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Oral history interview with James Penney,  
1981 August 21-December 6

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**Contact Information**

Reference Department  
Archives of American Art  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560  
[www.aaa.si.edu/askus](http://www.aaa.si.edu/askus)

# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of an interview with James Penney on August 21 and December 6, 1981. It took place in Clinton, NY and was conducted by Robert F. Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. 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

JAMES PENNEY: —Best shift or so—[Audio break.]

ROBERT BROWN: This is an interview with James Penney in Clinton, New York, Robert Brown, the interviewer, and this is August 21, 1981. [Audio break.] Well you were born in uh, St. Joseph, Missouri, in 1910. Were you raised there, too?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, I was brought up and went through grade school and through the first two years of high school and then we moved to Lawrence, Kansas.

ROBERT BROWN: What was your father, a businessman, or—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, my father was a sort of a—I'd say he was in business at one time with a grain, hay, and feed store in St. Joe, and his relatives, brothers and relatives were too there for awhile. But he had a—he retired from that before he was married practically, back in the—in about 1900, I think, or so. And got a—and he kept buying up old property and fixing it up, and he spent most of his life—well, he had a big garden in back and a cow. And [laughs] we peddled milk, and my father uh, spent most of his times trying to rent these houses and fix them up, and [laughs] so they could rent them, and all in St. Joe.

ROBERT BROWN: Did he do fairly well by that, or—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, he managed. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Well was he a fairly, pretty easygoing person, your father?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I think so. He was a little tough on us as children, [laughs] sometimes.

ROBERT BROWN: How many, how many children were there?

JAMES PENNEY: There were four of us.

ROBERT BROWN: You and what, and—

JAMES PENNEY: My older brother, my—

ROBERT BROWN: What was his name?

JAMES PENNEY: Freeland Franklin; my sister, Edna Jane; and my younger brother, William. That was, my older brother's two years older than I am, my sister a year younger, and my younger brother, three years from him.

ROBERT BROWN: What was your mother like, as you recall, when you were young?

JAMES PENNEY: My mother was, they—was the daughter of a, one of the Freelands, a John Westley [ph] Freeland who was a—settled in northwest Missouri and was a farmer. And most of his children were farmers and they—he had a square mile up there, [laughs] of, up in grand—

ROBERT BROWN: He was a pretty big farmer, wasn't he, her father?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, yeah, but he was a real hay [ph] farmer, [laughs] and he—

ROBERT BROWN: What do you mean? You mean he was, he was—always farmed it himself, in other words?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes, yeah, and the children, and so forth.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, what was your mother like, though, as you recall as a child? Was she—with you children?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, she was wonderful and she was very uh, my—but we, when we first moved to, when we

moved to St. Joe, my grandfather moved down with us, and he—and to St. Joe, and lived with us for a little while, and I remember him vaguely. And they—

ROBERT BROWN: Well did they uh, was school—did you like school?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes, we enjoyed school very much.

ROBERT BROWN: What do you suppose you were like as a little boy? Were you pretty mischievous, or, and lively, or—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, we were pretty serious, and I got serious in, about art and cartooning in the early day and I still have little, some—and we all went to school on time, came back and we all walked to school a mile or two to the Webster School. And we all had to be home on time, and, [laughs] and we never got involved in athletics much, but in the spare time, we built—oh, it was sort of out in the outskirts of the—well, then, St. Joe, in a sense, near where Corby Pond is. And we built tree houses and we built caves, and we took the neighbor kids and—with us, and we had an awful lot of fun that way. We're—we played Indians and cowboys, and we, [laughs] and we—

ROBERT BROWN: You had a pretty happy childhood.

JAMES PENNEY: —built shacks. Yeah, it was really very nice.

ROBERT BROWN: Did your older brother enter in these things too, or was—

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yeah, yes, but he was such a scholar. He went through school, facts [ph], and he had—what was it? Uh, he was crippled for a year or so and couldn't go to school, and he was really good to me, but he got through school, grade school a year early, and went through coll—through high school in three years, and [laughs] and he was really—I mean, he was Phi Beta Kappa and—

ROBERT BROWN: Was he—were you pretty close to him even—

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you—would he discuss things with you? Was he mostly interested in intellectual topics?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, he was interested in history and things like that, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Were you?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes, to some extent. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Were—did you—you lived in St. Joseph till, till you went to the University of Kansas or had you already moved to Kansas?

JAMES PENNEY: We'd already moved, when we moved to Kansas—when my father, he got a house down there and created a house, he had something for one down there, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Where did you move to?

JAMES PENNEY: Lawrence, Kansas.

ROBERT BROWN: Lawrence, Kansas, huh.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, that's where the university is. Yeah, and my brother, well, it was largely so he could go to school, and because they couldn't afford to send him to away to college, and so. So, he uh—my father was getting along, and he used to go back to St. Joe and look after the property then and so forth, back and forth.

ROBERT BROWN: Well was it—it was understood in your family that you, your brother and you would go to college? Were you expected—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, we were all, all—well, we—

ROBERT BROWN: You were expected—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: After my brother got—no, no, nobody else in the family had ever gone to college, but then, my brother was so excited when he got all the scholarships and was graduated Phi Beta Kappa, and he was valedictorian in his class, and so forth.

ROBERT BROWN: In uh, high school, were you active in any certain things? Were you interested in the arts

already?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, I—

ROBERT BROWN: High school—

JAMES PENNEY: —took some art courses then, and as I—I was a—I'd taken these cartoon courses and as a cartoonist, everybody thought I was going to be a great cartoonist. And I—

ROBERT BROWN: [Inaudible.]

JAMES PENNEY: I was a car—did cartoons for the school paper and was the art editor of the annual and so forth and did covers for the graduate magazines—yeah, no, that was at the university. And—

ROBERT BROWN: What were your art courses like in high school?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I wasn't too excited about them. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: What, what were they like? They just—

JAMES PENNEY: They were sort of design courses and so forth. And then I thought I might become an architect, because I—but then I couldn't make up my mind until I went to college, had to enroll in college, and then I decided I didn't want to have two minutes in mathematics. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, the mathematics was—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: So your high school art courses weren't every exciting.

JAMES PENNEY: But I, but I had taken, um, mechanical drawing and things like that and—

ROBERT BROWN: But when you got to the University of Kansas, did you know what you wanted to study?

JAMES PENNEY: I wasn't sure until my first year, then I enrolled and I could have made a choice in going into design or painting or architecture, and—

ROBERT BROWN: There were—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: And I wasn't in it very long before I decided I was going to be a painter.

ROBERT BROWN: Really?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: And what did you think you'd be able to do with that? You didn't worry about that?

JAMES PENNEY: I didn't worry, and [laughs] yeah, and then—

ROBERT BROWN: When was that, when did you enter the university?

JAMES PENNEY: I enlisted in 1927, and I graduated in '31, and that was in—the Depression was just booming along, but—

ROBERT BROWN: Did—when did you begin going into your art major, the first year, the second year?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, you had to—and when you entered the Fine Arts School, you had—

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, it was a separate school.

JAMES PENNEY: —at the university—you had to, you know, sign in to the Fine Arts School, but then you had to decide whether you were going to be a, make—[inaudible]—you had to take some basic courses. And then you had to decide whether you were going to major in music or design, or, or painting.

ROBERT BROWN: What were the, the basic courses you took?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, the basic courses, well, everybody had to take certain courses in English and things like speech and—but then you had to take a basic course in design, the basic course in, yep, in drawing, and the basic course in—

ROBERT BROWN: Who taught the uh, or the course in design, do you remember?

JAMES PENNEY: Um, Rosemary Ketch—

ROBERT BROWN: Rosemary—

JAMES PENNEY: —Ketchum, was head of the design department—

ROBERT BROWN: And what was that for—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: —and, uh—pardon?

ROBERT BROWN: What was the course like, the design course?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, design course was some very, very set sort of patterns of, sort of, exercises and two-dimensional design, dimension flats, and you know, and the—

ROBERT BROWN: —flat surfaces, yeah.

JAMES PENNEY: —of figures and, and with text—and things with textiles and all sorts of things like—I think I've still got an old pattern.

ROBERT BROWN: Was that very interesting to you?

JAMES PENNEY: Not very, it was sort of a chore. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, it was, because they were set problems, fairly restricted as to how much you could let your imagination go?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, and they were set little things that, page and page and page, you fill them in.

ROBERT BROWN: Did they have any—did you have any idea of why you were doing all of this? Did she—would—could she explain that?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, most of the majors in design were women who were going into textile design or something like that, or in—well, they had several things that they mastered, or dress design and things like that, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Then what was the other basic art course you took? You took design, and what were the others?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, you had to take certain—I had to—certain basic art history courses, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Was that slides—you taught with slides, and—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, they had some slides in that; they weren't very—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you enjoy—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: No, no, they—no, I don't think they did then. They, they had little pictures they put up on the wall, and I don't think slides came until later.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you enjoy that course?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, it was a—

ROBERT BROWN: —a requirement.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, yeah, and it was, it was, it was fine.

ROBERT BROWN: Who taught that course, do you remember?

JAMES PENNEY: Let's see. Was that Clara Hatton [ph], or—hmm.

ROBERT BROWN: But at any rate, you, you didn't get too interested in—

JAMES PENNEY: I've got an old, old um—

ROBERT BROWN: Oh well. But you didn't—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: —records; I can look them up.

ROBERT BROWN: But you weren't—never became really interested in the history of art.

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I—and a lot of people majored in history of art. Well, not a lot; there weren't too many majors in the fine arts. But I didn't get involved in, at—I took the art history courses in the—I think there were two years of, or a whole year, or two years, in history of art.

ROBERT BROWN: In the studio then, after design, what would the next course be? What were the next courses you took?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I took beginning drawing, and then I took life drawing, advanced life drawing, and painting, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Were these courses taught in a fairly academic way, that is, in drawing, did you begin say, drawing from plaster casts?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, we started drawing from plaster casts in our first year. It was all—[inaudible]—plaster casts.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you think that was pretty useful?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, it was a little boring, but it was the tradition. [Laughs.] And—

ROBERT BROWN: Was the teacher pretty good?

JAMES PENNEY: —and, yeah, and that worked out pretty well, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Who was the teacher, do you remember that?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, let's see. I think Eastwood taught the—

ROBERT BROWN: Raymond Eastwood.

JAMES PENNEY: Raymond Eastwood, I think taught the um—maybe Mattern taught the—

ROBERT BROWN: Karl Mattern.

JAMES PENNEY: —the—

ROBERT BROWN: What was Raymond Eastwood like? As a teacher?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, he wasn't very—

[Side conversation.]

JAMES PENNEY: —talkative, or—and was pretty—a somewhat isolated sort of person, I think—[inaudible].

ROBERT BROWN: Was he a pretty good teacher, though?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I think so. But, but mostly for the basic courses that we had.

ROBERT BROWN: Were they something like design, in that you had rather restrictive problems you had to—

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, and we had a course in still life, in painting and portrait, and—

ROBERT BROWN: But those—

[Cross talk.]

JAMES PENNEY: —life drawing and life—yeah—[inaudible].

ROBERT BROWN: But these earlier courses in drawing, were they rather—were you allowed to—a lot of free reign, or were you fairly restricted?

JAMES PENNEY: You were pretty restricted in the beginning in what you did. There were a certain number, you did one each week, and then there were sketch classes and that sort of thing, but of course, it was all very, you know, encouraging.

ROBERT BROWN: You were doing well, were you?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, I did very well. And I got scholarships, and I became a monitor of the—well, was that my senior year or junior year? Oh, and the life class and the sketch, and I taught the sketch class and then I taught the summer class. And—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you enjoy teaching?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes, that worked out very well.

ROBERT BROWN: What do you think you liked about teaching?

JAMES PENNEY: It was sort of a challenge, and it made you think about what [laughs] you were trying to organize your thoughts about your work.

ROBERT BROWN: You've already mentioned Karl Mattern. What would he teach? What did you have from him?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, Mattern taught the, um—let's see. Did he teach—he taught painting and he taught watercolor, and he taught—

ROBERT BROWN: Now was he very different from Eastwood?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, he was quite a—I liked him.

ROBERT BROWN: What was he like?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, he was a—I have Mary Mattern now and then, his wife, out in Iowa. Uh, he was a—we were very, very fond of Karl, and he was very, very helpful and he'd come around and help you out and give you ideas, and was very—

ROBERT BROWN: Was he dynamic? Was he uh, a lively person, or—

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, I don't think he was really dynamic, [laughs] but he was a—but he, you, you had a lot of confidence and faith in his opinions.

ROBERT BROWN: Would you see their work, too? Were you aware of his own work?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes, and they—and they had their studios there, Bloch and Eastwood, and—[inaudible]—would see them in there, and they'd show you some of their work, sometimes at least, or you'd sneak in and see it. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Did you like—who—whose work did you like best of those?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I think Mattern's and Bloch's, of course. I began to be—I didn't quite understand at first, but then I began to be very intrigued with it, and then of course, he was a very, very hard [laughs] operator in a way.

ROBERT BROWN: Who is this, Albert Bloch?

JAMES PENNEY: Albert Bloch.

ROBERT BROWN: But you—what do you mean, as a teacher, you mean? Or as a person, he was rather severe?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, yeah, in some ways, and—but he was, uh—you had a great respect for him, I think, and for his ideas and so forth.

ROBERT BROWN: What kind of ideas would he try to get across?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, he tried to—and of course I think all of them, their interest was to get you to look at the world, look at nature and not copy the, what you think you see, but put down what you see. Not to worry too much about what it looks like, but what [laughs]—and to learn to organize and to compose and to—and then, of course, we had a—I think on—well, we—there were lectures on color theory and things like that, and on all sorts of things like that.

ROBERT BROWN: But you best liked the studio work itself, did you, the sketching and the painting?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You said earlier that Mattern and Bloch's work, at first you couldn't understand it. What do you mean? Was it because it wasn't literal?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I didn't—Mattern, I don't think was, but Bloch—well, but then I became acquainted with all the—uh, not all the Old Masters, but Cézanne, and the Impressionists, and the Post-Impressionists, and Cubists.

ROBERT BROWN: And Bloch, what was Bloch's work like then? Was it Expressionistic, sort of?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, it was based on Expressionism, but then it began to be more, more formative in dealing with figures and so forth.

ROBERT BROWN: You came to like his work eventually?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, I liked it.

ROBERT BROWN: Of course there, would you have much of a chance to look at other work out in Lawrence, Kansas? You, there—was there a museum or anything there, that you—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, there were some collections, but mostly 19th-century things. And, and it was a—at the university, but it wasn't a large collection at all.

ROBERT BROWN: So your awareness of what was going on currently, in Paris or New York, would be through magazines?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, that was it pretty much.

ROBERT BROWN: And you became intrigued by that? You were, you would—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, come by the—by what I was learning and my awareness of all modern art and so forth, it was—

ROBERT BROWN: And the—and then these teachers uh, pointed out what was happening. They, they wanted you to be aware.

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, it was to some extent.

ROBERT BROWN: So, as teachers, they weren't—these teachers of painting, weren't, weren't particularly conservative at all, were they?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I wouldn't—but then they would have a few exhibitions coming through now and then, and that would be arranged; they didn't have much place to show anything.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you remember some of those?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I—trying to think now. I think they had some things of Homer and people like that coming through, and when they—

ROBERT BROWN: But not contemporary work.

JAMES PENNEY: Right, or—and then I think there was a show of some of the Impressionists and Cubists at one time back there on a small scale.

ROBERT BROWN: Was there a dean or someone at the university who was responsible for getting in these outside artists—uh, these people like Mattern and Bloch, getting them to come there?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I guess Swarthout.

ROBERT BROWN: Swarthout, what was his first name?

JAMES PENNEY: It was Dean, um, oh—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, his name's Swarthout?

JAMES PENNEY: S-W-A-R-T-H-O-U-T. Eight [ph], and, and um—

ROBERT BROWN: He was the dean of the art school?

JAMES PENNEY: He was the dean of the School of Fine Arts, and he was a musician. And, and uh, that was



Swarthout, and then Chancellor Lindley [ph] was there.

ROBERT BROWN: Lindley—

JAMES PENNEY: —yeah, was there, chancellor.

ROBERT BROWN: And, but he was also very interested in the arts?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I think so. I don't know what—

[Cross talk.]

ROBERT BROWN: Were you—did you work very hard during those four years?

JAMES PENNEY: I worked, I just worked my head off.

ROBERT BROWN: Huh. You didn't have much time for the usual social life, the—

JAMES PENNEY: I didn't have any really, then. I went to an artist ball or costume party once [laughs] or twice, and that, you know, in the fine arts, I think that, but—and I stayed at home and I ran back and forth for lunch, [laughs] for a mile or so—

ROBERT BROWN: Your home was there—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: —or—[inaudible]—well, it was about a mile or so, and up and down the hill and yep, studied at night and worked at night. And then, now and then I'd get some little job or something, so when—and I didn't have much to do with athletics or any outside activities, except I was involved in the arts. Well, I became president of Delta Phi Delta when they made a—

ROBERT BROWN: Hmm. This would be an art students' club?

JAMES PENNEY: What? Yeah, it was a, formerly a women's sorority but then I—but then they opened it up and made it a nationally—and made it both male and female.

ROBERT BROWN: But for people mainly in the arts?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Most of the students in art were women, were they, at the university?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, at the university, most of them were, especially—oh, there're a few who went on design, like Poco Frazier and some of the—and then there's—

ROBERT BROWN: Poco Frazier.

JAMES PENNEY: And then there were a few who were involved in—but most of the majors in painting were men, but there weren't very many. There may have been three or four every year—[inaudible]—oh, and maybe about the same number of women, so, but—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, was there any stigma for a young man to be in the arts? I mean, among your contemporaries in Kansas? What did people think of the fact that you were going—you were thinking of becoming a painter?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, they thought it was a—all of them thought it was sort of Bohemian. [Laughs.] And, and, they weren't familiar with any artists, really.

ROBERT BROWN: How about your—did your parents, though, support you in your—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: They supported me, but they didn't really—and then they realized I was involved and getting good grades, and—

ROBERT BROWN: That, at least, is okay, huh?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah. [Laughs.] And so, I was able to go on.

ROBERT BROWN: Who were some of your, uh, the fellow students that you were close to?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, there was Randall Brubaker. Chris Ritter came to New York with me in '31.

ROBERT BROWN: And Brubaker did too, did he?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah. And then there was, uh, let's see. Then there was several younger, a year or two older and some, Melvin Douglas [ph] but I don't think he was in high school, but I don't think he majored in—

ROBERT BROWN: But Ritter and Brubaker, you were pretty close to?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, when you graduated in 1931, did you know what, what you were going to do?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, Bloch told me, "If you're"—it was the middle of the Depression, you know, just the high point—told me, if I was going to be an artist, to go to New York, that's the only place, and get in the swing of things, and [laughs] work it out, [laughs] against the—and—

ROBERT BROWN: So, how did you do it? How did you get going to New York?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I saved up a few dollars, teaching there. I think I taught there that summer, the summer class, and of course, I stayed home and so forth, and I, and Brubaker—well, Chris Ritter had been to New York a year before he graduated—he'd graduated a year or so before—and he came back and he was going back again and—

ROBERT BROWN: Did he have any general suggestions or opinions?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I—everyone thought that the Art Students League supposedly didn't have any use for the Academy, but the Art Students League was the place to go, and so—

ROBERT BROWN: So what did you do, the three of you then set out for New York in September or so?

JAMES PENNEY: In this old Model T Ford Coupe that he'd bought—it was 15 years old or more—that he had bought two or three years before for \$25, [laughs] I think, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Huh. Did you set out, did you—

JAMES PENNEY: —and set out and it took us about a week, and I'd never been west of the—well, I'd just been west of the Mississippi at St. Louis once when I went down there for, [laughs] you know—and took us about a week, or eight days or something, I don't—yeah but—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you stop at museums or anything like that on the way?

JAMES PENNEY: Not much. We just, this—slept in the car overnight the whole time, [laughs] and the car wouldn't go very fast, you know, and we didn't try to avoid the big cities, and [laughs] and tried to avoid the Appalachians. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: So you uh, when you got to New York, what'd you do? Uh, the first thing you did was, look for a place to stay, I suppose?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I only really knew one person there, and that was Richard Hall, who was the—he was with an advertisement research company there, who, his—uh, let's see. He graduated from the University of Kansas and his sister, or daughter—no, no. Anyway, it was something like, knew him, knew him there—

ROBERT BROWN: At least it was someone you knew—

JAMES PENNEY: —at college.

ROBERT BROWN: —or they knew of you.

JAMES PENNEY: And he told me when I'd come to New York with him, things were pretty bad, but that he might give me a little work now and then if he could. And to go—and he told me about the YMCA over in Brooklyn, at the Prospect Park, that they had a lot of empty rooms, and, but to look up Julien Bryan over there, who was, had a—and—

ROBERT BROWN: Who was Julien Bryan?

JAMES PENNEY: Julien Bryan was a person he knew at the YMCA—sort of connected with the Y and the club—

ROBERT BROWN: So you got a room there at the Prospect Park Y in Brooklyn.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, for my—a room for—to do their posters, [laughs] and I did them for two years, and then I taught a class, once, one night a week, for—I did that for a little while, too—

ROBERT BROWN: Where, at the YMCA?

JAMES PENNEY: At the Y, yeah, for my room.

ROBERT BROWN: What, classroom drawing or something like that?

[Cross talk.]

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah. Oh, no, no, it was a children's class, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you pretty—what was your initial reaction to New York City when you got there?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, it was a whole new world, and it was so fantastic, the scale of everything, the ocean. I'd never seen the ocean before. [Laughs.] Yep, and all the historic sights, and then the utter uh, poverty and the desperation of the people that were unemployed and everything else, and it was a terrible situation.

ROBERT BROWN: So your—you quickly realized that your situation wasn't all that bad, huh, compared with that of a lot of other people?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I was lucky, because I was able to get—I paid once for a class at the—I'd applied for a scholarship at the Art Students League before and hadn't made it, I guess. But then I decided to go track—go anyway, go up to see what it was like, and I enrolled in Thomas Benton's class, and that was along November, I think, or December of '31. And then I didn't, I had money enough for one, [laughs] or saved up enough or something, for one month. And then, and I think it was about \$10 a month, something, and then I left, and applied for some scholarships and monitorships, and then in January or February, they gave me a scholarship, a monitorship—no—[inaudible]—

ROBERT BROWN: So you must have done pretty well then.

JAMES PENNEY: No, I had a scholarship that first year.

ROBERT BROWN: So you must have been—done pretty well for them to give you one so quickly, right?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, and then I—

ROBERT BROWN: Because they weren't giving everybody a scholarship, were they?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I think I got pretty good recommendations from—

ROBERT BROWN: What was uh, Benton's class like?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, Benton's class was a whole new world to me.

ROBERT BROWN: In what way?

JAMES PENNEY: And, well, I mean, he was very definite. I, you know, analyzing the Old Masters and block shapes and so forth, and I never was too interested in Benton's color, but his method of analyzing the movement and the form was pretty interesting. I learned quite a bit about it, and then of course, there was so many people in that class who were—who I knew later who became—oh, just uh, Jackson Pollock was in there and Whitney Darrel and Betty Parish, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you get to know—

JAMES PENNEY: And I think my first wife Frances Avery was in that class, and it was a whole, whole, uh, world. Oh, there were a lot of people. Jean, uh, no, Jean Morley I think was in there, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you get to know these fellow students?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes, I got to know them pretty well, and of course, they used to say your most important classes at the League is the—[laughs] is in the lunchroom where you sit around and talk, or talk with [laughs] all the students, and jab about, you know, [laughs] the instructors and about the classes and what they're doing.

ROBERT BROWN: And that was true, huh?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, and there was a lot of truth in that, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you remember some of your—what kind of things you'd talk about then?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, we talked about art, and about the artists, and about the classes, and the—and about the directions and all about modern art. Then we'd wander off and see shows on 52nd Street and see the student shows and criticize them, and see all the modern things that were a big surprise to you and somewhat just of a—

ROBERT BROWN: Did most of you respect Benton's work? Did you like his work at all?

JAMES PENNEY: I was never over fond of it, because of his color, and I'd been brought up in an interest in light and the influence of the Expressionists and so forth. And Cubists and Impressionists and so forth, and he had—didn't have any use for that. He was all involved in Rubens, and—but of course, he got you to see the structure of the picture, so then involve yourself in that.

ROBERT BROWN: He was particularly good at that.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, but his whole idea was to build up and just color your pictures. Sky was blue, the grass was green, [laughs] so this thing almost, it was light or dark, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: He was fairly indifferent to color.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, pretty much so, I think.

ROBERT BROWN: Did your fellow students kind of share your opinion that he—his weakness was color, the weak point?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I think most of them were involved in his uh—and of course they broke away and took classes with other people, eventually, and a lot of them really expanded. And then, maybe they learnt more than—about it than I [laughs] thought at the time.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, at the time, the—what, did you ever get to talk like to Jackson Pollock, who had such a career much later?

JAMES PENNEY: No.

ROBERT BROWN: What was he like then? Did you get to know him at all?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes. I've got a sketch or two of his I think he did in a Benton class, and sketches of mine and so on, things of that period, but—

ROBERT BROWN: Well what was he—was he a fairly modest person, or what was he like?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah. Well, he was—he became very much of a—he was very sort of impulsive, and he had a hard time sort of controlling himself in the style of Benton, and he was sort of, you know, always very agitated, and then of course, he became quite an alcoholic. But he was—but the same time, he had a real gift, and, and a real flair, and a real drive.

ROBERT BROWN: Now after the Benton class, what was your next, your next classes at the League?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I studied with von Schlegell, and who had sort of an Impressionist background, or—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you turn to him maybe for color? I mean—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, it was, somewhat that was, and working from models and so forth.

ROBERT BROWN: How would you learn about which teachers to take, from—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, you would—

ROBERT BROWN: —talking with the other students?

JAMES PENNEY: —talk it over and you would see their work, and you'd see the faculty exhibitions and then you'd see one-man shows of some of them now and then. And you became—of course, one of the main things was just the involvement in the whole art world. You became involved in them, and seeing all the shows and all the new exhibitions and all the galleries, and all the modern art was coming out, and all surprising new things that were developing.

ROBERT BROWN: You'd spent a bit of time going around to see exhibitions, then?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, we spent all our noon hours, usually, and all of our spare time doing that. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Perhaps you could recall some of those exhibitions that were important for you, the ones that you saw.

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I can't—I got notes about a lot of them, in probably my sketchbooks.

ROBERT BROWN: Are there any that come to mind that you remember?

JAMES PENNEY: Maybe sketches I did, yeah, there, but then of course, I was always very excited over, um—well, there were a few of the Americans like Ryder and Homer, and people I would—became really—

ROBERT BROWN: You would go look at their work in the Brooklyn Museum, or the Metropolitan?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, or wherever, yeah. And then, of course, I became very intrigued with Picasso and Matisse, and Braque, and of course—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you see their—

JAMES PENNEY: —Kandinsky and Marque, and um—

ROBERT BROWN: So you'd go to the Museum of Modern Art to look at those?

[Cross talk.]

JAMES PENNEY: And then, there were all the new artists coming up who were—and the American artists who were involved, and oh, I don't know, so many I can't think. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: But you spent a good deal of time. Then, did you try showing work fairly soon?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, I was immediately showing in the, uh—well, wherever I could. I showed, was down at the—I had—they had a little room they sort of made into a gallery room at the Y and I had a little show there of some of my things, and I—let's see. I put on a show of some, some other YMCA, some things I [inaudible] there, and then I showed with the, uh, what was it—

ROBERT BROWN: Well it—your record, you had a one-man show in 1935 at the Eighth Street Playhouse.

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, that was the Artists Aid Committee started that, and I was in the first Washington Square show, Washington. Jackson Pollock was there, and a lot of us were there in the same group, and I was with a—what was that little gallery for? I had a show in '31 or '32—

ROBERT BROWN: Would it have been the Wakefield Gallery?

JAMES PENNEY: Maybe—[inaudible]—and I think that was the—[inaudible]—no, the—

ROBERT BROWN: The Uptown Gallery.

JAMES PENNEY: Uptown, well, Brubaker started that. Not Brubaker, Ritter started that, was involved in that—[inaudible]—but—

ROBERT BROWN: Ritter became—

JAMES PENNEY: —but the Uptown Gallery, and then there was the—[Audio break.] More, well, more people kept coming to New York, and then of course when Roosevelt was elected, we were all getting very involved in socialist ideas or something.

ROBERT BROWN: You were quite strongly affected by the poverty you saw, weren't you?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, it was awful, just, I made a lot of paintings of the—just tragic sort of things and sketches, and so forth.

ROBERT BROWN: Were there—there were various artists groups organized, weren't there, then?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you—which were some of those that you joined, do you remember?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I joined the, uh—let's see—I guess I was in the—

ROBERT BROWN: —the Artists' Union?

JAMES PENNEY: —yeah, Artists' Union, I think, for awhile, and uh, but I never got very active in—[laughs] wasn't interested in being an artist; I was interested in being a painter, [laughs] rather than, from what—

ROBERT BROWN: You did share ideas, but you didn't want to be too involved in—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: No, I didn't want to get—

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned that 1935 exhibition in Washington Square was organized by an artists aid committee. Was that an attempt to raise money for the welfare of artists, or—

JAMES PENNEY: Uh, yeah, that was an effort to help artists, to show them on the Square where they—and especially younger artists who couldn't [laughs]—didn't have a place to show and so forth.

ROBERT BROWN: Did it work out pretty well?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I—it was filled with a lot of young artists who were pretty important at the time. Then, at the same time, it was filled with a lot of just junk, you know, and that's [laughs]—was the trouble with that sort of thing.

ROBERT BROWN: You um, at the Art Students League, you had some other teachers. George Grosz, you had for a while. What did he teach?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I was involved in that problem there at the League at the time about, uh, Sloan and about the—they wanted to—George Grosz wanted to come to this country and they wouldn't give him a job or something. He wanted to leave the Nazis, you know, Germany. And so I signed up to—or something to, involve in the—to give him a job at the League. A lot of people, of course, didn't like his work and so forth, and—

ROBERT BROWN: You did like his work, didn't you?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I wasn't too fond of his cartooning and so forth, but his drawing, and then of course when he came here, he immediately started painting, and didn't cartoon anymore. But I studied with him probably because I just felt I ought to support him, [laughs] I guess.

ROBERT BROWN: Was he a pretty good teacher?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I don't think he was a great teacher, but he would come around, say, look at something and say, "I tink dat is okay, go ahead," or, "Do it more vetter" [ph]. [They laugh.] And maybe make a little drawing sometime. I think I've got a sketch or two where he did that way, in some of my drawing.

ROBERT BROWN: But some of the older teachers were against having him there, is that right?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned John Sloan. Was he—what was his involvement?

JAMES PENNEY: I worked with Sloan for a little while. Well, there's a—and I never worked with Miller, but I learned a lot being around from his—from his methods and his collections, so forth, but—

ROBERT BROWN: What, what did you learn from Sloan?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I only studied with him for a month. I think he taught there for a month or so, and I learned maybe a little graphically, but I don't think it was any—

ROBERT BROWN: But you mentioned Sloan in connection with the coming of George Grosz. What was, what was his involvement there?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, it wasn't—

ROBERT BROWN: Or was it—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, now wait, wait. Was that the farmer that caused that big fight at the League? Sloan and—

ROBERT BROWN: What was the big fight about, like, whether to bring Grosz in or not?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, and so who was it? Was it Sloan resigned? Was the—[inaudible]—

ROBERT BROWN: When you—

JAMES PENNEY: I'm a little vague—I'm getting a little vague about some of these things. Unless I look up the— [laughs] all my notes.

ROBERT BROWN: A couple of uh, summers then you went home to Kansas and taught in summer school, right, during the '30s?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: In 1933 and 1937, I think, too. What was it like when you went home, after being in New York?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, a different world. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Did you think you wanted to stay in Kansas, no?

JAMES PENNEY: No, no, I didn't. [Laughs.] I thought I better stay in New York. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Now, you weren't too politically involved, but you were interested. Did you have quite a social life at this time, as much as you could, a lot of friends, and people get to—

JAMES PENNEY: Well—

ROBERT BROWN: —pal around with?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, I began to have a—I was always pretty isolated in some ways, but I began to, uh, open up. I had my first drink of, of liquor when I came to New York. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: You had never had it in Kansas.

JAMES PENNEY: No, never had it, never touched it. Well, of course, it was Prohibition [laughs] there anyway, and that was the—Prohibition was in Kansas long before it—but, my dad had a bottle. He took a drink every Christmas—[laughs] kept it hidden away.

ROBERT BROWN: This was another thing in New York then, cocktails or drinks, and parties.

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes, and it was wide open.

ROBERT BROWN: You had parties, so—

JAMES PENNEY: —[inaudible]—and I went to parties now and then, some ball, some—and my—well, I was a little frustrated at times. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: By what?

JAMES PENNEY: But I, oh, I began to have dates, occasionally, and [laughs] now and then. I had my first experiences, [laughs] and uh—

ROBERT BROWN: You kept working and get your painting pretty hard throughout?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, that was my drive.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, 1934, you were in the WPA, you joined that.

JAMES PENNEY: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Was that the relief project or the project where you—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, that, I forget what that was called, the first, when it was first founded, but it was set up, and they'd hired a few people to start managing it, and we'd been—oh—[inaudible]—I was up at the League at the time, and that was in, that was the fall of, was it '33?

ROBERT BROWN: And you heard about the WPA, over at the League?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, and there was a—no, it must've been '34. What was it, when I got—[inaudible]—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, '34, you say here, is when you joined the League—I mean, joined the Works Progress Administration.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: So, and were you given a project fairly soon?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, and I came back in '33 from Kansas that summer, then decided I was going to move in to New York and not go back to the YMCA. And I moved in and there I got a—and I had the scholarship at the League, or—no, it was a monitorship, yeah. And the sketch class—[inaudible]—and then, but, I didn't have any money except a few dollars, so I tried to—I came back that summer from—that fall from Kansas in a freight train with a haul from—other guys from—

ROBERT BROWN: —from the Middle West?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, right, from Kansas, and came through the—[inaudible]—and were going to—thought there'd be artists, or at least come to New York, and one of them, father got us passes to go through. He had some connection with a stockyard in Kansas, had got us passes to ride through with a shipment of hogs. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: So that fall, when you got back in the fall of 1933, uh, were—you were still taking courses at the League, and helping as a monitor?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, I had a, had the—and then I—

ROBERT BROWN: [Inaudible.]

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, and then I got a—let's see—and then I got a job in the—yeah, that's what it was. I got a job in the—finally got—I found—[inaudible]—applied, finally got a job as a—working at night in the supplies store at the League.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, at the Art Students League.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, I worked three nights—three hours a night for uh, I think they paid me about \$10.

ROBERT BROWN: —a week.

JAMES PENNEY: Or \$5, \$6, something like—

ROBERT BROWN: What were you the monitor for?

JAMES PENNEY: Uh, I was a monitor for the sketch class, the croquis class.

ROBERT BROWN: And who taught that?

JAMES PENNEY: That is the free sketch class.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, I see. And so your job was just what, check on their work, or just to make sure they had supplies, or—

JAMES PENNEY: No, just arrange for the model and pose the model and time it, and so forth.

ROBERT BROWN: I see. Hmm. Well, then in '34 is when you heard about the WPA, and you got your first—on the first mural project.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, I think—

ROBERT BROWN: How did you get that? [Inaudible.]

JAMES PENNEY: Well, we heard they were hiring at that. We were all excited they were setting these up, and we were down roaming around. We're all excited about murals, and about Orozco and Rivera and people, and we heard they were hiring one night up the League. The word got around and it was all—a whole bunch of us went down there one night, and stood in line for, [laughs] for—a long line—for about an hour or two, and signed up. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: They—did they test you or interview you, or just signed you up?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, you signed up, applying for, and your qualifications, and so forth, and then they notified you. They—or you kept calling, or finding out—

ROBERT BROWN: So you did then, um—



JAMES PENNEY: —or inquiring and then they finally had a place. Now Pollock went down with me that night from the—[laughs] and who else? Oh, there's a lot of—I think Helen Ludwig, and um—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, were they uh, were these bureaucrats fairly kind, or would they ask many questions, or—the WPA people?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, people—oh, it was sort of a statistical sort of thing that—[inaudible]—

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, they just took, took it one after the other.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: How would they have learned about your work? Would they look at it, or—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, they—you would have to give them some notes of your background, and then give them maybe a few recommendations, somebody they might contact.

ROBERT BROWN: So when did you, you learned then, in 1934 that you were on a project?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: And, this was the uh, Textile High School Library in New York.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: And were, were several of you involved in this project?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, there was about, about eight or ten, a dozen of us under Paul Lawler [ph], and then there was another group, the—

ROBERT BROWN: Who was the uh, the supervisor, Paul—

JAMES PENNEY: —Paul Lawler. He was a Yale Art School graduate, yeah, and who was a, you know, he was an older guy, had—but—

ROBERT BROWN: And he was a mural painter, whereas, you had—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, he, yeah, he'd done some mural pa—

ROBERT BROWN: You had no experience to speak of with murals.

JAMES PENNEY: Not really. I'd tried to do a few on ceilings, or [laughs]—

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative], but nothing to speak of.

JAMES PENNEY: I'm trying to—no.

ROBERT BROWN: Well was he a good supervisor?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I learned a lot about the methods and so forth, and I got real involved. Most of them just sat around, killed time, you know, uh—

ROBERT BROWN: Because they were paid by the hour, huh?

JAMES PENNEY: Paid, yeah, paid, and you had to be there on time and leave on time. There was a timekeeper coming around. And, but I was really involved, and we were all involved in designing, making the sketches, and planning the thing, and then, they were approved. And I made about half of the sketches for that, and I've got some of them here, I think—of Textile High School, and that made—when you started them and made some of the cartoons and I helped draw up all the—scaling up the cartoons. And then, next, Lawler came around and changed them all so they'd all be in his style, of course, because after all, it was his project, [laughs] and—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you resent that?

JAMES PENNEY: And I sort of resented that [laughs]—[inaudible]—yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Was he essentially a pretty conservative artist?

JAMES PENNEY: Yep, yes, uh very, very conservative.

ROBERT BROWN: So then after you'd done your uh—brought them up to cartoon size, then were you involved in the painting on the plaster, or was it on canvas?

JAMES PENNEY: No, it wasn't on plaster; it was on canvas, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you involved in that too, or did Lawler do that?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, we started them on the canvas, and then he would go over and paint them, and then they'd mount them on a wall later. And then you'd, they'd—well I think they mounted them, painted them on the wall. But—

ROBERT BROWN: You think you painted them on the wall after they were mounted—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, yes, I think so.

ROBERT BROWN: That wasn't too satisfying—

JAMES PENNEY: On a ladder, and so forth, we did out there, but finally, I went around and applied for another, see if I could get on something else and once I was—got transferred down at the—down to Washington Market, and we did some things—well, I got a letter from—

ROBERT BROWN: But you found the—

JAMES PENNEY: Helen Ludwig was on that. She's out in California now and she said she's being—[inaudible]—and she wanted to know if I remember just where some of the things—[inaudible]—I think. And, then we did a few panels, each individually, to go over certain—and had a few people working with us over certain areas of the market for the—I think it was for a festival or something.

ROBERT BROWN: But that was uh, an improvement over working under Lawler, I guess, wasn't it? That was—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I learned a lot from him—

ROBERT BROWN: You learned from Lawler, but you felt he was very restrictive in—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, but it was, was—[inaudible]—and then after that, I got—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, fairly that—later that same year, you—

JAMES PENNEY: Then, then I got signed to Moses Soyer and his group at Text—at uh—

ROBERT BROWN: —the Greenpoint Hospital, in Brooklyn.

JAMES PENNEY: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you know of Moses Soyer's work? Did you know about him or know him, before this?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I sort of—

ROBERT BROWN: You knew his reputation.

JAMES PENNEY: Vague—vaguely, yeah, something about him and Raphael, of course, and actually was better known that he was, at the time.

ROBERT BROWN: But you felt that—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: And Raphael was around the League and I talked to him.

ROBERT BROWN: So, you felt this might be an interesting project.

JAMES PENNEY: Well, and I thought it might be a change and I'd have a little more chance of—and, and it was a whole new—but it was—

ROBERT BROWN: The whole new what?

JAMES PENNEY: —and as a whole new, you know, a development, yeah, and there were four wings to that: Refregier had one and Soyer, the other, and then there were two small ones, that I think Hartl, Leon Hartl, and who was the other one, Hunter Davis? No. Well, had—they only had—the two small ones just had one or two

assistants but the—but here too, I got involved and designed half the panels and painted them. [Laughs.] And, and then, then finally, I was able to leave it too, after a year, for my own project, at Flushing High School, and Soyer finished up the panels and—but we didn't paint those in the hospital. We painted those on—well maybe it was in the basement, or one time, when they were metal [ph], but then Soyer repainted [laughs] a little to give his [laughs] slant to them. And uh—

ROBERT BROWN: Was he—do you think it was a matter of pride, in, or in his case?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, yes, and he felt they looked sort of in the same vein.

ROBERT BROWN: What was he like to work with, Moses Soyer?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, I liked Moses, yeah, very much, and we had a group of us, had a lot of—and then wandering around the pavilions and galleries and have our lunches and exploring the artwork in other people's studios. And then he would have a model part of the time, and we would sketch. Uh, sometimes it was posing for—sometimes it was just sketches.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, was um, this work pretty satisfying to you?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, it was quite an interesting project, yeah. And—

ROBERT BROWN: Well the—you liked better though when you were on your own, then in 1935 to '38, a three-year period, you were at the Flushing—

JAMES PENNEY: —Flushing High School.

ROBERT BROWN: —High School, um, historical theme, the early history of Flushing.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, the early history of Flushing.

ROBERT BROWN: And there, did you have assistants, or were you all by yourself?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, I had about four assistants. And, well, they were helpful. They weren't too involved in [laughs]—

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, was it, was it—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: —as artists, but that was a big job, designing that and trying to plan it for the stairways, and the view, and then, research on all the history and [laughs] and—

ROBERT BROWN: How many panels did you have there, quite a few, or—

JAMES PENNEY: There was four, two on the sidewalls of the stairway, two on the end walls. The entrance came down and then the stairway turned and went downstairs.

ROBERT BROWN: Sort of a split stairway at the—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, yeah. And—

ROBERT BROWN: Did your assistants help much or were they kind of lazy, the way they had been in those other projects?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, they worked pretty well. Uh, but of course, there—I was—sort of a job to keep them busy sometimes, and then sometimes I would have them, oh, do things like trace the cartoons and—[inaudible]—and a lot of things like that.

ROBERT BROWN: Would the government, the timekeepers come around very often and see how it was going, and—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, they—

ROBERT BROWN: [Inaudible.]

JAMES PENNEY: —came out periodically.

ROBERT BROWN: Were they sort of a nuisance, or—

JAMES PENNEY: At times, yes. Most people resented them, but—[laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: They wouldn't—uh, then would they also come around once in awhile and look at the quality of the work? I mean, would some other people come, like—

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yeah, yes, but not the timekeeper.

ROBERT BROWN: No, no, some of the people that came and looked at the—can you recall their names at all?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, there was—

ROBERT BROWN: Was it McMahon, or some of those people, did they ever come?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, there was McMahon and she didn't come around much that way herself but, but there would be a whole—several people who were involved. Trying to think of their name now. Mmm—

ROBERT BROWN: These weren't artists, usually. These were uh—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, a lot of them weren't—

ROBERT BROWN: —administrative.

JAMES PENNEY: Some didn't have much, much art background at all, no.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you work closely like say in a high school or in a hospital; would you work closely with the administrator, the schoolman, or the hospital administrators?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, we had talked to them sometime, but didn't have much to um—no. But they were supposed to sort of approve the plans, to a certain extent.

ROBERT BROWN: So you stayed on the WPA, you even designed some murals for a high school library in Far Rockaway, which I guess wasn't built, but you said it was exhibited at the WPA building at the New York World's Fair, the designs were exhibited.

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, I had planned—no, the high school was built, but—was there, but the—but I was—had to leave the project and I came back. I taught summer from Kansas, was at—no, I got home again, then I was—they had us, three-month project or something like that—no, six, eight month, where you had to be recertified, and, I got off and—thrown off in the—and I didn't get back on.

ROBERT BROWN: Why were you thrown off, when you—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, they, every—they—everyone was thrown off after a certain period, and they had to go all through the rigmarole again.

ROBERT BROWN: So you had about—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: To be certified, yeah. And then I, um, what was it I was doing? Well, anyway—

ROBERT BROWN: Well you did teach briefly at the Saint Bartholomew's Episcopal Church in 1938 and '39. You had some teaching experience.

JAMES PENNEY: Well, yeah, I—

ROBERT BROWN: That was just a—

JAMES PENNEY: That was a night—

ROBERT BROWN: —sketch class.

JAMES PENNEY: —night class, the sketch class, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: And did you give—you gave some private classes, too?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, not really. I would give some private instruction once in awhile, yes. But—

ROBERT BROWN: So come 1939, you're really uh, had no job to speak of.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, and then they were dropping the projects, and the war was coming on, everything was just a mess and they were cutting off all the money for it, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Did um, did you get to the World's Fair?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: What'd you think of it?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, it was quite an experience. Yeah, it was a, really a big and uh—what would you say? [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Did it—was it handsome? Was it a delight to be at, or—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, it was, uh, just a different world, with all the foreign countries and everything, and, and all the busy, bustling around. And of course, a whole lot of it was organizing things for sale, [laughs] and trying to promote, advertising, but it was—and then there's big Ferris wheels and things like that, and slides, and all sorts of—

ROBERT BROWN: Well how did you uh, make a living these years, when you were—did you—were you still at the League in the later '30s, or were you beginning to sell some of your own work?

JAMES PENNEY: No, I'd had a few shows, one-man shows, and—but, I was pretty desperate in those years, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: But you had an ex—a one-man exhibition at—with Hudson Walker Gallery—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, yes, I, I had—

ROBERT BROWN: —in 1939. How'd that come about?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I was with his gallery shortly after he found it, I guess, and—

ROBERT BROWN: How, how had that come about? How had he gotten to know you, or—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, maybe he'd seen somebody where I'd gone around to see him, or—oh, I think I met him somewhere, and somebody, maybe it was the YMCA or somewhere, somebody said that, for me to—what was it? And he told me to—oh, it was something about he knew somebody in touch with—and he said to look him up and, and so he—[inaudible]—my work and took me at the gallery and I had my first show there.

ROBERT BROWN: Uh, can you describe, what kind of work were you doing that he exhibited? Can you describe that?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, those were things in the, which, I think it was some—I don't, uh—things of the West, and trips out there, and New York City. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: The kind of sceney social—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, something—

ROBERT BROWN: [Inaudible.]

JAMES PENNEY: —things like—let's see. Was that when I had the *Elevated* and *Tearing Down the EI*, and things like that? I forget just the thing, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you, did you do fairly well at that exhibition? Did they sell things?

JAMES PENNEY: I don't think anything hardly was sold, maybe one or two things.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you get to know Hudson Walker?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes, I got to know him very well and—[inaudible.]

ROBERT BROWN: He did what?

JAMES PENNEY: I was very fond of Hudson, lone, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Did he help you out, I mean, in those days, with a dealer like that, maybe give you a little bit to keep you going?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, uh, a little maybe, [laughs] I think he may have.

ROBERT BROWN: What was he like then, at that time? Would you describe him, please?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, Hudson was a very serious person involved in art. Let's see, what was his business or his—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, lumber, I think—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, or some—that's, that's right, that family in—

ROBERT BROWN: —Minneapolis.

JAMES PENNEY: —Minneapolis, that's right. And, he—well, he had a lot of interest in—but he—but a huge interest in art, and set up and was sponsoring art and artists that way. And, uh—

ROBERT BROWN: But would he talk to you a lot about contemporary art?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, some. I think he had seen my work and what I was doing once in awhile, and helped select things.

ROBERT BROWN: Did he strike you as a very caring person?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, I thought so, very much.

ROBERT BROWN: Well you had this one show with him. Did you—were you—uh, did he show you over several more years? Because he had his gallery for a couple more years.

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, he kept my work with the gallery until he closed, and then I—recommended several different galleries on my ideas and my work.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you get then picked up by another gallery?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, then I might have showed—I might have shown with a picture or two with some other galleries and so forth, but I, I had to—I went with Kraushaar in '45, I think, or '44.

ROBERT BROWN: But for several years, you didn't really have a gallery. But you did, uh—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, when the Hudson closed in '42—

ROBERT BROWN: —[ '41 or '42, or something.

JAMES PENNEY: —[ '41 or '42, something like that—

ROBERT BROWN: In this uh, old resume of 1940, you indicate that you were—you must've submitted to a number of group exhibitions, many of the leading museums and so forth. You would send work—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes, yeah, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: This would be the Corcoran, the Chicago Art Institute.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, that's right.

ROBERT BROWN: The uh—hmm. And were sometimes things sold from those exhibitions, or—

JAMES PENNEY: Well—

ROBERT BROWN: Probably not.

JAMES PENNEY: It was rare in those days if anything was sold, once in awhile.

ROBERT BROWN: Then about that time, you were married too, weren't you, about 1941 or so? You married the former fellow art student, Frances Avery.

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, that's right, yeah, Frances Avery.

ROBERT BROWN: Had she continued as a painter, or—

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, and she—what is kept [ph] to be a painter, and we had a little problem sometimes with sharing the studio or having separate studios, [laughs] but she uh—and then she got to teaching for, down—where was it she—

ROBERT BROWN: In Manhattan?

JAMES PENNEY: Uh, it was over in Queens, I think, at, what was it?

ROBERT BROWN: Well you uh, got a job teaching at Hunter College in 1941. And how was that, was that a pretty big art department?

JAMES PENNEY: That was when uh—well, it was a—[inaudible]—but it was mostly uh, decoration and—

ROBERT BROWN: You mean that—

JAMES PENNEY: —design and things like that.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean most of the people were going to become illustrators or teachers—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, that's right.

ROBERT BROWN: Who were some of your colleagues there, do you remember the names of some of the people that—fellow teachers?

JAMES PENNEY: Who was he, fellow who was head of that? Uh, oh—

ROBERT BROWN: Anyway, was that a good place to work, Hunter College?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, it was sort of a routine job, sort of a very set—and I think I taught—did I teach mechanical drawing there, or something like that? But, it was, it was uh—no, I don't think I taught painting—[inaudible]—but it was convenient, New York, that was the only thing.

ROBERT BROWN: But you were at—there only one year 'til 1942, and then, what happened then is, for several years you didn't have a job. Were you in the military, or—

JAMES PENNEY: No, I was waiting to be called up but I had a low number, [laughs] and then, in the meanwhile, they formed the Jordanoff Aviation Corporation was doing manuals for the Army and Navy, and I got a job there

ROBERT BROWN: —with uh, Jordanoff.

JAMES PENNEY: —yep, with a lot of draftsman, artists, people around who did the—

ROBERT BROWN: —the graphic work.

JAMES PENNEY: —the drawings for the—there was—well of course, my—Hunter sort of had helped me to—

ROBERT BROWN: —to get that job?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, my, and teaching up there, had helped to give me a background, so I was able to do that drafting.

ROBERT BROWN: But you, you were with them for two or three years, then.

JAMES PENNEY: Pardon?

ROBERT BROWN: You were with Jordanoff Aviation for two or three years then.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, I was, well, until the end of the war.

ROBERT BROWN: So you had uh—in a way, this was your longest steady job, wasn't it?

JAMES PENNEY: [Laughs.] Almost.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it, was it satisfying work? Or was it very routine?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, it was very routine, but at the same time it was very interesting, because you would be traveling around, checking the changes in the blueprints and checking your drawings against the company from the [inaudible] they were manufacturing. And you traveled around, over various places, and saw the uh, everything from submarines to airplanes to, to, uh—

ROBERT BROWN: So you really had a range of work then, did you, and you got to travel?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Your family stayed in Manhattan.

JAMES PENNEY: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Well then in—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, it was sort of a, you didn't know how long or where you were going to be for awhile. You'd be working on some manual and then—[inaudible]—it up and, let's see, I've got one of the manuals around somewhere, I think. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Well, well, most people they were going through a lot of moving in those days anyway, weren't they? I mean, in time of war, a lot of people were—

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, oh yes, yes, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —shuttled around so you were—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: That's right, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: So you stuck with them till uh, '45, and then you, you once again had a teaching—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, well—

ROBERT BROWN: —position at—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, well of course, they dropped everything as soon as the war was over. And I, and then I was able to get a job with—at, what was it?

ROBERT BROWN: Bennett Junior College?

JAMES PENNEY: Bennett Junior College, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: You stayed there for a coup—one year, I guess. [Inaudible.]

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, I went up two or three days a week and took Poughkeepsie on the train and stayed overnight, and commuted back and forth to New York.

ROBERT BROWN: Had, had uh, during the war, had you been able to paint? Or were, were you now able to resume your painting much more steadily?

JAMES PENNEY: Uh, well, I was able to. I wasn't painting too much on the—when I was at Jordanoff, was pretty wandering around, you know. I'd try to do a watercolor at two places we went, and make some sketches of something, but I'd have a few things started and try to get them finished; I still seem to be in that same boat. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: But now, after the war was over, you could paint more steadily, couldn't you?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, yes, but I was commuting then back and forth and back and forth, and after Bennett—I got a job at Bennington, [laughs] and that was still a bigger shuttle back and forth.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, would you still commute? You didn't—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, yeah, I—

ROBERT BROWN: You didn't take your family up to Vermont.

JAMES PENNEY: No, no. We did during the summer I think, or something like that.

ROBERT BROWN: And what was it like teaching at Bennington? That was a fairly new school with a great variety of the teachers, I think, and—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, yes, it was, it was a very interesting school, and they had some pretty interesting people there. And, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Do you remember some of them?



JAMES PENNEY: Well, let's see. Who was it? Was it oh, Paul Feeley? And uh, who were the others?

ROBERT BROWN: Was it quite—it was quite a serious place, wasn't it—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes, yeah, very serious place.

ROBERT BROWN: Would there be quite a lot of discussion of, of art?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, you'd get together some, discuss it, to see what the others were doing, and I think I had a little studio there where I sort of worked while I was there, nights and [laughs]—

ROBERT BROWN: What kind of uh—what sort of style did you have at this time, and what subjects were you working on?

JAMES PENNEY: Well. I was involved mostly in oh, landscape and to a certain—some, and still life, or buildings and so forth, or—

ROBERT BROWN: But your style would be, it was evolving, wasn't it? Wasn't it somewhat different from what it had been in the '30s?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, it was, it was getting a little freer and more, um—well, those murals tightened me up a little, I think, in some ways, [laughs] but—and like I say, it was getting freer and more—

ROBERT BROWN: —more abstract?

JAMES PENNEY: And those tendencies towards abstract, and I was doing a lot of experiments with abstracts, and I had the students do some abstract compositions and you know, try to explore the—what it was all about and what was going on.

ROBERT BROWN: What sort of things was your wife doing then? What kind of painting was she doing?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, she had been on the project before too and was involved in—she had been involved in—who had she worked with? Ed Laning, and she—Ed Laning or—I think so.

ROBERT BROWN: But did she have a more or less a figural style?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, she was involved in more—

ROBERT BROWN: —more than you did.

JAMES PENNEY: —because, yeah, much more than I was, and more involved in the, well, the Miller tradition, that's how—

ROBERT BROWN: She'd been a pupil of Miller.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, she had been a pupil of Miller.

ROBERT BROWN: Doesn't he seem to leave his stamp on the people who have been his pupils?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, uh—

ROBERT BROWN: Fairly strong like?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, it was a very, very strong carryover in, of his style and—[inaudible]—work and, of course, I never studied with him, but I learnt something from him. I thought about glazes and underpainting and so forth, but I never wanted to get involved in his, that sort of a style. And although it has a great possibility and flexibility that way, but most people who are in that, just tied down to that and couldn't get away from it, and Bill Palmer was in that class for awhile, but, but he gradually back—basically after the war, began making a whole—breaking away and having a whole fresh approach to all his work and it was very—

ROBERT BROWN: Weren't many of you painters breaking away a bit in the late, in the postwar period?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You were very experimental.

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, yes, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it a time—were you hopeful that there'd be a sort of a new day for art that—were there more galleries now? Were there—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, the galleries were beginning to expand after the war. They were pretty tight back in the '30s, very closed. Yep, and all the whole, fresh movement of [laughs]—and uh, was developing, all the new galleries and the abstract galleries and abstract artists, and the—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you keep in touch with some of the—those people that became the new celebrities, the new abstract artists, like Pollock? Did you keep in touch with those people at all, after the war?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, Pollock used to stop around every night practically, every—not every night, once a week or so, he'd stop in the middle of the night and, [laughs] pretty tight, and [laughs] and talk and talk and talk and oh yes, I was in touch with an awful lot of them, with Diller, with Gorky, who worked beside me on the project, and —

ROBERT BROWN: What did he work with you on, in the project?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, he had his own project there that he was—but we were in the same room, the same building working on—

ROBERT BROWN: And these fellows you kept in touch with was—

JAMES PENNEY: Then I got—and oh, an awful lot of them, I have some touch all the time, and when they founded the Abstract Artists group they wanted me to join it, but I didn't think I wanted to quite [laughs] you know, close myself to that. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: You were a bit on the fence?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, well, I was, I was more involved in—

ROBERT BROWN: What, nature, or—

JAMES PENNEY: Nature and, and—

ROBERT BROWN: —observation?

JAMES PENNEY: —motion, ideas from observation rather than in the sort of the formal abstraction that so many of them were involved in, like—

ROBERT BROWN: Did formal abstraction never, uh, attract you very much?

JAMES PENNEY: Not the formal, no, it was more the freedom. But I knew all of them and a lot of them had—lived near and [inaudible] a lot of the artists, I, you know, and they'd stop in and I'd stop in over the years, and oh, Gorky and Stuart Davis and—

ROBERT BROWN: What was Davis like?

JAMES PENNEY: And, then of course, you knew all, knew Marchand [ph].

[END OF TRACK.]

ROBERT BROWN: Side two. [Audio break.] Been talking a bit about just after the war, and mentioned several of the people you knew. You mentioned Stuart Davis, you'd known since the '30s. Uh, a couple, two others I think you said you could say something about, uh, you mentioned a little earlier Burgoyne Diller. Is he someone you first got to know in the '30s?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, yes, I knew him around the League and he was—

ROBERT BROWN: What was he like? What was his—did he become a friend?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, he and I were close friends, but I knew him uh—I always had a certain respect for him because he was such an ardent Abstractionist. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Were those people, the ardent Abstractionists, in the '30s, were they sort of a minority, people like Diller, and—

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, they were a—started out as well, exploring, well, with Mondrian you know, exploring a whole world that lots of people weren't even aware of. And when Hofmann came to the League, there was quite

a fuss about that, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: Was that in the '30s?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah. And of course, a lot of people studied with Hofmann. I didn't, but it became a very, uh, popular.

ROBERT BROWN: I suppose it caused some tensions, did it, along the other teachers?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, when did—yeah, then of course, around the League and places, there's always extremes of every direction and so forth, and we're sort of [laughs] questioning one another.[laughs]. Uh—

ROBERT BROWN: So Burgoyne Diller was one of the Americans that was already interested in abstraction.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Was—and, were there some others that you knew in the '30s that were already uh, getting into abstraction?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, there was quite a number, there was—[inaudible]

ROBERT BROWN: You've mentioned some, but you decided not to join the American Abstract Artists, when they set up. You—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, two or three of them came around when they were forming it and wanted to—[inaudible]—but I thought I'd better not. Uh, I wasn't sure enough of myself; I guess I'm still not. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: You also said you got to know in the '30s, Leonard Bocour, who then made quite a career of paints, and how did you get to know him?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, he was demonstrating I think, on—to the, uh—and he set up his—and had, gave the artists all the opportunity to make their own colors and he showed them how to do it with them grinding their own colors, and I think he gave them some lessons in that to American Artists School—[inaudible]. I still—

ROBERT BROWN: To, to the American Artists School, was that—

JAMES PENNEY: Was that—yeah, I think that was one of the—

ROBERT BROWN: In the—this was in the 1930s.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, so.

ROBERT BROWN: And you also said you did a little printmaking, Will Barnet who was at the League for years, uh, helped you with that. Did—was he someone you—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: Well he was a printer at the League.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you get to know him pretty well?

JAMES PENNEY: Uh, oh yes, I still see him now and then, and I know him pretty well—[inaudible].

ROBERT BROWN: What was he like, at the—when you first knew him?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, he was a very, very dedicated guy, and his his work has changed over the years quite a bit, from sort of a Daumier, to [laughs] to a very, well, fairly abstract sort of approach to nature.

ROBERT BROWN: Well you were on the Board of Control of the League in the 1940s, and I think from uh—by 1941. What did that involve, being on the Board of Control? What, what was their business?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, that has to do with planning the curriculum and selecting instructors, and organizing the finances and making the catalogues I was in charge of the catalogues for, years, designing it, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Was that—this was in 1940s, 1941 to '46 you were involved, and were those controversial years, or were those—do you recall what would you have to do, placate each camp? You mentioned there were the Abstractionists and then there were the Traditionalists.

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I think it was always, was some sort of that way and it still is, I think, but—[audio break]—they had the elections and elect the officers and the Board of Control and so forth, annual meets and the

members and—

ROBERT BROWN: Well did they try to be very broad? It's—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, they, uh—it's according [ph]. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: It's what?

JAMES PENNEY: They, they'd try to keep it open and keep the League going, but been big fights there over the years about who, what direction they all take, and who'll run it, and that sort of thing.

ROBERT BROWN: It isn't simply a matter of saying, "Let's keep the great variety in the League," because sometimes, certain camps want to prevail, want to—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, so and then they wanted to keep it balanced, and then they wanted to keep it—and then they bring in somebody sometime who's new, that they wonder what'll happen but they want to keep it fresh, and then they have a problem with the old guard, and [laughs] you know, it's a—

ROBERT BROWN: Then you have a staff that—Stewart Klonis, was he there those, all those years?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, he was there all those years.

ROBERT BROWN: And how was, uh, what was his job, to keep it going day to day, and—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, he was the chairman of the Board of Control, the president, the—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, what was he like to work with?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, he was very—he was really a wonderful person, and he was very well organized and knew how to plan everything, and he kept the League going, I think, because there was some pretty rough times, but—and he was very open-minded, I think, about the people. I think it was the election there when he became the director of the Board of Control up there, was a—and I got in.

ROBERT BROWN: In the same year.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, and then, I think you—at the time, you could only serve two years on the Board and then you had to leave and then you come back. And, and—or maybe it was three, and I was made vice president of the League when we made Stewart Klon—decided that the League needed a director to come in, made Stewart Klonis director. Of course, I might have been president if I'd been interested and all—[they laugh]—but, but I didn't want to get involved in that administrative work. I always—[inaudible]—

ROBERT BROWN: But you were probably considered a pretty fair-minded person, is that what recommended you?

JAMES PENNEY: I hope so. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: At that same time, you were a nine—well, about a little later, 1945 to '48, you were the vice—a vice president and a trustee of the American Fine Arts Society. Now what was that?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, that was an organization that organized exhibitions and sent them around over the country.

ROBERT BROWN: The exhibitions of what?

JAMES PENNEY: Uh, exhibitions of art.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, contemporary art? I mean, American, or—

JAMES PENNEY: American art, I think.

ROBERT BROWN: Was the purpose to try to get people around the country to know?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, I think that was—

ROBERT BROWN: Who, who was the—who had set this up?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, it was set up by the—

ROBERT BROWN: —American Federation of Arts, or—

JAMES PENNEY: No, I think it was connected with that maybe. And—well no, that was connected with—

ROBERT BROWN: Or was it—

JAMES PENNEY: No, I think the League had—

ROBERT BROWN: Some role in it? Who were the uh—

JAMES PENNEY: Role in it, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Who were some of the other people involved with this Fine Arts Society?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, I was trying to think. I think, gee, it was Paul Nosunder [ph], Hale, and—

ROBERT BROWN: What, Robert Hale?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah. No, I think they were in a—I forget who all was in it. Or maybe, maybe some of the dealers were. I can't, I can't recall at the moment just who was involved in that.

ROBERT BROWN: You also were at least a member of Artists Equity, which started about 1947. Did you ever do—have much to do with them, or just joined it?

JAMES PENNEY: I just joined it for a while there and didn't have to do anything.

ROBERT BROWN: Uh, then in 1947, you began your affiliation with the Kraushaar Galleries. Did uh—did the Kraushaars come to you, or how did you—how did that begin?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I think somebody recommended that I—and I forget who that was, but I knew it was Russell Cowles or—

ROBERT BROWN: Was Russell Cowles someone, uh, like a pretty good friend of yours?

JAMES PENNEY: No, I never knew him very well, but somebody suggested to him that, there was somebody around the League at the time—[inaudible]—

ROBERT BROWN: Was the Kraushaars Gallery one of the more prominent galleries of the time?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, I think so. And it's one of the oldest galleries in the country, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: And has it, has that gone pretty well for you?

JAMES PENNEY: It's, on the whole, it's gone very well. I've been very pleased to be with it, and they are, and they—I've always been, felt very lucky to be with them, because they've had such a reputation for their honesty and their integrity, and their treatment of the artists and their dealing with them.

ROBERT BROWN: Well then, you taught then for just one year at Bennington, and then I gather you heard of a position up here in upstate New York, in Utica at the Munson-Williams-Proctor and at Hamilton College. Had somebody told you about these positions, or—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I think Bill Palmer was one who—

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, you had met him? You knew him?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh I knew Bill, yes, back in the '30s and on the WPA and everything, and I knew him, and my wife of course, Frances, knew him very well back in those days because they were—and then we had a studio there in New York right next to his for a while.

ROBERT BROWN: And he'd come up here a few years earlier to direct the art school.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, that's right.

ROBERT BROWN: So, did he get in touch with you, and uh—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, or I heard or it was announced somewhere that there was an opening there, and they wanted to know if I might be interested, and I came up and discussed it with them, and that worked out very well.

ROBERT BROWN: Did it seem like it would be a good place to come?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, it was uh—

ROBERT BROWN: Because it was far, it was—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: Far away, that was the only trouble. And when I took it, I never had a car and never driven, and I took the train up back and forth, [laughs]. I still do quite often.

ROBERT BROWN: But what, what led you then? It would be uh, Palmer suggest—

JAMES PENNEY: And, and the—I came out to teach there and at Hamilton College because Bill had been teaching at Hamilton, and he felt his job as the director of the Institute was too, too uh—

ROBERT BROWN: He should devote—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: —too much and so, look for somebody else and he felt I would fit in. So I commuted back and forth from Institute to Hamilton and back.

[Cross talk.]

ROBERT BROWN: How did you find it? Did—was there a difference? There were—those were, uh, students who wanted to be artists over at the Institute, whereas here, they were simply boys in part of a liberal arts curriculum.

JAMES PENNEY: Well, they—

ROBERT BROWN: —curriculum.

JAMES PENNEY: Well, they—some of them were students who wanted to be artists, but most of them over there were older people or amateurs, an awful lot of them, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: They just came in for sort of, some training later in life.

JAMES PENNEY: But they had some courses there with credit, and at that Utica College and so forth to set up—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: And they had a seven-year policy at the Institute then, and I could only stay seven years, and meanwhile, of course, I kept my studio down New York and commuted back and forth, back in the first two or three years and that was a hectic time.

ROBERT BROWN: And you never uh—then you finally moved up here then after two or three years.

JAMES PENNEY: Well, no, after my wife and I were divorced, my trip to Mexico in the old car that I got, which was a—I'd just learnt to drive that spring and drove to [laughs] Mexico and car broke down. They had to get a new engine in it, and there was an old, uh, what was it? Uh—

ROBERT BROWN: This was about 1950, wasn't it?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, 1950.

ROBERT BROWN: So that trip was not just travel; it was—yeah.

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, that trip was, was a wonderful experience, and a couple of students went down to the Mexican art workshop where, what was her name that's—uh, had that down there, and I thought I—I gave some talks there and taught there a little while that summer.

ROBERT BROWN: Where was that, in—[inaudible.]

JAMES PENNEY: In, um—

ROBERT BROWN: —Guadalajara?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, I believe that's where it was. And, at—no.

ROBERT BROWN: But after you came back, did you still—

JAMES PENNEY: I've got a whole sketchbook of stuff up there.

ROBERT BROWN: You still lived in New York, then, and then—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, and I, and it was quite a job going back and forth to the Institute and—

ROBERT BROWN: —the college—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: —and the college and going back and forth to New York on the train and so forth, but then I got a car, and that helped quite a bit.

ROBERT BROWN: How would you rate the students up here? Were they fairly good compared with some you'd taught in New York City? Were they—or were they quite provincial by comparison?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, they, the students up here are pretty brilliant students. Of course, most of them, I had a—it was a pretty tough course we gave them, because some of them felt art was a gut course. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: You're talking about now Hamilton College?

JAMES PENNEY: Hamilton College, yes. And—

ROBERT BROWN: Were there, were there other instructors in art at that time?

JAMES PENNEY: Where?

ROBERT BROWN: Uh, at Hamilton College.

JAMES PENNEY: Oh no, I was the only one who taught art, painting, and they hadn't had a course there at all until Bill came up, and that was just one course, and so finally they started giving a credit. Edward Root started the course with a—years before with a—which was a free course I think that they took without credit, and one, for one month during the year or something. [Inaudible.]

ROBERT BROWN: Was he still teaching when you came up?

JAMES PENNEY: No, no. He, he had, Bill Palmer—

ROBERT BROWN: —had taken over.

JAMES PENNEY: —taken over then, and then I took over Bill's place, and we had to—there were no art supplies and you had to furnish all the—furnish all the supplies and order them and buy them, and arrange it, and set up the easels. And they never had a life class before and I set up that in a couple of years, and they had never—it was whole new, new world, especially place—

ROBERT BROWN: They didn't—they'd never thought about a life class. That was sort of a little too—

JAMES PENNEY: That was taboo.

ROBERT BROWN: —sophisticated, taboo.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, [laughs] in a men's, in an isolated men's school, yeah. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Do you—so you found the students were bright, and some of them had a uh, faculty for—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, and some of them became very involved in one way or another and went on with it, and—

ROBERT BROWN: But since there was only one teacher, there couldn't be that many courses, could there?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, no, they, first there was just a beginning course, then we gave them an advanced course, and then of course, it was usually if they made it in art. Of course, they had had, for every course they majored in, they had to take about five—uh, three courses in something else, but they had to get that many credits.

ROBERT BROWN: But it wasn't—but there was only one teacher. How could they have a major? Was it just you, or did new, other people come in, too?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, no. I—they had a one-year course beginning sur—that I took care of—

ROBERT BROWN: A survey—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I mean I gave them exercises every week of drawing and ended up in painting a piece of sculpture. And then they had a—and then we let them take and do—and then I put in an advanced course that they could take. And then they were able to do in a pen study at my direction, or sometimes take a course at the Institute or somewhere that they get credit, or if they had a junior year, take a course somewhere.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you give them art history, too?

JAMES PENNEY: No, I didn't teach art history. I never had any—

ROBERT BROWN: But was there somebody here who—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, oh yes.

ROBERT BROWN: There was.

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes. Oh yes, and art history, of course, was—that was the major, really.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh really? I didn't know.

JAMES PENNEY: They—but then they were able to major in painting after awhile—[inaudible].

ROBERT BROWN: Who was at—here in art history?

JAMES PENNEY: Paul Parker.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, what was, what was his background? Was he academic background, or some—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, he's—he paints, but he came here from—where was it—the University of, was it Iowa, Illinois—where he was head of the—of art, and he was a museum person. He was in charge of exhibitions and things like that, too.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, at the college, or, or down at the Institute?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, he had nothing to do with the Institute. He had a full-time job here, teaching art history, you see. He taught a whole range of courses, "Early Art," and "American Art," and—

ROBERT BROWN: So he was the head of the art department, and you were a member of the art—

JAMES PENNEY: —and, and "Renaissance." Pardon?

ROBERT BROWN: He was the head of the art department; you were a member.

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, oh yes, oh yes, yes, I never had—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you all work pretty well together?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, we worked very well together, always; Paul and I always got along very well.

ROBERT BROWN: So, when did you decide that you'd stay around? Now you had a seven-year policy at—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I had—

ROBERT BROWN: —the Institute—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: I had to leave that, so I left and I got a job at—they gave me a job at Vassar. I've taught there for—and then they asked me back at Hamilton on a full-time basis.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, that was in '56, you came back full time.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, that's right.

ROBERT BROWN: By then, you'd moved away from New York City?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I married Rachel in '50, or was it '53—[inaudible]—

ROBERT BROWN: Uh-huh, and you'd met her up here.

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, and—



ROBERT BROWN: So then you began living up here.

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, and, but I kept my studio still down there until '55 or something, and then they closed up that building or something, and so I—

ROBERT BROWN: But you continued painting steadily—

JAMES PENNEY: —until '55—until—

ROBERT BROWN: —and then you'd have exhibitions at Kraushaars, or you'd be sending things down there regularly.

JAMES PENNEY: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: By the '50s, were things beginning to sell?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, at times, our things would get—do pretty well.

ROBERT BROWN: And uh, then, and you went abroad, really, well, if you don't count Mexico, for the first time in uh—

JAMES PENNEY: —'53.

ROBERT BROWN: —1952 or ['5]3, and—

JAMES PENNEY: —'50—

ROBERT BROWN: Well you indicated '52 here, on this list. But at any rate were you gone the whole year?

JAMES PENNEY: No, no, that was just in the fall.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, I see.

JAMES PENNEY: Wait a minute.

ROBERT BROWN: Or even the summer?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, just the summer, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: This, did this have quite an effect on you, this trip to Europe, or—you'd already of course been painting for 20 years. Do you suppose it had any effect on you?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, I had never been there and it was just a new world in many ways. It was something I'd always been anxious to see. We went over. There were 11 of us I think, passengers, on this big freighter taking old automobiles to Greece, and it took about 14 days to get across. Let's see. It was an old—what was it—Liberty ship or so—

ROBERT BROWN: Liberty ship from World War II.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, and I went through that well, and I got off at Italy; most of them did. There were a couple of priests, the priests—[inaudible]—priests got off to see the Pope and the—

ROBERT BROWN: So you went off—

JAMES PENNEY: —Athena going on to Greece. I'd been in touch with them. We had a reunion up here, 50th reunion. [Laughs.] No, not 50th—

ROBERT BROWN: —but 20th, or—

JAMES PENNEY: —25th or something.

ROBERT BROWN: Could you um—you were off on your own, sketching and looking.

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes. Oh yeah, I wandered around, painting everywhere I went, and never knowing quite where I was going to go next. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: But you were used to that sort of thing.

JAMES PENNEY: Well, a little, yeah. And trying to understand the language, and of course, I had a little French

and Italian, and, but it was a wonderful trip.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you—you first—you came back then to Hamilton, finally had your—got your position in '56. You also, perhaps earlier that year, had been a fellow at Yaddo in Saratoga Springs. What was that like? Because that's where you—you lived there and you worked with a wide variety of people.

[Cross talk.]

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, I was there for—was it a month or two months? Uh, but it was a—or maybe six weeks, something like that.

ROBERT BROWN: Was that a good thing?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, that's a very, very worthwhile thing. I should contribute to them, but I don't—

ROBERT BROWN: You, you painted there—you [inaudible]?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, yeah, they set you up and you painted, and sort of alone, and [laughs] had a little cabin to yourself or a tent-like—

ROBERT BROWN: And were there other—

JAMES PENNEY: —cabin, and—

ROBERT BROWN: And you'd come together, were there—there were other painters there?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, and then you'd sort of come together for your meals and so forth and talk, and it was a—it was really very, very nice, very worthwhile. It was, it was—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, you painted—then '56, you started permanently at Hamilton, and you found that was a very good thing and you stuck with it until you retired in '76.

JAMES PENNEY: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You'd never probably thought that you'd be tied down or staying at one place for so long, did you?

JAMES PENNEY: I never knew. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: But you found in general, it was a good thing, you were able to uh—you liked teaching?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, I enjoyed teaching, and it was always sort of a challenge to line up in, in a schedule, [laughs] that—

ROBERT BROWN: Then you had a number of students—

JAMES PENNEY: And then, then of course, of course, it kept me going. [Laughs.] It just uh—

ROBERT BROWN: You always painted steadily on the side, whenever you weren't teaching?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And then you've had a number of students who have gone on, right?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: That must've been exciting.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, it's—was really very, very wonderful to have students and hear from them and know that they're continuing, and decided to be artists. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Well did they—gradually, did the uh—

JAMES PENNEY: I know there's a very brilliant student here once, of mine, who took my courses senior year I think, or maybe it was the junior and then to—and, he, Phi Beta Kappa everything. His—he decided he wanted to be an artist, and his father, he was very upset because his father had told him he'd see him through the Harvard Law School but he wouldn't see him through on—or maybe it was Yale, not Harvard—but he wouldn't see him through in art school. [Laughs.] And so he went to law school, and ended up quite a well-known lawyer. But he—

but he's had a lot of interest in art, and I think takes a few lessons now and then.

ROBERT BROWN: I bet you found that there was a tension here. Was there, because you were a minority—

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes, very much so.

ROBERT BROWN: —in uh—I mean, this was generally a general preparation for professional or academic careers here.

JAMES PENNEY: And there were a lot of people around the faculty who I think, who sort of looked upon art as a hobby, you know, or something, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you, did you see those attitudes change over the years, or was it—

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, I think they've changed a lot.

ROBERT BROWN: Now they're much more accepting of this sort of thing?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah. But then we had some very good people here too, who were quite interested in the arts, like Tom Rudd, who was chairman of the trustees, I think, for a while. And, and—

ROBERT BROWN: And he was—

JAMES PENNEY: He was also head of the trustees of the Munson-Proctor, I think, or he was a trustee of something.

ROBERT BROWN: And he was uh, he was genuinely interested in—

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, yes—

ROBERT BROWN: —in the arts.

JAMES PENNEY: —very much so.

ROBERT BROWN: So that helped a great deal.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, and so—

ROBERT BROWN: You, uh—the, sort of the wheel turned around. Here, you finally settled down after being rather, you know, restless, oh, for many years, and then, you mentioned earlier, when you went to the Art Students League, how you looked down on the National Academy, and here in the 1970s, you're elected to that National Academy. How do you think that came about? Did your attitudes change, and—

JAMES PENNEY: No, not so much; the Academy changed. [Laughs.] And, there's a—and it's amazing how the Academy has changed, and the people who are up for election who become members, they're the abstract artists and people that you wouldn't think of that way, who—[laughs] and they're getting the prizes and so forth, often.

ROBERT BROWN: Well maybe it's—uh, you think it's something like as with the League? The League has to change, or has to be broad? Same thing with the National Academy?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, I think so, yeah. Of course, that's why the League was founded. It broke away from the National Academy because it was—[laughs] it was too [laughs]—and uh, and no, the Academy used to have its offices—well, the League was in the old Academy building when the—I first went there. And the League would—the Academy would have its show down in the galleries there, the League galleries there, and we used to go down, [laughs] look those over, and decide what we thought of them. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: So they were a pretty defensive group, weren't they?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, in many ways, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: But now you find they're different, when you—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, they've opened up and it's quite a fresh, lively group of artists they have also, quite a range.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, most of your time now, I mean, uh, is where you're simply painting on your own, aren't you?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, or hoping to or thinking about painting.

ROBERT BROWN: And you get the summons from the Kraushaar Gallery once in a while, to get some stuff together?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, and I try to do it. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Do you find you sort of need a goad, you need someone—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I don't know, but I seem to have just a little trouble deciding or—what I want to do, or how I want to finish it and so forth.

ROBERT BROWN: Was this, was this true in the '30s too, or when you were younger? Do you think you just sort of plunged into things more?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I suppose I used to work a lot more just directly as I do in watercolors, and that's—maybe I better get out and try that, a little more of that now. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Rather than what, translating a sketch and doing oils?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, yes, and then the big—or organizing or some idea and so forth, but in recent years, I've had a lot of ideas of going back to old sketches that I never—and creating some memory of something, [laughs] but I haven't done much that way. And then I used to be more involved in the city and the people and the movements and things like that, and I—

ROBERT BROWN: Why do you think now you're more interested in nature and—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, maybe it's just because I'm isolated up here, and then of course, I never cared too much what the subject is of what I paint so much as—it's a—some sort of an inspiration or a revelation to me in terms of form and color and light and so forth.

ROBERT BROWN: What about emotional content?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, and emotions, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, because that was so pronounced in your early work.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah. That's—and then I look at some of my work now and then and I think, well gee, I should have done better in that. [Laughs.] And I keep hoping I will; I think, any day, I'm going to really hit the [laughs]—

ROBERT BROWN: You mind giving up your—

JAMES PENNEY: And now—

ROBERT BROWN: Hmm?

JAMES PENNEY: Now and then I get wound up and really get going and—but it takes me a little while to get wound up, [laughs] sometimes.

ROBERT BROWN: You sometimes miss the stimulus of people dropping in, the way you said they would, in the middle of the night—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, uh—

ROBERT BROWN: —and the artists, sort of casually dropping in on each other, and the like?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, I used to do that on other people too, [laughs] some, but they—well, yeah, every now and then, somebody does up here, former student or somebody in the area, surprise you or gives you a telephone call usually. They don't want to drive all the way up here from Rochester or somewhere, if you're not home. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Do you ever think of moving back to New York?

JAMES PENNEY: I have thought a lot about it, but I uh, I don't know how I'd manage it, you know? Sometimes I wish I had. [Laughs.] Once in a while, I wonder why I ever came up here, [laughs] or at least for the length of time I have, but after all, you can't—doesn't matter where you are particularly; it's what you do, and how well you do it. [Laughs.]

[END OF TRACK.]

JAMES PENNEY: [Inaudible.] [Audio break.]

ROBERT BROWN: This is continuing interviews with James Penney in Clinton, New York, December 6, 1981, Robert Brown, the interviewer. [Audio break.] Uh, well, tonight we want to talk about the uh, well, the nature of your work, and what it's meant to you, what you were—if you can look back on what you were trying to do with it, and why don't we just start with some of your earlier stuff? Do you want to talk—when you start—when you came out of the University of Kansas, were you determined you were going to be an artist, you wanted to be an artist?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, I was definitely determined to be an artist. I'd thought maybe of being an architect or a cartoonist, when I went to Kansas, but when I left there, decided to be a painter.

ROBERT BROWN: And this was in the Depression, or just—

JAMES PENNEY: That was in '31 when I graduated.

ROBERT BROWN: You knew it was going to be a hard, hard career?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, but they—that was the first when they told us, if we're going to be artists, to go to New York, because that was the center, the activity in New—either make it or you don't. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, so you were willing to do that. What had you done at Kansas? Do you have any examples here—will you talk about—of—

JAMES PENNEY: I've got some drawings, and a lot of drawings of—class drawings of paintings and cartoons, and I have, I've got I think a few paintings somewhere around, but—

ROBERT BROWN: How would you describe that work you did when you were at Kansas? Was it pretty conventional or was it—what were you trying to do?

[Cross talk.]

JAMES PENNEY: Well, it was very serious. [Laughs.] And they thought I had great talent. And it was largely based on nature, or on visual experience, and they really didn't think I needed to study, I was going to New York, but I got involved, and went to the Art Students League, and various places.

ROBERT BROWN: What—they thought you were ready to go out and be a painter?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, they thought I was very good.

ROBERT BROWN: Who was this, Albert Bloch, and people like that—

JAMES PENNEY: Albert Bloch—

ROBERT BROWN: —and Karl Mattern?

JAMES PENNEY: —Karl Mattern, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: They thought you were very good.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, so—

ROBERT BROWN: Do you have an example of that work? You did have one in here, around that. [Audio break.] We—we're looking now at this watercolor, which was a senior composition at Kansas.

JAMES PENNEY: '30, '31, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Uh, in this, what were you trying to do? Did—did the teacher give you a definite assignment, or were you pretty much on your own?

JAMES PENNEY: No, I was on my own, and, evidently, saw a rainbow as—I walking along in the—after, or during a rain, and impressed me, so I—

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, but that's pretty uh, almost spooky, that painting, because these, these telephone poles, these cross fixes—they look like so many crosses.

JAMES PENNEY: That's right. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: The figure looks very uh—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, that's probably why I painted it. It seemed so strange and so [laughs]—such a miraculous phenomena was going on.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you taken by kind of melodramatic things at that time, do you think?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I always have been, [laughs] and uh—

ROBERT BROWN: What was your, what was your state of mind at that time? Were you, were you very depressed or, in—by the Depression, for example? Is this—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I, we were all worried, but we decided we had to make the most of it, [laughs] and—

ROBERT BROWN: Now what in here of the—your teachers would we see? [Inaudible.]

JAMES PENNEY: I don't think anything particularly of either of them.

ROBERT BROWN: Did they encourage putting feelings into, into your work?

JAMES PENNEY: Putting what?

ROBERT BROWN: Fee—your feelings, you know, expressions.

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, I think very much, but they didn't, uh—well, in many ways, they tried to prevent you taking on a style, or any style that they had or anything else, but—

ROBERT BROWN: What did—what are the—what were they more interested in?

JAMES PENNEY: They were more interested in your observing nature and being able to control your, uh—

ROBERT BROWN: —your, your tools.

JAMES PENNEY: —and organize what you're trying to do, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: So what did you think of that, this painting you did?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, I think it holds up sort of interesting, and then somewhere back in the other room is a watercolor—is an oil I did of a rainbow, reminds me a little of that without the telephone poles and the figure in that, [laughs] back about 20 years ago, I think. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: It came back to you, huh, sort of?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: But this time, it seemed like you were interested in—sort of in man's fate, weren't you, and when you went to New York, you did quite a lot of things that reflect what you saw—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, it was a whole new—yeah, when I came to New York, it was a whole new world to me, that, a big city. I'd never been, lived in a big city, the Depression, and was on my own, and it was a—well, just, I didn't know anybody hardly, except a couple of people I met that summer, [laughs] told me to look them up, and—but the three of us went there, and we—

ROBERT BROWN: But—

JAMES PENNEY: —stuck it out.

ROBERT BROWN: But then when you got there, I mean, you were really impressed by the kinds of people you were seeing, and the buildings, and—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I was impressed by everything. It was a whole new world. I'd never been west of the Mississippi before then, I don't think.

ROBERT BROWN: Or east of the Mississippi. [Laughs.]

JAMES PENNEY: I mean east, yes. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Do you have any, uh, pictures from that time? Can we look at some examples of your work— [inaudible]—your early work in New York?

JAMES PENNEY: Early work?

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

JAMES PENNEY: The major one I did of the subway, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Is this one that you exhibited?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yeah, that's exhibited and that's in a collection now, and I've done about 35, but I did a lithograph, almost the same idea.

ROBERT BROWN: You did this lithograph when you were at the Art Students League.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Who was your teacher, printmaking teacher there, do you remember?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I worked with Charles Locke in—

ROBERT BROWN: Charles Locke?

JAMES PENNEY: —yeah, in printmaking, most of the time, but the—I think there's one here.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, you did these things for—

JAMES PENNEY: —that's—[inaudible]—cards.

ROBERT BROWN: —for a company, you did this?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, he, this friend of mine I met out there was—worked for Hauser [ph] which was a, uh—

ROBERT BROWN: What, a brokerage house or—

JAMES PENNEY: No, he—they did surveys.

ROBERT BROWN: So this was sort of a cartoon, and you'd had some cartooning experience.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, well, that was my interest before I took up painting, really, in high school.

ROBERT BROWN: These are—these are very whimsical. You all, you all must have liked doing things with touch —[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, I had a lot of fun with those things.

ROBERT BROWN: When you did—but when you did this painting of the subway, was this a very serious thing, a major thing for you to do, this painting here?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, here's—

ROBERT BROWN: This was a very important thing.

JAMES PENNEY: Here's another one I did, did at that time.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh. [Laughs.] *An Epidemic Next Year.*

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Oh really, this was to friends, I suppose.

JAMES PENNEY: Well, this was for the doctors in the hospitals.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, I see, the—[inaudible]—[they laugh.]

JAMES PENNEY: The elevator never worked before. [Laughs.] And, they were having um, well, they didn't have many customers—[inaudible]—[laughs]—[inaudible]—

ROBERT BROWN: But did—but your major thing would, would have been some painting like this, right? The subway.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, here's another one, oh yes, yeah, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, but this was—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: In those first, two or three years I was staying at the League, and commuting back and forth from Brooklyn and doing their posters, and starting—and I've got ideas and sketches for all these things without the final things, but uh—

ROBERT BROWN: As you look back on this, were there any teachers at the League that influenced you a bit, or—

JAMES PENNEY: Not particularly. In the easy course I became interested in a lot of people and like, well, Hopper, for instance, and act—and of course, I worked with Benton and I worked with, with uh—

ROBERT BROWN: —with Ben who, Shahn, right?

JAMES PENNEY: —with Thomas Benton a little while, and then I got this picture in here. These were, are in collections—[inaudible]—

ROBERT BROWN: Now this one here, the diner or the café is like Hopper, right?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, that's a little more like a—that's in the other room—[inaudible]—

ROBERT BROWN: Well what is this painting here, well, of a landscape with these figures?

JAMES PENNEY: That—[inaudible]—

ROBERT BROWN: Is this from the '30s, too?

JAMES PENNEY: That is '39, a bombed city as an idea of the war.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, you were, you were very aware of the uh—

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes, indeed.

ROBERT BROWN: —coming on. You were quite involved in politics for a while, weren't you?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I wasn't really involved. I tried to stay away from—

ROBERT BROWN: But I mean you were affected by it. It was in the air.

[Cross talk.]

JAMES PENNEY: —heavy involvement and the Communists and so forth. They were fighting us and so forth, but it was all around you, and you couldn't help having some part in it. And uh, let's see, wasn't much of the—but, well here's another one there that was in that summer town show, and that's a little like—

ROBERT BROWN: All right, this is—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: —a watercolor over there.

ROBERT BROWN: —watercolor here of uh, men in Central Park. What were these, workers, or just—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, workers in Central Park, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: They would just be people would be brought in, kind of paid on the dole, and they were paid—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, and maybe they were on the dole, cleaning or digging up, uh—

ROBERT BROWN: At this time, what was your attitude toward these? These men look anonymous, they—you don't show their faces to any extent.

JAMES PENNEY: Well, no, I, they just—

ROBERT BROWN: They seem like their beaten down—



JAMES PENNEY: —[inaudible]—by the whole spirit of what was going on.

ROBERT BROWN: Here's Chris—here's uh, wintertime, snow, and the stark trees, and here are these men, very, very drab. Were you quite affected by that?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes, very much, the whole—

ROBERT BROWN: Made you very sad and—

JAMES PENNEY: —experience, yeah, it was at times, yes, very much so.

ROBERT BROWN: We see this also in this *Workers in the Snow, Central Park*, uh—[cross talk]—you did.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, that's in some collection now, and it was uh—I got this one upstairs; I'm tearing down the elevator, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Now is this also from the '30s?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Now this is much more general than the others.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, well that's—

ROBERT BROWN: This one is much looser.

JAMES PENNEY: —that's a lit—little later.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you painting in a bit looser technique by uh, what, when? This is what, the late '30s or so?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, that was, was in the late '30s I think, about uh—I don't have a date on this. I've got the painting upstairs, maybe it's on the back of it.

ROBERT BROWN: Even this one of the bombed city is much different from these earlier ones. It's—what are you trying to express in this, in *The Bombed City, 1939*?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, just the, just the awfulness of the war in Europe, and people being killed and just the tragedy of the whole thing. [Inaudible.]

ROBERT BROWN: Did you—were you exhibiting by this time pretty steadily at different galleries?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I, in '30, I showed with the artists up at the Art Students League, and I showed at the, oh, all these art organizations that were associated with it. I was in the first Washington Square show, uh, Jackson Pollock and I down there in the field. I never showed in another one, [laughs] but, uh—and I think I had my first show in New York in the YMCA where I worked for my room way over in Brooklyn, yeah. And—

ROBERT BROWN: But you were in a gallery by the late '30s. Did you—did Hudson Walker—

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, well, and I had a show before that in the Artists Equity or something like that, some WPA gallery, or something like that, then I got on Hudson Walker when he started his gallery in about '35.

ROBERT BROWN: What was he like to work with?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, he was a wonderful person. I was very, very fond of Hudson.

ROBERT BROWN: Would he talk with you quite a bit about your work, and what you were going to do, and—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, well, he just got to know you and liked your work, and encouraged you, and had a show of my work in 1939, I think that was it, and—oh here's that one that you've got that color, uh—

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, but this is much later, yeah. Yeah, let's wait on that one.

JAMES PENNEY: But then— that, see, uh—date on that one—

ROBERT BROWN: So in the '30s, you were still fairly expressionistic and realistic and looking at things around you, sort of painting a common—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, and then of course I was experimenting all the time and trying to figure out what I was trying to do. And I'd run from sort of abstract patterns and their collages of subways, [laughs] all sorts of things, and very—and I forget when the first abstract artists group started, but they asked me to join them. I've got a few of those things I've found in the back of some old things, I don't—but I didn't think I quite wanted to [laughs] commit myself that way, but Diller and uh—

ROBERT BROWN: —Balcomb Greene.

JAMES PENNEY: —Balcomb Greene, and—

ROBERT BROWN: —Stuart Davis.

JAMES PENNEY: —Stuart Davis, and oh, I forget who they all are now. [Laughs.] Uh—

ROBERT BROWN: You wanted to be what, did you feel—

JAMES PENNEY: I just wanted to be uh, express myself. [Laughs.] I was just trying to get—that's what I've always felt about painting and my painting, and I've always liked in others. There's not nothing cold or factual or statistical or anything, but something that was an expression of a mood, or an emotion, or an experience that would be sort of maybe intensified or highlighted and so forth. And of course, maybe a little of that came from my association with Bloch and with, uh, the—

ROBERT BROWN: —Karl Mattern.

JAMES PENNEY: —Blue Rider [ph], and I always liked them. Liked, uh, Cézanne and Van Gogh, and those artists, and Turner was about my favorite early artist, Rembrandt. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Do you remember in the '30s in New York going around, looking at some of their work in the museums?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes, I kept covering the galleries and the museums, and walking around. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Was there quite a bit you could see in New York then?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, there was quite a bit and there was a lot of industry and things that were going on, maybe—I forget what the shows were, but maybe the first Van Gogh show or something, then some of the new museums were beginning to open, and it was a lively time, and uh—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, did this continue for you into the 1940s?

JAMES PENNEY: Uh, no.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it pretty much a continuation, or did you—

JAMES PENNEY: Yes—

ROBERT BROWN: What about during World War II, did you—

JAMES PENNEY: Pardon?

ROBERT BROWN: During World War II, was there much of a break in your production, or—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, there was sort of a break, but, in many ways, I was fortunate, because World War II, I—well, when was it? I was off the WPA about '39 or '40 something. I got a job. I took a course, had to at Columbia, and I taught mechanical drawing up at Hunter College for a year or so. And then, the war came on, and, and I got a very low [laughs] number so I didn't—wasn't called up immediately, and then I got a job with Jordanoff Aviation Corporation—

ROBERT BROWN: Jordanoff.

JAMES PENNEY: —uh huh, doing their drawings of operation, maintenance of plane—manuals of planes and submarines, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have very—uh, fairly—a little time to do your own work, or was—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, it was pretty busy, but I had—but I always worked at night and everything, and got ideas.

ROBERT BROWN: Do we got—do we have some examples from the 1940s we can look at, uh—

JAMES PENNEY: —oh, see a—

ROBERT BROWN: —of your own work? Let me—

JAMES PENNEY: —see a different light, and—

ROBERT BROWN: In general, you would work and work over something, the subway pictures, we—you would work on repeatedly.

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes, and they're abstractions of them and that—everything. It was—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you get—were you quite fussy, would you say, sort of a perfectionist with yourself?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, I still am I think, maybe too much so. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Well now, why don't we—we've got a couple things we could look at here during, or around World War II. This first one here looks like there's trees in the winter with a moon behind clouds. It's quite a desolate looking.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, oh yeah, yeah, well—

ROBERT BROWN: What did you have in mind—

JAMES PENNEY: —it's a little like the spirit of so—of this, in some way. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Of the battle, the bomb scene.

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, yeah, and maybe that was the spirit of the times.

ROBERT BROWN: You were quite, you were quite preoccupied by that during World War II.

JAMES PENNEY: I think so, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Were you painting, or were you working? You were working at Jordanoff.

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, I worked.

ROBERT BROWN: But you were painting whenever you could.

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, oh yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You were married at that time to a painter, weren't you?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, that's right, Frances Avery.

ROBERT BROWN: Was she doing sort of expressionistic things too, or—

JAMES PENNEY: No, she was—well, she's kept changing some, but she was more of a—she was a member of the Miller class, and [cross talk] Homer and that sort of period, that time.

ROBERT BROWN: And then didn't go out of that.

JAMES PENNEY: And—well, but then gradually she changed, and she taught—been teaching over the years; she's—

ROBERT BROWN: Well now—well now this one here, the trees, I mean, it's quite stark, very simple and very broad brush strokes, isn't it?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You were no longer interested in fussy kind of—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I—

ROBERT BROWN: —displays from nature or anything to speak of.

JAMES PENNEY: Well, that's from nature, but—

ROBERT BROWN: It is from nature?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes, it's a—but I was—I became more and more concerned about sort of simplifying, getting the spirit. Well, that was what I was after in all of them, everything, but of course, some of those things in this, like those lithographs, are more, much more specific, in a sense, and the same by my concern was the organization of the spirit of the movement, the idea of the, idea of the whole, that—

ROBERT BROWN: And in this one, what would you say it might've been, your idea?

JAMES PENNEY: Well—

ROBERT BROWN: These two shattered trees.

JAMES PENNEY: It was that and the moon coming behind the clouds, and the thing of the light coming through from behind the darkness, I think.

ROBERT BROWN: Both literally and uh, also to express something.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Well now, here's one here you did just after the war in '46. Uh, this one you call *Ice Skaters*, but the ice skaters are having a—

JAMES PENNEY: Way out in the distance—

ROBERT BROWN: —just a little—

JAMES PENNEY: —[inaudible]—[laughs].

ROBERT BROWN: —side issue. It's really a rather stark landscape, a little village, rather, a winter landscape, probably. What do you suppose you were expressing in that?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, just here's some old machines over here, and—

ROBERT BROWN: But these are all kind of broken down things, aren't they?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, a lot of them, yes. Uh, but they were, what's—well, maybe it was just this thing touching me that you move back and back through all this desolation and to a little activity, that was sort of—

ROBERT BROWN: —a little recreation, a little fun.

JAMES PENNEY: —sort of exciting.

ROBERT BROWN: Was your own life somewhat like that, at that time? It was a hard life, and—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, it—[inaudible]—

ROBERT BROWN: It still was?

JAMES PENNEY: —problems, yes, but it all worked out, fortunately, but—

ROBERT BROWN: But '46 then, when you did this, you were teaching—you taught at Bennett Junior College briefly.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, that's right, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: And it was—this was almost about the time you came up here to Hamilton, right?

JAMES PENNEY: I came up here in '48.

ROBERT BROWN: And when you came up here, what kind of things were you doing? Do you have examples of what you would have shown then when you came up here to Clinton, New York?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, let's see, what do I have? And to—

ROBERT BROWN: About 1950—

JAMES PENNEY: —open up some but—and I made my first trip there and I got a car in '50 and we made a trip to Mexico. Was an awful trip. We got a divorce then, and I got a—[laughs]—the car broke down and the old, broken Model up—Model T Ford, and had to get a motor put in that cost more than the car did. My father died and—no,

my mother died and I had to fly back [laughs] from there—

ROBERT BROWN: —from Mexico that—

JAMES PENNEY: —and back, yeah, [laughs] and, oh, it was an awful summer, but—

ROBERT BROWN: This was the time when you began to enlarge your subject matter, through travel.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, and then in—when was it—in '50—uh, ['5]4 or something, I went to Europe for the first time, and then I began to, to open up. This was an instant show that was in, was—they organized over here artists in the area, but, that, other people wouldn't think they would have a—[inaudible]—but I was interested in the abstract quality in everybody's art, that—

ROBERT BROWN: Did you keep in touch—after you got up here, did you keep in touch with some of those abstract painters down in New York?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, I have been in touch with a lot of them over the years.

ROBERT BROWN: People like Pollock, did you keep in touch with him?

JAMES PENNEY: I—

ROBERT BROWN: After World War II?

JAMES PENNEY: Not much, because he moved out to Brooklyn or something; I didn't see him much after that. I think it was Brooklyn or Queens. And then I was moving out of town and teaching and one thing or another, and —

ROBERT BROWN: Well what kind of things did—again, I'll ask, did you—would you have been able to show the people up here in Clinton, when you came to teach? Why don't you look for something like that?

JAMES PENNEY: I think I—[audio break]—I made sketches while I was waiting at the station to go up to Poughkeepsie or [laughs] somewhere.

ROBERT BROWN: This is the *Station at Dawn*.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, *Station at Dawn*.

ROBERT BROWN: You made sketches, and then this is an oil, is it?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, and that's an oil.

ROBERT BROWN: It's very oblong, very much—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: [Inaudible]; it's not, it's not simply a perspective study, is it? Is it—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, no, oh no, oh no, it's just a medium of the movement of the trains and the light at the dawn when [laughs]—and uh, and the whole pattern of—

ROBERT BROWN: There's hardly anybody—

JAMES PENNEY: —from the spirit.

ROBERT BROWN: There's hardly anybody in it. It's a structure, there's—

JAMES PENNEY: There are not very many people, no.

ROBERT BROWN: The people that are in it are very—are rather overwhelmed by this rather stark setting. Were you yourself overwhelmed at that time? I mean, how were you, when you came up here?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I had to wait there for the train and so I became entranced by [laughs] ideas when I'd look at it, and let's see, those are early—

ROBERT BROWN: So, well then you came up here to the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, in 1948, '49, right?

JAMES PENNEY: I came up in '40—fall of '48 to teach the studio class at Hamilton College where Bill Palmer had

been teaching, and to teach the graphics class, and a direct class at the Munson-Proctor Institute. And so, I had to commute back and forth. I didn't have a car; I didn't have any—took a bus back and forth and walked up the hill sometimes—

ROBERT BROWN: —to Hamilton College.

JAMES PENNEY: —Hamilton College, that was so—until 1950, I was pretty—and then I had a studio down in New York and lived—and commuted back and forth down there quite a bit, so forth.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, uh, did—how did you like the teaching up here? Was it—

JAMES PENNEY: I liked it, yes. It was very, very demanding, but was entirely up to you pretty much, but a very stiff schedule of exercises you had to give all the beginning students, and so—

ROBERT BROWN: Really? Who, who set this down, you mean, at the Institute?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, Edward—

ROBERT BROWN: [Inaudible.]

JAMES PENNEY: —Edward Root started the whole idea of art here at—

ROBERT BROWN: —at Hamilton.

JAMES PENNEY: —Hamilton.

ROBERT BROWN: And down at the Institute, Bill Palmer was the uh—

JAMES PENNEY: Bill Palmer was the director of the arts.

ROBERT BROWN: And he took an active interest in what you taught.

JAMES PENNEY: Well, he didn't have anything much with Hamilton anymore, because—

ROBERT BROWN: No, but he did down at the Institute.

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, down at the Institute, oh yes.

ROBERT BROWN: He took a very active interest in what you taught there?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, yes, but, at the Munson-Proctor at the time, they had a, what was a seven-year policy. Nobody could teach there more than seven years, except the directors, or the head of the [laughs]—everybody had to leave, and so they'd get a shift, people, some. So in 19 and—I taught there from '48 to '55, and then I had to leave, and so I left Hamilton. I got a job up at—and I still had my studio in New York and was commuting back and forth so, and meanwhile, I'd married Rachel, and—

ROBERT BROWN: Now Rachel's someone you'd met up here, right?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes. Yeah, she was a secretary to the director, Thomas Brown Rudd, who was the lawyer, and secretary and was a lawyer when he was head of the trustees of—

ROBERT BROWN: —head of the—

JAMES PENNEY: —Munson-Proctor.

ROBERT BROWN: —the Institute.

JAMES PENNEY: And, then I got a job at Vassar and I taught there for a year, and then they asked me back to Hamilton on a full-time basis. And so—

ROBERT BROWN: Well you were really very busy then, but did you contrive to paint quite a bit too, at the time?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes, I painted. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: And these are some examples of work you did at the time?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, one of them di—these are examples of—

ROBERT BROWN: Now these are mono—

JAMES PENNEY: —of lithograph, lithographs I did at the Munson-Proctor Institute—[inaudible].

ROBERT BROWN: But this one, now on the left a bird's behind wire—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, pigeons.

ROBERT BROWN: —and then the one on the right is—

JAMES PENNEY: —chairs, Victorian chairs, I think it was—[inaudible]—

ROBERT BROWN: Is—there's something rather sinister about them. They're rather—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, I know. [Laughs.] Victorian chairs. [Laughs.] One of them—

ROBERT BROWN: So this Expressionism we've seen—

JAMES PENNEY: Both Maine, low tide [ph].

ROBERT BROWN: Huh. You would go up there occasionally in the summer to Maine?

JAMES PENNEY: I started going up there once from—maybe that was—maybe that wasn't Maine. Maybe that was—Cove Island or—

ROBERT BROWN: But you—

JAMES PENNEY: —or Nantucket, I went up there.

ROBERT BROWN: But you continued going, traveling a little bit.

JAMES PENNEY: Well, some, yes, some, limited extent. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Now what do we have? This is a—

JAMES PENNEY: Oh that's a watercolor. That is '68, '69.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, much later.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, much later.

ROBERT BROWN: But at this time you were still—there's a good deal of Expressionism, it looks like to me, in your work.

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Now, what do we have—

JAMES PENNEY: Some watercolors of a trip to Europe about '73.

ROBERT BROWN: Much later.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah. But, uh—

ROBERT BROWN: We have any of those—[cross talk]—okay, this *Rock of Versailles*, now, this is an oil, right?

JAMES PENNEY: It's a little pale, yes, but yeah, it's an oil, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: All right, now, in this, were you painting—was this pretty much a departure in your style?

JAMES PENNEY: No, not really. I was using—began using a palette knife there, you can see it, and that was, I was impressed with the mist and the—and looking out across on this huge rock island, emerging out of the mist and the fog, and—[inaudible]—

ROBERT BROWN: But I mean, the means here are very—these are very simple. They're very economical means. I mean, it's very simplified.

JAMES PENNEY: Not really, it was very, very highly organized, and then boiled down to just very select emphasis, or focus you know—[inaudible]—

ROBERT BROWN: Is this a whole select—uh, a type of painting you were doing quite a lot in the early '50s?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, I think I was working that way tremendously a lot that way, and I've got a lot of paintings in the other room—[inaudible]—

ROBERT BROWN: But by then, were you showing these quite a bit?

JAMES PENNEY: Uh, oh yes, I was showing them. I was having shows at Kraushaar.

ROBERT BROWN: What—when did you start at Kraushaar? In the late '40s—

JAMES PENNEY: After Hudson Walker, after I joined Kraushaar in '45, it—and I had my first show there I think in—was it '49? And uh—

ROBERT BROWN: A painting like this, would you do from sketches? You'd make sketches on the spot when you were up in Canada, say, you could—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, that's a watercolor. A lot of things are watercolor—[inaudible]—

ROBERT BROWN: You'd sit down and—

JAMES PENNEY: That's a watercolor—

ROBERT BROWN: —you'd make watercolor sketches right on the spot.

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, oh yes, often. And every once in awhile, I'd maybe do a small oil sketch on the spot, but every once in awhile, I'd, if I was located somewhere, I'd do an oil right on the spot, but that isn't too common that way.

ROBERT BROWN: Were watercolors for you mainly a means of sketching, or did you sometimes exhibit—

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I like watercolors. Oh yes, I exhibited but they aren't—

ROBERT BROWN: They weren't the final definitive—

JAMES PENNEY: —main means of—yeah, and all over Europe, trips to Europe, I would make one or two watercolors every, every day, and would be there three months and come back with [laughs]—and—

ROBERT BROWN: —hundreds of things.

JAMES PENNEY: —everywhere I go, wandering around and carrying a suitcase in one hand. Pretty hard on my wife [laughs]—[inaudible]—

ROBERT BROWN: Was it? Was she pretty understanding about some of this?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, except the time in—where was it—outside Naples, where she was sitting on a turnover [ph] waiting for me to paint, and I was sitting there painting a watercolor, wasn't looking, and she was sitting there, waiting. Somebody came along on a bicycle and started to snatch her purse and ran off with it, and had all our traveler checks and everything. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: That was disaster, huh?

JAMES PENNEY: That was pretty rough. But fortunately, we—they took care of it and [laughs] we were able to—

ROBERT BROWN: Well now, looking at this oil here of the Percé Rock on the—I guess it's in the Gaspé Peninsula in Québec.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Uh, what would you have done? You would have had a watercolor or a drawing that lay behind this, a sketch?

JAMES PENNEY: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And then, from the sketch, would you extract things that you wanted to emphasize, or how would you go about it?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, it would be, I would hyper-emphasize them, [laughs] I'd say, in the oils, maybe, if I felt that way, I would pick out what I wanted to, or maybe work on them a long time trying to select it, how to balance things, but the—but I do that in my watercolors, too. [Laughs.] But—



ROBERT BROWN: This was just a further—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, but—

ROBERT BROWN: —further—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, but it's a further—

ROBERT BROWN: —distillation, or whatever you want to call it.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, distillation, I think that's good. It's like these crazy things that—oh, this is the same one and I've got two in the other room.

ROBERT BROWN: What is this, a series of signs and all, and you combined them into one painting?

JAMES PENNEY: No, that was a view of [laughs]—

ROBERT BROWN: Of what, a city?

JAMES PENNEY: I thought I might paint one today of a little filling station or something, a big, big one of these new—what do they call them—malls, where they're all just big blank walls. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: This is a view down the street, say, 20 or 30 years ago—

JAMES PENNEY: That's right, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —with all its signs.

JAMES PENNEY: Well, not—there's a date on it, about '69.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, so that's not so long ago.

JAMES PENNEY: No, not so long ago. [Laughs.] There's another one, something like uh—

ROBERT BROWN: Well did you find that teaching affected—

JAMES PENNEY: Here's, here's one, '51.

ROBERT BROWN: Now let's see.

JAMES PENNEY: [Inaudible.]

ROBERT BROWN: Farm buildings in the winter. Well now here you've gone pretty much Cubist, I would say, or at least abstract.

JAMES PENNEY: No, no, it's the same spirit as this, and this, of the light emerging. Sometimes I was a little more linear, and people associated me a little more with mosaics [laughs] and so forth, and, uh—

ROBERT BROWN: What about light emerging, your—you just said that. What do you mean?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, but the light emerging between the forms and the buildings and some falling on them and so forth.

ROBERT BROWN: Is that something that appeals to you, studying how light—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, oh yeah, that, that—

ROBERT BROWN: —[inaudible] things?

JAMES PENNEY: —that's, that's my main—

ROBERT BROWN: What about this—

JAMES PENNEY: —main interest in it. That was the interest here.

ROBERT BROWN: Here's another one too of the '50s.

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yeah. That's a little pale, but the painting's in the other room.

ROBERT BROWN: But this is one of what, the city?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, that's in New York City looking up Madison Avenue, I think, from about 54th Street from the top or the roof of some hotel or whatever. I was staying there.

ROBERT BROWN: And this and this, what were you trying to do? You weren't trying to show the forms of the buildings.

JAMES PENNEY: Well, no, I was just trying to get the spirit of the night and the light and the pattern and the movement and the whole spirit of the thing.

ROBERT BROWN: Almost like a time—a photograph, a time exposure, almost, in some ways.

JAMES PENNEY: Well, nothing like a photograph. [Laughs.] Not going to any detail, just picked out lights and areas that gave the spirit of the thing rather than the letter. The same way with all these things. Here's the other one of that sort of thing—

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, of a view down a street with all the signs, and billboards and the like. What appealed to you in that?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, just the endless jumble [laughs] of shapes and light, and they made you dizzy, practically. [They laugh.]

ROBERT BROWN: And try to reduce that to a painting, try to concentrate on that—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, and that, or, organized in some sort of a concentrated form, but to get the spirit of the time, which I thought was awful, [laughs] and everyone else did too.

ROBERT BROWN: Now what was the reaction of the—of collectors, or of the—or art critics to this sort of thing?

JAMES PENNEY: Well, I think they were all very interested in it, but I don't think many people collected these particular [laughs] pictures. They didn't want them on their wall or see too many every day. [They laugh.] They get the spirit of it, but it was a—it's almost a commentary [laughs] on the time. Maybe it's affected them; maybe it's made them change it a little. [Laughs.] A lot of hallways and doorways and light there, the patterns of it.

ROBERT BROWN: Is this something you've done for some years now?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes, and, and the—

ROBERT BROWN: I've seen paintings.

JAMES PENNEY: Yes, I've done that for many years, and off and on.

ROBERT BROWN: Is this typically a good formal problem for you, is that why you do them?

JAMES PENNEY: No, it's—

ROBERT BROWN: —different planes, and light.

JAMES PENNEY: It's uh—I just look and see a pattern that way, of the light and color that really intrigues me, and —

ROBERT BROWN: It's only incidental that it's a hallway or an open and shut—

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes, doesn't matter what it is, and, and there's one of flora—or the hills in Tuscany—

ROBERT BROWN: Well, this is more of a conventional landscape.

JAMES PENNEY: Well, yes—

ROBERT BROWN: Not conventional, not, not—

JAMES PENNEY: Yes and no.

ROBERT BROWN: —no details.

JAMES PENNEY: But yeah, but I was interested in the movement of the patterns going across, and lighting around the hills and so forth. And here's one. What's the date? '56, '57. I—well, that was when I was up in Yaddo

that summer.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, up in Saratoga Springs.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah. That's, and this is the interior at Yaddo, the village. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Well here again, it's an interest in lights and darks and—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, and I just picked out the patterns in the grates and the things that I focused on here and there, they—but I think that's sort of part of the whole spirit of my work though. Well, even in some—something like this—

ROBERT BROWN: The Tuscan—

JAMES PENNEY: It's all blurred and then you come into focus here and there on a few things.

ROBERT BROWN: But the overall is an impression, sort of an almost expressive of emotion or light and dark.

JAMES PENNEY: Same way with this—[inaudible]—

ROBERT BROWN: It was a study, a figure study.

JAMES PENNEY: No it wasn't a study of a figure, but it was the light and the color in this, by the light, [laughs] hitting on the wall.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, actually that's—the figure's only incidental, really, isn't it?

JAMES PENNEY: In a way, yeah, but uh, probably the pattern—

ROBERT BROWN: The charming element though.

JAMES PENNEY: Oh yes, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you do many figure studies?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, I've done a lot over the years, now and then. I haven't done anything much lately, but every now and then, I keep thinking and make a few sketches of some idea and I think I'll have to go out to Fort Worth—[inaudible]—before. Oh, here's a figure study I did of my wife once—[laughs]—

ROBERT BROWN: Of what—what is this—of a woman, 1965.

JAMES PENNEY: [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Well, this is certainly trying to express something. What are you trying to express in this study of your wife?

JAMES PENNEY: I was just trying to express—

ROBERT BROWN: Large form—

JAMES PENNEY: That's the form emerging from the light.

ROBERT BROWN: —sort of striding forward.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: It's not simply a—

JAMES PENNEY: That's just sort of a pattern, and here's one of a beach, figures on a beach, that's about—what's the date of that? That's '73, I guess.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, and there's a large painting or study right here, too.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, I got to find—

ROBERT BROWN: In this, you were trying to what, cast the volumes of a form, or a—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, and sort of the movement and the pattern, the volumes and the—and bring them into focus here and there, and out of focus. But uh, that was '68. Well, that was dark. See? That sort of idea.

ROBERT BROWN: Has your more recent work become a little more abstract?

JAMES PENNEY: No, I don't think so, much, I don't—

ROBERT BROWN: Well now, why don't—when we look at the *Dark of Night*, it is fairly, fairly—

JAMES PENNEY: Well that's not so recent.

ROBERT BROWN: No, '68, but what is the date of this study of the tree?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, wait a minute.

ROBERT BROWN: No that's the wrong—

JAMES PENNEY: That was *L'Isle-sur-Sorgue at Night*, that's in Paris, in—

ROBERT BROWN: —'76?

JAMES PENNEY: —'68 or '70, something like that, in that picture.

ROBERT BROWN: Well now here you are, fairly representational, chairs—

JAMES PENNEY: No, not, not particularly—

ROBERT BROWN: —[inaudible]—tree.

JAMES PENNEY: I put in a few people sitting around here, but it was the light on the trees and the light at night. They're almost entirely in silhouette, and nothing definitive about them.

ROBERT BROWN: I agree, yeah, there's no details, but I mean, but—

JAMES PENNEY: And this one I like very much, that's in, on—Lehigh University owns it, '68—of a—it's a little sharper, but the same spirit.

ROBERT BROWN: Uh-huh, of a plant—or several trees and—

JAMES PENNEY: —trees—

ROBERT BROWN: —a lawn—

JAMES PENNEY: —yeah, at night.

ROBERT BROWN: You can practically feel—see the leaves moving and the wind, and—

JAMES PENNEY: These, these dark cavities up against the light coming through and so forth, and movement in space, and these are all fairly good-sized pictures. But, there's a little difference between that one and this one, which is, is uh—

ROBERT BROWN: Now the one of the left, what is that one?

JAMES PENNEY: That's the one in '59 in Fort Worth Museum. There's one of that in color too.

ROBERT BROWN: Well that's much more, less identifiable as—

JAMES PENNEY: This is '68.

ROBERT BROWN: —a particular scene.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, this is ten years earlier, yeah, but the trees at night, [laughs] and light from behind there. [Inaudible.] Oh, I think that this looks, these had—this is the—

ROBERT BROWN: Now that's what—

JAMES PENNEY: —same thing.

ROBERT BROWN: —a study of clouds and the moonlight, and—

JAMES PENNEY: —and the surf.

ROBERT BROWN: And the surf?

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: This was done when, in the '70s or so?

JAMES PENNEY: That was done about '61.

ROBERT BROWN: Uh-huh. But you continue, I mean, you were—there's—you really don't see clear breaks in your work over the last 20 years.

JAMES PENNEY: No, I don't think there's any sharp breaks. Of course, here's something, that was a studio down in the Chelsea and—when is that? '60, '65 I think, '63.

ROBERT BROWN: And that's much more detail than is usual.

JAMES PENNEY: Well, but it's a pretty big canvas, and look at the section there that's an abstraction. [Laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: Definitely, yeah.

JAMES PENNEY: But it was a pattern of lighting and a stark dark and then, of busy areas against active areas and so forth that—[inaudible]—and here's one. I repainted the—or painted over some, I guess a still life, [laughs]—

ROBERT BROWN: Oh my, yes.

JAMES PENNEY: —of—

ROBERT BROWN: —rather grotesque figures.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah. [Laughs.] It was a lot of junk, really, but—[laughs.]

ROBERT BROWN: You chose that deliberately? For what—

JAMES PENNEY: I think—

ROBERT BROWN: —[inaudible.]

JAMES PENNEY: I think I was up in the studio, yeah, up in, at the college, I was—

ROBERT BROWN: Why did you pick out such grotesque—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, well, that was some student things and some stuff sitting around on the shelves from, over the years, and some old tin cans I packed up and stacked up there instead of throwing them out, [laughs] and I thought, well, paint a picture of it. [Laughs.] And, but I'm never quite pleased with it.

ROBERT BROWN: Well you didn't do it just simply as a record of that studio, did you?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh no, no, but that was—I never do things with records; I do things with, [laughs] with paintings. Uh, [laughs] that's uh—

ROBERT BROWN: —'76.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, well, that's—oh and here, it's another one. It's a little like—it's in the other room—of a little—like these, in the same spirit about the same time as these things.

ROBERT BROWN: And this, about 1971, it says—it's sort of a series of patterns, in—

JAMES PENNEY: —'69, is what—

ROBERT BROWN: It's the '70s, flags, et cetera, yeah.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, well, it really struck me, this parade, the marching by of—

ROBERT BROWN: The patching [ph] of Florence.

JAMES PENNEY: —yeah, of the patterns of the flags. You can't tell what's on the flags or anything, but I didn't—wasn't trying to tell it. I was just trying to get the folding motion, the movement and so forth, of it all. There's another one, of—

ROBERT BROWN: Now what did—

JAMES PENNEY: —[inaudible]—'60, oh yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: In a study of trees and limbs almost in silhouette.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, just a—well, that's not too far removed—

ROBERT BROWN: —from that study of clouds and—[inaudible]—

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, and just the same, little different subject matter. Oh then, this is a big one in the other room.

ROBERT BROWN: This is one of a string quartet, and this is the uh, 1970—'72.

JAMES PENNEY: Yeah, I've got that in the other room; I'll show it to you.

ROBERT BROWN: Was that a study, or done by—somebody asked you to do it, or you just simply were intrigued by it, or—

JAMES PENNEY: No, I—we'd gone to the chamber music concert for years. I would take those sketchbooks and I've got sketchbooks just full of—where are some of those—

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, these?

JAMES PENNEY: —of sketches of—

ROBERT BROWN: And you were—what were you trying to get—capture in the painting?

JAMES PENNEY: Oh, I—just interested, and trying to get some of the spirit of the movement rather than define the oh—[inaudible]—

[END OF INTERVIEW]