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Oral history interview with Michael W. Monroe, 2018 January 22-March 1

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Michael Monroe on January 22 and March 1, 2018. The interview took place at the home of Michael Monroe in Bellevue, WA, and was conducted by Lloyd Herman for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Michael Monroe and Lloyd Herman have reviewed this transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

LLOYD HERMAN: This is Lloyd Herman interviewing Michael Monroe at his home in Bellevue, Washington, on January 22, 2018 [for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution].

Michael, would you tell us when and where you were born and your parents' names?

MICHAEL MONROE: My name is Michael Wesley Monroe, and I was born in Racine, Wisconsin, on the shores of Lake Michigan, on February 12, 1940. My father's name was Wesley Robson Monroe, and my mother's name was Margaret Petersen Monroe. I was one of five children growing up in the Midwest.

LLOYD HERMAN: Were your siblings older or younger, and male or female?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, as I said, I'm one of five children. So I have an older brother born in 1936; myself, male, in 1940; and then a child in 1944, a brother; 1948, a sister; and 1952, another brother. So there were five of us, each spaced out exactly four years apart.

LLOYD HERMAN: Well, I'm interested in your childhood and particularly what home life was like with your siblings. Did you have chores or participate—you were in the city. You weren't on a farm or—

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, I actually grew up probably five miles west of Racine, Wisconsin. At that time, it was a semirural area. There were farm fields all around, cornfields and so forth, so it wasn't truly rural, but it was before the age of suburbs. Those terms didn't exist at that time. So we had access to Racine, which was a city at that time of around 40,000 people, 85 miles north of Chicago and 25 miles south of Milwaukee. [00:02:00]

And growing up as a child, we had a wonderful family life. My parents were quite extraordinary people. They were very open, very progressive attitudes, and they wanted each child to do what they felt they wanted to do. We had no expectations to be doctors, lawyers, et cetera, but rather to find out what made each one of us tick, and then see what they could do, with their very modest means, to expose us to those interests that we had early on. And that becomes, really, the basis for my growing up. Because I was one of the elders, I took care of my younger brothers and sister. So we were a very close, tight-knit family.

LLOYD HERMAN: Did you have household chores when you were a child?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, I was extraordinary at [laughs] organizing and cleaning up and making order out of chaos. And as you can imagine, living in a family of seven people, there was a lot of chaos. So there was quite a range in age. But one of the things that I did really excel in is doing dishes, organizing, and rearranging things. I began at a very early age rearranging furniture in the house [laughs] as an interest in art, design, et cetera.

LLOYD HERMAN: Did you have a garden or any animals?

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes, we had, of course, the family dog, but we only had one of those. And my brothers and sister had—my one brother had about 120 guinea pigs [laughs]—sorry. There were gerbils and turtles with painted initials on them. And a variety of pets, so that was—but we were surrounded by a lot of farm animals in the neighborhood. [00:04:04]

LLOYD HERMAN: But you didn't have farm animals yourself?

MICHAEL MONROE: No, no, no.

LLOYD HERMAN: Or a garden that you had to hoe or pick or—

MICHAEL MONROE: No, no, no. [Laughs.]

LLOYD HERMAN: Yes. Well, getting on to school—well, first of all, I don't think I asked you about your parents' occupations.

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, my father was actually a construction worker, and he later became a production coordinator for the construction company. And he worked on buildings that Frank Lloyd Wright designed, throughout the Midwest. The company he worked for was Nelson & Company, and that company was made up of a lot of Danish people. Racine, Wisconsin, at the time was the highest concentration of Danish people living outside of Denmark, in America. So this construction company that my father worked at hired mostly Danish people, because they had the technical and craftsman skills to execute the buildings that Frank Lloyd Wright designed all throughout Wisconsin.

My dad would go on weekends to inspect what was being done, so I would travel with him. So I, as a child, would run around in many of the famous landmark buildings. And Racine, Wisconsin, where I was born, is the home of Johnson Wax Company, who was a great patron of Frank Lloyd Wright building, not only Wingspread, but building the Johnson Wax buildings and towers that are so famous, the administrative offices. So as a child, I was exposed very early to forward-thinking, progressive design, and I would ride my tricycles throughout the concrete hallways of some of these buildings [laughs] before they were open. [00:05:54]

And my mother was a homemaker with five children. It was an era when there was nothing wrong with being a homemaker, and she was very Danish, very exacting, very perfectionist-driven, but she had a great sense of humor. Both my parents did. They were really extraordinary people and supportive not only of my family, but of taking in lots of people from World War II who were exiting Europe and coming to America. They would help all these immigrant groups come to learn how to become citizens and so forth. So I witnessed a lot of them helping other people, and that leads me on through my life of mentoring and giving to artists, which we'll get into later.

LLOYD HERMAN: Do you remember how Danish culture was part of your childhood and your siblings'?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, at holiday times, we—first of all, my Danish heritage is three-quarters. I'm three-quarters Danish, one-eighth English, and one-eighth Scottish. And the Monroe name carries through that wing, but I'm primarily Danish, and all the things that we did as children tended to favor the Danish side of life. So we would celebrate the little Christmas Eve, which was December 23rd, as well as December 24th, the big Christmas Eve. And there were lots of Danish flags around the house, a sense of design consciousness. So that was very influential.

And plus, on almost every other street corner in Racine there was a Danish bakery, with the most incredible Danish pastries. So I thought every town in America, really, was going to have all these bakeries [laughs], and eventually I leave to the greater, outer world and discover that, no, there aren't these bakeries around. So there were shops and so forth in the town where I was exposed to Danish design at a very early age. [00:08:17]

LLOYD HERMAN: Was Danish spoken on the streets, with such a large Danish immigrant population?

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes, with the older people, there was, and when you would go in the shops, you would hear a lot of Danish. I didn't learn a whole lot. But my grandparents, of course, spoke both English and Danish, but Danish much better. So when they wanted to talk about us as children, they used Danish.

LLOYD HERMAN: Where were your grandparents then? Did they live in Racine as well?

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes, they did.

LLOYD HERMAN: Oh, they did.

MICHAEL MONROE: My grandfather was a blacksmith in Denmark, and his mother wanted him to be a blacksmith, because she said, "There will always be horses, and you can shoe horses." But he later, when he immigrates to America, does a lot more work with forging tools and so forth for different companies that were in Racine. So I had an early exposure to flame and fire, heat and iron.

LLOYD HERMAN: Were both of your parents, then, born in this country of immigrant parents? Were they—

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes, my mother was born in this country of immigrant parents. She's one of five children, and all five were born in America, beginning in the late 1800s and 19—

LLOYD HERMAN: So you had quite a large family of cousins as well as uncles and aunts. All in America?

MICHAEL MONROE: Right. My mother was one of five children herself, so they all settled in Racine, Wisconsin. It was a very large clan of Danish people. So you would hear the names of Christiansen, Larsen, Jensen. It was very rare to find other names [laughs] of different groups.

LLOYD HERMAN: In school, were you—with so many other children of Danish parents, was Danish taught? Or were there—do you remember any learning problems that immigrant children might have had, or how they were good at particular things maybe because of their heritage? [00:10:22]

MICHAEL MONROE: Not really. I think that it was a very different time, a much more harmonious time, I thought. There was—I didn't notice, myself, differences, although there were. I remember going to school with Armenian children and being fascinated by their traditions and so forth, and some of the other groups. German is also prevalent in Wisconsin, more so in Milwaukee, and Polish in Milwaukee. So they did not have—they weren't teaching Danish at all at that time. That wasn't as popular as it is now, to learn a second language.

LLOYD HERMAN: So everyone was really pretty well assimilated in your generation.

MICHAEL MONROE: I would say so, yes. There was a very small black population in our town. And Latino was a little more prevalent, because Wisconsin, being an agricultural state—I was exposed to more Latino students. But it didn't seem at all—we weren't cognizant of the differences to the point where it would have caused any kind of prejudices.

LLOYD HERMAN: Yes. Did you move much as a child, or were you pretty much in the same place your entire childhood?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, probably moving three times between the ages of birth and 1952. So from 1940 to '52, moving four times, all within one mile of each other, three homes. And then, in 1952, we moved to the big city of Racine, which for a child growing up in a more rural area— [00:12:08]

LLOYD HERMAN: But you were in high school by that time.

MICHAEL MONROE: I started junior high school in—

LLOYD HERMAN: Junior high. Yes.

MICHAEL MONROE: —when we moved in—and we moved to a Victorian house on the shores of Lake Michigan in the city of Racine—from 1952 until, of course, I leave home after college. So I went to junior high school and senior high school in the Racine Unified School District.

LLOYD HERMAN: Were you active in school life, in clubs or sports? What were your kind of extracurricular activities?

MICHAEL MONROE: I would say they were all art.

LLOYD HERMAN: All art? Yes.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes. I took to art at a very early age, and all through elementary school I was the one that did the posters, decorated the homeroom doors, decorated and made the Valentines box in school where each child drops in a valentine. I did the displays and so forth. So my talent really emerged, and I think teachers recognized it and—

LLOYD HERMAN: At about what age?

MICHAEL MONROE: Oh, I would say seven, eight, nine. In elementary school, I was really very taken with art.

LLOYD HERMAN: Were you a social person? Was it a large school or a small school? What would social activities be? Would you participate in sports?

MICHAEL MONROE: In junior high school, I was in [the] after-school art club. Sports, not particularly, although I would play tennis occasionally throughout junior and senior high school. I never cared for group sports, but rather those that were individual sports. And ice skating, of course, was a big thing in Wisconsin and so forth. But I wasn't much of a joiner. I was much more of a loner and kind of lost in my world of making things. [00:14:12]

LLOYD HERMAN: Did you have close friends who shared your interests?

MICHAEL MONROE: I had a few close friends, but I was pretty much kind of a loner. And, really, I always had projects to do and so forth.

LLOYD HERMAN: As you progressed through high school—particularly since you were then in the city of Racine—how did your interests develop? And how were your particular art interests—how was that rewarded?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, I should step back to 1946, when I'm six years old, and my parents took me to the only art museum in town, that had just opened in [1941 –MM]. So in 1946, my older brother is 10 years old, and my mother takes us to a Saturday art class. And at that time, they didn't allow children at age six to be in an art classroom. [Laughs.] Unusual for the—compared to today.

So I had to sit out in the hall while my brother was in the class, and my mother was sitting with me. And the director walked by and said to my mother, "Well, what is he doing sitting here? How come he's not in the class?" And my mother said, "Well, he's not old enough yet," and the director said, "Nonsense." So he brought me in, sat me [at] an easel, and I painted a picture—which I still have today—and at that moment I knew what I was going to do with the rest of my life, and I never wavered from that.

LLOYD HERMAN: At age six?

MICHAEL MONROE: At age six I just—so my parents recognized that and made sure I went there. And I had a 30-year relationship with that museum, taking classes from age six—

LLOYD HERMAN: This was which museum? [00:15:56]

MICHAEL MONROE: The Charles A. Wustum Museum in Racine, Wisconsin, founded in [1941 –MM]. And it still exists today. It's a part of a different organization, the Racine Art Museum, which also administrates the Charles A. Wustum Museum. So I took every class there, from age six through at least age 18, and worked in the gardens on the estate of the museum, and was mentored by the director and his wife, who made the entire difference in my life.

LLOYD HERMAN: And who were they?

MICHAEL MONROE: The first director of that museum was Sylvester Jerry, and his wife was Cherry Barr Jerry. That was her name.

LLOYD HERMAN: How do you spell that last name?

MICHAEL MONROE: J-E-R-R-Y.

LLOYD HERMAN: Oh, Jerry. Yes.

MICHAEL MONROE: They took an interest in me, in mentoring me, for the next 25, 30 years. And they were my second family. I spent enormous amounts of time and took classes in drawing, painting, jewelry—copper enameling, as it was called then—lapidary, polishing stones, and mosaic, ceramics. So by the time I'm 18 years old, I've taken almost every medium, except glassblowing, of course, which doesn't emerge until the late 1960s in America, as we know it today.

LLOYD HERMAN: What do you think you were best at, of those different materials? What were you drawn to, if there was a favorite?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, I was drawn really—I started more in drawing and painting, and it was really watercolor painting that really attracted me. But all of my work in 2-D had a very strong design sense to it, in terms of composition and so forth. And even though I took a lot of classes in crafts, materials, I enjoyed them, clay especially. But I don't really start serious clay classes and other forms of craft until I go to the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee for further education. [00:18:14]

LLOYD HERMAN: Before the university, in high school, then, were you—you said you were more of a loner than a joiner. Were there social clubs or craft- or art-related clubs that you participated in?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, there was an after-school art club, which I joined, and then I was the designer for the class yearbook for three years, 1956, '57, and '58. So that's where I started to really become interested in graphic design, the layout of the pages and so forth.

But when I was in my senior year of high school—there is the National Scholastic Art Competition [Scholastic Art & Writing Awards], which has been going on for numerous years. And at that time, each senior who wants to submit a portfolio of their work for a national competition, and eventually a scholarship, you could apply. So I applied with a portfolio of 16 works, and the first stop for those portfolios was within each state of the union. So each state in the union would send all of their works to a central city in that state, and it was juried. The highest award you can get is a gold key, and I won 12 gold keys out of 16 in my portfolio.

So I won the state competition for that art, and then it was sent to New York for the national. So that would have been 50 portfolios coming from 50 different artists, 50 different states, all coming together in New York City, and they would pick five scholarship winners. And I won one of those scholarships, to a school of my choice.

[00:20:04]

But I never thought I would win, so I was very casual and nonchalant about what school I put down. I put down schools I knew hardly anything about, [laughs] and two of them were in Chicago, because Chicago was 80 miles south of me. So it was the Art Institute of Chicago and the American Academy of Art in Chicago, both, at age 18, I knew very little about. So I won a competition for a scholarship, a full scholarship for one year [1958 to '59, at the American Academy of Art in Chicago –MM].

LLOYD HERMAN: This was right after high school, then.

MICHAEL MONROE: Right after high school. That was my first year after that, and it was a school that was really preparing people for the advertising world. It was very academic and very design conscious. And I didn't really like having art classes all day, although you would think I would. I realized that, in the long run, I needed to have intellectual education and stimulation, so at that time I transfer to the University of Wisconsin in Racine, Wisconsin. They have a two-year college there. And then, after that, I moved to the University of Wisconsin branch in Milwaukee. And of course, the main campus is in Madison, Wisconsin, and then the only other large one was in Milwaukee. Then sprinkled around all the state were smaller two-year institutions that fed students to the larger institutions in Madison, in Milwaukee.

So in Milwaukee, I start my form of college education, which goes on for about six years, when most students do it in four. I just kept taking classes in all the craft media, because I just enjoyed being a student, and that certainly was the era, in the late '60s.

LLOYD HERMAN: What was your work like in that winning portfolio? Was it watercolors, or drawings, or—

MICHAEL MONROE: It was watercolor. It was poster design. It was some very simple printmaking techniques. It was drawing. The idea was that you would try to present yourself in a well-rounded way. There was a Christmas card I designed that was printed in high school, and that was part of it. So it ranged from mostly two-dimensional arts, from graphic design, printmaking, painting, and drawing. [00:22:27]

LLOYD HERMAN: Was that where you thought your career would be headed, or where your academic work in the art schools after high school would go?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well—

LLOYD HERMAN: You weren't thinking three-dimensional art at that point.

MICHAEL MONROE: No, I was really much more involved in two-dimensional art, but design was always an interest of mine, especially interior design. As a young child, 12 and 13 years of age, I would go to this furniture store in Racine, Wisconsin. That was a phenomenal store, and it was mostly Danish design. And I would, as a 12-year-old, wander through the store. And only now do I sort of wonder what the clerks thought [laughs]: a 12-year-old boy was spending two and three hours looking at all these pieces of furniture. But it was really—it was the design.

So I'm conscious of design qualities, three-dimensionality versus two-dimensionality in the fine arts, and blending it with the strong sense of design, which, of course, comes from the Scandinavians. So I'm not really locked into any one development of any one of these to the point of super-mastery. I had the great experience of working in every medium, so that would eventually pay off years later in my curatorial work, that I've actually done the things that I'm looking at.

So I took a degree in education at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, because the theory at that time was, well, you know, you might starve to death as an artist, [laughs] but you can always be a teacher. So I followed that model, which was very prevalent at the time, because there were teaching jobs, certainly. [00:24:14]

LLOYD HERMAN: Going back to that furniture store experience, I'm thinking that that must have been only around 1950, or even a little earlier than that.

MICHAEL MONROE: It would have been—my first exposure comes in about 1950, '52, '53.

LLOYD HERMAN: I was just thinking about the advent of Danish Modern as a real taste and movement in the United States, and that must have just about coincided with it.

MICHAEL MONROE: Absolutely. And not only furniture, but they had, you know, cookware, candelabras, some amount of clothing. So it wasn't just the furniture. It was the whole gestalt of the design coming from Scandinavia, and I really related to that in a design sense.

LLOYD HERMAN: Were you aware of particular designers' names at that point, like Hans Wegner—

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes.

LLOYD HERMAN: W-E-G-N-E-R.

MICHAEL MONROE: Oh, yes. Thank you. [Laughs.] Finn Juhl.

LLOYD HERMAN: Georg Jensen.

MICHAEL MONROE: Oh, Georg Jensen, yes. Well, of course.

LLOYD HERMAN: J-E-N-S-E-N.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes. Oh, yes, be careful.

LLOYD HERMAN: Very Danish.

[They laugh.]

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes, so that was a really powerful influence on me, and I carry that through to this very day. I like to think it traces through my Danish heritage. And when I gave a lecture tour when I was [with] the Smithsonian, of Denmark, I was even more reinforced by what I saw there. And I saw the people there, and they all looked—

LLOYD HERMAN: You've been to—have you been to Denmark?

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes, I have. I did the Smithsonian tour—but when I saw all the people there and saw all the design—and the people all looked like the relatives I grew up with. [They laugh.] And the design was, of course, phenomenal. And when I got to the airport to come home to America, I said to myself, Why am I leaving? [Laughs.] [00:26:07]

Anyway, so the university years were very busy, practice-teaching. And I won some scholarships at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee.

LLOYD HERMAN: How much practice-teaching was there? And particularly, I guess, how—were you kind of self-directed to be a teacher, or were you still considering that you could be a practicing artist?

MICHAEL MONROE: I really thought that the teaching was for me, because in my family—I saw my family giving constantly and helping other people, and I sort of adapted that kind of attitude, and I wanted to share what I had to do. The teaching experiences that I had as a student at Milwaukee were quite interesting, and the first one as a practice teacher almost ended my career in teaching.

In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, very close to the campus is a very, very poor part of the city, and there were urban development housing projects for African Americans. In one of the buildings, the high-rise apartment buildings, in the basement they had an art program, an after-school art program for the African American children. So I would go there four times a week to teach these kids after school, and it was an amazing wake-up experience [laughs] for me, because I was used to the classical role model for a teacher to stand up in front of a group of kids and give directions, and they would all sit and listen and smile and then go to work. And that would be—you know, and you would guide them. [00:27:50]

That did not work, because when I came to the school, the kids were bouncing off the wall, running around, throwing things, and so forth. And I tried my traditional teaching methodology that I was taught, of setting them all down to listen and so forth, but that wasn't going to work. So for the first month I thought, I'm not going to be a teacher. I can't do it. And then, suddenly, something clicked into me. I got there ahead of the kids one day, and I just sat at a table with this art material around. And I just started making something, and I never said a word. And the kids all came in, and they saw me sitting there doing it, and they said, "That's cool! That's great!" And they all sat down and worked in total silence.

LLOYD HERMAN: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL MONROE: And here, all this teaching education [laughs], and then in that situation—that taught me a huge amount about life and about how to get people's attention and so forth. So then I stuck with teaching, and, of course, there was the junior high teaching component part of that. And then there was a senior high component part of that practice-teaching in Milwaukee.

So Milwaukee becomes a very important part of my life, and, of course, the Milwaukee Art Museum, right on

Lake Michigan, is an anchor for me, to go and see that. So museums become a very important part of my life very early on with their educational aspect, whether it be through classes or the actual collections and so forth.

LLOYD HERMAN: Do you remember—first of all, as a teacher, do you remember teachers that you had that were particularly important to your education and your artistic development?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, my junior high school teacher was very important to me, and she exposed me to a lot of things beyond my narrow world of the Racine, Wisconsin, area. And so, likewise, my high school teacher. [00:30:11]

But my primary teachers were Mr. Jerry and Mrs. Jerry at the museum. They were the huge influence on me, and I would—they had all the books right in their living quarters, where I would visit often, art books and constant exposure. That was the first time I really heard in my life classical music. This couple, Mr. and Mrs. Jerry, had WFMT radio station, a classical music station out of Chicago, with Studs Terkel. He's a great interviewer. But this is where I first heard classical music, and it made a huge impact on me.

LLOYD HERMAN: Did you not have music in your home growing up? Radio or—

MICHAEL MONROE: We had music. We had—but it wasn't—it was more popular music, not classical music and so forth.

LLOYD HERMAN: I think about fads in high school, whether it's music or dancing or movies. Were there any of those things that you remember were particularly important to you?

MICHAEL MONROE: In junior high school, we saw one movie, a Salvador Dali movie, a Surreal movie that—I don't remember the title today, but I would like to see it again. But it was an extraordinarily powerful movie. It was a very surreal black-and-white film, and it really—I've thought about that movie today and how important that Surrealism, the subconsciousness and so forth, became a part of visual memory that I have.

LLOYD HERMAN: What about museum exhibitions? Were there any that stick out in your mind—particularly since you've moved into Milwaukee, but even at the Wustum Museum—anything you remember that stood out? [00:32:09]

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, as a 16-year-old, I started to work at the museum for the city of Racine. The city of Racine managed and provided the funds for this museum, so at age 16 my first job was working at the museum. So I was exposed to maybe 10 exhibitions a year, primarily all in two-dimensional areas. So that was really the primary. And occasional trips to Chicago, school trips, where we would go to the Art Institute and so forth.

I remember being very impressed with just about everything I saw, but particularly a set of tiny little miniature rooms in the Art Institute called the Thorne rooms, T-H-O-R-N-E rooms. I had just been exposed to the work of Joseph Cornell doing his boxes, and then we went to the Chicago Art Institute, and I saw these Thorne rooms, which, of course, aren't quite Joseph Cornell, but the extraordinary craftsmanship and the absolute perfection and reduction of scale of every piece of furniture and tapestries in these rooms was quite an extraordinary thing.

So, early trips outside of Racine, meaning Chicago and Milwaukee, were extraordinarily impressive to me. Because at that time, travel wasn't easy, even though these distances are not long. So the school trips exposed me to a larger world, which becomes very important to me as a child, to realize I don't have to spend my whole life in Racine, Wisconsin. Pushing out like that is something that I encourage deeply in children, to know that there's a larger world and then a larger one. And the art school trips really did that for me, to see that there was a larger world. [00:34:07]

LLOYD HERMAN: Did your family make trips together? Were there things that you did as a family that you remember?

MICHAEL MONROE: Our family trips were more based on the world of nature, hiking and so forth. Because of having five children, there were so many diverse interests of each child, but we did go to a World's Fair in Chicago that I remember. I don't remember going much with family to museums, but they took me, as I said, to the Charles Wustum Museum. Because I didn't drive at the time, they took me to classes, and that's really when my major—

LLOYD HERMAN: World's Fair in Chicago? I can't think of what year that could have been.

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, there was one—not a World's Fair. What was in 1952? [1950 Chicago Fair –MM]

LLOYD HERMAN: Because there was one in the '30s, but you weren't born yet. [Laughs.]

MICHAEL MONROE: No. No. Yes, there was one in the '30s. I'm thinking there was a big one in Chicago. Maybe it

was a Midwest one, 1952-ish, somewhere in there, around that time period.

LLOYD HERMAN: Yes. So, in Chicago, did you live in a dorm? Or what was that—

MICHAEL MONROE: No, I commuted.

LLOYD HERMAN: Pardon?

MICHAEL MONROE: I commuted [170 miles round trip –MM].

LLOYD HERMAN: Oh, you did? Oh, my gosh.

MICHAEL MONROE: There was a train that went from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to Chicago. It was called the North Shore Train. It was a commuter train, and many people commuted at that time. So I, at age 18, started to commute. And I did that for one year. So I did not live in Chicago, but spent a lot of time at the Art Institute.

LLOYD HERMAN: As a result of that and not having kind of a communal life at the college, did you make friends with other students or—

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, there were some actual students from my hometown. There were three of us from that area; there was a couple that I still keep in contact with today. But I was only there one year and left, because I wanted broader educational experience, and a university would allow that to me. [00:36:08]

LLOYD HERMAN: How do you think that year—because that was a year away from home—influenced you and your choices?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, what happened after that year—during that year, I had always thought maybe that I wanted to go into the advertising world. That had a great mystique to me. So after that year in Chicago and before I went off to the university—I had an uncle who ran a successful advertising agency in Chicago. And he said, "Why don't you come and work for me while you're waiting for the university to start up?" So I did that, and I worked at that for a year.

That was an eye-opening experience for me, and a very good one for me to have at that age, because Madison Avenue was dominant in the advertising world, and I was going to be an illustrator and so forth. And then I worked for him for a year and saw what that life was really like, and how cutthroat it was, and how competitive and how short-lived jobs were. If you lost the account, if you lost the John Deere lawnmower account, everybody was gone. So I was exposed to all of these different types of people.

One of the things I had to do was write copy for ads. I also did some of that, and that was probably the best thing I learned, was how to write a really complicated thing and condense it down into a paragraph that would catch somebody's eye. And particularly when you're writing a wall text for an exhibition [laughs], you need to write 250 words and capture it. So that was a great learning experience, very eye-opening. But I saw how shallow that world was, and that propelled me even more to get an academic education through college. [00:38:02]

LLOYD HERMAN: So what caused you to choose going to the University of Wisconsin then, after that?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, it was, primarily, close by. And financial reasons, because the tuition was almost nonexistent. So even though it was only 25 miles away, I went there, and I lived on the campus there.

LLOYD HERMAN: Oh, you did live on campus.

MICHAEL MONROE: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And for the first two years, I went to the University of Wisconsin in Racine, as I said, the two-year college. And they didn't have—they had only one course in art, so I had to take all academics the first two years. At the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, now, I could take straight two years of art, so I took every course possible and stayed longer.

LLOYD HERMAN: So you got all those required subjects out of the way [laughs] while you were still in Racine.

MICHAEL MONROE: Right, only because I—

LLOYD HERMAN: Like a junior college, it would be, as we think of them.

MICHAEL MONROE: Right. So when I graduate from the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, it's 1967, in January. And I wanted to become a teacher. So I went back to my hometown, and because it was January, there were no teaching positions open. So I did substitute teaching.

LLOYD HERMAN: But had you had coursework that prepared you as a teacher?

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes. My education, my undergraduate education, is a B.S. in art education, a bachelor's of science in education, art. So because it was the middle of the year, I became a substitute teacher, and I moved throughout the system of the schools that I taught at. So for instance, I was a substitute teacher at my high school, the junior high school where I went, and suddenly I learned for the first time in my life how to walk into a room full of total strangers and people, and take command of the situation, which was an enormous challenge, especially with junior high school students. [00:40:09]

LLOYD HERMAN: Oh, boy.

MICHAEL MONROE: It was a different class every day, so sometimes I was teaching auto mechanics one day, which I was totally inept at. But anyway, what happened is, I got experiences throughout junior and senior high school teaching in all these different areas within a short period of time. And what I remember most was that every 45 minutes a bell rang, and children changed classes. And I was teaching with some of the people that taught me. They were still there.

And suddenly, I realized that it was like Pavlov's dog. Every 45 minutes, a bell would ring, and a whole new group of people would come in at you, and you would be teaching art, and the bell would ring. And I started thinking, I can't do this the rest of my life. Because I saw my teachers doing that, and I saw the summation of their life. And I said, I can't have Pavlov's dog, a bell ringing, and my performing—because teaching is performing, in terms of—you're selling a product. I'm sorry to say it so crassly, but you're convincing people to do something that they may not want to do and so forth. So it taught me a lot about public speaking eventually, and how to grasp that right away.

That's when I decide to go on to Cranbrook Academy of Art, because I then wanted to teach college without the Pavlov's dogs so prevalent. Yes. [Laughs.]

LLOYD HERMAN: Did you make friends among other artists in these various situations from, say, high school on? Were you part of a community of artists other than teachers and, of course, the ad agency people, in somewhat different disciplines? [00:42:06]

MICHAEL MONROE: I was never really much of a joiner of organizations, but certainly in public school teaching you have meetings where you gather and so forth and develop friendships. But I only practice-taught for about a year and a half before I go off to graduate school. And graduate school is really where I developed some close personal relationships that then carry me through, that are still very valid and I'm in touch with today.

LLOYD HERMAN: Well, that partly answers the question I was about to ask, and that's about your relationship with other artists. Did you have friends who were artists during that time that you were practice-teaching or going to college and—

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes. Yes.

[Audio break.]

LLOYD HERMAN: So the next stage is entering Cranbrook, which I think must have been a very difficult school to get in, wasn't it? I think of it mostly as a graduate school. Is there an undergraduate program?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, when I apply in 1967, they did have an undergraduate program—but, of course, that didn't apply to me because I already had an undergraduate degree—and a graduate department. So the graduate school was better-known and had more students in it than the undergraduate program. Cranbrook is a very unstructured school, so it wasn't really ideal for undergraduate students who need more structure. It was perfect for—

LLOYD HERMAN: Now, just to clarify, Cranbrook Academy of Art is in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.

MICHAEL MONROE: Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.

LLOYD HERMAN: And it's had a very illustrious faculty. [00:44:02]

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes.

LLOYD HERMAN: Who was teaching when you first began there?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, there was Robert Verizer, who was in the design department.

LLOYD HERMAN: Can you spell that last name?

MICHAEL MONROE: V-E-R-I-Z-E-R. Robert Kidd, K-I-D-D, was in textiles. Let's see. George Ortman was a painter. He was in charge of the painters. They had one faculty member for each of the divisions of teaching. So it was painting, sculpture, architecture, printmaking, jewelry, weaving, ceramics, design. That was about it.

LLOYD HERMAN: Ortman is O-R-T-M-A—

MICHAEL MONROE: Oh, George Ortman, O-R-T-M-A-N, a well-known American painter.

LLOYD HERMAN: Who were some of the others that you remember teaching there then?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, Robert Kidd taught in textiles.

LLOYD HERMAN: Yes, you mentioned him.

MICHAEL MONROE: Julius Schmidt—J-U-L-I-U-S Schmidt, S-C-H-M-I-D-T—he was quite a well-known Midwest sculptor, working mostly in bronze casting. Let's see—

LLOYD HERMAN: I was trying to think of some of the original faculty. Was Toshiko Takaezu teaching there yet?

MICHAEL MONROE: No.

LLOYD HERMAN: No? She had been a student there, I think, but—

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes, that's true. Richard DeVore was a well-known name in that era with the ceramics, so he was there at the time.

LLOYD HERMAN: D-E-V-O-R-E.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes, Richard DeVore. Let's see.

LLOYD HERMAN: You had not had military experience, Michael? [00:46:00]

MICHAEL MONROE: No.

LLOYD HERMAN: No, you didn't.

MICHAEL MONROE: I did not have military experience.

LLOYD HERMAN: So you were able to go right through college and not interrupt it for that.

MICHAEL MONROE: Right. Right. I was drafted, but was rejected for a medical problem, so I was able to—and this, of course, was all during those critical Vietnam years when they were drafting people.

LLOYD HERMAN: Yes. How many years were you at Cranbrook? And isn't that where you met your now-wife, Bernadette?

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes, I was at Cranbrook a year and a half, although the school has a two-year program. I was excused early to take advantage of an opportunity to become a director at a university art gallery, and the faculty at Cranbrook felt that—they all voted that I would be able to not complete the full residence requirement for two years, but that I could continue my work and come back at the appropriate time and present my graduate show, my thesis, and so forth.

But Cranbrook is quite an extraordinary place, as you mentioned. It's a great design school, architecture, the weaving. It was a place where all of those arts were integrated into one kind of learning experience.

LLOYD HERMAN: Did you need to choose a major in one discipline, or did you—

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes. Yes, you did, and I chose design because that seemed to be the broadest, and it allowed me to be connected closely with the museum on campus, where I did a major exhibition for them. So that helped me with my curatorial experience, doing an exhibition, which received quite good attention from the *Detroit Free Press*. So then I designed graphics and posters and exhibition designs—theoretical ones, of course, except for the one that I did. [00:48:02]

LLOYD HERMAN: And what was that one that you did?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, it was just at the very beginnings of consciousness in America about recycling. So I did an exhibition called *Whatever Happened To?* I went all over Detroit and gathered junk: store mannequins, tires from automobiles, all sorts of things that were being thrown away and not recycled. And I made a huge

assemblage in the gallery, and some of these pieces were hanging from ceilings. There were mazes where people had to walk through automobile tires.

Then I photographed all of the factories in Detroit that were producing these things. And those slides, 35-millimeter slides, were inserted into projectors. And then, from the ceiling, all over the gallery, were projected these images of factories. And the reality of the three-dimensional objects was real, so the imaging came across the room hitting all of the objects that they had thrown away.

So there was this—the room was very dark, so you sort of wandered through this continually changing kaleidoscope of images, of factories churning out things, and then the no-longer-used products that were real, three-dimensional, hanging from the ceiling. And it was quite a powerful impact. There were probably 10 to 12 projectors going at all times, so it was—you never really knew where you were. You were totally immersed in the exhibition, because the images from the slides would also go across your body. So you were meshed with all of these thrown-away tires and refrigerators and stop signs and so forth. [00:50:06]

LLOYD HERMAN: And this was at Cranbrook.

MICHAEL MONROE: This was at Cranbrook, yes, and the *Detroit Free Press* wrote a big article about it. So that really was a lift for me from a curatorial point of view, and again, I go back to my childhood of organizing disparate parts and bringing everything together. Growing up in a large family, with a lot of chaos, I had to protect myself by organizing thoughts and ideas. I see this as kind of a reoccurring theme.

LLOYD HERMAN: Were there other exhibitions at Cranbrook that you recall that you had organized that—

MICHAEL MONROE: No, I just did the one.

LLOYD HERMAN: You just did that one.

MICHAEL MONROE: Because I was only there a year and a half, so it happened very quickly. But Cranbrook is an amazing place. The graduate school is limited to about 100 students, carefully chosen, so you get to know each other very intimately—

LLOYD HERMAN: How?

MICHAEL MONROE: Because it's an isolated campus on an extraordinary 250-acre piece of property with rolling hills. And everybody who later meets each other in life and you find out that you went to Cranbrook, you automatically hug the other person and squeeze them, because of the unique tightness and bonds that you develop with people there.

LLOYD HERMAN: And who were some of the others that were there when you were, if any notables?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, Steve Frykholm was in the design department.

LLOYD HERMAN: What's the last name?

MICHAEL MONROE: F-R-Y-K-H-O-L-M. He was a close friend of mine and still is. He was in the design department, and he has gone on to become the graphic designer for Herman Miller furniture, and was in charge of all their graphics from about 1974 till today, and has quite a career in the design field through Herman Miller. He's still very actively working today. [00:52:12]

Let's see. Jon Eric Riis—R-I-I-S—a remarkable textile artist who was in the textile-weaving department. Arturo Sandoval—S-A-N-D-O-V-A-L—was a textile artist working at the time. Gretchen Bellinger, who went on to form her own commercial textile business in Connecticut, very much like Jack Lenor Larsen, teaching there. Let's see, who else—

LLOYD HERMAN: Bellinger. Is that B-E, or—

MICHAEL MONROE: B-E-L-L-I-N-G-E-R. Let's see, what's—let's see.

LLOYD HERMAN: And, as if on cue—

MICHAEL MONROE: Oh, yes. [They laugh.] And that's where I met my wife Bernadette Monroe. She grew up, actually, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, just 25 miles away from my house. She was very involved in art throughout her life, but our paths never crossed, even though we went to the University of Wisconsin nearly at the same time. But it wasn't until Cranbrook that we meet there, and she comes as a first-year student when I'm beginning my second year teaching. So [laughs] we meet and then fall in love and marry—

LLOYD HERMAN: While you were students at Cranbrook?

MICHAEL MONROE: No, no, after I left there.

So, I was there just the year and a half and then took this job—my first professional paying job in the art museum world—at the State University of New York in Oneonta, New York. [00:54:10]

LLOYD HERMAN: What year would that be?

MICHAEL MONROE: That would have been 1970, the fall of 1970. The State University of New York has many campuses across the state of New York, and some of them are graduate, and some are undergraduate. The smaller ones sprinkled throughout the state were undergraduate schools, and the one that I was hired to teach at, and be primarily the gallery director, was located in Oneonta, New York. State University of New York, Oneonta: O-N-E-O-N-T-A.

So my wife and I moved there in 1970, and my primary job was to direct the gallery, which I did. However, I wanted to know who my audience was—the students—so I offered to teach one class in design, in addition to my gallery duties, as a way to learn who my audience was. Because here I was going to be doing exhibitions for them. And I learned who they were. Sixty percent of them were students who were coming from Long Island and had never had much opportunity to go into New York City to see work, because at that time the parents were terrified to have their kids go into New York City. So, oftentimes, I would take them on trips to expose them to art in New York City.

LLOYD HERMAN: How far from Oneonta is New York City?

MICHAEL MONROE: Four hours. It's a four-hour trip by bus.

LLOYD HERMAN: Four hours?

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes. As a young person growing up in Wisconsin, I always felt inferior to New York City because that's where the art world was. Everything was there. So in growing up, I paid a lot of attention. I knew what was going on in New York in the exhibits and so forth. [00:56:03]

So here I am, a child from the Midwest—rural, growing up—coming to teach in upstate New York, teaching students who all grew up in the shadows of New York. So on the field trips, when I would go there with them, I had to introduce them to the subway [laughs], to the Met, and to the different museums, so it was a kind of ironic experience. So I taught there for three and a half years, and, of course, directed the fine arts gallery there.

LLOYD HERMAN: Was that a satisfying experience, teaching and directing, or did you get—

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes. I only did it for one year because I just needed that one-year shot, but it's a big job to both—I'm sorry.

[Audio break.]

LLOYD HERMAN: Okay.

MICHAEL MONROE: So that's—I only taught the one class, just so I could learn who these people were. And that was my audience, and then I went on to teach. And a lot of the people that I gave one-person shows to during that three and a half years were people I met at Cranbrook, so—

LLOYD HERMAN: People you met where?

MICHAEL MONROE: At Cranbrook.

LLOYD HERMAN: Oh, at Cranbrook.

MICHAEL MONROE: So that was my immediate contact there. And of course, being there, now I'm closer to New York City, and start to learn more of the artists in upstate New York and so forth.

LLOYD HERMAN: With your affinity for New York City, and the art scene there particularly, did you imagine you would eventually end up there? Or how did you see your future developing after you and Bernadette were married? And where did you see all of this going?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, I really knew that museums—because I went there when I was six years old—had been a reoccurring theme throughout my whole life, so when I began teaching and began directing the gallery there, I knew it was curatorial work in exhibitions that I wanted to do the rest of my life. But always in the back of my

mind I had thought, Oh, I would like to run my own art gallery. But that doesn't emerge into reality until much later in my life. [00:58:15]

The exhibition that brought me the most attention, nationally, was an exhibition that I did at the State University of New York, Oneonta, at the fine arts gallery. And that was—I had dreamed and had kept lists of all of the very best artists in the United States working in craft media, the top people in the field, which I had been exposed to through *Craft Horizons* magazine throughout the years from high school. My high school classroom had *Craft Horizons* magazine in it, which was extraordinary in a rural area. All of my exposure to craft media and the leading people in the field came through that high school experience.

LLOYD HERMAN: Okay.

[Audio break.]

We were talking about your job in Oneonta at the—and taking field trips to New York. Can you see at that point that your interest in art, or craft, became more focused on a particular medium or style?

MICHAEL MONROE: Not particularly a media specialty. I really—in looking at craft, the first thing I looked for was the vision that an artist had: What were they saying that was new that hadn't been said before in their work? And then to secondarily analyze, What materials did they use to help support that vision? So throughout my whole career, it's always been the vision first, and then looking at, Oh, why did they use metal to get that particular effect? And so forth. [01:00:09]

So that was always important to me, and it is to this very day, is that if you don't have anything to say, it doesn't matter how technically gifted you are. So that's been something that I looked for. I'm much more cognizant of it now, but at the time I didn't really care what material it is. What had to grab me first was the vision, and then let's find out how that did. So I was really enamored of all the craft media, so that I did not have one specific area.

LLOYD HERMAN: Well, that was going to be my question, whether or not you—having experienced, as a maker, working in these different materials—whether you had gravitated to one more than others.

MICHAEL MONROE: No. I liked clay because it was not very resistant. Metal was frustrating to me, because it was a very resistant material. It fought you all the way. So I found that certain artists are attracted to certain materials to work with because of the qualities of those materials. Some people like resistance, like forging iron. You have to like that kind of heat-resistant—blowing the glass. And there are those people who are tactile, working with textiles. So I think these responses that people have to a material very much fit their personalities in some way.

LLOYD HERMAN: Well, I was thinking of whether or not you really responded to representational work as opposed to form, thinking about potters at that time, not so many ceramic sculptors, but people who were doing thrown vessels primarily.

MICHAEL MONROE: [01:02:00] Well, I think that's a fair assumption. The word "form" is a really good one, and now that I—

[END OF MONROE18_1OF2_SD_TRACK02.]

MICHAEL MONROE: —think about it, the exhibition that I organized at the State University of New York in Oneonta was called *Forms*—F-O-R-M-S—*Invitational*. And this was the exhibition that I searched through all of the copies of *Crafts Horizons*, and I picked out the top person in each field and wanted to do an exhibition of their work in Oneonta. While I knew these people were quite well known already—they were starting their ascent into really high-profile, well-known artists. And I said, you know, These people will never want to send some piece of their work to this little upstate town in New York.

So I wrote them all a letter, and I included a list of the other artists who received the invitation. So when they looked at the list, they all said yes [laughs], because they could see the company that they were in. They were in with their peers, et cetera, so that was kind of a wise, sly device to get what I wanted. On the other hand, everybody said yes, so it was going to be a jam-packed show. But people like Robert Arneson, David Gilhooly, William Harper, Albert Paley, Wendell Castle, Françoise Grossen, Claire Zeisler. These were all the works that I had admired up to that—

LLOYD HERMAN: We'll have to go through and spell those names when we get the transcript.

MICHAEL MONROE: Oh, okay. [They laugh.]

So, lo and behold, they all said yes, so we had this rather extraordinary exhibition.

LLOYD HERMAN: Was there a catalogue published?

MICHAEL MONROE: No, there wasn't. The university at that time didn't have the resources for a catalogue. I wish now it had. All that remains is a list of the names of the people. And I did a lot of installation photographs of it, so I have that on record. And at the time, *Craft Horizons* magazine had learned about the exhibition, and came up to upstate New York to review it and to write an article about it. [00:02:09]

LLOYD HERMAN: What year was this?

MICHAEL MONROE: This is probably 1972. So now Lloyd Herman—the founding director of the Smithsonian American Art [Museum]'s Renwick Gallery—has founded the museum, and they are in the stages of renovating it. And he picks up the *Craft Horizons* magazine.

LLOYD HERMAN: That was that exhibition? [Laughs.]

MICHAEL MONROE: And that was that exhibition. And he was looking for a curator. They already had a curator at the Renwick Gallery, but that person was short-term, and Lloyd was looking for somebody. And he saw this review, and he sought me out. So with that, I—at first when he called me, I was very dubious and wasn't sure if this was legitimate, because at that time the Renwick Gallery in DC had not opened yet. It was not officially yet a part of the Smithsonian family.

LLOYD HERMAN: Really? Not in '72?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, now, you opened on January 28th of 1972, so I hadn't heard of the Renwick Gallery.

LLOYD HERMAN: No, no, of course not.

MICHAEL MONROE: You see, so it had just opened, so therefore they knew, when I had our first meeting at the Rhinebeck, New York, Craftsmith Fair [Rhinebeck Crafts Festival]—

LLOYD HERMAN: The American Craft Council's fair. Yes.

MICHAEL MONROE: —in Rhinebeck, New York, in probably 1972.

LLOYD HERMAN: It must have—well, I thought maybe that was '73, Michael, because—

MICHAEL MONROE: It might have been '73, yes, because I come in—you're right. It is 1973. We meet for a get-together, because Rhinebeck is upstate New York; Oneonta is upstate New York; we're going to be there. So we meet each other there and just have a preliminary, get-to-know-each-other kind of experience. [00:04:07]

LLOYD HERMAN: Yes. Before we go on to that fateful meeting—

[They laugh.]

MICHAEL MONROE: Because this is a very critical moment in my life. Perhaps the biggest one is that exhibition that I did.

LLOYD HERMAN: Well, yes, just backtracking for a minute, that very ambitious exhibition that you did that was in *Craft Horizons*—did you have to work within a budget when you were at Oneonta?

MICHAEL MONROE: Oh, yes. Yes, but I asked all the artists to pay for the shipping. This was in a different time in —

LLOYD HERMAN: Because that sounds like a very expensive show if you were to do it today.

MICHAEL MONROE: [Laughs.] Well, all of the artists were so keen on being a part of it that they supported the cost of the shipping both ways. Very different—a very different era in American—

LLOYD HERMAN: Well, and you had had experience with budgeting and all of that, which was certainly something that I remember never really having to do at the Renwick, remarkably. [They laugh.]

Anyway, yes, I do remember writing to you, because in the photograph in *Craft Horizons* it just seemed like an extraordinary installation. I think you had mannequins hanging at angles in space.

MICHAEL MONROE: Oh, in that one. Oh, yes. Okay, that was another show.

LLOYD HERMAN: Oh, it was? Okay.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes, that wasn't that show, but we had another one. Yes.

LLOYD HERMAN: Oh, well, that's the one that I think I responded to and wrote about. And your response to that—I think maybe I asked if there was a catalogue, and you wrote back and said no, there wasn't, but you enclosed a poster that you had also designed—

MICHAEL MONROE: Oh, yes.

LLOYD HERMAN: —and in your letter said, "By the way, do you have any openings?"

MICHAEL MONROE: I did? [They laugh.] How conveniently I forgot. [00:05:57]

LLOYD HERMAN: It was funny, because Arthur Feldman was the person that we had first chosen as associate curator. My title was director, although it was a curatorial position within what was then called the National Collection of Fine Arts, now the Smithsonian American Art Museum. So it was kind of odd even to have the title "director," but because we were a separate building and perceived as a separate program, I was actually curator, and your—the job we were filling first with Arthur was as associate curator. And he was really a decorative arts historian, and I realized—as did my boss, Joshua Taylor, the director of the art museum—that he really didn't know the contemporary field at all, and that we weren't really doing history shows. Those were more likely to be done in another Smithsonian museum, so he—I think we mutually agreed that it was not a good fit, and that's when we were looking for a replacement and how I happened [laughs] on you.

So, Michael, when you got to the Renwick, this—of course, you had worked for government in the State University of New York system. Did you find this an entirely [different] kind of life than you had had before, work life?

MICHAEL MONROE: Oh, well, it was very, very structured. It took—I suddenly realized, working for the largest complex of museums in the United States, that things would have to be much more prepared ahead of time. It would have to require a much longer lead time for doing exhibitions. That was something that was new to me and required a meshing of planning and chronology of the birth of an exhibition within a very formal, established system that the Smithsonian has. And that was very frustrating to me at first, but gradually I realized that [laughs] you're just one person in a wheel, and that is a much more inclusive gathering of talents to bring about exhibitions and so forth. [00:08:35]

Prior to that, I simply came up with ideas for exhibitions and did them, but this required many steps of approvals and so forth, and certainly much more research than I had done in the past, et cetera. But it was certainly one of the most fantastic experiences in my life, to suddenly go to Washington, D.C., and to have the resources that the Smithsonian had for finding artists, publishing catalogues, and really going deeper into curatorial work and involvement that was much more satisfying, because the resources were there to help bring the reality of what you were thinking into being.

LLOYD HERMAN: What was the first exhibition that you organized for the Renwick?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, the first exhibition was called *The Goldsmith*. This exhibition was a result of the Society of North American Goldsmiths, an organization in the United States that promoted metalsmithing, in both techniques and exhibits. It was a national organization, and they had a conference in Minneapolis-St. Paul where they were going to meet and have a lot of their work on view. So I went there to that conference and was exposed to all the artists in the United States in one place that were experts in their field of jewelry. [00:10:22]

And out of that evolved *The Goldsmith* exhibition, which was a showing at the Renwick Gallery of the members of the Society of North American Goldsmiths. And that was the first exhibition—

LLOYD HERMAN: Didn't the Renwick share that, though? I remember the director of what became the, maybe, Minnesota Museum of Art in St. Paul, but it was the St. Paul Art Gallery or something first. Malcolm Lein—L-E-I-N—was its director, and it seemed to be that the Renwick had shared that show with them in some way.

MICHAEL MONROE: It had shared the show with them. We shared it, so that was my first, as I say, traveling exhibition. So we had to add certain pieces to it, but the core of it was Malcolm Lein.

So that was the show that—I didn't originate it, but I curated it from what they had. And then we added other pieces, brought it to the Renwick, but I do not recall if it toured after the Renwick. I believe not. I think it was a one-time exhibition.

LLOYD HERMAN: But I remember that exhibition primarily at the Renwick because you designed the entire installation, which was quite magnificent. And I don't remember whether there were any budget limitations. I think that we must have had cases built, probably, within the Smithsonian, because we did have the possibility

within our parent art museum for construction of things. Do you recall? [00:12:04]

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, I designed it in a way where we would not have to have pedestals built, because I knew that would be way too much money to have all these individual pedestals. Plus, a Plexiglas bonnet vitrine on top of each of these would have been enormous, because that was a large exhibition. So I designed a system of walls that could be built [from] sheetrock, which was very inexpensive, and then between the walls would be areas where the pieces of jewelry would be shown on very simple but elegantly covered shelves, and then a four-by-eight sheet of Plexiglas would cover the whole wall, showing the jewelry behind it.

So there was no elaborate fabrication required, so it was a very inexpensive but effective way. And that was interesting because I turned out all the lights in the gallery, except for the interior lights of the exhibition cases. And within two weeks after the exhibit was up, people were bumping into the walls because their eyes couldn't adjust from the bright light of an exhibition case until they got to the next case. So the Smithsonian security division, which oversaw all of our exhibits, required me to put more light in, which I did. But it was, yes, a very dramatic exhibition.

LLOYD HERMAN: Were there other challenges [laughs] to either the design or the exhibitions that you chose that you recall?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, I think there were so many—it was quickly that I realized that you're working within a very large organization. For instance, the disability, ADA rules came in while I was there, meaning that had a huge effect on the design of exhibitions, the amount of space you had to leave for wheelchairs, label heights had to be—and so forth. But I tried never to let that become confining or restricting in terms of my curating of the idea and the pieces that we could accommodate. [00:14:24]

So that became a very essential part of thinking ahead of time of how you were going to mesh not only your artistic curatorial idea, but with what was possible within the structures and the framework, which was frustrating at times but certainly ones that we—you know, that we would deal with that—you might not find those rules at smaller museums.

LLOYD HERMAN: Well, I guess that really kind of leads into finding what was challenging, and working in this very different environment. Washington, D.C., is a tiny little part of the major Smithsonian museum complex, which continued to grow even after that time you had come to work there.

MICHAEL MONROE: Right. Well, one of the interesting parts about the Renwick was that, because we were a curatorial department of a larger museum, all of the support help for the museum was located across town. So for instance, when we were doing exhibitions, everything had to be super organized in terms of the building of things and the presentation, because all of the materials and everything was done off-site and brought on-site. So you had very little chance for alteration on-site because the materials and the equipment weren't there. So it just required a great deal more exacting kind of attitude about putting shows up. But it didn't, certainly, limit any idea that we ever had. It was just more complex planning. [00:16:03]

LLOYD HERMAN: Quite apart from the exhibitions that you personally curated, you designed installations for a number of shows, too, as I recall, didn't you?

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes. Some, I was a pure designer, and some, I was acting in both worlds. At that time, that was—the Renwick was kind of a microscopic version of some of the larger museums. And it gives us more flexibility, but frustrating at times.

LLOYD HERMAN: Yes. Well, I shouldn't be interjecting myself into this [laughs], but I remember that when we first opened the Renwick Gallery in January '72, we did not collect. And it was a conscious choice, because what is now the National Museum of American History collected ceramics and glass and textiles.

MICHAEL MONROE: Right.

LLOYD HERMAN: And the art museum that we worked for had a very small collection of oddities, some European crafts that had been somehow brought [laughs] in and accepted for the collection and others that were part of a USIA exhibition program that was also run from within our parent art museum.

So we had this sort of oddball group of things, but we had a few American pieces, and this is what led to the Featured Object. Do you want to talk a little about the Featured Object? Because that's an idea that you used after you came out to Bellevue.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes. Well, when guests entered the foyer of the Renwick Gallery, it was quite a magnificent experience for them to be surrounded by the sort of small capsule of opulence—it was quite beautiful—reflecting the Victorian era. So we had the issue of: How can we quickly make people realize that our mission was the

same as, but very different than, the building they were standing in? [00:18:17]

So we placed a very contemporary craft object in the foyer, that people almost saw immediately, that explained who this artist was and their technique, a small label, and accompanied it as an indicator of a transition—a segue, if you will—into what they were going to experience once they were in the building. And so as the museum started to collect—really under your guidance, in the very early days of the collection—we would place those objects out in front in the foyer as a way to sort of ground people that, What's this funny Victorian building, and what is this odd, very contemporary-looking piece of work doing here? And it eventually became a rotating space for objects over a number of years, and it's an idea that I took elsewhere in my career.

LLOYD HERMAN: The idea, I think, first came about because my first boss at the Smithsonian, Frank Taylor, was an advocate of helping small museums develop, and one of the things that he often would tell them about was what he called the single-object exhibition, in which you could take, say, a porcelain teapot from China and talk about everything from how the pot was made, what porcelain was, tea ceremony, any of those things. And we had these rather disparate objects. I think that we started out by simply trying to broaden what we were showing in temporary exhibits upstairs, another aspect, but then actually started to collect. [00:20:02]

And I'll interject here, too, that the reason that the Renwick eventually started to collect was that after we opened and began showing exhibitions—I remember particularly an exhibition of the potter Maria Martinez from San Ildefonso—I-L-D-E-F-O-N-S-O—Pueblo—that people started offering us examples of her work. And our boss, Dr. Joshua Taylor—I didn't have to go through any committees or review panels. I would go in to Dr. Taylor and say, "They want to give us this," and he said, "Oh, that's great. Let's do it." And we would accept an object or objects into the collection with that rather [laughs] casual way of doing things, without any committees or even a collections policy to guide us.

As the program developed and after *The Goldsmith* show, you began to originate exhibitions really from scratch, unlike *The Goldsmith* show. What were some of those that you remember particularly and fondly, or not? [Laughs.]

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, one that was—I dealt with the notion of what artists were doing in their work that carried the subject matter of the animal, the animal image. And that was quite an extraordinary show. I searched the country for people who were using the animal image as a major portion of their work, and in all media, from textiles, fabric, costume, to wood, to jewelry and ceramics, the full gamut of the craft media. And that was particularly an enjoyable show to do. [00:22:01]

LLOYD HERMAN: And you both selected and designed the installation—

MICHAEL MONROE: That's right.

LLOYD HERMAN: —as you did, I think, most of the exhibitions at the Renwick after you arrived.

MICHAEL MONROE: There's one that I really want to just say something about, and that was—my, really, first assignment under you, Lloyd, at the Renwick Gallery was to handle the Albert Paley gates, the portal gates that Albert Paley won a commission for as a proposed design for the Renwick Gallery museum shop. Lloyd Herman came up with the idea, and artists submitted drawings, and Albert Paley was selected.

Now, Albert Paley, of course, at the time was known as an extraordinary jeweler, but had just started to explore the possibilities of ironworking. So he was shifting into larger-scale ironwork, and he was selected to do this commission of gates. And those gates are being produced in Rochester, New York, long before I arrive at the Smithsonian. But when I arrive, Lloyd said, "I want you to handle Albert Paley and these gates and the installation and simply make it happen." So that was very exciting because, as it turns out, the portal gates by Albert Paley that the Renwick owns are among—perhaps one of the most extraordinary pieces of iron and metalworking perhaps in the world in the 20th century. They stand testimony to extraordinary talent that was really just emerging.

So I would call Albert every couple of weeks and say, "When are the gates coming? My boss is concerned and wanting to know." [Laughs.] And he would say, "Well," and then I would say to him, "Well, how much do they weight?" Because my job was to install them. And he would tell me they were 2,500 pounds. So then I would wait a couple of weeks and call back and say, "Albert, tell me, how much do they weigh now?" And the weight of them kept going up and up, and I didn't know what kind of hinge we would use to hold those gates into the archway that they were designed for. [00:24:29]

But ironically, in the end, we found that aluminum was the answer, the strength of aluminum. It was extraordinary to find that. So the aluminum hinges are what held the gate in place, which is so antithetical to the heaviness of the gates. [Laughs.] That was quite a story, and that was a really exciting beginning to my career, to have had that experience of working with Albert and putting those gates up. And they really are among the

proud achievements, really, of Lloyd, the visionary, to see the use for that, starting a competition and helping a young artist.

LLOYD HERMAN: It was really important to his career, because that was the first of his major commissions that led to not only many other gates but full, huge sculptures.

But, you know, the gates that we had when the museum opened in '72 were elevator grilles designed by Louis Sullivan.

MICHAEL MONROE: Sure.

LLOYD HERMAN: And when the new director of the American Art Museum came in—because these were on loan from their collections—he liked them and said he wanted them back at the entrance of their museum shop. And that's when we had to do something to secure the museum shop and came up with the idea that—this was not long after a pivotal workshop in Illinois. I'm going to say Northern Illinois University—no, Southern Illinois University—[00:26:06]

MICHAEL MONROE: Southern, at Carbondale.

LLOYD HERMAN: —at Carbondale.

MICHAEL MONROE: Right.

LLOYD HERMAN: And Albert Paley and several others who had attended that workshop and were just beginning to delve into forged steel were asked to submit designs. It was a very limited invitational competition, and Paley submitted a very detailed rendering of what the gates would look like. And they look virtually exactly like that rendering, but that got him the job.

So it was a learning experience for us, having never commissioned an artist to do something. What I remember, Michael, about the installation that you were faced with is that they were—I didn't remember about the hinges, but the fact was the gates were way too heavy for the framework, and they had to brace within the walls of the building to support the weight of the gates. But they were certainly an important, pivotal thing for the Renwick and for Paley.

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, the aluminum hinges was a connector between the gate and that interior structure.

LLOYD HERMAN: Oh, that framework.

MICHAEL MONROE: That was redone on the wall, so it wasn't just going into sheetrock. It was going into another piece of heavy iron. Another important lesson that I learned at the Renwick that I had no preparation for, which has served me extremely well the rest of my life [laughs], is an interview I did with the *Washington Post* during the time that Albert Paley's gates were being installed.

So the reporter came to talk to me about the gates, and we had a long, wonderful conversation. And she asked me, "Michael, how much did these gates cost?" And I told her. I said, "$2,500." And this was the reporter Sarah Booth Conroy, a longtime employee, reporter of the *Washington Post* who really covered architecture and design and craft for the *Washington Post* and was an integral, really, part of covering our exhibitions over the years. [00:28:19]

So after that interview, the next day, the photograph comes out of the gates, and the headline of the article was "Smithsonian Institution Pays $2,500 for a Pair of Gates." Now, this is 1974, and I was mortified. It was very difficult for me, because I was innocent, and I thought she was going to write about the art. [Laughs.] So out comes the story, and it taught me immediately volumes about how to be interviewed by newspapers and how to be very careful, how to be structured and so forth. And that was another learning experience.

And I'll be forever grateful for Lloyd Herman giving me the opportunity to step into this incredible world in Washington, D.C., and a new institution being formed, coming in to offer a great contribution to the Smithsonian's representation of craft as a single entity unto itself. And that really changed an enormous amount. Certainly, we had the Museum of Contemporary Crafts [now Museum of Arts and Design] in New York and so forth, but for Washington, D.C., the nation's capital, to have this material represented really did start an exposure to what artists were doing in a very different way.

LLOYD HERMAN: How do you—looking back, because you were a father of a young son at the point—I remember when I interviewed you at the Rhinebeck Craft Fair that you had your son, then known as Matthew, in a stroller. [00:30:13]

MICHAEL MONROE: Right. [They laugh.] A year and a half old, right?

LLOYD HERMAN: Yes. And Bernadette, your wife—when you came to Washington, she had a teaching job.

MICHAEL MONROE: Right.

LLOYD HERMAN: You lived in Reston, west of Washington, D.C. How did your work focus into your family life, and how did all of that work out for you? Because that was a quite radical change, to move into a city like Washington, even in the suburbs as you did, and deal with something much bigger than Oneonta or Cranbrook.

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, after I accepted the job, we were, of course, still up in upstate New York, and had to move to Washington, but we didn't have any real contacts with people in Washington, D.C. We needed a place to live, so I thought—I remembered hearing in the early 1960s in architectural magazines and design magazines about a community that was forming—an ideal community in Reston, R-E-S-T-O-N, Virginia—which was going to integrate nature, buildings, architecture, different levels of housing, for this ideal community. So I went to architectural magazines in the library, and I looked up what was the name of this place, and up popped the word "Reston." And of course, it appealed to my entire organizational fetish in my life—laid out and well thought out, well designed—so I said, "Well, let's go there and live." [00:31:52]

So that's where we went, and, of course, it's 25 miles directly west of the Renwick Gallery, near Dulles Airport, another extraordinary design accomplishment. So then I commuted every day from 1974 to 1984 on a bus to go to work. And my wife stayed at home. We had decided she was going to be a mother, a full-time mother, until our son became an age to—so that she could go off and start her own teaching career, which she did for 30 years, high school art teaching.

LLOYD HERMAN: So when did she start teaching after you moved there in '74?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, she would have started teaching about '84.

LLOYD HERMAN: Oh, okay.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes, 10 years. Yes.

LLOYD HERMAN: I didn't realize that. Yes. What, then, besides your work, did family and social life revolve around? Because you were, you know, as you said, 25 miles out. So coming into DC to go to concerts or theater or anything would have been kind of an effort with a young son.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes, but we did go to many Kennedy Center performances. We went to plays at Arena Stage. So we had—because Reston at that time really was a community of all young people, and we were living in close quarters in townhouses and so forth, so there was a huge network of people that could babysit and take care of you. It had an enormous effect on, certainly, myself and our son, eventually. His career today in art has been totally inspired by living in Reston, Virginia, which is a reference point and so forth. So, very idyllic, design conscious.

And of course, through the Renwick, I began to travel and be exposed more to the craft that was going on in the United States. Whereas you were all more involved with bringing the foreign exhibition component, which I thought was a really unique part of the Renwick, in terms of bringing work from other countries and merging them together with the American experience, which was not being done anywhere in the United States. So that you could see Copenhagen porcelain in one room and ceramics by Peter Voulkos in another room. And I thought that was really quite a unique way of thinking that you don't really see very often, a chance to see design like that juxtaposed, two different cultures. [00:34:35]

LLOYD HERMAN: How do you see the Renwick changing during the period that you were there, both when I was there and after?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, I think it starts really with the contemporary studio craft movement, in terms of starting, if we say 1940, when the GIs came back.

LLOYD HERMAN: The postwar movement.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes, the postwar movement, and when the GIs come back and they infiltrate all the art departments nationwide and start doing some very, very unique works of art. They really boost the amount of activity, the creativity in—whether it's textiles, ceramics, wood, fiber, all of those materials. So these people infiltrated the university systems, stayed there for a long period of time, and created what I think are among the strongest contemporary works in craft media since that time. And that was kind of, from my point of view, the golden era of innovation. Because why? Because those people had their university paychecks to support them, and they could afford to be really outrageous, innovative, and take risks like we haven't seen perhaps since. [00:36:05]

So these people keep their jobs, and yet, on the other hand, they start to educate hundreds of students who cannot go out and find teaching jobs. So most people start to move into the craft fair, in a way because their professors are still hanging onto their jobs. So they're having to understand what an invoice is. They become more part of the marketplace. They have to up their game about having design display in their booths instead of orange crates. They move to oriental rugs.

So there's this whole shift from, maybe, more marketing and entering into the craft fair, as another subset of what their professors were doing. So I think this movement shifts rather dynamically and that artists are maybe not taking the risks, but are thinking maybe more about marketing. And of course, ultimately, today, now artists are doing all their own marketing, social media. For instance, a Renwick Gallery exhibition that was reopened in 2016, the *WONDER* exhibition—

LLOYD HERMAN: Yes, or maybe '15. I'm not sure now.

MICHAEL MONROE: Right. The Renwick was closed for a few years—2014, maybe '13, '14—for renovation yet again, and they reopened with an exhibition called *WONDER*. And it was quite an extraordinary exhibition. About 10 different artists were each assigned a different room in the Renwick Gallery, and they had millions of visitors for that show. And at first I was disappointed and I was jealous, and I thought, Well, how come the shows I did never had a million visitors? [00:38:12]

And then suddenly I wake up and realize this whole phenomenon of social media. My own personal physician here in Bellevue did not know I worked at the Renwick, but he went there with his two children and took selfies, pictures of themselves. And they sent it to all their friends and Facebook and all of these media. And I kept asking the people at the Renwick, "How did you get all these people?" And they said, "Michael, social media." And they had people lined up around the blocks. We did not have that. We had to depend on a single reporter for the entire city of Washington, D.C., to get the word out. So I've seen that, you know, enormous change.

But back to the other, I think that the innovation that we saw with people like Voulkos, and William Harper in enameling, Claire Zeisler in textiles, Sheila Hicks—and the list really goes on—these were people that were really quite well known, but they taught so many other people that it seems to me now that we see a dilution of some of creativity based on the ability for these younger artists to market their work in order to survive.

And university art departments are closing. Commercial galleries, you know, are closing. So the opportunities now are not—they have to be self-created by the artist, and this has happened even since the birth of the craft fair. So we get, from this isolation, university professors creating some of the most extraordinary works in American craft, to a slightly watered-down version of their students. And then, now, today you have the Etsy movement that came in and— [00:40:14]

LLOYD HERMAN: E-T-S-Y.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes. Do-it-yourself and so forth.

So it seems to me that the field is shifting radically into being more populist and so forth. So I'm kind of—not concerned, but I see this period that you and I have both lived through, and I'm examining that as we talk now.

For instance, recently at the Bellevue Arts Museum, I did a panel interview of six very young artists, and they don't hope anymore for a gallery. They don't even think about a gallery representing them anymore. They all have their own websites. They're Facebooking, and they're selling things online. And people are buying art online without ever seeing it.

So I think we lived in a golden era that was hugely successful, one of a kind, that has inspired people in these generations who do not know necessarily who these forefathers are. So we see a lot of what we would call knockoffs. So I'm worried about that. But we certainly were at a period at the Renwick where we really introduced and found a foundation in this country for people to make judgments on, because you see collections, American collections—particularly in the Washington, D.C., area, the number of collections was maybe two or three people. And by the time the Renwick has been there for 15 years, there are maybe 25, 30 collections. And of those, there are 10 of them that are national in scope, with quality and so forth. [00:42:05]

So I think the Renwick played a role differently than in New York. New York museums—there's so much prejudice and so much highbrow and discrimination in New York City that we didn't have in Washington, D.C. Washington, D.C., was much more populist. People of all walks of life come to Washington, D.C. So we were able to operate in a milieu that I think was more open—because of our tourist base—in a way that exposed craft that people may not have seen if they ever went to New York, because many people from the outer parts of the United States are terrified of New York. So that's just a theory that I have that needs to really be developed by historians in the future.

LLOYD HERMAN: Well, I share your feeling that we have lost not only many craft galleries, or those that focused on maybe one or two clay artists or glass artists, but we've lost almost all of the craft shops—

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes.

LLOYD HERMAN: —the places that would sell production crafts, more than one of a kind that a craftsman would make. That whole field, I think, is losing ground unless they are able to sell online. Places like the Bellevue [Arts &] Crafts Fair [now BAM ARTSfair], sponsored by the museum you last erected, has been in existence even longer than the museum has; that's sponsored.

And there, again, I think you can begin to see that's kind of the last reserve for people who make production pottery, for example, functional works. So it is a change, certainly, that I think has been profound. And I think the *WONDER* exhibition really capitalized on the artists at the other end of the scale from the do-it-yourself movement, who are not necessarily highly skilled. They haven't gone through university programs. [00:44:05]

MICHAEL MONROE: No.

LLOYD HERMAN: But at the other end of that spectrum are these installation-size art objects, if we can even call them objects. So those are what I see as the two poles, of the Etsy things that are sold virtually all online and may have only someone who is silk-screening commercial baby bibs or plates with their own designs.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes. Yes.

LLOYD HERMAN: And that's the decline, also, that I would like you to comment on, about how education has changed, university programs that have either lost ground or that have closed entirely.

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, I think working in the craft media—for instance, ceramics, metal-making, weaving—takes an enormous amount of skill that has to be developed before you can express yourself in certain ways. So are young people today—with so many distractions via social media, short-term attention spans, et cetera—willing to make 2,000 chips of clay for test tiles on pieces that have been fired and hang on the wall, even before they make their first piece of ceramics? Think of the amount of time it takes to make a bezel to hold a diamond in a ring. And all of these craft media are driven so much by technique, whereas oil painting may not be as demanding in terms of technique, although it can be. But the crafts are highly technical kinds of things, so people don't—young people don't want to spend that time. They want instant gratification, so you see the work that we see now is very slapdash, and it's shortcut. [00:46:05]

It's all about shortcut, and, of course, now you don't have to do a glaze sample to see it. You can enter anything you want on the computer, and up will come a perfect color rendering of the formulas, everything. So that whole kind of work, with the hand terminating in something quite extraordinary, I don't think is happening with—there are a few rare people, I think, that are, but I think the world has changed. And again, the time period that we were there is quite extraordinary, and I can only say I'm very happy that I lived in the time that I did; politically, socially, economically, and so forth. Maybe I think at age 78 that I'm an old person talking, and I'm missing something, but I do keep abreast of what's going on, and that is a concern for me.

LLOYD HERMAN: Besides the—and I wanted to go and give the full title of that exhibition that you mentioned, *The Animal Image. Contemporary Objects and the Beast* was the subtitle.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes.

[Audio break.]

LLOYD HERMAN: How Betsy and Charlie [ph] changed that.

MICHAEL MONROE: And how does that—because I now look at this and realize, Gosh, I didn't really do that many shows. But I was integrally involved in a lot—almost all of them—in terms of, you know, getting it off the ground after you did the curating and so forth. But I think what people need to know is that there are very few museums that size today that do 12 shows a year. Remember? I mean, you set a pace. [00:48:07]

LLOYD HERMAN: Well—

MICHAEL MONROE: And that—there were just the two of us, so that need segues into the notion of traveling exhibitions, that we could not curate all of those exhibitions. But I think it's important to get on record the number that we had, because I think it's extraordinary.

LLOYD HERMAN: Well, and—

MICHAEL MONROE: I mean, don't you? When you think of—we had the resources then.

LLOYD HERMAN: Yes. Yes, it's incredible. I really realized much later how spoiled I was. You know, for someone who had no credentials at all, for me to get that job [laughs] is crazy.

MICHAEL MONROE: You know, I follow pretty close to you on the same thing. I mean, I had some credentials from Oneonta, but you had—

LLOYD HERMAN: Oh, no. I mean, you—

MICHAEL MONROE: I mean, I didn't have a lot of academic credentials. But I couldn't get my same job today—

LLOYD HERMAN: No, I couldn't get an art handler's job with my—

MICHAEL MONROE: Because we grew up in an era when there were no museum education programs.

LLOYD HERMAN: Yes, no craft specialists. Yes.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes, and so forth, so it's a different era.

LLOYD HERMAN: Yes. It truly is.

MICHAEL MONROE: But, no, so maybe we should touch on the number—

LLOYD HERMAN: Let's talk about exhibitions you remember, and we can talk about those during the time that I was there. You know, *Craft Multiples*, which did tour nationally, and it was really kind of the antithesis of *Objects: USA*, which went internationally to big cities. We went to cities with under a 50,000 population, and that was a deliberate effort to get quality shows to smaller towns. And the reason we started collecting more earnestly was because Susan Mellon gave us $40,000, and that's how we chose things from *Craft Multiples* to buy for the collection.

MICHAEL MONROE: Say that again. The $40,000 was— [00:50:00]

LLOYD HERMAN: —from Susan Mellon, who was Timothy Mellon's wife at that time. I think they divorced soon after, and I don't even know how she heard about us. And we got that money from her, and that's why we bought things from *Craft Multiples*.

MICHAEL MONROE: Oh, okay. And that forms a nucleus then for a collection.

LLOYD HERMAN: And some other people gave us pieces, I think, too.

MICHAEL MONROE: Right. And I think there's 100-percent ownership by Renwick of the show. I think—

LLOYD HERMAN: A hundred—it was our show.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes. No, what I mean is that all the pieces are in the collection now.

LLOYD HERMAN: No.

MICHAEL MONROE: Oh, only some?

LLOYD HERMAN: No, they were on loan. No, we didn't get everything.

MICHAEL MONROE: Oh, we didn't get everything.

LLOYD HERMAN: No, maybe only eight to 10 pieces.

MICHAEL MONROE: Alright. But that forms a nucleus—

LLOYD HERMAN: Yes.

MICHAEL MONROE: —and kind of the idea that we can collect. I just remember this thing, this argument of, "Should we collect? Should we not collect?"

LLOYD HERMAN: Well, you—let me ask you—

MICHAEL MONROE: And I remember, "The other museums got it covered. What are you going to do?" Et cetera, et cetera.

LLOYD HERMAN: Let me ask you about how you remember the collection developed. Because initially I think

what I felt is that we should get examples by the best-known makers, from whatever was the kind of key moment of their style.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes. Yes, the rationale.

LLOYD HERMAN: And then you branched out and started acquiring younger artists who weren't up to that level, and Ken [Kenneth R. Trapp, subsequent curator-in-charge]—went even further in that direction.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes, he went even further. Yes.

LLOYD HERMAN: And I have no idea what they're collecting now.

MICHAEL MONROE: No.

[Audio break.]

LLOYD HERMAN: Okay. Well, let me resume then.

MICHAEL MONROE: Do you want me to start out by just—

[Audio break.]

Do you want to start with *Craft Multiples*?

[Audio break.]

LLOYD HERMAN: We're recording again now. That was a short break. We're back, resuming my conversation with Michael Monroe.

And during the time after he had come to the Renwick Gallery, talking now about the exhibition program at the Renwick Gallery, its size and the kind of variations of what we had shown.

What do you recall about that, Michael? [00:52:20]

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, first of all, I certainly remember being impressed by the number of exhibitions the Renwick Gallery did a year. By that, I mean 12—perhaps 10 to 12 exhibitions a year—with a very, very small staff, Lloyd Herman being the director and myself being the curator. We carefully crafted an exhibition program that dealt with many aspects, historical and contemporary, of design craft, whether it was American or the globe. So it was a constant theme of craft and design in the world and in the United States. So there was this wonderful juxtaposition of outside America and inside America.

But what's most extraordinary is the number of exhibitions that we were able to do with just the two of us, Lloyd Herman as director and myself as curator. So we, of course, took many traveling exhibitions from other organizations, museums, that particularly fit well into the mission of the Renwick. Lloyd Herman was instrumental in bringing a foreign exhibition program, which was quite extraordinary. So we had a wonderful mix between what was going on in the world, the United States, what was going on in craft design, folk art, decorative arts, and that combination was certainly a very appealing one because it gave visitors a huge array of opportunities to see what was happening in the world. [00:54:11]

And I remember particularly one exhibition that was organized at the Renwick, primarily by Lloyd Herman, that dealt with artists who were making one of a kind, but also who had started to venture off into the notion of making multiples, more than one of a prototype, if you will.

LLOYD HERMAN: They had to make at least 10 of a single design of their design, and they had to personally have some role in the actual making of it.

MICHAEL MONROE: Right.

LLOYD HERMAN: And it was a national competition that resulted in this. I was one of three jurors, and the whole effort in organizing that show was to kind of show the opposite side of what the major traveling exhibition *Objects: USA* showed, which premiered even before the Renwick opened, at our parent museum in 1968. That was all about really larger sculptural objects, and I wanted to focus attention again to the handmade, functional objects, and that's how *Craft Multiples* came about.

And that did tour, and rather than sending it to big cities, as *Objects: USA* had gone to, we went deliberately to cities of under 50,000 population, so that it would bring a quality exhibition from the Smithsonian to smaller towns and show them quality crafts. And as a result of that, we were given, as I recall, a $40,000 gift from Susan

Mellon, who was married to Timothy Mellon, one of the Mellon heirs from Pittsburgh, to purchase objects from *Craft Multiples*. And we did buy a number of them, and then other artists donated to the collection. [00:56:10]

And of course, that brought about a whole discussion about, "What are we collecting?" Because when the Renwick was founded, we even had a plaque on the front fence around the building saying that the Renwick Gallery was devoted to exhibiting the works of craftsmen, designers, I think folk artists, internationally. Remember, this was before our parent museum became the Smithsonian American Art Museum. It was, when the Renwick was founded, the National Collection of Fine Arts, which included European art as well. So it was something of a difference, until Joshua Taylor unexpectedly died at his house in Oaxaca, Mexico. And things were sort of thrust in limbo for a year while a new director was sought, and that's when great changes came about.

MICHAEL MONROE: And one of those changes was a more focused idea about the Renwick starting to collect in a more formal, cohesive way, with a mission about what we were going to collect. And that evolves, really, out of *Craft Multiples,* because it gives us a kind of a core set of objects and starts really to move us towards collecting more.

LLOYD HERMAN: Yes, I think that's right. We had begun kind of haphazardly collecting, but I don't think—without anything that resembled a collections policy. And it was all—you know, I would go to Dr. Taylor with something that somebody had offered us, and he would say, "Oh, that looks good. Let's get it." But I had to make no case at all for that. So that certainly did change. [00:58:04]

But just to go back to the exhibition program to explain a little further—when we opened the gallery in '72, it was with the idea that we would have only changing exhibitions. Some we would originate. Some we would take from the Smithsonian's traveling exhibition service. And we had two galleries devoted, on the 17th Street side, to those and other foreign exhibitions, which often came to us through the embassies in Washington or from other museums. We had, then, galleries on the opposite side of the second floor where we worked closely with curators in the other Smithsonian Museums. So for example, Paul Gardner, the curator of ceramics and glass in what's now the American History Museum [Smithsonian National Museum of American History], organized the Frederick Carder glass exhibition for the opening. And we had another curator of ethnology who organized another show—I don't remember now. I think it was—

MICHAEL MONROE: *Man Made Mobile*.

LLOYD HERMAN: *Man Made Mobile* came later, and that was all about the Western saddle. So we were—we tried to branch out to become allied with other parts of the Smithsonian that collected craft under different guises, whether it was ethnology or design or whatever.

But after—and then, the first-floor galleries, the two major galleries, were exhibitions that we either originated, or we would take from other sources, or co-sponsor them in the case of—we worked a couple of times with what was then the American Craft Museum—maybe it was still the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, now the Museum of Arts and Design—and shared exhibitions with them. So it wasn't that we originated all those exhibitions. That would have been impossible with such a—

MICHAEL MONROE: Right, with just the two of us.

LLOYD HERMAN: —quickly changing exhibition program. [01:00:03]

We had some galleries that would change out every three months, that would accommodate the usual term of a traveling show, or six months—I think it was six months, or maybe it was nine months—and two years. So the two-year ones were usually those that we originated that we could keep up for that amount of time. But we were still changing exhibitions almost every month. It was a very ambitious program.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes. Well, I remember when I first came, realizing that the incredible resources of objects in the Smithsonian's holdings across all 19, 20 museums is something in the millions, and less than one percent of everything the Smithsonian owns is on view. So if you were to go to each museum and look at every object, that's only one percent of what the Smithsonian—so I think the resources that we have at our fingertips were quite extraordinary, and I think we can go on record as having really utilized those resources in so many rich and wonderful ways, to make the point in contrast to the more contemporary exhibitions that I and Lloyd Herman or Lloyd brought in. So the juxtaposition was really taking advantage, fully, of the circumstances in which the museum operated within the context of all the museums in the United States at this—

LLOYD HERMAN: Well, one of the ideas that we had had initially in having things of different duration was—I had come from a public relations background, and I realized the importance of always needing to have something that can be publicized. And even if it was only the Featured Object, it was something that was new. We didn't have openings for those, of course, but—

MICHAEL MONROE: In the hallway exhibits.

LLOYD HERMAN: In the hallway, and the hallway—

[END OF MONROE18_1OF2_TRACK03.]

LLOYD HERMAN: —exhibits were very small ones too. But it always gave us something to announce, so we could get a reviewer in from the *Washington Post* or wherever, or we would get mentioned in new exhibitions and publications. So it was a way to keep the Renwick name as an absolutely new entity in Washington, in a city of museums, keeping it in the press.

And that, certainly, continued until Dr. Taylor died and was succeeded by Charles Eldredge from University of Kansas—Eldredge, E-L-D-R-E-D-G-E—who brought in one of his colleagues, Elizabeth Broun, B-R-O-U-N. And she then succeeded him after he reorganized the museum and went back to Kansas. And that was when you became curator-in-charge, Michael, because I had just turned 50 in 1986, and I could take an early retirement from the federal government with a reduced annuity if my job was abolished. So I played into Eldredge's hands by saying, "Well, you can abolish my job and let me retire." And that's when you took over with a different title.

MICHAEL MONROE: Right. Yes, my title is a very unusual title because the new director, Elizabeth Broun, did really not want to have two people in the same organization with the title of director. So although I inherit Lloyd's position after he leaves the museum, I do not inherit the title, so I become perhaps the first curator-in-charge [laughs], in the museum world, as the title that I used until my retirement in 1995. [00:02:03]

But let's get back to the collecting, because the collecting policy starts to emerge just as Lloyd is leaving and I'm taking over. So perhaps the hardest part of collecting, really, is determining what you're going to collect. So we had discussions about what time period, whether we would go for major artists with a single piece, fewer major artists with more than one piece representing different aspects of their career. So there were many different ways of thinking of how we were going to approach it.

We began by really settling in on identifying the major people since 1940—the studio craft movement birth, if you will—and making a list of those top people. Many of them would have been artists that would have been found in the *Objects: USA* exhibition. That formed a very pivotal moment in American art history, both from painting and sculpture as well as the craft field, and awakened many people to who these artists were. So that list provided guideposts, if you will, for us to start to begin collecting the collection as you now know it.

So we did focus on those artists and finding major pieces by them. And we were quite successful with that strategy and finding donors to give to pieces, as well as funds provided by the James Renwick Alliance, which plays a really key role in the history of the Renwick Gallery. And this is a support group that was founded by Lloyd Herman in about—1984?

LLOYD HERMAN: Oh, no, no, it was before that.

MICHAEL MONROE: No, no, okay.

LLOYD HERMAN: It was—I don't remember now, but it was—and it was originally called the James Renwick Collectors Alliance. [00:04:03]

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes.

LLOYD HERMAN: But many people felt excluded because they were appreciators and not yet collectors.

MICHAEL MONROE: Not collectors, that's right. Right. And they begin to provide funds for a lot of the Renwick programs, such as lecture series, a visiting scholar program, and for acquisitions. So that enables the Renwick to really start to buy major pieces for the collection.

So we worked our way through the list, keeping our eyes on the key figures as well as the next generation of emerging artists, as well as a really shorter list of people who were perhaps in their early 20s and 30s that were just going on. So we would merge these lists together when an opportunity presented itself. If it was a gift with no money spent, then we could move between these lists of key people, and that was the strategy to build quite a remarkable, small, but very strong collection.

Then in about the late 1980s, the Smithsonian develops a fund, called the Smithsonian Acquisitions Fund, for all of the museums in the Smithsonian family. And the idea behind this is that the Smithsonian really did not have a lot of financial resources for curators to buy things for the collections in the 19 different museums. So a lot of curators—we had to rely on gifts coming in that were not connected with a price. So this fund was to develop to allow, specifically, curators to buy major, major pieces to add to the collections, to add to the quality and depth of those collections by providing funds that we normally wouldn't get. [00:06:05]

Under that program, we were able to buy some very major pieces. For instance, Wendell Castle did an extraordinary piece called *The Ghost Clock*, which is an iconic Wendell Castle piece and a one-of-a-kind, extraordinary piece that was far beyond the reach of our financial resources. And that piece was brought in under that program, as well as a necklace by Albert Paley that is quite extraordinary, as well as pieces, installation pieces, by Dale Chihuly. So that was the strategy, and that fund lasted for about four years and allowed us to really acquire major pieces.

LLOYD HERMAN: About what years would that be?

MICHAEL MONROE: I would say it comes after you leave. So I'm saying '87 to maybe '92 and so forth, and then the program ends. But I would say it provided us with at least a couple million, if not $2,500,000. And then sometimes the fund could be used as a match to raise money from outsiders in the community to match that fund. There was a number of different strategies to make it possible for us to acquire some quite iconic and amazing pieces by leading artists in the field. And that was kind of my collection philosophy. And then, of course, I leave in 1995, and a new curator-in-charge comes, and I'm not familiar with what happens to that collection policy after that time period. So it provided us with a really strong burst of energy for collecting. [00:07:54]

But as the Renwick became more and more well known for its collection, it started to receive more and more gifts, because there were more and more collectors. After a critical mass of people saw Renwick exhibitions, they became interested, started to build collections, so that in turn really provides us with some opportunities.

I can remember working with collectors in Washington, D.C. The strategy of working with them could be quite challenging, in the fact that they would invite you to their homes to pick out a piece you might want for the collection. And I remember doing that a number of times, and whenever I picked out something, they would say, "Oh, no, you can't have that. That's my husband's favorite piece," or, "Oh, no, you can't have this." So I really only wanted the top-quality pieces, and of course, intuitively, many of those collectors knew what they were. They wanted to be generous, give a gift, but not necessarily a key piece.

So I was caught with the notion of, How do you say no to a collector when the rest of the house is filled with things you may want and so forth? So I did in the beginning reject the pieces that were offered to me, at the risk of offending people. But then quickly thereafter, I did an exhibition, a small exhibition, of what the Renwick collects, as a teaching device, so that when collectors came, they could quickly see that I wasn't after the trinkets, but I was after major, significant, important pieces. And after that, that sort of sent the signal that, We don't want to go near the Renwick with something that's really not significant. [00:09:55]

Another strategy I used when going into a house—and I thought of this just on the spur of the moment—which worked out to be a really good device for curators caught in the position of being in a home when they're offering you something. I came up with the idea on the spot with Arthur and Jane Mason, Washington, D.C., collectors who had perhaps 800 pieces of wood-turned art. They offered me to come and pick out a piece. So I was in the room with them and realized how I was trapped, because I knew whatever one I might pick out, they might not say yes to. So, on the spot, I said, "Jane Mason, would you go get me some of those little red sticky tags they use in commercial galleries?" So she went and got them, and I said to them, "I'm going to put a red dot on five pieces, any one—any one—of which I would be very happy for."

So that took the tension out of the room, and it made me happy. And then I walked out the door, and later waited for a call from them, and they said, "We've decided you can have all five." [Laughs.] But it was a really good device for taking away that tension, and easing that. And of course, the results happened to be quite terrific. But even—there had been the one. I didn't feel trapped, and they didn't feel trapped, and it's a device I've taught other, younger curators.

LLOYD HERMAN: And did that work with other collectors through the Renwick?

MICHAEL MONROE: Oh, it always worked. It always worked. It was really good, so I never put a star on anything I didn't want. [00:11:47]

Now, if an object at that time when we were collecting had a value of more than $50,000, I could not accept that piece on the spot, but rather had to take [a] picture of the piece and bring it forward to the Smithsonian American Art's board of commissioners, who had to vote on any acquisition that was valued at $50,000 or more. So then I would have to stand up at a semi-annual meeting and then show them this piece, justify why I wanted it, and so forth. And that was what they would then vote on. But anything under $50,000, I—as a curator, curator-in-charge—was able to bring into the collection without prior approval. Although I always sought approval from the director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum on a one-to-one basis. It was just that after the $50,000 mark, it triggered it, so that was an interesting other layer to the collection.

LLOYD HERMAN: No, I had never heard about that.

MICHAEL MONROE: And I don't know what the current rules are today.

LLOYD HERMAN: Well, Michael, during that period after they renamed our parent museum the American Art Museum and we could no longer at the Renwick—or you could no longer—have foreign shows, how did the exhibition policy and schedule become changed? I think you did fewer exhibitions then, but were most of them organized in-house, or were there traveling shows? I just don't remember.

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, the formula was the same. The numbers were not. For instance, we said earlier 10 to 12 shows a year, so the formula at that time was to balance and so forth. But after the point you're mentioning, that we no longer did foreign exhibitions, we took more exhibitions from other museums who were traveling them, and at that time the staff was reduced to just myself in terms of a curator position. So the numbers dropped, but we relied more heavily on touring exhibitions, or exhibitions that were part of the Smithsonian collection. [00:14:11]

The first Smithsonian-wide collection was seen and organized with Lloyd Herman's idea at the Renwick Gallery. And by that, I mean that the Smithsonian had never in its history—to our knowledge, at that point—organized in one building one exhibition that drew upon objects from every one of the Smithsonian museums. And when it was proposed, it was a first, because the museums at the Smithsonian are the opposite of what you would think of as being all one happy family. They're all very strongly driven into their own missions and are oftentimes not aware of what's going on in other Smithsonian museums. So this exhibition was revolutionary from that point of view, and it featured ceremonial rites of cultures all over the world.

LLOYD HERMAN: And the name was *Celebration: A World of Art and Ritual*.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes.

LLOYD HERMAN: And it followed, really, in an odd way the format of *Objects for Preparing Food*, a show that Paul Smith—when he was at the American Craft Museum and I was at the Renwick—organized. And we shared the curatorial responsibilities, in that he would choose manufactured and contemporary things, and I would work with other Smithsonian departments to find things in ethnology and cultural history collections. So for example, there might be, in *Objects for Preparing Food*, "Straining" as a category, and you would get strainers that might be a pierced gourd from Uganda, or it might be a steel colander from 19th-century America. [00:16:06]

So that's really how that idea for *Celebration* came about, I think, in working through—as we had worked with the ethnology curators on those American Indian shows, trying to find ways that we could show off parts of the Smithsonian collection that weren't otherwise seen. And curators, I think, were generally very responsive.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes. Well, I think the key to this exhibition was, of course, the number of countries represented from all over the world. But the objects from each country were not all grouped together. In other words, all the objects from Hungary or Italy were not in one group, but rather they were organized by thematic idea. So the notion of celebration—which goes back to the title of the exhibition—was, How do we celebrate a young person turning 16? for instance. Then those objects around the world that celebrated a transformation from youth to young adulthood were grouped together so you could compare the cultures with the ceremony, the content of the ceremony, with how they expressed that through craft, art, and design.

And it was quite revolutionary in terms of this curatorial concept that really cross-referenced and always had a reference to the strength of design, the craftsmanship coming from that country. So it was a really rich experience, as opposed to grouping objects by each country; that did away with this totally. So there was a holistic approach, which was unique in our thinking at that time in America when that show was done.

LLOYD HERMAN: I think, also, we used, maybe, video for the first time. Because we had a whole section, I think, on dance. [00:18:06]

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes.

LLOYD HERMAN: And I think—and we were able to get major cultural historians helping us with different parts of this. It was quite a remarkable thing, and it took the entire building. And Michael, you dealt with having—

MICHAEL MONROE: Two parts.

LLOYD HERMAN: —to design and install it.

[They laugh.]

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, the exhibition was so large that it took—there was a part one that lasted—

LLOYD HERMAN: Oh, that's right.

MICHAEL MONROE: There was a part one that lasted six months, followed up by part two, which lasted another six months. So it was an enormous undertaking. Smithsonian-wide, I'm told, had never done that before, so it was quite a—

LLOYD HERMAN: I think that's true.

MICHAEL MONROE: —unique chapter in the Smithsonian's history, in terms of coming together. Because, as I said, everybody kind of operates in their own sphere, and that did not happen without enormous challenges. But the end result was quite wonderful. It has, actually, a catalogue with it, by the way.

LLOYD HERMAN: Yes, it's a major hardcover book.

The other one I was just thinking about was another collaboration with the American Craft Museum, called *The Object as Poet*—

MICHAEL MONROE: Oh, yes.

LLOYD HERMAN: —in which we got grant money—I don't remember where now—to pair, I think, five or six visual artists with the same number of poets, and they would collaborate on new pieces. It was a very different idea, and it came not from us but really from Rose Slivka—S-L-I-V-K-A—who had been at the American Craft Council for decades and had been editor of *Craft Horizons* magazine. And there, again, we shared that with the museum in New York.

Are there other exhibitions you can think of, Michael, that happened after I had left that—[00:20:03]

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, you—

LLOYD HERMAN: That reduced program that you directed?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, you know, we started an exhibition—a small-sized, one-person exhibition—solo exhibitions for artists that were young and just entering maybe perhaps what we call now mid-career—artists working in, of course, the different five craft media—as a way to start to lay groundwork for next generations having important exhibitions at an important institution. For instance, we did an exhibition of Dale Chihulys—a small, one-person exhibition, probably 60 small pieces of glass—in 1987. Dale Chihuly, no one had heard of him. He was a young glassblower out in Seattle, Washington, who had studied with Harvey Littleton at the University of Wisconsin in the late 1960s. So, early in 1985 or '86 we do a small exhibition of Dale Chihuly.

LLOYD HERMAN: Are you sure that wasn't in the '70s?

MICHAEL MONROE: Oh, the '70s.

LLOYD HERMAN: '78, I think.

MICHAEL MONROE: '78. You're right. I reversed the numbers. '78, which was this artist's first national exposure, solo show exposure. He came with his pieces, and they were installed, and not many people really saw that exhibition. But the artist has credited that exhibition for launching his career worldwide, because the seal of approval from the Smithsonian certainly helps any artist, but in this case it was quite extraordinary. [00:21:57]

I remember the day—I would like to just digress a little bit, using this one artist as a sample of how times have changed since that time. Dale had just started, really, blowing glass in his career, and we selected him for an exhibition that I curated. I was so excited the day that the crates arrived with all the glass in the crates, and Dale arrived on that same day so that we could start working together on [un]packing the show and so forth. So I met him in the shipping room, and I said to Dale, "Oh, let's open the glass. I want to see the pieces and so forth." And he said, "No, no," he said, "That's not important. We don't need to do that now." He said, "Can you get me a light table?"—which is a device for showing 35-millimeter slides and color transparencies on a flat surface.

So I ran around the museum and found a lightbox, and I put them on the table, and he pulled out of his portfolio some of the most beautiful photographs I had ever seen taken of works of art: color transparencies—four by five, six by eight, eight by 10—and they were extraordinary pictures of his work. And he turned to me, and he said, "Don't worry about what's in the crate." He said, "I'm going to become known in the glass world through these pictures." And I thought, I don't understand. What does that mean? I want to see the work. I'm used to touching and handling the work.

And he at that moment taught me one of the biggest lessons about marketing I ever learned. Because he said to me, "I'm going to get these pictures into every airline seat magazine published by the airlines. I'm going to get them in *People* magazine. I'm going to get them in *ARTnews*. I'm going to get them in every possible

reproduction that I can, and that's how I will become known." [00:24:08]

And I thought that was very unusual, but in retrospect it opened my eyes about marketing and promotion and not staying in your ivory tower studio. That was kind of the norm for many of the artists since World War II, the studio craft movement. People would come to them. They were not promotional people. They had no reference for doing that. Galleries would find them and so forth. So Dale was the first person that really woke me up to it.

He did not have any money at that time, so he said, "I traded my pieces of work with a top photographer to take pictures of my work. I could never afford this." He didn't even have a catalogue for his work. So he would have a publisher and hire—would give a curator a piece of glass to barter his way into promoting his art. All very smart, all the things that an artist wants: publicity, a catalogue, documentation, and so forth.

So it really was at that point—that was a turning point in my learning about the art world, and it certainly began a shift, a paradigm, in what artists do for themselves now, today. But he understood that. But the good thing is that his work was extraordinarily fine as well.

LLOYD HERMAN: Let me just add something to that, Michael. You may remember that to publish catalogues in the Smithsonian, we had to go through the government printing office. Dale wanted to do his own catalogue with his own designer, and we had to get a waiver to allow him to do that. [00:26:05]

MICHAEL MONROE: I forgot about that.

LLOYD HERMAN: And the other thing was that he also produced the posters for that exhibition, which I saw in other cities before we had even glimpsed it.

MICHAEL MONROE: That's right. That's right.

LLOYD HERMAN: Later, after that, my brother-in-law had a copy of *Fortune* magazine, I think it was. And the cover story was called "The Art of Self-Promotion," and guess whose picture was on the cover? It was Dale Chihuly and his glass.

MICHAEL MONROE: [Laughs.]

LLOYD HERMAN: Well, let's pause that session. I think I need to change devices.

MICHAEL MONROE: Okay. And lunch, a little bite to eat.

[END OF MONROE18_1OF2_SD_TRACK04.]

LLOYD HERMAN: This is Lloyd Herman on March 1, 2018, recording in my home near Seattle, recording an oral history interview with Michael Monroe. This is memory card number two.

Hello, Michael. Nice to have you back again, and perhaps we can take up where we left off a couple of weeks ago. You, at that point, I think, were maybe just ready to retire from the Smithsonian, after how many years?

MICHAEL MONROE: I was at the Smithsonian from '74 to '95. Roughly 23 years was my tenure at the Smithsonian, starting out as curator and eventually moving into the position of curator-in-charge.

LLOYD HERMAN: Do you remember, particularly, highlights of that that you may not have spoken of before? I know one of them. You were getting involved in the White House Collection of [American] Crafts. I would like you to talk about how that came about and your other involvements with the White House, the vice president and his wife, who were also involved to some degree with activities that you did at the Renwick.

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, first, I would probably talk about the White House Collection, which evolves in—I retire in 1992, but the collection was initiated, actually, by the first President George Bush, in October of 1993. So he declared, through presidential proclamation, that 1993, the next year, would be the Year of American Craft. So it must have been the election of 1992, Clinton versus the first President Bush. [00:02:10]

So it was going to be a proclamation of the celebration of American craft in America. Very similar—modeled sort of on the idea of the early 1970s with the Earth Day, which was one of the first highly recognized nationwide celebrations. So building on that idea, it was decided that 1993 would be a year in which we would celebrate the beauty and the visionary power of American craft in American culture at that time.

So the election, of course, happens in November of 1992, and Clinton becomes president. So in January, when they take over the White House, they declare that they will honor the previous president's proclamation, and indeed celebrate at the White House the American craft movement as it stood in 1993. Oftentimes, because of the nature of how Christmas is celebrated, it's oftentimes a time to celebrate craft, so it was thought that we

would do an exhibition that would open at the White House right around the end of 1993, because it would take some time to organize such an exhibition. However, it isn't until April of [1993] that the White House, the Clintons, approach me.

LLOYD HERMAN: Michael, before you get into that, I think there was some involvement with the White House before that, through the Carter and Mondale administration. And I know that we had sometimes visits from other presidents' wives, like Betty Ford during Gerald Ford's term. But would you talk a little bit about that first, just to show a little history before the White House Collection that you organized? [00:04:16]

MICHAEL MONROE: Sure. Well, as you know, the Renwick opens in 1972, and because of our proximity to the White House and oftentimes, because of the subject matter of the mission of the Renwick, it would dovetail with interests from various times of first ladies and/or presidents of the United States. And the first, really, contact we had was with, as you said, Betty Ford taking an interest in one of our exhibitions, and that was followed by Joan Mondale and Mrs. Carter, with their interest. Every year, the first lady does what they call the Senate Wives Luncheon, and it's a tradition in presidential history. So this was held at the White House, and Betty Ford and—I'm sorry.

LLOYD HERMAN: Rosalynn Carter?

MICHAEL MONROE: Rosalynn Carter and Joan Mondale, with her assistance, decided to feature handcrafted objects on each of the dining tables for the Senate wives. And that consisted of blown goblets, ceramic plates, cups, saucers, and so forth. So we definitely wanted all the 50 states represented, and they turned to the Renwick Gallery and asked us to help them organize and take over the curatorial and registrarial functions of putting together the dinnerware for that luncheon. So that was a heavy involvement, and it really brought a lot of attention to the handmade in America and the importance of it. And, of course, anytime the White House does something, it gets publicity, so it's a great boost, certainly, to the craftsmen in America to have that kind of exposure and opportunity. So that's certainly another example. [00:06:20]

Another example was Barbara Bush. First Lady Barbara Bush had a passion for needlepointing, and one Christmas we did a reproduction of the Renwick Gallery in needlepoint. So it was a model of the museum done in needlepoint, and then the rest of the Grand Salon of the Renwick Gallery was decorated with needlepoint ornaments from around the country. But Mrs. Bush's responsibility was to needlepoint the doors for the model of the Renwick Gallery, and that was the last thing to come in just before it went on display. And up came the doors, and they were stitched into the—

LLOYD HERMAN: So was that the year, then, that the White House tree was decorated with handmade American crafts? Or was that another year?

MICHAEL MONROE: I believe that was also—well, I don't know the full history of crafts at the White House, but I know that needlepoint was featured in the year of Barbara Bush's. And over at the Renwick, we had this—we had needlepoint ornaments as well on some trees, not to the extent, certainly, that the White House did, but also this beautiful reproduction in needlepoint of the Victorian-styled Renwick Gallery, which is quite a challenge for needlepointers. But they're a dedicated group, so that was another—certainly an involvement with the White House across the street. And, of course, the American Craft Collection that I put together in [1993 –MM]. [00:08:02]

LLOYD HERMAN: Okay. Go ahead with that then.

MICHAEL MONROE: So the Clintons, as I said, decided to honor that request from the first President Bush, that 1994 would be the Year of American Crafts.

LLOYD HERMAN: '93.

MICHAEL MONROE: '93, right. But it isn't until April, after they are inaugurated in January, that they turn their attention to how we can celebrate it. So they decided that they wanted to do something in craft and were advised that the guy at the museum knowledgeable about craft was right across the street from the White House. Hence, I was called over to talk about ideas for that, and what emerged was a craft collection that would be seen at the White House. So that was the birth of the White House Collection of [American] Crafts.

Our objective was to show contemporary crafts, to show the full range from more beginning artists to established artists to how craft is oftentimes a collaborative effort, so there were pieces by men and wives. Also that craft is a tradition passed down from generation to generation, so we had two generations shown in the exhibition. And to try to distribute the pieces coming into the collection from as many different parts of the United States as we could. So those were some of the objectives. Also that these were all to be total gifts. There was no money to be spent, federal U.S. dollars, on this collection, so we had to rely, really, on artists' generosity in giving pieces, which they all did. And those who couldn't found donors that could get pieces. [00:09:50]

So we had a call—it was by invitation, so I wrote the letter, which Mrs. Clinton signed. And in the middle paragraph is the description that I wrote asking for a specific kind of piece. Because I knew, as you were—being on the receiving end of something free, you were not always privy to have the kind of quality that you wanted, so that paragraph really helped the artists to sort of identify what to give. And all the artists really gave in that spirit, so that we had a control element for the most part on the collection.

So the pieces arrive in November of 2000—

LLOYD HERMAN: '93.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes. So in April I'm working on this collection. April, May, June. And then in November all the pieces arrive. And on December ninth of that year, all of the artists around the country and their guests came to the White House to celebrate the arrangement of these pieces that were sprinkled throughout the White House. And that included coffee tables, fireplaces, mantles, and so forth, that I thought would be appropriate places for craft. So that was quite a spectacular evening and a real boost for American craft.

LLOYD HERMAN: Was there a handout in the White House?

MICHAEL MONROE: I'm sorry?

LLOYD HERMAN: Was there a handout in the White House for people who—

MICHAEL MONROE: There really was no time for that.

LLOYD HERMAN: No, no, no.

MICHAEL MONROE: The artists wore nametags and so forth.

LLOYD HERMAN: No, I mean for tours through the White House after the—

MICHAEL MONROE: No, I was not aware of a handout. I think the docents or tour people would certainly have been aware of it.

LLOYD HERMAN: So they were simply distributed along with historical things—

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes.

LLOYD HERMAN: —in the furnishings of the White House.

MICHAEL MONROE: Right. And that was one of the challenges, was how to introduce very contemporary work into a very historical setting. But after you study the decorative arts in the White House, there's an enormous amount of craft in the pieces that—for instance, President Monroe, no relation, purchased a lot of French tables and fireplace mantles. [00:12:04] And many of those pieces that I selected for the collection really used the same techniques that the French used, in marquetry and insets and ironworking and ormolu and so forth.

So there were a lot of connectors there that I wanted to try to emphasize to not only show a connector, that craft is carried on through tradition and idea, but also that there's very contemporary as well, so that it's an ongoing dialogue with craft, texture, design, and color and so forth. The White House Historical Society, however, were very apprehensive about introducing these very modern pieces into this pristine environment. But it certainly, I think, worked out very well, as seen in the catalogue. So there was a very beautiful integration with the contemporary and the historical.

LLOYD HERMAN: And Harry Abrams was the publisher of the catalogue.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes. In fact, that's an interesting story, because Harry Abrams—Paul Gottlieb, their CEO, was visiting the White House the day before Thanksgiving to talk to the Clintons about a different book project. And that's the first time he saw that, the exhibition there, and was just taken so much with it that he decided he wanted to do a book of it. So that very evening, the prior day to Thanksgiving in 1994, he and Mrs. Clinton agreed to do a book.

And that evening, while the photographer represented was in his studio in New York, about to put the Thanksgiving dinner turkey in, he received the call that he had to go to Washington for the next three days because the Clintons were not going to be physically in the White House, and this would be an ideal time to photograph all of these objects in situ, while the Clintons were out, because of security reasons. So those are the pictures that you will see in the White House Collection of American Crafts, in the book. So that was a rather fast turnaround for that. [00:14:26]

LLOYD HERMAN: Who was the photographer? Was he the White House photographer, or from Abrams?

MICHAEL MONROE: No, no, he was a photographer hired by—Taylor is his last name, and I can add that spelling.

LLOYD HERMAN: Spell that.

MICHAEL MONROE: Taylor [John Bigelow Taylor].

LLOYD HERMAN: Taylor. Oh.

MICHAEL MONROE: Taylor, yes. So that was in November, and for the following year, then, the book was published.

LLOYD HERMAN: Which was in '94, the year after the Year of American Craft.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes. Right. And then it was decided after the pieces were at the White House—they were there for about a year and a half, and every time I would go over across the street from the Renwick to sort of check on where they were and their conditions, I was rather stunned to learn these objects were moving all over the place [laughs] within the White House.

So, you know, a museum curator likes to think of displaying something and leaving it set, protected, in place. So this quickly turned into becoming a working collection so that the pieces were being handled and moved and used in everyday settings within the White House that I had no knowledge of, and it actually was quite a good thing I didn't. [Laughs.] Ironically, no piece was ever damaged, and no piece ever went missing.

And then it was decided by the Smithsonian American Art Museum—then called?

LLOYD HERMAN: The National Museum of American Art. Yes.

MICHAEL MONROE: [Laughs.] But they would travel the exhibition across the United States. So that exhibition then launched in 1995 and then traveled the United States for 11 years, to many different venues. [00:16:12]

LLOYD HERMAN: But it began the tour not at the Renwick, but at the National Museum of American Art.

MICHAEL MONROE: Right. We did not have an opening in our schedule, and the Smithsonian American Art Museum did. And it was quite a spectacular installation and really showed the pieces in a different setting than in the White House, which I think is a very good learning experience for people to see how context is everything in terms of looking, oftentimes, at objects and how you perceive them.

LLOYD HERMAN: And you had chosen the objects with an idea of context, with how they would fit in the historical furnishings at the White House?

MICHAEL MONROE: That's right. And that challenged the notions, either by color or technique or by style. But that—to emphasize the continuation of craft and variations on a theme throughout history, which we can find going all the way back to the cave periods, of artists who were using techniques that are still used today, but that in times—they reflect the times in which they were made, and sometimes they borrow from earlier traditions.

LLOYD HERMAN: So the collection is now in the Clinton Library, rather than in the White House.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes. At the end of the exhibition tour, it was decided—there were three choices for that collection, and it's important for people to know this, because there's been always a lot of questions. Whenever I toured and gave lectures on the exhibition, one of the first questions people would ask is, "Well, what's going to happen to this collection?" [00:17:49]

So the Clintons had provided three options that certainly could work, and one was that they could remain as part of the White House Collection. So that was one choice. The second choice was that they could go to the Clinton Presidential Library when it was eventually built, as part of the history of the Clinton administration. Or the third choice was to give it to the Smithsonian Institution.

The Renwick had already had in its permanent collection many of the same pieces by the same artists, so that did not seem to be a good use. If it stayed with the White House—as you know, around the Beltway in Washington, D.C., there are hundreds of storage facilities filled with objects that have been given to the White House that may not be of the kind of quality or appropriateness to go to a presidential library. The White House is also not a lending institution, so once those pieces went into storage, they probably would never been seen again unless there was a first lady that was interested in bringing them back out. So the choice was to go to the presidential library in—Clinton—

LLOYD HERMAN: It's in—

MICHAEL MONROE: Clinton? No.

LLOYD HERMAN: Clinton Library, but it's in Arkansas.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes, Clinton Library in—

LLOYD HERMAN: I can't think if it's in Little Rock or—

MICHAEL MONROE: Little Rock. That's it, on the river.

LLOYD HERMAN: Yes.

MICHAEL MONROE: So that's where it went, and as I said, five of those pieces are on display, and that's where the pieces are now. And because the presidential libraries can be lending institutions, that opened the opportunity for any museum in the future to borrow from a presidential library. And it seemed best that the artists would get the most visibility from that, as opposed to the other choices. So it was decided that the pieces would go there.

LLOYD HERMAN: Good. Well, after the—is there more about that collection?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, I just think that—as I said, the show traveled for 11 years, so—

LLOYD HERMAN: Eleven years?

MICHAEL MONROE: Eleven years. So that was quite remarkable.

LLOYD HERMAN: No damage either? [00:20:00]

MICHAEL MONROE: No, just one little piece got a little dent on it, but it was repaired.

I think for me the most important part is that the title of the exhibition, because it included the word "White House," attracted huge audiences around the country. Anytime you use the White House name, of course, that certainly helps to drive attendance. But what was interesting is that, because of the White House name, it did bring a huge swath of audiences that had never been exposed to craft at the level that it was practiced by the artists today.

So that opened the eyes of enormous numbers of people. Because people in the museum world, in craft and design, are very conscious and aware of all of these artists producing these extraordinary things, but the average kind of public may not have that exposure to it. So this really hit a new audience, and every new museum director dreams of, How do you get to reach a new audience? And that is certainly what this exhibit accomplished. It was extraordinary. And I think that's my proudest moment, is helping those artists to achieve a broader audience.

LLOYD HERMAN: Well, undoubtedly. You traveled to give talks—

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes, I did.

LLOYD HERMAN: —at many of the venues where the traveling exhibition was shown. Did you have—have you either at the Renwick or—we'll get into "since then" in a few minutes—continued to give talks and jury shows and have a presence around the country?

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes, I do a lot of jurying at competitions around the country. Today, of course, it's all done in your living room with technology, whereas we used to have to travel to these places. And I also write catalogue essays for artists. I write a lot of letters of recommendation for grants for artists, and I do a lot of mentoring of artists. I help them with their careers and give them critiques. [00:22:06]

Because in the craft world today there are a disproportionate number of artists versus those people who are in the curatorial world. So these artists are operating oftentimes in a vacuum without any feedback except from their husband or wife or grandmother, which needs to be discounted immediately. [Laughs.] So there's this real need there for them to talk to somebody about their work that can be honest. So I probably have at any one time 15 or 20 artists, since I left the Renwick, that I talk to regularly and critique their work and point out different things. And that's given me a great deal of joy, so I've been very actively involved since my retirement, serving on boards and so forth.

LLOYD HERMAN: Well, let's go into that. Why did you at that point decide to retire?

MICHAEL MONROE: [Laughs.] Well, I found the Smithsonian experience quite extraordinary, and there's virtually nothing like it in the world. It's a phenomenal, phenomenal opportunity. And when I came in '74, and after 23 years, I became frustrated [laughs] with the numbers of levels of paperwork and red tape that evolved over the years.

LLOYD HERMAN: Approvals.

MICHAEL MONROE: Approvals, yes. And I found it started to cut down, really, on the creative aspect and the sense that you could move quickly and experiment, take risks, and so forth. And that's not what the Smithsonian is about, nor should it be, really—maybe, perhaps. I mean, it's a very storied history of scholarship and so forth, so it's—I think that there have been some signs that they're listening up and becoming, I think, a little more outrageous and daring. So I had had that experience, so I wanted to go off and explore other ideas. [00:24:16]

LLOYD HERMAN: Had you any idea what you wanted to pursue when you took retirement?

MICHAEL MONROE: No, I just needed some time off. One of the things I had always wanted to do was own my own gallery, but I knew I didn't have deep, deep pockets, so I knew that wasn't going to happen. But then I was hired by the Peter Joseph Gallery in New York City. Peter Joseph was a very wealthy man who collected and had a great affection for handmade furniture, the likes of Albert Paley, Wendell Castle, some of the great names—Garry Knox Bennett—in American furniture.

He opened a very beautiful space on Fifth Avenue and 57th Street called the Peter Joseph Gallery, in which he showed the leading studio furniture makers in America. So he hired me to be the president of the gallery, so I went to New York and lived for two years, and then got that experience out of my system, which I found very interesting, being on another leg of the stool. And that stool consists of the museum, the art dealer, the—

LLOYD HERMAN: Teacher?

MICHAEL MONROE: The teacher and so forth. So that would give me that other experience of that. The gallery, however—although it had been in business about six years at that point—Peter Joseph developed cancer, which was fatal, so the gallery then closed.

LLOYD HERMAN: So that's the reason that that chapter of your—that the gallery closed. Yes.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes, and then for a brief period of time, two years, I became the executive director of the American Craft Council. [00:26:02]

LLOYD HERMAN: And that was also in New York.

MICHAEL MONROE: That was also in New York City as well. And then after that I returned to Washington, D.C.—which I had never left, but commuted back and forth during those years—and worked with collectors on their collecting, continued to mentor artists, serve on boards. And then, in 2004, I was offered another opportunity, which is here, but I don't know if you want to go there yet.

LLOYD HERMAN: Okay. Well, if there's nothing more about that period before you came out here—

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, one of the things I was most pleased about at the Renwick was, of course, to see the power of the Smithsonian Institution about giving recognition to artists and what that meant and how it changed their lives and so forth. And that was a very thrilling thing to see. But one of my proudest achievements, I think, was to start the fellowship program that is paid for by the James Renwick Alliance, an independent support group at the time.

LLOYD HERMAN: Starting when?

MICHAEL MONROE: That was starting, I think—I would say probably '88, '89. And I think since then we've had 20, 25 scholars come to Washington, D.C., from around the country to study the collections and to be exposed to the Smithsonian's collection. As you know, many universities in our country do not offer the decorative arts and contemporary craft history as a degree that you—so that there is a real lack in America of scholars to be curators and to write seriously about craft.

LLOYD HERMAN: Do you feel that's—

MICHAEL MONROE: So I thought, as a way to sort of meet that need, we would start this fellowship program, and I think it's been very successful. It continues to go on and gives people an opportunity to delve in areas that are neglected by university art history departments, who tend often to shun craft as being a secondary art form. [00:28:11]

LLOYD HERMAN: Does that continue to be funded by the James Renwick Alliance?

MICHAEL MONROE: To my knowledge, yes, it is. And it's an annual award, and it's been given since that. Matthew Kangas—

LLOYD HERMAN: K-A-N-G-A-S.

MICHAEL MONROE: —well known here in the Northwest as a writer, scholar, and so forth, and critic—was our first fellow, so there has been one every year since then.

LLOYD HERMAN: How long does that fellowship last, then? A year?

MICHAEL MONROE: A year, yes. It's a year and—

LLOYD HERMAN: So they spend a year in Washington.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes, so they travel back and forth depending on their own geographical location and so forth. So that is an opportunity.

LLOYD HERMAN: So after you left the Smithsonian and the Peter Joseph Gallery, say a little bit more about your tenure as executive director of the American Craft Council.

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, as I said, I was there only a couple of years, so it was—I found that it was not a good fit for me. I found that being the executive director was really not suited to my personality—

LLOYD HERMAN: Because it was more desk work and not involvement with artists?

MICHAEL MONROE: It was much more desk work and not direct contact with the object, or direct contact with the artists, that a curator has and even a director of a museum has, even though that can be a little more administrative. As you know, the Renwick is part of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, which—a lot of the administrative work of the Renwick was handled by those people, so that allowed the person in charge of the Renwick to have the luxury of having more time to intimately get involved with artists. [00:30:08]

So that became a very difficult time for me, those years, in terms of not being able to have that kind of direct access, and it made me realize for the first time in my life how important the direct connection with an artist is, input and being able to see and shape with your hands their career, their exhibition, their way of calling attention to the world.

So the executive position, I found, through that experience, was not for me. It was one of the, perhaps, great learning lessons in my life, that I stepped outside of my realm. But it wasn't until I did it that I found that it was not a good experience for me, a very sad experience for me. But it really made me realize my love was working with the artist, the object, interpreting it, and the hands-on, which was not part of that experience.

LLOYD HERMAN: You said a little earlier that you, then, after leaving the American Craft Council, began working with collectors in the Washington, D.C., area, where you had continued to have a home.

MICHAEL MONROE: Right.

LLOYD HERMAN: And I assume that during that period that you worked in New York, that your wife, Bernadette, continued to teach?

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes, and then she took a year off from teaching and joined me in New York City. So I was in New York City a total of about four years. I had an apartment there, but I would commute on weekends and so forth. And then, one year, she took a sabbatical and joined me in New York.

LLOYD HERMAN: So how did it come about that—were you actively looking for something else to do, other than being self-employed and helping collectors? [00:32:10]

MICHAEL MONROE: No. Actually, I wasn't at all. I was not at all familiar, really, with the Northwest as a region in the country except for the wonderful artists that they produced, particularly in ceramics and jewelry and so forth. So I was very content doing what I was doing. But my love throughout my whole life since age six, as we've talked about, has been museums. And one day, I received a call in 2003 from a man out here in Seattle—actually, Tacoma. His name was Mark Haley, and he was involved in the crafts and the art world in this Tacoma and Seattle region. And he told me about [coughs]—excuse me.

LLOYD HERMAN: Here, have some water. Mark Haley, H-A-L-E-Y.

MICHAEL MONROE: Then he told me about the Bellevue Arts Museum. The Bellevue Arts Museum has been around since the late 1960s. It was in a suburb of Seattle, 10 miles east of Seattle, and was a museum as an outgrowth of a street fair and started by a developer in Bellevue, Kemper Freeman's family. And they decided to do something to bring Seattle people across, over to Bellevue. So as developers of shopping centers and so forth, they created the Bellevue Arts Fair in the 1960s, which was a very successful, highly regarded art fair at that time. [00:34:11]

And out of that, eventually, evolves the museum. The museum was for craft and design, primarily Northwest art, and was a very nice complement to the other museums in the area. So the history of that museum evolves up until the point of about 1995, when they decide to build a major building. In 1995, the fund-raising climate in the Northwest was extremely wealthy with money from Microsoft and major tech companies and so forth, so there was a huge amount of optimism and so forth. So it was fairly easy to raise money at that particular point in time, so they decided to go from a 10,000-square-foot Bellevue Arts Museum, which was located on the third floor of Kemper Freeman's shopping center. So, it was a—

LLOYD HERMAN: Bellevue Square.

MICHAEL MONROE: Bellevue Square. So here was a museum on the third floor of a shopping center, which was not the role model for museums, historically, developing in this country. More of a Japanese—I think, Lloyd, you know about that.

LLOYD HERMAN: But just to inject, I think before that it had been in what had been a funeral home, and so—

MICHAEL MONROE: That's right, but first a little red schoolhouse.

LLOYD HERMAN: Oh. So it went through the growing pains that many small museums or historical societies have, of moving to sort of a found building to eventually—

MICHAEL MONROE: Absolutely.

LLOYD HERMAN: —a purpose-built building as that one. And the architect of that building was—

MICHAEL MONROE: Of the new one? Of the new building? [00:36:00]

LLOYD HERMAN: Of the new building.

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, it's Steven Holl.

LLOYD HERMAN: Steven Holl, H-O-L-L.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes. So in 1995, they decided to go from the third floor of the shopping center across the street to a vacant lot and build a 45,000-square-foot museum, which was a big leap in terms of scale and staffing and so forth. Because there was easy access to a lot of generosity from the tech world in the Northwest, the Bellevue Arts Museum raised $25 [million] in a fairly short period of time, and then hired an architect to design the museum. And his name is Steven Holl—H-O-L-L—who is a Washington State native, now a highly, highly regarded and well-known architect worldwide. But they felt they wanted somebody local to design the museum, which was entirely appropriate.

So they built the museum, and it was to open in 2001. And it opened to great fanfare in quite an extraordinary, quite beautiful building, a very powerful piece of architecture. And they began to do exhibitions and do beautiful publications and so forth.

So they started to run out of funds very quickly, because they were operating on a 45,000-square-foot building from a 10,000-square-foot. And from my point of view, I think they failed to multiply all of the costs. For instance, your electricity bill, a lot of basic services are—jumping from 10 to 40 is a big jump in staffing. And the ambitious program. They did extraordinary exhibitions and so forth, so there's— [00:38:01]

LLOYD HERMAN: Michael, if I may interject—

MICHAEL MONROE: Oh, yes. Yes, absolutely.

LLOYD HERMAN: It was also, I think, because they had changed from a very craft-centric art museum—

MICHAEL MONROE: Right.

LLOYD HERMAN: —to something that was much more esoteric and conceptual. And I think they also lost their audience. A new director had come in, and she had very different ideas, and the collection, small though it was,

had been given away earlier to the Tacoma Art Museum, or perhaps on long-term loan, I'm not sure. But I think it was that, to a great extent, not only had they not budgeted appropriately and raised the money, but that the attendance dropped off because of these very advanced contemporary art exhibitions that no longer relied on that kind of craft backbone that the art fair was, that established it in the first place.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes, I think that's very important to add. And, as you said, this new director that came in after the person prior to her, who had raised all the money and ran a very successful—

LLOYD HERMAN: Let's give her credit. It was Diane Douglas who had been the director—

MICHAEL MONROE: Diane Douglas. Right.

LLOYD HERMAN: —and she raised the money.

MICHAEL MONROE: And as what happens oftentimes with so many museum directors after a major building campaign and years of struggling away, they—you know, they're exhausted, and then they need to move on to something else. So the director that replaced her is the one that really wanted to turn the museum into a very avant-garde setting for exhibitions, which is even difficult to do in New York City, where there are—the Museum of Modern Art is avant-garde, but they still have the *Water Lilies*, Monet's *Water Lilies,* nearby. So in Bellevue and in the Northwest, to have a museum totally devoted to super avant-garde art, as a steady diet over a period of years, just wasn't going to make it. [00:40:05]

So there were a number of factors that came in there that really closed the museum quite suddenly, and it remained closed for a year and a half to almost two years. It was quite tragic to have this extraordinarily new building sit there. So they appointed an interim director, and they had three staff members in the building for about a year and a half, just maintaining the building and so forth. And they began to search around the country for somebody who could come and revive the museum again as its original purpose, under which Diane Douglas had operated for several years, and that was craft and design.

So they went back to that mission. They held community town halls all over the Northwest, saying, "What should the Bellevue Arts Museum be?" And out of that grew this notion of, "Go back to your original roots: craft art and design." So that's what they did. And they had a budget of $3 million a year, and they had decided that they would not reopen again unless they had two things in place: an executive director and $3 million in the bank, because that was the annual budget.

So the concept was, Before we can open, we had to have $3 million in the bank. That would take care of the budget for the first year. And during that first year, the executive director would be raising the money for the next three years and leapfrog, therefore, in the future. That was the concept.

LLOYD HERMAN: So it did actually close. Because it sounded like what you were saying was that they sort of were in a holding pattern and it was open.

MICHAEL MONROE: No. They were open for about a year and a half, and then they closed. They were closed down because of the new director who did not take the opportunity to educate the community about these new avant-garde exhibitions. [00:42:04]

[Audio break.]

LLOYD HERMAN: Okay, we can continue.

MICHAEL MONROE: So anyway, I received calls from the interim director, Mark Haley, of Tacoma—a nearby city, here, to Seattle—to tell me about an opportunity, that this museum, the Bellevue Arts Museum, was looking for a director who could rejuvenate and reopen and set the museum back on a course to success. So I immediately jumped at the chance, because it had now been almost 10 years since I had been out of the museum world. [Laughs.] And now I'm age 64 and have lived in Washington, D.C., for 30 years. And I receive this call, and Mark Haley laid out everything about this place, and I thought, This is a total disaster. [They laugh.] And at age 64, what am I even dreaming about, getting married again to a museum? [They laugh.]

So I spoke to my wife, and we said, "Yes, let's do it." So we tore up all our roots in Washington, D.C., and this evolved out of my love for art museums. [Laughs.]

LLOYD HERMAN: But you kept your house in Reston.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes, I kept that as a backup.

LLOYD HERMAN: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL MONROE: So what happened is that they had—I was interviewed in April. They interviewed four people. Three of them were young people, and one was a senior citizen, myself.

LLOYD HERMAN: What year was this?

MICHAEL MONROE: 2004, and I'm 64.

LLOYD HERMAN: Okay. Yes.

MICHAEL MONROE: The young people who applied were frightened to take it because they were in the period of their lives where they were resume-building, and they did not want to take on the risk, enormous risk, to take this as—it could be another failure. And, of course, I knew it could be another failure as well, but dangle a museum in front of me and I'm there. [00:44:12]

Anyway, so they had promised—I was interviewed and then hired, and they promised me by the time I arrived in July of that same year, 2004, that they would have enough money, the $3 million required, to reopen. They said by the time I get here in July, they would have that money. So we pack up everything, move across town.

LLOYD HERMAN: Across the country.

[They laugh.]

MICHAEL MONROE: Country. Across the country. So the first day on the job, I find out there was no $3 million, and all—they had only raised $600,000.

LLOYD HERMAN: How much?

MICHAEL MONROE: Six hundred. So here I am, a new kid in town, not knowing the social elite of this country—of the Northwest and so forth—having to raise money for an institution that had spectacularly failed. Its failure was published on the front page of the *New York Times* and so forth. So now I was in a terrible shape to get the museum open. And people did not want to give to the museum because they said, "You had your chance, and you failed, and you have to show us again." But how can I show them when I didn't have the money?

I don't know whether we should stop here or not, a second. Can we stop?

[Audio break.]

LLOYD HERMAN: Okay.

MICHAEL MONROE: So I had a real struggle trying to raise the money to reopen this magnificent building and the opportunity here and so forth. One day, I did receive a phone call from a foundation in America, and they said that they had heard that I was back in the museum world after a hiatus of being gone for 10 years, and that this foundation had heard about the failure of the Bellevue Arts Museum in its new building and so forth. And they said they felt that if anybody could revive this museum, I was the person that could do it. So I was the recipient, the Bellevue Arts Museum, of enough money beyond the $600,000 needed to reach the $3 million as a gift. [00:46:39]

LLOYD HERMAN: And this foundation was?

MICHAEL MONROE: The Windgate Charitable Foundation, and it was because of them that the Bellevue Arts Museum reached its $3 million mark, so that we could reopen the museum, and to carry the mission forward. So that was an extraordinary gift, and that allowed us to start to, quote-unquote, show the community what this museum could be. So I know I need to stay five years to make that happen. It's almost like any new business you start. It takes you at least three years to get an inkling of whether you're going to make it. Five years, you kind of know [laughs] whether you're going to make it or not. And that's just a rough rule of thumb.

So that's why I stayed five years, got the museum back on its feet, doing extraordinary exhibitions and catalogues, getting the community back in the doors and so forth. So it was the most exciting thing I ever did in my life, very different than the Smithsonian. As I said earlier, in the Smithsonian, if you wanted to get an idea done, it might take two or three years. But with this museum, I could come in the door in the morning with an idea, and by noon I could start to work on that and judge it and value it in a much quicker way. [00:48:10]

So I felt like I went from, you know, this enormously respected institution, which I am so grateful for, that I had that experience, and to Lloyd Herman who really helped make it happen—to go from that to this other was amazing, and it was just phenomenal. And both parts, both situations, have their very important place in America. So this gave me a chance to really do the kind of work that we did at the Renwick, on a different level and in such an important place, because the Northwest does not have a lot of venues. And yet again, there are

the—

LLOYD HERMAN: Does not have a lot of what?

MICHAEL MONROE: A lot of venues for artists to show—

LLOYD HERMAN: Oh, yes.

MICHAEL MONROE: —in terms of private galleries, or for the region. In fact, there's—we consider the Northwest: Washington, Alaska, Oregon, Montana, Idaho, and so forth. So there weren't a lot of venues that were open to the numbers of artists out here. Not many museums were paying attention at all to what was going on in the contemporary field and what was going on in American craft and so forth. So it was a really important role to play—

LLOYD HERMAN: Did you inherit the board?

MICHAEL MONROE: I inherited about eight members of the board, out of about 20. Many had left after the museum closed, and there was a handful of very dedicated board members who stayed on, who were extraordinarily helpful, and as a small group of people we really worked hard. And because I did not have the money to hire experienced staff, because that would have cost too much, I had to rely on interns from the University of Washington's museumology program, and many young people who were getting their first job. [00:50:11]

So I felt I was not only directing the museum, raising money, but I was running a graduate program [laughs] in museumology. But it was such an extraordinary group of people. They were all so young and enthusiastic, and I brought out my professorial background of teaching at the State University of New York and so forth. So together, there was this enthusiasm and this fight to make this organization survive, and it was really an extraordinary experience.

LLOYD HERMAN: And did—

MICHAEL MONROE: And these young people have all gone on to really good jobs.

LLOYD HERMAN: That's what I was going to ask.

MICHAEL MONROE: [Laughs.] Nora Atkinson, for instance, was a University of Washington museumology student. We hired her as an intern, and then—not "hired," had her as an intern—and then she became a curator at the Bellevue Arts Museum and then went on to the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery, under the auspices of a generous gift from Lloyd Herman to make that position possible. So there's a wonderful linkage between all of these.

But again, the Renwick and the Bellevue Arts Museum really focus their attention on a whole group of artists working in materials—with clay, glass, wood, fiber, and metal—and bringing attention to them in a way that major museums don't do in cities, major cities.

So we played a very important role to artists, not only in the Northwest, but also from some of the Asian countries in the Pacific Ring region. We launched many careers during that five-year period. One of the artists went on to have a one-person show at the Museum of Modern Art because of the Bellevue Arts Museum and the catalogue they saw, and other artists have gone on and become very accomplished. And it's that exhibition and it's that catalogue, which—even today, with computer technology, I think the physical handing of a catalogue to someone has a tangible kind of thing, and that was my goal there. And we produced in five years about 10 really significant catalogues. [00:52:30]

LLOYD HERMAN: I think that was a very significant thing to do, to always have a catalogue. It reminds me a little about what Janet Kardon, K-A-R-D-O-N, once said when she was director of the American Craft Museum. She said, "Without a catalogue, an exhibition is like Kleenex." It just disappears, and there's no record of it.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes. It's ephemeral. It's absolutely ephemeral.

LLOYD HERMAN: What exhibitions at the Bellevue Arts Museum—and I wanted to say you changed the name from "Bellevue Art Museum" to "Arts," I believe. And it's—

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, now, you did that. You were the one who [laughs]—you were on the advisory committee.

LLOYD HERMAN: Oh, I was, but I didn't remember—

MICHAEL MONROE: And you, I think—oh, no, you thought it should have an S, and so—

LLOYD HERMAN: Oh, I don't remember that.

[They laugh.]

MICHAEL MONROE: That's okay. It gave us a lot of leeway.

LLOYD HERMAN: But the focus on craft and design, what exhibitions are you particularly proud of at the Bellevue Arts Museum?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, I think it was fortuitous in a way that, prior to my coming here, the Bellevue Arts Museum had signed a contract with a traveling exhibition of Sonny and Gloria Kamm—K-A-M-M—and they have perhaps the largest and most extraordinary collection of teapots in the United States. The number is in the thousands. Anyway, this was an exhibition that was already booked, so we had to honor that, because not doing it would have cost us more than to do it. [00:54:09]

So I inherited this exhibition, and it was our first exhibition, so all eyes were on the museum about what its first exhibition was going to be. [Laughs.] So there was a little bit of concern about, "What, a teapot exhibit? Is this serious?" And so forth. [Laughs.] But it was a very large exhibition, and we opened with that, and it turned out to be a very popular exhibition, as it has been everywhere it's gone. So what it did is, it showed the Bellevue Arts Museum going back to its roots of craft and design and so forth.

So I linked that also to an exhibition of Albert Paley's work, an artist that's not well known on the West Coast. And those were because they were convenient. It takes a couple of years, as you know, to curate an exhibition, so we had to bring in exhibitions that were exciting and that would quickly establish what our new mission was, and then work very hard through educational programming to get people back into the fold.

So it became easier each year to raise the $3 million budget, and finally people recovered to the extent that they now had an identity of what our museum was, and that it was in addition to the extraordinary variety of museums that the Northwest has, from the Museum of Glass in Tacoma to the Tacoma Art Museum to the Seattle Art Museum to Bellevue Arts Museum. Each one of these institutions complemented one another in a way that was very helpful in their entirety of presenting a really outstanding experience for visitors, and to keep the standards very high. [00:56:08]

So Bellevue Arts Museum started a series of biennial exhibitions [BAM Biennial], every two years, which hadn't perhaps been done in the Northwest before. We went through each of the media—clay, glass, wood, fiber, and metal—every two years, and I'm not sure that had been done in the past, taking that idea. But that was, I think, one of the extraordinary gifts that we did, because it brought out artists nobody had ever heard of, working at very high levels within this huge Northwest area. The Northwestern states of America are gigantic. So out of those exhibitions artists have gone on to very successful careers, because nobody knew they existed, because they didn't have the opportunities to exhibit.

Again, we go back to the notion that there are many, many more artists in the country than exhibiting opportunities exist for them. So Bellevue Arts Museum has found very talented people that nobody had heard of before, coming from Montana, Idaho, where they don't have much exposure. So it's fulfilled its role at, I believe, a very high level, and so forth.

LLOYD HERMAN: Besides the Northwest biennials, are there other thematic exhibitions or others that come to mind that were great successes?

MICHAEL MONROE: Let's see. I'm sorry, I forgot to bring my list [laughs] of exhibits, which is my clue.

LLOYD HERMAN: Oh, actually—

MICHAEL MONROE: Oh, do you—you don't have the Bellevue one, do you?

LLOYD HERMAN: No, I don't. I don't.

MICHAEL MONROE: You have the other one.

LLOYD HERMAN: I just have the Renwick. [00:57:53]

MICHAEL MONROE: Oh, yes. No, I think we did not do a lot of thematic exhibitions, only because the biennials really fulfilled that role. We focused on a lot of one-person exhibitions, but always combining them with—you cannot really do a steady diet of one-person exhibitions in a museum the size of Bellevue Arts Museum. So you have, as you have intimated—thematic exhibitions are an excellent way to bring people into a museum, because

they tend to be very diverse in technique and idea and so forth. So it reaches a very broad audience in that way, whereas if you don't like the one person's exhibition and art, you lose that audience.

So it was always about balancing some historical design exhibitions, jewelry, ceramics, and so forth. We did a big exhibition of Robert Sperry's [work], who was a well-known Northwest ceramic artist teaching at the University of Washington. So we've taken and done exhibitions of people who have not had the due kind of respect in the Northwest. Ironically, many of these artists had respect all over the United States, but not necessarily within their own backyard.

LLOYD HERMAN: Michael, were there other exhibitions besides the biennial that you originated there, or took from other sources, that you're particularly—that were crowd-pleasers or helped build your audience or maybe secure more funding? Because funding is always a concern for a museum that isn't government-run like the Smithsonian. [00:59:49]

MICHAEL MONROE: Right. Well, as you know, it's important to have a balanced exhibition schedule and to delve into a variety of media, time periods, and so forth. And I think one of the exhibitions that attracted a huge audience was a small exhibition, but quite exquisitely curated by another institution, and that was to show the art that the Japanese had done during the internment camps here in America. That was quite an extraordinary exhibition, and it showed the full variety, from paintings to crafts to the struggle to express themselves through limited means, through limited material sources and so forth. And I think that—

LLOYD HERMAN: Did that help build—

MICHAEL MONROE: —that brought in a huge audience. And it was so interesting, because throughout my career as a museum person, every day I would take time—five, 10 minutes—and walk through the galleries, just to put me back in touch with sanity and the work that artists make—

LLOYD HERMAN: In the gallery when there were visitors there, to observe then? Or—

MICHAEL MONROE: Sometimes with—yes, with visitors, too. Sometimes just alone, but oftentimes with visitors, because I had to always be in touch with, Who were these people? and so forth.

And what was so interesting with that exhibition is that there was total silence in that exhibition. Nobody spoke. Nobody talked about anything. They were just riveted, and you knew that these artists had made some very powerful connection with them. So that was quite an extraordinary experience. It's an exhibition that traveled, but did not really travel very widely, and I don't remember at the moment—I can add that certainly—who did that exhibition. We try to be very mindful, as most museums do, of their community in terms of— [01:02:06]

[END OF MONROE18_2OF2_SD_TRACK03.]

MICHAEL MONROE: —the makeup of their community and so forth. So that's always an interesting thing. Thirty percent of the community in Bellevue is Asian.

LLOYD HERMAN: Thirty percent?

MICHAEL MONROE: Thirty percent, which is quite a high number, so we're very cognizant now of the art of those communities.

LLOYD HERMAN: I would think that would largely be Chinese and Indian.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes, that's right.

LLOYD HERMAN: Because of the tech industry.

MICHAEL MONROE: Exactly. Exactly.

[Audio break.]

LLOYD HERMAN: How about public programs and other ways to attract audiences?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, public programs, of course, are integral to any part of any museum, so we offer a huge variety in hands-on instruction, children's classes. Family Day is a really successful day, where the entire first floor of the museum, which is a large public space, is turned over to children and their parents. The parents cannot leave. They come, and they sit, and they work with their children. They cannot leave. It's not a babysitting service.

LLOYD HERMAN: So it's not a day-care service.

[They laugh.]

MICHAEL MONROE: No, and that has been extraordinarily successful, and they are usually related to the exhibitions on hand.

And we also found that—we did a gallery that is what we call the Community [Education] Gallery, and that turned out to be a very successful program. People always want to know what museums or nonprofits—or museums, particularly—are doing for a set of people, artists and so forth, who cannot get into museums. So we developed a high school program, or other groups of artists that have formed together based on a medium or something, say, woodturners and so forth. And we have done a number of high school exhibitions in this space, and the exhibitions are juried, oftentimes, by—there's a museum curator—oftentimes by the students' peers. Each piece is presented and framed at a very high, professional level. A student is hired to write the panel—not hired but asked—to write the panel that describes their school and their program. [00:02:31]

So it's treated at a very high level, and it's been an extraordinarily popular program to bring in people that don't normally get a chance to have exposure. But the quality has to remain, and I insisted upon that, that it has to remain at the very highest level. Because that's the standard.

LLOYD HERMAN: Well, this leads inevitably to the question about—why and when did you decide to retire from that job?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, I decided that it would take me five years. And the board of directors, when they hired me, they said, "Well, when will we know if we're going to make it or not?" And I said, "A minimum of three years." And they said, "Oh, we can't wait that long. No, we don't have that much time. We can't wait that long." And I said, "I'm sorry. You're going to have to wait, because any new director—it's going to take them one year to learn the community. The second year, the implementation comes, of their program. And the third year you start to be able to measure that quality." I said, "At the end of three years, we'll have a pretty good idea. At the end of five years, I guarantee you we will know. And I can't predict how it's going to turn out, but I will tell you at the end of three years." [00:03:52]

And at the end of three years, I said, "We are going to make it." I just knew that we were going to make it. I had seen enough change and so forth. I left at age 70, so I was there for the five years. And in retrospect, I'm sorry I did leave. [Laughs.] I would still like to be involved in the museum on a day-to-day basis, but I'm 78 now. It would have been fun to stay a few more years to really solidly lock it down, but it's been an extraordinary experience to dip in at age 64 and find these new talents, nurture them, bring them forth, and so forth. So it's been my life's work.

LLOYD HERMAN: Well, you retired, but the current exhibition at the Bellevue Arts Museum is on the teaching artists from the Pratt Fine Arts Center in Seattle, so clearly you have not left—

MICHAEL MONROE: No. [Laughs.]

LLOYD HERMAN: —the field or the museum, only—

MICHAEL MONROE: No, it's pretty hard. It's pretty hard not to. You know, I—there's a very famous artist in America that works in the material of glass, and about—oh, golly, maybe 16, 17 years ago, this artist wrote a letter to all of his galleries and all the people that had ever bought a piece of his and museum curators and everything. And it was a form letter as a businessman would write, about the fact that he was retiring. You know, this is a person that was probably 40, 50 years old. And I won't name this person, but I was absolutely stunned because I had never heard of people in the visual arts that wrote a letter saying they were retiring.

LLOYD HERMAN: [Laughs.]

MICHAEL MONROE: Opera singers, ballet dancers, they have to. They don't have a choice. [Laughs.] I mean, actors go on forever, but to say in the visual arts world that you were retiring was—it stunned me, and still to this day. [00:06:10]

So that's how I feel. I feel like I've never really retired. I don't have to unless I can't spell words anymore, but it was—I just never think of people that are passionately involved in what they're doing as, you know, retiring, especially from the visual arts.

LLOYD HERMAN: Michael, you may not name him, but I assume you're talking about William Morris.

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes, I am.

[They laugh.]

LLOYD HERMAN: Who moved to Hawaii, and—

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes. You know, and I—it was just—it struck me. Because I thought, Would a real artist ever—did Picasso ever write a letter: "I'm retiring"?

LLOYD HERMAN: Yes. Creative people remain creative.

MICHAEL MONROE: As long as—yes.

LLOYD HERMAN: Maybe they find another avenue for creativity.

MICHAEL MONROE: Exactly. Anyway, so I think, you know, I've never really retired. You know? I just keep reemerging and so forth, because I can't—the feedback that you get, and the satisfaction that you get, of helping and nurturing and providing opportunities for artists is my greatest pleasure of all.

LLOYD HERMAN: What are you involved in currently, at age 79?

MICHAEL MONROE: Seventy-eight. [Laughs.]

LLOYD HERMAN: Seventy-eight. Sorry.

[They laugh.]

MICHAEL MONROE: At 78, well, I am—actually, well, I'm not in anything at the moment. Not anything at the moment that I know of, though it might be coming.

LLOYD HERMAN: Because I remember you've been—during the period, I guess, before you came to Bellevue, you were working for theguild.com as their artistic supervisor and—

MICHAEL MONROE: Yes. Right. [Actually, artfulhome.com. –MM] That's called the Artful Home. It was one of the first—

LLOYD HERMAN: An online art sale. Yes.

MICHAEL MONROE: —online art sale things, and I do a lot of jurying for them—

LLOYD HERMAN: Still?

MICHAEL MONROE: —and alert them to keep their quality as high as possible and so forth. And I still jury exhibitions online, and I continue to advise artists and so forth. [00:08:06]

LLOYD HERMAN: Do you have any observations about how the craft and design fields have changed in the course of your professional life?

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, I would say—I think it's a hard thing to do that when you're older and looking back, yet you have the perspective and you have the knowledge to talk about these changes. And at the same time, I'm reluctant to do it because—am I capable of judging new technologies without prejudices and harkening back to the good old days? So I'm very reluctant to do that.

Of course, now, I question whether young people today have the stamina to learn some of the extraordinarily difficult techniques involved in making. For instance, a well-known metalsmith recently wrote me saying, "I'm very concerned, Michael, that in the next 10 years we're not going to have anybody making hollowware in America," working with silver and three-dimensional hollowware. And as you know—or I know from making it myself when I was a student—producing a piece of hollowware is not an easy [laughs] thing. So these techniques that are so intermeshed with so many of the craft fields demand such a length of time and study. [00:09:58]

I'm wondering if people—and yet, when I say this, I don't want to say that, because I'm not sure about that. But when I see, with jewelry, the laser machine now, it just pops out this jewelry in massive numbers. So this whole world of technology is meshing in ways that are worrisome. And yet it's always been there. Even in the '30s and '40s, there were technologies that came in plastics, and Wendell Castle taking plastics and making chairs and so forth.

So that's the one point where I get reluctant about age on my part, as to whether I should be—well, my general feeling is that the democratization of craft, and that whole Etsy movement, and the blurring of all those lines, has come through social media and the computer. So that is—are those traditions of making 2,000 glaze samples to hang on a wall, each coated with your experiment—is that still being done? And does it need to be

done?

You know, I also see, in the fine art world, artists who are working in textiles precisely like—and they're super well-known names—that are precisely like Sheila Hicks, when Sheila Hicks was doing this in the 1960s, not getting—many craft artists not getting the kind of attention from that world. And now, suddenly, that world is waking up and thinking, Oh, these are all new people. So when you live long enough, you start to know the sources that many dealers aren't even aware of. What is it, Ruth Akagama, the Oriental woman that did the wire forms that are hanging down? She's just been recognized now as the— [00:12:17]

LLOYD HERMAN: Ruth Asawa? Claire Zeisler?

MICHAEL MONROE: No, Ruth—I have to get that name [Ruth Asawa]. But, anyway, now these are handled by the biggest galleries, and some of them have figures of—some of the artists, or just their work, is being copied. Maybe the new generation doesn't even know of that. But it's just disturbing to me to see, after so many years [laughs] of fighting and struggling, that some of these prejudices [about craft] are breaking down—and I'm happy for that—but when I look at it, I think, Wow, that's a direct take-off from somebody else. You know, that's the Claire Zeislers of the world in textiles. And, you know, you see these things.

So, yes, I think I am concerned, but I have to be careful, because every generation has produced technology that we thought was going to bring the end to the creative process, and yet those people have carried on. So is there a whole group of people I don't know about because of my age? So I'm reluctant to say that just based on what history has shown us over time.

LLOYD HERMAN: I even think about your own son, who is in his 40s—

MICHAEL MONROE: Mm-hmm [affirmative], early 40s.

LLOYD HERMAN: —and how he started out as a painter and became successful, but then he started working with those adhesive plastics.

MICHAEL MONROE: Vinyl, aluminum handles.

LLOYD HERMAN: Vinyl, and that, too, was a new kind of material. And he created—well, maybe not created, but developed—a unique approach to using contemporary materials in that same way. [00:14:06]

MICHAEL MONROE: Right.

LLOYD HERMAN: But I think now what you were just saying, though, harks back—

[Audio break.]

Oh, sorry. So continue, Michael, about the changes that you've seen.

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, I think in university art departments, we've seen a lot of reduction in departments that have been teaching these areas.

LLOYD HERMAN: In the craft media.

MICHAEL MONROE: Right, in the craft media. And of course, it's very familiar to all of us about the GI Bill, if we can go back to that, in which so many returning GIs took advantage of that and really became—

LLOYD HERMAN: After World War II.

MICHAEL MONROE: —that core in state universities across the country, with teaching these skills, oftentimes, which they had to learn some of themselves. But I think that provided a really solid core and a huge boost in America to the handmade. And I think that whole generation was extraordinarily successful at turning out numerous artists, as well as private art schools. So those—the role model at that time, for a young person in the '50s and '60s getting a degree, was that they would teach someday.

LLOYD HERMAN: Did you say in their 50s and 60s?

MICHAEL MONROE: No, in the 1960s and '70s—

LLOYD HERMAN: In the 1950s and '60s. [Laughs.]

MICHAEL MONROE: They would practice their art and follow what their professor did in teaching in art departments, but those professors that had those GI Bills, they kept those jobs forever. So you have this huge

imbalance now of terrific artists being produced, but not the university positions. So, you know, I see that a lot of university art departments are being cut back and so forth, and I'm concerned about that. [00:16:07]

I looked at the *American Craft* magazine, and if you look at the whole history of those and going through those, it seems I see less innovative work, perhaps, now than years ago, less emphasis on exquisite craftsmanship. And again, I say this, but I'm also concerned about, you know, Am I an old person [laughs] talking and reflecting back on that? The golden age, from my point of view, was in the '40s and the '50s and the '60s and the '70s.

LLOYD HERMAN: Yes.

MICHAEL MONROE: But then, I'm in my golden age myself, so am I missing something that's there? I guess there would be a good way to do it by doing research on statistical evidence of university art departments and so forth. I haven't done that, and I don't know if there are studies like that—just what we hear by mouth from one another—or not. But I have talked to several artists who have been on the circuit of the craft shows, who are now older, of course, and of course, they tell me things that they're very concerned about. You know, "Where is the source of some of these materials coming from?" Outsourcing the production of things and so forth.

So the whole—you know, but it's all part of our culture, too, so where do you draw that line? For me, it always comes back down to looking at the object itself that's been created, and judging that on its aesthetic merit and so forth first, and then studying next, Okay, how was this made? What were the steps used? As opposed to making judgments based first on the technology: Well, it's laser-cut; therefore, it's no good. [00:18:03]

I don't want to approach it that way. I want to look at the object and relate to it and see about the vision behind that object and what new vision that artist is presenting us to move us forward in a visual way. And then, secondarily, I want to look at, Okay, how did they get there? And then see how those techniques fit into that, and not the other way around. So I don't want to be prejudiced against any technical advancement, technology, laser cutting, any of this. I don't want to go there. I want to start with the product, and oftentimes we start with the other way around and make judgments.

And I think, when in doubt, always go back for the vision, number one: How extraordinary is that vision? And then, number two: Okay, how did they get there? And to not get those things confused. I think that's more and more the meshing of the craft world with the art world and so forth, because they are blending in ways. So to look at that vision first and then say, Okay, how is it that they got there? and so forth, and not the other way around. And to remain as free of prejudice as possible and always starting afresh with each look and divorcing yourself from [laughs] your prejudices, getting rid of them, and keeping a clear eye and a clear mind.

LLOYD HERMAN: Any concluding observations about your own life in the arts?

MICHAEL MONROE: My own life in the arts?

LLOYD HERMAN: Your own life in the arts.

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, I think my only regret is that I gave up my own visual career as an artist. That would be my only regret.

LLOYD HERMAN: You never wanted to go back? Or never did go back?

MICHAEL MONROE: Occasionally, I go there in my mind, because I—you know, every piece of artwork I look—every interior space, I mean, I'm always redesigning it. I redo everything. Sometimes I go to people's houses and rearrange their furniture like Frank Lloyd Wright did, a fellow Wisconsin native. [00:20:17] [They laugh.]

So I never let go of redoing things or thinking about it. My visual world is virtually—everything I've learned is visual. Even mathematics as a kid, I couldn't learn what one and one is unless I saw two oranges with a plus sign. [Laughs.] So I'm totally visual, and my whole world has been through vision. I was horrible at mathematics, but I was a genius in geometry because I could see circles and squares and triangles. [Laughs.] So it's been a visual world, and fortunately, in my own education, which didn't conclude until I was 32, I took classes in virtually every medium. Quite a few classes, except glassblowing, which evolves after I leave school. But I've done every technique: lithography, mezzotints, some—

LLOYD HERMAN: Well, I think that serves you well in understanding technical adeptness of—

MICHAEL MONROE: It absolutely has, and sometimes when I jury an exhibition that includes 2-D art and sculpture and craft all together—sometimes, the artist will say, "He didn't know anything about visual arts." But in the end you realize visual is visual, and the same principles apply across the whole board in making visual judgments. And the technology shouldn't be the first—again, I'm redundant again, but it has to be really good visually. And then how they got there is important, but really not important in a way. If the visual end product is

lousy, who really cares [laughs] about the process?

LLOYD HERMAN: Yes. I agree.

MICHAEL MONROE: So that's my short answer for people that say, "What is art, and what is craft?" You know, after 80, 79 years—we get asked that all time: "What is the difference?" And there is no difference really, none at all, except that if it's not visually strong then—you know, it has to be. That's where I start. That's my starting point. [00:22:21]

LLOYD HERMAN: Good. Well, thank you.

MICHAEL MONROE: My elevator speech on the difference. [Laughs.] Yes.

LLOYD HERMAN: Yes. Thanks, Michael. This has been good of you to sit down again [laughs] for this and conclude it.

MICHAEL MONROE: Well, that's okay. Thank you.

LLOYD HERMAN: Uh-huh [affirmative]. End.

[END OF MONROE18_2OF2_SD_TRACK04.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]