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Oral history interview with Thomas Gentille, 2009 August 2-5

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Thomas Gentille on 2009 August 2. The interview took place in New York, NY, and was conducted by Ursula Ilse-Neuman 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.

Thomas Gentille and Ursula Ilse-Neuman have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

PROLOGUE [added by Thomas Gentille after the interview]: [Film director Michelangelo] Antonioni once told [Mark] Rothko: "Your paintings are like my films - they're about nothing . . . with precision." [From Jeffrey Weiss, "Temps Mort: Rothko and Antonioni," in *Mark Rothko,* ed. Oliver Wick (New York: Skira, 2008).]

URSULA ILSE-NEUMAN: This is Ursula Ilse-Neuman interviewing Thomas Gentille at his home on East 64th Street in New York [NY] on August 2, 2009. I'm conducting this interview for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disc number one.

Thomas, you have been one of the leaders in the field of American studio jewelry since the late 1950s. You also have been especially revered and honored in Europe. In this interview, I want to ask you to discuss your reflections on the richness of your contributions to the field, both here and abroad.

But let's start at the beginning. Can you describe briefly how your artistic journey began? Tell me about your childhood and family background.

THOMAS GENTILLE: It's always hard to begin at the beginning.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Maybe [year and] place of birth?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, that's a good place to start. I was born [in 1936] in Mansfield, Ohio, in a house, not in a hospital. It was at the height of the Depression—that was the worst year of the Depression. The house has since been torn down; a factory took over the space. I'm, of course, American-born, but my grandfather came from Italy, from Sicily somewhere, and my paternal grandmother is American-born, but her parents were born in Italy, and, of course, these are two different countries, Sicily and Italy. If you're a child raised in an Italian family that has been separated by Italy and Sicily, you're very aware that they're separate countries.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: How so? How are they that different? I'm not aware of it. You mean temperamentally they're different?

MR. GENTILLE: No. If you say to a Sicilian that they're Italian, they will say, no, I'm from Sicily. They're very independent about the island of Sicily.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Touché. Okay.

MR. GENTILLE: And that was established very early in my childhood.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And your father and mother were both working, or did you get—

MR. GENTILLE: Well, my mother, when I was born, was not working, no. My father was working, but I'm not sure where or how.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Mystery father.

MR. GENTILLE: I'm not sure. My mother's side of the family is Swedish, Irish, and Swiss. She came from a little town called Saint Johns, Ohio, and she was raised by my great-grandmother. Her mother died when she was less than a year old. My great-grandmother was an incredible woman. She was very religious; she was from a sect called United Brethren. I've never met anyone who was part of that sect, but they had come originally from Switzerland because they were persecuted in Switzerland; so they came to America. So that side of the family goes back to the Revolutionary War.

My great-grandmother lived in a long house, very long, along a road; it had been a tavern during the Revolutionary War and had been made into a house. She was fiercely independent. She had enough property to grow all her own food. She never had running water in the house or plumbing—there was an outdoor facility, and she got water from across the street, from a pump. She made all of her own quilts and all of her own clothes. I remember as a child going there and helping to make butter in a churn, and only less than half of the house was heated. The rest was left cold in the winter. But she had a quilting frame there, and she made all of her own mattresses out of chicken down and all of her own pillows. So there was kind of a tradition of living alone, being independent and making do for yourself. That ran in that part of the family. I adored my great-grandmother. She was an incredible cook.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And also the artistic penchant and the artistic endeavors probably were very impressive to you—

MR. GENTILLE: Yes. It was just part of life there. The Italian side of the family was noisy and boisterous and loud, and they were all together every Saturday evening. The entire family would come. My grandmother had a fairly large house. It was two stories high, but it was an unusual house - and I was born in that house, but it was a separate apartment on the ground floor.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Were you the only child?

MR. GENTILLE: Yes.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Okay.

MR. GENTILLE: So the family would come every Saturday, and her dining room table could seat, I think it was 16 people, and then a leaf would go in sometimes when there were additional guests. I was brought up in a very Sicilian style, with the dinner and meals and so on, and that was really great.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Sounds wonderful. Yes. Yes, that sounds wonderful.

MR. GENTILLE: I just mention this because those were kind of the foundation years and—

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And you mentioned your grandmother, or great-grandmother even, having a very big influence on you, almost—I get the feeling—more than your mother, in terms of —

MR. GENTILLE: I don't know. She had a big influence on my mother. My mother, for example, was never permitted to see a movie. When she was 16 years old, she snuck out of the house and went to her first movie. But my mother's mother—her father left and went to California; left her with her grandmother—had been an artist in the period when women bought kilns and china cups and plates, and then she would decorate them with painted flowers and so on. And she did fashion drawing.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: So there was really art in the family early on that you were exposed to, at least in terms of making things—making things in terms of color and with your hands and so on, which I think is important in early childhood.

MR. GENTILLE: This just seemed all part of my childhood. I think where it came into being important was later on when I decided that I wanted to become an artist. Most of my peers in art school had a real struggle with their family because they wanted to become artists. And I'm from an Italian family who really enjoyed the idea of art, even though they didn't participate in it. I had never been to a museum until—I think I was in—a few years before college. But my parents never took me to a museum. They would take me to the gardens of the museum, but they would never go inside.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Never the inside. What was the first museum? What did you see?

MR. GENTILLE: Probably the first one was Cleveland Museum of Art [Cleveland, OH], which has a very great collection.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Very good one. Very lucky. Yes.

MR. GENTILLE: And it was small, but everything they had was a masterpiece. I mean, they had maybe one of the Blue period of [Pablo] Picasso, but it was *La Vie* [1903]—I mean, one of his absolute best.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: A very good one. Yes, yes.

MR. GENTILLE: And so the whole museum was filled with that kind of thing.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Now, in terms of schooling, your early education, was there anybody, a particular teacher

who was influential, or was there an emphasis on art education during those school years or even high school?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, there wasn't an emphasis on it, but the high school that I went to was a pretty brilliant high school. They had absolutely everything, from music appreciation to creative writing to art courses or art classes. And you were able to have some electives there. I had been interested in art a little bit, but not very serious about it.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Not serious. Where did you excel? Which courses—do you remember?

MR. GENTILLE: Just—it was just a general course of art. I had two different teachers, who were both influential, but the most influential in high school was a man by the name of Clay Walker.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Tell me about Clay Walker.

MR. GENTILLE: Clay Walker. Well, he's, I think, maybe the most incredible person I've met in my life. And certainly was very influential in my formation as an artist. He had been a soldier in World War II, and he married what was then called an English "war bride" and brought her back. He and his wife lived in Amherst, Ohio, and they had a son by the name of Robbie. His wife's name was Muriel. And this was a big joke in school because when I mentioned his wife one time, I referred to her as "Mural"—[they laugh]—which cracked him up. And that kind of broke the ice with us. I was always very impressed with what he had to say.

I was taking Spanish at the time and not doing very well in Spanish and not enjoying Spanish very much. I had a teacher by the name of Señorita Cummings. And Señorita Cummings said to me, you're not really interested in learning Spanish, are you? And I said, no, I wasn't—not realizing I was going to live in New York eventually, and that it would have been a really good language to know —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes. You could have used it.

MR. GENTILLE: —and I wish I had. And she said, you know, there are two things you can do. I can let you sit in the back of room. I'm going to have to give you an F. And you can just sit there and do what you want to do; or if one of the other teachers in the building will let you come into their classes, you can take their class and get a credit for their class at the same time. So I opted to do that.

So I went to Clay Walker, whom I'd been enjoying as a teacher in my art classes, and asked if I could come to one of his extra classes. And he said, well, I don't have any free classes during that period, but I have my own period where I have the room to myself, and you can come and work anytime that you want to. He said, sometimes I won't be there. I'll be in faculty meetings, but you just come to the room, and you can work.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Work in terms of drawing, or what did you do?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, that was one of the things that was great about Clay, was that he—there was another fellow who was a year ahead of me. And he was interested in both of us because we were both interested in art. The other guy eventually went to Cranbrook [Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, MI]. And I went to Cleveland Institute of Art [Cleveland, OH], actually, on Clay's recommendation. He recommended three schools, and that was one.

I was doing *papier-mâché* furniture and murals, and he was a woodcutter. He did great woodcut prints. And we would do woodcuts, and he introduced me to oil painting and to egg tempera and to mosaics and to photography and —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Wonderful.

MR. GENTILLE: The students had to make a book using reproductions of art that we liked. We put the book together, and we had to cover it with cloth. We had to make an album cover for Bizet's *Carmen*. We had to do all these incredible projects.

He would invite me and this other fellow out to Amherst, and his wife would cook dinner for us. He had built a studio, and he built houses in the summer. He was a great big guy, and he would lift steel beams up into the ceiling to support the roof and so on. I saw a couple of his houses.

And anyhow, Muriel would never come into the studio. He would take us into the studio, and he would show us all the things that he was working on and talk about all the techniques. He would take us into Cleveland to see the shows, and he would drive us to Toledo [OH] to the Toledo Museum of Art. That's how I first saw their great Greek and Roman collection. And he would take us to a friend of his, who was an artist by the name of Robert Freemark, who was quite well known in Toledo, and to his studio to see his work.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Now, how old—I'm sorry to interrupt—how old were you then? Approximately 17 —

MR. GENTILLE: Well, high school is, what, 16, 17, 18?

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MR. GENTILLE: But what really started me on art was one day I went to his room to work very early. The doors were made of wood, and there was a frosted glass pane so you couldn't see in, and I just opened the door and went in because I didn't have to knock. And there was Clay Walker standing with one hand on the seat of a chair and the other hand on the back of the chair with his feet straight up in the air. [They laugh.]

And I was never quite sure about artists. I didn't quite know whether I wanted to be an—quote—artist. And when I saw Clay standing on the chair like that, doing this handstand, I thought, this is okay for a guy to do. I want to do this.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Fantastic.

MR. GENTILLE: And so that was kind of a defining moment for me.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Did you just surprise him in this posture? Or do you think he did it for you to sort of encourage you?

MR. GENTILLE: No, I just surprised him, because I didn't have to knock, and as I had study period, I came, and I opened the door, and there he was. [They laugh.] And he got down, and he said, oh—

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Sort of a yoga thing?

MR. GENTILLE: And he said—no, he said—I think something like, oh, excuse me. I was just doing some exercise.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Wonderful. Now, were you able to stay with him through graduation from high school - to the very end?

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, so I had classes all the time.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Wonderful. Okay. And you graduated from high school when, 1950?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, that would have been '54.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And you went right away to the Cleveland Institute of Art after that?

MR. GENTILLE: That next fall.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And you said that Clay Walker recommended three schools—Cleveland and do you remember the others?

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, Cleveland, Cranbrook - and at that time, Bowling Green State University [Bowling Green, OH] had—and still has - a very excellent department. But he felt that Cranbrook was too isolated for me. I had gone to visit my friend who had gone—he was a year ahead of me - and I didn't like the feeling of Cranbrook. I wanted to be in the city.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Did you look at Cranbrook? Or you just from here say —

MR. GENTILLE: I didn't—well, I went to look at it.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: It didn't appeal to you.

MR. GENTILLE: Uh-uh. [Negative.] And then he said, I don't know that you should go to a state school. It depends on your finances. So I applied for a scholarship at Cleveland, and I won a scholarship for half the year, which paid for tuition. Afterwards at Cleveland, there were three more years, and I applied for scholarship for every semester—so it would be six scholarships. And I won seven scholarships for the whole time that I was at Cleveland, which is what allowed me to go there.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: So you didn't have to earn any money while you were —

MR. GENTILLE: Not while I was in school. But every summer I worked. I worked in clothing stores. I worked in a steel mill, which was really a rough job. It paid a tremendous amount of money. But before we go on, I want to go back for a moment to high school.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Okay.

MR. GENTILLE: Because someone else needs a tribute, and that's a woman whose name was Helen V. Oehlke. O-E-H-L-K-E. She was called Miss Oehlke [pronounced L-Key]. She was considerably older than Clay. The two art rooms were next to each other, and they were very supportive of each other. While Clay was interested in art and teaching you all the techniques, Helen was also—or Miss Oehlke—[laughs]—was also interested. She taught me how to do serigraphs. And she let me do some clay sculpture in the room.

But she was very, very interested in teaching people social graces. She felt that you couldn't get anywhere in life unless you understood the social graces. So she would work with the students in the art classes developing those graces, and Clay would work on the art. So together, they were a winning package.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: They were wonderful. Yes. And she certainly didn't surprise you with handstands, I assume. [Laughs.]

MR. GENTILLE: No, she didn't. She was quite a lovely lady.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: —beautiful things. Yes.

MR. GENTILLE: She was just absolutely charming. Yes.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Wonderful. So that was really a very rich experience you were fortunate you had in high school.

Now, can we go back to the Cleveland Institute of Art? This is a very famous school, of course. Very, very important also for the development of the American studio jewelry movement. Were you at that time interested in jewelry or just in general art—painting and other—

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I was a painting major and a sculpture minor. Those were the two real interests. And I was very interested in printmaking. So of course, the first year at Cleveland, there are no electives at all. There's a prescribed course—at least then. I think there still is, although I've heard that they're getting away from that now, which is unfortunate.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Who were your teachers there?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, my first day of school, my first instructor in college was Kenneth Bates.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh. The enamellist.

MR. GENTILLE: The enamellist. And the first day of school, we had a pad of newsprint paper, and we had a brush, and we had a bottle of ink that we had to bring to class. And we spent the entire day—I mean the entire day - drawing straight lines on paper with an ink brush. They couldn't cross over themselves. It couldn't be two lines. It had to be one line. The entire day. And I thought Kenneth Bates was totally insane. I thought, what am I doing in this school? And of course, I learned more about lines on that one day than I'd ever learned in my life. So it was actually a brilliant project.

One of the things that Clay Walker had told me was, if ever you do anything in art that you embark upon, do it absolutely completely. If you do drawings, mat them. When you hand them in—just don't throw things in, but do a whole thing. So I matted my drawing, and I handed it in the next class. And Kenneth Bates picked up and looked at every single student's—there were 30 in that room; there were three rotating classes—and talked about every single student's work except mine. He just left mine on the table.

And after class, I went up to him, and I said, you didn't say anything about my work. I'd like to hear what you think of it. And he said, what I think of it is, I think you're a pretentious ass that you would mat—think your drawing—lines were so important that you would mat them. [They laugh.] So I explained to him what Clay Walker had told me. And he understood completely and said, ah, I understand. That's not necessary for this class. And we kind of became friendly after that.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes. Already the perfectionist also in you.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes. So one of the things that he taught us was the Munsell color theory, which was a hateful, hateful project. But once again, I learned an extraordinary amount about color.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Tell me a little bit about how you learned about color. How was that? If it doesn't take too long, it would be nice to see how you learned color theory.

MR. GENTILLE: Well, basically, the Munsell color theory consists of three parts: hue, value, and chroma. Hue is any color that you choose. Value is the tone from light to dark. Chroma is the intensity of color—of pale blue versus an intense blue, like the hydrangeas that we're looking at that sit on the table here.

And then you had to make a little card with each of those three things. He would assign every student a different color. And then you would have to separate that by 10 absolutely equal values. We were using poster paint and there couldn't be any brushstroke showing. And it had to be exact spacing. And he could look at them and tell you what was right and what was incorrect. By the end of the project, you knew what was right and what was wrong too. Then we had to cut them out and mat them on cardboard. So he was a perfectionist also.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And that suited you well. And you suited him well, since, looking at your work, it certainly is totally perfect.

MR. GENTILLE: Well, thank you.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Front and back. And we will get to this. Now, what other teachers did you have in Cleveland?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I had—I'm trying to think—give me just a moment.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: John Paul Miller?

MR. GENTILLE: John Paul Miller I didn't have until my sophomore year. And then I had him for design also. It was sophomore design. The first semester was only two-dimensional work. And the second semester was three-dimensional work. He also was a brilliant teacher. An absolutely brilliant teacher. He gave projects that were just—made you grow and that were really, really incredible. If we have time, I could talk about them, but he was remarkable.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Tell me a little bit about him as a person, as a teacher. I think he was an outstanding teacher, as you said. And I've read about him that he really had this very special talent for grasping his students.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes. He was one of the shyest people I ever met. Students never spoke to him in the hallway—ever—because John at that time was hypersensitive. Outside of class, if you spoke to him, he would flush red. He would start—at the base of the neck and his—would just—because he was blond—and he would just turn completely red. So students usually, when they walked through the hall, would look down at the floor. Almost all of them. There were three rotating classes of 30 each. And this was the story that everybody did.

But we always knew when he did granulation—of course, he was famous for it, and we knew his work. And we always knew it because when we would see him the next day in class, he would be sunburned from doing the granulation, because he had to be so close to the fire when he was doing it. So we always knew he had done granulation the night before. He would spend an entire class describing your projects to you. And when he was done, you would have no idea what he wanted. [They laugh.] Everybody would say, "what does he want?" And nobody would know. Pardon me, I'm banging on the table here.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: That's okay.

MR. GENTILLE: And I had two roommates in college. And we, fortunately, were each in one of the rotating three groups. So we were never in class together, but we always had the same projects. And finally, after our freshman year, I found a big attic in Cleveland. It had had a fire in it, and I got the landlords to fix it up.

We took this big space and divided it by sheets, so we couldn't see what each other was doing, because we didn't want to influence each other's work, and then we would only discuss it the night before classes were due. And nobody ever understood what he wanted. Later on, many years later, I was invited to Penland [Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC] to teach, and I told Bill Brown [director of Penland] this story that I've just told you.

And Bill Brown said, "You realize he was one of the best teachers you ever had." And I said, "Yes, I know that." He said, "But do you know why?" And I said, "Well, what do you mean?" And he said, "Well, because he would spend a whole day not specifying what he wanted because he didn't want to lock you into an idea. He wanted you to remain as open as possible. So he would just give you enough of the basics, but he would circumvent everything while he was talking so he wouldn't influence you." And that's exactly what he did.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: What he did - even though it was anxiety-provoking maybe initially, you really grew through him. How about granulation? Did you learn the granulation technique from him? Or did you just watch or —

MR. GENTILLE: No. As a matter of fact, I didn't—it is a misconception in many things you'll read about John Paul Miller or about me in reference to John Paul Miller. I never had John Paul Miller for jewelry. He did not teach jewelry when I was at school. He didn't begin that until many years later. I studied jewelry with Fred Miller.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, yes. His friend.

MR. GENTILLE: Who taught hollowware.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Whom he respected.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes. He and Fred—they had built a—

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: They respected each other as tremendous talents?

MR. GENTILLE: They were in school together, and they had built a studio together. Fred was married, and he had a daughter. And then they were involved in, of course, the famous Potter & Mellon [jewelry] store in Cleveland.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Right. When did you become interested in particular in jewelry? At Cleveland or —

MR. GENTILLE: Well, all through school I was curious about taking a course in jewelry. And I never did until the senior year. I had had some ceramics—by the way, at Cleveland, I went two years in the old building, which had been a former mansion. It was an incredible building, but the life drawing studios were on top in a huge attic; the ceilings were like 30 feet high, coming up to a point.

Then I went two years to the new building, which is still there, but it was green glass when it was built. The director [of the Cleveland Institute of Art], Joseph McCullough, in the painting studios, made us spread newspaper down on the floor so we wouldn't get paint on the concrete floor. And the students all rebelled, and we started kicking over our jars of turpentine and things so that we didn't have to work on paper, you know. [They laugh.]

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Right. It was, after all, a painting class. [Laughs.]

MR. GENTILLE: Yes. And when you asked about color, I wanted to mention that Joe McCullough taught a color and composition course. It was just a two-hour course once a week, but he had studied with Josef Albers. So we learned a great deal about Albers. We had many of the same projects that he had given to McCullough in class. And then these three—the three of us - the other two friends of mine, those roommates—they were also painting majors. We asked McCullough if he would give a special course in color and composition in painting.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: You asked him?

MR. GENTILLE: We asked him to do it. And so he did that for, I think, two semesters. There were about six people who were interested in that class. It was a tough class. But Albers is about the relationship of what one color does to another. And the course that Bates taught was about how to achieve any color that you want. So the combination of those two things—so in essence, I had four years of color theory. And so that's my foundation.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Were there any prescribed trips to the Cleveland Museum? Or you went on your own? Tell me about the life you led there in Cleveland.

MR. GENTILLE: In Cleveland?

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Did you look at a lot of art? Or was it mostly just schoolwork?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, of course, I was in school, so I was mostly working. But periodically, we had had a bus trip that would go to Pittsburgh [PA] to the Carnegie museum—Carnegie Institute[, Department of Fine Arts; since 1986, Carnegie Museum of Art], I believe it's called. And at that time, the director of the Carnegie Institute was Gordon Washburn. And Gordon Washburn, whom I didn't meet in those years, was bringing for the first time a lot of the European paintings to America that had never been to America before. He was —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: You mean early 20th-century paintings or—

MR. GENTILLE: Yes. Well, not early—I mean, painters who were working in the '50s. So, yes.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: In the '50s, basically contemporaries.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes. Like [Conrad] Marca-Relli, for example. I had never seen a Marca-Relli. In fact, I think that the first Marca-Relli that was ever shown in America was shown at the Carnegie Institute. And we would go to see those shows. They were incredible shows.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And they probably influenced your artistic sensibility. I'm sure they did; so you got really into —

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, I think. Marca-Relli did influence me, actually, in painting, because I started incorporating fabric in my paintings at that time, actually.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Interesting.

MR. GENTILLE: Textiles. And I remember I did a series of all red—red-on-red - paintings. I hadn't seen any white-on-white or black-on-black paintings. But when I was in school, I was doing white-on-white paintings very early on. They were abstract, but they were not nonobjective when I was in school.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: So you basically got introduced to European paintings in this country, because I know you went to Germany later, and you probably saw paintings there, too; but that was later. They came to this country.

I know that there were sort of, now in retrospect, very important competitions in Cleveland for the students and also for the teachers in which you could exhibit your work already. Did you participate?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, Cleveland was, and I think still is, unique. They did a system in school—it was called "concours [d'elegance]"—and for the concours—that was the final exam for each class. So every class that you did, you had a concours. You were given an assignment, and in the concours, you were not allowed to have any help whatsoever from the instructors, nor you were able to do work in class time. You had to do all of it out of class.

Then on the date that those were due, you brought them in. And three other faculty members from different departments would come, and they would judge the concours. There would be first prize, second prize, third prize, and an honorable mention. That was for every class you had, for every semester, for four years. At the end of those four years, the highest points that were received in those concours were then eligible for the Gund Scholarship, which was a great traveling scholarship. And so they all added up.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes. Interesting. But were there exhibitions in which you participated in Cleveland where you could actually exhibit your work as a student?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, that was part of it. Also, along with the concours, there were student exhibitioned works. Once again, all work that you submitted for the exhibition could not include any class work, nor the concours work. You had to do all of that work, once again, independently outside of class.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: That's pretty demanding.

MR. GENTILLE: So when you were at school at Cleveland, there was no time for anything except maybe dinner and an occasional watching a television program if you were lucky.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, yes. What were the first objects or paintings you submitted? Do you remember what you submitted to these exhibitions?

MR. GENTILLE: I think the first things that I submitted were woodcuts.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Okay.

MR. GENTILLE: Actually, I did a great deal of printmaking. When I was in high school, I did a huge amount of woodcuts and so on.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, you mentioned.

MR. GENTILLE: I even did one with 30 colors in it, 30 different hues.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Do you still have those woodcuts?

MR. GENTILLE: No. Later, my father burned everything that I did, so I lost all of it.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: That's a tragedy.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Very much. So after Cleveland, after you left Cleveland, how did you pursue your career? Or did the military service then intrude, and you went to Germany? I'm not quite sure what the sequence is.

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I—of course, I worked every summer because the scholarship paid for tuition, but it didn't pay for supplies and food. And my family had not very much money. So I worked every summer to make the

money for that. And so when I got out of school, I stayed in Cleveland for a year.

My first job after graduating was managing an espresso coffee shop. That espresso coffee shop was in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, and it was next door to the only art movie theater—actually, there were two art movie theaters in Cleveland. And that was the first time I ever tasted espresso. There was no espresso in Cleveland before that time.

But I was very interested in film. So I saw hundreds and hundreds of films. Also, as I was growing up as a child, my Grandmother Gentille loved to go to movies. This was during the war, and we saw movies—double features - two or three times a week during the war.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: What sort of movies? American movies or foreign movies?

MR. GENTILLE: Oh, it would have been all American movies.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: All American movies.

MR. GENTILLE: —when I was —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Okay, Gary Grant?

MR. GENTILLE: —because it was during the war and —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes. What fascinated you about the movies? The visual impact or the stories or probably everything?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, of course, in those days, almost all movies were black and white. I loved black-and-white movies. I still prefer them. And —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And you have quite a movie collection, haven't you?

MR. GENTILLE: I have maybe 600 films in my movie collection.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, yes. It's amazing.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, mostly before 1960; I have some after, of course, and some contemporary ones. But after 1960—1961 is the beginning of real violence in movies. Before that, if it was a murder mystery and someone got stabbed or shot, they would be behind a screen, and you would see the shadow.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Right, discretely done, yes.

MR. GENTILLE: And then you would just go into the story. And later, things became too graphic.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And too bloodthirsty, yes, yes.

MR. GENTILLE: And I no longer cared to see the rest of the film, so I would lose interest in them.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: So it was movies; it was paintings; it was your teachers; all these factors, made you decide to stay an artist and remain an artist, right? I mean, you pretty much decided you wanted to be an artist at that point, or even earlier?

MR. GENTILLE: No, I decided to be an artist when I saw Clay Walker doing a handstand on a chair. That's —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, okay. Yes, you mentioned that, sorry.

MR. GENTILLE: I was interested in art before then, but that was the day —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: That was the day.

MR. GENTILLE: And I never, ever thought about the possibility of not being one.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes.

MR. GENTILLE: By then, I was so involved in it that I never —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Did you ever think—and this is not done in this country here - of doing an apprenticeship with a jeweler or —

MR. GENTILLE: No, absolutely not.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Never, never.

MR. GENTILLE: Never, no, no. I always knew from the very beginning that the worst thing you could do is get a job in your chosen profession. I always felt to get a job as a jeweler, working for somebody else, would make me not want to do jewelry. And over the years, I've advised students not to do that. I said, get a job selling clothes or working at a grocery store. I don't care what it is, just don't —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Because it sours you on, basically, your creativity, and it impinges —

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, it eats you up. And actually, every student that I recommended not to do that who did that anyhow ended up giving up jewelry, almost exclusively. And the ones who followed my advice said they realized the value of not doing that.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, I can see that. Just one more question about Cleveland. Did you have any classmates who also became jewelers who are well known? I don't know about [William] Bill Harper. Did you go to school—he came later?

MR. GENTILLE: No, no. He went to school maybe 10 years after I did.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Ten years, yes.

MR. GENTILLE: Although he studied with Kenneth Bates -

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, right, he did.

MR. GENTILLE: - as well. But he studied jewelry with John Paul Miller—by that time, John Paul was teaching jewelry.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: So can you think of anybody who has become a jeweler from when you were at Cleveland?

MR. GENTILLE: No, there was no one that became a jeweler, but I did want to say that Toshiko Takaezu came to Cleveland when I was there.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, tell me about it.

MR. GENTILLE: Well, she came, and it was in the new building. I went to her one night and said I had been doing some ceramics, but I was no longer taking the course. Could I come in the evening and throw things? And Toshiko was—she was tough.

She was a really tough teacher, and she said, yes, you can come and throw, but there's some things I expect. One of them is, when you're done throwing in the evening, when you clean up, you have to clean up all of your space as perfectly as you can; then you have to go somewhere else and clean up there as well.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: [Laughs.]

MR. GENTILLE: Because you'll always miss something that you've messed up. So the studio was spotless at night. I went in, and I threw for quite a while. So I never actually studied with her, but we became friends. She had a basement apartment in Cleveland in which one wall was painted gold, with gold paint. And she would invite some of the ceramics people over. She invited me to come for dinner one evening, and we went over, and she was a great cook—not was, but is a great cook.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: She still is, yes.

MR. GENTILLE: She's just a fantastic cook. So we had dinner, and we were sitting at the table, and she gave us all chopsticks. And I said, I don't know how to use chopsticks. And she said, kind of, well, are you going to try? And I said, well, I'll try. So I kind of picked up a couple things and dropped them and so on and so forth.

And I said, I'm going to have to have a fork. She just looked at me straight in the face, and she said, chicken. [They laugh.] And so, of course, that made me furious. [Laughs.] Everybody respected Toshiko unbelievably. And so for her to call you chicken would just—unendurable.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: That's not good, yes.

MR. GENTILLE: So I sat there and ate with chopsticks, perhaps the slowest meal—and I'm a slow eater—[they laugh]—that I've ever eaten in my life. But when I was done, I knew how to use chopsticks.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Did you eat out of her dishes? Her own ceramic dishes?

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, some of the dishes were her own, yes.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Nice, yes, wonderful.

MR. GENTILLE: And later on, Toshiko and I—we had an interesting experience. She had a very famous potter come from Japan who's—I think it's [Fujimoto] Yoshimichi. And I'm not sure about the name now. It is the National Treasure Kaneshige Toyo. It's been a long time. He never turned the wheel himself. His son turned the wheel for him. He would sit on a great pillow. Toshiko had set up a kick wheel so that—with a platform—so that he could throw the way that he did, and his son kicked. It was absolutely fascinating. The man just—when he threw, it was like watching poetry.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, yes.

MR. GENTILLE: So when he left, there was a friend of mine by the name of Carolyn Schnedarek, who's a potter. And I said, Carolyn, I want to throw on the wheel, because this man was so beautiful, and I wanted to absorb some of this. So I got on a pillow, and Carolyn kicked. She was also thrilled by it. And when we were doing this, Toshiko came into the room, and she looked at us. And she turned around, and she walked out.

For almost three weeks, she wouldn't speak to me. I would see her, and she would just turn around and walk away. And so finally, I had to confront her. It really felt like a confrontation—I was really—pretty frightened, actually. And I wanted to know what was going on. And she said, you've made a mockery of this famous man. And I said, but that's not what we were doing. And I explained to her what I've just told you, what we were doing.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: How impressed you were.

MR. GENTILLE: And it was from that moment on that Toshiko and I became very good friends.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, wonderful.

MR. GENTILLE: She understood immediately —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: She thought you were disrespectful, but —

MR. GENTILLE: She thought we were being disrespectful, and then she realized we wanted to absorb - the opposite.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: It's just the opposite.

MR. GENTILLE: And then everything was fine.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: That is wonderful.

MR. GENTILLE: So that was great. So I learned a lot in Cleveland. [Laughs.]

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: I know, and, yes, you learned a lot in all your institutions, which is really wonderful. Can we briefly go into your stay in Germany? I know you observed some military service. I don't know for how many years in Germany. Did this experience have any impact, or lasting impact, on your work and life? Also on your work? Or was it just —

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I don't think on my work at all.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Not at all. Cultural—the different culture did not influence you at all, you think?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I think it did, of course; I was there for almost two years. First, after I left Cleveland, I moved to Boston [MA].

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, I see.

MR. GENTILLE: I had gone to Haystack [Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME] as a student and —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, yes, we wanted to speak about Haystack and Penland. So that was before the military service [that] you went to Haystack? Or you returned to Haystack?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I went to Haystack while I was still a student in 1956. That was the first time I had gone there, at the old school, the old Haystack when it was in Liberty, Maine.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Tell me about that experience at Haystack, just briefly.

MR. GENTILLE: Well, that was an incredible experience, because it was in Liberty, Maine, and I had not been on my own, out of Ohio, very much. I mean, I just traveled with my parents. And this other guy that I told you about that was a painter was the one who was going to go to Haystack, and convinced me to come along for that summer. We applied for scholarships, and we got working scholarships.

So I went up there, and we arrived at Liberty, Maine, which only has about six houses, and we didn't know where we were. So we had to rent a place to stay overnight. And then we went to the school the next day. We had arrived a day early. So Fran Merritt [Frances S. Merritt, director of Haystack Mountain School of Crafts], who was up there, put us to work immediately. We had to construct a framework and cover it with fabric to cover an old-fashioned fireplace and chimney that went up through the roof.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh.

MR. GENTILLE: Pris [Priscilla Merritt, wife of Frances]—at that time was the chief cook for the whole school. The food was excellent, but they felt that I was just too sensitive of a person. By the way, I had gone there to study woodcuts with Antonio Frasconi.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: I wondered, yes.

MR. GENTILLE: That's the reason that I went.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: The purpose was to study woodcuts. For how long?

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, and—well, it was the whole summer.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: The whole summer?

MR. GENTILLE: Yes.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And what year was that? Do you recall?

MR. GENTILLE: That would have been 1954.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Okay.

MR. GENTILLE: And also, I might add that I had a chance for an extra class that—my scholarship allowed me to take several classes. And I was always curious about weaving. And they suggested I take weaving, and it ended up that Jack Lenor Larsen was the weaving instructor.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, how fortunate.

MR. GENTILLE: So I learned how to weave and with Jack Lenor Larsen. His assistant at the time was Wynne Anderson. And I learned more, actually—I had Jack for three weeks, I think, and I learned more from him about weaving than people that I had met who'd been weaving for two or three years. I knew more in three weeks than they knew —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: How interesting.

MR. GENTILLE: I mean, I could actually thread a loom by myself.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: He was such a terrific teacher, or he just —

MR. GENTILLE: Brilliant teacher, yes.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, yes.

MR. GENTILLE: It was terrific.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: I didn't know that your friendship goes so far back with Jack Lenor Larsen.

MR. GENTILLE: I've known him for a very, very long time.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Were there any other classmates you remember who became jewelers?

MR. GENTILLE: No, none.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: None, none of them.

MR. GENTILLE: No.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: So you really went through many of the crafts processes, not only jewelry. You're really well versed in many of them, which is wonderful.

MR. GENTILLE: Right, because I had painting and sculpture and weaving and ceramics and woodcutting, and I just—I felt that it was important to get the foundations in all of these things.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes.

MR. GENTILLE: Because somehow I felt that I was going to be able to combine them all, and I needed to know as much as I could.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And you did. Your interest in materials and techniques probably stems from this wide experience of materials.

MR. GENTILLE: I think, absolutely. I don't approach jewelry as a jeweler. I approach it more from my painting and sculpture point of view.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Right. Exactly, yes, yes. We will speak about your work intensively a little bit later. If we get the biographical things out of the way. [Laughs.]

MR. GENTILLE: Oh, I'm sorry, yes. So after I —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: After Haystack, you went to Boston. What did you do in Boston?

MR. GENTILLE: I went to Boston. I was dating a girl who lived in Cambridge [MA]. And I was planning on moving to New York, and I was a little worried about moving to the big city. I'd been there to visit, but I—so she said, well, instead of spending the money to go to New York, I'll drive you free to Cambridge. [They laugh.] And Boston's across the river. So, you know, I was very young. I didn't have a job. I didn't have any money. I didn't have an apartment. So I said okay. So I went, and I got a job the first —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Just blind —

MR. GENTILLE: The first day, I found a room. And I got a job the second day.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: What did you do?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I hate to confess it now, after I said I never did jewelry, but I got a job in a jewelry store.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Selling?

MR. GENTILLE: No. Actually making. And so—[laughs].

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Making new work?

MR. GENTILLE: I'm laughing because I almost forgot about it. [They laugh.] What we did was they sold tie bars and cuff links with initials soldered onto it. So it wasn't designing jewelry. It was strictly the technical part of soldering something together. So I kind of broke my idea about working for someone, because they weren't going to be taking my designs and watering them down. I was just going to be doing technical work.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Right. It was really something just to make money.

MR. GENTILLE: Right. So there were three benches, and two of the people—one girl was trying to be a composer; one woman had an uncle who designed furniture, and there was me.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Interesting atmosphere.

MR. GENTILLE: There was a big safe, and they would give you a yellow piece of paper with instructions on it, and they would give you the initials in silver and the bar, and you would solder them onto and then polish them as quickly as you could.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: It was pretty straightforward, yes.

MR. GENTILLE: Pretty straightforward. And then if you got gold, there was a bigger safe. It was a walk-in safe, and you were not permitted to go in there. The mother was an elderly woman who sat there all day, and her son

was the one who got the material—or the head jeweler who had been with them for many years.

And when they hired me, they said, eventually, the woman who owns the store will accuse you of stealing. We're telling you this now because we want you to know what you're getting into. He said, you may go for months or years, and it won't happen. But one day, she'll say that you're stealing, and we will have to fire you.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Goodness.

MR. GENTILLE: So if you're prepared to work here under those circumstances—and I said yes, because I had no money. [Laughs.]

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: It didn't matter, yes.

MR. GENTILLE: So I did it.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: At least you were forewarned.

MR. GENTILLE: So I worked there for about three months.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And then you were accused of stealing?

MR. GENTILLE: There was a little alley in the back, and there was a little folding table with black legs that opened up, and you could set a round tray on it. One of the legs was broken, and it was in the trash. And I asked the owner's son if I could have the table—it was already in the back. And he said yes. She saw me carry that out. And although he explained to her that he had given it to me, and it was broken, she was of a mindset that I had stolen it. So they fired me.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: So she felt it was time for you to leave, so—[laughs].

MR. GENTILLE: So I left. And the remainder of the time—I was in Boston for nine months, and then I got drafted.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, yes. Now, we come to Germany.

MR. GENTILLE: So that took care of my finances. So that's how I got to Germany.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes. I can't imagine you in the military because you are such a creative person, such a freewheeling person. Was it very hard for you to adjust to this regiment, and, on top of it, in Germany? Was that sort of a shock for you?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I had my basic training in Fort Dix [NJ]. Fortunately, it was summer, because one of my college classmates had his training in the winter, which was apparently hell.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: It would be worse. Yes.

MR. GENTILLE: And although it was hot, I had eight weeks of basic training, which I found both hateful and interesting. I learned a lot about myself—doing physical things that I thought I couldn't do. I got pneumonia, which was very typical in the army in Fort Dix in the summer. And then after that, I thought, oh, thank God, this is over. They put me into advanced infantry, which is another eight weeks of training which makes basic training look like playing cards.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: In Fort Dix, also?

MR. GENTILLE: Also in Fort Dix. But by then, I learned a great deal about the army, and one is, never volunteer to do anything, ever. And never do anything well, because if you do something well in the army, they give you all the hard work to do.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: That, of course, only applies to the army because that's not your attitude otherwise. [Laughs.]

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I'm going to go backwards for a second because I said something about Fran and Pris thinking I was too sensitive when I was at Haystack. So what they did was, as part of my scholarship, they put me on garbage duty. It was taking a wheelbarrow of exposed garbage to a pit way out up a hill and dumping the garbage into a live pit with—filled with —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: I don't think—[laughs].

MR. GENTILLE: So I got toughened up a little bit at Haystack. So the army didn't seem so bad for me.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And where in Germany did you wind up?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I had been trained in Fort Dix to be a machine gunner. So after I had that training —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Of all things.

MR. GENTILLE: But I need to tell you this little story first, because I was telling you about the army and not doing anything well. By then, I'd got the lay of the land in the army. So they had our whole company out, and they pretty much said, some of you are going to go to Europe, and some of you are going to stay in America. Everyone who wants to stay in America, raise your hand. Well, by then, I knew if I raised my hand to stay in America, they were going to send me to Europe and vice versa.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh?

MR. GENTILLE: So I took a chance, and I raised my hand.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: You certainly psyched them out.

MR. GENTILLE: I did, and that's exactly what happened. Everybody who wanted to stay in America got sent to Europe, and all the Europeans—there were many Germans who were dying to go back home.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes.

MR. GENTILLE: They were sent out to California.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Astonishing.

MR. GENTILLE: And other places. So I got to Germany by learning how to lie. [They laugh.] That's how I got to Germany.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: No, how to psyche people out and get into people's mentalities. I'm impressed.

MR. GENTILLE: I was assigned as a machine gunner, and there were supposed to be two other people in a team. We had training twice a year, and we were sent to Hoensfeld, which is in the mountains where Hitler trained his troops.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: In the Alps, yes.

MR. GENTILLE: It's in the Alps. It's very, very barbaric up there. It's a rough life, and we worked really hard. I was sent up there twice, for a month each time. But I decided - because the machine-gun team was supposed to have three people in it, and they were always short staffed, there was always two. So I was carrying a machine gun and a tripod, or a machine gun and ammunition.

I weighed about 130 pounds in those days. And the equipment—[they laugh]—I do not want to do this. You know, and so finally, I thought—and I have almost two years to be here. I want to do something more constructive if I can. So as luck would have it, I was very lucky. There was a military high school equivalency program on the base in Schweinfurt, where I was stationed.

So I went over there - and the military educational facilities are always run by former colonels. So I went to the former colonel, and I said to him, I would like to teach. And he said, do you have a degree? And I said no, because I didn't get a degree from Cleveland—you had to go for a fifth year, specializing in your major.

By then, I wanted to be a jeweler. But, I said, I have a teacher's certificate. And he said, ah, that's good. Where did you go to school? I said, Cleveland Institute of Art. He said, well, that's interesting. He said, what was your major? And I said, painting. He said, don't tell me anything else. Can you teach American history and general science? And I, of course—[they laugh]—said yes.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes.

MR. GENTILLE: So I had my duties transferred to teaching, and as luck would have it—I've had a lot of luck in my life - the book that I had to teach American history from was the identical book that I had when I was in high school.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh.

MR. GENTILLE: So I knew it forward and backwards by heart.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: How fortunate, yes.

MR. GENTILLE: So my first classes were all sergeants who couldn't go any further in their military career until they had a high school diploma. They were an incredible group of men, which I enjoyed very much and think of fondly to this day.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, that's wonderful.

MR. GENTILLE: They really worked hard. They were really great.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: But you also enjoyed the teaching in itself, right?

MR. GENTILLE: I did. I taught —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Because you did teach later on.

MR. GENTILLE: That gave me my first teaching experience. I taught six people how to read, three guys who didn't know the alphabet -

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Wonderful.

MR. GENTILLE: - while I was there, and that was very rewarding for me.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Quite an accomplishment. Tell me, what was the nearest cultural center? Did you get some time off to look around museums or go to the theater, to concerts? Did you have any of the cultural benefits, being abroad?

MR. GENTILLE: Very little. But off-post, as part of the *kaserne* [barracks], there was a ballroom and a library. And in that library, in one of the rooms, there was a German-American discussion group. And so many German people came there to learn English. This, of course, is in the late '50s, early '60s, and only about three GIs went. So I got to know a lot of the German people. And in those days, Germany was still very, very poor.

People never invited you into their homes. But my friend Ken [Kenichi Buma], who was my ally in the army, who was in a different company than I, and ironically, our billets—although they were in separate buildings quite far apart, our windows looked out at each other's windows. So we could see each other across the long way. And Ken, same age as I - we were both, of course, older by about six years than most of the soldiers because we'd been to school and everything - he was studying to be an architect.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, it was a good match.

MR. GENTILLE: So we were able to get together in our free time. There was also a movie on the post and a PX [Post Exchange, U.S. Army retail store].

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: So you had some cultural life.

MR. GENTILLE: And so we had some cultural life. I got invited to quite a few German homes. I once got invited by a man by the name of Herr Ultsch, who had two children, Diether and Elisabeth. Elisabeth was a blonde-haired, blue-eyed child of about 12, and Diether, dark haired, was a couple of years older. Herr Ultsch collected books. They invited me one year for Christmas to join them for dinner. Christmas dinner was noodles and butter. That was all—and wine.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, really. In the late '50s?

MR. GENTILLE: There was no money—because every penny went toward his books.

[End disc one.]

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: This is tape number two. [Ursula Ilse-Neuman interviewing Thomas Gentille, August 2, 2009, New York, NY, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.]

Now, Thomas, we were speaking about your experiences in Germany. Can we just know a little bit more your exposure to German culture? You said you were invited by German families. I'm particularly curious because, of course, I am German. But I also feel that somehow, this was important for you. For one thing, I know you speak pretty well German—German pretty well, rather. [Laughs.]

MR. GENTILLE: I speak a little German. I wish I spoke much better, but at the education center where I was teaching military personnel, there was one room that was for language learning. It was all done on tape. So they gave me—I had a key to the room, and so whenever I had a spare moment, I would go and learn the German language.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Because your pronunciation is just perfect. When you said "Dieter," I was really impressed. [Laughs.]

MR. GENTILLE: Well, it's kind of funny because I was in Bavaria, of course, and the tapes were all in High German—Bavaria speaks Low German. And it seemed that nobody in Bavaria could understand what I was saying. When I finally learned I could actually speak some German is when I went to Vienna.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, I see.

MR. GENTILLE: I started speaking, and suddenly, everybody knew what I was talking about. And then so when I came back, I had had a big cultural lesson -

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, that is wonderful.

MR. GENTILLE: - about the north and the south, so—[laughs].

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: When you went to Germany, did you get an opportunity to travel to other countries in Europe?

MR. GENTILLE: You know, I had very little chance for traveling. I did get to France and England and Scotland, and then I later got to Vienna. What had happened was my sergeant basically hated my guts because I had gone over his head and the heads of the officers in the army in order to teach.

Most places, when they have a teaching facility, there are separate billets for the teachers. But in this case, I was in an infantry unit, and there were no extra billets. So every day, when we filed out for formation, all the soldiers would be in battle gear for going out and training, and I would be in my dress greens.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: I see.

MR. GENTILLE: And of course, my sergeant would be in battle gear. And since my name starts with a G, I was in the front line, and he couldn't quite tolerate this. So eventually, he moved me into the back line.

When you're teaching in the army, really the responsibilities are quite incredible, because you have to grade all the papers and do all the teaching, and everything is restricted because when the final tests come, if one gets loose, then the military has to reprogram for the entire army all of the questions and answers to the program.

They're very, very strict about what information GIs are learning, so that they're entitled to this diploma. So you have to grade papers, and you have to do all of this. So you're not supposed to have any KP [kitchen patrol] or any guard duties. But my sergeant kept putting me on KP and guard duties.

So actually, my entire company had been made private first class or corporals, and I was the only one who had not been promoted because—I had to do KP, and I had to do guard duty. But he finally made a mistake, as Christmas Day came on the first year, and he put me on KP on Christmas Day. I had already had KP that month twice, and I was not supposed to be getting it at all.

So I went to my colonel and told him what had happened, and he was furious. He made me stand at attention, and he called the company commander. Now, the company commander is the last person in the world you want to know your name. And I had to go to the company commander, and I was—I didn't know what was going to happen. The upshot of it was, the next pay period, I was promoted.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: [Laughs.] Oh, good.

MR. GENTILLE: Promoted—promotions meant nothing to me except it meant more money.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, right.

MR. GENTILLE: So that gave me some money to travel.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: But in terms of jewelry, let's come back to jewelry. In Germany, you did not go to the Munich Schatzkammer [Imperial Treasury] or to the Vienna - jewelry was really not in the picture, then, right?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, it was.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, was it.

MR. GENTILLE: I had two experiences with jewelry. One was in Schweinfurt itself. There was a jeweler, whose name I now can't remember, who had a little jewelry shop on the square. He'd been making jewelry for many

years. And at that time, I couldn't speak any German at all and he spoke no English.

But we managed to communicate with hand signals, drawings, and so on. Occasionally someone would come in the store and would help with a little bit of English. He made tabernacles for churches—quite large ones; I mean maybe 30 inches long —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Silver?

MR. GENTILLE: —by 24 inches high. Well, he made them in copper. But he fire-gilded them. And so in the basement of his home, one time he was going to fire-gild one of these tabernacles. It was the first time I'd seen the process, and in the process, the whole thing is completed in copper—the tabernacle - and then it's coated with mercury. But the mercury is in a bowl, and the bowl has had pure gold dropped into it. And the whole tabernacle, which is copper, is covered with mercury. So then it turns into a mirror.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: It's quite dangerous.

MR. GENTILLE: It's quite dangerous.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes.

MR. GENTILLE: And you're supposed to use a rolled-up piece of leather to rub the mercury on the copper, but he would stick his thumb, repeatedly, right in the mercury and do the whole tabernacle.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Did he ask you to help him?

MR. GENTILLE: No, I just watched him.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: You watched.

MR. GENTILLE: And then, when you heat up the piece with a big, broad flame, at one moment, the mercury volatizes, and those fumes are totally poisonous. Suddenly in front of your eyes, the tabernacle appears to turn into pure gold. So it's amazing. You've gone from copper to mirror to gold.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Fascinating.

MR. GENTILLE: But all the fumes—

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: The miracle.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, it is like miracle, and of course, fire-gilding lasts—the Byzantine things were fire-gilded as opposed to gold-plating, which rubs off. But all those fumes went up out of a grate over which people were walking. So it was a terrifying experience.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, my gosh. So you did that once. And what was the second experience?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, the second one was on the way to Vienna. I was very lucky because my friend, Ken, the architect—we couldn't take a leave together because his company training was always one day different than mine. So he'd flown to Vienna, and he knew I was coming the next day. And he said, you'll be arriving the same day that I'm leaving.

So I will find a cheap hotel - don't worry about getting a hotel - and I will transfer the hotel room to you. So I went down, actually, on my birthday, down to Vienna. I went to Passau on the train from Schweinfurt. I left early in the morning and took the boat down the Danube -

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: How wonderful.

MR. GENTILLE: - which was a thrilling experience. There were a lot of Germans and a lot of Swedes on the boat —all with black umbrellas to stay out of the sun. There were two restaurants on the deck. And we passed all the palaces—some abandoned, some still functioning.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, the castles and the churches.

MR. GENTILLE: The place where the *Venus of Willendorf* had been found, which I had learned from my great art history teacher, [Frances P.] Franny Taft, who's still teaching at Cleveland, who was a member of the Taft family. She was a brilliant teacher. So I learned my art history from Franny Taft.

I arrived at Vienna at dusk, coming out into the big bay in front of it, and of course, it was like diamonds on the horizon. And there is Ken, standing on the pier waving. He took me to the street where the hotel was and

pointed and said, that's the name of your hotel. It's down there. I have to catch a train. And he ran the other way on his way to Rome. [They laugh.] And I had my hotel room.

So I roamed around Vienna, and I had been passing these two long buildings. The narrow end was toward the street, and the length was away from the street, and there was a big space in between, a lawn. And they looked like palaces. I didn't know what they were because I was passing them on the bus everyday.

But out in front was parked this beautiful old Rolls-Royce, just with a flat back and a separate compartment for a chauffeur in the front. It was there every day but moved by about three or four feet. I was aware that it was in a different position. And I was dying to know whose it was. And I thought, well, this is a palace. On the last day I thought, I have to go this building; I have to look in this car, because I wanted to see the dashboard, because I love those old Rolls.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, handmade.

MR. GENTILLE: I wanted to see the craftsmanship in it. It ended up the building was a museum. It was a historical museum. There was just a little plaque in the front that you couldn't see from the bus, which is a little bronze plaque. It wasn't even on the edge toward the street. You kind of almost had to know it was there.

So it was a very inexpensive admission, and I went in to see what was in the building. I walk up this beautiful staircase, and to the left, there's a big double door that's open. The door's open, and I look in the door, and there were about 100 display cases, the old-fashioned ones. They were wood, and the fronts were tipped in—they were glass, like a pyramid but long on one side. There were two on one side of the room and two on the other end, all these rows going down. And every single case was filled with diamond *en tremblant* jewelry.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, goodness. Which museum was the—Historisches Museum [Vienna, Austria]?

MR. GENTILLE: Historisches Museum.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes.

MR. GENTILLE: It was an old wood floor, and there was nobody in the room but me, and when you walked on the wood floor, it would creak, and it would make all the cases shake, and all the diamonds would send scintillations all over—it was an unbelievable thing.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Wonderful—what an experience.

MR. GENTILLE: And many, many, many years later, I became friends with the Bollmanns, who we'll talk about later. And it ends up that the Bollmanns had seen that exhibition and that that exhibition—the diamonds were taken from another museum that was being renovated, and they were only in that building for a very short period—one summer.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: What luck.

MR. GENTILLE: And I happened to walk into it that summer. So that was my second jewelry experience.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: That was meant for you; yes, you were fortunate. Wonderful. And what a positive experience with diamonds, also.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, it was remarkable.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: You don't use diamonds at all in your work.

MR. GENTILLE: I have used them in the past.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, you have, yes. We will get to that. Now, back in the States, how did your artistic career progress? Where did you go from Germany—to New York? Or?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, when I got out of Germany, I got out at Brooklyn [NY]. I came over in a troop ship. It took nine days to come back. I was seasick for four and a half days twice.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: [Laughs.] You were in the bowel of the ship?

MR. GENTILLE: Bottom of the ship, yes, and below the water line. But when I got out, all I had was a duffle bag on my shoulder and an invitation to stay for a few days with Irena Brynner, the jeweler, who I had met on leave once.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, yes.

MR. GENTILLE: So I stayed with her and her mother for a couple of days.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: How did this come about?

MR. GENTILLE: I don't remember how I—before I was drafted, when I was living in Boston, I had come to visit New York, and I wanted to meet some jewelers. So I met Adda Husted-Andersen. I met Irena Brynner. I met a couple of other jewelers, but because I had no—when I lived in Boston, I had known Issey—I can't think of her name now, but the Japanese jeweler who died quite a few years ago.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes. I have to look up the name.

MR. GENTILLE: All I can think now is Issey Miyake—[laughs]—and of course, it's not.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: It was Miye Matsukata.

MR. GENTILLE: But I didn't know her very well, and she had given me these names in New York, I think.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: But for example, Adda or —

MR. GENTILLE: I had been in their shops —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: You knew those shops then? Yes, how fortunate.

MR. GENTILLE: I did, and I went to—I had gone to Art Smith's shop several times over the years. In fact, when I was still a student at Cleveland, I went to Art Smith's shop, and I also went to —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Sam Kramer?

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, uh-huh.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: You did. And did you personally meet them?

MR. GENTILLE: I did.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: How wonderful, yes. Did they have any impact—you thought, oh that's the kind of life I want? They were pretty crazy people. [Laughs.]

MR. GENTILLE: No. Sam Kramer was pretty crazy and pretty unfriendly to me when I was in the store.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Unfriendly.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes. I was definitely a bother to him.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Interesting.

MR. GENTILLE: I told him I was a jeweler, and I think he wasn't interested. And Art Smith was very shy but very helpful and very kind, I found.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: That's nice to know.

MR. GENTILLE: I found him quite—incredibly shy, actually.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, different. Interesting.

MR. GENTILLE: I liked his work very much. I was very interested in his work.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And did you go to any of the dance performances for which he designed for the dancers? Did you see any of their —

MR. GENTILLE: No, no. I think I saw some necklaces that were designed for the dance but don't remember if I did or not —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: You did not go to the performances.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: So now, you're in New York, and you establish yourself first in Brooklyn, or right away in

Manhattan —

MR. GENTILLE: No, no, I came immediately to New York.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Immediately to Manhattan.

MR. GENTILLE: And —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And how did you survive financially?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, the first year was just really, really difficult. I mean, actually, to support myself to make jewelry over the years, I've done practically every job that you could think of rather than jewelry. I've done everything. I worked in stores, gave demonstrations at Macy's in the cooking department—because I'd learned to cook. And I've checked coats, and I've hosted parties. Everything you that you can think of to support my jewelry.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, yes. But all along, you were making jewelry. Now, what did you use as a studio in New York?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, actually, my first job in New York—official job - I was hired by David Campbell—at the then-called —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: American Craft—Museum of Contemporary Crafts.

MR. GENTILLE: Well, it was then called the Museum of Contemporary Crafts [now Museum of Arts and Design]. David had designed the building; Paul Smith was his major assistant. Paul Smith did the designing of the exhibitions, and I was kind of the paint and hammer—one of the paint-and-hammer guys. And Sam Richardson was there, then. And then, there was no research department. There was no photography department; all those departments started then. Renita Hanfling started the research department with Sam Richardson heading it, Renita doing photography for the slide files, openings, and events. And Lois Moran came to be David's secretary.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, yes.

MR. GENTILLE: So I knew Lois in those days when she had dark red hair —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Way back.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, way back then. And David had designed the museum—I may have said that already. But he was a great guy. The only exhibition I really installed - that is to say, placing the work - was Lenore Tawney's exhibition there.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, wonderful. And you met her?

MR. GENTILLE: I had met Lenore, yes.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Did you enter her wonderful studio?

MR. GENTILLE: Not until about a year later, I saw her studio. She was on Spring Street then.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Now, did this give you access to studio space so you could do your own work?

MR. GENTILLE: No, no, no. It didn't.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Not at all. Did you work out of your apartment then?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, what happened was Paul Smith had three rent-controlled apartments in the same building. He lived in the top floor one. And on the second floor, he had a studio that was his painting studio, because he was a painter and —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, I didn't know that he was a painter.

MR. GENTILLE: He said, I think I have too many apartments now. I want to get rid of one of them. I have an apartment for you, because he knew I was looking. And so I got my apartment from Paul Smith.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: That was fortunate.

MR. GENTILLE: I was really, really lucky. And then David said to me one day. He said, you know, America

House [cooperative craft shop] is a mess over there. We need somebody to do the windows and the interior of the store. And just keep an eye on the place. Would you like a job over there?

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes.

MR. GENTILLE: So I said, oh, yes, I absolutely would like to do that.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: A perfect connection.

MR. GENTILLE: So I did the windows for America House for quite a few years and the interior of the store. It was a big struggle because they—the director didn't really—weren't too particularly interested in showing things beautifully. They wanted sales, but —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, before—what sort of work did you do at that time? What materials did you work with? Do you recall? Was there a particular form that you experimented with at the time?

MR. GENTILLE: I would say the period where I was fooling around with things the most—trying to find my footing - was really the first year that I was in New York, the first six months or so. But very quickly, I knew what I wanted to do. Some of the very early pieces were—you probably won't believe this, Ursula, since we've known each other for so long - were quite organic.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, I remember one —

MR. GENTILLE: And that period was very short. [Laughs.]

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: What material did you use for the organic design?

MR. GENTILLE: At the very beginning, I was working in silver and a little bit of gold. That's when I used some diamonds and gold, but they were very —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And what made you think, then, about nonprecious materials. Was that a trend?

MR. GENTILLE: I had actually started thinking about that way back in school. It was always in the back of my mind, but where to get those materials was a bit of a quandary when I first came to New York. How do I develop that idea, I didn't have a grasp on yet. So I went back to the traditional materials of gold and silver for a short while —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: To do jewelry.

MR. GENTILLE: - till I got my footing.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Where in New York did you show? Were you part of the Morris Gallery—Robert Lee Morris Gallery - at some point?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, that came much later.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: That came much later.

MR. GENTILLE: At that time, most of the exhibiting I was doing was entering —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Competitions.

MR. GENTILLE: - competitions around the country for museum shows and galleries. I would send off the work, and they would be exhibited or rejected.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Which ones, for example?

MR. GENTILLE: I couldn't give you the name of any of them.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Any of them —

MR. GENTILLE: Most of them are out of business now, but they were all across the country.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: But they were very important.

MR. GENTILLE: There were quite a few of them. It was very important. And of course, it was a thrill to be exhibited in one of their shows.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Of course.

MR. GENTILLE: Because it was validation for the work you were doing, beyond the validation you gave to it for yourself.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Before we speak about—I would like to come back to Haystack, for example. You went to Haystack once. And you went there the second time. When was that, and were there any other craft schools that you taught or attended?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I did go to Haystack a second time as a student, and that time, I was hired—I was a scholarship student, but I was hired by Fran and Pris to be assistant cook for the entire summer.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh.

MR. GENTILLE: So I got paid for that, as well as the scholarship, and I cooked for what was it—about 60 people - along with Pris.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Gosh. And I'm sure everybody ate very well. What sort of food did you make? Pizzas?

MR. GENTILLE: Basically, Haystack only served meat once a week as a matter of economy, and so Pris was an expert with vegetables. Only once did I have to prepare a meal for the entire faculty and student body.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Group.

MR. GENTILLE: Because Pris had to go somewhere, and Fran had to go somewhere, and it was two different places, and it was very important that they do these things. And the meal I had to prepare was the meat meal that evening.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Of all things.

MR. GENTILLE: For everybody.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And you don't eat meat now.

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I did then.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Or at that time.

MR. GENTILLE: I did then. And the meat that I had to prepare was liver, for 60 people.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh.

MR. GENTILLE: So it had to be done on a grill. Well, Pris was great. She had recipes that would just blow you away. And Pris's secret was butter and cream. This is before we knew about cholesterol.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, I see. And it was Julia Child and —

MR. GENTILLE: So you can make anything taste good with enough butter and enough cream. So I had everything ready to go. Bill Brown was the assistant director at the time. And what Pris forgot to remind me or I forgot to remember, was that the grill had to be turned on an hour before we started the meal. And I forgot to turn the grill on. And I went in, and there was everybody sitting there to eat.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And nothing was ready.

MR. GENTILLE: Nothing was ready. Not the grill. So they had to wait for an hour. Now, a school like Haystack and Penland runs on its stomach. Both Fran and Bill said anything can go wrong in a school—you can run out of gas so the kilns don't work. It doesn't matter what happens. It can pour rain for days on end. But food has to be served on the dot every day, and everybody will forgive you for everything.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, dear. Were you in trouble?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I must say, when the announcement was made about what was happening, the entire dining hall just sat there. They were so patient and really wonderful. They waited for an hour for the grill to be warmed up —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: For the liver.

MR. GENTILLE: And when the food came out, they all applauded, so —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Wonderful.

MR. GENTILLE: So the whole staff—so it was a great experience, yes.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Now, what work did you do in terms of your own work there? Not cooking, but jewelry, or did you do woodcuts again or—what did you work on?

MR. GENTILLE: At that time, I was just starting doing jewelry, and Haystack did not have a jewelry studio when I went there as a student. Later on, when I was invited to come back and teach, I set up the first jewelry studio at Haystack. That was actually the old storage room for glazes—the dried glazes. They moved all the dry chemicals out, and the first course was casting. The jewelry department that I set up was for casting.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Wonderful.

MR. GENTILLE: And then later on, they built the large jewelry studio. Fran wanted metals to come to Haystack.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Was that in 1967 or before—1964?

MR. GENTILLE: No that was—you know, I don't remember the years. I have a problem with numbers, and so years don't always —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: But in the '60s, though, right?

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, it would have to have been in the '60s, maybe even—yes, in the '60s.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And did you teach at Penland or —

MR. GENTILLE: I taught several times at Haystack and at Penland. I taught a great deal at Penland. I was even there on the Concentration things, which lasted three months. So I taught there four or five times. I would teach, and Bill would always invite me to stay afterwards. So then some of the other instructors would come, and I would stay for their whole three weeks, and then the next instructor would arrive, and Bill would say, stay, hang around. And I had the summers off from teaching, so I would just stay the whole summer.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: How wonderful.

MR. GENTILLE: When I was in school studying with Fred Miller, I only had jewelry one day a week. He taught me all the basics, but I'm basically self-taught after that. A lot of the techniques and information I learned, I learned from other faculty at Haystack or Penland, because I would stay on, and I would work every night, and we'd be working, exchanging our information and so —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Do you remember some of the names of the faculty at Haystack?

MR. GENTILLE: At Haystack.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: At Haystack or at Penland, for that matter.

MR. GENTILLE: You mean in the metals departments or other departments?

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: No, in general. Let's say, general and metals in particular.

MR. GENTILLE: Oh, gosh.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Anybody —

[Cross talk.]

MR. GENTILLE: You know, I can't seem to remember specifically, but if you look into the archives of crafts during the period, almost everybody who was well known in the crafts was there at one time or another, and I met all of them.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Wonderful.

MR. GENTILLE: I mean, even some of the early wood jewelry that I did - we were talking about America House. Wendell Castle got hired to design and build the jewelry cases for America House. They were all made out of his laminated, constructed work that he was building, one layer of solid wood on top of another, and then carving them out. And I learned that technique from Wendell Castle, which I later applied —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, the stack lamination.

MR. GENTILLE: —to my jewelry.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: To your jewelry, I see. Basically from looking and speaking with him —

MR. GENTILLE: And talking to him about how he did it and what kind of adhesive he used and all of those things.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Now, what's the big difference between Haystack and Penland—what did you detect were the differences?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, if you talked to people who've gone to both schools, they each have their preference of those schools. One group loves the mountains, and the other group loves the sea.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: In terms of teaching approach, philosophy of the school?

MR. GENTILLE: Bill Brown was with Fran for many years before he was hired to do Penland. So the teaching philosophy was very much the same. It was all very open and very organic. They encouraged everybody—everything was very positive. They loved to see people work. They loved to see people produce. They loved to support you in any way that they could, if it was finances or materials or storytelling. Bill gave me a lesson in Ping-Pong one night. He said, you're a lousy Ping-Pong player. You can get better in 15 minutes. And I was and —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Wonderful.

MR. GENTILLE: So he—they looked after their people. Fran was very interested in classical music, so there was that —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Aspect, Yes.

MR. GENTILLE: I felt, for me, I love Maine and the stoicism that kind of comes from my great-grandmother. But I love the landscape, and there was—at Haystack, there's always a sense of peace at Haystack and work and production. Penland, when I was there later, of course, it was in the '70s, and there was a feeling of hysteria everywhere.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Was it very competitive? Is that the hysteria or —

MR. GENTILLE: No, no—just the atmosphere—there was lots of dancing in the night.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, I see.

MR. GENTILLE: It was in a dry county, so there was lots of drinking.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Social life.

MR. GENTILLE: Because dry counties are always notorious for a lot of drinking, and there was a lot of that going on.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And what did you teach at these schools?

MR. GENTILLE: I taught jewelry.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Jewelry. So you said casting, but also —

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, because casting was all they had when I started there. But later on, when I taught at Haystack, I taught in the jewelry studio. I taught all the techniques.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, engraving and all the metals techniques?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, not engraving, but all the things that are involved, soldering, filing, sawing —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: So the basics —

MR. GENTILLE: Working with stones, working with alternate materials, which I was interested in, but mostly about ideas. So if there was a student who'd never had any jewelry, I would teach them the basics. If there was someone who'd been working for 10 years, I would be talking about ideas with them.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Ideas, Yes.

MR. GENTILLE: So all of the instructors, I think, were very astute in doing exactly the same thing.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, right. So in terms of experience, they were very different, you know? There were students who never did jewelry and then again, accomplished people.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And speaking about ideas, did you do that also in your off time with them? Is that sort of the atmosphere where you really talk about art?

MR. GENTILLE: Many instructors would spend the entire evening in the studio with the students, and many instructors would not teach after certain hours. And the weaving studio, usually - when I was there, the weaving instructors didn't work all night because there was so much work to do on the loom that students needed to do by themselves.

In the jewelry studio, there was always some tragic problem coming up that needed to be helped. And weaving, also, had assistants for them. The jewelry didn't have assistants. So we needed - and wanted - to be there a little bit more for that reason.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Has that changed? Do you know?

MR. GENTILLE: I haven't taught at either of the schools for a very, very long time, so —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: You wouldn't know. Now, you taught, also, I think, at Bloomsburg State University in Pennsylvania [since 1983, Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, Bloomsburg, PA] and some other schools, like you were in Detroit?

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, I taught at the Center for Creative Studies [since 2001, College for Creative Studies, Detroit, MI] for one semester while Buffy Thomas was on sabbatical.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: What did you teach there?

MR. GENTILLE: That was a very unhappy teaching experience. The students were mean-spirited toward each other and toward me. For example, one of the students - when I went in, I had all the seniors—sophomores and seniors—one of the senior girls said, I've been here for four years now, and I'm not going to learn anything new, so don't try to change anything. I'm going to do exactly what I want to do for this semester.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: That was her loss.

MR. GENTILLE: She got a D, of course, a D-minus —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And it was her loss.

MR. GENTILLE: They begged me not to fail her. [Laughs.] She'd gotten nothing but As and Bs at the whole school, but she was quite a tyrant, and she came late to class every day and so on.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: So that was not good. How about the Center for Creative Studies in Detroit?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I do want to talk about—that's what I talked about.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, that was the—oh, I see.

MR. GENTILLE: The advantage I had—some advantages there are that I was the first person who had been given an apartment to work in, because I was going to be there for the whole semester. I was preparing for my Victoria and Albert [Victoria and Albert Museum, London] show [1987].

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Ah, yes.

MR. GENTILLE: Part of my agreement was the apartment, because I had to pay for my apartment in New York while I was away, and to have 24-hour access to the studios. So I did all of my eggshell inlay work in the apartment on the dining room table all evening. And I did metalwork and things during the day. But the director who had granted me this to come, left—decided to leave. So when I got there, there was another director, and everything wasn't set up. So I had these difficult students. And the students had to be out of the building in the evening—I think it was by 9:00.

And Detroit was a very dangerous city at that time. It may still be. It was right at the edge of the African-American neighborhood, and I was advised never to walk in that direction at night. The building is like a fortress. The janitor for the building was African-American, and the first night he came in, he hadn't been told that I was allowed to be there. He was really angry that I was there, and I explained it to him. And he came

back the next night with a gun. It was a very scary experience.

So finally I went to the director, and I said, you have to let this man know that I'm supposed to be there, because I was the only person allowed to be in the building. We finally got that all worked out, and once he felt I wasn't a threat to him—he thought I wanted his job, for some reason. I don't know why.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, I see, because he was the only one working late.

MR. GENTILLE: He was supposed to be there, yes. And so then he was very helpful after that. So it was a difficult experience, but it was really a good experience because I could work a lot. Because I could work, and I was forced to learn to deal with problems, with people that I'd never experienced before. So it was a growing period.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Maybe we should cover all your teaching experiences at this point and then go back to your wonderful work with materials like eggshell, which I didn't want to get into, because I think you also taught at Parsons [Parsons School of Design, New York City, now Parsons The New School for Design] for a long time here in New York? And before that, I think you worked at the 92nd Street Y[MCA].

MR. GENTILLE: I did. It's amazing—

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Or did I have it in reverse?

MR. GENTILLE: You have the sequence mixed up a little bit.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Okay. I'm sorry, yes. So it was first Parsons and then the 92nd Street—

MR. GENTILLE: No. First it was the 92nd Street Y.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Okay. Can you tell me about the 92nd Street Y? I think you accomplished many things there.

MR. GENTILLE: I can. There was no jewelry program when I went to the 92nd Street Y. When I was in the army, I had learned about the 92nd Street Y in the army because the newspaper for soldiers—oh, I can't even think of the name of it now—mentioned the poetry center at the 92nd Street Y. I think it was the *Stars and Stripes*, actually—the name of the paper.

I read about the poetry center; they had done several articles on it. And I thought, you know, if I ever move to New York, this is a place where I want to be. I had the idea in my mind that I wanted to run a jewelry program somewhere, and I thought, if I ever—when I go to New York, I think I'm going to go to them and see about it.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And you proposed it to them?

MR. GENTILLE: So I went up, and I proposed it to them.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Who was the director then? Do you remember?

MR. GENTILLE: I think the director was Nathan Kolodney. And I think I only met him one day, and then the next director came in. But they were very interested because, of course, part of the tradition, the Jewish tradition, is metalworking. So they were very interested in metalworking.

After World War II, they had set up a program to teach returning soldiers how to repair watches. So there were some benches upstairs, and a gas line had been put in for that. I found out many years later that a couple of jewelry courses had been taught there—I didn't know that at the time—but nothing for many, many years.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: That was part of the therapy program for returning soldiers on the G.I. Bill.

MR. GENTILLE: That's right.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: So you proposed that jewelry department for the Y, and they were enthusiastic? And how did you go about establishing it? You had some experience at Haystack, or was that with—

MR. GENTILLE: Well, yes, I had taught at Haystack. I had taught and—

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And you established a jewelry department at—not department but the first workshop at Penland?

MR. GENTILLE: No, at Haystack.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: At Haystack. So you had some experience, but this was, of course, the city. And did you know how many students to plan for or —

MR. GENTILLE: Well, we just figured it out together, and they said, how much can you teach? And I said, well, I don't want to teach anybody under the age of 18 because I want to deal with adults, not children - because they had many children's programs up there. And I think a class should be about two-and-a-half hours. That's a good amount of time. My classes were about three hours. And so I did that. And we figured out the finances, and I figured I could teach four classes a week.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And did you have to hire other teachers then to—was it a full-time program for the students, or no?

MR. GENTILLE: There was actually—there was a teacher there who had been there before me who was teaching one class a week doing jewelry—I think it was one class a week—using those benches. But she wasn't teaching all the techniques of soldering and filing. It was more a combination of things. And she did some of that. So she was there, but there was no program in place. And so I did the program, and then she was hired to work on—continued to work in the program with me.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Do you remember when it was fully operational, that program - in the early '70s, you think?

MR. GENTILLE: I can't remember the years.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, right. And how did you inspire your students? Did you also have—except for your own work. Did you have exhibitions? Did you give them exposure? Did you go to look at jewelry in the various museums? How did you —

MR. GENTILLE: Well, the students were a very mixed bag of all ages. Some had [experience in] jewelry; some didn't. Many of the students who came wanted to make a living making jewelry. They wanted to do beadwork and so on. But I wanted to run it on a university level.

By then, I had written my book, *Step-By-Step Jewelry* [*Step-by-Step-Jewelry: A Complete Introduction to the Craft of Jewelry*. New York: Golden Press, 1968]. That was done. And one of the things I had to do in that book were projects. One of the projects that I wrote in my book, actually, was a project that Fred Miller had us do as students. So it was a direct route from Fred Miller through me to the Y.

And the first project, I found out very quickly with students, they didn't know what they wanted to do. And so the first thing that they had to do with me was this project. Every student had to make a pin. And I had them all do separate designs. I talked to them about design and what the format had to be, because it was going to be a sweat-soldered project. I can tell you that technically when we talk about those things.

And they had to keep up. They had to do each step each week. And so once they had their first project, then things got freer for them. I was at the Y for 11 years, and I had some students who stayed with me the entire 11 years who were quite developed when they—

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: How wonderful, and they are now—

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I don't know what happened to them afterward. [Laughs.]

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Shana Kroiz, when was she your student?

MR. GENTILLE: That was from Parsons.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, that was Parsons. So you stayed 11 years at the 92nd Street Y and built up this whole department, which became very famous and is still very operational. And from there, you went to Parsons School of Design. How did this differ from the 92nd Street Y? Was it a full-time program? Was the program established?

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, it was a totally different program. At the Y, I was in charge of everything. One of my former students from Haystack came and was my assistant. He came to New York because I was there, and he really was very, very helpful. And his name is Alan Fairley; he's out in California now.

The students at the Y were sometimes very spoiled people who came from Park Avenue and kind of wanted you to make their jewelry for them, which I wouldn't do, and some were quite wonderful!

I had students from Europe—Tereza Seabra, who is considered the mother of contemporary jewelry in Portugal, was one of my students. She was married at the time to a Portuguese diplomat. She lived in New York, and she had her daughter here, Constança, who by the way, heard me talk about Cleveland [Institute of Art] so much

when she was growing up that she eventually went to Cleveland as a printmaker. And she won the Gund Scholarship, which is the highest award. By then the Gund was $10,000. And so she went back to Portugal. At that time, the dollar was very strong in Portugal—[laughs]—he says laughingly as the dollar plummets momentarily.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, yes, I know. And then was Tereza instrumental in—you also taught in Portugal several years right? Did she invite you? What was the school that you taught at in Portugal?

MR. GENTILLE: At Ar•Co; she began the jewelry program at Ar•Co.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: What does Ar•Co stand for?

MR. GENTILLE: You know, I don't know. I don't remember what it stands for. [Centre of Art and Visual Communication, Lisbon, Portugal.]

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, we'll have to find out. So you taught at Parsons, and when did you stop Parsons? Just recently—a few years ago, right? When they dissolved the metals department, actually, which is a big loss for the school.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, I had actually quit teaching before it was completely dissolved. The department was under Lisa Gralnick, although Lisa Spiros was the one who hired me to come there. I stayed through her tenure—and then through Lisa Gralnick's. And Lisa Gralnick became a jeweler because she had read my book. Her uncle gave her my book when she was a child, before she was a jeweler, and she saw a piece that I made in the book, and that was what made her decide to become a jeweler. Yes, she told me that story and—

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: She's a very good and interesting jeweler. So the book must have been really inspiring to many people. Can you tell me a little bit about the book? How did this come about? And you wrote several books, right? You wrote two books.

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I wrote one that's called *Encyclopedia of Crafts* that is not around very much. I mean, I just wrote the entries for jewelry. The jewelry book came about because there was a couple by the name of Bill and Shirley Sayles. Bill and Shirley Sayles got a commission to write craft books. They wrote the four first craft books—instructional books—that came out in America. And they were for weaving, knitting, ceramics, and jewelry.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And jewelry. And what was the title of your book?

MR. GENTILLE: *Step-by-Step Jewelry*.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And it is published by Western Publishing?

MR. GENTILLE: It was Western Publishing—Golden Press, which was the division of Western Publishing Company.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Okay. And basically, it was a how-to book?

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, and there were no how-to books on jewelry at all. All the books that you would look up were, like, from the Renaissance and it was "eye of frog" and "tail of newt."

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: I know it's still being used heavily by jewelry students.

MR. GENTILLE: And it is still being used, yes.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And what you did is you described the techniques that you used and others used, as well? Is it basically about how to do things, or are all the techniques that you described, you did, actually, to make jewelry?

MR. GENTILLE: What I wanted to do in the book is I wanted to write a book that people could pick up and learn to make jewelry without any personal instructor, but they could read the book, and they could make jewelry afterwards. That's what I set out to do.

And I only found out - actually, after the book had been on the market a couple years, people came up to me and showed me work that they had made, and they had never had an instructor; they had learned it all from the book. So I knew that I had succeeded. It was quite a day for me, that first time it happened. It happened repeatedly after that, but the first time, it was pretty thrilling.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And did the book deal with alternative materials, then? Mostly metals?

MR. GENTILLE: It did a little bit. I did a section called—well, it's called "Found Objects." And this was very interesting to me because, as we all know, we associate the term "found objects" with Marcel Duchamp. But Marcel Duchamp, that was not his term. His term was "selected object." And I had read that—unfortunately, I never met Marcel Duchamp although he did live in New York when I first came here. I didn't have the courage or even think about going to meet Marcel Duchamp.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: He would have enjoyed speaking with you.

MR. GENTILLE: He probably would have said, yes, come by. But his term was "selected object." And the press picked up the term "found object," and the art world picked up the term "found object," and he said, no matter how hard he tried, he could not get them to use "selected object," so he just gave up on the impossible.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: So he agreed to the French term *objet trouvé* after a while probably.

MR. GENTILLE: But in America, it was always "found object." So when I wrote my book, I did a chapter on "Selected Object." I chose the term "selected" as a tribute, as an homage, to Marcel Duchamp. And the main editor turned it back to "found object." Marcel had said he couldn't do it, and neither could I. [Laughs.] I don't know why I thought I could do it if Marcel couldn't do it, but—[laughs].

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Now, at that point, you have long had exhibitions, mostly group exhibitions. Tell me a little bit about your first solo exhibition. Or should we go into use of materials first?

MR. GENTILLE: I would just—I don't know when my first solo exhibition was.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: You don't remember?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, yes, my first one-man show was—I don't know. Maybe Robert Lee Morris. You know, I've never kept track of these things. [First one-man exhibition was at the Asheville Art Museum, Asheville, NC,1977; TG: Artwear exhibition was also in 1977; Artwear Gallery, New York, NY.]

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: When he had his store in the 80s [streets]?

MR. GENTILLE: It was in the East 70s, the upper 70s, on the side street, at 28 East 74th Street.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And he gave you a solo exhibition. Do you remember what materials you used there, what you made?

MR. GENTILLE: There were already a lot of materials in that show. There was bronze, and there were feathers, and there was wood, and there were all kinds of materials. There was even some gold in that show.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: In that show. Now, maybe we should speak a little bit about your—I mean, you are known worldwide for your use of alternative materials, and that you are the one who really understands the so-called soul of material better than anybody. And I have to agree, knowing your work now for almost 20 years; I think that nobody can get the essence out of the material as well as you can.

What provoked you to not work with gold and silver and diamonds any longer? Did you think this was too humdrum? Was it too luxury-oriented? Was it a matter of cost? But I don't think it was a matter of cost with you. It was probably a matter of, really, the challenge of these materials.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, I wanted to make a piece of jewelry when I was in school with Fred in ebony. And Fred wouldn't allow me to do it because, he said, it's not material that's suitable for jewelry.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: In Cleveland with Fred Miller?

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, with Fred. And he said, that was a material for teapot handles and legs and so on. Of course, Fred was primarily a hollowware person. He wouldn't let me do it in school, so I did it on my own outside of class, because I felt it was a precious material.

One of the reasons I wasn't interested in working with the precious materials as such is that I felt too much jewelry was based on the cost of the materials and not what the jewelry was about.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: About luxury and —

MR. GENTILLE: Luxury and wealth and monetary things. I felt that I wanted jewelry to be about something else. I wanted it to be about the material that it was made with, because even at the very beginning, even before I began jewelry, I felt that—making jewelry—I felt that the materials were very, very important, that that was the most important part of the thing. And then what you did with that material, how you reveal that

material, was an important thing.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: So you start basically thinking about the material, and then you think about what could it express, is that —

MR. GENTILLE: No, I think first about, what can this material do that's specific to this material? What does it want to do? What does it tell you to do? What does it—if something is not going right with the material, why is it not going right? Well, the reason it's not going right is because you're not giving it the respect it's due. So as soon as you give it its respect, what it wants to do, then it becomes beautiful. And the more you can find out what that thing is, the more beautiful the material becomes.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Was there any material in your past where you thought you didn't give it enough respect, and then you came back to it, and you found the soul of the material?

MR. GENTILLE: I wouldn't say that I found that I didn't give it enough respect. I would say that I hadn't found the soul of the material. And so I would abandon it until I could come back to it and approach it again from another point of view.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: How do you find the soul of a material? For example, you have plywood. Do you handle it a lot? Do you live with it for a while before you even think of jewelry? How does this come about?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, of course, I'm gathering materials with the idea of making jewelry from the material. So very often, I'll see a material that I'm attracted to, and I'll get that material.

It's almost always in a form that is not recognizable. That is to say, it's not a shape of something. It may be—like, plywood is flat, or plastic in a flat sheet, or even bronze, I buy in flat sheets. I never buy anything that has a shape in it. I always buy something—because I want to shape the material myself.

And just for example, if you saw plywood with a coarse tooth saw, it chips the wood and the top veneer. So right away, it's saying, I don't like this; don't do this to me. So then you use a finer blade, and then you find it doesn't do that.

And so if you're sawing it crooked, you find that the different layers of the plywood begin to take on a different shape. And if you don't want to take on that shape, the plywood is saying, don't saw me this way. You have to saw me straight.

Then, if you put a lacquer on it, it gives a certain color, and that color is not particularly, to me—my eyes—satisfactory. But if you put a wax on it, it does something to it. So the plywood is saying, don't lacquer me; wax me. Or it might be saying in reverse, it might be saying, don't wax me; lacquer me. And so you just listen to this little voice in the material—

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Is this over a period of a day, of a week? Of longer?

MR. GENTILLE: Oh, I've had materials sitting around for six or eight years or nine, 10 years before I decide what the soul of that material is. Other material, I pick up off the shelf, and I kind of get it very quickly. But I will say, the more synthetic a material is, the harder it is to find the soul of the material. Wood gives itself up very easily; like ebony tells you right away. Ivory, all those materials, give up right away. But the synthetics are really hard to find.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Difficult. For example, you worked with Surell [Formica Surrell, made of minerals and acrylic resins] as the first one, I think, in this country.

MR. GENTILLE: One of the first, yes.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Who introduced you to Surell, and how did this come about?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, Susan Grant Lewin introduced me to it. She was the creative director of Formica, and she had done a project inviting artists to work with Formica and furniture and so on. And she asked me if I would be interested in working with the material.

So I got some Formica, and then ColorCore came along, which was basically Formica, which is solid, and seams didn't show. And she said, would you like to try this Surrell? And I said, yes, and she got the material for me. She's been very, very helpful in my career with this kind of open-ended thinking. And of course, for me, it was a matter of finding the soul of these materials.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Now, with Surell, what tools did you use to use?

MR. GENTILLE: I used many of the same tools that I use in making jewelry of metal. In fact, all of the materials that I use, I'm using mostly tools that I use for making jewelry.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Can you talk a little bit about what tools you're working with? What is sort of the standard equipment you have, or special equipment?

MR. GENTILLE: The basic tools are saw frame, files, drills, emory papers, and polishing cloths, and so on. I never use electric motors, for example, in any of my work ever. I polish everything by hand. I use a felt—wood stick with felt and a compound.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Do you think you have better control?

MR. GENTILLE: Have absolute control with that. And I think you get a better surface, as well. So all of my finishing is done by hand. I have a flexible-shaft machine, which I can drill holes with. I have a Dumore drill press, which does very precision holes.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: But your inlays, for example, you carve out by hand? You saw all by hand?

MR. GENTILLE: Those are all carved out by hand, yes.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And the strips are sewn on by hand?

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, everything is done by hand. I do have a miniature table saw. So a lot of my geometric work, I can cut very clean, sharp edges with the table saw. Many of them are also done by hand, as well.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: What materials have you worked with? And I'm speaking about nonprecious materials. And was there a favorite one? I know you have worked with so many, but just name a few, or at least—

MR. GENTILLE: Well, the list is endless.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Steel, aluminum, eggshell, for example. [They laugh.] But you also have done embroidery; you have worked with glass.

MR. GENTILLE: Acrylic; I've used fiber; I've worked with glass; I've worked with cork; linoleum, I'm working with now. You name the material, and I've probably worked with it somewhere along the line. And yet, when you ask me, I have trouble specifying the materials. [They laugh.]

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: You are, of course, internationally renowned for your eggshell pieces. At least museums, when they hear Thomas Gentille, they sort of think, oh, I really want an eggshell piece in my collection. Tell me a little bit about eggshell: how you worked with it, what the allure is.

MR. GENTILLE: Well, as a jeweler, I've been interested in eggshell things for a long time. The Chinese and the Japanese did eggshell screens and lacquerwork and so on. I always thought it was very beautiful, and I always wondered how they did it. Later on, when I got interested in it - I know the eggshell is done with lacquer.

And it's a very, very difficult process; it's a very dangerous process—fumes and so on. Eileen Gray, who worked with eggshell and lacquer, finally had to give it up because it was so detrimental to her health. She had to quit doing it.

And here in America, even getting the materials to do traditional eggshell—in the New York area, it's just virtually impossible. Maybe if you lived in California, closer to Japan, you might be able to get them. So I could never find out any information, really, about it.

So I wanted to do it for jewelry. It seemed to me to be an ideal medium for jewelry. So I just decided to figure out a process myself. I worked on that for about—took me about six years. I developed my own technique, which does not use lacquer. In fact, all the materials I use for eggshell inlay are nontoxic, which was important for me because I only had very small studios and not always the best of ventilation.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, but the exact process you really want to keep to yourself—

MR. GENTILLE: I've never told anybody my exact process.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, and I will not press you for it. [Laughs.] But just in terms of eggshell in pigment, you put the eggshells—you assemble them. And then you use raw pigment to combine the various parts of—[inaudible, cross talk].

MR. GENTILLE: I use pure pigments—the same pigments that a painter would use. Of course, my experience

comes from my painting background. And some of the techniques I use in eggshell, actually, come from my painting experience.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: You made many eggshell pieces. They're mostly now in collections in museums, in private collections, or—?

MR. GENTILLE: Many of them are, but I have a pocketful of them. [Laughs] I still have quite a few, yes. And I'm planning on doing a new necklace actually, now. I finally have the drawings for it.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: How wonderful. Since we're speaking about museums and galleries for that matter, did you have any particular dealers who helped your career along, or somebody who was particularly important for your career—I don't know, Helen Drutt or someone before Helen, even, and after Helen?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, in a way, I think because I was showing with Robert Lee Morris in an indirect way, he was quite helpful. One of the things that was great about Robert's gallery was he had a girl who worked for him. Her name was Marianne [Ferrara]. I can't think of her last name right now. I haven't seen her for many years.

But she was a girl who could wear any piece of jewelry and make it look fantastic. She could just—

[End disc two.]

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: This is disc number three, Ursula Ilse-Neuman interviewing Thomas Gentille [August 2, 2009, New York City]. Thomas, you were just speaking about Robert Lee Morris's gallery and a woman called Marianne, who wore things particularly well.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, and I just think that helped people see my work in a new light. They saw it on [her], and they thought, well, this works. [Laughs.] So she was great for showing work in the best possible way.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, well, that is very important.

MR. GENTILLE: I think she helped everybody in the gallery, actually.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And it shows how important it is that jewelry has to be - you know, is worn. Now, what other dealers, both here in this country and overseas—

MR. GENTILLE: Well, of course, I worked with Helen Drutt for a while. And that was a love/hate relationship. One had to respect Helen because she really knew what she was doing, but she was very difficult to deal with at times, as I probably was as well. I must say, however, we've become very good friends and I love Helen.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, yes.

MR. GENTILLE: And she's done a great deal for the field.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Did she introduce your work to Europe? Was it Helen, or how did this come about?

MR. GENTILLE: You know, I don't know who introduced my work how to whom. It's just very strange. I was in some exhibitions that Helen did that were in Europe. I've never, kind of, followed how I've gotten to be well known; I never followed how that happened.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Why that happened.

MR. GENTILLE: I think the book, of course, had a great deal to do with it. And the fact that I exhibited a great deal, also, in group shows.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Right. Now, after Helen, is there any other dealer you particularly liked to be with, for example, in Europe? Are there galleries that have your work now, or is that not that important to you?

MR. GENTILLE: I've had three one-man exhibitions in Europe: two in Germany and one in the Czech Republic. I've shown at Schmuck [annual contemporary jewelry exhibition, Munich, Germany] a number of times, and of course, that is the greatest jewelry exhibition in the world. It takes place every year.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Exactly. Let us talk about Schmuck, then, and your other European exhibitions, which you had in France and in Portugal and so on. Let's start with Schmuck, since, as you said, it's the most important. When did you first start showing at Schmuck? What did you show? Can you tell me about the process, how to enter Schmuck, a little bit?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, it's changed. Right now you can go online, and you can ask to be part of it. But in years

past, you had to be recommended by someone first. And then after you were recommended, then you could send in slides of the work, and then that would be juried by some group of three jurors, I believe it was, international. And then you were accepted into the show or not. If you were accepted, then the work was shown in March in Munich. Jewelers come from all over the world to that exhibition, and there I met many, many great jewelers.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Of course. Did an artist friend recommend you first? Or you don't remember?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, actually, the first time I was in Schmuck was many years ago, in the early '80s. I had three pieces that, actually, had ostrich eggshell in them, and then I've been in several times since.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Well, you didn't only attend Schmuck, or have work there. Tell me about the prizes you won, please, which are very coveted.

MR. GENTILLE: There are two. One is the Herbert Hofmann Prize—Herbert Hofmann is the man who started the Schmuck exhibitions - and there can be up to three given in a year, but no more than three. And some years none are given. I won one, one year, which was an incredibly great honor.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: About five years ago, was that?

MR. GENTILLE: I think it was a little bit longer [2001]. Maybe six, not much? At the time I was told I was the first American ever to win it. But it ends up that I'm not. There was the couple in Detroit who did the Japanese paper necklaces.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, the Pijanowskis [metalsmiths Eugene and Hiroko Sato Pijanowski].

MR. GENTILLE: The Pijanowskis.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, they won? I didn't know that.

MR. GENTILLE: They won it as a team.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, they did, okay. But you're the first single person to win it.

MR. GENTILLE: The first single person to win it. And then, two years later, I was awarded the Bavarian State Prize.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Which is even one step higher up. Who were the people who won the Hofmann Prize at the same time as you did? Do you remember?

MR. GENTILLE: My good friend Bettina Dittlmann. And, oh, dear, you've got me on a name, now, and it's —

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: We will look it up. Don't worry.

MR. GENTILLE: Thank you. [They laugh.]

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: We'll look it up. And the Bavarian State Prize?

MR. GENTILLE: Cristane Förster..

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, Cristane Förster, yes.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, so the three of us. And a few years later, we had a reunion. We were all there together at the same time, when another Hofmann Prize was awarded. And I must tell you, the Hofmann Prize is the equivalent of the Academy Awards. If you've won the Hofmann Prize, and you're in the audience, and the people whose names are going to be announced - who get it this year, you get as excited for the new people as you were—perhaps more excited for them—than you were when you received it. Because when you receive it, you're numb. You're just kind of numb.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: [Laughs.] You had no idea you would be receiving it?

MR. GENTILLE: Oh, I had no clue whatsoever. I was actually in the gallery. I was not in the place where it was being announced. I had gone back to look at the exhibition because there was nobody there and I wanted to see the show better. I was there, and Pavel Opočenský and then Helen Drutt came running in, saying, what are you doing out here? You've won the Hofmann Prize. So I went into shock and ran out. [Laughs.]

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Very, very deserved. Did you think the Bavarian State Prize and the Hofmann Prize sort of helped your career along in this country, or is that more something—you are certainly incredibly revered in

Germany and in Europe. What bearing does that have in this country?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I think at the time Americans didn't know what those prizes were. So I don't think it had to do very much. But the fact that I was an American who had won a prize in Europe just began to change the way they in America looked at jewelry. So then I was able to talk to them about the way Europeans collected jewelry, as opposed to the way Americans had collected jewelry, which was a very different thing.

Because Americans collected jewelry primarily as something to wear—it was their main motivation—whereas the Europeans collected them as art objects which they also like to wear. But they collected them very specifically and in a very organized manner.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: A different point of view, not just ornament.

MR. GENTILLE: Totally. And now the Americans are beginning to collect more like the Europeans. They saw the value of that, and they are reevaluating their collections now.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes. You also won another prize. You have forgotten you were the "Classic" [*Klassiker*] at Moderna some years ago.

MR. GENTILLE: Oh, yes, I've forgotten about that. Oh, forgive me.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: A very, very important prize. Tell me about that prize a little.

MR. GENTILLE: Well, it's not actually a prize. It's an honor.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: It's an honor, yes.

MR. GENTILLE: It takes place in the middle of the Schmuck exhibition, in which the organization invites a Klassiker, or a Classic person that has been working for most of their life in the field; it's one of the greatest honors you can get in jewelry. They've had some great work there of the different European artists. I was honored by being the first American. So far I've been the only American, and that is quite an honor.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And which provoked—I mean, for one thing, you exhibited how many pieces as classical?

MR. GENTILLE: I think it was 35, 37, something like that.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Thirty-five pieces, which then really provoked the American Craft Museum, at the time, it was—or was it already Museum of Arts and Design?—to bring the entire Schmuck show over to this country for the very first time.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And, of course, we [who were] working there were very honored to have your 30 pieces within that grouping, which was a very, very important occurrence, I think, in this country, to get Schmuck over.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, that was pretty dramatic, actually. I was very lucky to have been the *Klassiker der Modern* that year because that was—my first one-person exhibition in the museum was there because of that.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: In the museum, and I hope that others will follow.

Tell me about the European jewelry community. Are you in regular contact with some of the well-known jewelers in Europe?

MR. GENTILLE: I am, with a number of them. Notably, of course, Bettina Dittlmann and Michael Jank, who is her husband now. And I'm in touch with Peter Skubic, who is, I think, one of the great jewelers in Europe. Peter and I—I'm born in '36; Peter was born in 1935, and we're both born on August 11. We have the exact same birthday, and we both work in very geometric styles. We seem to have a great deal in common with our friendship, although we're very different people.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, but your aesthetics are compatible.

MR. GENTILLE: Very much so.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And I know, also, when Europeans, like Otto Kunzli, when they're coming to New York, you are sort of the host for them. And you're—

MR. GENTILLE: Well, certainly, whenever possible for both of our schedules, we get together. As you know, Otto Kunzli was here when 9/11 happened. And he was stuck in New York because there were no flights out. And you

and your husband very graciously offered to take us out of the city up to Storm King Art Center [Mountainville, NY]. We got out of New York that first weekend, and we all really needed to get out of New York, especially Otto, who was trapped in a foreign country.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, he was traumatized.

MR. GENTILLE: And we spent the day up there. It was really a beautiful day. We had dinner. There were no planes flying, and it was just—

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Art as the healer, yes.

Do you want to add anything else about your European experiences? You also showed in Cagnes-sur-Mer [near Nice, France]; you showed in Lisbon. Tell me about these other exhibitions, please.

MR. GENTILLE: I did. I had a one-man show in Lisbon, and I had a very big two-man show, along with Wally Gilbert, at the Victoria & Albert Museum. They purchased two of my pieces for their permanent collection from that exhibition. The Gulbenkian [Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon], they built an entire new room in the museum for my work.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And what did you show at the Gulbenkian?

MR. GENTILLE: At the Gulbenkian there was everything. There was gold work. There was eggshell. There were all kinds of materials. Tereza Seabra—as you may know, there are a great deal of architects in Portugal. In fact, it's the number one profession, architecture. Practically every third person you meet is a trained architect.

The Gulbenkian Museum is very beautiful. In their permanent wing they have the largest collection of Lalique jewelry in the world. It's done in an Art Nouveau room [now renovated, no longer Art Nouveau], and it's quite a beautiful collection. The Gulbenkian collected direct from Lalique; a majority, if not all, of the pieces were never worn. And they have the ballet there, and the symphony orchestra. There are these big, wide landings in the stairwells, big enough to build a room in. And they built the new room for me there.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: You mentioned gold, but you didn't work in gold then. Some other jewelers did, or you did?

MR. GENTILLE: Actually, the work that was in the show was 24-karat gold, and some of it was over bronze.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, and what forms did you show?

MR. GENTILLE: There was a necklace. There were a pair of earrings. There was a hair comb. There were some hair picks—all things which I no longer do. I only do brooches now, and, very rarely, a necklace. But there was a brooch in that show also that was repoussé. And that was a great learning experience. I exhibited 108 pieces at the Gulbenkian.

Robert Lee Morris was very helpful. He had a big dinner party at his loft downtown, and he had about 15, 20 guests. After dinner, six of us were given "dessert." And dessert was a book, a small paperback book. Inside the paperback book—mine was the SoHo yellow pages - he has us open the books; they were wrapped in paper—and inside the book was a page of 24-karat gold. Six ounces of pure gold.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: My goodness.

MR. GENTILLE: And he had proposed that the six people who were jewelers - the rest of the dinner guests weren't jewelers—that he and the six of us do an exhibition of pure gold jewelry for Artwear. He had his lawyer there. There were contracts passed around, and the whole thing, the intention of it, was described.

The idea was that when the exhibition took place, when we sold the work, the money would go to pay back for the gold, to an entrepreneur who was doing this. Or, if we wanted to keep the work, we would pay for the gold ourselves. So we did the show. There were three months to prepare. I spent the first month exploring 24-karat gold, to see what it would do.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Did it occur to you to inquire about ethical mining at the time? This wasn't acute at all.

MR. GENTILLE: No, that wasn't an issue at the time.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: It wasn't. So you didn't know where the gold came from?

MR. GENTILLE: We had no idea where the gold came from, except for the stars. But I learned a great deal because I found what I would—now, I've talked about the soul of the material before. And I found, kind of, the voice of gold, because one of the things we were not allowed to do was to alloy the gold in any way. It had to be

in its pure form.

So I wanted to find out what gold would do. The first thing I found out was that gold—I'm not quite sure which way to put it—whether gold hates steel, or gold loves steel. Because gold does not like to be worked with steel. Because the steel will deposit on the gold, and if you melt the gold again, the whole surface will be covered with a thin film of steel, which is very difficult to remove. You have to scrape it off, unless you have one of these unbelievably dangerous acids to work with.

So I ended up making all of my own tools, for which I found bone and ivory and wood worked with gold very well. And cardboard, leather. So I did all the work with those, and flame. The first things I did looked Greek, and then, as I got a little more developed, they looked Egyptian.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Greek?

MR. GENTILLE: I'm sorry. I've got them backwards. Egyptian, Greek, and then they looked Roman. So I went through 6,000 years of history in a month. I realized that things looked the way they did because of the way the gold worked.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Interesting.

MR. GENTILLE: And that made me grow tremendously, about how this material worked.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: This is interesting. I wonder whether this is taught that way, that, really, the Egyptian and Greek and Etruscan pieces look the way they look because that's the way they could be worked. And you found this out for yourself.

MR. GENTILLE: It's because of the way the gold told you to work it. So that was very interesting. But the great thing about gold is, you can melt it back to its original form, and then you can roll it out and rework it. So I destroyed all the early pieces because they were experiments, till I knew what I was doing, and then I made the body of work.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: At least you did it voluntarily. Of course, you know, in wartime, for centuries, you had to turn your gold in for war efforts. [Laughs.] At least you did it voluntarily. I just want to come back, and I'm insistent about that: you also showed in Cagnes-sur-Mer.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: That was a group show, more of a group show?

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, actually, Olga Zobel invited me to do that. She does the exhibitions for Cagnes-sur-Mer. It's a beautiful little gallery, which is outside of the museum proper. And there's one gallery in the museum. The show took place within this very wonderful little structure that had been donated by a singer by the name of Suzy Solidor, a famous French chanteuse who became an antiques dealer and had moved to Cagnes-sur-Mer. And she willed the building to the museum.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Hence the name is Solidor [Galerie Municipale Suzy-Solidor, Cagnes-sur-Mer].

MR. GENTILLE: Solid—

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Hence the name is Solidor.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, that's right.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: It's a very beautiful, very important, especially for France, which is not very occupied with contemporary jewelry—not very much involved in that area. And so that was wonderful. How was the reception in France of that exhibition?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I think it was very good. Olga asked me to invite the people. It was the first all-American show there, so I invited Kiff Slemmons and Daniel Jocz and Eva Eisler. I did this because Eva Eisler works with geometric form, primarily, as do I. And Daniel and Kiff work almost the opposite of us.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes. One wouldn't call it narrative, but more in a sort of different—

MR. GENTILLE: Certainly, Kiff's is not narrative, but there are recognizable things in them. And so I felt these two opposites would be very good for the French public, with people coming to see the different approaches that the jewelers took.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: I'm sure it was an eye-opener.

MR. GENTILLE: It was beautifully installed, just beautifully installed. We had, then, one room in the main museum, which has a very ornate, marble inlaid floor. Olga insisted that all the paintings be taken out of the room, so there was just the huge, kind of Baroque fireplace and the floor and one big, square case in the middle, which was really a table covered with glass. And the four of us had our work in that one big room.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Very beautiful. Yes, yes. I think the Europeans in general are not as security-conscious in displaying their work. They are security-conscious enough, but not to the point that it is really detrimental to the work.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, generally speaking.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: It's a different attitude from here.

MR. GENTILLE: Generally speaking, in Europe it's safe to leave jewelry out of the case. People do not pick it up and handle it without permission. They look at the work. In America it has to be kept under glass.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Under lock and key. Now, did the Europeans buy any pieces for their collections? I know you have a piece or two, even, or three, in the Danner-Stiftung [Collection] in Munich.

MR. GENTILLE: Four. [Laughs.] I'm happy to say.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Four, I'm sorry. Yes, now. How did this come about?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, the first two that they purchased, they had seen in my one-man exhibition at Galerie Biro in Munich, and they bought them from the exhibition.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: It was under the directorship, or is still under the directorship, of Dr. Hufnagl, right?

MR. GENTILLE: Yes. And if I may say, the great, grand, and glorious Dr. Florian Hufnagl. He is quite a remarkable person and extremely knowledgeable about jewelry and all related fields.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Incredible eye.

MR. GENTILLE: Incredible eye. Yes, remarkable.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Then you have pieces at the V&A and in Portugal, I think?

MR. GENTILLE: I don't have work, actually, in Portugal. That was kind of an unfortunate set of circumstances, where I left a day earlier than the director, Azeredo Perdigaõ, who was coming around to get the pieces that he wanted. He was very elderly at the time, in his late 90s at the time.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Well, it can still happen. But the V&A, right?

MR. GENTILLE: At the V&A, they bought them from the exhibition.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And of course, there's this very famous and very knowledgeable collector, Dr. [Karl] Bollmann. Could you speak about him a little bit? He saw very early on the great importance and value in your work.

MR. GENTILLE: Well, Dr. Hofmann and his wife Heidi—

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: You mean Bollmann.

MR. GENTILLE: What did I say?

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: You said Dr. Hofmann.

MR. GENTILLE: Oh, yes, like the Hofmann Prize, I guess. [Laughs.] Dr. Bollmann. Well, they both have double letters.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Right.

MR. GENTILLE: It's actually Karl Bollmann; that's his first name. He and his wife have been collecting jewelry for a long time. They have an incredible collection, and they like to follow an artist's career. They like to get an early piece, and they periodically buy a piece from the artist. I don't know how much to say about them. They're just really remarkable. I've been to their house, when they threw a dinner for an artist. They threw a

dinner for me. They've thrown them for many other artists. I've been lucky to have attended some others.

Heidi does all the cooking herself and all the serving. And the table is set up formally with table linens. She's a very great cook. And after a beautiful dinner and the table is cleared, she says, Whose work would you like to see? And they bring that artist's work out, and it's passed around among all the artists and gallery owners and people at the table. You look at it, you talk about it, and then they'll say, Who else would you like to see? And she takes that work away, and she'll bring that person's art. And you ask for the person that you want to see, and out comes the work.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And which pieces of yours does he have?

MR. GENTILLE: I don't know how many pieces of mine they have in their collection. It could be as many as 10. It's quite a few.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Ten pieces. I'm sure he has acrylic.

MR. GENTILLE: They do have eggshell. I don't even know anymore, because what's happened—for the millennium, they went to artists all over the world and commissioned them to make a piece for their millennium collection. There was a contract that you signed. And then what I did is I submitted drawing to them. I told them I couldn't tell them how much the pieces would be until I made the pieces. So I made pieces at three different price levels.

I sent them the pieces, and they took a piece for the collection, of course, as they did from everyone. In fact, I met them - because I had never met them. And they actually came to New York to meet me. That was the reason they came to New York. And when they came to New York, they couldn't find me. I'm listed in the book, the telephone book, but they may not have gone past the one-L Gentiles. I'm in the only two-L family, and there's some names in between.

So I met with them at the Metropolitan Museum, because I knew I'd heard the name, but I had no idea what they wanted. And it dawned on me that I should take some work to show them. I did, and they bought a couple pieces from me there. They gave me the contract, and I didn't even read the contract. I just signed it.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: So the contract was, sort of, a commission. You basically don't work on commission at all, only very few commissions. Was that early during your career, or off and on?

MR. GENTILLE: At the very beginning in New York, and for a while, I did wedding rings for people. They were all one-of-a-kind wedding rings. I would meet with the people and get the feeling of what they were about, as people, and the size of the hand. I would get the measurement that would be the narrowest band they could take and the widest that the hand would work in. And then at the second meeting, I would present them with drawings, and they would choose. Then I would make a model in wax, because they were all cast. And then they would come to approve the wax, and the final would be the ring.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: But basically, you do not like to work on commissions.

MR. GENTILLE: I no longer work on any type of commission at all, including wedding rings.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Not at all. Okay, Yes. Now, I think we should go to the actual work, at least for the rest of this tape.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, the important part. [Laughs.]

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Exactly. What does jewelry mean to you? What are you trying to say with your jewelry?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, it's hard to answer.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Maybe I should put the question differently. Or do you know what I mean? Is jewelry, for you—is it in any way limiting, or can you say everything you want to say as an artist with jewelry?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, jewelry is the form in which I choose to express myself as artist. Maybe that's the best way that I can put it.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Right.

MR. GENTILLE: I do a great deal of watercolors, and I do endless drawings, all related to jewelry, mostly. But for me, I approach jewelry a little bit differently. For me, jewelry is almost a continuation of the painting and sculpture and the printmaking that I do. I think you can express everything in jewelry, and that's what I'm trying to do.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: But, of course, in a very abstract manner. You are not what, supposedly, Americans are famous for: narrative jewelry. You are abstracting your ideas. Is it mostly a formalist idea? Or where are the emotions in the process of making it? Because you certainly are very discreet, and I am told you're opposed to the idea that abstract art has no emotions.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And your work is really abstract. Can you address yourself to this point?

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, this is a very difficult question to answer. It's a difficult question to ask. My work, I wouldn't describe as abstract. I would describe it as nonobjective.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, okay.

MR. GENTILLE: Someone has asked me similar questions about - well, people tell stories. They do this in their jewelry. They do that in their jewelry. And they said, what are you giving people in jewelry? And I said, well, directly I'm giving them nothing. I don't want to give them anything. What I want them to do is take from the work what's there.

So what I'm talking about in my work is materials. Yes, I'm trying to get people to appreciate a different material in jewelry. What I'm trying to do is change the dimensions of jewelry, which I think I did successfully. Many people are now working in the larger scale that I work in. But for a long time, no one was working on that scale.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: True.

MR. GENTILLE: That was one of the things that I discovered in my V&A show, which is very scary, because they have a permanent collection of 6,000 years of jewelry around the walls. And you have to be in the middle and compete with all that, which is a terrifying experience. I found the biggest difference between that work, the 6,000 years of jewelry and mine, was scale. My scale was completely different.

The other thing I'm trying to have people experience is color and the richness of color. And the other thing is geometry, and the other thing is light—how light is absorbed, reflected, refracted, how it moves in and out of the piece. So in other words, what I feel I'm trying to give people is everything. I'm not trying to say, this is a story about a car going down the street. But I'm trying to say, this is a story about color and light and form and material.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Much bigger ideas, Yes.

MR. GENTILLE: So by trying to give them nothing, in one sense, I'm trying to give them everything.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And do you think the brooch format is the best way with which to express these ideas?

MR. GENTILLE: For me it is. I always used to make a bad joke when people said, what kind of jewelry do you make? I always said, I never make jewelry that holds you together. Never a belt buckle that holds your pants up, never a cufflink that holds your shirt together, never a tie stud that holds your tie in place. I'm more interested in the pin, because it doesn't have to do anything; it only has the requirement of not being too heavy, so as not to destroy the background on which it's being worn, and that's about its only restriction as far as I'm concerned.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And it is the idea communicated, to communicate artistic ideas. You're not getting caught with stories, per se, literal stories.

MR. GENTILLE: No, I'm interested in—

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: In artistic concepts?

MR. GENTILLE: In the art of the piece, in the same way that I'm interested in doing a painting or a sculpture.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Speaking about paintings, do you have any favorite painters, or painters you relate to, specifically?

MR. GENTILLE: I have a lot of painters that I really like.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Mention a few.

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I think that probably the first one I'm going to mention is [Piet] Mondrian, because he's

working with geometry. I've been asked this question about Mondrian before, if he's influenced my work. And I would say that he has definitely influenced my work, but I will also say, at the same time, in perhaps not the way that you would think. It's not his geometry that influences me, or his spatial concept that has affected me. It has to do with the energy in his paintings. The juxtaposition in his paintings has influenced me, not the geometry or the color.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Right, Yes. And almost the spiritual in it, which you can see if you, sort of, know where he comes from. And I think there is a certain spirituality and, I think, an equality in proportion and in juxtaposition.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, I would equate the spiritual with the energy, those as almost being the same thing.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes. What American painters do you feel close to?

MR. GENTILLE: American painters? Well, of course, I love [Mark] Rothko, if we can consider him an American painter. I like Ad Reinhardt. I like, of course, Agnes Martin. There're just so many, we could just—and so many Europeans. I mean, I love [Henri] Matisse. And of course, he was the great colorist.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Again, you get the soul out of each painting and whatever's important to you.

Thomas, where do your ideas come for your work?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, this is another question that's hard to answer because I almost have to say that I don't get ideas from anything. At the same time, I get ideas from everything. I mean, I love looking at things in museums, and I love walking the streets. In New York one of the things I enjoy tremendously is when there are two really tall, straight-edged buildings next to each other.

You can observe this walking through Central Park when you are looking at the new Time-Warner Center, and you can see the space between the two buildings. As you walk, you use your eyes almost like a movie camera. And as you're walking, you fix your eyes on that space, and you can see the two buildings coming closer and closer and closer together. And suddenly the buildings lose their importance. What gains the importance is the space between those two buildings. As you move, you can see that space getting smaller and smaller, and you kind of judge the energy of that space that you can see.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Can you relate that to your work, for example, for the composition of one of your works?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I would say that, for example, when I first started doing jewelry and for many, many years when I wanted to do a circle, I would only do the circle by hand. Because I felt the compass was too mechanical. It had no emotion in it. But the hand-drawn circle did. You could fill it out here; you could squeeze it in there, to make it a close-to-perfect circle, but, of course, it was never perfect. But it had great energy to it.

After doing that for many, many years, I understood the energy of a circle. So then I was able to use the compass to draw a circle, because although there are many, many degrees with a compass, I could tell which circumferences had energy and which circumferences didn't have energy.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Even though they were done mechanically, more or less, with a compass.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, I could tell when a circle was the right—because I had done it by hand. And that building analogy is almost the same as the circle. So when I do a circle in my jewelry, or when I do a space—two lines that come together, or a positive space—how wide that line is, that's an experience that comes from looking at those things. It's not an idea about a specific thing, but it's a concept about the world in general, which leads me to the work that I want to do.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Right. Observing more the built world than, say, the emotional aspects of the world.

MR. GENTILLE: No, I would say the only relationship—a lot of people have said to me, do you equate your work with architecture? And I don't. What I equate it with is the same thing that I equate architecture with, geometry. Because the father of architecture is geometry, and the father of my work is geometry as well. So there is a definite relationship between the two.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And if you read about geometry, there is a spiritual aspect to geometry too. So it is not a cold, just mechanical, or only even formalist way of working. It is just your way of expressing yourself.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, and good architecture has to have good energy.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Right. Your work is also very well known for the exquisite and very interesting finishes, to the point that we once thought that we would do an exhibition of showing also the backs of your work. Can you speak a little bit about that?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I've always felt that the back of a work was as important as the front. And I've always tried to make, on almost all of my pieces, something different on the back, because I believe that the person who wears the jewelry should have something just for themselves that nobody else can see. And if they want to show that to a good friend, they can take the pin off and show it to them. But I always do something that's just for that person.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: You know the well-known triangular relationship between the artist, the wearer, and the viewer. Is that important to you? In other words, is it important to you, for one thing, that your work is being worn?

MR. GENTILLE: I like to see my work worn. I enjoy it. But it's not important to me that it is worn. In other words, I leave that up to the person who has the piece whether they wear it or not. I think that most of my work looks better when it's on than when it's off, and that's as it should be. But I also think a good piece of work has to carry itself when it's off the body. So also you have the responsibility of the exhibition of a piece. It must also look good there, for someone who may not be fortunate enough to have someone's work. They can see that.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Right. But since jewelry is the conveyor of messages, and of course, they convey your artistic points of view, is that important to you? That, for example, it is important to you that you're not showing a rabbit, but that you're showing art that you really think has a higher value? Or do you put a value system between nonobjective and figurative?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, it's not that I put a higher level for it. It's just that that's my choice of the way I work. I can appreciate the other—and do very much—other people's work, but that's not the way I do it. I don't choose to express my ideas in that way.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: How do you relate to a person who, one day, wears your brooch and the next day wears some extremely kitschy, narrative thing? Is that something that would disturb you?

MR. GENTILLE: No. My feeling is, I've made the piece, and once the piece is yours, you have ownership.

[End track one.]

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: This is Ursula Ilse-Neuman interviewing Thomas Gentille at his home on East 64th Street in New York on August 5, 2009. I'm conducting this interview for the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution. This is disc number three, part two.

Thomas, last time we left off speaking about your work and we have covered, certainly, a great deal of territory, but I am still curious about the sequence of your work. Did your work change over time, and how so? Were there major shifts in forms or techniques and materials?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, yes. Work does change over time, hopefully, and the idea is to always keep growing. What I've tried to do when I'm working is I've always tried to include something new in every single piece that I've done. It might just be something—a very small jump—but it might be a very great jump, and I think that's how I kept moving forward with ideas.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Do you work in series? Let's say, you start—what was the first major body of work you did, and did you come back to the same material again over the decades?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I kept changing materials. Occasionally, I do a series; like I did a series of bronze pins where there's a circle with a square in the middle.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Do you remember when that was? About 1980s?

MR. GENTILLE: I don't remember the dates of anything.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: 1980s, though.

MR. GENTILLE: It was in the '80s, somewhere along in the '80s. But I had done some pieces before that in acrylic that were a series, but each one is different. It's just there's something in the idea, that there's kind of the format of an idea, and I work with that in the series. More often than not, my series would be in the drawings, where I might do 20 drawings for an idea, and then I may only select one or two of those drawings to do the actual pieces.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes. Also, in terms of geometry, were you always working in a strictly geometric format, or did that evolve over time more distinctly?

MR. GENTILLE: No. In the very, very beginning, I did some things that were almost organic. That was kind of a

short-lived thing, while I was exploring, and then I moved into geometry fairly quickly.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And in terms of colors, they are always very, very subtle. Were they ever stronger? Tell me a little bit about your use of colors, please.

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I think color plays many, many roles. Sometimes I like things to be very, very subtle. There's a Japanese word for it, as I've been told: this is *shibui* [simple, subtle, and unobtrusive beauty]. I mentioned Gordon Washburn before, and Gordon Washburn always referred to my work as being *shibui*. That's from whom I learned the word. I did a series of large acrylic armlets. They were sometimes very intense colors, but there was always a subtle relationship in the intensity of the colors. That's always interested me, that subtlety, whether it's quiet or loud.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Right. And how about technology and the technological advances over the decades? Did that interest you or influence you at all?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, basically, after I had Fred Miller in school, who taught me all the basics really well—Fred was incredible because you either did it right, or you didn't do it—and so I learned those basics really well. But I only had jewelry for a half a day, once a week, for a year. That was just enough time to learn the basics, so I'm basically self-taught after that. And I learned a lot of technique from fellow craftsmen, actually, at Penland and Haystack, and I got a lot of information from Oppi Untracht's book [*Jewelry Concepts and Technology*. London: Hale, 1982] —the first one he did [with the cover] that was black. That was interesting for me because whenever I wanted to do something, to learn a new technique, I would go to his book.

And when he wrote his second book, the really big one—it's got a gray cover [*Jewelry Concepts and Technology.* New York: Doubleday, 1985]—I can't remember the names of any of his books offhand. I had gotten a letter from Oppi to send slides for the new book, and then he wrote me back and said, I can't figure out how some of these things were done. He said, you work in more techniques than anybody that I've ever met, and this one I can't figure out. And I wrote back to him and said, well, it's your fault because every time I wanted another technique, I would go to your book. The one he couldn't figure out was one I invented, and that's done step by step in his book. He asked me if I would do that, along with some other artists who had invented new techniques.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: I see, well, it's certainly an encyclopedia, the Untracht book. And if he is surprised at how you did something, that really—[laughs]—is incredible. You mentioned Oppi Untracht's book. Are there any other publications that you think had a great influence, or furthered your career, so to speak? I don't know, journals here and abroad, or any articles—

MR. GENTILLE: No, nothing really. I mean, I look at everything that I can get my hands onto, but I look at a lot of painting, and architecture and sculpture books, and magazines all the time. But nothing directly, no.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: I remember with great admiration Vanessa Lynn's article on you, which, I think, she wrote about 10 years ago, 15 years ago.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, that was a beautiful article. I think she understood what I was trying to do, perhaps better than anyone. I've had a couple of good ones. Quite a few years before that, there was an article done by a man in Atlanta—I'm sorry, Augusta—no, Asheville. [Laughs.]

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Asheville. Somewhere—

MR. GENTILLE: From Asheville, North Carolina—

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes.

MR. GENTILLE: —who was an art critic. And I had a one-man show, by the way—I didn't mention that—in Asheville, North Carolina, in the early days.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Oh, yes.

MR. GENTILLE: I had about 35 pieces in that show, in the museum. He wrote a review of my work, and it was - for me, it was breathtaking. It was a really wonderful review because he knew nothing about jewelry and he liked the work, so it was very satisfactory.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, from an art point of view. Do you remember his name?

MR. GENTILLE: I have it in my records, but I can't think of it right now [Richard Van Kleek, June 9, 1977].

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: We will look it up, yes. And otherwise, I'm sure you're a reader of *Metalsmith* magazine, or

whatever sorts of publications are out—*American Craft*?

MR. GENTILLE: There were periods when I bought *Metalsmith* magazine from time to time. And I wrote an article for *Metalsmith,* and I asked that I not be paid for doing that. I asked that they give me a two-year subscription, so now I read every issue, yes.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, yes. That was a couple of months ago. Yes, I enjoyed that very much.

MR. GENTILLE: Thank you.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: In terms of—you said you didn't want any money. You wanted a subscription. I was sometimes wondering how difficult it must be for a jeweler who is not teaching and lives, basically, off his work—that must be very difficult.

MR. GENTILLE: It can be a tremendous struggle, but I think anything worthwhile is worth struggling for. And I do things like the magazine—don't pay me, but give me a subscription—which works out very well. [Laughs.]

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Are you trading work with other artists?

MR. GENTILLE: I sometimes do, yes. I have a small collection. I wish that it were much larger, but it's a fairly small collection.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Who do you have in your collection? For example, Peter Skubic, maybe?

MR. GENTILLE: I do have a couple of small Skubics, and I have, oh, just a bunch of people. [Laughs.]

[Cross talk.]

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: —your secret, okay. In terms of organizations, you're not a big joiner, I know. Are you part of SNAG [Society of North American Goldsmiths] or, I don't know, American Craft Council, or World Crafts Council? Any of these organizations?

MR. GENTILLE: No, I've never been a member of any of those organizations. I like what they do, and I respect what they do, and I think they're doing a good job, but early on, when I had absolutely no money at all and couldn't really afford to join anything, I decided that it would not be a good idea to join one organization and not another, because I didn't want people to think that I was being—

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Selective?

MR. GENTILLE: Selective, yes. I guess that's a good word. And so I didn't, but then I kind of got the reputation of being a person who never joined anything, and it is probably true. I just never did.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: You never did, yes. And you don't miss it, but I'm sure they miss you. In terms of your studio, I know that, at the moment, your studio is at home in your apartment. Has your working environment changed, in terms of studio space?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I've always had a studio. In any place that I've ever lived, I've put in a small studio. But the work that I do, very often—and it's one of the reasons you asked about my work changing—is, sometimes, when I have equipment made available to me - for example, at the Center for Creative Studies I had equipment that I had never had. And at Parsons. I had some equipment that I'd never had. I have always changed my work habits into the direction to use the equipment that was made available to me.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: That makes sense. What equipment, for example, did Parsons have that you didn't have before?

MR. GENTILLE: They had electroforming equipment for a short while, and they had some anodizing equipment for a short while, and they had a lathe and some other major equipment that I used.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: What other equipment—what equipment are you not using now? For example, are you a fan of the computer?

MR. GENTILLE: No.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Do you do any designs on the computer?

MR. GENTILLE: No. Hate them, hate them.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: No? I didn't think so. You hate them, yes, quite.

MR. GENTILLE: A little bit emphatic. I think there's some good work being done, and I think—

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: You do appreciate the computer - rapid prototype work?

MR. GENTILLE: I do, but there is a certain look that the computers, at this point, are giving—and I don't like that particular look very much.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, a less tactile look, a more, sort of—

MR. GENTILLE: No, there's something—in earlier times, someone might say of something that they didn't like it because it had a machine aesthetic. I happen to like the machine aesthetic. But there's what I would call the computer aesthetic, and I don't like it very much.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Very slick, smooth, overly finished.

MR. GENTILLE: Well, there's kind of repetitiveness. There's a symmetry involved in it. I mean, there are asymmetrical things, but then they're kind of stepped. I can almost always identify something that's done on the computer. When I can't, by the way, I am then surprised at how much I might like something. Someone will say, that was done on a computer, and then I am surprised.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Now, "happy accidents," which are celebrated in Japan, for example, handmade things is where the accident - really is a happy occurrence.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, I believe in the accident. I think it's really important.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Speak about the accident a little bit, please.

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I think there's accident and there's accident. Artists talk about the happy accident. And no matter what you're doing, you're probably going to make an accident somewhere along the line. The question is—well, let me put it this way: when I first started making jewelry, and I made an accident, I threw out what I did, and I started over. Well, you learn very quickly that you're not going to have any work if you keep doing that.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: That was a mistake, then.

MR. GENTILLE: So you look at the accident, and you think, how do I resolve this piece? And I would say 95 percent of the time the resolution that you come to makes the work a better piece than it would have been had you not had that accident. So accidents are incredibly important in your work.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, for the learning process as well as for the actual look of that actual piece.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, and it can be aesthetically important, but it can also be technically important.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes.

MR. GENTILLE: Everything you know technically may not be able to resolve that problem, so you have to learn some other technique in order to resolve the problem.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: That makes sense. Now, I wonder: correct me if I'm wrong; I think that your work has been more appreciated in Europe than in the United States.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Why do you think that is? Is that a reflection of the status of art jewelry in general, that it might be more developed or more appreciated in Europe than in this country? Do we here still have to catch up, or is your aesthetic more easily understood in Europe?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I think the Europeans—art is kind of a way of life with most European countries, and I think they accept it as part of the norm. And so I think they just see things easier than the Americans do.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And do they regard jewelry, in general, more than an ornament? Do you think they appreciate it more for their artistic values?

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, I mean, in Europe there's no question that jewelry is an art form. It's not even debatable, and actually, the debate is still going on in America. In Europe, they just laugh when they hear that it's still going on. They say, They're still talking about that over there? You know? [Laughs.]

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes. I fully sympathize. But we're getting there in this country.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, I mean, they admire America tremendously, of course.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, yes, and they're getting around to the fact that they really try to understand narrative jewelry, which, of course, is not your thing—but they are trying to, sort of, warm up to it a little bit more.

MR. GENTILLE: They are having a very, very hard time coming to the narrative.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, except for the Dutch. The young Dutch people are now, sort of, into narrative things, very often. Now, I wonder whether we could maybe address why you are a jeweler. You could be a painter. You could be a sculptor. You could be a weaver, a textile artist, or a ceramist—why jewelry? What is so intriguing about jewelry? What is so fascinating for you that you're a jeweler?

MR. GENTILLE: I suppose the all-encompassing thing has to do with scale.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes?

MR. GENTILLE: I like the fact that you can make a big statement, if you want to, in jewelry, and that someone can hold it in their hand, and turn it over and look at it—that they can wear that and have that with them. It tells something about the kind of thing that they like. And yet, the piece informs them.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: You mean, also, proportion, probably. If something is perfectly proportioned, it doesn't matter whether it's large or small?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, proportion is something else, but maybe I'm not explaining it well. They have a piece of art that they can carry with them.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Okay.

MR. GENTILLE: I think, perhaps, that's what it comes down to.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Okay, yes.

MR. GENTILLE: It doesn't have to be on a wall or standing in a garden. They can wear it and take it with them.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: It's the portability and the—basically, that's what makes it precious, in a sense, so that you can take it along.

MR. GENTILLE: And what makes it personal, is the word that I would use.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And personal and intimate, yes. Not precious, intimate, exactly. So you mentioned earlier last week that you liked to see your work worn, which you emphasize now, again. Tell me a little bit more about why jewelry. It's because it can be taken along? It's because it's on the body—is the human body important for you?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, they're complex questions. I think one of the things that I like about making jewelry is that while you're working on a piece, the entire world disappears. The piece of jewelry becomes your world. I suppose that's true when you're writing music, or when you're doing a painting or anything that you're focused on.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Or if you do poetry.

MR. GENTILLE: The poetry, yes. Everything disappears except that thing that you're working on, which is as it should be. But then that thing you're working on—when someone is wearing that piece, they're wearing part of that world that you've seen. And I think one of the things that people like about jewelry is that jewelry is a perfect world contained within itself. The outer world is not a perfect place, and so we like jewelry because it becomes part of a perfect world.

[End disc three.]

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: This is Ursula Neuman disc number four, interviewing Thomas Gentille on August 5, 2009 [New York, NY].

Thomas, we were saying that you see a complete, wonderful world in your piece of jewelry. Could you recollect —[inaudible, cross talk]?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I hope it's a wonderful world. [Laughs.] It's a complete world.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, a complete world, exactly. And the world is not always perfect, you said, so—

MR. GENTILLE: The real world is not always perfect, and I think one of the things that people like about jewelry is when they look at it, they can see a perfect world in that piece of jewelry. I think that's part of its appeal.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Which you want to communicate to the outside world, which is a very beautiful thought. And now that I know this, I'd like to wear your jewelry even more because we do bring the artist's work to the outside by wearing jewelry. Then it makes a difference whether the wearer really relates to your work or not, right?

MR. GENTILLE: I'm sorry, say that again.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: It makes a big difference whether the wearer relates to your work and wears it to the outside world and that it is your work and not somebody else's work.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, I mean, I hope—I would rather they didn't have it if they're not relating to it, because that's part of it. And in fact, I may have mentioned before that often on the back of pieces, I do special things that is only for the person who owns the work.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] For example, did you do this for the [Paul] DeMarco series?

MR. GENTILLE: Oh, the DeMarco series. That was a special series. Pat and Paulie DeMarco, actually—a friend of mine and former student Patty Cain had gone to the DeMarcos to ask them if they would give me a grant for my work. They believed in my work. And so I met with the DeMarcos, and they looked at my work, and they gave me a substantial grant.

Quite a few years had gone by, and I spoke to Paulie about a small loan of $100 for something I needed to get. He said, but you've never paid us back the grant money, which he referred to as a loan. So there had been some misunderstanding that it wasn't a grant; that he had thought it was a loan.

And so the woman who had arranged all of this, Patty Cain, went to the DeMarcos again and said, no, it was supposed to have been a grant. And Paulie said, all things like that are decided by my wife, not by me. So he needed to speak to his wife.

He spoke to his wife, Pat, and Pat understood where the misunderstanding could have been. And she said, no, no, I liked the work very much, so it should be a grant; he need not pay us back. And then Paulie loaned me the $100 for the other materials. So that for me—I have many stories like that about people who've been helpful in my work over the years. The DeMarcos were spectacular in that way. I am forever grateful to them.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Who else comes to mind? I know you had some people who really were—they were very fond of your work. And there was somebody in Switzerland also?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, yes, there've been a lot of people actually, but maybe one that I really should mention was Jack Lenor Larsen, who I had studied with—because I was not a jeweler yet when I was at Haystack learning how to weave with Jack. I had gone to study with Antonia Frasconi, the printmaker, who does incredible woodcuts. And Jack had said that summer when the session was over, if there was ever anything I needed, to let him know. I thought that was a very nice thing, but I didn't think very much about it.

Two years later, when I graduated, it had never dawned on me, frankly, that I didn't have any equipment to make jewelry. By then, I was a jeweler. And so I needed to buy equipment. So I remembered Jack's offer, and I wrote him a letter and asked if he would loan me $100 to get the basic equipment beyond what I had from school—a buffing motor and those things. And by reply, I got a check in the mail for $100 from Jack. No note, nothing about a time limit to pay him back, just a check.

Now, this was 1958, and that was a lot of money in 1958. I found out years later that Jack had done that for many, many, many students over the years that he helped get started in that way.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: That is nice to hear. And Jack, of course, is a huge force in this field. Of course, not only in jewelry but in the American crafts in general. So I'm, in a way, not surprised. He sees talent and supports talent.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, he's been very quiet about it, but he's been very supportive to many people.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Is there anything else you want to mention about yourself or your work? I know that you're writing poetry—very beautiful poetry—and sometimes very long poems. Is there any relationship you can see between your jewelry-making and writing poetry?

MR. GENTILLE: I suppose there's a relationship of everything we do. My poetry—the longest one I've written is 35 pages called "Orphekos Luristes," which is a retelling of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. But they tend to be very visual. My writing is quite visual, almost cinemagraphic—is that the word that I want?

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, or very visual, like the symbolist writers—full of images.

MR. GENTILLE: And although my jewelry is not about images as such, it's still very visual work, I think. So that would be the only relationship that I can think of.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Do you plan on writing more poetry? And maybe we should end with what's in the future for you. What are you working on at the moment?

MR. GENTILLE: Well, writing-wise, I'm doing a bunch of short stories right now. But jewelry-wise—

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Short stories about yourself or about —

MR. GENTILLE: No, all events that happened in my lifetime that I found interesting or fun or amazing or whatever.

The jewelry is ongoing always. I'm constantly working, and I'm constantly drawing. I probably have 6,000 drawings piled up—maybe more.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And they're mostly watercolors?

MR. GENTILLE: No, they can be everything, but they're all drawings for ideas for jewelry. And then I also do watercolors. I'm just working on a whole new series of things right now. I have a one-person show coming up a year from October, and I've begun preparing for that already.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: And that will be in this country?

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, it will be in this country.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Can you tell us where, or would you rather not talk about it yet?

MR. GENTILLE: No, it's scheduled for Gallery Loupe [Montclair, NJ].

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Gallery Loupe, the new gallery; very active; very, very dedicated. I'm glad you're there.

MR. GENTILLE: A new gallery, and a woman by the name of Patty Bleicher [co-owner, with Eileen David, of Gallery Loupe], who has just started a few years ago but is incredibly interested in jewelry and seems like a very positive person. She's great to work with, so I'm looking forward to the show.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Yes, and does wonderful shows. I saw some—both for students and for very accomplished artists like you. She is really dedicated to the field.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, she's moved into a new space from her original space, and it's quite a beautiful space, so I'm quite looking forward to it.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Right. Well, Thomas, I think we covered a great deal of territory. It was a true pleasure. I learned a lot. And I thank you.

MR. GENTILLE: Thank you.

[End track one.]

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: This is a postscript. August 5 [2009, New York, NY]; Ursula Ilse-Neuman interviewing Thomas Gentile.

MR. GENTILLE: Yes, one of the things I wanted to mention when you asked me about tools and equipment and grants: there was a woman by the name of Brenda Meredith that I met in North Carolina at Penland. She and I became friends. She lived in Pennsylvania, and she would occasionally come into New York and visit with me at my studio, and then she would go on to Julliard [Julliard School, New York, NY] to hear the concerts that the students were performing.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Did you accompany her to the concerts?

MR. GENTILLE: No, I never went to the concerts with her. She never invited me to come to the concerts. I think that was something for her that was—music was very personal, and she really wanted to attend these things by herself. I admire that kind of independence.

But she would visit with me for maybe two or three hours before she would go to the concerts. Sometimes we'd have dinner first. But anyhow, I had the desire to work in gold again.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: When was that about?

MR. GENTILLE: This would have been in the ’70s. And for a very long time, I wanted to work with gold, and I didn’t have the money to do it. Gold, of course, was still $35 an ounce. So you could get quite a bit of gold for the amount then, and now you can’t even blink at the word.

But anyhow, Brenda loaned me—or, rather, gave me as a gift - the money to buy—I can’t remember what it was now. I think, like, $200 worth of gold. And then I kept thinking about the gold and thinking about the gold and thinking about the gold. And I ended up not buying gold. I ended up buying a drill press. It’s called a Dumore drill press. It’s kind of the Rolls Royce of machines. It’s just gorgeous. They still make them, but I have one of the original models.

And the vast amount of my work that I’ve done after that has been done using that Dumore drill press. It looks brand new. I’ve taken very good care of it.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: So it was worth it in gold. [Laughs.]

MR. GENTILLE: It was worth its weight in gold, literally. Later on, I told Brenda what I had done. At first, she was quite disappointed because she had given it to me for the gold. But after I had discussed it with her for a while and told her what my motivation was, she applauded the idea.

And I’ve always been very grateful to Brenda. She’s surely deceased now. She was quite elderly at the time, and it’s been a long time. But I think of her very often. And often when I finish a piece of work, I have to thank Brenda for allowing me to get that piece of equipment.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: What a wonderful story. Well, thanks, I’m glad you mentioned this.

MR. GENTILLE: Well, I should also tell you that she purchased a gold pin from me that was about four inches square. It was a technique that I invented. It was quite flat, but it was, like, four squares and a circle making a square, if you will. And it was all done with wire waxes; it was cast. And to attach the wire wax to the base plate, I came in from the back with a heated needle. So when you turn the piece over, you see hundreds of dots making a pattern. You can’t see any of the connections on the front. That was cast in 18-karat gold.

Brenda bought that, but she was a modest woman, and none of her family knew that it was gold. The entire family thought it was brass. And she never, ever told anyone it was gold, because it was so large. When they would ask, they would say, is it made of brass? And she would always answer yes, because for her, the precious part of that thing belonged to her. And that was part of my philosophy of making things. She was quite a wonderful person.

MS. ILSE-NEUMAN: Again, you mentioned earlier that the backs are very personal for the people who wear your jewelry. And that was a very, very special back, it seems, and basically, what should have been a reverse of a piece, I think. I certainly would have tried to wear it on both sides, I’m sure.

Well, that was a wonderful story. Thanks so much, and we certainly will add this.

MR. GENTILLE: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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