with mostly a bunch of guys. What do I even wear? Am I trying to be like a tomboy, I'm just one of them? I can remember when I made that big sale, some craftsperson saying to me, well, he just likes you because you're cute. It's sort of like, you just can't win. It still really is a man's world, even at this time, even in this place.

And so, it was interesting when I had a show with Barry Friedman and Glenn Adamson who, I guess, has done some interviews for the [Smithsonian Archives of American Art Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America] series as well. He's an interesting guy, and he wrote a piece maybe for the *Woodturning Journal*. We were talking and he said — which I thought was quite astute of him — he said, "Well, I see there's some violence in this." I said, "Yes, there's violence." It's not domestic violence, but there's something about the silencing of women's voices that is a form of violence that never lays a hand on you. The worst thing, the worst kind of criticism isn't to have someone pan your work. It's to never be mentioned, it's to be ignored, it's to be anonymous. And I think that's going to be a struggle for women for a long, long time.

So it takes an hour to make a pie, it takes a week to make a pie out of wood. There's an intrinsic message there that I think that it's worth putting in a week of my life to make this pie in wood. There's something more to it than just isn't that amusing. There's a statement there that this very evanescent realm of people cooking for each other every day and having it get flushed, there's this — of all the cool cloths put on feverish heads, of all those things that get done, but that really don't get recorded as part of history.

In a way, to make it in wood, it's like solidifying it literally into an historical object and saying, you know this happened and this stands for something that happens over and over again. So there is definitely that feminist and that sort of angry content, but we all know, to stand up and rail and be angry is not — it's a way to get — [they laugh] — get thrown into a dark room at the top of the stairs.

So that's always been a very challenging thing to me in the work. To get across that strength, to get across my message. Well, it's again that middle path. It's trying to make my way, have my space, but not displace, or hurt or do violence to anyone else, to disrespect anyone else, to get my message across, by, in a sense, charming the viewer a little closer to look. That's, in a way, what the detail is for, to create, hopefully, a little charmed moment where it stays just a few seconds longer, with the hope that a little more of the feeling can come through, but to not grab. I don't want to grab anyone by the throat. I don't want to demand the viewer's attention. I just I want to evoke it in a really respectful way.

But there's so much stuff in the world, there are so many things that are flashing and popping up and vying for attention more and more. It's a very busy world and so it becomes more and more of a challenge to be heard in the clutter. And yet, the people who do buy stuff from us, as we were saying earlier, are people who have a sensibility of almost seeing the piece as therapeutic or as having some kind of anodyne quality that settles them or that's calming.

MS. SHEA: Speaking about the market — [they laugh] — what would you say about how it's changed in your lifetime?

MS. HOLZAPFEL: It's interesting and again, I keep thinking about this interview with Judy McKie because she said something that's been — she makes a remark about the field and the markets, and the trajectory of the craft movement that I really agree with. She's talking about style, cycles of style, as being 30-year, almost generational — excuse me — cycles if you think about the late 19th century Arts and Crafts movement. To me, movements often seem to be somewhat generational and have an arc, and this is reflected in markets and it's reflected in all the facets of the field. I feel like it's kind of about here.

MS. SHEA: And you've raised your hand high up. [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: I've raised — if it were a ski jump — not a ski jump; if it were a —

MS. SHEA: A hill.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: — mogul, it's right where you'd catch air and start to go down. Now, the reason why we're gleaming about our commissions by younger people, is, for a long, long time, the majority of our market, when we were in our 30s and 40s, the collectors were in their late 50s, 60s, even 70s. And they were in the mid '90s to the — I'd say to 2001. I wouldn't say it was a bubble, but I would say on that trajectory that it was peaking then. It was peaking in terms of the number of events that were happening. It was very yeasty. There was a lot of stuff going on and it was very exciting. There was a lot of interest, but like anything it has its time and then things change.

I had a show with Barry Friedman that opened the Friday after 9/11 and I stood there and New York was like a tomb. It was incredible how it felt in that city that is normally just in your face and throbbing. And it was so subdued and I felt like, boy, something just ended in a big way. That was one aspect of it, but it seemed like that was just a ripe moment, a caesura of some sort and since then, people are still making stuff, people are still buying stuff, but it's almost like entered a sort of Mannerist era.

There's a lack of freshness, there's an overly self-consciousness. Everyone settling into their roles. Whereas things seemed a little more interesting slippage and crosspollination for about a 10-year period, which is not to say that those things aren't still happening. People are collaborating, and I think there's still a tremendous amount of momentum, but I feel like that little golden age is tarnishing somehow.

And I've thought about it a lot because as soon as I'll say that, I'll have the thought, well, Michelle, that's just what's happening to *you*. But I don't think that's true. I'm still very committed and still very hot to trot every day to get out there and make stuff. But the — when I think of the field as a whole, and I've been a little bit more out of touch with it recently. I got a little — I just needed a little space from it, from the social aspect.

MS. SHEA: You're simply tired?

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yes, yes, I'm tired of it, and on a personal level too, suddenly, we had three grandchildren, and I really like being a part of their lives. So I had — somewhere in my time budget, something had to go. What went was that social aspect and that keeping my foot in and keeping up to date with the field. But I needed a break from it. It was a little bit like the trajectory of a romance that's not going to be a long-term relationship, where you start finishing each other's sentences a little bit too much.

And sometimes I wonder too about — and maybe this has always been the case, maybe this is just a question of me being idealistic, but I felt as though a lot of the scholarship that was being done was slightly self-serving. I wish the field had a more vibrant critical apparatus. When it's just the inner circle talking about the inner circle, it's too self-congratulatory. That was irritating me. But I realized that I couldn't — and this is where I found

myself becoming a critic of critics. It seemed like they were guns for hire, writing for — this is where I could get into big trouble — but writing for a catalogue where it's a self-serving situation.

MS. SHEA: A little incestuous, a little connected, a little —

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yes, yes, a little over-connected, a little just — and the thing is these are all people I know. I couldn't figure out what I could do anymore, because if I still want to be in the field and I'm critiquing the field, then it seems like I'm being self-serving, I'm — I almost felt like if I wanted to start to really critique the field, I would have to stop making work in order to declare myself out of the running, so to speak.

MS. SHEA: But a lot of people don't seem to feel that way. [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: No, no. And this issue has come up again and again, and it came up as well — the Collectors of Wood Art has a group — I don't know if you're familiar with them. They were mostly collectors of woodturning, again, this nebulous term, but also they were collectors of furniture, I'm sure, as well. Anyway, they started a group. And I was having this issue where work is now entering the secondary markets and I would have appraisers call me and ask me to appraise my own work. And I did it a few times and I started thinking, this isn't right. Why are they asking me? I'm the last person they should be asking.

Again, it seemed like this incestuous thing, and I was thinking, they should first of all, talk to the galleries who are selling my work. They know what my prices have been like. It was that they were saving money by asking me. And in one case, I even suggested to the person that if they would like to share their fee with me — [laughs] — then I'd be happy to; because they wanted pictures, they wanted documentation. This was something that was going to take me a couple of hours to put together. And again, the feeling was, you're supposed to want to do this. This is for your benefit.

But I wrote a letter to the Collectors of Wood Art for their newsletter saying, is this right? Do you, the collectors, realize that when you hire an appraiser, that they're turning around and asking the maker? And of course, it's in my interest to inflate my prices, right? This is not right. Then there was a little forum about it and some of collectors wrote in, and it left me with a feeling that they didn't really get it. In a way, they were parroting to me the response of, oh, you should flattered, or you should be glad. So in a way, what it reinforced to me was that feeling of this incestuous relationship.

That was aggravating to me in some way. I wanted more separation. So that's just a little example of this kind of all-in-the family feeling that I think, in a way, hasn't been good. It's been convenient and it's kind of understandable; again, the sort of tribalism that people tend to live within, but I felt like there was something happening there that I didn't like.

And there are some critics that will do reviews of the field and so forth, but often times, I feel like they really are like guns for hire. They're swooping down, looking around, writing their piece and swooping off again, and not really interested in having a dialogue. And I can understand why they wouldn't be interested in having a dialogue with someone who isn't interested in having a dialogue with anyone. Again, there seems to be this — I think it's that notion, that sort of journalistic notion, of objectivity which I find laughable in a way.

MS. SHEA: For criticism? [Laughs.]

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yes, yes. Not to contradict myself. I don't think necessarily that objectivity has to enter into it, but it does have to be a fresh pair of eyes without — hopefully, without too much of an agenda or with a very great agenda, an agenda that we're talking about — culture, we're talking about — what people make. We're talking about how this fits into the great span of art history, rather than the agenda of we want this to look good, so that so and so can feel good about their collection.

MS. SHEA: So the manuscript that you sent off, tell me more about that.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Again, the Wood Turning Center, Albert LeCoff came to me with the idea of doing a retrospective of my work. And at the time, I just wanted to write down in a coherent way my thoughts about what I do, and to lay it out as much as I could, the panorama of starting from thoughts about material-based processes, the nature of the material, the basics of technique and then these motifs, where they come from, influences from — other cultural influences, not just visual arts. But a lot of it is from literature, from math and science. And then there's a chapter as well about colleagues, about influences from colleagues, and collaborative works, because to me, that sort of community aspect of it is extremely important as well. I just see it as a circle, no one piece of which should be left out, to be fair.

Often times, when I'm dealing with someone with a strong art history background, they tend to be somewhat unaware of the technical aspects, or seemly uninterested in the technical aspects, but I feel as though if you were to just look at, say, *Fine Woodworking* magazine, you could easily form the opinion, oh, God, another article

about making a dovetail joint; boring. That's a technical magazine, and it serves its purpose and I can see where it might not be the best source for someone whose interest lies elsewhere.

But I think that technique can be an extremely lively aspect of the conversation about making something, as long as I don't start telling you about the degree to which I sharpen my bevel and how 38 degrees is so excellent. That's not appropriate, really. And I feel as though, too, in terms of an audience, that there are these retired guys who always say to me, where do you do you get your ideas from? So I wanted to really expand upon that, but in a friendly way that doesn't bog down too much, again, in a specialized vocabulary, that they call "artsy-fartsy" or "airy-fairy" or you know, they have all kinds of —

MS. SHEA: Wonderful?

MS. HOLZAPFEL: "Touchy-feely," whatever; to try and have that discussion be accessible and not scary. And also the part about community is extremely important too because when I sign my name to something, I'm really aware that somebody else made the tool that I'm signing with, that I needed to go down to the hardware store 10 times, and I'm really glad that they're there. That I asked David three times about this, that or the other thing. That my father made my lathe, that the loggers brought us this wood, that this is really a community, a community undertaking, and I just get to sign my name to this piece. So one whole chapter that I actually could expand much more is about that. So what I've got now it's more like an outline.

I have very little biographical background in it, but I would love to expand that as well, but it's something that Albert could take and send around because he's got to line up a bunch of museum venues in order to apply for this big grant that could bankroll this exhibit. So I got it into shape as best I could for him for that purpose.

But there's a part of me that would love to pursue that as a book in itself, and I've made a few little very tentative forays into that, but that would be a big job. It would be something I would really have to take some major chutzpah pills before I go out and do. But it was a tremendous exercise. I loved working on it, because it's almost like — it's been enough time now. I feel like when I look at my work, it's like somebody else made it.

The me of 1989, that's a really different person, a really different person, and I remember what that person was thinking and doing, but I'm not that person. A lot of those experiences that I had, I was really ambitious, and I was really out to prove something and in a way, I did. And there was some point at which I made a break with that person to a certain extent, and now I am just more ambitious to make what I want to make, more to please myself in some way.

I feel like I proved something as much as I could. But that began to feel like I wasn't making my best effort for the scientist in me, that it's very easy to get dragged into that glamour game, and when you're self-employed and you've got your own business, you've got to do that, you've got to put yourself out there. But it's like a siphon; it can suck you far away from yourself, and you can start believing the hype about yourself that you generated and you can lose yourself.

MS. SHEA: It sounds like a very interesting project.

MS. HOLZAPFEL: Yes, I'm hoping to continue on it.

MS. SHEA: I think we should bring this little disc to a close.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]