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Oral history interview with John Wilmerding, 2018 March 19-20

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with John Wilmerding on 2018 March 19-20. The interview took place at Wilmerding's home in New York. NY, and was conducted by Christopher Lyon for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

John Wilmerding and Christopher Lyon have reviewed the 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

CHRISTOPHER LYON: This is Christopher Lyon speaking. I am privileged to be interviewing John Wilmerding for the Archives of American Art, at his home in New York City, on March 19, 2018.

I would like to briefly rehearse your accomplishments, and what I take to be your overall project as a scholar, for lack of a better word, so that you might agree or disagree and send me in a better direction. I was so struck that your career has this symmetrical quality, that it—

JOHN WILMERDING: [Laughs.] I'm struck by it, too.

[They laugh.]

JOHN WILMERDING: Well, you know, it's amusing. I spent 11 years at Dartmouth, and then I went to the National Gallery, and that turned out to be 11 years. So when I was interviewed by Princeton, I said to them, "I seem to be on an astrological cycle, and I can't guarantee you more than 11 years." It turned out to be 25, but I was well aware of that—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] And your career begins with witnessing the creation of a major regional museum by a visionary woman collector, and it ends with you participating in the creation of a major museum with a visionary woman collector. I mean, it's so—

JOHN WILMERDING: That was totally, of course, unintentional. But again, felicitous. Fortuitous.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And in between, as you say, there's an almost ballistic trajectory to your career. You moved quickly.

JOHN WILMERDING: I wonder why you say ballistic.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: I thought you were implying it was uphill, and now it's been downhill for the last half.

[They laugh.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I didn't want that to be the implication. But what does strike me is how unwaveringly direct it is. I would like to talk about that, if it makes sense to you, and your perception of where you were going. [00:02:02]

JOHN WILMERDING: Sure.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: In the course of your career, you became a leading authority on American art, a field you helped define. You assembled an important collection, taught at several of our most prestigious universities and colleges, and served for a decade—more than a decade, as you say—in our capital as a curator and administrator at our national museum. This is quite an arc of accomplishment.

So here's the part where description starts to turn into interpretation a little bit. It seems to me—and I would like you to address this if you would—that in your writings, your collecting, your organizing of exhibitions, you aimed to tell a story of the rise of American art, the rise of American art as an expression of American identity, and that this has been an overarching project of a kind in your career. So I just wonder what you think about that, and whether, as you look back on what you've accomplished, this makes sense as a—

JOHN WILMERDING: Yes, I don't know how intentional that was at the outset. I guess I have an orderly mind, and once focused on something, pursue it. So yes, [laughs] there is—in loose terms—there is a doggedness here

that you've described. But it also is a factor of—in many instances, particularly in the early years—of accident and opportunity. [00:03:45]

Because, to go back to the start, I was brought up, obviously, in a collecting family. I was aware of that as a fact, but not in any way as an influence. My mother certainly talked about the Havemeyer Collection. Her grandparents—and growing up in Long Island, we were in close proximity. But the great irony was that—my guess is that she was aware of her grandmother being a very strong, powerful, matriarchal force on her children, which included my grandmother, Electra Webb, who later founded the Shelburne Museum. And in a radical way, she herself, by taking up an interest in American folk art, was turning away from the traditions—of Old Master and of Impressionist painting—of her mother.

There's a famous line in the family history, of my grandmother—I think at the age of nine or twelve, or as a child—coming home from the market with a small cigar-store Indian under her arm and a quilt, and her mother, Mrs. Havemeyer, saying to her, "Electra, how could you, brought up with Rembrandts and Monets and Degas, want to collect this American trash?" So, I was aware of that story, and in a sense of children and parents. My grandmother was equally a very strong, forceful personality. Had wonderful warmth, but even growing up, we grandchildren knew what a power she was. So seeing, as I said, the growth and the creation of her museum, had some kind of subliminal stamp. [00:05:59]

But my point through all of this is: I had no knowledge of art, per se, or of art history, or even patterns of collecting, except, as I say, this was a given fact. Bringing it down to my mother's generation, while she was a person of great taste—she did some collecting herself, but I think was also very much aware of a very strong mother. They were close, but nonetheless, the consequence, I believe, of that was that my sister and I—my sister is two years younger than I—were growing up, my mother—I don't know whether intentionally or not; doesn't matter—basically never urged us or took us into New York.

I, never having known about the Havemeyer Collection at the Met, never crossed the door, the threshold, of the Metropolitan Museum as a youth. My mother had been forced, obviously, to see the collection, to grow up with it. Had obviously gone to the Metropolitan Opera, done all the cultural things in New York. But here we were, 20 miles away. So my entire childhood, we had no exposure, except when we went into my grandparents' apartment on Park Avenue for holidays and I saw paintings on the wall. But to me, they were like anybody's decorations. To be sure, pretty important, but I had no sense of what they were, what they meant. [00:07:52]

In those days, both through day school—and then I went off to boarding school in my teens—but for the most part, American high schools and boarding schools, again, had no training or offerings in what we now call art history, or even art appreciation. Many schools obviously had crafts courses and so forth. So again, from childhood really until I was 18 or 19, I had no idea what all of this really was, as I say, to realize that I was part of a collecting family. That all came later, when everything clicked.

It's, again, to me, a great irony. This career is filled with ironies. This is the first major one, that I end up so committed to this field, and, as you say, with such a sense of trajectory. But it came out of a kind of vacuum. Just to finish the point, I think it was, as I say, my mother's own reaction to her parents and Shelburne and so forth. My father wisely chose not to live in Vermont in the family orbit. So we had both a physical distance, but in a sense, an emotional distance as well.

That combined with the state of American education, however you defined the humanities in those days. So as a result, at boarding school, I was solidly trained in literature. I think it's where I first developed my love of writing, and certainly of reading, and was at least introduced to classics of American literature. Somehow—again, instinctively, I guess—I was drawn more to American literature than to continental or French, English literature. I mean, we read all kinds of things, but I think that was my first stirrings of interest in American fiction, maybe American history, et cetera. [00:10:18]

So that by the time I hit college, with no awareness, from a familial point of view or an educational point of view, of the arts—because, as I say, we weren't taken to *Carnegie*, we were taken nowhere. Almost never came into New York for those kinds of things, particularly the family heritage sitting there at the Met. I get to college in freshman year. You have to take survey courses. You have to fulfill distributions. One of the major humanities courses that had a major reputation, as in the case of a number of universities, was the introductory art history survey. I think I took it for all the wrong reasons. It was where you were told you could meet the Radcliffe girls, where you also would be looked at by the upper Harvard classmen to be cultivated for the club system. In other words, for social reasons. I had no idea when I went into the lecture hall there, in the basement of the Fogg Museum, what I was in for. Except it seemed to me intriguing, the idea of a course, taught in the dark, with illustrations on a screen. The closest, of course, I could think of: This would be like going to the movies. [00:12:03]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: And it was, in a sense. You thought it was going to be entertainment. It was my first exposure, of course, to learning by visual means, and the power of the visual image. Like Vincent Scully at Yale and Harvard—I think the course my year was taught by John Coolidge, the great specialist in American architecture, among other things. Particularly, the second half was taught by the great Dutch specialist Seymour Slive, who had a wonderfully Dutch personality. Big Burgher style, body, and presence, and ebullience, and charismatic kind of enthusiasm, just as a sheer lecturer. I later knew, not so much that I had to show off as a lecturer, but conveying your enthusiasm for your material is half, if not three quarters, of the game if you're going to be an effective teacher. Slive had that kind of enthusiasm and innovation. He was very clever in how he taught us. [00:13:31]

I'm thinking of one—this goes back now 50 years. There was one lecture, when we got to Modern, he was talking about Piet Mondrian, and he brought in a Kleenex box, because he was trying to explain the perfection of Mondrian's later paintings, using squares and rectangles, and that these were all about perfect balances of the primary colors, of the essential geometries. And that, while it might look simple, assembling those squares and lines was all about the balancing of linear and planar and color and so forth. And he said the Kleenex box, in terms of advertising design, obviously is influenced by that, but is an utter bore, because it's just a plane—crossing lines. It was an immediate teaching device that drove in, explained—particularly after you've dealt with art that's basically realist in narrative, to get to 20th-century abstraction is no easy thing the first time out. I'm just recounting that incident because it was so effective.

For me, I think maybe by a month into the course, during the fall—we were, I think, up to medieval or Renaissance—something clicked, and I realized that in that classroom, when the lights went dim and the slides came on the screen, that, in a nutshell, there was visual information in imagery. There was history, there were ideas. There was what came to be described as national style. In other words, there was a whole world of learning, that we now call visual literacy, that I discovered in that course. Literally, by the end of the year, the following spring—Harvard made students commit to majors, at the end of the freshman year. Most universities, even today, wait until the sophomore year. We were all pressured to think about where we wanted to go. I think I had that in mind. Come June, it was pretty clear to me that this was an area I wanted to go on in. [00:16:24]

The other force, of course, in making that decision: I, for the first time, put together what I had inherited and knew was out there. It began to make sense, so that on my return to New York—of course, that introductory course at Harvard, we were taken into the Boston Museum and the Gardner almost on a regular basis. So I got used to the idea of going to public museums. They kept talking about the difference between the image and the real work of art, and how important the real thing was. That also was a great discovery, because while the image on the screen can convey a lot of information of one sort, there was also the experience of the original work firsthand. That was another great discovery: That once you got into the galleries, whatever period it was, it was a kind of miracle to see real paint, real stretchers, and real composition, real color, et cetera. So—I don't know where I'm going with this.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, one thing—we're skipping way ahead here, in a way, but did you also take a course with Benjamin Rowland in the course of that?

JOHN WILMERDING: Yeah, I'll come to that. Yeah. That came a little bit later. [00:18:02]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Was that still as an undergraduate?

JOHN WILMERDING: First as an undergraduate. I'll come to that next.

So, this was the first great educational clarification for me. Fortunately, I had had the base in boarding school, as I say, of, I think, learning to write, of also learning to read and enjoy reading, and, as I say, a foundation base in American literature. So American was swirling in the back of my mind, not explicitly by the end of that freshman year, but that committed me to the career, ultimately, that I would have. Many years later, in my own teaching career, I, almost instinctively and intuitively, often used the same mannerisms that Seymour Slive had used teaching me. Just as the famous Vincent Scully at Yale—we always used to joke: His graduate students liked to pound the screen with a pointer, fall off the stage, do all the dramatic things—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] He was amazing.

JOHN WILMERDING: —that Scully did.

So putting all those things together led, then, to a declaration of the major. Now, obviously, a major, particularly in your sophomore and junior years, is really fulfilling distributions. Taking courses in medieval, ancient Asian art, as well as modern. I think my instincts began to, in a way, go towards modern. Then, when I returned to New York and visited my grandparents—or indeed went into the Metropolitan Museum and see what they had—I had a certain, obviously, attachment to the Havemeyer Collection of Impressionist paintings. [00:20:12]

And as I say, at the outset, these early years were also coincident with my grandmother beginning to bring buildings to Shelburne to create her museum, and fill them with collections, American collections. One of the last collections she put together before dying in 1961 was the collection of American paintings. Up to then, she had been entirely committed to I guess what would be called American folk art, American decorative arts, early architecture, et cetera. But the, quote, "Americana" also had somehow implanted itself in my mind as an interesting—in a way, as she had made it for herself—a radical field. Something to take on that was not officially sanctioned, thought to be serious high art, et cetera.

In some ways, that was a mistake because Harvard, like many places—but Harvard especially—didn't have much tolerance for American art. It was not taught with a full-time appointment until, literally, about 10 years ago, when they hired Jennifer Roberts. In all of my years, they basically relied on bringing in a person maybe once a year, every other year, to teach something American. I remember Henry-Russell Hitchcock came in from Smith to teach a course on H.H. Richardson. But it was all done by visiting appointments. [00:22:06]

Harvard was clear—it was one of the only universities, and traditional, and conventional—serious scholarship had to have a grounding in German, particularly. The American field, needless to say, didn't have German scholarship, even though we had to fulfill language requirements to be, quote, a serious art historian. American was disdained, as was much modern art. There was no such thing as contemporary. It was simply thought not to be taken seriously, because it had no critical base. It had no history behind it. It didn't involve serious work, like archeological digging or learning Latin for medieval. It had none of those things.

So for variety of reasons, the American field generally was a kind of step-child. Not just in art history, but in earlier decades, the same trajectory was true of the attitude toward American literature. It was English literature, and that's why we had English departments. Finally, in my time, I think Harvard and other places, they became departments of English and American literature. The same thing—you can look over the field of American music. American music, the history of American music, really wasn't also taken seriously until recent decades. It came late to the game. So this was a general pattern. [00:24:02]

Now, Benjamin Rowland was a number of things. He had some kind of very serious sinus condition, so he never went to serve in World War II. He was also not a bad—in fact, quite a good—watercolor painter himself. Good enough that he had regular exhibitions at Doll & Richards Gallery in Boston.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And you organized a show of his work, did you not?

JOHN WILMERDING: Later, yes, posthumously, as a kind of tribute. His paintings, his research—one of the last of that generation that existed in many colleges of, in some cases, professors who only had MAs. They were kind of, in a sense, amateur specialists, and they were engaged, often, in a variety of fields. Rowland had one great speciality, perhaps foremost, in South Asian art, Indian art in particular, and wrote the *Pelican History of Indian Art*. He also had a secondary speciality in Italian medieval, Frederick II. Then there was this third, sort of back-pocket interest of his that developed, I'm quite certain, out of his painting career. Because as he progressed during the '30s and '40s, he began to correspond with artists that he liked—Edward Hopper, Sheeler, Demuth—often writing and corresponding about technique and so forth. So he himself began to have a familiarity—it's not fair to call it the history of American watercolor, but at least beginnings of it. [00:26:16]

And that led—I don't know my dates—that led somewhere along the line to him deciding to introduce, I guess, one or two courses on American art, I think as something that was just personally pleasurable, that came out of an interest that he himself had. But he had learned enough that he thought it would be worth trying. During those war years and later, he had the freedom, in a sense, to offer what he wanted. The result was that, indeed, in the curriculum at that time, he would offer two courses: one on early American, and one on modern American, beginning late 19th century. These courses would be offered basically at five-year intervals, so that, ironically, those—and this is the second great irony of my career, is that no American art was taught at Harvard, unless you happened to be there in a period when one of these courses was.

And I've forgotten which one I took, but it was early American. Whether it was my sophomore year or junior year, doesn't matter. But it happened to come 'round, and I thought, Well, might be fun to take. I'm having these stirrings of interest in Americana. And he was a wonderful, jolly guy, who had great sense of irony and sense of humor. He was a small, toad-like person, but very wry and a wonderful narrator. So I accidentally had the chance to take—I think it was American art from the colonial period, maybe up to the mid-19th century. I don't think that course even got as far as Homer and Eakins. [00:28:28]

But, talk about irony in timing. It happened to be the very material where I would start my work. Namely, it basically ended with the Hudson River School and what we now call Luminist painting. So that seed was planted there. Come forward to the final years: End of your junior year or senior year, if you want an honors degree, you needed to, at Harvard, write a senior thesis. This is different from Princeton, that requires a senior thesis of all undergraduates. But Harvard, it was a component of the honors program. I decided I wanted to tackle that,

partly because of his course and my developing interest. And now, as I say, I'm 18, 19, 20. I'm beginning to converse much more knowledgeably with my grandmother, who is now beginning to acquire key American paintings for what turned out to be her last collection for Shelburne. She would informally ask my opinion on things that she acquired, or I would venture them. [00:29:57]

Again, talk about timing and opportunity and accidents. One of the artists she began to acquire in depth was—then his name was Fitz Hugh Lane. Later, we realized it was Fitz Henry Lane. She acquired much of her American 19th-century collection from the great Boston collector Maxim Karolik, the Boston émigré who married into a lot of money and created, in previous years—that is to say, in the late '40s and '50s—he gave these three great collections to the Boston Museum. And I've always thought that an extremely interesting story in itself.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Did you ever meet him?

JOHN WILMERDING: Yes, I met him through my grandmother. But here was somebody who was a Russian—I've forgotten whether he was Ukrainian, doesn't matter—Russian singer.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Bessarabia, apparently. [Laughs.] Wherever that is. [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: I've often described—not quite an exact parallel, but he was a kind of American Tocqueville. That is to say, he had an eye for American paintings and American culture that nobody in America did—either collecting or really writing—and bought this brilliant collection for nothing. Martin Johnson Heades I think he acquired for $150, and Lanes, and so forth, and built up. That was the most important of the three collections. The first one was really American furniture and silver, coming out of classic, sort of old Boston taste, and the whole idea of furnishing period rooms and so forth. [00:31:59]

Then this paintings collection—I've forgotten what year in the '40s it was given—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: '48, I think.

JOHN WILMERDING: I think. End of the '40s. Was the largest and most important, and it was followed, in turn, by a very substantial collection of American works on paper. Drawings and watercolors, both folk and academic artists.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That must have been really unusual, to have a taste for that.

JOHN WILMERDING: It was. Yeah, it was. That's what I'm saying. It's really sort of remarkable, because it came out of almost nowhere. The fact that he had—whether it was a detachment or something, or just pure intuition—I think, given the postwar period, it was driven by a kind of new patriotism; the idea of, having made a home and been a success in America, he wanted to do something. That was the motivation, I think, for a lot of that generation. John D. Rockefeller and Williamsburg, Greenfield Village, Sturbridge Village, Flint, et cetera. The whole idea of, in a way, the outdoor museum devoted to America. Deerfield. The preservation of a whole history of American architecture was seen as a real patriotic undertaking, in a way, to stimulate American chauvinism, but also to set up a model that was thought to be democratic and would counter the Cold War ethos dominating Europe and the rest of the West. [00:33:59]

I think my grandmother doing Shelburne was in that larger context. I'm pausing where—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Let me backfill [laughs] a little bit here, because I should ask you some basic questions. You were born in Boston, in 1938, is that right?

JOHN WILMERDING: Correct, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You've mentioned your mother and father. I gather that your father was quite the athlete.

JOHN WILMERDING: He was quite the athlete.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And specifically, in relation to your future interests, a sailor.

JOHN WILMERDING: Yes. I've now realized—and I fairly soon did—that, at least starting off in my work in American art, would be with marine painters. I guess you become aware—if not your own DNA, you think about what you've inherited from your parents, literally. You're a product of both. In my case, it was obviously bringing together the American subject matter with being taught, growing up—learning how to sail, which I did every summer on Fishers Island. My father was an exceptionally good sailor, and we always won the major races, which was very exciting. But obviously, it gave me a familiarity with vessels in water, how they moved, how they worked, the physics of water and air and so forth, and construction, and the different types of vessels, from sloops to brigs to dories, et cetera. [00:35:55]

So there's no question in my mind that those two things came together so that when I had the opportunity to write about a marine painter, I could do it with a certain amount of confidence and understanding of—which helped me explain, in a way, in my first and later books on Lane, why he was so good. Because he had the ability, unlike many of his peers, to convey brilliantly how a vessel sits in the water, not just on it. Others could depict sailboats and steamships and so forth, but Lane understood—and there was nobody better, for example, at the painting of rigging. He did rigging in a way that had to do with abstraction, but it utterly worked. Beautifully drawn. All those elements were—I won't say purely technical elements, but if you were going to talk accurately about why he was so good, you needed to be able to explain that.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And he was somewhat crippled, is that right?

JOHN WILMERDING: Lane was.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Lane, yes.

JOHN WILMERDING: Not my father.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: No, no, sorry.

[They laugh.]

JOHN WILMERDING: Yes, he was. There's still some argument over exactly what it was. I've surmised that it was some form of infantile paralysis. But we do know—there's some documentation—that he lost the mobility in his legs as a child.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But he would go out on the boats?

JOHN WILMERDING: Yes, he went out with a great friend, who was later his executor, sailing first the Boston-Salem area, and then the Maine coast. I think one of the reasons why so much of his seascapes, and even views of harbors, are all from water level—and while we know, in a couple of instances, he did go ashore, even tried to hike up certain mountains, not severe ones—but he was largely bound to the vessels in which he was sailing. They were water-line, horizontal compositions, and that was the vehicle he was most comfortable in, both moving about and doing his art. [00:38:38]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And you did this honors thesis, you mentioned, on him. Is that right?

JOHN WILMERDING: Yes. When the time came to look for a subject, I went to Rowland, because then I liked what he taught, and I liked his personality, and I couldn't think, again, of anything else that I particularly wanted to do. And the modern field wasn't, as I say, taught any better. So for a variety of reasons, that was the—and the great thing about Rowland, both for undergraduates, and even more importantly, when I stayed on as a graduate student, he was willing to serve as advisor to those of us that wanted to do an American subject. Basically, the department tolerated that.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: At the undergraduate level, because topics are all over the place, it's less of an issue. It became more of one at the graduate level. I'll mention that more in a moment. [00:39:47]

So that led—and again, there were other coincidences here. My grandmother had introduced me to Maxim Karolik, and I think when I was going down to Newport for parties, Karolik invited me to stay in his house. He still had paintings on the wall that he had not given to the Boston Museum collection. Largely, they were duplications. It was these pictures he was selling to my grandmother. When he came up to Boston, we would often—I would go and he would invite me and my sister in. We would go in and have tea at the Ritz with him. He was a wonderful character, with a marvelous accent, and full of bad jokes, and full of himself, but a real personality. That just simply augmented—here was, in a sense, my first exposure to another collector of these artists, including Lane. So that helped to reinforce the decision, since, sort of out of a social situation, I realized it could be helpful in writing this thesis and assembling my material.

At the same time, as an undergraduate, among my circle of Radcliffe friends—this was a girl I was dating briefly, Eloise Weld, who was the daughter, it turned out, of a prominent family in Gloucester. Her father was the publisher of the *Gloucester Daily Times*, and also a transatlantic sailor. So when I went out to Gloucester to visit, on weekends or whatever, sailing came up again, but also he said, "If you're interested in Lane, the greatest collection is right here in Gloucester, at the Cape Ann Museum. And you should meet"—and he introduced me to both the president, a man named Hyde Cox, who happened to be a friend of Andrew Wyeth, of Robert Frost. Independently wealthy, lived in Manchester, but had become very much involved in managing the Cape Ann, then, Historical Society, which, like many historical societies, was a little dusty old house that nobody went into.

[00:42:32]

The, quote, curator was a man named Alfred Mansfield Brooks, who was then, I think, in his 90s. One of these old Gloucester types, who was the individual responsible for saving many of the Lanes that he knew from friends in Gloucester. So as people died, or he persuaded them to give—Lane was the most important artist documenting, certainly, Gloucester in the 19th century, and needed to be saved as part of the town's heritage. So by the time I come along, the Cape Ann Historical Society then had in its possession, I want to say, close to three dozen Lane paintings. As it happened, not surprisingly, none of the Maine pictures, but all Gloucester paintings, of all sorts and all periods. Representations of his lithographic career, which turned out to be important. And even more so, close to a hundred—almost the entirety—of Lane's body of drawings.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow.

JOHN WILMERDING: A couple have since turned up elsewhere, but the largest repository was there. [00:44:00]

So, indeed, I walk in, I meet Brooks, who shows me all of this. Bingo, I have a natural subject. Likewise, Karolik's collection had begun to become familiar to any of us at Harvard who wanted to study American. Again, ironically, given Boston's taste and the attitudes to American—it was sort of a secondary department. Perry Rathbone, who had come from St. Louis, I think—even though he knew American art, was basically dedicated to running an encyclopedic museum, and thought, Well, he'll take care of American art from a curatorial point of view. So it was, I think, the only curatorial department in the Boston Museum that had no full-time curators. It had basically two office assistants.

But it was, again, a stroke of luck. Except for the early collection, which was put on view because that appealed to those who wanted period rooms, Rathbone basically put most of the Karolik collection in the store rooms. These office assistants—and certainly this was the case when I started work on Lane—simply would either give us the key or take us down the hall, open the store rooms, and say, "Pull out and look and work on anything you want." We had the free run of the museum. There, the great discovery, of course—after Cape Ann—was this treasure trove of American paintings that Karolik had acquired. This became even more important when several of us, in later years, wanted to write a PhD dissertation. [00:46:10]

It was the great discovery—I mean, I didn't realize it when I was working on Lane—but it was the great discovery that was a real opportunity for me, and later all of my colleagues, that here were these great stashes of works of American art that nobody had touched on, worked on. Except for one or two histories that included Thomas Cole—the narratives were there—or Gilbert Stuart, American portraiture—the whole world, basically, of Hudson River painting, was just a vast, new world to be explored. The great opportunity that, in a way, got us all started, was—you know, in the years since, this is much less possible. Graduate students have to lurk around the dark corners to try and find subjects, but for us—and I've said this many times—there were more books written out of the basement of the Boston Museum than any other source. We all had—Ted Stebbins later had access to all—there were 30 Heades in the Karolik collection. The Heade monograph comes out of that. Barbara Novak's famous book on American realism in nature, based on her dissertation on Cole and Durand, was, again, primarily written out of that collection. So there were these resources that had minimal or no research done on them. In other words, a scholar's paradise. That was pretty amazing. So, it led me, then, to write the Lane book, the first little book. [00:48:12]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And that's, like, 1963? That's your first scholarly publication?

JOHN WILMERDING: '64. It was my first scholarly publication. I had come to know some of the other directors of museums in Salem, which had Lane paintings. A man named Dean Fales was then the head of what was called the Essex Institute. It's since been merged with the Peabody Museum. The Essex Institute was, in effect, the historical society for Salem. They published a quarterly bulletin. Again, anybody was really leery about publishing American monographs. There was no money. It was the same amount—but Fales had the idea—my thesis, I don't know, was it a hundred pages in typescript? Not all that long. He said, "We'll publish it, but we'll do it first in signatures, in the quarterly bulletin." I think chapters came out in maybe three successive bulletins. And he used the same printing, the same trim size, then, to wrap these signatures together.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Waste not, want not. [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: Exactly. That's a very New England attitude. But it got this first little book published, and was the foundation of everything I came back to and amplified later on. Now, fast-forward to graduate school, a year later.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I do want to take a slight detour, because your collecting activity begins around 1960 as well, I think. [00:50:01]

JOHN WILMERDING: '61. I think—yeah, I'm pretty sure. First year in graduate school. I graduated in 1960. I now

have a kind of mini-biography and mini-survey of Lane in that little book. The other great resource, of course, in Boston at that time, even more than New York, were the Boston dealers, most notably Charlie Childs, and the Voses of the Vose Gallery. They had handled, and were handling, more works by Lane. I think Harry Shaw Newman, here in New York, had turned up some from time to time. But Lanes were now, like a lot of American art, beginning to come out of the woodwork, as the prices were beginning to rise, as other collectors were beginning to get interested in Hudson River painting, for various reasons.

So I would make a point—and a lot of my basic research was simply cataloging what they had bought and sold over the years, not only historically, but even while I was there as an undergraduate. And after I had finished the thesis, but was still in Boston working, I think it was Charlie Childs called up one day and said, "We've just gotten in a beautiful new Lane, which you ought to come in and have a look at."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: This is *Brace*—

JOHN WILMERDING: No, this is *Stage Fort Rocks*, *The Western Shore*, of, I think, 1856.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Okay. So that's [demonstrates] this painting?

JOHN WILMERDING: Yes.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Do you remember seeing it for the first time? You don't need to look at it, right? [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: It's burned in my mind. That's still one of my favorite paintings. [00:52:00]

Now, again, one of the courses I took at Harvard—John Coolidge taught a course on connoisseurship and museum studies, and one of the exercises, concluding exercises of that course: Everybody was given, I think, $50 to go and find the best work of art they could find. Sculpture, anything. Print, whatever. Of course, again, you rummage through the antique stores, let alone the galleries in Boston. People brought back everything from Rembrandts to—whatever. Again, the idea of beginning to acquire something, and use your eye that you had been trained with to help make those decisions, to get the best thing you could for whatever limited amount of money you had, was an extraordinary challenge that, again, kept with me throughout all of my years. Because I didn't have infinite resources.

When Childs—to keep track of Lanes coming on the market, particularly ones that hadn't been seen since his lifetime—this one came out of some Gloucester house that I hadn't caught track on. I mean, I knew that he had done a painting of that subject. There was a smaller version in Cape Ann, and Lane's drawings for it were also in Cape Ann. So I particularly wanted to see it, you know: What had he done? I knew it was going to be something important because when I went into the gallery—even in those days, everybody knew how to present. The painting was not hanging in the traditional ground floor galleries where most of the inventory was shown. He said, "Come upstairs. It's in a special viewing room." [00:54:11]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: And it was my first exposure to the dealer who has the velvet-lined walls, and the rheostat lights, and there it's sitting. I think it was sitting on an easel, against red velvet walls.

Walking in, I was just blown away. It was a very beautiful picture. As I looked at it physically, closely, I realized that it was in virtually perfect condition. One of the things about Lane's paintings is his use of glazes to create the sense of transparency, and particularly in the later work, painted very thinly. A lot of Lane paintings, unfortunately, weren't ruined, but they were diminished by over-cleaning in the '50s and '60s, even when I was—and the over-cleaning removed those glazes. So what was left was a rather dull surface, despite his beautiful sense of color.

This picture—except, I think, there was one minor spot in the sky that had been conserved and painted—but other than that, it had never been re-lined. And again, re-lining, in those days, began to use the newly favorable techniques of aluminum lining. As a result, many pictures were not only over-cleaned, but they were pressed down on the aluminum, literally, with an iron. Even though they might be a shallow surface, a lot of the surface was matted. You can actually, if you look carefully—and that was one of the aspects of training at Harvard. You didn't necessarily take courses in conservation, but you were made aware of structure and framing and surface and so forth, and introduced to at least principles of conservation, which was another aspect of looking carefully when you were going to buy something. [00:56:23]

So this picture, for all kinds of reasons, was a perfect survivor from Lane's hand, as well as one of the most beautiful I had seen. And I guess, as I say, probably instinctively, inheriting all that collecting history came out because I had to buy it.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: I had to—I didn't know I was going to have a big collection, but in a sense, I wanted the possession that collectors want. So that really started it. My sister often joked that you don't have a collection of anything until you have three of things. So then I was on the lookout for something else. But that was the first. And it was based, obviously, and came out of my scholarly work, by training of my eye, and connoisseurship, and so forth.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Again, just a slight backfilling. You mentioned, before we began, your brother and sister. Your siblings are—how many?

JOHN WILMERDING: Just two. I have a sister two years younger than I, and then a younger brother, who was born after the war, who is eight years younger. So there's the three of us.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Any involvement on their part in art and collecting and so on and so forth?

JOHN WILMERDING: Not actively. My sister has collected Shelburne-like material: some quilts, porcelains, some American paintings. It's interesting, in the third generation, how many cousins have collected, in different ways. One actually became quite a successful antiques dealer, and you could see that that came out of the same. Others have become artists. That's still very much alive, yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Why is it—I'm going to ask a sort of naive question, but why is it important to be able to live with something, to experience it over time, as opposed to going to the museum and spending time in front of something?

JOHN WILMERDING: That's the basic question of, I guess, why anyone wants to collect. One aspect, surely, is you want nice things to look at—if you can afford them—in your own dwelling. I certainly learned that I would rather have an original than a reproduction. So I was naturally drawn to paintings over, for example, prints, even though they can be called originals. It's living with stuff that you like. The juices start running, and you get interested in the hunt. Sure enough—the Lane was that year. [00:59:50]

The next year, I had an even greater opportunity. The Vose Galleries said, "We've just gotten in a very important painting that was pulled out under some bed down on the Cape." A runner had brought it up to Boston, and they were about to send it off to New York. It was a George Caleb Bingham, of a Mississippi boatman, seated, that had been unknown since Bingham's lifetime, 1850. Clearly related to another work a year later. A good deal more expensive. I asked my father, "Can I do this?" He was a banker. I think his mentality was naturally thinking of things from an investment point of view. But he said, "Your mother has recently died. You've inherited a small trust. If you want to use your money that way, you're entitled. You have the expertise." He had the good sense to let me, as it were, take the risk of buying it. I knew how important the painting was. It was also in very good condition. It was one of the last—I knew from my work on that period—one of the last boatman pictures from his classic period still available in private hands. As I said, the collecting juices, once you—the rarity of having something. It was also a wonderful picture to look at. Now, this is 1962, I think, that I acquired the Bingham.

Thinking of my sister's edict, the third—I had become friends with Stuart Feld, who was a couple of years ahead of me in the graduate school at Harvard. John Coolidge had persuaded him to take a job that had been offered at the Metropolitan Museum in American art. [01:02:06]

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JOHN WILMERDING: And in those days, it wasn't thought necessary, if you were in the museum track, to complete your PhD. But Stuart was the grading assistant when I took Rowland's course as an undergraduate. And as I say, the few people who were interested in American art naturally were drawn to one another. Now I was beginning to go to galleries, just to see what was turning up, and Stuart himself began to collect, and after a couple of years at the Met realized he really wanted to be a dealer, and started going out into the field and began to buy things himself.

I remember him calling up one day and saying, "I've just been out to New Jersey and come back. I have a wonderful Heade." Three artists I would end up writing about, not on the spot. Heade, a little Peto still life, and a Frederic Church oil study of Cotopaxi. The Heade needed cleaning. He had it propped up on a table in his front hall. I went into the apartment to see it. Again, from my work on Lane and his relation to Heade—Heade was an artist I was naturally interested in. I had toyed with the idea, actually, of going to work next, after Lane, on Heade. My friend Ted Stebbins had come to the Fogg just after me, and equally was interested, and I said, "You take it on." When I had the opportunity to buy a little haystack picture, a gem of Heade's—not a big picture, but it was a gem of one of that series he did. I got it cleaned, and it was glorious. So that was my third—so one, two, three, within those three years. [00:02:04]

In a sense, they were so good, and so strong, and so beautiful, that you didn't need your walls filled up. It served—by then, I knew I wanted to collect. It was also, keep in mind, still a period when American paintings could be found for, some cases, hundreds of dollars, some cases not many thousands. So you could really buy, I want to say, freely. This was the great pleasure of, in a sense, the beginnings of our field. Almost all of my colleagues, like Stebbins, did start collecting. It was easy to acquire stuff that you absolutely loved. And if you used your eye carefully, you could buy great things. Over my time of collecting, there's as many important things that I sold, or to upgrade, as that I kept. I tell the curators at the Met that I once owned Thomas Cole's oil studies for *Desolation* and *The Oxbow*, which are probably now, I don't know, half-a-million-dollar paintings, these little studies.

But that's the point. These things were just—now, in the case of oil studies, this was thought to be a secondary sort of level. They were not to be taken seriously by major museums. So they were constantly on the market. There were now lots of competing dealers in American art. Not just the two in Boston, but New York began to have a major cluster of serious dealers who were going out and scouring the field. [00:04:05]

To come back to the story of Rowland and Harvard—becomes even more important for those of us that wanted to go on in the graduate field. I'm, in retrospect, kind of amazed that Harvard admitted us—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: —willingly admitted us, knowing our American interest, and the fact that Rowland would be willing to oversee. But it was not a field that was solid in the department, or for that matter, even respected. I remember being brought in to—Slive happened to be chairman of the department at that point, and I remember going into his office, and he tried to talk me out of writing a dissertation on American art. For me, the natural progression was from Lane to Salmon to American marine painting, which was my dissertation, and then almost immediately published. There was nobody who knew anything about American scholars.

Slive calls me in and says, "If you really want to be taken seriously as an art historian, if you want a really respectable job, if you want to get somewhere and be someone"—this was the gist of the conversation. His phrase was, "You ought to do something like Dutch art"—which was his field—"and then," quote, "you can do American art out of your back pocket." I was determined to do American art, period, and take that chance. But that was the—he didn't mean it meanly, but that was the—[00:06:08]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: No, no. He was looking out for you.

JOHN WILMERDING: That's right. That was the belief. To recap that period, it wasn't just I who was going through the program. This is the next great irony of our field, is that except for David Huntington, who was enrolled at Yale, which also did not have an Americanist—when he got interested in writing about Frederic Church, he went to George Heard Hamilton, who was the great specialist of French and European painting, but saw the quality of Church and said he would advise Huntington to do an American subject. But except for—Huntington was the other great distinguished scholar, colleague, friend of ours, who was not at Harvard.

But to take my, quote, larger generation, which are now described as, I guess, creating the foundations of modern American scholarship—I don't know whether that's true, but probably—whatever. But it consisted of certainly—just ahead of me at Harvard had been Jules Prown, who did his dissertation out of MFA, on Copley; Barbara Novak, who wrote the first really influential book on American landscape painting, American nature; Bill Homer, who later taught for years at Delaware and was a Homer specialist; Nic Cikovsky, who I hired as my successor at the National Gallery, was an Inness specialist—again, another Americanist; and Bill Gerdts, who went off to the Brooklyn Museum, pulled together the great collection—not Brooklyn. Sorry. Newark Museum. [00:08:26]

Interesting footnote there: He asked and petitioned Harvard. They grudgingly agreed. He wanted to write his dissertation, submit his catalogue of the American collection at Newark, which was a serious scholarly book. Well, Harvard had never dealt with a catalogue as a legitimate dissertation. But because it was all original research, and was on its way to publication, they did agree to it.

So that's half a dozen people who were just a year or two ahead of me. Plus, as I've mentioned, Stuart Feld becomes the most influential American dealer of that generation. Then, shortly after I finished, Stebbins—who was my age, but who had started Harvard in law school—had come into our orbit and met John Coolidge. Cary Welch, who was an Islamicist at Harvard, but who was also one of these amateur collectors all over the place. He had great Dutch paintings, but he also was the first to buy a still life: Nobody had heard of Joseph Decker. One of these paintings of apples in a tree. Absolutely, just mind-blowingly beautiful. A great Pre-Raphaelite picture. And also a Heade. [00:10:10]

So Stebbins, who had an eye and was interested in art law, decided, after he had finished his law degree, to enroll and get a PhD. So he's five years behind us, even though the same age.

So that was an amazing cluster that Benjamin Rowland was willing to oversee. After we were all through and looking for jobs—and that's the next phase, is: There were no such things as positions of American art. Jules Prown was the first to be hired, at Yale, but he was hired to teach English and American, and later became the founding director of the British Studies Center and Paul Mellon's collection. And of course, Copley had an English career, so he was able to get—likewise, when I was then looking for a job a year or two later, there were various openings around the country, but none of them were full-time Americanist. I was hired at Dartmouth, basically, quote, as a Modernist, and in fact was expected to teach modern art from really the mid-19th century to the present.

That turned out, for me, to be a very useful exercise, to learn and know the major field that was contiguous with American, and later, you realized, involved American artists going abroad. So much of American art, such as it was—Goodrich, Flexner, the very few texts that were available, were mostly about colonial and federal portraiture. Flexner was the historian. It was sort of America's Old Masters. [00:12:23]

And—what was I saying?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: So you're at Dartmouth. You're doing—

JOHN WILMERDING: Oh! When historical scholarship was available to us, it was largely this chauvinistic, nationalistic, hermetic approach to the field. So for me, the exercise of having to teach Chardin, and Rococo, and the history of Impressionism all the way through—was an extremely valuable requirement in terms of my own growing curve, and expanding and understanding that American art was a much bigger field than just homegrown—you know, that so much of it were artists, Audubon to Cole, who, in fact, were born abroad and became Americans, so to speak. And there were equal numbers who went abroad and went also to Asia. So the state of the field still had this bias against American as being something sufficient in and of itself to teach. What then happened, of course, was, as we began to make our mark and began to publish books, everybody realized that this could be a full-time activity. While I think I continued to teach an occasional course in my years there at Dartmouth, I finally became, quote, what we now call an Americanist, and taught it full-time. [00:14:13]

But I think, in retrospect, it became very clear that Harvard was—and most of these places were—rather embarrassed at turning out not only this plethora of Americanists, but ones that were really growing a new field, taking it seriously, and publishing faster and more original work than most colleagues doing French or anything else, where they were scratching over familiar terrain. Harvard was, I think, so embarrassed that they—after we all finished—put in a requirement. The next generation after us included Rusty Powell, later at the National Gallery; Jack Lane, who went on to be director at Dallas; Harry Rand, who was later curator at the Smithsonian. That whole next generation were told at Harvard that if you wanted to do a dissertation in American art, it had to have a European component to be acceptable. So Rusty Powell wrote a dissertation on Thomas Cole's English period. Jack Lane wrote a dissertation on Stuart Davis and Cubism. Obviously, Cassatt and Whistler were acceptable. [00:15:53]

So as I say, the fact that Harvard produced all these people, sort of against its better judgement, is one of the great stories. And they clung to it for years after. The silly requirement imposed on later students. Not having a full-time Americanist teach. They continued the system, and indeed, while I was at Dartmouth, I was invited back to teach at Harvard—I think it was in 1976—as a visitor. But that's all they would have. So these poor students—it was like us happening to hit a Rowland course. They were lucky if somebody came as a visitor to teach American art, but they persisted, and finally, finally, Harvard and other places began to hire, quote, fully-trained Americanists.

And the field not only grew in scholarly terms, but also its collecting. We had all, likewise, become friends not only with each other, but with the collectors of American art who were starting in the same period. Raymond and Margaret Horowitz, Dan Fraud, later the Ganzes in Los Angeles, whom I brought into the National Gallery orbit. So it was fun comparing notes. They also were avidly reading everything that was being published in this blossoming field, also developing very good connoisseurs' eyes. Put together superb collections of American paintings, which are now mostly in public collections. So that whole, as I say, irony that runs for a couple of decades stamps the beginnings of the field that we created in spite of ourselves. [00:18:04]

For me, finally, the last accident with Rowland was: as a graduate student, now five years later, he teaches his second course, and I'm now allowed to be the section instructor, the teaching assistant, as a graduate student, even though I didn't know the stuff myself.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: But over the nine years that I was at Harvard, undergraduate and graduate, I did manage to

hit two of his courses in different capacities. Again, it was really a matter of luck.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Also, in 1965, you became involved with Frederic Church's work and the campaign to save Olana. Do I have the time right?

JOHN WILMERDING: Yes. That was part of, as I say, these mutual friendships, anybody interested in American. After we had gotten our first teaching jobs—Huntington went to Smith. Others were beginning—well, Barbara Novak was in New York. Gerdts was, too. Many of us would invite each other to go visit each other's campus. I went to lecture at Smith. I got David Huntington to come up to Dartmouth, give a Church lecture. It was a way of filling out your own portfolio. But we all kept in touch. I mean, it was a small band of colleagues. [00:19:35]

Huntington—in a way, his story is the most dramatic, in that he got hooked on Church, and realized in the year that he was writing his dissertation that Olana—the last owner, Church's granddaughter, had died. And the decision was made by the next generation, they didn't want to keep it. They couldn't afford it. So, literally, the decision was made to turn everything over to Sotheby's: the building and property, and all of the art in it, which was extremely important. Of course, Olana, being kind of Persian Gothic, was sort of out of taste. Sort of strange Victorian flourishes. You know, a real American architecture. It was federal Jeffersonian. Or maybe Richardson was now well-established. But that had a kind of purity of the Romanesque. Church was this kind of fantasy fabrication that, I later argued, was one of the great artist houses in America, as important to the 19th century as Jefferson's was to the 18th century. Particularly the idea of a building being expression, being a form of, call it, architectural autobiography. Olana is inseparable from Church's personality. I remember Huntington called up, or wrote everybody he knew in New England, and said, "I'm going to try and save Olana. You've got to come over and see it."

So he set up an occasion some weekend where he had a kind of open house, and we all gathered at Olana. It was kind of a thing to do. It was mind-blowing to go through that place and realize what was there. So we all supported him. He, I think, took a leave of absence from Smith and began a financial campaign, beating the door with the Rockefellers, with Harry DuPont, [laughs] who was very interesting: Told him that he wasn't going to support anything north of the Hudson River, that New York was the purview of the Rockefellers, and he would deal with Delaware and south. He never really got in on it. [00:22:15]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] Didn't get involved in it.

JOHN WILMERDING: But that's how Huntington then persuaded Nelson Rockefeller, who was governor, and Larry Aldrich, his cousin, to take up the cudgels. Huntington's achievement is, as I say, almost more dramatic in that he took a leave to work on the campaign to save the house—which was taken off the market—and its contents: paintings, photographs, archives.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, it's really remarkable.

JOHN WILMERDING: Let alone, we all realized that Church's landscape there was an expression that had come out of his paintings. Huntington not only undertook the campaign; he almost immediately was able to publish his dissertation as the first modern book on Church, which is really the foundation of all Church studies since. Tremendous amount of work has been done.

But we still, all of us, go back to—and he also mounted the first Church retrospective exhibition that was shown here in New York. I want to say it might have been at Knoedler's Galleries. It was an art gallery, not a museum. And then traveled, I think, to the Smithsonian. But it was also a revelation, and now major Church paintings were coming on the market. Sherman Lee buys *Twilight in the Wilderness* for Cleveland, Bill Middendorf sells *Rainy Season in the Tropics* to San Francisco. A number of these major Church pictures. So his market is rising. Huntington—I won't say single-handedly—but was the major force who helped save the property, write the book, and do the exhibition. So to that extent, we were all involved collegially in that enterprise. [00:24:31]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I gather that when you were teaching at Dartmouth, you bought things, in part, with an eye toward exposing your students to original works and so on and so forth. Is that the case?

JOHN WILMERDING: Yeah, largely—well, again, I was collecting for pleasure, and sampling the field. I later winnowed out, as I wanted to upgrade or buy things that were—I mean, I think both the Homer and Eakins I bought were so expensive that I had to deaccession things within it. And that was a very useful exercise, a collector learning how to winnow, to save the best. I mean, there are different kinds of collectors.

I also realized Dartmouth had a very small collection. It had had no museum at that point. There were rooms on the upper floor of the art building that were dedicated to—they had Assyrian reliefs. They had a few Hudson River paintings. Barely enough to teach from. I took advantage, of course, of New England architecture from Orford, New Hampshire, above, over to Quechee and—God, what's the town where the Rockefellers had their property? Doesn't matter. [00:26:01]

Anyway, I used the combination of a few paintings in the museum, local architecture, gravestones in New England cemeteries, beginning with Hanover's. And then I realized that my own collection could be—I could bring works into class, particularly small, portable studies that were good examples. I remember vividly, one day [laughs]—later, this student became a very good friend. But early on, after having lectured on Lane, and then Robert Salmon—that I thought I knew pretty well and could explain pretty well—I brought in a little painting by Robert Salmon, and a second Lane that I had acquired. Boston Museum, crazily, decided to sell *Brace's Rock* out of the Karolik collection. To be sure, they wanted to use the funds to buy the great view of Lane of Boston Harbor. That was their decision.

But anyway, I had the little *Brace's Rock*, quintessential late Lane, and a Salmon, who influenced Lane. I put them on the board, and I turned to the class and I said, "All right, which one is which?" This hand popped up in the back row. It wasn't a big class, maybe 30 students. So most of them I've gotten—I didn't know them all. "The one on the right, sir, is Salmon, and the one on the left is Lane." I gasped, because he was totally wrong. He had gotten—totally misidentified. Having thought that I could convey the information, I could not believe that a student would get it wrong, that I hadn't taught them well enough, here with originals. And I obviously drew myself up. I must have looked fierce. I stared at this student, and I said, "What is your name?" as if to indicate he was a marked student for being so blatantly—having learned nothing. And again, without a pause, literally, he said, "Smith, sir." Everybody burst in laughter, because they knew he was not Smith at all. [00:28:47]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: He was captain of the hockey team, a guy named Denis O'Neill, who later went on to become quite a successful [laughs] Hollywood scriptwriter. Anyway, as a result of that incident, we became quite good friends, and literally, all these years, have remained friends. But I'll never forget, nor will he, that moment of getting—and putting me off by saying—you know, didn't pause—"Smith, sir."

So yes, bringing the works to class. For a time, buying acquisitions for that purpose. So I had a whole variety of artists that didn't end up in the collection, that went to the National Gallery. As I say, I had Coles. I had a wonderful Quidor. I had Bierstadt. Jerome Thompson. Many artists that one could acquire easily and inexpensively. Good artists of their type. But for that period, at least—I won't say it was an encyclopedic collection, but it was a collection that had enough variety that it was perfect for teaching purposes. [00:30:07]

By the end of the Dartmouth period, not only had I been given a chair, but—served as department chairman—nonetheless—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Also the humanities division chair, something like that.

JOHN WILMERDING: Well, yes, that was more accidental. There was a head of the humanities division, and the regular chairman of it was taking a sabbatical, and I did a fill-in. It was nice on the CV, [laughs] but it was not a major enterprise. But with all of those promotions and positions, at that point, I never thought I would leave Dartmouth. I wasn't looking to climb a ladder. I mean, this brings us to the next story of the National Gallery and collecting.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I do want to pause and ask you, though, about the *Pelican History*.

JOHN WILMERDING: Okay, yes. Can we just take a quick—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, totally.

JOHN WILMERDING: —a quick pause?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yes.

[Audio break.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: We're back in business here, I think.

JOHN WILMERDING: Okay. I'm going to give a quick diversion, which needs to be typed in in the earlier Karolik, grandmother moment. It's a wonderful little anecdote about them. I put it in writing somewhere, but for the record, it's fun. It wraps up their relationship, in the sense that, after working with Karolik for several years and building this paintings collection for Shelburne, they became pretty good friends. He was a great supporter of her building a museum, and giving her confidence and so forth. So it was a very nice mutual relationship. [00:32:07]

As it happened, my grandfather, Watson Webb, died, I want to say, sometime in 1960. And Karolik [laughs] waited, oh, I think maybe a couple of months, a discrete period, and then he comes to my grandmother and says that he wants to propose marriage to her. In the great phrase that came down in the family, "Electra, this would

be a great marriage of the arts." And, "As a token of my esteem, I'm going to give you a little Martin Johnson Heade painting of a rose. Because a real rose is too ephemeral, and I want to give you something as a permanent token." I don't know how long my grandmother paused—probably, again, discretely—days, weeks, whatever. Said, "Maximum—Maxim"—[laughs] maximum. He was maximum. "Maxim, I'm going to say no to marriage, but yes, I'm going to keep the rose."

[They laugh.]

JOHN WILMERDING: He was a devil. As it turned out, she herself only lived another few months, I think, died later in August of '61. But it was a nice—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's a great story.

JOHN WILMERDING: —anecdote that summarized that relationship. Because he was of enormous help, and they were sort of kindred spirits. So anyway, just plug that into the earlier—[00:34:00]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Well, he was sort of going back to the well there, wasn't he? Wasn't Martha Codman about 30 years older than him when he married her?

JOHN WILMERDING: Yes, and she had died—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Like in '48 or something?

JOHN WILMERDING: Yeah, sometime before. So he had been a widower, and sort of a randy old man.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Couldn't help himself, huh? [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: He couldn't help himself. Alright, so—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Sounds like you were working on the *Pelican*—how did this come about, the invitation to do this?

JOHN WILMERDING: Well, that's an interesting backstory in itself, in that it reminds me my life has been made up, in some ways, periodically, by no's. Either I have said no to something and then later changed my mind, or no in the sense that I had been turned down for things that I wanted. Case in point: I had wanted to undertake a project and get sabbatical and a foundation grant, and I applied to the National Humanities Foundation for one of their fellowships and was turned down, to great disappointment. Put that together with a moment when I got the invitation from Nikolaus Pevsner's office in London to do the *Pelican History of American Art*. And it turned out—I wasn't at all surprised—that several people had already been approached, and either couldn't do it or turned it down. Most notably, my friend Jules Prown at Yale, who accidentally had already published—with Barbara Rose, I think—for Skira Publishers, his survey of American art. So he felt that he didn't need to take on another. [00:36:16]

But even that's fraught with irony, because he was the third choice. This is typical English snobbery. The *Pelican History* first turned to—well, they had long had a policy of having national authors do different subjects than their field. So a German did the *French Pelican History*. The exception was all of the books on English art and architecture. Only the English could do that. Like, they got Ben Rowland as an American to do Indian art, and generally down the line. So, initially, they didn't want an American to write about American art. Of course, they thought, because it was the English language and they had created America—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: —that he would ask an English scholar to write. I think there were at least two who were asked to do it, and neither one of them could get beyond American art than the colonial period. [Laughs.] They could deal with Copley, because he had a long English career to follow, but they stalled when they got particularly into the 19th century in American landscape painting. This, again, partly is a factor that there were no books on American art available in Europe or England anywhere. So, by default, they reluctantly approached an American, namely Prown. He turns them down, and for whatever reason—whoever recommended me, whether it was Lloyd Goodrich or Prown himself, I don't know. I've never wanted—doesn't matter. The invitation came to me. [00:38:26]

And I don't remember my reasoning, but I said no. I guess I thought it was just too big a project. Also, I was on my own trajectory of marine painting. I had little projects. The next Lane book was in prospect. Various other kinds of—I mean, I was constantly writing, and wanted to write. I just thought, I don't know that I'm capable at this early stage of my career, even though I had taught American art from beginning to end. It just seemed too daunting. Even though they had two formats. I think one was 40,000 words and one was 60,000, and the American, they didn't think, was worthy of the bigger format. It was just typical of the day. That didn't matter.

But still, that was a big amount of writing. And I thought, I don't know that I can even find the time.

So I told Ben Rowland, Seymour Slive—James Ackerman had done Renaissance architecture for the *Pelican* series. I had three senior faculty members that I had worked with at Harvard who had all written *Pelican* histories. When I told them that I was going to say no, they beat me over the head and said, "You simply cannot turn down something so prestigious." At the time, it was the great series on the history of art. My old boss, Slive—and Rowland, too—said, "You can't. You've really got to find time." [00:40:29]

And so now, I apply for a Guggenheim Foundation Fellowship. I got them all to write. Lloyd Goodrich, I had come to know. So I got a lot of good senior people. This time, having been turned down by the NEH, I got the Guggenheim Fellowship. It allowed me to take a full year off. By now, at least, I knew about my own writing, despite the length, that I could be very methodical in blocking it out. My writing habits tend to be that I want to get something pretty much blocked out, whether it's chapter by chapter or paragraph by paragraph, that I know what I want to get through. And I do this before I even write down.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I have to say, I was really amused. You know, I've spent all my career as an editor, so I'm used to looking at things. So I just decided to see how this thing was structured. The first chapter is kind of eccentric. It goes to 41 pages. But the rest of them are lockstep, 35, 36 [laughs] pages, right on through. And I thought, Wow, what a disciplined writer. That was very funny.

JOHN WILMERDING: [Laughs.] That was the first real exercise in that. I knew that it was absolutely necessary, if I was going to get this done in a year's time, which was my ambition—if I was ever going to finish it, or ever marshal the material in a way that—because I couldn't allow myself to overwrite a chapter, and then be caught later on, or vice versa. [00:42:14]

So I did agree to do it. Dartmouth gave me a year's leave. I literally sat down and blocked out every chapter and the illustrations that would be in it. I made my selections—because I instantly realized, even with Winslow Homer, I probably couldn't write about more than three works of art. I knew how difficult this was going to be, to summarize these full careers, et cetera. I also had the ambition—probably, in retrospect, not a good idea—of including a few examples of photography, of sculpture. I did not include architecture, although I made reference to it in the literature.

But I wanted it to be—it was also one of the first surveys of American art that included a serious number of—then, they were called Black artists, African-American artists. I wanted space to make reference to literature. This is the other contribution that all that background from boarding school through Harvard—at Harvard, because there was no American art, I spent a lot of time taking courses in poetry and literature that were all American. Or history; I took Jacksonian America with Arthur Schlesinger. Wonderful, wonderful people. I took poetry courses from Robert Frost's friend, Theodore Morrison, I.A. Richards, Archibald MacLeish. These were major names at the time. [00:44:01]

So I now realized that—beginning with the *Pelican* project, but even more in later books—my interest in what would now be called American Studies, that includes literature, culture, other aspects—the interdisciplinary American art—all came out of that strong, rich background that I had subsumed on American history and American literature. Then I, in time, took a long time through the career to begin to make intelligent cross-references, intelligent correlations. So the *Compass and Clock* book and others were really later career books, but I can see how they came out of these formative early decades.

In any case, despite coming from a collecting family, despite doing, at Dartmouth, my first little exhibitions—I've forgotten the guy's name who was director of the deCordova Museum.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right. That's in '66, '67?

JOHN WILMERDING: In there, yeah. This period when I was just starting at Dartmouth—and interested, again, not just in collecting, but if I was doing monographic studies, to be able to see them on the walls. Again, as an Americanist, you made a point of going to visit all the New England American collections: going over to Williams, going over to Amherst, going over to Colby, et cetera. So I got to know some of those directors. [00:45:56]

I did three projects at Dartmouth—three external, that included the deCordova. The first was on Lane, the second was on Robert Salmon, and the third was on William Bradford. The Lane was shared—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: With Colby.

JOHN WILMERDING: —with Colby. The Salmon, I think, with the Peabody Museum. The Bradford, maybe with New Bedford. Doesn't matter, but—and they were all small. Had nice little pamphlets. Not proper catalogues, but—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: How many works, like in the Lane show?

JOHN WILMERDING: Maybe 50.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, that's substantial.

JOHN WILMERDING: Well, the deCordova Museum gave its full space, and then Colby did, too. That helped establish my reputation. But it got me, as it were, in my terms, involved in museum work. I, by then, knew that I really—I thought I was pretty good at teaching. I was good at teaching. I wanted to teach. In those years at Dartmouth, I never was looking to move on to museum work. I was perfectly happy there. I also realized that you don't do your career any service by just water-bugging around from one job to another, just because something appeared. It was the first time I really learned how to say no, as well as how to say yes. [00:47:41]

There were offers of jobs that I knew were inappropriate for me. I was approached by Cooper Union, for example. I knew people on the board. But I also knew I didn't want to be an administrator. My scholarship wasn't going to do any good there. The really tricky one, I finally said no to, was the Yale Center for British Art, after Prown had retired. Again, I don't know who put me in for it. I went down there and interviewed, and was basically offered the job. It was very appealing in a way, that it was a brilliant collection, but I was also very torn, because I knew that my real passion was American art.

Having gone through the process of interviewing and so forth—first time I met Paul Mellon. Again, fortuitous, because it later led to working with him at the National Gallery. Mellon was a classmate of my uncle's at Yale, so there were some real connections there. He blessed the idea of I being offered. I thought I was still pretty young for a museum directorship, but as I thought it through, my decision in saying no was two-fold. I said, "Up to now, I've been a professor, and while I've served as department chairman, I'm not sure I'm an administrator of a museum. Secondly, I'm an Americanist. I don't mind learning a new field, but for me, the challenge of moving in two new directions simultaneously—that is to say, to a new art field and to administration—I think is beyond my capacity." [00:49:51]

It was a tough thing to say no. Because my father had gone to Yale, I had this kind of Oedipal thing, having gone to Harvard. You know, he was the athlete, I was not. I thought I didn't like New Haven. It was dirty and whatever.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: There was this building resistance anyway, but it was a hard professional decision to make.

Again, irony. Coincidence. I grew up sailing on Fishers Island, as I've said, and one of those whom I sailed in competition with regularly was Carter Brown, and his younger sister, who was closer to my age. My parents were friends with the Browns, so I knew them perfectly well. I think Carter, who was already well into the museum business, seeing me come along as a successful young scholar—it's what I've described as the Chinese water torture, the drip, drip, drip thing. He would say, "If you ever want a museum job, think of the National Gallery. Come to Washington."

I mean, I didn't pay attention to it, because I didn't want to be a full-time museum person. Here was another occasion—he kept at it. I had known the National Gallery. Great collection. I had used their Bingham on the cover of the *Pelican* book, in fact. So I had worked with the curator who covered American, a guy named Bill Campbell, who was a kind of generalist. They had no real hierarchy then, but he sort of served as a chief curator, covering various fields, including American. I don't remember seeing an obituary. There was no announcement that I knew of. [00:52:00]

He had died, and several months later, Carter called and said, "Bill Campbell died, and I want to start a full-fledged American department. We've never had one. We've got a great collection. We've begun to do important exhibitions under Campbell." Sort of traditional, canonical: Homer, Mary Cassatt. I've forgotten what others. Few things, but some important things. "It's a great opportunity. Also, we're just on the threshold of completing the new I.M. Pei East Building, so there will be all kinds of opportunity for exhibitions and for growth."

I thought, This is kind of appealing. But it was such a jolt that even though I had had familiarity with collecting, with collectors, with doing exhibitions, I knew it would be a wrench in terms of the professional year. At Dartmouth, you may have a reduced salary, but you're only on duty for nine months out of twelve, and I liked my summers. I also, as I say, liked teaching so much that the idea—even though I thought it might be fun to be a curator, to give up—the worry, even, about turning your writing over to required in-house projects, as opposed to things you wanted to do yourself.

So I said, "No. I really don't want to move. I don't want to change professions." I made [laughs] the mistake of saying, "Why don't you go on with your search?" I gave them a number of names, people they ought to go through. Then I stupidly said, "If you haven't gotten anywhere in six months"—I thought I was putting it out of

my book altogether—"come back and let me know." [00:54:12]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: I don't know whether they did any further homework. I think they did think of other people.

In any case, six months later, almost to the day, Carter calls up and says, "We haven't found the person we want. We want you. I'm sending up my deputy director, Charles Parkhurst to Hanover for the day to talk to you about it and answer any questions or reservations you might have." So I sat down before he came up, and I wrote a list for myself of things that I wanted and wanted answered. Not just salary, but how much time I could have off to write. Could I even teach while I was at the National—all of these things that would make it possible and palatable. Well, with the result that Parkhurst came up. We spent a very nice time. And by the end of the day, there was nothing on my list that I could use to say no.

Meanwhile—again, one of the great experiences at Dartmouth, a formative one in the sense that it confirmed the direction of where my thinking and writing and teaching was going. That is to say, interdisciplinary work. There was a fellow colleague in the English department there named James Cox, a Southerner, who had a great, irreverent sense of humor. Kind of a wild man. But again, one of those great teachers. We instinctively became friends. He was a Mark Twain specialist. [Laughs.] We used to get off campus once a week for lunch, and we would go to a local restaurant and have a martini in the middle of the day, and a hamburger. Anyway, these became sort of rites of friendship. [00:56:15]

We became very close, and talking all the time about American art and American culture. I don't know what years it was. We thought, "Let's try and think of a course we can teach together." He had a really original mind. He proposed doing a course on, quote, the culture of Hartford, Connecticut. He had worked on Mark Twain, who was from Hartford. I had worked on Thomas Cole and Daniel Wadsworth, who were Hartford. Frederic Church was Hartford. Then we thought, "There are all kinds of other things in Hartford we could work on." Samuel Colt and firearms. The insurance industry. Wallace Stevens, great Hartford poet. Richardson did one building. Frederick Law Olmsted, whom I knew well, had done the Institute of the Asylum, had worked for Colt. The more we talked about the possibilities—you know, John Trumbull, who also worked for Wadsworth, had painted all these revolutionary war pictures. In other words, there was a rich history, not only of the visual arts, but the architectural arts, and then the literary arts. [00:57:56]

So, indeed, we did—I think it was for two years—we did a seminar. Admitted, I think, about 12 students. We arranged to take them down to Hartford two or three times. We got a college van, drove down. I had a very good friend who was an architect in Hartford, who helped set us up with the Atheneum; the Connecticut Historical Society, which had a great American collection. We plotted out these three weekend visits, where we would go see a number of the—it was very interesting. We wanted particularly to take them to the Colt Firearms factory, because Cox made this incredible—again, it was a kind of lightning-rod association, and he put it to the students: "What's the relationship between—why, in the same city, do you have the foremost manufacturer of firearms, and a city known for the insurance industry?" Now—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Hmm. [Laughs.] That's an interesting connection.

JOHN WILMERDING: Well, the connection is that it's a class thing. That the rich buy insurance, the poor buy guns, and they're both forms of protection. Once you make—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's brilliant. That's really brilliant.

JOHN WILMERDING: It is. It is! But that's what this course did for us. We were able to put them together. So we set up—it was interesting. Mind you, this is in the '60s, with Vietnam. The first time we went to the Colt people, they said, "No, we don't want a bunch of students coming through." They wouldn't let us. We went to look at the building. They have a wonderful onion dome and so forth. And we did other work on Colt, but we couldn't go through the factory. Because another of the connections we wanted to make was, Colt and the interchangeable parts was a major development in firearms. Cox, as a Southerner, pointed out that one of the reasons that the North won was right there in Hartford. That is to say, they had the wealth to build firearms, blankets, et cetera. They could provision the Union Army in a way that finally overwhelmed the South. [01:00:45]

That's a bit of an oversimplification, but it was the kind of thinking—and he also, in a way that I didn't make—this is where I learned a lot from him. He said Hartford, Connecticut—as we were looking at clocks in the State House and in the Connecticut Historical Society, early American—Hartford had major early American clockmakers, so that when—we went to visit the Twain House, of course—when Twain comes along and is interested in the typewriter, one of the first to write on the typewriter, Cox makes the connection that the expertise of clockmakers provided a technology for the typewriter, and later industrialization in Hartford. Well, we go to the Twain House. Right across the lawn is the Stowe House, Harriet Beecher Stowe. Alright, so now we're into male and female. We're into two types of writing. The Stowe house is a reserve—[01:02:06]

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JOHN WILMERDING: —puritanical Federal house, as opposed to Twain's Steamboat Gothic. So it was contrast and relationships. Those were—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And thought expressed in forms.

JOHN WILMERDING: Yeah. So now we're into the first-rate women writers of the 19th century, and the women's movement. Catharine Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe. Stowe and Twain writing about the Civil War, and the Mississippi, at different moments. Harriet Beecher Stowe writes in the '60s, Twain writes in the '70s, but they knew each other. So Cox puts together the Mississippi as the center of the country. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is about a migration of figures going north, to get to Canada, in effect, the northern route. Mark Twain, in *Huck Finn*, writes about drifting south. So we're into the compass. This is finally *Compass and Clock*, for me. North and south on the same spine of America.

We began to make all of these—we went to the Connecticut General Life Insurance Company, and were able to interview—I mean, imagine for students—we interviewed Wallace Stevens's personal assistant—[00:01:47]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] Unbelievable.

JOHN WILMERDING: —who had worked for Stevens, and took us into Stevens's office and described what it looked like when he was there. He said Stevens was profession in bonding insurance, kind of intellectual insurance, but his office was covered with papers. He said the floor was covered with books and papers. So he was also mentally, in a sense, writing poetry in his mind, but he wrote nothing in the office. He compartmentalized, and wrote his poems in his mind as he walked up Asylum Avenue—which they had driven—to his house. He said, "In all the years my wife and I knew Stevens and his wife, we were never invited into his house for dinner." That his private, poetic life, as it were, was totally separate from his insurance life.

This was another duality for constructing—anyway, it was great fun, and I think I learned as much from that as from anybody else or anything. It certainly has affected my interdisciplinary thinking, because we put together Colt, the Stowes—I mean, it was incredibly rich. And it was fun to go visit the museum. Of course, there, in the Wadsworth Anatheum, is one of the great collection of firearms as works of art, let alone the great collection of John Trumbull's Revolutionary War paintings, and the great collection, outside of New York, of Hudson River painting, namely Cole and Church, whom Wadsworth had commissioned.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It's just this giant matrix of all these currents—

JOHN WILMERDING: So we put it—anyway, so that was, as I say, a very important shaping. We did it twice. To work with students, it was the kind of thing that Dartmouth is very good at. We all became quite good friends, very close. [00:04:07]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And his name was Cox?

JOHN WILMERDING: James had a wonderful name: James Melville Cox. And he was a great authority, of course, on Melville as well. One of his famous lectures, I went to hear—because he was a firebrand. He was a real Southern firebrand. When he got to *Moby-Dick*, he said to the students, [demonstrates accent] "Now, I tell you, it's no accident that I'm lecturing on a sperm whale, and my name is Cox, and it's called *Moby-Dick*." Well, this is perfect for Dartmouth undergraduates.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: That's the kind of lightning linkage he could make.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow. Wow.

JOHN WILMERDING: So I learned a lot from his teaching. I learned a lot from these exchanges. It enabled me to write *Compass and Clock* a number of years later.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: This is wonderful. I wanted to hear your thoughts about—this is so unexpected as a way of—but it perfectly explains what you were trying to accomplish, really.

JOHN WILMERDING: So that 11-year period was a very rich one, that included the writing of the*Pelican History*. It was the summary book of my early career, in its size and ambition. The nice thing—a little footnote—the nice coda is, all these years later—that was 19—God, I can't remember.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: '76, it was published.

JOHN WILMERDING: '76, yeah. I wanted to have it published in the centennial year, as a way of completing it. [00:06:00]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The one place where you somewhat tip your hand is that, almost throughout the book, everyone is represented by one or two pictures, except for the second half of the 19th century. We've got Homer, Eakins, so on, who have five or six pictures. That's interesting. [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: And they would be the artists I would write about next. The shift, for me, from the early 19th century to the later 19th century. But just to finish the point, the '70s there, before I leave in '78 to go to Washington—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: '77, I think.

JOHN WILMERDING: Or '77. That's right, because the East Building opens the next year, '78, is the *Pelican* project and the teaching with Cox.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The other thing that, being an old MoMA person, I just had to mention is your contribution to Kynaston's American *Paradise* show.

JOHN WILMERDING: That's got a wonderful anecdote that goes with it.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You and—

JOHN WILMERDING: —Barbara Novak and—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —Bob Rosenblum.

JOHN WILMERDING: —Bob Rosenblum. We all wrote, at the time, rather radical, revolutionary essays. They were very much despised in the critical press by Modernists. Barbara Rose—everybody took us to task, because I had the nerve to write about the relationship to Luminism and Abstract Expressionism. Again, the official art historical world still kept a major separation between Americanists and Modernists. Nobody had even begun to work on the early American modern, which tied it together, the Stieglitz circle. And so the official MoMA community and its critics, scholars, writers, were very annoyed, upset, even outraged, that the three of us, who were essentially 19th-century people, would be invited to publish, let alone do an exhibition. [00:08:07]

It was Kynaston's idea. He went to Dartmouth, came up. I remember, vividly, talking with him. He said, "I want to tie in the continuities, as it were, from Luminism to Rothko." He saw—to his credit, he persuaded Barr, and whoever else in charge, to let him do this. It was the centennial exhibition. It was MoMA's claim to explaining the American character in art, but particularly the modern American character had this kind of grounding and connection that nobody else would allow or permit.

It was up for a long time during the year. It didn't travel. It was up for six or eight months.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow. That's unusual.

JOHN WILMERDING: Well, because it was the centennial celebration, bicentennial. After it was all over and done, the MoMA press office sent each of us a big folio, a binder, with copies of all the press.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: All the reviews, yeah.

JOHN WILMERDING: It was richly written about. As you went through it—I'll never forget. I mean, I was amused, really. There was not a single favorable review.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's amazing.

JOHN WILMERDING: Because of that critical outlook, nobody could understand the structure.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I can only guess what Bill Rubin thought about the whole thing. [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: I wish I had had a chance to talk to him about it. [00:10:01]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But Bob just reveled in being kind of a contrarian.

JOHN WILMERDING: That's right, yeah. Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: He was marvelous.

JOHN WILMERDING: Augustus Vincent Tack, nobody had heard of, and he showed that Tack was predecessor to

Pollock. But each one of us, in our own way, did something that was totally offensive to official critical views.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But from today's perspective, looks very convincing, I think.

JOHN WILMERDING: Yeah, yeah. I know. I've since done lectures on—now you look back and say, "God, what was the fuss all about?"

CHRISTOPHER LYON: There was this monolinear narrative that the museum—even into the mid-'80s, the joke was, the guards would stop you if you went through the galleries in the wrong direction. [Laughs.] When the collection was reinstalled after the 1980 renovation. That was not true, I don't think. [Laughs.] There was a line. When I was at the Institute, I took a seminar with Bill Rubin about New York School painting and so on and so forth. It was sometime around then that Bob Rosenblum wrote, in print, "If I were installing the collection, I would do it differently." And boy, did that get Bill's goat. So he invited Bob into the seminar, said, "Okay, show us what you would do." And it was brilliant. I mean, he started showing us Spanish artists that none of us had ever heard of, late 19th-century, early 20th-century artists. It was like the scales fell from your eyes. He was really something. [00:11:51]

JOHN WILMERDING: Well, I remember his Guggenheim exhibition, when he did—he had Sargent next to [Jacques-Louis] David. I remember going through—when the Guggenheim did the Norman Rockwell show, which everybody was appalled by. Bob took us through and explained, "That passage is Cézanne, that passage is Matisse," and he was utterly—whether it was true or not, he had a vision and saw stuff. It was absolutely wonderful.

Listen, it's 12:30. Let's pause.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Pause, okay.

JOHN WILMERDING: Because we're on the threshold of—

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CHRISTOPHER LYON: We're back. The afternoon of March 19th.

In 1977, you became both senior curator and curator of the American collection at the National Gallery, is that right? You've sort of had a—

JOHN WILMERDING: Right. Part of my negotiation was to up my salary from an academic salary. So one of the things that Carter did was create—I don't think the title had been used before—senior curator. Which, if I recall, was mostly funded by civil service, but it could be topped off from private funds that were beyond the civil service ranking. The senior officers at the Gallery, the executive officers, are all paid by private funds. Most of the rest of the staff is civil service. Anyway, partly to lure me there, that title was created.

But the real importance was to create a department of American art, which hadn't existed before, which is sort of amazing. I was given the promise of hiring an assistant curator, which I did within a year of getting there. So we really started seriously mapping out the cataloging of the collection, an acquisitions program. I always had known in my mind, going there, that the first real exhibition I wanted to do was *American Light*. I thought of that as the title. I guess, originally, I thought, like the MoMA exhibition, I would carry it from Luminism into Abstract Expressionism, using O'Keeffe and various other—Dove and so forth—one could have filled out. But then quickly realized that that just would cover far too much terrain and would end up being messy, and that the real scholarly contribution of that show was to dig into depth into these key mid-century figures. [00:02:34]

The other thing I wanted, and succeeded in doing, was inviting several colleagues to write for the catalogue. I wrote the longest essay, so I had my say and my ideas laid out. I invited an old Harvard friend, who, like James Cox—this was a guy named Al Gelpi, who was then teaching at Stanford, American literature—to write about the literary counterparts to Luminism. Ted Stebbins, who had then finished his work on Heade—he was interested and did write, as a kind of contrarian, about why Luminism didn't exist as an American style, and that it was really more international. [00:03:34]

He made a very interesting case, comparing Russian and Scandinavian painting, which was only just beginning to be looked at at that point, and made a legitimate case that at least there was such a thing, one might call, as Northern Light. That, in Northern Europe, Scandinavia, there are artists we now recognize who are doing very similar things to the American Luminists. I still argue, then and do now, that there's a particular American character to Luminism, particularly in its format. The idea of the horizontal format in relation to the national landscape. Both the aerial view and the distant view are related. That's why I had quotes from Emerson and Thoreau on the walls and in the catalogue. There are American aspects that have to do with our specific geography, that one could say, at a certain latitude—like Northern Europe, an awareness of fog, an awareness of

sunset, eerie kinds of Arctic light—is something shared internationally.

Anyway, Stebbins wrote that essay. I'm still rather pleased with how it all was assembled. It was a really good mix. One of Barbara Novak's students had just written a dissertation on design in American drawing and painting, and the role of drawings, so that came in. Then, Weston Neff, whom I had known from the Met, who had worked on Western landscape photography, contributed that, partly because I knew I wanted to include photography in the exhibition, to show that this existed across media through those mid-decades. So that, I knew, would be the first big project, and I think that was—I got started in '78, and we opened the show in—I think it was the winter of 1980. [00:06:00]

But as part of that—that was sort of part of a program. I said to Carter, "I think what I'll do is give you a kind of statement of possible exhibitions that I want to do over the next decade." He was very good in pushing curators to think about long-term program and strategy for exhibitions, and likewise acquisitions. He would say, "Write down what you think are the 10 most important works of art still in private hands or that might be on the market. What are they? Where are they? And let's see if we shouldn't go after them, either by gift or auction or whatever." Those were very useful exercises for curators to think about. I said, "Luminism is the broad thematic show. I would like to follow it"—I can't remember in what order—"to do some kind of major collection show, to do a monographic exhibition." I've forgotten—there was maybe one other category. And indeed, over the next few years, I did Peto as the monographic exhibition, and the Ganz exhibition as the major collection exhibition.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Can I ask you, just in passing, about—you and Wanda Corn contributed to a post-Impressionism catalogue in there, somewhere around 1980?

JOHN WILMERDING: That was a sort of typical, last-minute curatorial need. There was, in Europe—I've forgotten who organized it. It might have been the Royal Academy. Anyway, there was, circulating in Europe, a show of post-Impressionism, which had entirely European work. Carter had the idea, when he brought it to the Gallery, he said, "Let's add some American pictures." So that was a last-minute project under deadline of publication. [00:08:16]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I'm only asking because I've been spending some time with Wanda Corn's book, *The Great American Thing*, and—you know where this is going. [Laughs.] Her approach, trying to put the Stieglitz circle and so on into a kind of larger narrative about the development of an American identity and art seems to dovetail with some of your concerns. I just wondered if you and she had—

JOHN WILMERDING: We're old friends. We had first met, I think, when I went out to San Francisco to see her early Andrew Wyeth exhibition, the first modern retrospective, at the de Young Museum. We became friends then. She's a few years younger. We've since been both on the board of the Wyeth Foundation, so we've kept up our friendship. I've always liked her work. I called her to take on that particular—I think I made the selections, or suggested the artists and called the various curators, because we had to work on a very quick deadline, both to get things and then get them reproduced.

So I called Toledo to get—I've forgotten what I included in that grouping, but because Wanda's most recent book, I think, or exhibition, at that point had been *American Tonalism*—which was a very interesting, pioneering show of painting and photography at the end of the 19th century, Dewing et al—I just, off the top of my head, thought she would be good on, and could write easily about, in effect, American artists of that period, not necessarily Tonalists. And she was up to the task. So that's how that collaboration came about. [00:10:15]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Just curious about that. I think you also, when you first came into the National Gallery, re-hung the American collection?

JOHN WILMERDING: I did. I did. I guess any curator likes to do that.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Can you talk a little bit about how you think about a problem like that, about presenting a kind of survey?

JOHN WILMERDING: Well, you have a sequence of rooms. Logically, I thought it ought to be reasonably chronological. Like any collection, there were pockets and byways. I mean, the Gallery had the great Garbisch collection of American folk art, so the question is where that would be integrated. There were things of that sort. That was a major guiding light as to—the Gallery's first strength is in colonial painting—Copley, the early limners, Stuart—and so the first galleries were likely to be, and were, portraiture. Then history painting, Copley and West. Then, logically, the emergence of early landscape. They had some very good, but not in-depth, holdings of Hudson River painting, but they needed to be clustered together. [00:11:51]

The American galleries there, as still now, are largely contiguous. They're more or less the same size, some with fairly high ceilings. So, curatorially, some decisions are simply made by the size of pictures, that you're likely to figure out a way of putting them in the biggest galleries, where you can get sight lines. They also are galleries

that are—I won't say axial, but they are on right angles. In other words, as you move from space to space, you can often see through openings to the next galleries beyond, and then maybe take a turn and so forth. That led me to the other—again, a question of eye. How to hang things using sight lines, and placing important pictures so they could be seen from some distance. For example, I know that Whistler's *White Girl* occupied that kind of framing of looking through several galleries. So there were certain pictures that would be anchors for different rooms, so that intuitively, I suppose, as a curator, you're making decisions about your own judgment as to what is the most important.

Carter himself always put final approval, and would come through. Had a very good eye himself about framing things side by side, what worked together. With any big collection, you don't want to have jarring frames side by side. Things don't always work. You want to observe little tricks, obviously, like having portraits near a corner of a wall, glancing inward. So, I don't think there was any single factor—[00:14:04]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: This is fascinating.

JOHN WILMERDING: —but to me, again, as in here would be the historian side. I mean, you're doing the two things. You're doing art and you're doing history. Both need to be served. The art in a sense that it's a visual experience. You want the most important things to stand out. You want to have colors in one work juxtaposed to ones in another, so that—I've always been a great believer—the Gallery still doesn't have large chat labels on the wall. It's the experience of the works themselves. You can always look at the label of who the artist is. If there is information, it's usually in brochures or sheets in the side if you want to inform yourself further.

But in other words, it's the experience of seeing art in itself, in its serenity, in a well-managed, constructed way. So that the shapes of canvases, what might be pairs, how a whole wall would look, how complementary walls, right angles—for me, to be able to create sequences that you hope, in a sense, are going to make it possible for self-education. As a sophisticated or an open viewer going through a set of space—and it doesn't matter what kind of art you're talking about, what period—that certain juxtapositions, or certain side-by-sides, are going to, by virtue of their comparison, teach you something. Whether it's two works by the same artist or artists of the same school, so that, when you get to an Ashcan room, or a grand portrait room, that would be logical. [00:16:10]

Large parts of those installations still hold true in the Gallery's collection today, which has, of course, been greatly transformed, not just with the addition of my things, but of course, most dramatically, a few years ago, the absorption of the Corcoran Gallery collection, which has brought in everything from Church's *Niagara* to great Sargents and so forth. In other words, if there is such a thing as American Impressionism, or there is such a thing as second-generation Hudson River School, as opposed to first, you want to make clusters that, in a sense, show what early Hudson River looks like, as opposed to Cole's followers in the second generation. That's the way I've always gone about it.

I think that you also learn, particularly in installing temporary exhibitions, that there's a difference between the way works will look as illustrations in a book, versus the way they might look if you're giving a lecture with slides, versus the way they might look on the walls. Each one is a different kind of experience. They all involve different levels of learning and of seeing, but that you don't necessarily—some museums and curators sort of slavishly repeat what they've done in the book, or vice versa. I've always thought, and the Gallery certainly taught me that lesson, that the direct experience of—and works are never cluttered in the Gallery. There's a kind of stately, open installation that's meant to—and it's reinforced, of course, by that Renaissance Revival, stately architecture of Pope. That the experience of the works are also meant to be, in a way, dignified—and yet, as I say, be able to teach you something just by virtue of the way they're hung and presented. [00:18:37]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Now, at a certain point, you're made deputy director. And now you're overseeing what? Exhibitions, publications?

JOHN WILMERDING: Yes, there was some juggling. I had some interesting competition among—because, deputy director, you've become an executive officer, and it's a kind of cabinet around the director that includes the administrator, the general counsel, the head of CASVA—the Center for Advanced Studies—the treasurer, and so forth. Not a big group. So you're on a par with other senior officers responsible for major components of the Gallery's administration, and deputy director is the number two to the director. So I always viewed it, from the beginning, as a kind of first among equals. [00:19:45]

I didn't have any training in this, although I had been chairman of a department. But I realized that these other officers don't report to you; they report with you. At the same time, there is the role that you are number two, and in that sense, you have to perform some kind of coordination, some kind of persuasion, to get things done, but essentially under the purview of that. I felt that I was not fully capable of having—again, it was one of these time and labor issues. While the deputy director has the responsibility for all curatorial affairs, I argued to Carter that we ought to separate out the position—and it's varied over the years—of chief curator from deputy director.

At the moment, I think, Frank Kelly is actually chief curator and deputy director. I felt, particularly with my strength in American, while I certainly knew the other arts, that that was the right time to have a separate chief curator, who would report through me, but in a sense would have the immediate oversight of the curatorial departments.

The way it worked out was we both coordinated what the curators did. Because the deputy director job also includes things like the publications office, the education department. One of the interesting squabbles was the general counsel decided I was accumulating too much power, and went into battle to get the archives, the National Archives, which are quite important—the library, by the way, also reports to the director. But the archives—it's a big operation with a lot of history—is a separate office, and the general counsel decided that he wanted that reporting to him. I could have—not that I cared less, but I wasn't going to go to war over maintaining that. But you could argue that archives could report either way. Anyway, that was a minor—and then, in the end, perfectly amicable. I had enough to do as it were, and so I let that go. [00:22:41]

It basically is responsible for all of the staff other than security. Security is under the treasurer and the administrator. And then, as I say, the Gallery, at least the senior officers, are paid by the trustees and serve at the pleasure of the trustees, renewable annually, as opposed to civil service. That's the great downside of civil service, is that once you've been in your job for a year, you're basically given life tenure. I tried to remove somebody in civil service. I had to do a fair amount of it. There was a lot of—I won't say rot, but a lot of things that Carter didn't want to tackle. He was much more dealing with the opening and the running of the East Building. His ambitious exhibition program, that included *British Country House* and various other real blockbusters—I mean, that was his real love, and he wanted to spend time around the world putting these things together. [00:24:05]

So he let things go. There was an administrator who basically was an alcoholic and not doing his job, but he had gone to the same boarding school that Carter had, and I think Carter had sort of a very difficult, if not impossible, time dismissing somebody who, in effect, was a schoolmate. So I had to tackle a number of things like that. There were curators who had been there too long, or curators who hadn't published, for example. It was an excruciating first year, in that I basically had to, one way or another, remove or persuade to retire close to a dozen key people: a couple of curators, a registrar, a sculpture conservator. Carter and I jointly had to deal with, as I say, an administrator, a treasurer. There was a lot of—of course, what I learned was the difficulty, in a civil service system, how do you go about this.

Every case was different. Some cases, you simply persuaded people. Others, you had to use the intimidation of saying, "Well, if you don't resign, then you're going to be reassigned to education or something else at the same salary, but not doing what you want to do." I learned a lot from that. I learned mostly that grown-ups, in a situation like that, can behave like children. It amazed me that people who had PhDs could come into the office and behave like children, could cry like babies. They could go shopping, but they couldn't get an essay written on time. I had to learn how to deal with those foibles, in a sense, to make everything work. If the curators are going to be serious, if it's going to be a major institution, which it is, then they need to form high standards for, particularly, publication. They're scholars. Some were simply not performing. [00:26:38]

That first year, for me, at least, was largely about housekeeping. I think I did it pretty well, without a lot of grudges. Some were very upset and unhappy. You had to learn how to ease them out. In most cases, they soon realized that, in fact, they were better off doing something else or moving on. At the time, nobody likes to be terminated or pushed around. So it was a lot of administrative work.

Again, I had an unusual relation with Carter, in the sense that I knew him growing up. He was a very private person, and didn't, intentionally, I think, make a lot of friends within the Gallery. He was perfectly personable, but there was a real insulation between him and those around him and those who worked for him. I think that was his way of running things with ultimate authority. Partly because he had personally hired me, and we knew each other—we were in the same club at Harvard, our families were friends—I guess he never had to worry about me or our relationship. And so it was, for the most part, a quite happy professional, working relation. [00:28:27]

The one little chore that he made me do, that I had to swallow hard as a curator, was he wanted to do a Grandma Moses exhibition. I rolled my eyes.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: I even had the nerve—oh, I know. It was being supported by a New York gallery that has the copyright to Mary Cassatt, and in fact was giving to the Gallery a very important Schiele painting. So Carter wanted to do something nice, as a kind of payback. When he told me this—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Is this Galerie St. Etienne?

JOHN WILMERDING: Yes. I said, "Carter"—oh, I know what I—I had the nerve to write the Gallery, saying that we weren't going to be publishing a catalogue. My implication wasn't good enough, and I said, "I'm not going to write anything." Carter saw the correspondence, hit the roof, and said, "We are going to be doing a catalogue, and you're going to oversee it." I said, "Well, I'm not going to write anything under my signature, but what I will do is write a reasonably long introduction under your signature." And that's the way we resolved that. But other than that—I mean, it was fine in the end. [00:30:04]

[They laugh.]

JOHN WILMERDING: But other than that, I pretty much was able to do what I wanted.

I guess I also realized, as time went on—because in the earlier five years, as curator, I had two opportunities to teach, which I had wanted to keep my hand in. I did a visiting term at the University of Delaware, commuted up and back, and another at the University of Maryland. So I was able to keep my hand in it. That teaching activity, obviously, I had to give up as deputy director, which was okay, but I guess that itch was always there.

I realized, perfectly appropriately, that a number two cleans up all the mess for number one, and does all the dirty work. As I've said on other occasions, Carter loved nothing more than going around Europe, flying around Europe, kissing the cheeks of the crowned heads—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The crowned heads of Europe. [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: —of Europe, and left the daily—you know, he said, "The daily management is up to the deputy director." I think I learned to do it perfectly well, but it was taking its toll. It was very tiring. I think it did make me realize, ambiguously—this goes back in a way to the Yale situation—made me ambiguously, on the one hand, know that I could do the job of director, but simultaneously, tell myself that I didn't want to do it. That I could and I couldn't do it. [00:32:00]

A couple of things happened. One was that Princeton was, at that point—I'm now three years into the job—Princeton, at that point, had been given a chair in American art. I think basically the first chair fully dedicated to American art. An old friend of mine, who had been in Washington, was now in the department at Princeton. He called me up and said, Would I be interested? I had only been deputy director for three years, and I thought, "It's too soon to move. I had better not come back to that yet." One, I was enjoying the deputy directorship. It was going pretty well.

But come five years—oh, I know what happened. It was very amusing. The Sarofim family, who had given this chair to Princeton, wanted it named after their son, who was due to graduate in 1986. Lo and behold, dear Christopher Binyon Sarofim, '86, didn't finish his senior thesis as required, and the university told the department and the Sarofims, "We can't name a professorship with '86 when Christopher hasn't graduated in '86." So Christopher went to summer school and worked away, and the department had to call off its search. I thought, "Well, that's just fine. Let it ride, and I'll give them all the names they want when they can resume." [00:34:00]

So, getting him through his work and his degree delayed everything by at least another year. Then they began the search all over again, called, and now I've been in the job for five years. I guess what I must have realized—because I was then in my early 50s—that, since I was only, I think, three years younger than Carter, I thought, "Do I want to be in this job for the rest of my career?" I still had a good 25 years, at least, to get to the magical number of 65. Or not quite that, but a good bit of time ahead of me, whether it was in that job or going somewhere else. I thought, "Well, Carter is going to be in that for the foreseeable future, and do I just want to go on doing the same thing?" When they reopened the search, I came back to it and realized that, yes, I would like to go back to my first love, which was teaching.

The other thing was that I realized Princeton was in a perfect physical location, halfway between New York and Philadelphia, so that making use of museums—I went to Philippe [de Montebello] and secured a title of visiting curator at the Met. We had initially thought that it might be much more teaching, exhibition, coordination between the Met and the Princeton department. Didn't turn out quite that way, although I realized that I would be able to make use of the Met for teaching purposes. [00:36:02]

I think my first concern was I didn't want to go back to a déjà vu of Dartmouth, and they're very similar, conservative colleges. But there were key differences. One being, as I say, location, access to museums, and coordination with them, particularly for teaching purposes. The one thing that I was successful in doing was offering a number of graduate seminars over the years that made use of access to the Met. In one year, for example, the students ended up researching and writing about works that were going to be in a Met exhibition.

Another year, I guess when it was Homer and Eakins watercolors, I was able to work with the Met conservation department in looking at works firsthand. I remember how startled these graduate students were—I was going

to say kids—when the curator and the conservator brought out the solander boxes and pulled out original Eakinses and Homers. They looked like, to them—they were such familiar master works, but they looked like they were looking at posters. Then the conservator got them with a microscope, and they really saw about weave and texture and pigment and so forth.

So it was having access, for teaching purposes, that was really terrific. The more I thought about it—the lure of, one, going back to teaching; secondly, teaching graduate students would be something new; and thirdly, the various museum associations for teaching purposes in both directions, let alone taking them down to Washington—all that, I realized, was part of what I could do. [00:38:08]

So I agreed to move. It was tough on everyone. It was a real jolt after being there 11 years. I think Carter was upset. It was hard. But what I didn't realize, of course—I should have anticipated, but I didn't realize—that Carter himself would retire abruptly a couple of years after I moved to Princeton. I made the right move, and whether it would have been different had Carter left, or announced he was leaving while I was still there—I guess I might have taken it on, on an acting basis. But as I say, having thought about it, I probably would have gone into it and it wouldn't have been right. It wouldn't have been good. I don't like lots of travel. The glamour and the whatever—I could see that, as we know, Washington institutions have to deal with budgeting from Congress. There's a lot to it. This positive, namely the funding that helps with your fundraising. Half the budget is federal.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The early '90s was kind of a fraught time, too, with the culture wars and all the rest of it.

JOHN WILMERDING: Dillon Ripley was also making Carter's life difficult. There was a lot of competitiveness there. And understandably. The Smithsonian's problem is that it's got Congress and various government officials who are on the board of regents, so it's very easy for them to throw tantrums and disrupt things. Also, it's such an enormous empire. That's more than running a great, huge university. [00:40:17]

The positive side was that the Gallery was self-sustaining, that we had almost no government interference. It was treated as a kind of jewel. Carter orchestrated that very well. But we were left alone, and that was the great pleasure of working at that government institution. In a sense, it was the private side.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I have to ask you: Do you want to talk about the *Helga* show?

JOHN WILMERDING: Oh, sure. Well, that was a case—the Gallery, up until that point—again, I loved Carter's manipulations.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: That is to say, up to that point, there had been a policy, that was pretty regularly enforced, that the Gallery would not do monographic shows of living artists. For manipulation, for market reasons, et cetera. Carter wanted to begin to do some, and the way he worked the way into it—I don't know whether they still largely held to that—was that the Gallery would take on doing exhibitions of parts of an artist's career, rather than full-scale retrospective. It was a bit of blurring of the definition, but it was a way of having it both ways. For example, we did, I thought, a very interesting show of Rauschenberg's overseas cultural exchange suite. [00:42:15]

That was a way, also, of bringing artists into the National Gallery and building up the modern collection, which desperately needed it. So some things came in by gift, et cetera. That was a way, also, of staking our position in the contemporary field. Helga came about because Leonard Andrews, the owner—a publisher, I think, of a legal newsletter, law newsletter, and made his money, and was a neighbor and friend of the Wyeths—had gone to Andy, who was a good friend of mine. I've known him for years because of the Wyeth Foundation, going back to the '60s. Andrews, in any case, had gone to Wyeth directly and negotiated a purchase deal of what he thought was the entire collection. I think there were a few things that were not included. But he ended up buying close to 450 works, mostly on paper, but half a dozen major dry-brush watercolors, and perhaps a dozen temperas, of which, again, three or four or five were as good as anything Wyeth ever did. So, far too many, et cetera. [00:43:48]

Andrews comes in one day with a big solander box, portfolio, of a sampling of the selection. Carter, always interested in sensationalism—used to tell curators, in fact, that bad criticism was better than good, because it brought the public in.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: So you would have weeping curators. Carter would tell us, "Alright, we're going to do much better if we've been crucified!" And so I think Carter loved the idea that this was going to be controversial, that it was an American artist who, at that point, still wasn't thought in very high favor in official circles. Was too popular.

So, Andrews opens the solander box and brings out all these nudes. I could see Carter was quite taken that this would be perfect sensationalism, and, Would I take it on? Well.

[They laugh.]

JOHN WILMERDING: As things unfolded, I thought this was really the end of my career. What I did in the essay—one, I went to interview him and got some very interesting material, but I also tried to stand back and put it in perspective. That meant some compact discussion of the nude in modern art, going back to Ingres through Delacroix, Courbet, Manet. Wyeth knew most of those artists, if not specifically, generally. He went to museums regularly, looked at catalogues regularly. He told me later that my argument that the black velvet choker in one of—I've forgotten what it's called—night study, one of the *Helga* nudes—was inspired by Manet's *Olympia*—he said, "I never looked at *Olympia*." I still don't believe him. But Wyeth—[00:46:10]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] That's really hard to believe.

JOHN WILMERDING: Wyeth had a wonderful capacity for telling you what he wanted you to believe about his work. I had learned that much. I thought, "That, at least, I can write about, to put this in historical perspective so that it could be taken seriously." I also talked a bit about Wyeth's age at that moment. I think he had just turned 70. In subtle ways, the whole issue of the male reaching that sort of last point of interest in sexuality. I didn't speculate. I, to this day, don't believe that there was any sexual relationship there. You look at those pictures, and there's nothing sexual about them. They are nudes in a traditional sense.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: They're strangely colder.

JOHN WILMERDING: They are strangely cold, and they are in the tradition of the nude posing in the studio, so to speak, like a still life. It's a studio prop. It was a fine line to tread, but I thought because all of the press explosion—it hits *Time* and *Newsweek* magazine simultaneously, the critics are lambasting it—I had the curatorial problem of, as it was, cutting the exhibition down, I think, to like 225, half of what he had acquired. It could have been trimmed even more, but I realized that it had to be greatly edited to be presentable. [00:48:01]

Where we got into trouble was, the Gallery does have a policy that you do a private collection, you need a major gift. Andrews did fulfill that. He gave the Gallery a very beautiful, important Wyeth watercolor, worth a great deal. We also asked that the exhibition be, because it was works on paper, limited to four venues, which he agreed to and then later violated. I don't think there was any contract, but it was a clear agreement that we thought it was irresponsible for these works on paper to be exposed indefinitely. Sure enough, by the end of the four venues, there had been all the huff in New York press, and Philippe was saying, "This is not worthy of the Met. It's not worthy, even, of New York." Well—who was it? Buck, out at Brooklyn, the director at Brooklyn—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Bob Buck.

JOHN WILMERDING: —at the time, negotiated to get it as a fifth venue to bring it to New York. In a way, that was fine, although this was venue number five.

Then the real whammy was, after it was finished with Brooklyn, Andrews negotiates something like a 12-museum tour through Japan. So we had egg on our face on that requirement, but legally there was nothing we could do about it, and we didn't anticipate being blindsided.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: What role did Paul Gottlieb play in this? [00:50:00]

JOHN WILMERDING: Well, he played the role of publisher. He made the deal to publish.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The way it's been sometimes presented is that Paul put this package together and brought it to the National Gallery. But it sounds like that wasn't the case.

JOHN WILMERDING: I don't know the exact chronology. He might have called Carter and said, "This is in the works," but we never saw Paul initially. Andrews himself arrived personally to show us—as I say, maybe two or three dozen were in this portfolio, enough to convince us to do it. Probably—it makes sense that Gottlieb was already involved as a publisher of what would happen. So to that extent, he might have been pushing it. I'm assuming—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: The mythology is that it sold half a million copies.

JOHN WILMERDING: Yeah. It was. It was the biggest art seller, I think, until Rewald's *Cézanne*. The biggest-selling art book ever, and it was briefly—I don't think it ever got to the bestseller list for the *Times*, but I do remember it was on the bestseller list of the *Washington Post* for a couple of weeks. For me, the great personal irony—I can enjoy it long after—as, technically, a government civil servant, as I was, curator, I could not be paid a cent. And here it makes all this money. I don't know even whether the Gallery got royalties from the sale of the

—they must have. I think they got a lump sum, perhaps. But the Gallery made no money. I got nothing. I had to write the essay on government time. [00:52:00]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I've written about this a little bit. This was Paul's scam in the '80s. He couldn't justify, any longer, maintaining the in-house staff needed to do proper art books, and he had the brilliant idea of farming it all out to museums, and then profiting. He kept this up for 10 or 12 years, and then the whole house of cards collapsed.

JOHN WILMERDING: One of the amusing byproducts was, as you know, he negotiated its publication—I've got several of them here—into, I think, four foreign languages. There was Japanese, there was German, there was French. There might have been Dutch. I'm not sure. Anyway, there were at least four others. Everybody else went along with it. They had a different cover. But the French—Gottlieb calls me up and said, "The French don't want to publish your introduction," because I had written about Courbet and Manet, and they had just assumed that nobody else but Frenchmen could write about French art. So they were totally dissatisfied, and they wanted to substitute somebody from the Louvre, who would write a new introduction for the French edition. The one thing I credit Gottlieb with, he said, "No, you're going to take it as is. You can translate it, but you're going to take my essay," and kept it in, and it was published as that. I thought that was one delicious little piece of it, some outcome. And yeah, it was—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Michael Brenson, at least, said you had made the best case that could possibly be made for—

JOHN WILMERDING: Oh, did he?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I looked it up last night. [00:54:00]

JOHN WILMERDING: Did he?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah.

JOHN WILMERDING: I forgot.

[They laugh.]

JOHN WILMERDING: It still amazes me to this day that I survived unscathed. There was very little, if any, personal attack on me or my writing. It was partly—there was so much to write about in terms of its presentation, of the whole salaciousness of the Betsy-Andy story, that everybody was preoccupied with that. And there was actually very little writing about it as an art show, I mean, ironically. So on and on it went, and then had this terrific unraveling.

And of course, Andrews, he went off, making money. He bought the collection for 4,000,000, and then I think comes time—he then decides he has to sell it, whether he had to sell it or wanted to. After his big Japanese tour, he then sells it to a Japanese consortium for 40,000,000. So he had plenty of delicious capital gains out of it all.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's so outrageous.

JOHN WILMERDING: That's all sort of the nasty fallout. But Carter, as I say, believed—partly tongue-in-cheek, but partly quite seriously—that it was worth taking advantage of that sensationalism. That this is the way you bring people in. We had [George] Shultz and all the high powers of Washington there at the opening, and television. I think I went on ABC, *Good Morning America*. It was a wet dream for the PR department. They loved it. Carter did, too. I think the curator sniggered and all that. [Laughs.] [00:56:09]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wow.

JOHN WILMERDING: So that's the *Helga* story. Okay, we'll break off here?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Let us—

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CHRISTOPHER LYON: It's Christopher Lyon interviewing John Wilmerding on March 20, 2018, in his New York City apartment, round two. You were talking about the Ganz collection exhibition.

JOHN WILMERDING: Yeah. Late in my years at the National Gallery, I arranged the exhibition of Jo Ann and Julian Ganz of Los Angeles. They had become friends of the Gallery. The Gallery, like almost all museums, expect, usually, some kind of gift for showing a private collection. You don't just enhance a private collection without anything. They had one of the finest collections of the period put together, and needless to say, there were a lot

of things in it the Gallery would love to have. So it seemed a natural idea to propose to them an exhibition. We didn't discuss, early on, what they might give. They later were very generous. But it clearly was, in a sense, in both sides' interest. I thought the more we could—even though they had associations with Los Angeles County Museum, the more we could cultivate them, the better. [00:01:40]

So we installed the exhibition. It turned out to be, in some ways, a kind of sensation in that—we hadn't realized at the time, but it was Hilton Kramer's last art review. By the time he was ready to retire from the *Times*, he had gotten very cranky and very irritable, almost perverse, and for some reason, decided to showcase all of his venom on this exhibition. In fairness, one of the points that reviewers made was that, at least in the opening, it was over-lit. The Ganzes had made a point—one of the first collectors to do so—to get pictures in very good condition—although they were accused of over-cleaning—to put on good period frames. So, to some eyes, the installation looked just a little too showy. And Kramer absolutely ripped into it.

I think there were parts, in retrospect, I would have left out. They had a whole section of what we call American Renaissance work, late 19th-century classical revival figure paintings, and a good many of them pastels and watercolors. They were just simply not as strong. They came across a bit too sentimental compared to the various other areas of their collection. Extraordinary still lifes by Harnett and Heade, wonderful genre paintings. They collected artists like J.G. Brown. He was a known name, but not really well-known. So there were a lot of interesting things that they bought that were just first-class examples by those artists. [00:03:56]

Anyway, it was a huge controversy. I think they were, needless to say, [laughs] quite upset by it. But distinct from other occasions like that I've seen, where collectors or donors pick up their marbles and give up, the Ganzes had enough confidence in what they were doing. They did, in fact, deaccession some of the American Renaissance pieces later on, and boiled the collection down to perfectly wonderful Hudson River paintings. A great Lane of Boston Harbor, wonderful Kensett, a suite of Sanford Gifford oil sketches for some of his major works, one of the classic Raphaelle Peale still lifes. I mean, it was a really fine collection.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And bracketed in time by?

JOHN WILMERDING: Well, starting with Peale, sort of early 19th century—1810, 1825—and running up to the end of the century. They had a great Peto. The Harnett, *Mr. Hulings' Rack Picture*, was probably Harnett's finest work. Those are all basically late 1880s. So it was largely, not entirely, a 19th-century collection covering the major subjects of landscape, still life, and genre painting—were the three great strengths. In the end, it all worked out. It was a very popular show, and led, in later years, to Julian Ganz becoming a trustee of the Gallery. Both of them joined in the trustees council. They became important donors. When they finally decided to sell the collection a number of years ago, they gave several key works, and made available for sale several others, and kept their promise to benefit the Gallery. [00:06:23]

So it was a great experience, and one of the nice things for me—which again is a segue into moving to Princeton, after I left the Gallery as an employee—when Julian, for age limit, retired from the board of the National Gallery, I was elected to his vacancy. Which was a nice feeling, that another American collector—not that they had a slot for that purpose, but the timing worked out. As I said, we had become good friends. So I sort of liked the idea that I was succeeding him in that position on the board. That all happened several years after I got to Princeton. In fact, I had no idea that my association with the Gallery, in a sense, would continue so intimately and professionally in the years following my actual time in Washington.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Can you talk a little bit, in the wider sense, about the aspect of being a curator, of acquiring work, and developing relationships with lenders? [Laughs.] I always think of an episode when I was at MoMA: There was a private event when Rauschenberg's bed was given to the museum by Leo Castelli, and there was a little trustee thing. I, for some reason, was able to watch this. Bill Rubin's standing in front of this thing, and he gave a nice little talk. And he said, "And Leo kept his word!" [Laughs.] I just thought, Wow, this is interesting. There's this personal kind of— [00:08:25]

JOHN WILMERDING: Well, that's the job of all curators, of course. Going back to my point about Carter Brown asking all the curators to keep wish lists of the dozen works they might want to acquire, most of those works would be in private collections, so you do want to cultivate the people with similar interests in your field. The Gallery was late to the game in having support groups for various departments. And that was one of the reasons when they, after they opened the East Building, created the trustees council—a group of collectors, basically, from all over the country. There was no built-in membership or high-level support, and the Gallery wanted to make its case that it was a national institution.

Part of the rhetoric was that, to collectors, "Yes, maintain your ties to your local home institution, but think of the Gallery for one major work." That appeal did work, and it was a way the Gallery, particularly as prices were escalating—not just for American art but across the board, to a point where even the big institutions—like the Met, the Gallery—couldn't afford to buy everything they might want to. So the idea of even proposing formulas

like half-gift, half-purchase to collectors became a very useful device. And indeed, the Gallery and others should bring major acquisitions into the collection by such means. The Ganzes were, in a way, a kind of perfect example of that. [00:10:30]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Right. And taxes factor into all of this, too, right?

JOHN WILMERDING: Well, yes. There are variations of this, but the simple formula of part-gift, part-purchase is that—just for simplification purposes—if you give 50 percent of a work, that becomes a major tax deduction, and you're paid for the other 50 percent. In effect, you have to pay capital gains on that. You have to pay taxes on it. So the two parts, in effect, equal each other out, and both sides benefit. The institution gets the work, so to speak, for half price. The donor gets full credit in the transaction when all is balanced out. So a lot of museums now use that, and indeed it is, from a tax point of view, beneficial to everybody.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And from the terms of the institutions, building the institutions.

JOHN WILMERDING: Yeah.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It's favorable. [00:11:45]

JOHN WILMERDING: One other story, in a way, that again makes the segue from my years at the Gallery to my years at Princeton, and forms another continuity for me, was: Just after I got to Princeton, my first, I think, graduate seminar, I decided to do on obviously a subject I knew well. I hadn't been actually full-time teaching now for close to a dozen years. Going back, while I knew I could, I hadn't organized courses and so forth, so I thought for my graduate seminar, I would simply do Luminism, which was a big topic. It's one I had worked on, known about, and so forth.

We had, I don't know, a standard seminar-size group of perhaps, in this case, 10 students. It was an interesting mix. Princeton often encouraged that—for the very best undergraduates, they could apply to come into a graduate seminar. In fact, I had, I think, one or two in this group. So it was an interesting mix of students. The first half of the course, obviously, was reading as much bibliography, mastering, getting a grip on the material, through both lectures that I did, and readings and presentations that they did. Then, about halfway through the semester—and they were writing short papers and thinking about what they might do for the full course—but halfway through the course, a quite unusual opportunity arose.

This had to do with the sale of a famous collection of Winslow Homer watercolors that had been on deposit to Bowdoin College for years—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Where's Burden [ph] College? [00:14:00]

JOHN WILMERDING: Bowdoin College.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, Bowdoin! [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: Bowdoin College.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I'm sorry. [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. On loan to the college museum, which is a fine, small museum of early American art—a family named Pulsifer, I think originally from Hartford, had placed on long-term loan about, I want to say, a dozen really beautiful Winslow Homer watercolors, almost all from the 1870s. His first sort of significant period of watercolor painting. Nobody ever thought that they would ever become available, because they had been so long associated with Bowdoin that it just seemed they would eventually be part of the permanent collection. Anyway, for whatever reason, the family decided—I think it was one of those things where a new generation couldn't afford to keep them up. They couldn't agree on how to—whatever.

Anyway, so the decision was made that they were going to sell them. Like a lot of collectors, they, when they first sounded out the market, expressed an interest, a desire, if at all possible, to keep the collection together, which seemed a little bit unrealistic in the sense that Homers—by then, this is now in the late '80s—particularly watercolors, in good condition, were already bringing enormous prices. So it was a collection of real value, and there weren't many collectors out there that either might want or could acquire the whole group. [00:15:56]

Serendipity, again in my life, steps in. One of the people I had met when I got to Princeton was an alumnus who—he might have been on the support group, or an advisor to the art museum, doesn't matter—was a lawyer. I've forgotten his last name at the moment. Doesn't matter. Anyway, this alumnus lawyer happened to be the executor, or the advisor, for the Pulsifers in selling this collection. Now knowing that I was at Princeton in American art and had done work on Homer, he asked my advice. I, needless to say, immediately thought of Paul and Bunny Mellon. They had, over the years, collected a lot of Homers. They, ironically—well, not ironically—

nicely, their favorite period of Homer's work was just this area of the early-to-mid and late 1870s. So we made contact with the Mellons, and sure enough, they were interested in buying the whole collection.

There were wonderful moments I had with the Mellons after I got there as curator. They would often bring works on approval into the Gallery for curators to look at and comment. I remember one day, Carter Brown called me up to the office, and the two of them were there. There was a little Homer oil, 1870s oil, hanging on the wall, and there was a watercolor. I think Paul had found one. Bunny had found the other. In they came, and, What did I think, What did we all think? They pressed us: Well, if we had to choose, which one would we go for? [00:18:15]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: Needless to say, after the discussion was over, Paul—or, I don't know, Bunny, one of them—stood up and said, "Well, dear, I think we should just get both." And they did. So I well knew their interest in this material.

The nice thing that Paul allowed: I said, Would it be possible to do a small, focused exhibition? Just at a small, sort of one-gallery show of these 14, or whatever number of pictures it was. Because the intention was, they were going to acquire the works for their private collection. It would be understood that, ultimately, on their demise, they would be a bequest to the National Gallery. But we all assumed, at the time, obviously, that once they got them physically, they wouldn't be out of sight, but they would be in their collection rather than the public domain. So I argued, Well, it would be nice to have a small show, and that we would do it jointly with the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, where I think there were still a couple of surviving Pulsifer family members. [00:19:43]

So [laughs] I now had the task, in the middle of the term, to organize and produce a catalogue on the Pulsifer Homer watercolors. So I walked into class and I said, "Put your books down. Stop reading about Luminism. The second half of the course is going to be a crash course in Homer, and you're all going to be writing entries for the catalogue."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Wonderful. Wonderful. What an opportunity.

JOHN WILMERDING: It was, and it was great fun. Fortunately, the group was really smart. It was one of those lucky things, because often, you'll have one or two students who are not up to either the writing or the research. I was amused to remark, after it was all done, I think at the opening: Not one of them was an Americanist or going on in American art. But I had a really bright group, and even—this is now 30 years later—one of those students, a guy named Douglas Nickel, is now a distinguished professor of photography at—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: In Chicago?

JOHN WILMERDING: No. He was. He's at—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: He was at Chicago, wasn't he?

JOHN WILMERDING: Yeah. He's at Brown University now. Another one of those students, an incredibly bright, later major in the department—I think he was actually a freshman. I can't remember. It doesn't—but a guy named Frederick Ilchman, who was the son of—his mother was president of Sarah Lawrence College, and the father was a foundation head. He came from a very bright family, had a very good eye. Later went on to work in Renaissance art, and is now the chief curator of European painting at the Boston Museum, and has done—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: All in this seminar. That's amazing. [00:22:01]

JOHN WILMERDING: Yeah, and there were others who went on to equally interesting careers. So for me, it was, of course, a wonderful start to my time at Princeton. But to carry off—I mean, fortunately, Princeton is on a semester, rather than a term, system. So the combination of a 14-week term, plus a reading period of several weeks after Christmas for them to get their research done and papers done, did give us time. We had to be disciplined, we had to move quickly, but they were up to the game, and every one of them wrote very fine—I wrote a long introductory essay on Homer in the '70s. And then, I think, as I say, it was almost one-to-one. Each one had a work to write. It wasn't a long essay, but it was, in a sense, their first, literally, publication. As I say, it was a marvelously fortuitous opportunity that—again, as I say—kept, for me, the continuity of associations from my Washington years into my time at Princeton.

I think for me, intellectually and professionally, the most important transformation, I want to say, or expansion and growth in my scholarly work and thinking, came at Princeton through my association with the American Studies department. Actually, it's called a program. It's not a formal department. Princeton's American Studies program is, I think, one of the oldest in the country. It was started, not surprisingly, in the chauvinism of World War II. Princeton has developed these so-called programs, which are, in a way, interdisciplinary groupings of

faculties with likeminded interests. In the case of American Studies at Princeton, something like 15 departments, or representatives from departments, participate in the program. [00:24:33]

A regular department, obviously, is degree-granting. You take your courses, do your distributions, write your papers. The programs were set up not as a degree program, but with a set of courses provided, as I say, from these participating faculties—people from history, sociology, languages, art, music, Woodrow Wilson School, great variety—and offer seminars so that a faculty member who may be full-time in a department might dedicate one eighth or one quarter of his FTE to offering a course in American Studies. American Studies provided the umbrella for devising courses that wouldn't be called strictly departmental, that were in fact interdisciplinary. All of those latent interests I had had, but never really had a chance to develop—except from time to time in making, say, literary and art historical comparisons—as I thought about what kinds of courses I might offer under that rubric, led me to create a course. [00:26:06]

This was a classic instance where, for me, a course led directly to—in some ways, to me—my most interesting book, *Compass and Clock*. Because I thought of the idea of—and it's an artificial one, and since it's a construct, I thought of the idea of taking these round-numbered moments—1800, 1850, and 1900—and using them to bring together works, individuals, documents, events, from different spheres of American life, and put them in one pot, and see what that tells us about that particular period. Not so much in one 12-month period, but give or take a few years around that date.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: How did you conceive of the readership for a book like that? It's not exactly an academic book. It seems aimed at a broader audience, and yet requires a certain level of equipment. [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: I don't know that I thought of that formally. I just thought that it was—I mean, it wasn't all that original a field. Other colleagues in American art were beginning to probe other areas of culture. I think that was one of the most interesting aspects of the development of the American field, was its expansion into related disciplines, bringing new perspective—expanding the very idea of what art history was. I don't know that I thought particularly—I just thought that the material was interesting enough that I had landed on, to be sure, un-artificial, but clever, and at least a specific point of view that set out an argument. I wasn't going to a publisher. [00:28:21]

Now, step in on the other side, Paul Gottlieb—and I've forgotten how I was introduced to him. It might have been, actually, from the *Helga* series. I don't know who mentioned it to whom. I might have, thinking that Abrams would be interested in a kind of quirky book. While they were known for art books, they did other kinds of publications. Gottlieb himself was an extraordinarily open-minded, omnivorous kind of reader-thinker, liked new ideas, and to my delight, he seized on it, said, "Of course we'll do it." It turned out to be the last project I did with Abrams when the house—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: He left Abrams not too long after that, right?

JOHN WILMERDING: No. Again, it was very unfortunate, because no sooner had I finished *Compass and Clock*—I don't know what provoked me to think about my next book, but that was the one on—[phone rings]—let's pause for a second.

[Audio break.]

JOHN WILMERDING: Sorry. Anyway, I thought of this project of—I don't know how it came to me. These things creep up on you. The idea of: What is the meaning of where an artist places his signature? It led to the book that was called *Signs of the Artist: Signatures and Self-Expression in American Painting*. [00:30:01]

When I said "creeps up on you"—I realized that Lane had put his initials or his signatures often in really unexpected places in his paintings. I was not interested in the shapes of signatures just on the surface of the canvas, but where the artist illusionistically placed it within what would be called the fictive space, the—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You make a really interesting point about the staircase portrait of Peale, with the calling card, is that right?

JOHN WILMERDING: Well, actually, I think it turns out that it's the ticket to his museum. So it serves the same purpose.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh! But what you talk about is, it's on the boundary between the actual step and the—

JOHN WILMERDING: That's right. That's right. And Lane would put his signature on rocks on a beach. I realized, all of a sudden, that he did that because that's where he sat to do his painting. He was there. I had an introductory chapter on European painting, because there was some writing on this. I realized that Vermeer, for example, in a couple of cases, put his signature on the back wall of a painting, which, in a sense, indicated he

was in the room with the subject. It's either the *Astronomer* or the *Geographer*. I've forgotten which one. Rembrandt did the same thing.

So I did a kind of summary as a prelude, and then started looking, of course, through the whole field of American art.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I'm having this vague memory. Is there a little book called—something about names on trees? Rensselaer Lee?

JOHN WILMERDING: Could be. I don't know it. I vaguely—I don't know that I read it.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It's totally fascinating. It's about the history of inscribing initials and so on. [00:32:03]

JOHN WILMERDING: Nobody had done anything on this systematically in American art. And I started with the famous painting of Copley's, *Watson and the Shark*, which, of course, was well-documented. Jules Prown, a couple of years ahead of me, had written, at that point, the standard, complete monograph and catalogue of Copley's work. I looked at the *Watson and the Shark*—of course, there are two versions, Washington and Boston—and realized that nobody had ever commented on where Copley signed that picture, including Prown. Even today, if you ask people who know the picture or looked at it, don't know where the signature is. It's, in fact, on the inside of the stern board of the boat, the rescue boat. Most of the figures are leaning forward to try and rescue Watson, so that there is—and this was my argument—there's this kind of vacancy in the stern of the boat. My proposal was that Copley, by putting his name there, in a sense was declaring himself—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: "I saw this."

JOHN WILMERDING: —the captain. Well, "I saw"—but, "I was in charge of steering the boat." And also—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Did Copley participate in the event?

JOHN WILMERDING: No!

CHRISTOPHER LYON: No, okay. [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: No. No, no. No, no. He had met Watson when he got to London, who, at that point, is a grown man, without one leg, because the shark had bitten it off. Was now lord mayor of London. This was an event that occurred in Watson's youth, 20 or 30 years before. So Copley himself would have been very young and in America when it—so Copley was interested, and again, it's a very important transitional work, because it's his first history painting. In a sense, becoming an English artist. So in a larger, metaphorical sense, I was trying to argue that it was Copley, as it were, steering a course between American painting and English painting. [00:34:31]

That got me going, and the more I got into it, William Sidney Mount, Severin Roesen, wherever you looked—not everybody—there were unusual signatures in unusual places, that as you started probing, began to tell you something about the artist's thinking about himself in relationship to the subject he was depicting. They were often very clear decisions, because—didn't mean that every signature was in the painting. There were others that were more, call it, perfunctory, in the lower corners or whatever. So there was a distinction artists, for the most part, clearly made when they wanted to do this. It culminated with both Homer and Eakins, who extensively did this, and helped me, in a way, probe and reveal a lot more about the psychological nature of those two particular artists. They were the basis of substantial chapters toward the end. [00:35:49]

And it was a way of bringing it up to the present. I think I ended up with Richard Estes and Andrew Wyeth. Estes, as a Photorealist, had begun, then—does it much more often now—to place his signature illusionistically in one of the signs in the background of his street scenes. Again, the cliché is, it was a simple way of an artist, in a sense, placing himself and expressing his familiarity with that particular subject. In some cases, like Homer and Eakins, to an extent, there are more unexpected revelations that could be argued as to what these signatures mean. It wasn't just the trick, the device, of placing oneself there. So it turned out to be a wonderfully rich and interesting book. In some ways, I think it's my cleverest book, the one I had the most fun with.

I bring all of this up because I started to work on this, and I laid it out after finishing *Compass and Clock*, and I took it to Paul Gottlieb. As I say, I hadn't written anything yet, but I said, "Paul, this is what I want to do next." He said, "Great idea. We should work on it." I think, within a matter of days, Abrams was sold, and he was on his way out. It never happened. As it turned out—and I've been very lucky with publishers. I've never been published by one single publisher. I've had runs with publishers. I always thought it was interesting to work with different small universities to large art publishers, and I've been very lucky—not everybody is—in pretty much getting things published that I wanted to.

In this case, I took it to the Yale University Press, which, at that point, was beginning to emerge as the most significant, influential publisher of art books. Again, I was lucky. The editor who had just arrived there had been at Princeton, so I knew her. [00:38:11]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Pat Fidler?

JOHN WILMERDING: Yeah. I thought, Well, I've never done a book with Yale. They're the top of the line, and it would be fun. So that all worked out nicely.

What American Studies offered me, as I say, was: It put the pressure on to think about teaching courses in an interdisciplinary way, trying to make those connections. *Compass and Clock* was the first to do that, and I taught that course, basically, almost my entire time at Princeton, every other year. I didn't want to do it—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That course? So you built a course on *Compass and Clock*?

JOHN WILMERDING: Yeah. Well, it was the other way around. I did the course first, and then *Compass and Clock* came out of it.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Came out of the course, got it. But you structured the course that way, with the three markers?

JOHN WILMERDING: Actually, I think the very first time I did it, there were four dates. I also had—we looked at artists and writing in 1836, which included Audubon and Thomas Cole and Bryant. It was another nodule where you had this cluster of artists and writers and thinkers, from Erie Canal. I mean, I can't—but what I realized was —

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But you did that in your *Pelican History*. You did 1776, 1836, 1876. You know, you—

JOHN WILMERDING: I did a bit of that. I've been playing with—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yeah, a chronological thing. [00:40:01]

JOHN WILMERDING: Over time, I realized that's what, in effect, an historian does. You have to try and make sense out of patterns. It also made me realize that some of it is artificial, some of it is imposed. It's a construct, but that's what a good argument makes.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I really wanted to get to this point and just ask you a little bit, because in *Compass and Clock*, you talk about cyclical notions of history, and that brought to mind the various schemes that art historians, at least, have thought of. I'm thinking of—you know, Kirk Varnedoe had this idea of a spiral through history—

JOHN WILMERDING: Yeah [laughs].

CHRISTOPHER LYON: —that Pepe Karmel talks about. I don't think Kirk ever got to kind of articulate this completely, sadly. Then, of course, there's Alfred Barr's famous torpedo through time, and so on. So I wanted to ask you about these schemes, and what's useful about them, what's potentially maybe a little misleading about them, and just hear your thoughts.

JOHN WILMERDING: Well, all those issues are present in *Compass and Clock*. I don't think I ever thought of it as part of a grand reading of all of American history. Those three areas were ones that I had worked on, up to that point, individually. Lane and Church, mid-century. Peale is earlier. Then later in my career, Homer, Eakins, and Peto. So they were clusters that I had already started work on. [00:42:00]

But as I say, I think it was really the challenge of teaching in the American Studies program that encouraged me to pull this together. So it wasn't any grand vision, but it was a way of dealing, as it were, artificially, in the parentheses of the 19th century. I had toyed, when I set out, to have a section on 1950, and realized—but I only got part-way there. I mean, there's Jackson Pollock. There are key works by the Abstract Expressionists. There's developments in atomic energy. There's certain writings: Faulkner, Hemingway. But the more I pushed on it, there just wasn't enough, and again, it was just a way of, in a sense, stretching. As my original concept for the Luminist exhibition would extend up into the 20th century, this was a way of blocking out a further possibility, and then pulling back. I realized, from the point of view of a book, first of all, there was enough of real substance just to stick with those three dates.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: There is a sense in your *Compass and Clock* scheme, or perhaps maybe more in the *Pelican History*, of this progression through the 19th century, through Luminism and this kind of obsession with light and so on, but then moving to a kind of realism toward the end of the century, I guess that one would associate with Eakins and Peto and so on. [00:43:58]

I was somewhat struck that you, jumping forward almost a century, became particularly interested in artists dealing with objects in their art, dealing with actual things, [laughs] which Pop art, in general, but also realism—Chuck Close, you reproduce in that book. I got the sense that you were looking for a kind of analogue to what had happened in the 19th century in the transition from AbEx and so on into something of a more objective, cooler, more realistic art or something like that.

I'm just spinning here, [laughs] to hear what you have to say. I don't want to impose something.

JOHN WILMERDING: No, the currents of all those ideas are there in my work, particularly as I got into 20th century and modern, but I don't think they took root enough that I ever wanted to articulate it or pull it all together. This, as I say, turned out to be a discrete project that had a neat beginning and a neat ending. Yes, I was mindful with the cyclical idea that it might be applied later, but not enough to include in that particular part. I was aware, for example, Barbara Novak's first book really starts with realism and idealism, with Cole and Durand, but she carried it to—the end of the book ends up with Sol LeWitt. Her whole life, her essential theme: that the linear tradition from Copley ends up there. [00:45:55]

Now, I think her interest in Sol LeWitt partly had to do with her husband—Patrick Ireland, Brian O'Doherty—who was a conceptual artist and worked in neat, linear schemes. That kind of new formalism was very much in the air at the time that she was writing. It's an interesting connection, but it also, to me, in some ways, is very forced. It's running the thread just a little too far. Again, that's why I didn't want to have this become a scheme for [laughs] some kind of universal view of the field.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Let me slightly indulge myself. It seems to me there's a really interesting counter-narrative there—which is maybe even suggested by Robert Smithson in his love affair with entropy and so on—that the '70s starts to see a bifurcation, and then a real multiplication, of narratives with the rise of the women's movement, with the assertion of—and I'm not necessarily describing this as an entirely positive development. I think we see identity art as an aspect of the identity politics that kind of is afflicting us. [Laughs.] I'm just particularly interested in the idea of the story, and how the story is told, and how the narrative—

JOHN WILMERDING: I guess my simplified story of 20th century would be the intersection and conflict between realism and abstraction, from Ashcan to the early Modernists, back to regionalism, then to abstraction, then to Pop. Then it all breaks down, and what we've had since then is no particular [style –JW] dominating. It's been the kind of total fragmentation, which is another way of speaking about what you've just mentioned. [00:48:07]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Wasn't this—you emphasize in your book the importance of union. You talk about that when you talk about the Federalist Papers, and putting "UNION" all in caps. I'm thinking that the other side of that, of course, is this danger that we now see so strongly of factionalism, of the breaking down of that union. These things have to be reflected in art. They just—

JOHN WILMERDING: Yeah. I guess the last major phase or development—in both my writing, collecting, thinking—led me in a whole new direction—is my turn to working on and publishing on living artists. As was so much of what I've encountered and pursued over my decades—is accidental. I think I've mentioned I had—not a fear, but I had a very strong reservation about interviewing, writing about, living artists. I had done some, obviously, on Andrew Wyeth, whom I knew, but I had learned the lesson how much an artist can fabricate or embellish, manipulate, and in a sense deceive. That's part of the nature of the artist. Beyond that recognition, I didn't want to tackle that. I thought it was just too tricky. [00:50:00]

Obviously, also, my essential training up to that point was 19th century, and while I was trying to think of connections into 20th century, because I had to teach it—as an Americanist, you want to think of what's the character of the field from beginning to end, in all of its variations. But I hadn't, up to that point, tackled any writing.

I had gotten to know, socially, Richard Estes, the Photorealist, in Maine, in the summers. He had started coming to visit his dealer, Allan Stone, whose family—a long time there. Allan had just bought his own large house when his father died, and so he, in effect, had two houses, one of which he didn't need. He proposed to Richard that he think about buying it and spending more time in Maine, because he had come to visit every summer. Richard spent more and more summers there. Got to know a lot of the rest of us who were on the island, either seasonally or otherwise.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: What island is this?

JOHN WILMERDING: Mount Desert Island.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, you were on Mount Desert? Okay.

JOHN WILMERDING: I was in Northeast Harbor.

Allan struck a deal with Richard. Rather than outright selling his father's house to him, he bartered. Richard, I think, gave him a couple of his major paintings. Allan gave him the house. It was a great deal for both, and ultimately led, after—again, I can't remember the exact time—ultimately led to Richard becoming a Maine resident. He still has a New York studio, and is here in the wintertime, but the majority of his time, he's a Maine resident and works there from May through Thanksgiving. Through mutual friends, Sunday lunches, boating parties, whatever, we got to see him. I knew his work and admired it. Never really talked—I mean, occasionally, we would talk about artists that we liked. He would comment on Church, one of his favorites. Eakins, he liked. That all made sense to me. [00:52:42]

But I never thought of pursuing any of this until he called one day and said that the publisher Rizzoli had approached him about publishing a big monograph. He liked the idea, and asked if I would write it. Again, of course, my first reaction was not to say no, but to take a deep breath and pause. Because I didn't think—it wasn't easy to step over that threshold. I guess what I realized, what convinced me that I could tackle it, was that it was a style of work I was familiar with from the 19th century. It was a kind of realism that I had seen in Wyeth. So I knew something about it. But I think the real piece that I thought I could bring to writing it was, in a sense, the historical background, the possible sources, the tradition out of which his realism, and particularly his subject matter, comes from. So I had, in a sense, something to contribute, because I think there had already been at least a catalogue, and maybe a small book on Estes's work, essentially by Modernist critics. And while they were good, didn't have this contextual sense to them. [00:54:25]

So I agreed to tackle it, and realized the more I knew about his background and training and what he had looked at—not only artists that he said he admired, but in simple terms, here's a painting of all these New York street scenes with manipulated perspectives, his fascination with reflections and so forth, with the play of a sheet of glass separating but joining both the street and the interior space. All those wonderful plays in Estes's work, immediately, as a historian, took me back to making the point that he had spent several years in the school of the Art Institute in Chicago, and had spent a good deal of time in the museum. In that museum, of course, one of the most famous Hoppers, *Nighthawks*, is the very prototype for Richard's cafeteria street scenes.

But it went beyond that. There are particularly Venetian paintings in Chicago's collection, Venetian master paintings—Guardi, Canaletto, Bellotto. Again—and there are other Baroque paintings of street scenes with perspective and illusionism—[00:56:01]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And the big *Rainy Day Paris* [laughs] painting. Which doesn't have a lot of glass, I don't think, but—

JOHN WILMERDING: No. I've never asked him about the Caillebotte, that in particular. But the point is: Yes, all of these were major inspirations to him. Like any artist, some probably were quite explicit. Others could have just been absorbed in going through the galleries. So that's where I started the book. Then it was a matter of trying to lay out sense of how he got from one period to the next. The challenge of what was the relationship later on between what I call his still lifes and street scenes, and then his figure paintings and portraits. So it—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: You've always been very attentive to the relationship of architecture to culture. I haven't read your book; I wonder if you wrote or thought about the relationship of contemporary glass architecture to—and what that might mean culturally.

JOHN WILMERDING: I didn't write about that. It's, in a way, in the background. That's a good point that one could pursue that even further. The other thing was that, now in Estes's later years spent on Mount Desert, he was beginning to do many more landscapes inspired by that, that were quite different from urban, and often was painting the Mount Desert scenes in New York and painting New York pictures in Maine. Which, of course, led me to realize that his work is not only about observation, but it's about thinking in memory and artificial construction. One of the things that's sort of initially overlooked by people when they see Photorealism for the first time, they think it's just sort of slavish copies of photographs. [00:58:09]

But all of this led me to the insight that Richard is very interesting and has remained—really emerged as—the greatest figure of that generation of Photorealists. It's partly because of this imaginative ability to synthesize, to reconstruct, so that his best ultimate images are, yes, depictions, but they're also total inventions. They are, finally, as it were, paintings in their own right. In other words, I realized I had something to say.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: They're very modern in their all-over-ness, too. I mean, they're not—

JOHN WILMERDING: That's right, yeah. One can approach it from all kinds of perspectives.

So now, just to pull things together—I've again forgotten what date we're talking about, but around, I guess it was 2004, the National Gallery comes to me and says they would like to do an exhibition of my 19th-century collection, which was basically hanging in the house, jammed into the house, in Princeton. I won't say there wasn't much more to add to it, but it had a completeness that I was satisfied.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: How many works, roughly?

JOHN WILMERDING: I think there were about 50, divided more or less in half between paintings and works on paper. There was a whole subgroup of American artists painting or drawing Mount Desert, which I knew pretty intimately, so it was natural to collect good examples when I could find them. Church, for example, William Bradford, [William] Stanley Haseltine, et cetera. So it had certain kinds of clusters, but again, a kind of overall consistency. [01:00:23]

I realized, in a sense, you always—again, private collection doesn't automatically translate into a good public exhibition. I had thought about that, of course, from my curatorial experience, but I also had to think about it as the collector of all these works. The first obvious thing I realized was, there was a kind of breadth that could be interesting to the public. That is to say, early works from the first, second quarter of the 19th century—anchored by Lane, of course—and running up to the early 20th century, with late Thomas Eakins. Obviously, American realism was another continuity. I had still lifes. I had some figure paintings. I had genre. In other words, within those 50, there was a certain richness. There was a certain coverage of the field that had, at least, coherence to it, I had imagined.

So agreed to it, and we set about doing it. Well, of course, the works had to leave the house close to a year before the actual exhibition, particularly to have photography done for the catalogue. So all of a sudden, I was presented [laughs] with a situation of empty walls and empty floors, which I think to—[01:02:06]

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JOHN WILMERDING: —any serious collector, it's a horror vacui.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: It was pretty horrifying living with blank walls. I mean, I had a few sort of folk things I could put on the wall to pretend I had stuff. But [laughs] it made me think about what might I go on and buy next. Also, it gave me the first inkling of an idea, that rather than bringing the works back after the exhibition, I would make an announcement at the opening that this was going to be a gift to the National Gallery. For tax reasons, basically a promised gift. Some things were given outright, where I could get tax deduction. In effect, it would be committed to the Gallery. Moreover, I would leave everything there, physically.

The second piece of homework, in a way, was more important, before I, in a way, committed to it. I think every collector wants to feel that his or her works are going to make a difference somewhere. That if you're going to make a bequest or an outright donation, you hope that they'll be used, that there's room for them. I mean, these are all issues with a variety of museums, some of which have space and some don't. While the Gallery is a relatively young institution, it doesn't have the numbers of objects of older museums. Nonetheless, even with the East Building, it's pretty filled up. [00:01:47]

So what I did—and I went through my mind's eye, as it were, going through my entire collection, each artist, and considering how that related to works in the permanent collection. With just a couple of exceptions, I realized that almost everything was not yet represented in the Gallery's holdings, and that what I had would supplement what they did have. It wasn't so much that I was going to insist that everything be put on view. I think that's the job of curators. But I could imagine where a number of things that I had would make sense in certain galleries.

For example, the Gallery had a great South American Church, but at that point, not a North American Church. I had a painting of Mount Desert. Of course, now they have the great *Niagara Falls*. But at that time, they had just a South American landscape. They had Heade's still lifes, but not a Heade marsh scene. They had on loan, at that point—now, fortunately, acquired—they had on loan the great George Caleb Bingham *Jolly Flatboatmen*, but they didn't own a Bingham. I had a boatmen picture. And et cetera, et cetera. My Peto fit—in every case, generally, they either had different subjects by the artist, or they didn't have the artist at all. So I thought, all told, this could really help a great national collection and supplement. The more I thought about it—as I said, at the opening—I liked the idea of seeing these works on display where they could fit and be enjoyed, rather than simply be a dreary list of objects in my obituary. That it was time for them to have, as it were, a second life, in an institution I had had, now, a longtime association with. [00:04:26]

So anyway, it all worked out, and indeed the first thing the curators did—most of the major works are hung in the galleries, and really make a point, really help strengthen. For example, the Gallery is very strong in Winslow Homer, from early to late, but the one period that they did not have represented was his English period, and I—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, you have the seaside—

JOHN WILMERDING: It's called *Sparrow Hall*, of the women standing. It's an interior street scene rather than a seascape. Homer painted a lot of watercolors in England, but he only painted a very few number of oils. So here

was an English Homer that plugged and made complete the Homer sequence. So I was very pleased with the idea, at least, that it made sense. I had an Eakins watercolor, *Delaware Bay*. They didn't have an Eakins watercolor at that point. So from beginning to end, I realized things really, really fit. So it was a very happy occasion, very happy resolution, and I've enjoyed everything since.

But it then led to my thinking, What do I do now? I want to collect something. The first decision I made was, in a sense, obvious. I don't want to go on collecting the same things. By now, the American market was so expensive. Also, the really good things, of highest quality, had been pretty much snapped up. I mean, things do come on the market. So it didn't make sense to, in a sense, continue with—maybe unfair to call it second-level works, but works that really would be redundant to what I had already acquired. [00:06:30]

So now kicks in, of course, what has been a longtime interest, even going back to the '60s, namely Pop art. I think for a couple reasons, I remember when it first hit the fan. I was then an undergraduate, graduate student, and I just thought this stuff was really fun. I got on the mailing list to Leo Castelli. In those days, often when he had an exhibition of Lichtenstein or whoever it might be, he would get the artist to design the poster for the exhibition, which would be folded up and mailed as flyers to the clients, to the whole client base. Now, many of these things now, like Lichtensteins, Warhols—because a good many of them were signed, either actually or in the plate. Now, of course, when they come on the market, they are thousands of dollars just for what were really mailers and advertising. I think you could subscribe, for $35, to get—and I think I acquired two or three Lichtensteins that way. I mean, They were real silk-screen prints. Combined with, a few years later, when I get to Dartmouth, Bob Indiana and Rauschenberg come as visiting artists. It was my first sort of association, of meeting and liking Bob Indiana. I think I acquired one or two of his small early prints. [00:08:33]

So I had them in the background. The Lane and Bingham and the other major works would have been out front, as it were. It was a grain, as it were, that represented, in a sense, the protest, the radicalism, of the 1960s, of remembering having been a part of all that turmoil as my career began. The first seed of thinking about Pop and the period of the '60s began, that this is a revolutionary art. It was as different as the new writing of the period, from Tom Wolfe to Mailer, et cetera, and to the other new protest movements of women, of the race movement, the sexual revolution, et cetera. So, now it comes into my mind: Because I had liked the stuff all along, why not go to a completely different subject and period, one that I liked? It wasn't that new. So I fixed on the idea of collecting Pop art. [00:10:02]

Now, mind you, by the 2000s, Pop has become very, very expensive, sort of the major figures. Like the 19th century, you have to learn who the dealers are. First thing I did was to go around and find out the dealers for all the major figures that I liked—Wesselmann, Indiana, Lichtenstein, even Warhol, et cetera—and just find out what was available. If you're going to go buy, you've got to do your homework, compare prices, et cetera. Living, essentially, in a domestic-scaled house, and later apartment, of necessity I was going to have to acquire only works of modest scale. But I also realized, the more I looked at what dealers had, I wasn't interested and had no means to buy huge Warhols or large Lichtensteins, which is, of course, what major collectors and museums want. But I realized that, in many cases, there were available—at very modest prices—maquettes, studies, small-scale works, ideas. They were sitting in the store rooms of many of these dealers, and they were not particularly pushing them.

So that's what I did. I started acquiring works that were available, of generally a small scale. I initially put an emphasis on sculpture, again, as a less popular aspect. Most people, again, the real prices are for paintings. It wasn't an absolute thing, but it was another way of giving a kind of angle on that collecting. [00:12:13]

One of the nice byproducts of this was that I got to, first, Wesselmann's dealer, and then he took me to Wesselmann's studio, where I got to know him a bit, and the wife. I had already known Indiana. I met Lichtenstein. I met Oldenburg. I can't say they're friends the way Indiana is, but it was—you know, Alex Katz. So it was nice, as I say, meeting some of these artists. Now, at least, I wasn't so timid about asking, "Why did you paint this way?" Having a conversation about what they did became rather fun. I remember a day sitting in Wesselmann's studio with—because I clearly wanted to buy some things. I said, "What might you be willing to sell?" He put up on the wall a whole range of things, and my seascape, cut-out aluminum seascape, was one of those works. So buying directly from an artist was another shortcut. That all just turned out to be a lot of fun. And so—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Were you interested in acquiring any Jasper Johns?

JOHN WILMERDING: No, because Johns and Rauschenberg I think of art historically, and from a collecting point of view, are still too painterly. They're too much proto-Pop. They're obviously important—they're the beginning of the Pop movement and would be included in any survey, but in a sense, they're—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I was just thinking of Johns and Peto as—there's some connection there. [00:14:03]

JOHN WILMERDING: But again, in terms of the movement, they're really transitional from Abstract

Expressionism into pure Pop. It was just a way of—I basically limited myself to half a dozen figures that I really like. Yes, it would be nice, but Johns, of all of them, is probably one of the most expensive, and to find the right thing just seemed unrealistic.

So, as I said, basically concentrated on Katz, Lichtenstein, Wesselmann, a couple examples by George Segal, a couple examples by Warhol more recently, several acquisitions by John Wesley. So again, without trying to do a survey, it was a more useful exercise to have small groupings and clusters, and so—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Which other of the artists have you written about now?

JOHN WILMERDING: Well, as I say, once that got going, and I met some of these, Tom Wesselmann died shortly after. I want to say 2007. I only knew him for a short period of time. And after he died—because now I was excited about his work, and I had, in the studio, seen massive numbers of things, talked to him about them. I now had published with Rizzoli the Estes book, and I said to them, "What do you think about doing a Wesselmann book?" [00:16:00]

They loved the idea. There had been, again, some catalogues, some small books. Actually, the best thing on Wesselmann, up to that point, was his own autobiography, which he wrote—it was quite wonderful at the time—he wrote under the name of a pseudonym, Slim Stealingworth. I remember, when it came out, everybody was: "Who is Slim Stealingworth? Why haven't we heard of this person?" It took a while for people to realize that he had written it. I asked Tom, "Where did you come up with Slim Stealingworth?" He said, "Well, I would go play golf with friends in these fancy clubs up in Westchester, and they would ask me to sign in, and so I came up with this name, just as a kind of stage name, to cover for myself." I mean, it was also a play on stealing, worth. He was a very playful, whimsical kind of artist. But having written it, and published by Abrams, I think, it only covered the first half of his career. It's the best—he's one of those articulate artists who could write about his own work beautifully. [00:17:24]

But I realized it really covered only his work up through, I want to say, the '70s. Like a lot of those artists—Oldenburg, particularly Lichtenstein, Warhol—the later work was thought to be much weaker, repetitive, less interesting, certainly worth a lot less. There was a real prejudice against late Warhol. Even late Lichtenstein was much less appreciated. Everybody wanted '60s work. Wesselmann was under the same kind of shadow. He had made such an impact with the *Great American Nude* series, that he himself realized by the end of the '60s, as he got into the '70s, he really wanted to do something new. Same thing with Lichtenstein, wanted to get out of hot dogs and the comic book things, and while continuing the same vocabulary, do something new. Wesselmann in particular, I saw, wanted to push into new subject matter, like landscape, like still life, and even broke up, as it were, the *Great American Nude* into body parts. Breasts, legs, hands, penises, even. It was a way of just following into a new phase of both technical experimentation and new subject matter.

So I thought there was a real story there to tell, that I could bring up to date now that he had died and there was a full career. So I took the publisher from Rizzoli, and the editor I had worked with on Estes, down to the studio and made a proposal. Claire Wesselmann thought, at the time, I just wanted to do a book, which should be done, just on Wesselmann's prints, which is a great body of work. But I said, "No, I want to tackle the whole career in a big monograph." So that led, then, to the Wesselmann book, which was, by far, the biggest monograph I had done to date. Of course, they pulled out all the stops in lavish illustrations, large-scale publication. I was extremely pleased with the results of that. [00:20:00]

And it wasn't that I was only continuing to write about modern artists. I did a book with Gagosian on Lichtenstein's still lifes.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, you're the—okay. I have that book. He was doing some nice books for a while, though he seems to have tailed off a bit.

JOHN WILMERDING: Yeah. I was also doing books on Robert Indiana, with whom I had now resumed a friendship. Acquired a few of his works. In fact, ended up, I think, either co-contributing to monographs, or actually planning exhibitions on maybe even three occasions. For Indianapolis, we did a big retrospective of Indiana's prints. I and their curator did that jointly. Another curator at the Farnsworth Museum and I did Indiana's private collection at the Farnsworth Museum.

So now I was, in a way, not on a roll, but comfortable in particularly the artists that I liked and knew something about, or had something to say. It was worth doing. Now, my 19th century has never flagged, because interspersed in recent years, there are a couple of little books I did on Frederic Church, revisited Lane a couple of times, and so forth. So in a sense, my later career of writing has taken this turn, as my collecting had, into modern, but mixed in with others.

Of course, in recent years, I had the opportunity of doing two exhibitions at Acquavella Gallery, who have the money to produce beautiful books. And one of the nice byproducts of all of this was began to work jointly with

Rizzoli, who have now begun to distribute their most important publications. [00:22:11]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, that's nice.

JOHN WILMERDING: They asked me, Is there something I would like to do? It was like Luminism, sort of bubbling away under the surface of my thinking all these years, but now coming to fruition was the idea of doing—now, having gotten familiar with Pop, even obsessed with it, I proposed a Pop art still life show. It's called *The Pop Object: The Still Life Tradition in Pop Art*. One reviewer criticized it, saying, "This has been done before." It really hadn't been. They've got a big gallery over there, with four spaces. I thought, "Four different spaces. I could do four different aspects of Pop still life." Two of which were more expected. The one major theme was household objects and household accessories from Johns—I mean, all across the board. It was a wonderful group of things. They had the drawing power to get major loans. So household objects, yes, that's part of a major theme in Pop we've seen before.

The second was, again, less well-known. I proposed something for a small room—in effect called landscape or nature—from Warhol's flowers to Jim Dine's artificial trees, Katz, et cetera. So that was a little bit more offbeat. Then there was—oh, food and drink, an obvious theme. A big gallery devoted to that. Again, a lot familiar, but what was fun about it and new about it, was throwing all of these artists, large numbers of them, into the same room, and including—it was the first time that Marjorie Strider—we showed a lot of her big food still lifes. So that was more, as I say, conventional. [00:24:41]

The fourth gallery, in a way, was the most original: body parts. I was thinking of Alex Katz's fragmented bodies, John Wesley—I've forgotten who else. Obviously, Wesselmann's mouths, and Warhol's pieces of body. In fact, in a delicious bit of installation—I don't know whether the public ever got it—I worked with the Acquavella daughter, Eleanor Dejoux, who had a great sense of humor, and we more or less curated and installed the thing together. I don't know who came up with the idea, but we both loved it: hanging, [laughs] perversely, a Wesselmann mouth next to Warhol's painting of John Richardson's penis. It just was a kind of inside joke. The room was—and I thought, This I won't say is totally original, but really it was a new aspect of looking at what was clearly a major undercurrent or theme in Pop art. [00:26:07]

And again, that was a book that was picked up by Rizzoli. Out of that came an association. Acquavella had taken on Wayne Thiebaud as his East Coast representative, and given Thiebaud's age—at that point, he was 90; I mean, he's now 92—Acquavella wanted to do a monographic exhibition of Thiebaud, and would I do it? Again, was not an artist I had really written about, but I now felt comfortable enough with the vocabulary, with his place—and he occupies a very interesting place between the Abstract Expressionist tradition of brushwork and Pop sensibility, and yet he's not a pure Pop nor is he an AbEx painter. So there was something to say there. We ended up doing a very nice—and again, they published a nice monograph that, once more, Rizzoli distributed.

Then, finally, I guess the most recent big monograph I've done with Rizzoli—they came to me and said, Would I do something on Fairfield Porter? It's not that I can constantly tackle new things, but Porter, again, [laughs] was a Maine artist, had painted subjects I had seen. I thought he had occupied a very interesting position in early Modernism. And moreover, in a way most important, as I looked at the existing bibliography, there hadn't been an exhibition on Porter for 30 years. There had been almost no publications. The catalogue raisonné was a—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: There was a biography, though, right? [00:27:58]

JOHN WILMERDING: There was a very important biography, Justin Spring. That was the one thing that existed. Spring made a decision, as he said at the outset, to do the biography and, in a sense, not an art history. He does talk about key works, but it's not an art survey of Porter. So there was a very spotty, as it were, negligible, available piece of writing, publication, on Porter. So I thought this was the perfect kind of task to tackle.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's a really interesting community, that 1950s Maine community. I got to know Rudy Burckhardt a little bit, years ago. And just imagining—I don't know that much about it, but, you know—

JOHN WILMERDING: Well, of course, Porter is really interesting. He's not a great painter, although there are great moments.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Some of them are pretty terrific.

JOHN WILMERDING: He somehow is in that category with Milton Avery, coming out of regionalism and realism, Burchfield, et cetera. He ends up being a very singular artist, devoted to realism through a period of dominant AbEx. Very interesting, problematic personal life. So that was a nice project to work on.

Well, I guess the last thing we should talk about is Crystal Bridges and Alice Walton.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Yes. [00:29:48]

JOHN WILMERDING: Once more—I guess I shouldn't be surprised after all these years—total serendipity, totally unexpected, out of the blue. The timing, again, was absolutely perfect, because this was now 2005, the year after I had given my collection to the National Gallery. After several years of working with Alice and her acquisitions and her eye, I said, [laughs] "Thank God I gave away my collection. You would have chewed me up, sucked everything out. I wouldn't have had a chance."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: It came out of the blue in the sense I was in Maine one summer, the summer of 2005, and I got a phone call. Maine in the summer is where I like to sail in the afternoons, but it's where I do most of my writing. So I don't like to do, as it were, business. That's for the rest of the year. That separation of distance up there and life, and I didn't want to deal with academic problems.

Whatever writing I was doing that summer, that was it. I get this phone call saying, "This is Ralph Lerner, and I have a business proposition for you." Well, I mistook—because the Ralph Lerner I knew was then, and I think maybe still, just been serving as chairman of the art department at Princeton. The Ralph Lerner I knew was dean of the school of architecture, and was a very difficult person, who was totally uncooperative, even subversive, in dealing with the art department. Wouldn't allow our faculty to use his library. Never encouraged joint courses. You would certainly think that the history of architecture and the history of art were natural partners. But we had a terrible relationship. He did everything to undermine us. I don't know whether it was out of insecurity or jealousy or just sheer perversity, but I didn't like him. [00:32:18]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] Bottom line.

JOHN WILMERDING: The bottom line. He was otherwise a nice guy.

[They laugh.]

JOHN WILMERDING: So when I get a phone call and it starts out, "This is Ralph Lerner," I, in a sense, immediately broke out in a rash, and I thought, I don't want to hear a business proposition from Ralph Lerner. So I cut him off, virtually mid-sentence, and I said, "I don't want to do business while I'm here in Maine. Write me a letter." And I basically hung up.

Well, about a couple of weeks later, two letters, nice letters, arrived, one from Ralph Lerner, the art lawyer in New York, who at that time [. . . –JW] was the major art lawyer for many New York collectors, did work for the Met and several museums. That was his speciality. It made sense, because he had been hired by Alice Walton to begin to put together bylaws and legal framework. She had decided, by then, to start a museum of American art. He explained that, and of course then I felt very sheepish [laughs] and had to apologize. It's just a wonderfully amusing misstep, and it's a wonder he even wrote me. [00:33:56]

Anyway, he wrote back saying, "I'm writing on behalf of Alice Walton, who wants to start a museum and would like to hire you for your expertise in helping out create it and build a collection." At the same time, a personal handwritten letter came from her, explaining the same thing. What I never asked, and I guess I never really wanted to know, was how my name came to her attention. I assume that because I had had museum experience, I had collecting experience, I had an academic record, I had the qualifications to help. My guess is that it was a mutual friend, Ruth Stevenson, in Fort Worth, who was the president of the Amon Carter Museum. It was her father who had started that museum. I later realized that Ruth had gotten Alice to serve on her board of trustees, and they were sort of common collectors. Alice was just beginning to acquire for herself. My guess is, Ruth—who was then president of the National Gallery, and had become a good friend of mine, and I had gone to lecture at Amon Carter, and now she was associated with the Gallery—probably was the one who suggested my name. Doesn't matter. [00:35:29]

But what was the point—it just came absolutely like a lightning bolt, out of the blue. So I said, "Be glad to consider it. When I get back to New York in September, let's meet." We did. Hit it off right away. She's an absolutely wonderful personality. In some ways, self-effacing, reserved. Dresses in relatively modest colors: tans, browns, grays. In other words, not an assertive, show-off person. Minimal jewelry. Hair pulled back, beginning to gray. I soon learned was a horse trainer and rider, specializing in these so-called cutting horses, which are the ones that, I guess, manipulate herds of horses. Real specialty. Went and participated regularly in rodeos. Little calluses. In other words, had a sort of roughness to her, but I soon realized great sense of humor, obviously incredibly smart. Point is, if you saw her coming down the street, you would have no clue that this was the richest woman in the world, or the richest woman in America. I liked all of that. As I say, just personally, smart, needless to say keen business sense, clearly real ambition to acquire something.

She filled me in on the story to date, which is she got the idea of using the family woods that many of them had bought up on the north edge of Bentonville, where she had grown up as a child, horseback riding and playing. She and the others in the family were buying up tracts just to preserve them from development. I think she had

already sponsored the building of a summer camp for disabled children elsewhere in this property. So clearly, the philanthropic idea, which is a very strong current in that family, beginning with Sam Walton—which is now, I think, crystallized in the Walton Family Foundation, their biggest philanthropic trust—that instinct already existed. [00:38:31]

She had no formal art training. Remembers going to country fairs and so forth with her father, buying little posters. She once joked that her first acquisition was a Picasso, which turned out to be a postcard reproduction or something or other. But she had gotten the idea of looking at stuff, and pictures, and making a few acquisitions. Somewhere along the line—again, I don't think she had any art training—she started teaching herself to paint, and actually turned out to be quite competent, especially in watercolor, which is extremely difficult. The first time I was then summoned down to Texas to talk to her about all of this, and see what—she had already begun to acquire a number of quite good works of American art. Like a lot of collectors, started in an easy part of the field, namely American Impressionism at the end of the 19th century. So she already had a couple of very fine Innesses, a couple of very fine Sargents, I think also a William Merritt Chase. [00:39:47]

So the beginnings of at least a personal collection had already begun to take shape. I remember going into her bedroom, where there were watercolors by Avery—I can't remember—Sargent, Hassam, and whatever. Then I realized there were a series of watercolors by Alice Walton, framed on the wall. I think the best way of phrasing it is, they were not embarrassments. They held their own. They were not equal to Sargent, but they held their own. They were really quite good. So she was, I think, even unconsciously, wrestling whether to get serious about buying works or—I mean, she wasn't going to be an artist. But she had bought enough that, somewhere, there was a trigger that led her to think, I'm going to formalize this and make a museum.

She went to her brothers and sisters. What did they think about the idea? Because she played, Where should a museum go, if I'm going to get involved in one? After thinking about various places in the state or the Midwest—I remember one of the first times I visited there, there was a map of the US out on a table, with little circles all over it of different size. I said, "What's this?" It was where every American museum was located, and the bigger circles were the bigger urban museums, the smaller ones—and you realized that, in a circumference around the northwest corner of the state of Arkansas, was absolutely blank. So her thinking, almost immediately, decided, this museum is going to be—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: And that's where the Waltons were based, right? [00:41:49]

JOHN WILMERDING: That's where she grew up, where the family is, where Walmart is based, et cetera. It was very clear that there was nothing—I mean, I think Kansas City is four hours to the north. To be sure, Oklahoma's museums, Tulsa and Oklahoma City, are a couple of hours to the west. But it's a bit of a drive. So it was very clear—and even the state of Arkansas itself only had what's called the Arkansas Arts Center, which is devoted to 20th-century works on paper. Didn't have any kind of museum at all.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: There's nothing in Little Rock?

JOHN WILMERDING: Well, that's where the Arkansas Arts Center is. They have a museum, but it's so specialized, nothing encyclopedic, either American or European. Compared to even many of the other Southern states, like Alabama, Florida, et cetera. So it became pretty clear that she wanted to create something in Bentonville, and the logical place was somewhere in this tract of forest land, north of the city. The brothers and sisters thought it was a good idea. They didn't have much expertise or interest in art, but they liked what she was proposing and they went along with it enthusiastically.

The pieces were beginning to come together as I came into the picture. She had already begun kind of informal search for an architect. I said, "I want to stay out of that. I can tell you whom the architects I like, to consider." Renzo Piano. You know, the usual suspects. But that was too big a project if I was going to be involved in the art-acquiring. She already had a director, who really was assigned the liaison with that task of architectural selection. But it was underway. [00:44:09]

And about the time she hired me, she had also herself—one of the things she had done was fly around the US and Europe, looking at the smaller museums in Switzerland, Germany, and various US museums. One of the architects she immediately liked was Moshe Safdie, who she ultimately hired. Because of his work in glass—the renovation of the Peabody Museum in Salem, the Skirball Center in Los Angeles in particular—and the more they talked, the more she liked him. Hadn't made a final decision. He was brought down, as I was, to Arkansas to talk further. Not at the same date that I was there, but about the same time. She tells this story, as she had done with me. Puts me in her Jeep and crashes through the woods—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: —to show us where she wants this museum, in the damn riverbed. It was total absurdity that you would build a museum on a river. Now, this is the headwaters of the Crystal River.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, I see. I was wondering where the name of the museum came from.

JOHN WILMERDING: Well, I'll come back to that, because that's very entertaining, the naming of the museum. Anyway, through the woods each of us goes, but on his trip, she drives over some boulder or log, and poor Safdie is thrown out into the mud— [00:46:06]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, my God.

JOHN WILMERDING: —and hops up, gets back in the Jeep, and she says, "Do you want to go to the motel and change your clothes?" He said, "No, no, let's finish this tour. This is such fun. I love it." Anyway, the afternoon is complete. They get back to leaving him off at the hotel, and he says, "Now, what do you envision is the next step here? Is there going to be a committee to select the architect? Are you going to do other interviews? How will you reach a decision?" Alice said, "I'm the committee, and you're the architect."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: And that was that. She loved that he was so enthusiastic, bounced back. But they had also hit it off, because she already had a conception of the museum as something that would be in nature. She didn't want a palace on the hill, like the Getty, or even the Philadelphia Museum. She wanted something within the experience of landscape itself. She understood that landscape was the great and essential American subject matter, in literature and in painting, and certainly the Western migration—well aware of the history of the Trail of Tears that went through that part of the country. So the idea of having a building, a museum, with a lot of glass, where visitors could experience landscapes in the museum, and then look out the window and immediately walk out there, was an essential from the very beginning, and it was just what Safdie's architecture could accomplish. [00:48:07]

The reason for being on the river—straddling the river—was that her family house was also designed with a stream running underneath it, by an architect named Fay Jones, who was a student of Frank Lloyd Wright's, head of the architecture department at the university over in Fayetteville, and had designed a lot of private residences. One of the most beautiful outdoor chapels I have ever seen in my life, south of Bentonville, a memorial chapel of wood and glass within the woods. It's the most beautiful, moving experience at any time of year. Again, a Fay Jones building. Obviously, she took Safdie to see her house, and in a sense, the museum would be a larger version of that. It would be justified also. So that was all decided.

It was a bumpy start the first years, because they began to do the engineering drilling into the riverbank, and soon discovered that the geology was different in every quadrant of the museum on the two sides of the river, which was clearly going to add significant expense to drilling, foundations, building, and so forth. This being her first architectural project, it's the one—I won't say misstep, but the one thing she didn't handle as well as she might, given her business sensibility. She's a tough businesswoman, no nonsense, get things done. [00:50:09]

But by this point, she developed a real friendship with Safdie, and they had a way of egging each other on. That is to say, he would propose something: "Do you like this idea?" "Love it. Let's"—the equivalent of major work orders were being piled on. She would say to him, "Do you think we can do this? I would like to try this." He said, "Of course you can." At least at the outset, there was never—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: All it takes is money. [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: At the same time, even for the mightiest, it can be finite. Which is to say, she had never, from the outset, had—until later on—one of those contractual dealings of a not-to-exceed budget, and a not-to-exceed time. Because of this friendly, cooperative relation, the stuff just piled up and piled up.

All of a sudden, after two or three years, I think there was an indebtedness, or a commitment, of like $60,000,000, and nobody knowing what the end point was going to be. It was, in effect, out of control. She realized, as she almost had to bring the project to an end, that it was simply just overwhelming. The staff member who had been assigned to the architecture basically had to be let go. The engineering contractor was dismissed. What she did was, smartly, hire one of those review firms, consulting firms, that just deals with architectural projects, like these headhunters. They gave her a hard-nosed evaluation of what had been done, what needed to be done. Safdie himself had become lax in supervision. He spent time in Boston. In a way, everybody shared some of the blame, including Alice, she realized. [00:52:35]

So she called a meeting. I remember it was a tough one, saying, "This has to be done." A contract was established with Safdie. A new firm to do the work was hired, that was really competent and up to it. We crossed that threshold, and everything, then, was smooth sailing. I've forgotten the total cost of the museum, but it was brought under control, and it was brought in.

The other consequence: I think there was a two-year delay in its opening. She had originally hoped to open it in

November '09, which was to be her 60th birthday. It ultimately, as I say, dragged on and didn't open until 2011. She picked the date, the finite date, and said, "It's got to be done by 11-11-11." I remember going to the opening [laughs] that night. Everybody in black-tie. All the lights were outside, and there were these tractors out in the riverbed, moving stones and planting trees at midnight. At the very end, she got them in 24 hours. I thought—I looked out the windows—that this was some kind of earthwork or conceptual art. [00:54:11]

[They laugh.]

JOHN WILMERDING: But no, they were putting in the last plantings and the last [laughs] stones on the riverbed. What Safdie designed—have you been there?

CHRISTOPHER LYON: No, I have not.

JOHN WILMERDING: What Safdie designed were two large, sweeping, arching buildings that cross, really, the stream, that was now dammed up in two places, to create an interior pond, over which these two major pods sit. There's a third one further up. The locals named them armadillos and the turtle. They do have kind of an armadillo shape. Beautiful sort of engineering. Trusses made out of Arkansas white pine, with brass or copper roofing that's now begun to turn green, and glass. The galleries are largely framed in spaces within these structures. They house temporary exhibition space. The history of American art, from colonial, works its way over one of these bridges into modern and then contemporary. Then there is—as I say, the turtle, is largely a single space for entertainment, lectures, gatherings, that kind of thing. Then the wing above special exhibitions has administration. A very fine art research library. [00:56:02]

We were very lucky. In the middle of all this process, somebody put—I guess it was Bill Reese, the prominent dealer in New Haven of rare books, said to her that there was a very important art book collector in New York, an amateur who had—just as an exercise, really—built up an art library and was thinking of selling it. Didn't know what to do with it. He was in an office building opposite Penn Station. I remember going, and we spent a morning walking through the shelves and the racks and pulling out things. And [laughs] of course, my ego led me to see—I was just curious—what publications had this guy acquired of mine? And virtually everything, including little pamphlets, little early catalogues that I had done.

And I realized, as I went through the collection, it was true almost throughout the collection. He had acquired early runs of National Academy of Design exhibition catalogues, all kinds of—particularly 19th-century runs. Turned out he had two or three albums of artists' letters: Mount, Cole, I think there was even a Homer. Extraordinary archival original. But the point was, what I learned from just reviewing what he had of mine, there was a completeness to this, overall. He had stopped collecting, I think, maybe five years before. But as Bill said, completing, building up the recent bibliography, would be easy. But in a nutshell, it was an art research library comparable to anything in the Ivy League. [00:58:06]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's amazing!

JOHN WILMERDING: So there was no question. She bought it outright, moved it. She realized that if this museum was going to succeed, it had to have scholarly depth. The University of Arkansas department didn't have any serious library or instructors. And one of the things she has done in recent years, among the most recent gifts—I think it was something like $30,000,000 to the university in Fayetteville, to create a center for American art. To fund a program of instruction and the hiring of serious senior faculty. Typical Alice, put a tough set of provisions on it. Which is to say, she is leery, as I am, of the tenure system. It can be abused.

So she said: Part of the provisions are that this will fund these new professorships with high, competitive salaries, well above the state level, like civil service. So these are going to be real plum jobs that will have access to Crystal Bridges, using the library, et cetera. I've forgotten the review process, but she wants a review, in effect, a tenure review, every five years, to see what these individuals have published. If they flag and don't meet the standards, then they don't get fired, but they revert to their Arkansas salary as opposed to—[01:00:05]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: —the Walton salary. [Laughs.] Very clever incentive to get people, and to keep them being productive. But she realized that, probably for personal associations—the university is 20 minutes away. As I say, it's where Fay Jones worked.

Crystal Bridges itself now has a program, sort of a miniature version of the National Gallery's Center for Advanced Studies, where there are anywhere from three to six visiting fellows in residence throughout, basically, the academic season, that are at three levels: pre-docs, post-docs, and senior established people. It's been underway now for two or three years, and been a big success, because it's brought very good—younger as well as older—people who have projects to work on: either finish their dissertation, use the collections to think about exhibition work, et cetera. It's just what you want. Provide a year of research and residency.

Alright, that's the more recent past. To go back to 2005, shortly after I had been hired, now comes the unbelievable timing of the New-York Historical Society making a decision to sell *Kindred Spirits*, as well as basically all the major works in their collection. Gilbert Stuarts, Copley, et cetera. I remember [laughs] I was lacerated by Michael Kimmelman for perceived conflicts of interest—[01:02:06]

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JOHN WILMERDING: —because I personally had already had a position at the Met, even though it was not paid. It was an informal position called visiting curator, to make use of—for teaching purposes. I had also, at that point, just been elected a trustee of the National Gallery. I had not yet become one—I had been to the first meeting—but at that moment, had been elected one. I'm only mentioning it because the Met and the National Gallery decided to jointly bid for *Kindred Spirits* when it came on the market. Alice clearly wanted it. So I was caught in the crosshairs of these three institutions.

I basically stayed out of the whole process, but it was perceived that I was pulling strings and whatever. She decided, I realized in retrospect, that she was going to go for the best. The smart thing was, she never told me what she was going to bid. I knew from the Gallery what it and the Met were going to bid, but thank God I didn't know what she was, because then I really would have been in a real conflict, knowledgeable conflict. The only thing she asked me was my, basically, appraisal of the work, and I said, "I think, at least from my point of view, and most of my colleagues, it would automatically be on a list of the top 10 greatest works in the history of American art." You know, if you're going to do your top 10, whether it's *Watson and the Shark*, Pollock's *Number 1*, Eakins's *Gross Clinic*—I mean, it would be pretty easy to assemble, but the *Kindred Spirits*, Durand portrait of Cole and Bryant, has always been one of those iconic works. [00:02:07]

Again, I was caught in a perceptible buzz saw, in that, in the months preceding, I had been asked by Neil Rudenstine, who was then one of the trustees of the library—and I think he had been assigned by his fellow trustees—to chair a committee to review the art collection, with a clear idea, I think, to deaccession. He called me and asked if I would come in and advise. He also got Philippe de Montebello's permission to let Carrie Rebora, then the curator of American art at the Met, also join the committee, being a major Copley-Stuart specialist, of which the library was also strong. We both knew, clearly, this was their aim, even though officially they just wanted, as it were, art historical rankings and appraisal of what they had.

What became clear, and I think later justified their decision, was they were sitting on a warehouse of hundreds of paintings that they couldn't use, and that were deteriorating, couldn't be cared for. We pointed out, of course, and they knew, that *Kindred Spirits* was sitting in an upstairs reading room with, I think, the Stuart *Jefferson* and several other major colonial portraits. That these pictures were only being seen by, I think, something like 10[,000] or 20,000 people a year, at most. They would dribble in. If you were an Americanist, you made the pilgrimage to go see *Kindred Spirits*, but nobody looked at it. [00:04:09]

Their self-argument, which I certainly bought into—I knew it was, at the time, a real controversy and a hoo-ha that the thing was leaving New York, blah, blah, blah—but they said, "We're a library. We're not a museum. We don't have on staff either a paintings conservator or a curator. We don't have the staffing, and we can't afford to pay for staffing. And even if we did, is it really justified for that picture? Even though it is available to the public, it simply isn't seen. There's almost no way we can make it seen, like a museum." So that's what led them to their conclusion, and I personally think that was justified.

Where a lot of the problems occurred was, I think, with Sotheby's. Although the library itself was very amusing, because in conversation, they said, "If this picture leaves, we can't let it go to Japan or leave the country. We don't even really want it to go to the West Coast, to the Getty." So the idea was hatched between them and Sotheby's to have a limited bid, invitational, secret auction.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.] This is starting to get a little—uh.

JOHN WILMERDING: Well, clearly, obviously, they realized, from a fiduciary point of view, if you're going to sell something, you've got to sell it to get maximum value. So they did go along with the idea of a private bid auction, to satisfy that. It would have been, I think, a very different order if it had actually been put out for sale. But anyway, that, I think, was a bit of a mistake, or a major mistake. [00:06:10]

Anyway, the result was they invited, I think, about 30 bidders. Half museums, half private collectors, of which Alice was one. When it happened, they certainly didn't like the idea that it was going to the empty—what they call the flyover zone in the center of the country. The net result was: She did her homework, figured out, whether she was told or not, what some of the other bids were going to be. She never formally or officially ever told me or the press what she actually paid. Common thinking is that it was $35,000,000. I knew that the Met and the Gallery were going to bid up to 30; 15 apiece. But she was determined to get it.

What I realized was, not just to beat out the big boys, but that this was a picture that had supreme importance

in the field. It was of the highest quality, art historical importance, and it would set the standard for her museum. It was also a quintessential American landscape that served the very essence of her vision. She thought that through, and was determined, and did acquire it. So that did set the ball rolling to buy only the best things we could find. [00:08:04]

It was a wonderful, rollicking period. For about 10 years, she would come up to New York three, four times a year, and we would set these two-day programs. There was a chief curator who had been hired, and a nominal director, who later left. But there were generally three or four of us who met. They would have done their homework with dealers who had works we wanted to see. Usually these visits were timed to the auctions at Sotheby's and Christie's, the American auctions, and then later the modern auctions. We would set up one-day visit to Sotheby's and Christie's. The other day, nine to five, to dealers who had things we wanted to see. It was an exhausting but exhilarating blitz.

The great revelation to me was how much was being sold, and would be sold, by so-called private treaty through Sotheby's and Christie's. There was a lot of—and of course, in a way, I think the sublime accident of timing was that a lot of this buying occurred when the recession hit. So there were a large number of works now coming out of private collectors, some of which we could identify. I could not believe that they were going to be for sale. But people like Manoogian in Detroit, Myron Kunin in Minneapolis, started selling. Later, even the Ganzes did. So things were coming out of the woodwork from prominent collectors, corporate collectors, or private collectors, who didn't want any publicity. They never were going into the regular auction rooms. [00:10:14]

So we would go to Sotheby's and Christie's, look at the regular stuff that was coming up for sale, decide what we wanted to bid on, and then we would be taken into one of those private galleries. There would be, on the walls, anywhere from three, four, to a dozen master works of American art to pick and choose from. A lot of her buying was done that way, one, because she didn't want publicity before the museum opened. Very smart. I mean, when she bid publicly, everybody knew. So we acquired a great deal by those methods. They were exhausting two-day affairs. I like to joke that, after one of these two-day blitzes, I would try and set down on paper—because we had more or less reached consensus on how many works, what they were priced at, what we really needed, what we couldn't take. I jokingly said, "I think we have committed to spend, or have spent, the equivalent of $2,000,000 an hour for one of these periods." Anyway, it was a firestorm of acquisition. We moved very quickly. But as I say, we were extremely lucky in what was available. [00:11:46]

It was an amazing thing. She negotiated several private purchases through Manoogian. For example, the Martin Johnson Heade series of 16 pictures known as the *Gems of Brazil*. A great Arthur Tait. A picture that had been on long-term loan to the National Gallery, Richard Caton Woodville's *Mexican War News*. All of a sudden, I heard from colleagues at the Gallery: "*Mexican War News* belongs to Alice Walton." She had purchased it directly from Manoogian.

So things were coming in from different quarters. One of the things that people, particularly dealers, couldn't believe at the beginning was that she had no single dealer that worked for us. She bought all over New York, bought from dealers in California, New Mexico. When things turned up and were offered, there was a kind of blanket—I mean, she wanted the best that she could find. It was very fortuitous. The collection—we didn't buy with any idea that we had to have X, Y, and Z.

One of the great things about Alice Walton, I think—almost a sui generis collector, in the sense that she has, obviously, the resources, as any good collector might want to have, but she also has the art historical knowledge. Whenever she was going to buy something, she would buy the books, learn about the artists, where it fit in the career. She would do the business homework, either get somebody to do it or do it herself, market comparables, so that she knew what a work in one part of the career versus the later point in the career, what the valuations might be. She had the passion for collecting, and ultimately has a great eye. [00:14:02]

Not all collectors have all those five components. They overly rely on advisors. They may have the passion, but they let other people do the art historical. She puts all of that together, and while we had constant dialogue and I produced a lot of things and argued a lot of things, it was always in discussion, and she weighed in and basically made the ultimate decision. It has been an incredibly rewarding, stimulating, equal-to-equal sort of discussion.

Anyway, that went on, as I say, for the first five, six years, where we really got the base of the collection put together. As we approached the opening date in 2011, her original idea, I think, had been only to have the collection go up to early American Modernism through the Stieglitz circle. Because she said, "There is no Jackson Pollock that we can afford. I don't want to spend 15 million on a picture when I can spend 10 million for five great paintings. Let alone, it's not going to be available." But as we got closer, it was clear, one of her passions is for art education, particularly bringing in children. She persuaded—I don't know whether it was John Tyson—put together an endowment that was largely family-based, but got major components of gifts in the 20-to-50 million range, from both John Tyson and several other major donors. In the end, I think the total endowment at

opening was right around 850 million. It was instantly, I think, the third largest American endowment. [00:16:07]

But pieces of that endowment were allocated not just for staffing and maintenance. A major section, obviously, for acquisitions. And then persuaded Walmart to kick into the endowment to make possible free admission. They get credit for it, but the fact is, the museum is free. They do now charge a variety of ranges for special exhibitions, but they've also built up a membership, even with free admission, and she's broadened the base. We've begun to get gifts from other collectors. She didn't want it called the Walton Museum, which goes back to the naming of the museum. I'm moving back and forth.

There was to be a press conference announcing the museum. This is back in '05 or so. The night before, we were sitting around. Safdie was there. I've forgotten who was the landscape architect she had hired. Myself. We were all going to talk briefly at a press conference announcing the museum and what it was going to be and look like. We were talking about it the night before, Well, what's it going to be called? She hadn't decided yet. She said, "I'm toying with Benton, because of the family in both Arkansas and Kansas, Thomas Hart Benton, both the senator and the painter." Benton was logical. She absolutely, like Andrew Mellon and the National Gallery, did not want it named after herself, because if it was ever going to attract gifts and support from others as opposed to just being perceived one wealthy person, that it would need to have something more neutral. So we weren't quite certain. [00:18:25]

The next morning, she says, "I'm calling it Crystal Bridges." I immediately said, "Oh, Alice, I think that's very tacky. It sounds like a second-rate country singer in Las Vegas. Crystal Bridges and the Rivets. Or like, Britney Spears. It just doesn't sound right." And she took a deep breath and paused, and said straight to me, [demonstrates accent] "Well, I like it."

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: So I said, "Oh, Alice, I like it, too. It's just right." She said, "My reasoning is: the building is built, museum is built, on the Crystal Stream, or the Crystal River, but this is also a museum of glass. It just makes sense." I must say, to her credit, there was not a single snigger or snicker in the press or anybody when they heard the name Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. But it was just a very funny moment. You know, "Is it going to work?" But it did make sense.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Now that I understand it, I have to say that always when I heard the name, it sounded like the name of a mall or something.

JOHN WILMERDING: Yeah, exactly. But nobody has had that reaction. They've got a nice branding logo. [00:20:02]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: It is nice.

JOHN WILMERDING: But anyway, the last real decision—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Sort of evokes landscape, and also the building, right?

JOHN WILMERDING: Yeah. The last major decision implied before opening was the question of the museum's coverage. A couple of us who were involved in advising said, "Alice, this really should cover American art up to the present." It clicked with her in the sense that her interest in education, and her own practice of art, years earlier, which had then led to reading about the artists that she admired, and then to acquiring the works by those artists—it was a kind of logical progression there—that education was to be, if not something new, something very special. She was very concerned about the demography of visitors. She wanted this open—it was not to be an elitist experience. Everybody was to learn.

The thing that has pleased her most, once it opened, was walking through the galleries and seeing farmers in overalls, mothers pushing baby carriages, people in wheelchairs. It's been one of their great accomplishments, particularly in return visitation. There's been a kind of intentional—not so much lowest-common-denominator attitude—but intentional accessibility and approachability in how docents lead people through, so that visitors are meant to have a sense of ownership, a sense of understanding, direct connection with the works. It has worked. [00:22:00]

It continues to have—she's been working more recently on minority representation, both in acquisitions, but in also education. When we had an exhibition about the Mexican-American border, called *Border Cantos*, there was an important program available in Spanish. It's been very important for the sense of ownership by the local community and the local, what they call, touch states, which have been their primary base. She brought into them the idea that living artists, contemporary art, was absolutely integral to the American story.

She also realized that the few acquisitions we had in 20th century—O'Keeffes, et cetera—were pretty spotty.

They didn't have the depth or the coverage of the earlier historical collection, which, by the time we opened, was first-rate. Very few major artists missing. Some we'll never be able to acquire, namely Bingham. But she said, "We don't have to own everything. We can make arrangements to borrow. We're not going to buy everything by opening day." She has this kind of long-term view. I mean, I like to get the thing done, get what you want, keep going, even over-spend, which she wouldn't do. She said, "We can't have everything by day one." So the most recent years, just before it opened and since it's opened, the entire thrust has been buying modern and contemporary. [00:23:51]

We did have very good luck getting a few major masterpieces. Out of Switzerland came an offer of an exquisite Mark Rothko, comparable in quality to the David Rockefeller picture. From Japan, some collector wanted to deaccession a Jasper Johns alphabet, *Gray Alphabet*, from '58 or '60. I've forgotten the date. Not a big picture. Its only caveat is that it's oil on paper, so we worried a little bit about showing it. But the point is, we were able to get, and variously picked up across the board from Minimalism, Abstract Expressionism, contemporary, major figures.

She's adventurously bought Robert Gober; Mel Edwards, the African-American sculptor; and most recently got Safdie to build—because visitation of the museum, the annual visitation, is now leveled at 650,000. That ranks just below the major urban museums. I was shocked to see and learn that Boston, the MFA, hovers around one million visitors. For a great urban American museum, that's unbelievable. I think we rank something like, I want to say, 14th or 16th in visitation.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: But still, that's amazing. [00:25:52]

JOHN WILMERDING: And it's led to one new enterprise after another. Her nephews got interested in collecting, supporting the museum. She's had them rotate on and off the board. They ended up buying an abandoned Kraft cheese factory in Bentonville, and are now converting it into basically a PS1, MASS MoCA.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Perfect.

JOHN WILMERDING: It will open in, I think, 2020. Visiting artists, music. She says one development in contemporary art is the breaking down of borders between these various genres. Music, art, performance, et cetera. It will also be a place where some of the bigger contemporary works might hang. She's also well-aware she wants to expand the demographic for the next generation, and if you're going to bring in 30-year-olds, you need that kind of excitement.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: I think it's so smart to extend it to contemporary art, because that's the audience, the primary audience now.

JOHN WILMERDING: And we've done it in another way. As the museum has basically filled up, she had Safdie build a new outdoor elevator tower out into the lower riverbed and forest, where now is being developed a major forest walk, what she refers to as the outdoor gallery, where significant outdoor sculpture will be placed along this route. [00:27:45]

And then architecture. I got a call from owners of a Frank Lloyd Wright house in the Jersey marshes. Quite a nice, classic—I don't know whether it's Usonian—Wright house. They said the marshes are flooding, the building is in real danger, and would Alice Walton be interested? I said, "I rather doubt it." Moving a thing from the New Jersey marshes? We're not collecting architecture. Well, the next thing I know, Alice—they went to her directly. Sure enough, she said, "Yes, I do want to move it there." It cost a million dollars to move. Whatever. Take it apart. Anyway, it's been sited in the woods next to the museum so beautifully, you think that Wright designed it for that site.

I said, "Alice, what's the justification?" Well, she had figured it all out. She said, "We can teach, now, the history of American architecture in one theme through three generations: Fay Jones, who trained Wright, and Moshe Safdie, who works in a Modernist vocabulary inspired by Fay Jones." The next thing we did acquire—were offered—Buckminster Fuller's last geodesic dome—

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: —plus all of his archives! We now are beginning to acquire significant archival additions to the library. It's called the *Fly's Eye Dome*, and it's now out on the other side of the museum. And it's a wonderful public attraction to go into this thing. One of the first commissions was a James Turrell skyspace. So we have these outdoor—and again, they're ways, in her thinking, I believe, of educating people to art, both inside and outside. [00:30:08]

She's very proud, one of the first things they did, even before the building was constructed, was to engineer something like 60 miles of pedestrian walking trails through these woods. Bicycle trails, and mountain bicycle

trails. So it's like Olmsted in Central Park. They all can use the woods without bumping into each other or knocking each other down. The bicycle trails go to the end of the woods—600 acres, whatever it is—where there's parking spaces. A lot of Bentonville's younger group park at the parking lot and bicycle to work in town, coming through the museum. As best as they can account for, the daily use of the trails involves about 5,000 people.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's a lot.

JOHN WILMERDING: As best as you can count. Because the property abuts the northern edge of town, it's something like, as I recall, 15 minutes walking from the hotel that she built, 21c, a marvelous boutique hotel that's been hugely successful in its own right. Has one of the best chefs in Arkansas, such as that is, and its own art collection. It's part of this 21c complex. I think there's one somewhere in Tennessee, two or three others in the South. It's been such a success, both the restaurant, but the hotel occupancy has been something hovering around 95 percent, which beats almost any hotel. But the point is, people can come and stay there, have a really civilized meal. In good weather, can get out, walk across the next plaza into the trail, and go down physically to the museum. [00:32:28]

So the whole operation, as well as this vision for the future—as I say, monetarily supporting the academic program over at the university, the research component in the museum, public visitation, programming, et cetera. My role, finally, has changed from obviously being a paid advisor in the early days. Once it opened, she had to, obviously, create a board of trustees, and I was put on that. Obviously, a permanent professional staff has now been hired. They can't have a trustee or an advisor telling them what to—we're involved in consulting. Alice and I and the director constitute [laughs] the, quote, art committee of the board. So we have a say. [00:33:32]

I think one of the things I've been useful to her, as a trustee, is good museum practices from my 20 years on the Guggenheim board, my eight years on the National Gallery board. Things that everybody else would take for granted. She really had no idea. Having acquisitions approved by the art committee on behalf of the board as a fiduciary sponsor. Having the exhibition or program brought to the board to approve. I was well mindful of the Krens years at the Guggenheim, when he just went off and did exhibitions that, in some cases, were very controversial and embarrassing. I said, "Yes, the ideas ought to come from the staff, but at least the board shouldn't be blindsided, and there ought to be some things"—and I said, "Even conservation ought to be brought to the board's attention." Again, mindful of the great conservation controversy at the National Gallery, when a Rubens was over-cleaned, and Paul Mellon and the trustees took a lot of heat. As a result of it, Paul instituted—in a way, overkill, but—every conservation proposal, for any work, has to come to the board for approval. I said, "I'm not sure it needs to come to our board for approval, but at least the information has to be presented."

I've remained involved. I don't know how much longer I will. But it's not only been great fun, but I feel I've been able to make, obviously, first of all, an art contribution in the acquisition of artists I knew and didn't know. The fun of collegiality in building it all, and then witnessing a real professional museum come into being, and within a year or so, reaching this threshold of extraordinary, sustained attendance and revisitation. So a museum that was perceived as, or thought of, rather snidely by the East and West Coast, as sort of a barren zone—the outcry that *Kindred Spirits* was disappearing into Arkansas, of all places. [00:36:29]

The great thing, satisfying thing, to me and I think to all of us, is the credibility the museum has, the ranking in the field, the sense of being treated as an equal from loans. I mean, she has major masterpieces that everybody from the Met to the Louvre need. We've got to be careful about everything being swept away. *Kindred Spirits*, and I guess Norman Rockwell's *Rosie the Riveter*, are the two most popular pictures in the museum. As it turns out, they're both now out on loan for a Rockwell show, and for the Met's current Cole exhibition.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Which is marvelous.

JOHN WILMERDING: Which is marvelous.

So while my role has changed, we've still maintained great friends. She is one of the great visionaries, I think. As you pointed out for my career, has been a wonderful parenthesis of starting with watching my grandmother create a museum and realizing what a visionary she was, and my career, in a sense, coming to a close with working with Alice Walton, who has done something that really hasn't been done. I mean, the last major American art museum, I think, to open was Amon Carter in Fort Worth. [00:38:09]

So it is, I think, a great achievement for—and for all the criticism of Walmart, one piece of her endowment, for example—because I've been asked, Why did she spend all this money on a picture when she could have contributed to social causes? Good question. I point out: Well, she went out and got, I think, 10 million added to the endowment, explicitly to bring children and youths from the surrounding three counties, free of charge, to the museum, to get them there. She realized, of course, that Arkansas, like many states, have given up all art education. So now there's this free program that brings these kids to the museum for the day, and gives them a

free lunch, and takes them back. There's already been very serious testing evaluations of what this has done for their education in their school, and it's been proven now, overwhelmingly, that visual literacy has made them more engaged intellectually in other subjects. Confidence. They've learned American history. It's had all kinds of educational benefits. This study is now being looked at by other states.

So for her, in a sense, the social philanthropy is in what the museum's role can do for kids of any status, financial or otherwise, and it has really paid off. Isn't that enough? [00:40:13]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: That's a nice place to [laughs]—a nice affirmation with which to end. Is there anything else that you would like to address?

JOHN WILMERDING: Well, I was going to give you a short list of some of my distinguished students.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Oh, right.

JOHN WILMERDING: I will comment on that, only because I think we've touched on it before. The book I most favor and think most important in all of American literature—I mean, I've got lots of favorites. Thoreau's become a great favorite. But the great model for me, with whatever flaws it has, is *The Education of Henry Adams*. Not least because it's the great model of interdisciplinary. Here's somebody who brings art and science together, sees the significance of architecture, but also scientific ideas. His book, written and published at the outset of the 20th century, is one of the great prophetic and visionary books, in the sense that he suggests the importance of the woman. Not just *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, but the woman in the 20th century. He writes about Russia and Germany, and their coming power. Forecasts, almost, the century to follow. [00:41:55]

He writes about science, and the idea of relativity, at the very moment that Einstein is creating the term. Adams doesn't know what Einstein is writing, but Adams, in his own vocabulary, writes about—I think he uses race in both senses—the race. Race will be important in the 20th century, but also race as motion and relativity. That great understanding of putting it out there, of—relativity will be the great education of the 20th—so I admire it for all of that.

It's also one of the most original books in its form and style, in that it's written in the third person. Like Franklin's autobiography, that Adams was aware of, it's an artifice. He can stand back, as I've written somewhere, and look at his life like Peto painting a still life. He can rearrange things in the way that Franklin talked about, his written autobiography, allowing for and correcting the erratum of his real biography.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: To me, the whole exercise of writing an autobiography—and he's also a great stylist of the English language. There are memorable lines from beginning to end, these pithy aphorisms. Aside from it being an autobiography about—I mean, always told my students they had to read it twice. Once as an American, because it's all about what it is to be an American, to be in a democracy, to be educated. And secondly, to read it as a student. What's the nature of education? That it's not learning from a professor, just taking notes robotically. It's not just pouring knowledge out. It's engaging that knowledge, as Adams did, and coming back at it, and ultimately learning how to teach yourself. [00:44:35]

So the whole first half of *The Education* is all about failure. Failure in the schools in Boston and Quincy. Then he goes abroad, studies the German schools, the best of their—in the 19th century. Talks about their failures. He goes to London, of course, and Oxford, and the failures of the English system. He not only goes to Harvard, but comes back and teaches there. All he is aware of is how Harvard failed him, and the failure of these great institutions. Then there's a turning point in the middle of it, as he begins to realize that real education, the learning part, is your active engagement. To me, that's a great model. [00:45:36]

But from a teacher's point of view, and affecting students, my favorite line in the book—one of my favorite lines, but for my purposes—is, "A teacher affects eternity; for he knows not where his influence stops." And I love that idea, because as a teacher, when you're lecturing, or giving a public lecture, you never know, in your audience, who's going to be affected. I've tried to learn how to speak to a middle ground, so I'm not just speaking to hermetic intellectuals, nor am I speaking to the lowest common denominator. But even then, in classes I would sometimes think I had made a brilliant point, and a student would come up afterwards and say, "I didn't get that, sir." Or, correspondingly, you said something, and a student comes up and says, "That was so exciting. That was such an insight." And it would be totally unexpected. That's part of what I love about education.

So you plant the seeds. And indeed, in my case, I've had several distinguished students grow into something, not necessarily in art or art history. So if they're as good in communicating their passion as I was in mine, it indeed runs on indefinitely. I think, for me, that's why, while I was glad to have the museum experience and relate to collecting, I was ultimately glad that my career is bracketed by teaching. [00:47:45]

But just to give you a couple of examples—it's not a laundry list—I start at Dartmouth, and the first and really most prominent student I've ever had is Leon Black, one of the greatest collectors in the world, certainly in America. He says that my course was the only art course he took at Dartmouth. I guess he was a history or economics major. It doesn't matter. It's not so much I take credit for his entire career, but it's lovely to know that something you planted—and there were a couple of lectures he actually remembers. So I'm happy that he now—I mean, think of his influence on what follows.

But also at Dartmouth, a guy named Bill McDonough later went on to become the dean of the school of architecture at the University of Virginia. That's a pretty prominent professional position. Another museum director, Max Anderson, was a Dartmouth student. Very amusing, because Max—who was extremely bright, really bright, and particularly interested in classical archeology—maybe for distribution purposes, took my course in American art. And I think it was the only C+ he got at Dartmouth. He never forgave me.

CHRSITOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: He just thought he could whip it out. I don't think he particularly cared. So I've always kidded Max that he ended up being the director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, after hating it and doing—I mean, he was really a top-line student. Ended up of real distinction.

George Shackelford is now the chief curator at the Kimbell Museum. An African-American kid named Thurlow Tibbs ended up in Washington, assembling one of the first significant collections of African-American art. He's since died, and I've forgotten where he bequeathed the collection. But at the time, it was the first real significant collection. There are now, of course, others. [00:50:16]

[Also, from Dartmouth, there's Jim Nachtwey, with an international reputation, perhaps our finest antiwar photographer at work today. –JW] Then, finally, a guy named Carl Little is a poet and writer in Maine, and is known—probably is the most significant poet and journalist in Maine. Published a number of books on American art. Writes poetry. Not so much known outside of the state, but in his own way, has reached a real level of recognition.

My one year as visiting professor at Yale, in 1973, included one of the brightest women I've ever taught. Kathy Foster, who is now—has been for several years now—the senior curator of American art at the Philadelphia Museum, and has done some great exhibitions on American art—most recently, the one on *Watercolor in the Age of Homer and Sargent*—would be now considered one of the top curators of American art in the country.

My year at Harvard—I taught in 1976—had a huge class. I ended it in Pop art, 1970s. For my last class, I thought I would shake up staid old Harvard by declaring a costume party for the final class, and I arrived in costume. I looked out at this whole audience, and I saw this young woman holding up a dripping ice cream cone. I said, "What is that?" Because I was going to call the winner up for an award. This was sort of a prelude to the class, kind of fun. She came up, and her name was Rebecca Zurier. She said, "I'm the Statue of Liberty." The ice cream cone was the torch. I said, "Well, you better [laughs] lick it quickly." [00:52:21]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: [Laughs.]

JOHN WILMERDING: Anyway, the prize. Having lectured on Oldenburg and Lichtenstein and Pop art, I pulled out a rubber hot dog, that you could squeeze and it would whistle. I held it up, and I said, "May this give you endless aural satisfaction." Probably couldn't get away with that now. But she went on to be a really prominent professor of early American painting, probably the most prominent specialist on American Ashcan School, teaching at the University of Michigan.

At the National Gallery, I take a bit of credit for the ascendancy of Franklin Kelly, whom I hired as a summer intern shortly after I began there. I needed assistance for researching and so forth. We hired Frank, and he later went to the Corcoran, and of course came back to the National Gallery and followed in my footsteps, both as curator of American art, and in the last 10 years, deputy director. So it's nice to see—I can't remember. I did teach at Delaware. I think I reviewed his doctoral dissertation, but I didn't teach him directly. But I feel that was—in a sense, it followed. [00:53:59]

Then, finally, at Princeton, I would cite Mark Mitchell, who's now the curator of American art at the Yale Art Gallery. Paul Provost, my first PhD, who ended up being the head of the American department at Christie's. To go back to my discussion, review, of the first seminar I taught at Princeton: Frederick Ilchman, I think I mentioned, has ended up being the chief European curator in the Boston Museum.

Then, finally, a young hotshot of the last few years, Carter Cleveland, who founded this Internet enterprise called Artsy, which has taken off and was a brilliant concept. He was a computer major. His father was a collector, and [laughs] like Leon, insisted that the son take my modern course. Which I think was a good thing, because it was a way for Carter to pull together the computer world with modern art. He's, again, taken off way beyond

anything I understand.

Just that list of a dozen gives me enormous pleasure that—in some ways, you never knew whom you were going to affect, and here they are, in their own careers. And whether Seymour Slive thought that when he was teaching to me and others—he must have, because that was our job. That's why we love doing it.

CHRISTOPHER LYON: Passing it on. Wonderful.

JOHN WILMERDING: Fin [ph]. Or, *fin*! [Laughs.]

CHRISTOPHER LYON: *Fin*! [Laughs.] Across the screen, right.

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