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Oral history interview with Walter Midener,
1981 Aug. 3

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Walter and Peggy Midener on August 3, 1981. The interview took place in East Jordan, Michigan and was conducted by Dennis Barrie for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The Archives of American Art has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. 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

DENNIS BARRIE: This is usually a pretty reliable machine. You can all talk. Why don't you all say something? Just say who you are.

PEGGY MIDENER: Hi, I'm—

DENNIS BARRIE: I just want to see if it's picking you up.

PEGGY MIDENER: I'm Peggy Midener, the missing [laughs]—

DENNIS BARRIE: The missing link.

PEGGY MIDENER: Right, in the previous interview.

DENNIS BARRIE: Walter, say something. Let me just see if we're recording.

WALTER MIDENER: We are going to—our last interview was in 1874, and—no [they laugh], 1974

[Audio Break.]

DENNIS BARRIE: Okay. It is the third of August, 1981. I am in—is this technically East Jordan?

PEGGY MIDENER: Yes.

DENNIS BARRIE: East Jordan, Michigan, with Peggy and Walter Midener. Seven years ago, we left off with an interview, which is hard to believe it's seven years ago. I've got to find a new job. Seven years ago, we left off interviewing Walter on basically the Center for Creative Studies, and we left a lot of gaps in the interview. Where should we begin? Should we finish up Center for Creative Studies, and then go into your real life? Okay. Well, tell us, in '74, the new building had been finished, right?

WALTER MIDENER: Yes, and I remember we discussed many things which you wrote in the catalog for the 50th anniversary of the art school of the Society of Arts and Crafts, now the Center for Creative Studies, College of Art and Design. And I told you, at that time, my goals, and shall we say my dreams, too. Fortunately, before I retired as the president of the institution in 1977, all of these dreams came true. We got a beautiful new building, designed by William Kessler Associates, and then, of course, we worked—after we moved into this new building in 1975, we also went after the accreditation. [00:02:17] In early 1977, the combined visitation committee of the North Central Association of Schools—Secondary Schools and Colleges, and the National Association of Schools of Art, came to visit our school, and they were quite pleased with the facilities, which had been, before that, insufficient for such a broad degree program in the arts and design, and the crafts. And so they recommended—the North Central recommended a three-year initial accreditation. Later on, I heard that the National Association had recommended us for its 10-year reaccreditation. Well, I was very happy about three years— [laughs]—better than no years, you know. Ten years were better than four years. So I was very happy about it, and—however, as it is usual, I had to go to Chicago and to appear before the review commission at the North Central. There, I got the biggest surprise—pleasant surprise, I may say—when they informed me that, first, they overruled the visitation committee's recommendations unanimously, and gave us three—instead of three years, they gave us five years initial accreditation, and of course the 10-year reaccreditation by the National Association of Schools of Art. [00:04:21] After that, I said—I had already recommended to the board that they look for a new president at that time, because I was—later on that year, I was going to be 65, and I thought, let's get out [laughs] why—so that is that. After that, we both taught two more years at the Center for Creative Studies, and in '79, we moved to East Jordan. And by that time, our new studio was ready, and—well, we are pretty—I, at least, am pretty glad to have gotten out of the race, and whatever you want to call it. [Laughs.]

DENNIS BARRIE: I think it was a good time. I mean, to get the accreditation was really quite an achievement.

Because as we talked earlier, most of these things were done in a nine-year timeframe, right, when you took over as director or president of the school?

WALTER MIDENER: Yeah, correct.

DENNIS BARRIE: Yeah. I'm glad you're up here and happy. Can we backtrack, then, and go in—

PEGGY MIDENER: Yes.

DENNIS BARRIE: Yes, definitely. When we talked before—

PEGGY MIDENER: Back to 1894. [Laughs.] 18-whatever.

DENNIS BARRIE: When we backtracked before, we were very good—when we talked before, we were very good on talking about the center, but we really never talked much about the two of you, and your professional and personal careers, and how they interwove, and so forth. [00:06:11] First of all, I don't even know when the two of you first met and when you were married. Could you give us an idea of when this all came about, and how it all came about?

PEGGY MIDENER: Okay. I was a student at the Society of Arts and Crafts, on Watson Street, and that was in 1946. I had decided, after two years of college, that they didn't have enough art, and I determined then that I really wanted to paint, and be an artist, in quotes [laughs]. So, we looked all around, my parents and I, at art schools, and we sent away for catalogs and things. All of the schools, I don't know, they just didn't seem to have what I thought I wanted, and I couldn't really manage Paris. So, an unheard-of school, right in my own hometown, turned up, and that was the old arts and crafts school. So I thought—had a look at it. I went down there. The building was delightful. The neighborhood was still very interesting.

DENNIS BARRIE: Watson Street.

PEGGY MIDENER: And the faculty, I think all two of them, or maybe three at that point, were charming. So I thought, I will love going here, and I did go there for a year before Walter came. I studied sculpture and painting, and Gwen Lux was the head of the sculpture department. She was leaving, so I knew in the fall, when I came back, there would be a new head of the sculpture department. And the day school started, the registrar called me in and said the new sculptor had arrived, and the model wasn't going to show up, and would I mind terribly sitting for a portrait head? [00:08:04] I really sort of—it was messing my plans up, but I said, "Yes, I could do it," and I thought, this way, I'll get a good look at the new teacher and see if I like him. [Laughs.] See if I want to really take sculpture again. So I did go there. And all of my buddy students were taking sculpture from him, too. And here came this interesting, handsome, slender-looking young man [they laugh] with these monster calipers. I was sitting very nervously. I had never modeled before. He was really very fussy about things. I would start to snicker with my pals, and Walter would say, "Would you keep your mouth closed, please?" [They laugh.] That would make me laugh even more. He would come up with these evil-looking calipers, and he'd measure my eyes or something. I was sure I was going to be undone by these terrible things. But anyway, we suffered through the portrait, and I discovered then that I would never be able to be a student [laughs] with Walter as my instructor. So I became a painting major at that point. And a few months later, we were married. I decided [laughs]—

DENNIS BARRIE: Really? Was it that quickly?

PEGGY MIDENER: It was that fast, yes.

DENNIS BARRIE: Oh, my.

WALTER MIDENER: Forty-seven.

DENNIS BARRIE: Forty-seven? That is very—that's when you came. You came in '47?

WALTER MIDENER: No, in '46.

DENNIS BARRIE: Oh, you did? It was a little while.

WALTER MIDENER: In September '46.

PEGGY MIDENER: Right, so it was the following spring that we were married, following June.

WALTER MIDENER: At that time, there was Sarkis, [Jay] Boorsma, and Guy Palazzola. I started with—

PEGGY MIDENER: And Jack Foster, too. Wasn't he there?

WALTER MIDENER: I started with Jack Foster.

PEGGY MIDENER: And that was it. That was the whole faculty.

DENNIS BARRIE: Who was teaching painting?

PEGGY MIDENER: Sarkis.

DENNIS BARRIE: Sarkis was?

PEGGY MIDENER: Yeah, and Guy taught drawing. And we knew everybody. [00:10:00] It was so great. The relationship between the students and the faculty was really nice.

DENNIS BARRIE: Very intimate and very nice?

PEGGY MIDENER: Oh, yes. The school was running on lean means in those days, and if things needed to be done before the school shows, I mean, the faculty would do all the painting, and carry out the trash. We just—you know, everybody pitched in and ran the school. It was really one of those rare things. It was a fun, great big family. If anybody had problems, everybody knew about it, and everybody could help solve [laughs] them, or mess them up. But it was nice.

DENNIS BARRIE: What was it like being the wife of a faculty member and also a student?

PEGGY MIDENER: Well, I didn't notice any difference, really. I mean, there wasn't that distinction between faculty and students. The faculty taught, but it was all very open, nice kind of relationship—

DENNIS BARRIE: Pretty easy relation—

PEGGY MIDENER: —as I said before. So it just meant that I got invited to all the parties [they laugh] on a legitimate basis, that's all. And that we could entertain that—and that we had to find a place to live.

DENNIS BARRIE: Now, you said that you couldn't be his student, but how did your marriage reflect in your work? Your work and his work. Did it have an effect?

PEGGY MIDENER: Oh, it did, because we traveled, and I had never really traveled before. We used to go to New York regularly, sometimes a couple of times a year, and I could see all the shows, and I met a lot of interesting people.

WALTER MIDENER: Curt Valentin.

PEGGY MIDENER: Curt Valentin, who had a marvelous gallery, and one of Walter's old friends, and he became my friend.

WALTER MIDENER: Jakob Goldschmidt.

PEGGY MIDENER: It was great to meet so many exciting, stimulating people, who didn't know they were being exciting [laughs] and stimulating, except they really were to an artist. All the museums, of course, were there, that I could visit.

DENNIS BARRIE: It was an exciting period, too.

PEGGY MIDENER: And then we went to Europe. [00:12:00] That was seven years after we had been married. We took our first trip to Europe—my first trip. That was marvelous. Then, from then on, we just never stopped traveling and doing nice things. That's influenced my work.

DENNIS BARRIE: It has?

PEGGY MIDENER: Oh, yes. Yeah.

DENNIS BARRIE: In what—

WALTER MIDENER: You can see it here. That's Ephesus.

PEGGY MIDENER: I think, um, Greece probably was the—

DENNIS BARRIE: Ah-ha, that is—

PEGGY MIDENER: —biggest influence on me. I'd always dreamed about going there, and I had read everything I

could get my hands on. Unfortunately, I never learned to speak Greek, and I never learned to read it.

DENNIS BARRIE: No one does.

PEGGY MIDENER: But I did my album that—

WALTER MIDENER: I did.

DENNIS BARRIE: Did you really?

WALTER MIDENER: Oh, sure.

PEGGY MIDENER: Oh, you sure studied it in school.

DENNIS BARRIE: Oh, you had classical—yeah.

WALTER MIDENER: Six years of it [laughs].

DENNIS BARRIE: That's right.

PEGGY MIDENER: I bought a record of how to learn Greek in record time, and all I could do was imitate the accent, and not learn anything except "Good morning, good evening, how are you?" But that got us through nicely in some of the villages.

WALTER MIDENER: Well, Dr. Kemperman [ph], in '53, before our trip to Europe, was consulted by Peggy about a possible pregnancy, and the rabbit didn't say yes or didn't say no, so he advised Peggy and me, "You better get going"—

DENNIS BARRIE: Go now.

WALTER MIDENER: —[laughs] "before a couple of years. You won't be able to go. In a few years, you won't be able to." So we went, and I don't want to go into the details, but—

PEGGY MIDENER: But you had a good time, and I had a horrible time. [Laughs.]

DENNIS BARRIE: You were pregnant?

PEGGY MIDENER: Have you ever done Europe on your knees? I know every bathroom from [they laugh] Paris to —[00:14:02]

DENNIS BARRIE: The rabbit was right, huh?

PEGGY MIDENER: [Laughs.] The rabbit lied.

DENNIS BARRIE: Oh, that's terrible.

PEGGY MIDENER: Well, yeah, but it was nice, too, because I had waited seven years.

WALTER MIDENER: However, the following January, Wendy Paula arrived, and—

DENNIS BARRIE: So Wendy is your first?

PEGGY MIDENER: First and only.

DENNIS BARRIE: Oh, I thought you had two.

PEGGY MIDENER: No.

DENNIS BARRIE: For some reason, I did.

PEGGY MIDENER: Well, Jordan is the second.

DENNIS BARRIE: Oh, well, yes, okay.

PEGGY MIDENER: [Laughs.] You can see. He's imitating your baby, Dennis. Just lying down.

DENNIS BARRIE: Same nose.

WALTER MIDENER: Now you can ask about Wendy Paula Midener, because [laughs] she was quite neglected,

since she wasn't mentioned in the [laughs] previous interview.

DENNIS BARRIE: Oh, I plan to ask you, but I haven't finished with the two of you, so hold on a minute. I do want to ask about Wendy. But I'm really kind of curious, since you're both artists and your child became one, how do you think the two of you played off each other as artists? How do you think it's affected your lives? Very curious about that. In that, do you get ideas from each other? Do you criticize each other? Do you talk about art with each other?

WALTER MIDENER: We criticize only by mutual—

PEGGY MIDENER: —consent.

WALTER MIDENER: Consent. [They laugh.] I mean, the—

PEGGY MIDENER: And then very gently, I think.

DENNIS BARRIE: Very gently?

PEGGY MIDENER: Yeah.

DENNIS BARRIE: Really?

PEGGY MIDENER: Yeah.

DENNIS BARRIE: Do you get ideas from each other?

PEGGY MIDENER: Um. Probably we do. Maybe it's subliminal. I don't know.

WALTER MIDENER: Peggy appears in—somehow, in all my female sculpture.

DENNIS BARRIE: Oh, really? See, you didn't tell me that before.

WALTER MIDENER: Oh, yes.

DENNIS BARRIE: Did you? Does she?

WALTER MIDENER: Oh, yes.

DENNIS BARRIE: That's very interesting.

PEGGY MIDENER: I didn't paint figures, really, very much, so Walter actually doesn't appear in mine. No, but I paint strong constructions and things [laughs]—you know, that's—Walter is a strong construction. [00:16:06] So he takes another form.

DENNIS BARRIE: I just wondered like, did your styles change as you knew each other? Did you gain anything from each other? Do you think you borrowed anything?

WALTER MIDENER: Oh, definitely, I feel.

PEGGY MIDENER: I'm sure, yeah.

WALTER MIDENER: The only thing is that I would even have been more influenced by her thinking, I think, if the darn administration wouldn't have interfered for the last 19 years [they laugh] at the school.

DENNIS BARRIE: Yeah. It's very difficult.

PEGGY MIDENER: That has been hard. That's put a clinker in any kind of nice, uh—well, influential relationship on both of us, because Walter had to really steal time away from the school to work. And at that time, you were working on your big metal things, and that was away from the school. The first time we've ever shared a studio is here. We've never worked together.

DENNIS BARRIE: That's incredible. I didn't realize.

PEGGY MIDENER: And most people didn't think that we ever would be able to. They knew Walter as a determined individual who—

WALTER MIDENER: [Inaudible.] [They laugh.]

PEGGY MIDENER: Say what he wants.

DENNIS BARRIE: I didn't say a thing.

PEGGY MIDENER: I think my students feel I'm pretty determined in my own way, too. Maybe a little more acquiescent at times. It's worked out very nicely. So we're discovering a new relationship with our work. Fortunately, we both enjoy the same kind of classical music, mostly, so we don't have to fight over what we're going to listen to while we're working.

DENNIS BARRIE: Did you teach the whole time at—

PEGGY MIDENER: Yeah, I took probably—

DENNIS BARRIE: —Society and CCS?

PEGGY MIDENER: —three years off when Wendy was a baby. When she was about four, I came back to the children's classes. [00:18:01] I was head of that department for about 18 years.

DENNIS BARRIE: Children's classes? Yeah, I think I must have known that.

PEGGY MIDENER: And then, as Wendy grew older, really my interest followed along with her creative growth.

DENNIS BARRIE: Oh, that's kind of interesting.

PEGGY MIDENER: When she got into high school, my interest then became involved with that age group, and the kinds of things that they were interested in. And I began to get very nervous and not as patient with the little tiny kids, because I had been before. But I always liked—I thought that was the time to get out, because you can't really genuinely teach little kids and not have a great abundance of patience.

DENNIS BARRIE: I've learned that, just by being a—

PEGGY MIDENER: I didn't think it was fair. But I really, then, was enjoying teaching older people. So, at that time, Sarkis had leaves of absences, periodically, because he was not well, so he asked me to take over his classes a lot of the time, which I did. Then, eventually, he made me a full-time teacher. So then I had beginning painting students. I would start them out, and then they'd go to Sarkis. That worked out beautifully. In fact, my mother was my student [laughs] for one semester. She was very shy about coming down to paint, but she loved to do it, and she was a good student, too. At that time, too, it was less structured. It was a wonderful mix. We had older people who had not had a lot of experience, and some who hadn't painted in years, and then young kids out of high school, and a lot of GIs that were coming in.

DENNIS BARRIE: Oh, yeah, I would think so.

PEGGY MIDENER: It was really very, very nice, and very stimulating for everybody. It was not everybody in one age group, everybody with the same experience. It was a very healthy kind of a mix, and I'm sorry that that had to be sacrificed, you know, when the accreditation and everything came along. [00:20:07]

DENNIS BARRIE: More structure.

PEGGY MIDENER: That was a loss.

DENNIS BARRIE: It's happened almost everywhere.

PEGGY MIDENER: Oh, I know it has. I enjoyed that. That was a good time to be teaching. I enjoyed teaching right—in fact, I wasn't sure that I was so keen about this retirement business, because that meant forced retirement for me. But I've enjoyed every bit of it. I did teach last summer up here at the—

DENNIS BARRIE: I was just going to ask, did you teach up here?

PEGGY MIDENER: —Crooked Tree thing. I taught children's classes again, because I thought I would like to get back into that with children, and I loved it. But I'm beginning now to find time to do my own work, and I'm disciplining myself, little by little, to get back into it, with less time for gardening or housework, and really scheduling myself, which I hadn't been able to do before.

DENNIS BARRIE: I think self-discipline is tough.

PEGGY MIDENER: And I love it, so I didn't teach this year, and I don't plan to until I feel ready to again. It might be selfish. In fact, I really have a guilty feeling about thinking that, you know, got to contribute more. I should be

doing this, or I should be doing that. But there's still the time to do that. I want to do my own things, and I'm finally doing them. And I'll show them to you later—I've been making strange boxes, and painting, doing things, but in areas that I didn't feel I could get into before, because I thought, as a painting teacher, I'm expected to paint and show paintings, and I couldn't explore all of these kinds of things that I've really always wanted to do. You were asking about influences. Walter has been a good influence, and particularly in the serious—I've always been serious about it, but it's a way of life. [00:22:03] It's a real life. And you discipline yourself.

DENNIS BARRIE: To work at your own creation.

PEGGY MIDENER: I have not been terribly strong on self-discipline. When I was teaching, I wouldn't be late, and I could be there on time. I wasn't absent. That kind of discipline is fine, because it's laid down by somebody else. But when you've got all the time in the world [laughs], and it's your own self-discipline—

DENNIS BARRIE: I know.

PEGGY MIDENER: —that's a struggle. But I love it, and I'm [laughs] becoming really good. I'm getting much better now.

DENNIS BARRIE: Can I ask, have the two of you ever shown together?

PEGGY MIDENER: Oh, yeah.

WALTER MIDENER: Yeah.

PEGGY MIDENER: Several times.

DENNIS BARRIE: I was very curious about that.

WALTER MIDENER: In Bayview, here, [laughs] we—I think when Peggy gave a lecture the first year we were there, at the country club there, at the golf club, and she gave a lecture to the Crooked Tree Art Council, and of course she had painting of hers exhibited there, and I was asked to exhibit half a dozen pieces of sculpture, which we did. Then we—

PEGGY MIDENER: At the Women's City Club, we did a couple of times, I think, over the years.

WALTER MIDENER: Women's City Club.

DENNIS BARRIE: Ah, in Detroit, you did.

WALTER MIDENER: And even Wendy had a couple of things there.

PEGGY MIDENER: Right. Yeah, the three of us. That was the first time that happened.

DENNIS BARRIE: You know, I vaguely—after I asked the question, I sort of remember something like that. How long ago was that, do you know?

PEGGY MIDENER: Well, that must have been—

WALTER MIDENER: Fifteen years—no.

PEGGY MIDENER: No, no, because Wendy was at school, making her dolls. She exhibited some of her wonderful puppets and things.

WALTER MIDENER: It must have been '72.

PEGGY MIDENER: Seven years ago.

WALTER MIDENER: About nine, 10 years ago.

PEGGY MIDENER: Around then. And then at Traverse City, at the college.

WALTER MIDENER: Oh, yes, yes, at the—there, we exhibited together.

DENNIS BARRIE: Hmm. Do you think about exhibiting in Detroit and New York and other places at this time?

WALTER MIDENER: Not really. [00:24:00]

DENNIS BARRIE: Not really?

WALTER MIDENER: Not really. If I look at certain things which are going on in New York, I really don't want to compete with that. I had my time in New York, at the Metropolitan, in '51, and at the Whitney, and other museums. The Pennsylvania Academy, and the Philadelphia Museum, with a big sculpture show. So I really want to do the things, now—because I know, right now, as your associate, Mrs. Miro [ph] said, I'm out of synch, and I don't give a darn a hoop.

DENNIS BARRIE: My associate. [Laughs.]

WALTER MIDENER: Well, she interviewed Wally Fort [ph] [inaudible].

DENNIS BARRIE: Oh, that's right, she did. She did interview Wally for me, that's true. [They laugh.] What was I going to say? Let's talk—we mentioned Wendy before, and I think I only met her once. I really didn't know her. I did see her work, I remember, early work, which was in textiles, wasn't it?

PEGGY MIDENER: Right. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. She was a crafts major.

WALTER MIDENER: She was in the big show.

DENNIS BARRIE: She was in the big show of the school, but she was also in a few other places. She was in the crafts gallery [Detroit Gallery of Contemporary Crafts] and—

PEGGY MIDENER: In the crafts gallery, and the Fisher Building, yeah, with—

DENNIS BARRIE: And a few other things.

PEGGY MIDENER: —marionettes and things.

DENNIS BARRIE: You're right, about the school exhibition. Let's talk about her. She was obviously influenced by both of you for—did she want to be an artist at age one, because of two artistic parents?

PEGGY MIDENER: Practically, yes. I mean, she grew up doing these things, and it was our way of amusing ourselves. Any games that we played always had some kind of visual means of developing them. [00:26:02] When she went with us to Europe, she was—seven?

WALTER MIDENER: No, nine.

PEGGY MIDENER: Nine, okay.

WALTER MIDENER: To Greece and Italy.

PEGGY MIDENER: I had always read to her. In fact, that was a great time. I would give a private lesson to a couple of kids, and their parents would never pick them up, so in the interim in-between, [laughs] I would read to them. Marvelous stories, like all the C.S. Lewis stories, and lots of stories about mice. There were some well-written mouse stories then. Anyway, we read all of those things. Consequently, Wendy really did not do an awful lot of reading for herself, until we went to Europe. We would kill ourselves with activity in the morning, then come back for a siesta, and Walter and I would have our books and we'd read. Wendy would make little dolls and puppets out of pipe cleaners and yarn and things that she'd buy in shops. Finally, she'd pick up a book and start her reading then. And she never stopped. I mean, she's read more books now, I think, than [laughs] most people read in their lifetime, and she just started. She's a voracious reader now.

WALTER MIDENER: By the time I had to find books in English, in Greece and Italy, she—[inaudible]—horrible time. [Laughs.]

DENNIS BARRIE: Yeah. Oh, I believe it.

PEGGY MIDENER: But then that influenced her work, her trip there, the first time that she went abroad. It influenced, and it still has an influence. The early books that we read, a lot of them, of course, were fantasy books, and wonderful classic fantasy books, and her work has evolved from that ever since. She's created her own kind of world for her things.

DENNIS BARRIE: Was she a textile major, or a painting major?

PEGGY MIDENER: No, she always did painting and sculpture. As easily as other kids can ride a bicycle, which Wendy was not always [laughs] great at doing, she would paint and sculpt. [00:28:09] Once she graduated from Interlochen Academy, where she was a theater major, a drama major, she came to CCS, and decided that she really had not better take either sculpture or painting. Anyway, she knew she could do that, and it would have been a little funny. She wouldn't have wanted to have me for a teacher, and she would have been stuck,

because I had all the beginning painting students. So she took crafts, and that way she could do ceramics and weaving, and make things that she'd always liked to do, without actually infringing on anybody else's territory. She felt that way. We didn't feel that way. I would have been delighted to have her.

WALTER MIDENER: But I want to point something out. If you ask me what was the proudest day of my 33 years association with the art school of the Society of Arts and Crafts—CCS now—it was the day when I called the name of—when the name Wendy Midener was called at the commencement, and I was able to confer her degree to her. I had tears in my eyes.

DENNIS BARRIE: Oh, I'd think so.

WALTER MIDENER: [Laughs.] So [inaudible] I had Wendy.

PEGGY MIDENER: The leaky Midener. [They laugh.]

DENNIS BARRIE: So she was doing textiles, basically, though?

PEGGY MIDENER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DENNIS BARRIE: Because that's the work I remember. When did she get into her whole career with—was it costume design? Was it costume design for the Muppets?

PEGGY MIDENER: No. No, no. It is building parts of the—

DENNIS BARRIE: —structure?

PEGGY MIDENER: —marionettes—

DENNIS BARRIE: Armature and so forth?

PEGGY MIDENER: —and the puppets. Well, faces. [00:30:00] Hands. Whatever they needed—

WALTER MIDENER: She's a Muppet [laughs]—

PEGGY MIDENER: —she would do it. She made all of Ms. Piggy's shoes for the first Muppet movie. [They laugh.] So we didn't look at the heads or anything. We just—in the few shots where they'd show feet, which is rare, Wendy made the shoes. That was very much fun. We could probably tell this together. If I start telling it, Walter will interrupt. If he tells it, I'll interrupt. But it's a special story. It's about how Wendy got her job with the Muppets.

DENNIS BARRIE: Yes, I'd like to hear.

WALTER MIDENER: She had a—after her success at the contemporary crafting, she—

PEGGY MIDENER: In Detroit.

WALTER MIDENER: It was a sell-out thing. In fact, there were—they have a backorder of 15 orders for her puppets. Well, she decided to go to New York, and she had also another little job. She had just enough money to go to New York, and she could have stayed there for half a year. The loft, which she sub-rented, or sub-leased, from the Gronus [ph], was very expensive, and—well, sometime in early December of—I think it was '77, Peggy, or was it '76? I don't know.

PEGGY MIDENER: I don't know, '77 probably.

WALTER MIDENER: She had a little show in the loft, and Carol Ward [ph], who had been one of her babysitters, she brought somebody—they had met again in New York, and she brought a member of the Jim Henson Associates staff—[00:32:07]

PEGGY MIDENER: Michael Fritz [ph].

WALTER MIDENER: —Michael Fritz along. And Michael Fritz bought three puppets. One of them, he gave to Jim Henson. She sold quite well there, and she also had a commission to do a portrait puppet.

PEGGY MIDENER: Well, it was a sphinx.

WALTER MIDENER: A sphinx, you know, of Diane von Furstenberg. It was a gift of her business manager to Diane for Christmas. But it was a hurried-up job, but Wendy did, apparently, a very good job, and the man paid her to do it, and we thought—and after that, on Christmas, she came home to Detroit, or Highland Park, and we

thought, well, now she sold something to the jet set, and—

PEGGY MIDENER: Everybody wanted their portrait done by Wendy. A portrait doll. She was really excited.

WALTER MIDENER: Well, she never heard a darn thing from Diane von Furstenberg.

PEGGY MIDENER: Not even a thank-you note. That's really terrible.

DENNIS BARRIE: So strange, isn't it?

PEGGY MIDENER: Yeah.

WALTER MIDENER: Which is strange. However—so then, in January, she went back to New York, and Peggy was expected, about a week after she had returned to New York, for a visit. The day before the visit, she got a telephone call from Jim Henson, and he said, "Young lady, I got for"—I don't know that he said "young lady"—"I got a beaut[PD1] iful"—[00:34:16]

PEGGY MIDENER: He didn't know she was young. He didn't know how old she was.

WALTER MIDENER: "I got one of your puppets for Christmas, and I think it's—I liked it very much. I would like to see more of your work. Why don't you come over tomorrow at 11 o'clock? I am—because I would like to see something." She said, she answered, "Well, I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Henson, but I expect my mother to arrive at Kennedy or LaGuardia at 11 o'clock, and I'm sorry."

PEGGY MIDENER: "I have to meet my mother."

WALTER MIDENER: "I have to meet my mother." So he said, "Well, I have to leave very soon for London. I don't know when I can see you at another time before then, before I go to London." He left it, "Well, I'll call you. Don't call me." Half an hour later [laughs], he called back and said, "Can you come at 9:30?" At that time, in that half an hour, Wendy must have thought it over. [They laugh.] She said, "Yes, I'll be there." And she delegated some of Peggy's students—

PEGGY MIDENER: They all live in New York, and they all came to the airport.

WALTER MIDENER: Writing their music, and they all—she sent them there, and she went to the interview, and now, Peggy, you can tell.

PEGGY MIDENER: Actually, Wendy didn't know too much about Jim Henson. [00:36:02] She was too old for *Sesame Street*, and *The Muppet Show*, maybe it was on, but—

DENNIS BARRIE: Maybe it just started then.

PEGGY MIDENER: —we hadn't seen it. So she really didn't know who he was. But it was a chance for a job, and her money was running low, because she had made the agreement that, when her money run out, she'd come home, if she couldn't hack it in New York. Anyway, she thought she would go for the job thing. She was coming down with a horrible cold. We waited and waited and waited in the airport for her to rejoin us there, and she didn't show up, so we finally called the apartment, or the loft, and she answered, and she could hardly talk, and said, "Just come home. I've got something good to tell you." So all of us trooped back there, and here was Wendy, with her head all clogged up, but she said, "I'm hired for two weeks. It's a seminar, and they're talking about making a fantasy film that Jim Henson is writing, and they're bringing Brian Froud, who is a British illustrator, over, and I'm going to meet him." She said, "We're going to discuss whether it would be possible." She said, "You know, they do *Sesame Street*, mother." [They laugh.] So I said, "Oh, that's really very nice." I didn't know too much about it at that point either. I thought it was an interesting opportunity.

WALTER MIDENER: But now, she listens to it every day [laughs].

PEGGY MIDENER: So anyway, it worked out. They did hire Wendy. It was a two-week seminar, and they did figure out that making a film like this was a possibility, that they thought they could do it. So Brian stayed over for a while. They set up a little workshop right—a couple doors away from the Henson Associates thing, and there they started the construction of all the characters that you'll be seeing in *The Dark Crystal*.

DENNIS BARRIE: Fantastic.

PEGGY MIDENER: The film didn't even have a name then. [00:38:00] Wendy has created the leading little hero and heroine, Jens and Kira. I saw them evolve. When I first saw the mock-ups for them, or the original dolls, they were so beautiful-looking. You would look at them and absolutely fall in love with them. But I think they were too sweet, too—

DENNIS BARRIE: Too sweet.

PEGGY MIDENER: —yeah. Jim would say, "No, they have to have more pointed ears. They shouldn't have noses." Brian would say, "Well, they've got to have this or that." Wendy sort of accommodated their wishes on these things, without losing any of the magic that she had in these. So they ended up looking—they're not quite human, and they're not quite animal. They're just a strange, in-between area, but they're absolutely delightful. Then Brian did all the other characters, and designed all the sets and everything.

DENNIS BARRIE: We should mention, for the tape, that they are now married, right? Brian Froud and—

PEGGY MIDENER: Yes.

DENNIS BARRIE: —Wendy Midener.

PEGGY MIDENER: They worked together—

DENNIS BARRIE: Midener-Frouds.

PEGGY MIDENER: Right, the Midener-Frouds. I think Wendy will keep her name professionally. I don't know, maybe it would be an advantage to have Midener. [Laughs.] I was telling somebody the other day, "Maybe they'll let us use that name, and we'll all be the Midener-Frouds."

DENNIS BARRIE: We should also mention, she worked on the character of Yoda, was that it?

PEGGY MIDENER: Oh, yes, yes. That was a strange thing, too. She was on loan by Jim Henson.

DENNIS BARRIE: To?

PEGGY MIDENER: To George Lucas. She was given drawings, very rough drawings, of the character that they wanted, and asked to make this thing that would work like the Muppets work. So she made one of them, and they suggested a few changes. So she made a second one that pleased her very much. [00:40:00] And she took that one in, and everybody there just loved that one. Whoever the—I don't remember the man's name. He's the head makeup man who works on all of these things—said, "No, it has to be a little bit different." So she made a third one, just the way she wanted it, and they all took the second one, the way that she had [laughs] so actually, the Yoda you see is more her interpretation than the original drawing.

DENNIS BARRIE: That's fascinating.

PEGGY MIDENER: She was given credit in the movies. She was called "fabricator of Yoda." But in all the books and everything else, I mean, it just doesn't say that.

DENNIS BARRIE: That's too bad.

PEGGY MIDENER: Unfortunately, she's not getting any royalty either.

DENNIS BARRIE: I look at all those credits. I saw *The Empire Strikes Back*. In fact, I saw it, I think, after I found out that she had done some of the work on Yoda. But the credits are massive in those movies.

PEGGY MIDENER: I know, and they're fast. You've got to be on your toes.

DENNIS BARRIE: Oh, you can't absorb them! I keep looking for names, and—

WALTER MIDENER: Didn't see it?

PEGGY MIDENER: We missed it the first time.

DENNIS BARRIE: I don't remember if I did. I don't think I did.

PEGGY MIDENER: It's toward the end.

DENNIS BARRIE: Because I mentioned to Diane, but—but I don't know if we saw it prior to talking to you or after, but anyway, I do, I constantly look to see who does what in those films, because the magic of those films is, so often, the people who create the characters and create the special effects. It's so hard to absorb that.

PEGGY MIDENER: I know.

DENNIS BARRIE: I'm glad she did something like that.

PEGGY MIDENER: Oh, I am too. It was a wonderful experience for her. It was great for her. She'll get plenty of credit for the next film that's coming up, so there's no problem there.

DENNIS BARRIE: When will we see *The Dark Crystal*?

PEGGY MIDENER: They're finishing the shooting in September, and it will be released in May. Less than a year now.

DENNIS BARRIE: Is there anything else we should do?

PEGGY MIDENER: Well, I should probably get our lunch on. [00:42:00]

DENNIS BARRIE: That's a good idea. We've worked.

PEGGY MIDENER: That's something that I should do. Your children are being awfully cooperative there, and they're lovely—I think they need food.

WALTER MIDENER: Yes.

DENNIS BARRIE: Have we covered everything? Want to cover anything else? We covered what I wanted to cover.

PEGGY MIDENER: Right, okay. I'll excuse myself.

DENNIS BARRIE: Well, we'll just turn it off.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]