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Oral history interview with Ruth Penington,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Ruth Penington on February 10 & 11, 1983. The interview took place in Seattle, WA, and was conducted by Lamar Harrington for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Ruth Penington and I are sitting here this morning ready to begin an interview about her 45-year career in jewelry and a number of other areas. Ruth is an artist, a designer, a craftsman, a designer-craftsman, a silversmith, a goldsmith, an industrial designer, a metallurgist, a teacher. She is a founder of artistic organizations, she is a participator out in the field in addition to all of the arts, which really refutes the argument about teachers in the ivory tower. I also read in an article by Margaret Callahan many years ago, in the fifties, that she is a pioneer in the field of modern jewelery; and certainly she is that. We are going to talk about your career, Ruth, and we should start with the very beginning, with the early years-- family, school, and so forth. As I understand it, you were born in Colorado Springs, Colorado, in 1905. Is that right?

RUTH PENINGTON: Right. Or so it says on the birth certificate.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: It occurred to me, also, that one of your colleagues at the University of Washington was born in Loveland, Colorado, and that was Glen Alps. Did you know that?

RUTH PENINGTON: I guess I did know that at one time.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I don't know which year that would have been, but at least you were close to each other geographically.

RUTH PENINGTON: He's not close to me in age.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: No. His career has not been 45 years yet, I think. Tell me about your family. Perhaps the grandparents.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, my father's father was a woodworker in the days when they made carriages. He was a carriagemaker and went on to work in the early automobile body business and then in the airplane business. So his training was as a craftsman. My father was never that kind of a craftsman, but he was very skilled with tools and helped build things. Mother's family were from Pennsylvania-- farmers-- but in those days, the farmer had to do everything. So these were skills that she'd brought along, principally in working with beautiful fabrics and sewing.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: What about your grandmother? Was there anything...

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, not that I know of. You know, farmwives...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: She kept all of these artists going.

RUTH PENINGTON: Kept the family going, yes. No one else that I know of has been really in the art field until later generations.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I read someplace where you mentioned that your mother really did encourage your creativity.

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh, yes. I can remember starting some of my first handwork when my mother was pregnant with my younger sister. She was sewing in those days for the new baby and I had to sew, also. So she encouraged me. She didn't just turn me loose and tell me to go away. She gave me cloth and needles and thread and things that she had been using and helped me make a small apron for my doll, which I still have. And at the age of three, I think it's pretty good. It had a belt stitched on; it had hems; it had lace around the edge with blue ribbon insertion. And for three years old, I look at that and I think, "I did that? That's fantastic."

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Where is that little apron now?

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh it's probably in my treasures.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You should watch for it and be sure to save it. I'd like to see it sometime.

RUTH PENINGTON: I'm trying to save it. This kind of encouragement and-- in those days, I made my own dolls out of clothes pins and dressed them with scraps of material. I don't know, it seems to me that you have to have a certain amount of inborn facility for working with your hands and being interested in it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You mentioned your baby sister, she was on the way at that time. How many brothers and sisters do you have?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, there were three of us in the family, my brother younger than that.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Were the other two artistic?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, my sister died when she was 19-- just starting school. She was interested in this kind of thing, too. My brother never was particularly. He's great with figures.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Also, when you were in the earlier grades in school, did you mention to me one time that you had one teacher who was inspirational?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, I was talking about high school in Seattle, I think, because I always enjoyed doing things, you know-- the manual training that we got in grade school like weaving a rug and things of that kind. The high school teacher's name was Hotchkiss [I think Lulu - LAMAR HARRINGTON], and she had the kind of training that...In the art classes, we didn't just copy pictures-- which many times was done-- but she put us right down in getting composition and designing objects as well as drawing and painting. And when I came on to the university, it was a continuation of this same sort of thing. So I had, really, four or five years, starting at the age of about fourteen, of continuous art training. Had some ceramics in with it. It was no great trauma-- no great break-- between that and when I went on to the university.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You moved to Seattle, then, from Colorado in 1907?

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes, when I was about a year and a half.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Let's talk about the art school. One thing I was wondering is, who encouraged you to start at the University of Washington?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, economics for one thing. This was a fine and big school and I was encouraged, of course-- was expected-- to go on to college. I had graduated as a valedictorian of my high school class, so there was a great deal of choice, except that I was interested in art. The university was handy. We didn't have a large amount of funds; I couldn't go away. I don't know whether people had scholarships; now I would have applied for something or other and gotten into some other school, perhaps. But it was close; I could walk or get there very easily. And I was accepted and it was a school that gave me a tremendous amount of valuable training.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: In the brochure-- I think it was printed by Lambda Rho Alumnae, and we'll talk about that organization later-- about the School of Art from about 1932, I notice it was at that time called the Department of Painting, Sculpture, and Design.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And later, it was changed to the School of Art?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, the emphasis was on not the historic, let's say the Eastern School emphasis on art as "fine art" in which you had the painting, sculpture, architecture... The emphasis was on the total use of art-- not just the studying about art and art history and studying the renaissance painters. Design was to include all the things which we sometimes just call crafts-- handicrafts. It was all a part of the same picture. We were, at that time, under the College of Fine Arts, which was music and architecture, public school art-- I mean the painting, sculpture, and design or PS&D as we called it. And later on-- in three or four years-- we were placed under the College of Arts and Sciences. College of Fine Arts was dropped and everything went under Arts and Sciences, which incidentally, gave me a shot at Phi Beta Kappa which I couldn't have been in if I had been under Fine Arts. Since it was changed to arts-- liberal arts group-- then it made me eligible. Isn't that interesting? Kind of an offside.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Otherwise you wouldn't have been able to have done that.

RUTH PENINGTON: No. No matter what my grades were. However, this same sort of interest in all the arts-- having the same kind of basic interest, the same kind of basic training, the same kind of basic emphasis, and all working together, especially in our college where the studios were closely related-- we were not isolated. So we knew what was going on in other parts. And everyone, to begin with, had to get painting, had to get design, had to get drawing, no matter which area they were going in-- and then it wasn't until their second or third year that they diverged into their fields, their specialties. So it was a much broader sort of thing, and of course being in a

university, you had access to all sorts of other-- what do you call it, ancillary, is that a good word?-- fields that related to it. So that when the industrial design department was set up, the problem that came to those who were working just in architecture or who were working in commercial art class school; we had the engineering school, we had all the business schools-- economics-- that a person who wanted to fit in the field of industrial design needed as a part of their training. It was all right here. The course was set up to make use of all these things in the different areas. So, that is, to my way of thinking, one of the great advantages in this kind of thing rather than going off just to an art school. I don't know how other people feel about it, but I thought it was a great advantage.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You got your B.F.A. in 1927 with the Phi Beta Kappa and then your M.F.A. in 1929 as a metal worker and industrial designer.

RUTH PENINGTON: No, not really, I guess it was a general sort of thing and I think I did my thesis in illustration. The industrial design area hadn't been developed at that time.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Let's go back to that teaching philosophy at the University of Washington at that time and talk more about the influences-- for instance from the East and from Europe.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, the faculty that I came into were people who had a very strong background in the design area and had been graduates from Teachers College at Columbia University-- where they worked with Arthur Wesley Dow. And this emphasis of course carried over part of the Dewey emphasis-- learning by getting in and doing it. This, of course, influenced the sort of training that we got. There were a number of people who had that kind of background. We had others who had the traditional art background of painting, and all of them had had experience, as far as I remember, in training in Europe as well as the Columbia experience. But it made a well-rounded kind of thing. And the person who was one of the most influential ones there-- not the chairman of the department at this particular point-- but I'm thinking of Helen Rhodes, who was a very fine painter, who was a very fine designer, did printmaking and things of that kind. Walter Isaacs, who was the chairman of the department, had had this Columbia background. He had had training in Europe, and in painting. He understood design; in fact, he was one of the first design teachers I had when I came there. So each of these people was interested in other facets of the thing rather than just the thing that they were producing. And they were all producing artists, exhibiting, which was a great stimulation to the people who were studying with them.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Some other people who may have been there at that time-- did you mention Alfreda Storm?

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. She was a very strong person in design and textile design, things of that kind. And Annette Edens, who was another very good designer and painter.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And Eugenie Worman. Was she there at that time?

RUTH PENINGTON: I don't know when she first came on, but she was there very early. Of course, her interest was mainly in ceramics. The ceramic field hadn't been developed too much, but it was there, in relationship with the School of Mines.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Because of the firing and so forth?

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. Well, of course they also had access to the...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: ...the glazes and the whole chemical department. Also John Butler?

RUTH PENINGTON: John Butler was there, yes. He was a painter. And Ambrose Patterson, who came in with training from Australia and Europe, was a painting professor.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So there was a wide range of influences.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. And it all came together. And for a part of the time, the Art Department was housed quite close to the Architecture Department and we had courses in architectural history as well as art history and the men, people from architecture, came into our classes. I can remember a couple of them-- some of the very top architects we've had around here. They came into the metal work class, and they were so tired of architecture they had to get into something else, and they did beautiful things. It was wonderful to have them.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Also, would you have had any publications that early? From other parts of the country, like periodicals and so forth?

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh, certainly, sure. All the European magazines and the ones that were being published in the East-- wherever they were published. So, we knew about some of the things that were going on in Vienna and places of that sort.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You mentioned the other day Ernest Fenollosa. Would you talk a little bit more about his philosophy and what his influence was?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, I know that he was very into the background that we had, simply because of his influence in the study of Oriental, particularly Japanese, painting. He was a man who came from Harvard and spent most of his life in Japan studying this. His publications are from there. And he was, I think, I was reading just recently, the director of the Imperial Museum in Tokyo. But this was an aspect of painting that had been ignored in Western Europe after the Byzantine period, or not much later than that, in which the idea of painting was not just observation, with everything being focused on the painter who then saw everything in linear perspective as they had learned to do in the renaissance period-- late renaissance-- but had retained the earlier idea of composition and perspective in relationship to the importance of things. I mean if you go back to the Egyptian or Greek or something-- things were emphasized and the spaces filled with the way in which the linear, not just the linear, but the dark and light pattern, was set up. So that this was a different approach than just making beautiful drawings a la renaissance period. We had that side of it, too, but the design and composition was based on the sort of thing that Fenollosa had been exploring. That's the reason for the difference in the painting of the Japanese. It wasn't because they couldn't do something else, but this was the way they felt about the world. And you see this on Oriental art. It was rediscovered, really, because, if you look back in the history of painting, it came across from Asia Minor and into Europe and the Byzantine period and then into the medieval. There was a complete dropping of that, of putting objects in the space because they did something for the space, objects one in front of the other because the color played in certain ways, because certain lines.

But this idea of perspective was developed, and while we were taught that part, we were also taught this other [Oriental] idea. I think this is what a great many schools missed. And this came through the work that Fenollosa had done and that John Dewey and then that Arthur Dow had done in relationship to this composition of space-- the spatial relationship. So this is one of the things we had in our background.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So you were getting all of that as well as all of the influences from Western Europe, too.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes, I mean we were studying both sides of it. But the design and the composition, it's certainly something that makes the primitive, let's say, or the pre-renaissance period-- the kind of art that was being produced there and as we look back now and see these wonderful things that were done in earlier periods which were really looked down upon at the time of the renaissance-- people said they didn't know how to draw, you know. And why did they make those figures so much bigger in the Egyptian paintings? And the little ones down at the bottom? The fact that this was a different system-- the important things were put in certain relationships. If you had more than one place to look at, you looked at it from a different position. You didn't just look at it from your own standing in one important spot.

So this, I think, had a great deal of influence in the kind of training we got in the school. And it made it easier, somehow, to understand a lot of the things that were coming out of the Modern [era] in Europe. So I began to think about, you know, go back into the primitive or the cultures that were either discovered from the past or flourishing now. We had the big museum where we had Indian and Alaskan art for our use. One of the first things that we ever did was to go down and study the design, the patterns, and things of that kind that came out of those cultures. So we were not limited. We didn't have as much background, perhaps, in folk art as they would have had in Scandinavia, let's say. We had a great deal more variety, perhaps, because the people who came to this part of the country, most of them had been from backgrounds in Europe or someplace of that kind, or early American where the folk art field was there. But that was not quite as strong an influence as what we find having come from, let's say, Sweden or something of that kind.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So I suppose that part of the very great value for any art student of being at the University of Washington was not only this tremendous variety of influences that you were able to draw upon, but also for a person who had decided to go into one of the so-called craft areas to be able to have that variety may have been completely different from a lot of schools where perhaps only technique might have been involved.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: What about the other schools that you can remember at that time-- perhaps on the East Coast? Were there other schools that had the same direction as the University of Washington?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, if you go back to the beginning, say, of the Industrial Revolution, where the work of the craftsman, the potter, the weaver, or whatever, was understood by the whole community because they probably could do some of it, too. There were specialized things, but this was a part of the total thing. You then come into the Industrial Revolution where the designer was separated from the person who was doing the work. The person who was doing the work had the machines to do it-- they were craftsmen, but not designers to start with. And then the machines took over and you had a copying of things that had been done by hand with all the variations that were possible; and they had to have somebody to design them, of course.

So this was a break, the division that broke the tradition of people knowing what was going on and of people being able to use their hands and make things for themselves. Now, that carried on for years into the early part of our country, with the women doing these beautiful quilts and things of that kind. They all knew how to do this-- they weren't all necessarily the greatest craftsmen, but there were specialized craftsmen--the tinsmith that went around and worked in the community and people like, you know, the Paul Revere sort of tradition, where these were trained craftsmen. But they, for the most part, were working with old designs or directly with designers, or they were designers themselves. You got a great break there for a while where the machine took over but somebody had to design for it and it wasn't very well understood what it could do and what the possibilities were. So there was kind of a wonderful feeling when an industrial designer could come along and help out-- but then they didn't know, either. They didn't know the craft side of it. So the training that gave the young person--the beginner-- design and an interest in what's gone on before-- the richness of the background (either a tradition or a learned one) and the opportunity to produce these things, and let the material say what it had to say... That's one of the things that started us off, especially in the universities, I think, rather than the art schools, rather than the traditional colleges that had the emphasis on art history such as the University of California at Berkeley which has separated it out so that sculpture and architecture and painting were art. And all the beautiful textiles and things that people knew about were not, nor the beautiful things that were made in metal, which we now accept as art and they finally get them into museums. One of those early shows sponsored by the American Crafts Council under Mrs. [Vanderbilt--Ed.] Webb finally convinced some of the big museums in this country that it was worth their time and this is not such bad stuff. They could show it, they could display it in museums.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Let's go back to the University of Washington, just for a moment...

RUTH PENINGTON: I'm kind of skipping around.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: ...because I would like to hear you talk about Walter Isaacs.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, he was a wonderful person. His first employment there was the year I was a freshman, and for some reason or another, he taught one of the beginning design classes and I happened to be in it. And that was a very nice way to get acquainted. He had the university training, but he had also had all this background in painting. I had many classes and courses with him, and as I remember, I got into a couple of what were then termed upper division classes when I was a second-year student, which helped me a lot because I got some people that had-- that was their last year of employment, and I learned a great deal from them. I can remember being put into a life class in the painting department which was reserved for the upper-division people-- juniors and seniors. So I was put into that as a sophomore. I got that same, you know, the old traditional type of painting, really, right from the very beginning-- and painting composition-- but his painting composition, as he taught it, was compatible and was a part of the same thing that we learned in the beginning courses in design. So there was a meshing of these two things.

He was very modest kind of a person. I can remember it was one of his habits to-- he was working in his studio and there were paintings sitting around and he'd bring them out and set them up where the students were and ask them what they thought of it and take their criticism, He was not proud about this at all, you know; he was a painter and a worker along with them. And he really valued their comments. It was kind of fun to have that kind of a background.

But the composition-- he taught history of painting also and it was always based on understanding composition as well as just the history of the artists. But one thing when you got into the composition class-- here's a nice thick white canvas; a nice big white completely empty-- you can do anything on it. The first time you put a brush stroke or a line down, you've set the whole thing. So this was his feeling about the interrelationship with composition. I always enjoyed that. Sometimes he would come in and stand beside your painting, your drawing, your easel, and just stand there and look and then he'd go away. Well...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: What did he think?

RUTH PENINGTON: What did he think? Yes, what is he going to say? Where Ambrose Patterson might come up to it and look at the drawing, and take his thumb and swish it down. Out would go your drawing, which was wrong, undoubtedly. He was a very fine draftsman. So things of that kind. But the people who were there were working artists and they had this kind of a very informal sort of thing. It wasn't set up, you know, as I'm the master and you're the underlings at all. And we did know about what was going on in Vienna and all of these people that were working in the early periods of the industrial design fields.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I wanted also to ask you about other artists in the area. Not only these people that you have mentioned at the School of Art when you were a student, but how about other artists out in the community at the time? Was there much of an opportunity for you to know about the other artists?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, yes, I mean through the museum and through people-- groups of people like Ambrose

Patterson and Kenneth Callahan and I can't think of some of the others, who started the Northwest Printmakers group. It grew out of all of us who were students, and we had gone down and done prints-- some drawings of the old part of the city before it was wrecked and things of that kind. But we had shows. We set up our own shows. This included students and faculty members and people who were not involved in the university at all.

So there was a general understanding. The Seattle Art Museum began doing things with paintings and exhibitions, and anyone was [possible], of course, to join in. I think it was a small enough community and things hadn't happened too much that it was a wonderful time to get started in this and know all of these people. You may not have gone on in their direction, but you got to know them.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Now you did advanced study, during those years, at California College? Oh, no, wait a minute, the first one, the earliest one, was Columbia Teachers College in 1929.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. Well, I went back there during a short period of the summer and I particularly wanted to get in with one of those classes in metalsmithing which they were offering at the time. Someone who would come in from-- I think from Providence were the schools were set up for that business. Because Providence School of Design-- Rhode Island School of Design, for instance, was one of the East Coast schools that sponsored courses in metalsmithing I was particularly interested in. The factories and Gorham Silversmithing and all of these people were there, and so there were sort of trade schools. We didn't have that sort of connection here. Ours was a more general thing. The Columbia University was a short experience, but it was a very valuable one.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Did you say that you studied pewter while you were...?

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. Well, I was going to be teaching in the metal field and wanted a little bit more of that. I had had a shop available in the university and the person that had been teaching it was going, so I was asked to take over and do it. And so the man I worked with-- I can't even remember his name, now-- at Columbia for a short time, we did begin to work some with pewter. We didn't do very much with silver in those days; it was kind of expensive. Almost two to three dollars an ounce, instead of what it is now. But we worked with other metals and I did get working with pewter which was useful, as far as I'm concerned. And the design teacher was very valuable. But that gave me a start, and a chance to go and see the museums and get involved there.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Sometime later, 1931 and 1932, you went two summers to Carnegie Summer School at the University of Oregon. What did that entail?

RUTH PENINGTON: This was set up-- I don't know quite where the emphasis came from-- but the Carnegie Foundation had set this up and hired people to come in, some of them from outside and some of them from the school there. And I think that I had been recommended-- not necessarily through the university, but through the Seattle Art Museum where I had some work on an exhibition earlier. People from the colleges were brought down for this short summer session. Very fine chance to get acquainted. It was a very informal kind of thing, lectures and things of that kind, and we got acquainted with people in the field around and the schools here and down there in the Oregon setup.

Portland, of course, was one of the places where the crafts were favored during the Depression days when they got the Oregon Ceramic Studio started. And of course all this was right about the time of the Depression, also. One of the things that was very valuable there: the Women's Art Honorary decided that they could do something to help people who were out of work and who had nothing to do, so they set up art workshops of various kinds-- very small fees-- and for several years, they conducted this. It was a sort of an informal art school just for craftsmen. They got looms together and they got a metal shop working, and this was a completely volunteer thing-- aside from the museum and aside from the school-- but it used people who were in that kind of background.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Now was that in Portland?

RUTH PENINGTON: That was in Seattle. And the Portland one, then, was set up for the Oregon Ceramics Studio. Originally, the funding was by the Portland public schools who needed a place to fire their work. And so this was set up from that standpoint and then it had WPA help and things of that kind.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Now this was the Oregon Ceramics Studio...

RUTH PENINGTON: That's the Oregon Ceramics Studio. These were the days when you didn't have jobs, you know, in 1929, thirties, when public works were on. That certainly helped.

We did know people in other communities, you see. We knew things that were going on.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: When you were down at the University of Oregon those two summers on the Carnegie Summer School, did you work almost completely in metal?

RUTH PENINGTON: No, no. It was primarily lectures and painting in combination with the architecture department. I can't even think that I did any metal. Trying to think back-- it wasn't that kind of a session.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Can you recall who some of the teachers were those summers?

RUTH PENINGTON: Let's see. Mr. Lawrence was the dean of architecture. He was a very fine person. His interest was in a widespread sort of education in art. I remember Lucia Wiley was there as a graduate student and instructor. She was interested in doing fresco painting and she became very well known for those things. She worked in St. Paul in the public art things-- in the post offices and all. So she was there to help give people an idea of what the real fresco possibilities were.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Another advanced study period was at California College of Arts and Crafts in 1935.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, that was just a summer session. A friend, Maryhelen Byers, who was on our faculty, and I went down to study with one of the men who had come in there as a painter. And, incidentally of course, to see the town and live in the community. That's where I got very well acquainted, to start with, with Imogen Cunningham and people of this kind that made a great influence on things in the art field in San Francisco.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Was Imogen at the California College of Arts and Crafts or did you meet her in some other way down there?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, her husband [Roi Partridge--Ed.] was at-- what school? Yes, he was there, wasn't he? And she was living at the time in Oakland. That's where I got acquainted with her, actually. She was a marvelous friend all these years.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: About ten years ago I remember on the campus at the University of Washington there was a movement, or there were a lot of discussions, at least, regarding the possibility of changing the administrative structure of the various schools-- like the School of Music, the School of Art, and so forth. And that takes me to a broader subject, distinctions between the professional art school and the university art school. Now you've already touched on some of that by your statements about the wonderful diversity of material that you found at the University of Washington. Do you want to elaborate on that at all?

RUTH PENINGTON: I don't know whether there's much more to say except to describe the University of California system. I was there as a visiting professor for one semester and I had been down there during a summer session. A number of our people who had taught or had come from the University of Washington were involved there at the time. The basic training there had been "fine art" such as you got in Yale and some of these other schools in the east, where art history, and sculpture, painting and architecture were the fields. Nothing that had anything to do with textiles, metal or woodworking had any standing. Dr. Lila Morris O'Neale was teaching courses in the history of textiles, for instance. And someone else was teaching some courses in the history of metal or something. Then they got these laboratory classes in as a part of their lecture series. And that's where they brought in a few people who were really practicing designers and craftsmen to teach.

I taught one summer. There was a small spot in the basement where there was some jewelry equipment and I was asked to come down and teach because this jewelry section was part of another course. It was not given academic credit. The people who were going out to teach had to have it, but they couldn't have it as part of their academic credit. The same thing happened in textiles-- you had people like Lena Miller, who did marvelous things-- and in textile design. But it had to be a laboratory section of Lila O'Neale's History of Textiles or something of this kind, a finagling to get anything beyond the strict fine arts into the curriculum...

[Tape 1; side 2]

RUTH PENINGTON: ...these so-called craft classes are now not at the university as such. They have all been put out into the schools which started out as state colleges, like Davis-- the agriculture school-- and at junior colleges around in the communities which have marvelous art departments. The tremendous growth of all these wonderful things going on in the California area and San Francisco were shoved aside from the university and put out in these other fields. That's maybe what you're thinking about and it's what we've fought at the University of Washington. Never really had to do it-- I mean we started out the other way, you see, with all of them [craft classes--Ed.] a part of the system, with credit, and they led to whatever degrees were appropriate. Whether this is part of the thing that's going on now, I don't know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But there have been a lot of changes in the last-- what-- two years at the university as far as the so-called craft...

RUTH PENINGTON: I don't know. Have there...? Well, there's some of these professional courses that they've just recently tried to get rid of, and don't ask me to comment on those, because this is something that I really am not involved in, but I feel very strongly that it is a very strange way of providing an education for people if you

don't have anything to do with the humanities and the arts. Which is one of the things that seems to be happening at the university. Professional courses such as interior design having been dropped completely-- a valuable and flourishing department completely closed out because of some dictum from above. So I don't know anything about it. I mean, this is one of the things that's kind of hard to deal with. Hard to take. Art history has been developed much more completely than it was earlier, so that it's a very going concern.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: As I recall the history of art, although there were survey courses for many years with very large student body registration in those courses, it seems to me that it really didn't get going until about 1968 or '69, something like that, and has developed tremendously within 14 years.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes, it has. And I don't know, my own feeling is that we do not have in this community resources for real serious study of art history, except in a few instances, compared with what Chicago has or what New York City had, or European centers have.

And there's one of the things about the art field; it's not like music, in which if you have the score and a competent performer, you can have the same music no matter where. If you want to study a great work of art, getting a little chopped-down reproduction in a book-- half of the painting of Sacred and Profane Love is given to you as an example in the history books in a small black-and-white thing... You have to go where they are in the museums, and the museums are not in Seattle, all of them. And there, I think, is one of the reasons why I've never felt that the art history area had enough resources here to develop like it should. It's easier just to learn about stuff out of a book and get a bunch of slides. And every time you look at the same slide by somebody else it's a different color or a different something else. It's nothing like going and standing in front of the painting and looking at it. But you can't travel to Paris or to Istanbul very easily. So, I don't know that it needs to be a field that you feel has to be so huge-- expanded so-- but I don't have anything to say about it, in fact. But that's the way I feel about it. I mean, I have certainly been helped and have enjoyed and loved all the work I've done in art history and when I'd go to someplace in Europe and stand in front of the Pieta and the Louvre, it meant something, but something more that I ever could have gotten from reading about it in a book. Now, I can't afford to go there very often, but I've taken every chance I had to look at everything I could see. And what I know about art history has made me know what to look for. And the great, marvelous books that we have in the library-- that is another thing that we had access to, a very good art library, as it's been built up-- but that's just my opinion. But you can get the piece of material, you can get a hunk of clay, and you can build no matter where you are. And I think that's my answer to what I feel about building up art history. I don't know how much these people-- I had a student come in and wanted to write a -- no, she was working. She'd gotten a master's degree in some school down in the Southwest and her thesis was-- what, I don't know-- but I asked her about her sources. She had two books to study, to read, to write this thesis from. Now, if that isn't stupid, I don't know what is.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And she got her degree.

RUTH PENINGTON: She got her degree. She didn't know anything about art.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Let's talk about your own professional career, Ruth. I wanted to ask you how you decided to go into the field of metal. We didn't talk about that.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, I hate to say it, but I think it was partly happenstance. I mean I wanted to go in. The reason I took the work in the first place-- in high school I'd had some ceramics, and in the university, the teaching program involved taking metalwork or ceramics. That is, we had to get a little technique. I'd already had some ceramics, so I opted for metalwork and jewelry. And I was a little bit stupid at that time and signed up for an upper-division course as a second-year student. And thank goodness I did, because the teacher, who was very fine, let me come in the course. The next year she was gone, and the person who took her place knew nothing at all about it. I'm being very hard on this, but it was true. So I had had very good training, and I just knew this was one of the things I really wanted to do. You get a chance with your hands, and work in the thing, and it was what I wanted. So, when the position became vacant later on, I was asked to start in and work with it. That's why I went in and got some more training wherever I could.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Someplace I read a comment by you to the effect that there was a fairly decent studio for you to practice in and that this may have helped to inspire you.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes, well, the people who had been there before knew what they were doing and they had good equipment. You couldn't take, you know, a very long major in it or anything of that kind, but the training I got-- proper use of tools and the use of the material and the techniques and all-- were accurately taught. I was not behind in that. I just didn't have the four years of experience that I might have had in a trade school.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: The record of your teaching positions at the university: you have been instructor in 1929, assistant professor in 1937, associate professor in 1943, and full professor in 1951. And as I understand it, you set up the Industrial Design Department right after you had received your degree and started teaching as an

instructor in 1929.

RUTH PENINGTON: No, it didn't start that soon. I had been encouraging the people. Actually, what happened is that I had started working with some idea of industrial design because Gilbert Rohde-- who was an industrial designer, one of the early ones, in New York-- had been asked to come. This is another thing as an aside-- we were put in contact with people, visiting professors, all the way through-- people like Archipenko... So Gilbert Rohde was there for a year teaching in industrial design. And I went in and worked with some of his classes. I had worked in some of the engineering courses and foundry and in machine work and then things of that kind and industrial things. So this came along during the Second World War and we needed training in those kind of courses. I had set up courses in the art department for blueprint reading and things of that kind that they wanted to help people get into the defense industries. And we had taught those. So, when this opportunity to study with Rohde came along, I went in and worked with him. And then I had a leave of absence-- or actually a summer that I went east for study. I don't know that I was in any one school, but I found that I could go into his studio and work as a designer in his studio during that summer, so I asked for a leave for the next term and stayed there most of the year. When it ended-- this was just the end of the Second World War-- I came back by way of California because I had the summer assignment there.

But after getting back into this area and into the university and the teaching again, it seemed to me that this was one of the things that we could set up in the art department rather than turning it over to engineering or architecture. We could set up this industrial design curriculum for the people who were coming back from the wars. You know, it's one of those things that they come in and needed training; they could come to school. We had all the various engineering departments available; we had the architecture available; we had drafting; we had all these fields related to their needed training right here. And so, in working with the other departments getting the curriculum set up, I did do this. We enrolled students in the beginning engineering courses and drafting and they took things of that sort that were already set up. And that, again, is the advantage of course of having been in the university. So, I can remember one-- well, just last year they invited me-- the Industrial Design Association of our region, which included some of these first students that I'd had in this industrial design course. They were putting on a testimonial dinner for the man who came in, whom I recruited, who had been the head designer for Boeing down here for all these years.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Now what was his name?

RUTH PENINGTON: Frank Del Giudice. He had come from the east-- what was the name of the company? I forgot. Anyhow, he ended up the head of the company, but he's had this Boeing contract all these years. However, all of these people came for this testimonial dinner-- I mean a memorial-- t'wasn't a memorial, pardon me.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Not yet.

RUTH PENINGTON: And they invited me and they invited the head of the department. So these fellows came up, you know. Hadn't seen them for twenty years [and they'd say], "Well, I remember when I came to this school and I looked over and wondered what I could take and I looked over that curriculum and I thought that's for me-- that's got business administration, that's got engineering, that's got art, that's got all these fields. That's what I want." You see, it was a course that was really very useful to them and we got people who were working in the field to come in and teach the major courses. So I did actually set it up. I got it through, you know. You had to go through all this rigamarole in the university of getting a course approved as a degree course. I didn't teach in it very long, but I did teach part of it at the beginning. So that was fun.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You've touched a little bit on industrial design, but I wonder if we could talk a little more about what is industrial design, how it got started in this or the last century, and why that was.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, it goes back to that division of things in industry and the craftsman not being the same thing. And, of course, I suppose the Bauhaus was one of the originators of these things. For the most part, these people were trained as architects and then began working with industry, to help them out.

In 1952 when I spent six weeks working in one of the silversmithing shops in Copenhagen, one of the men that I met to start with was an industrial designer and he could give me information about the shops and the people that he was working with. But I went and worked in the A. Michaelson shop, at the bench in the silversmithing shop. They had an industrial designer, a woman, who was there. And the manager said to me at one time, "This woman, she's a good designer, she has all the training that they could give in the good schools there." He said, "She's worked with us for four years and now she begins to understand what we need in the way of design." Now, this is the problem, you see, and this man that I had contact with was a silversmith as well as an industrial designer. At that time, they were just beginning to decide that the European system should have a little more of what the American system had of giving their workers training in design. These were men who could make anything you put in front of them. They were skilled craftsmen, but they knew nothing about design. They were beginning to have the employers allow them to take part-time off and learn design and drawing, drafting, things

of that kind. Which is what we had been doing all the time. Their system, of course, was to separate the kids-- the sheep from the goats, I guess. I don't know. By the time they're twelve years old they have to decide whether they're going on to the university for the learned professions or whether they're going to go into the shops and learn a trade. So these young men and older ones who were in that shop got their general education at night in the evening schools and they worked in the shops all day. And they can do anything. But they needed this other training and they were beginning to feel this there. This was interesting to me to see that that was the way it was going there. Our schools had been doing this. At least many of our universities had been giving that kind of training to start with. So, I guess I'm off the track of...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, no, you aren't.

RUTH PENINGTON: But the industrial designers, for the most part, started out with the idea that they came from the design side of it that was involved with architecture to begin with. I think those were mostly the people who were trained that way.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: This is like Gropius you mean, and the Bauhaus?

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes, and those people. And then they started working with materials and machines-- design for machines. When I was over in this conference in Vienna a couple years ago-- big schools and all there had shows up, you know, and this one was in modern art, metalwork and jewelry. And I swear those things were, I don't know, twenty years old as far as the design, or thirty years old. They still had things where the sculpture looked like bathroom fixtures and things of that kind. They were going at it still from that standpoint in the industrial design end of it. Well, that's one way of going, you know. And the shows were marvelous things, but they were sterile. They didn't have any of this feeling of personal things that you're apt to get if you get a craftsman who knows both sides of it and starts out and lets not only the job he's got to do, but the material itself, his knowledge of the material, and his own feelings dictate what's going to happen. Of course if they're designers for industry they have to know the machines. They have to know what they can turn out for the cheapest price and what they can sell thousands of things. They don't want to do it...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And they have to know a lot about the function, too.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yeah, sure. You have to know this. But I felt that their show was pretty sterile. There were a few people who were doing something else. Well, that's one way of going at it. And pots and pans that we have now are some very handsome objects, you know. But I don't want to wear jewelry-- that kind of jewelry-- all the time, really.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Would you say that the main difference between the arts and crafts movement and the Bauhaus would be that William Morris of the arts and crafts movement was rejecting completely the machine and wanting to go backwards, where the Bauhaus-- after at least the earliest stages-- was beginning to embrace the machine and trying to find a way to integrate the design and the machine?

RUTH PENINGTON: I suppose so. Because the industrial period, from which William Morris rebelled, of course, didn't stress design, really. I mean when you think of some of the awful things that were made because they were made that way first in wood, they were made that way by hand someplace, and so they turned them out by machine by the millions. That didn't have anything to do with design. They're just copying whatever they could lay their hands on. On the other hand, they do have to know what the machines will do in order to work with it. They have to have a certain amount of sensitivity and we inhale all the things that... One of the eyeopeners that I remember now was the Chicago Fair and then the San Francisco Fair, in which beautiful things that were done in Scandinavia came to the attention of the American public-- textiles and jewelry and things of that kind. They were based-- really grew out of this folk tradition with people who knew how to put them into production and how to do something a little bit further.

And things that Dorothy Liebes was doing with textiles. Designers in the big factories in the east have thousands of volumes of patterns that have already been done over the history of design, and they can get a book and take this piece out of that one and this piece out of the next one and turn out fabrics that'll sell. And Dorothy Liebes was down there with her rooms full of weavers who were doing things for jobs. There's always a couple of yards on the end of the warp to experiment with, and she would supervise that part of it. But wonderful things were happening. Now that was a new approach that probably grew out of-- maybe influenced by-- the Scandinavian things, which were the old home things, you see. Those things influenced the things we saw here. We got them in-- what was it, 1930? At the Chicago Fair, it was.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: We talked a little about the University of California at Berkeley and their design department and the problems you had seen there. You had a visiting professorship there in 1945 and 1947?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, it was a summer I was there to handle summer class. And then I came in as a visiting professor for a whole term, or the next year, or something like that.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Was Ed Rossbach there at that time or did he come later?

RUTH PENINGTON: He came later, I think. I don't think he was there. Lena Van Puymbroeck Miller was there. She was one of our U of W graduates and one of our former faculty people. But when she married Robert Miller, who was also on the faculty, she ran up against this rule that they had then that the two...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: No nepotism.

RUTH PENINGTON: Nepotism. That they couldn't teach-- no matter what their field was. So they both left, and he became the head of the California Museum in San Francisco and she went onto the university faculty in Berkeley.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Before we go on to another visiting professorship, I'm thinking about Ed Rossbach. You were at the University of Washington on the faculty when he was there as a student.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes, he was one of my students.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: What do you remember about Ed Rossbach?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, he was a fine guy. He could do anything. He did some beautiful metalwork. He was good at anything as far as I know. But I do remember one remark he made after he was down there in Berkeley for a while and was teaching down there. He said, "You know, when I was there at the school, I didn't realize how good it was."

LAMAR HARRINGTON: He could do anything. And everything he did had great beauty and a lot of vitality.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. I thought so.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: He even did some ceramics, I think I heard.

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh, yeah, he did all, you know, the usual things. Phil McCracken, who was-- I don't know whether he was in school about the same time or not, but he's a sculptor. I met him in the post office. He lives up in Anacortes part of the time. Put his arm around me. "Well," he said, "you know, I don't think I ever did tell you how much I got out of that jewelry class that you taught." I just loved to have him in the class. He hadn't gotten into painting and he and Walter Isaacs couldn't get along at all. Walter thought he was no good at all and he thought Walter was no good, I guess. Came into the jewelry class. He could do just beautiful pieces of jewelry just as soon as he found out what the technique was. Why he just took off, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And many of his pieces have a monumental feeling, I think.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, that's what's been part of the fun in being in on the university faculty with this kind of work, you know. Small studio classes and shops, you get acquainted with all these people and it's all very informal. You see them again and they're doing wonderful things. It's great.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You went to the University of Alaska for a workshop or as a visiting professor in 1953. What was that about?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, they asked me to come up and teach design and jewelry to their courses. They had an art department that was primarily under home economics, teaching courses for teachers that went out into the far, small villages, you see. So they came in during the summer. I don't know whether it was one of these government-sponsored things or not. But the university had that course set up and they had some equipment and someone who was teaching crafts, I think. I guess I shocked the woman who was the head of the department. She wasn't teaching then; I was the only one teaching. But one of the first things she wanted to know-- she was a home economics person, and she wanted to know what my text was. I said, "Text!" I was teaching a design class. I didn't have a text. From then on, she didn't know what I was doing at all. I was just giving the beginning design. Then they asked me to do some jewelry and I did that. And the students had a chance to find out what it was all about.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I would think that in 1953 in Alaska, especially with your background by that time, which was quite rich, that it must have seemed very arid up there in the resources available to the students.

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh, I don't know. The students that came in, of course, were teachers who had worked other places. I wasn't working with the students there. They hadn't had too much background. And most of them, as I say, it was under home economics; they'd had that much of it, but they hadn't had an art background at all, really. You just take people where they are and you give them the material and the tools and see what they can do. And I know that they learned a lot about it, because going out to the smaller school in the remote villages, they didn't have very much equipment, you know, most of them. But they could have a different approach to what they did with it.

Wasn't very arid, it was very hot in Fairbanks, frankly. Ninety degrees and they had the first circus they'd ever had up there and everybody came, you know, here's the first time they'd ever seen a horse, these kids. The first circus that was ever up there, and they brought in all these kids from the remote areas by airplane.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I think it gives you a very good idea of the needs of human beings when you have something to offer and you go out to some other place where the resources are not so great, to see the way they absorb what you're able to give them and how happy they are to...

RUTH PENINGTON: Yeah, it just made a lot... They didn't complain at all, you know. They were really [intrigued].

LAMAR HARRINGTON: It makes life worth living.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, it was quite different down here. It was a little harder on the head of the department [who happened by]-- I guess to look in to see what I was doing, I don't know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Let's talk about some of your faculty colleagues-- since the time you began teaching. The School of Art had a very large faculty. I don't know how it compares with other universities, but...

RUTH PENINGTON: I don't know how it is now, either, of course. We did have a big group of people.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But in the sixties and fifties, it was quite large, wasn't it?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well it seems-- I can't remember...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, the sixties was the time when our university and others, too, went through big building splurges and things were developing then.

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh yes, and we had upsets of various kinds. We got more and more equipment, which was nice. Not as much as they have now, but enough to do a lot of work with hand things and not so much with machines. There was more studio space, more shop space, more things of that kind so that the interior design people had a chance to make furniture as well as to look at it and draw pictures of it. And the printmaking, and the printing, and the papering, and you know, the painting, sculpture, all of them developed. I mean, there were lots of people there, more and more. And of course, ceramics got a nice big new place. I don't know what time these things came on.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, that would have been in the sixties, I think.

RUTH PENINGTON: Would it? When was all the upset? Was that in the sixties? Seventies?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You mean the political upset?

RUTH PENINGTON: Yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That would have been, I think in the middle sixties, late sixties, something like that.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yeah. Well, it didn't bother our students particularly, you know, that part of it. They kept on coming. I know my studio had windows around three sides of it and was sticking out by itself and I kind of wondered when they decided they were going to shut down the university whether the students would [be damaged]...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You're talking about the rebellions of the students on campus. That happened on our campus-- at the University of Washington-- in 1969 and 1970.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yeah. Well, I was just thinking about that kind of thing. But for the most part, the art department didn't suffer from that part about it, like some schools did. The university was pretty lucky.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: During that period, especially in the so-called "craft field," some of your colleagues were-- well, we'll talk about some of your students a little bit later...

RUTH PENINGTON: We should talk about you and what you were doing down at the Henry Gallery, because this is one of the things that was terribly important at that earlier period.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, that had to do with exhibitions.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yeah. Do you want to do that later?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I'm trying to be very organized here.

RUTH PENINGTON: Okay. Because that was the beginning of those big shows that we had that were a very great help to people.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Let's talk some about your teaching philosophy. We've touched on a lot of it in the various things that you've discussed so far, but let's talk a little more specifically. You've mentioned the advantages of being a designer-craftsman. Do you have some comments you could make just about art? What you see as the purposes of art-- not only jewelry or crafts, but the entire spectrum of art.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, of course it is, I suppose, for the artists a matter of expression just as any other field, and this is the thing that the artist is involved with and needs the training for and experience and chance to observe. And another one of the things Walter used to say: you learn art from art. You've got to see it, you've got to be with it, you've got to be a part of it. This is the advantage of a school, or you can go to a museum and study or be in a community where art is going on all the time. Well, I taught general design, painting, and drawing, and things of that kind. The art education-- I didn't teach in any of those fields, and there might have been a little antagonism between my feeling about teaching the courses I did in design-- because I taught textile design, as well as these interior things. I had some experience in working with designers in the East on that score. And the home economics field of textile design and all those resources were open to us-- this was another one of the nice things about the school.*

*[Interviewer offers the following version, based on additional conversation--Ed.]

This is the advantage of being part of a university-- or you can go to a museum and study or be in a community where art's going on all the time. My teaching at the university involved courses in general design and design of printed fabrics, but principally metal and jewelry design. I didn't teach any of the art education courses, perhaps because I feel that the teacher should know the medium, whatever, instead of just passing a few problems on to students. For the textile design program, our students had a close tie-in with the School of Home Economics and its courses in the history of textiles and techniques. Its study collection and resources were open to art students. So were those of the anthropological museum. We were on good terms with the Colleges of Architecture and Engineering, and with mining engineering and the Seattle Art Museum. This was another one of the nice things about the School of Art at the University of Washington.

[End of interviewer's version]

So I just feel that anything, any medium-- if you know something about the medium-- it is a way of expressing yourself. And it makes its influence on the people that see the completed thing. It's not always a thing that they understand, either. They don't know exactly what you've done that makes it useful, or that makes them like it, or that makes them feel comfortable with it or not comfortable with it. As an artist and a trained designer, you need to be able to figure out those things, too. The person, for instance, for whom you're designing has to be consulted; and this is one of the things that I sometimes find [difficult]. They just decide that they're going to do it this way or else they abandon all thought of whether it's anything they want. There's those two aspects of it. Call in a designer to do some work and tell you exactly what they want done. Well, that's no help either. Or call you in and say, "Well, you just do it." There has to be an interchange of ideas. In other words, no matter if it's painting a room or whatever you have certain given facts: what sets you off; what makes you start; why do you want to do this; why are you going to do it in the first place. Somebody wants you to do it or you want to do it yourself. But it's like the first line on the canvas. The thing that starts you thinking is what are the requirements? What am I supposed to be doing? What am I trying to achieve, and how do I go about it? What are my materials? What will my materials do? Which ones will I choose? Is that anything that I-- what I'm talking about...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Absolutely. Walter Isaacs on the occasion of one of your major solo shows, this one in 1962 at the Henry Gallery, wrote you a letter. I don't know if you remember it.

RUTH PENINGTON: I cherish it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: He said, "It's as if metal were clay in your hands. You have risen above the difficulties of the craft and have reached expression." Well, I think what you're talking about now-- that's the part where you're rising above the difficulties of the craft.

RUTH PENINGTON: You have to know that. But you don't have to be a virtuoso, necessarily. Obviously, you have to have some drive to get in to do this. And depending on how hard and difficult your material is-- clay is very easy, you can push it around, but you can't push a piece of marble around like that.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: No, but it is amazing to see a jeweler actually work on metal. Metal, to me, has always seemed an invincible material; and when I saw someone work on it, I couldn't believe how malleable it was...

RUTH PENINGTON: And malleable it is...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: ...in the expert's hands.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. And that's one of the things you have to give students an idea of. There's what they can do with it. What it will do. You have to know the techniques and you have to know the material before you can express anything. And if you know all of this and you have enough of the drive, then expression is easy enough. But maybe you don't have anything to say.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And that's the expression part.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Another thing that has a lot of mystery in it for me is the differences between two-dimensional and three-dimensional art and how certain artists decide that they're going to go one way or the other. Is there something in us that's innate that leads us toward a two-dimensional or a three-dimensional kind of work? I know that while I have a great appreciation, I think, for all art, and music, and dancing, there is something about three-dimensional art that really turns me on as compared to the flat surface. And I don't know why that is with me. Do you have any pet theories about that?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, no, I don't. Of course I've worked in both those. I don't know how successful I've been, but I didn't go into textile design, for instance. I had some experience and think of all these wonderful things you can do to the fabrics and the yarns and all of these things. But I feel better with the other; maybe this is what you're talking about.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, you know, you can look at a painting and you can almost feel the contours of whatever is shown in the painting-- even if it's an abstract painting-- with your eyes. But being able to pick up some object that's three-dimensional-- no matter whether it's a smooth, organic kind of rendition or even if it's a more constructed kind of thing geometrically. There's something wonderful about picking up something in your hand and holding it there and looking at it and touching it.

RUTH PENINGTON: And conversely, it's practically impossible to jury a piece of work of that kind from a slide. It's the same thing, but you need to experience the object itself, really.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You know, I have another question here. I thought recently a lot about diluting creative expression or the creative impulse with such factors, for instance, as commercialism. I definitely feel that the minute that you get away from the art as art, it's diluting it in some way. Now I'm not saying that that's always a bad thing; but it does seem to me that commercialism, for instance, the desire to create something that is going to make a living for an artist, is a tough thing for the artist. Do you agree with that?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, it's a touchy thing, but I immediately thought of the Parthenon, which was built for a temple for such-and-such a thing and had to house certain things, and they had to work with the stone, and it had to all be done because you knew what the material would do, and that it was a certain use. And it's a great work of art. I don't think you can divide it that way, but I do think that is a very difficult thing to have to work with. If the artist knows his material and medium and is given any choice at all-- and it isn't dictated to him completely-- then he ought to be able to take that as one of the factors that he has to consider in his total thing. It doesn't always happen and if you're doing it and just turning it out, you know, making money on it, you may not have the time to do it. People are lost.

[Tape 2; side 1]

RUTH PENINGTON: If you have the final say on this work, any of these factors are simply part of the problem. The thing I can remember, I suppose it's a tradition in the profession: a designer from Rohde's was making furniture for a famous furniture company, and he wanted to do radio cabinets. So he did the best things he could do, the best designs, and they laid them all out and made the choices on the basis of what they thought was going to be the best design. And then they wanted the owner's wife, who had good taste, to look them over, and she chose the final ones that she thought would be the best. And they took them back to the shop and manufactured the discards.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: The same thing then would apply to other aspects of art. Things that have to be worked into it-- such as function, the business of the emphasis on the material and the technique-- those are all aspects that you need to think about in the total work.

RUTH PENINGTON: Total thing, yes. And I personally don't feel that a work of art should have to have a written explanation. I think it should say what it has to say...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: On its own.

RUTH PENINGTON: ...on its own, so that you don't have to explain too much. And I do think that this is what happens if people can rid themselves of preconceived ideas. People are educated no matter what. Whether they're educated to something that's valuable and useful and whether it's good or not. They expect what they're used to seeing. If it's something different, it's a threat and it may be much better, you tell them that, but it doesn't mean a thing to them. So they have to experience it themselves. The artist who's doing it, supposedly, is a person who has trained sensitivity. He may not even have the technique he really needs, but he knows what he wants. He knows the direction he wants to go. The sensitivity is there. So, I don't see what difference it makes what medium you use.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: We have about five more minutes on this session, and I wonder if we could speak a little bit about the problems and the joys, really, of the teacher in encouraging creativity and originality in students. Now, I know that here again, you probably would say, "That needs to speak for itself."

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, yes, but if you set up too much of a rigid line and don't try to explore what the person has in their own approach to things, then you've lost what's good... Where you get your inspiration, of course, it comes from many sources. Maybe from teachers or maybe from what your fellow students are doing, the pleasure of being in a studio situation with other people. I was riding down the street in the spring in the University District with-- dear, I can't think of her name now-- one of the people on the faculty who was a very fine-- Florence Wood-- and we went past a yard that was full of azaleas. And she said, "My, what a wonderful combination of warm and cool reds." That opened up, for some reason, a whole thought about color to me. Now there was no teaching in that and I had been studying color, but that particular idea had never hit me. Now that's teaching; I mean it's where you get ideas. You know, how do you get them? You have to see a lot if you're an artist, because this is what the visual thing is-- it's what you're all about in most cases in art.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And the person who sees all that in everyday life-- and thinks about it-- is the person what is going to make the best teacher?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, yeah, probably. And you get people, you see youngsters, you know; what can they do, and they're not afraid of trying it. But you get to a certain stage, and I find it here, for instance, since I'm trying to work with the decorating committee in this...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: In Horizon House.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. We're doing something else and I came in one time, and one of the first things I did after I was asked to help was to set up a slightly different arrangement of a group of four chairs out here. They were lined up vertically and horizontally with a table in between them. Two people sat facing two people inside the entry. I turned it 45 degrees so one chair was on each corner of this table. And it's in the same position, but it opened up the whole room. People coming into the entrance, well, you know, this brings you in. Now all I did was to turn that square 45 degrees into the room. [A person may say he's doing something in a certain way because] it's always been done this way. You see this business of tradition is one thing-- you've got to get some new ideas going occasionally. And kids or young people are apt to be a little more open, but not necessarily. Depends on how much they've had. So the thing that really is hard to know is just how far you can push people. You can't. You have to show them things, you have to talk about them, and give them the chance to explore it. You have to give them the techniques. All you can really do is teach the techniques and the use of the material.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, this has been wonderful, Ruth, and I think we'll close for today and go at this again another day.

DATE: FEBRUARY 11, 1983

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Today is February 11, and we'll resume the interview with Ruth Penington. Just before we started the tape recorder today, Ruth was talking again about her belief that a work of art should stand up on its own without a lot of interpretation. And you were giving some examples, Ruth, of works of art that have inspired you.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, I simply feel that the medium in which the artist is expressing himself is a medium which should speak for what he has to say. If he's a poet, he uses words, rhythm and whatnot. If he's a sculptor he uses form that is visible-- it can be touched and felt. One experience that I had that was very impressive on my mind was a hurried trip at the end of the day ahead of the closing guard in the British Museum. And suddenly in a small room, I came up against a big, solid piece of marble and I wondered what it was. I was way over my head. I looked up and at the top was the most beautiful form. The experience, the emotional impact of this form sitting on top; all I could see was a part of it. It was a wonderful shape and a wonderful form; and, of course, I immediately backed off far enough to see what it was. It was the hindquarters of a great Assyrian lion on top. This was a direct impression from the object that came without any explanation. It didn't make any difference whether it was an Assyrian lion or something else, but it was there to be experienced. I think if a work of art is strong enough, this is what happens. You go into certain rooms and you get certain feelings. I was, again,

impressed at one time at the guide who was showing us through a church in Russia. She said, "Of course, I'm an atheist and I don't believe in all of this." But she said, "Whenever I go into one of these churches, I get a very strange and tremendous feeling." This is the thing that a great work of art can do. The architect, the builder-- whether it's an architect or not-- the traditional forms, or whatever, were there for certain purposes, to express certain things and they do. I think it's impossible -- not necessarily impossible, but very difficult-- to have to translate work in one medium into another. I didn't need anyone to explain to me Mozart's Requiem when I remember hearing it in England in one of the Three Choirs Festivals in this great cathedral. I was in behind the organ, behind the choir and the ambulatory, so I didn't see anything, just the music was coming through in this great gothic cathedral and it was tremendous. It simply overwhelmed the whole church and everything there. This was a work of art. That's all you can say. It didn't have to be explained in any other terms. The artist knows how to express the thing he wants to express in his medium. This is what a great work of art should do. Not all of us have great works of art, but, whether it's a question of texture and feeling it-- something you can feel with your hands-- or you can judge it by your eyesight or whatever it might be-- it might be the sound. But I don't think it should have to be interpreted in terms of another medium.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You know an interesting thing about those examples that you've just given. Although Mozart is considered to be from the so-called Rococo Period, and he composed during the era of the Gallant style for the salons of society, he was able to compose in a really monumental way. I think that his whole view of life and of music was a monumental kind of view. And it seems to me that the things that you've mentioned-- for instance, the flanks of the Assyrian horse and the Requiem-- those are both really monumental works of art.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And your jewelry-- and your metalwork-- takes on a very monumental quality. It's interesting...

RUTH PENINGTON: You think so?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Absolutely. I think many of your works of jewelry and metalwork do tend to be on a less monumental scale and...

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, of course, you're dealing with the human figure if you're doing jewelry and it has to relate somewhat to the size and scale of the use of the thing. This is always a part of it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But take some of your works-- even if they aren't on a person-- they do have a monumental feeling.

RUTH PENINGTON: That's interesting.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, when we get around to look at some of the photos of your work, I'll tell you which ones they are. And I would say that the majority of them are like that. They do have monumental qualities about them-- if we can come to an agreement about what monumental means.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, I was thinking of the fact that the use that is to be made, of course, is a part of the designer's or the artist's problem coping with the sort of thing that he has to say. He could go into any one of the number of media depending on his skills. He might do the same thing with an entirely different medium. I can think of (I shouldn't perhaps mention it, it's not my own work, so I will just say something about it) a very beautifully made coffee pot that I know of. When I look at this it's a very handsome object sitting on the table; but it is so large and so heavy that by time it gets a couple of quarts of coffee inside of it, I don't see how a person sitting at a table can pick it up with any grace and pour the coffee. So this is one of the factors. Now, if you're looking at it just as a work of art and then you're thinking of, in most cases, the so-called handcrafts that are made for utilitarian purposes as well, which can be beautiful. And if they're properly designed and all, they are beautiful objects. I look at a great many things in museums that I have had an opportunity to see, and I think, "Isn't that the most marvelous shape." It was a useful object but it was beautifully shaped or it was richly decorated, if you want to call it that. Modification of the surface was so that it was a marvelous thing just in itself, as an abstract thing, and yet it was very useful. The kind of expression that you get from various sources-- I think that it's difficult to explain in any other way. I don't think it should have to be, but if you're trying to tell somebody else about it, maybe someone else wouldn't get the same impression that you get at all.

But the one thing that we had mentioned earlier was the experience of going into this church in Istanbul-- not the big major churches, but one which was so-called on the outskirts-- outside the wall. It was just being made available to tourists, and we insisted on going. It was a small church. It was fourteenth century or even earlier and it was a beautiful example of the Byzantine period. All kinds of marble treatment. It had beautiful mosaics, but off to one side was a chapel that was a later period, perhaps. But coming into the end of the chapel looking down to the end, here was the most magnificent painted fresco of the Resurrection that I think I have ever seen. It had the most tremendous sense of force and dramatic quality of everything being brought to a point

explaining the statement that Christ made: "If I am raised up, I will draw all men unto myself." And this was the feeling that you had; it was pulling everything up into it. Tremendous thing. It was unexplained, I don't think you had to know the story in order to feel that. The mosaics were beautiful but they didn't have the expressive quality that this simpler one-- well, I don't know that it was much simpler, but it was a painted fresco rather than a mosaic. This is what I mean by expression. You didn't have to have anybody telling you what it was.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: As far as expression goes, what do you think about artists who use such things as social commentary, political statements, that kind of thing, in works of art?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, I think it's always been done, and especially when the artist was not free just on his own but was doing a commission or something of the kind. He was telling a story, he was magnifying the monarchy, he was doing something that would explain the church. Another little example of this was going into the chapel in Italy. The chapel of Saint Francis. As we went in, there was a group of people from the countryside: father and mother and several children. And this great series of frescoes down the side of the church on either side; I should say, on the life of Saint Francis. The father was taking his family down the side and pointing out to them exactly the story that was being told in these pictures. Just like reading a comic strip is really what he was doing. Well, we went in because we knew that Giotto's paintings were something that we'd never see again.

But he was there reading the story of Saint Francis to the family. Now the fact that he did this, as an illustration, doesn't mean that it wasn't a great work of art. So this is one of the things that I think great artists can do. It doesn't have to be just pure illustration.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yes. The commissioned work of art is another aspect of art superimposed on the artist's expression. And as you said yesterday, it's important for the artist, once having a good artistic base, to be able to work anything in that needs to be worked in. Like functionalism too, I think you were saying.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. Well, I don't think of it being superimposed in that sense, because I think it has to be acknowledged as part of the problem that the artist has to solve in presenting his work. And sometimes the problem is a little less easy to handle, but with a skilled person it can be done. I mean, if it's going to be a teapot and it has a spout and a handle and you want to make a container for liquid, you have to have the spout in a position where it will pour the tea properly into a cup instead of dribble down the side or wander off someplace at the bottom of the pot. These are problems that are technical problems, but it doesn't mean that they can't be solved aesthetically or that they make any less beautiful an object when you get through with it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But in what you're talking about now, you assume that with a teapot that need for it to be well-made functionally is being brought to bear upon the artist from the outside. And in the case of the Giotto mural, that was being brought to bear on the artist by the upper levels of the church. I'm thinking, for instance, of the artist himself, herself, who has a burning message to give to the public and the artist puts it into the art. It isn't being forced upon the artist by someone who's commissioning the art, but it is coming out of that person's inner self: belief of some kind-- a social belief, a political belief. And it would seem to me that that's a little different than the Giotto mural or the function.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, it might be in the sense, I suppose, in how skillful the artist is in presenting this idea in the medium in which he's working and not demanding another means of getting the idea across. Whether it's an emotionally or intellectually felt need for expression of these other things-- not just that he's joyously working in color or something of that kind. This, I think, is a very personal thing.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: It's like the organic inclusion of this idea into the work of art so that the form and concept are all one.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes, you have to consider these two aspects of the form and the concept of the thing. And to have a great work of art they become one, it seems to me. I don't know that necessarily everybody gets to that stage. But if it's a great work of art it certainly has. And you may understand it from a different level; you may like it for a different reason. I mean it's not always possible for everyone to get these ideas on the same level on which the artist is doing them.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But you do feel that it's a valid thing to present those ideas in the art?

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh, yes.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But it needs to be integrated formally into the work.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. I think it needs to be a part of it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I wonder if you would discuss, Ruth, your experiences in some of the workshops that you've participated in. I think the first one would be with Gilbert Rohde, and you've already talked about that

some. He taught at the University of Washington. You apparently studied with him, and then got the idea to go back to his studio?

RUTH PENINGTON: I don't know that it was necessarily the first workshop. It was the first connection, directly, with the industrial design aspect of it. He was teaching at the university, and obviously it was a chance to sit in on this kind of thing and find out what was going on. So when I had the opportunity to go back there on a trip, I looked in on him and found that there was an opportunity to work in his studio just as one of his slaves, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Would that be like a production studio?

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh yes, it was a production studio. Well, what I mean is it was a design studio, and he had furniture contracts with the [Herman--Ed.] Miller Furniture Company and with textile companies and that sort of thing. So I was put on some of those jobs. I had the chance to go and work with the manufacturers and work in the studio, get the designs going, and help supervise it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Would this be furniture design or metal design?

RUTH PENINGTON: Part of it was furniture and part of it was then, textiles. It wasn't metal at the time. But it was getting into the manufacturing and production end of these things which was valuable.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And during that trip was when you had the good opportunity to visit museums and...

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. Oh, and that, by the way, was another time that by working with them... Peggy Rohde had made arrangements with Mrs. Webb to...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Of the ACC [American Crafts Council].

RUTH PENINGTON: ...to try and establish a school. Now this was when Mrs. Webb was first beginning to think about the school for American craftsmen.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Which was part of ACC?

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. So Peggy took me along to be a part of this design exploration team. And we went with Mrs. Webb up the Hudson-- what is the school up there? I can't think of its name right now-- where it was first established for a year.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Was that at Rochester?

RUTH PENINGTON: No. It was-- oh, well, I'll think of it but not right now.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, anyway, it's where the American...

RUTH PENINGTON: Where ACC set up the school for the first year. And Mrs. Webb was looking for a location where she could sponsor this.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And who was Peggy?

RUTH PENINGTON: Peggy Rohde, Gilbert Rohde's wife, who was also one of the designers. So that was a project there. It was the first time I had met Mrs. Webb and it was a very nice experience to do this. Dartmouth was the school that was being investigated. So, after that, of course, I had a chance to meet [people who were active in ACC - LAMAR HARRINGTON]. But that's what got me acquainted with her. We added on some other things later on.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Then in 1947, we mentioned before that you went to Rhode Island School of Design and participated in a workshop with a lot of other jewelers from back East with William Bennett from England as the silversmith.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. He was brought over by this Handy and Harmon, which is a big silver production company in the East. I guess Margaret Craver, who had been working with them as a designer and was from Kansas, from Wichita, had sold them the idea of sponsoring this silversmithing workshop for craftsmen in the various schools to come in and study with this English silversmith. She perhaps had studied with him in England, I'm not quite sure. So we were invited, and the workshop was held at Providence, Rhode Island, in the school there where all the equipment was available. Bennett came over and it was a six-week session and we had people there from Cleveland, Kansas, here, New York, and New England. It was a very nice group of people who were working in the field of silversmithing. And he had ideas, of course, of different techniques than what some of us had picked up before and it was a very useful thing. We made two or three pieces each during that time. A

film was made which was very useful and I used it later on in the classes-- the construction and the technique of handling the material was very useful. The end of the session, they gathered up our pieces and circuited them between the schools where these people had come from. It was a show. It continued on with other people. I think he was there another year and then they brought in a Norwegian or Swedish silversmith and did the same thing later on. It was an expensive job for Handy and Harmon to have done and it was a very great help to the silversmiths around in the school. It got people together and ideas going.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Under Bennett were you doing mostly hollowware?

RUTH PENINGTON: Uh huh. Well, forging, too, hollowware and forging.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But not jewelry.

RUTH PENINGTON: No jewelry.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Then you went later, among a number of trips that you've taken to other countries, with Elizabeth Curtis to Copenhagen and on to Europe. This was in 1952...

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: ...and I believe that is the year you worked in the production workshop of A. Michaelson in Copenhagen. Is that right?

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. I had made contacts-- really through ACC, through some of the designers that I knew and through Mr. Bennett-- getting acquainted with people to meet in Copenhagen, and I made contact with one of the industrial designers who was also a silversmith. We explored the workshops of the different people-- Den Permanente was a wonderful place to start because the work of all the silversmiths was on display in a big permanent collection. So I was able to talk to the management at Michaelson's, which was one of the very good places-- not as large as Georg Jensen, but a complete, not only hand workshop, with jewelry, goldsmithing, silversmithing, and enameling, but a factory that did machine production also. But I was allowed to come in, and that was an interesting thing because there were sixteen silversmiths plus the foreman-- a couple of them-- and a couple of apprentices. And after I visited them in the shop, went around and talked with them, apparently the management thought it would be all right for me to come, but they had to have the workmen vote on me. And they decided I wouldn't be too much of an interruption to their work. They let me come to work with them.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And they were mostly technicians.

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh, yeah. They were highly skilled craftsmen. So I had a seat assigned to me along the bench along with one of the younger men who was busily learning English so I could get along. The main foreman was-- they were both Danish. One of them spoke a little English but hadn't spoken English for a long time and the other one spoke Spanish. That didn't help me too much, either, but we got along, had translations. And the young woman who was acting as their industrial designer spoke very good English, so I got along very well and it was a very pleasant kind of a situation. I had access to all the different parts of the operation and the foreman assigned me a job just as they would an apprentice, to go ahead and make something. And I suggested a couple of things that I'd like to know about, so I sat there all day long. I went in at eight o'clock in the morning-- took my lunch-- and sat through the day through four o'clock or three o'clock in the afternoon. I've forgotten which it was. This was right after the war and of course Denmark was pretty poor yet. So I had taken silver with me-- two or three big pieces of silver-- which I had deposited with them and they issued it to me. And so I got my pieces finished and went to bring them home; I had the silver that was left over I hadn't used, and then I had to pay...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Duty? On your own silver?

RUTH PENINGTON: On my own silver. But it was the work that had been made outside of the country so I had to pay duty on that. It seems a bit silly. Anyhow, that was a very fine experience. And of course that time of the year, it was early spring and in those northern latitudes there was lots of light after I got through school-- I mean after I got through work. So we could see the country and get to all the museums and concerts and restaurants.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You and Elizabeth Curtis, your colleague.

RUTH PENINGTON: My colleague.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Now, during that period you must have learned quite a lot about the Scandinavian industrial design practice and how it related to European and perhaps to American, too.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. Well, this was one of the things that was so fascinating-- did I mention this before?-- that they were at that stage where they were beginning to think that the workmen who were trained in the shops through the apprentice system, and passed all their examinations... And it's a great honor to the shop when

people passed and it was a great disgrace if they failed, you know. I mean it was shop thing. So they had this kind of training. They could do anything. Give them the model or the design and they could make it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Technically.

RUTH PENINGTON: Technically. But they had no training in design or draftsmanship or any of those things. And they were just beginning to think that this was something that they needed to do. So men were being released from the shop by their employers to go to class and learn the art side of it, the design side of it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Which really had not been a practice in Europe, isn't that right?

RUTH PENINGTON: No, it had not been a practice. There were a few people. The designer who helped me get into this particular position, Eric Herlo /w, was a very fine silversmith, but he was also an industrial designer. He'd gone through both processes, and he was one of the people that really felt that this was necessary. So, it was interesting because of course I mentioned that this is one of the things I think has been valuable on our side of the train, that we got both things at the same time.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Much earlier at the University of Washington?

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. So that this is one of the things that we saw coming off in Denmark. It was the same process. But it was a marvelous place to be, of course, because here were all these gorgeous examples-- Viking, and craftsmanship.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: In the museum.

RUTH PENINGTON: In the museum. That museum is something, really. You could hardly imagine it has so much material-- all of these early explorers all over the world, you know. Scandinavians got around everywhere. And of course the ships were sent out by the government, by the king, and there was always part of that treasure that came back and went into the museums. But they had wonderful things from all over. We looked at these things and saw how they were made. You saw this belt that I made. It was in one of the first American national shows. This came out of one of the museums that we saw there in Denmark. I didn't know what it was-- I didn't speak or read Danish, particularly-- but it was a big, thick, about a four- or five-inch-wide belt, it seemed. Not very big around, maybe big enough to go around the waist, and it had stones-- amber-- set in rows. Just a solid mass of these things. And I found out later it was made for some elephant's foot, leg.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Like an ankle bracelet?

RUTH PENINGTON: Like an ankle bracelet from someplace in the Far East. It had come back in [a Viking ship]. This impressed me and so I was thinking of picking up, as I had been doing, the stones that were on the beach where my house was-- which were very hard stones but were polished by the sand and the water, and so had a wonderful, soft thing. I wanted to make them into a belt for myself, using sliding panels on it so that it could be positioned. But it's turned out to be very successful and it got into the first big ACC show-- was that 1953 or '55?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That show went from 1953 to '55. It was the Designer/Craftsman exhibition sponsored by the ACC.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes, and it went through three or four museums in the country. So it went on a circuit and I swear that it was from then on this cult of beach pebbles all over the place, after that belt was shown. It seemed to me that's where it came from. I hadn't noticed them before, but anyhow.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, I think that happens a lot of times when a thing goes around nationally. Could we take a little detour for one moment?

RUTH PENINGTON: Let's get back on the theme?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: We'll go back onto our theme again, but I got to thinking about one of your colleagues at the University of Washington, Paul Bonifas. And the reason I thought about him is because we were talking about the European tradition of the designer and the craftsman being separate, and the fact that when he came to the University of Washington, he had come out of that tradition. We didn't talk about him before and I wondered if you have any remembrances about him or comments about his work or his philosophy.

RUTH PENINGTON: No, I didn't work too much with him except that-- well, I did, too, because he was particularly interested in doing things that were from cast pieces, which was different from what they had been doing at the university. They had been doing hand-built and wheel-thrown things.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Cast ceramic-- is that what it was?

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. I can remember that I didn't really work with him in the studios, particularly. But the things that he did-- well of course, he worked in metal, didn't he, too-- bronze.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yes. Ann Hauberg has quite a wonderful piece he did in bronze. Well, let's go ahead. I think we should talk about some of your many services to organizations. The first, and I suppose most important and perhaps the longest sustained kind of service, would have been to ACC-- American Craftsmen's Council.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, possibly. I thought it was something that I enjoyed a lot. When I first met Mrs. Webb, who was the sponsor of ACC, really, supporter, I began to get acquainted with it that way. At one time, her idea of trying to get the museums interested in the crafts and the work of the American craftsman was sort of a strange approach for many of them. They would exhibit paintings and sculpture and things of this kind, but the idea of putting on an exhibition of the work of craftsmen hadn't apparently gone very far. And she felt that this was something that should be done. Apparently it had come in after seeing these wonderful things from the Scandinavian countries and the World's Fair and things of that sort. So it was a time when people felt that this was important and she was able to convince these museum directors and get them going on the project of a circuit of craftsmen, of the big competition of getting people from all over the country and them displaying this in three or four of the big museums to start with. It really got people kind of aroused to the fact that maybe this was something a museum could...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Could validly show.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yeah. And so the Philadelphia Museum and the Brooklyn Museum and the Chicago Art Institute and the San Francisco Museum were in on this. But this was one of the opportunities I had to get acquainted with these people, because I was asked to come to some of those preliminary discussions where we tried to figure out how it could be done, including the first conference in Asilomar, which Mrs. Webb sponsored. And it grew from that with the knowledge of what was going on in different parts of the country.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Now that first conference that you went to, which had to do with trying to integrate museums with crafts, was sponsored by the ACC's Educational Council.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, I suppose it might not have even been ACC at that point.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, it was.

RUTH PENINGTON: I guess it really was.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: The reason that I know that is because there is a wonderful folder out in the Records Center at the University of Washington that has the minutes of that conference, which was held at Chicago Art Institute, in 1954. And it tells about your involvement in that. Was that one of Mrs. Webb's pet projects-- the Educational Council?

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh yes.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Now, that apparently did a lot of good at that time with these various major museums that you've just mentioned. Today, there are still some major barriers, apparently, to getting crafts into the museums. And I wondered if you have any pet theories about where the basic problem is.

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh, dear.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: For instance, is it the problem of more education? Is it that curators and directors have not been exposed enough to the wonders of handcrafts and their material and expressive qualities? Is the problem that art critics are not educated along those lines or that art history departments are not giving any courses in the history of crafts?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, I think it's probably a combination of these things. The anthropological museums, you know, have wonderful collections. Going through the Field Museum or some of the museums in Chicago and New York, you see all these beautiful things. They don't mind showing things that the archeologists have dug up. But it's been awfully hard to convince some...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: The Museum of Modern Art? They have an Industrial Design Department...

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: ...but not a craft emphasis.

RUTH PENINGTON: No, no. No, no, not that! But the fact that there were contemporary things of value, in addition to the beautiful objects the anthropologists have dug up.

[Tape 2; side 2]

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Let's discuss the ACC conference. There was Asilomar-- that would have been 1957-- which was sponsored by ACC, and there were a number of conferences after that. One at Lake Geneva...

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes, I enjoyed that one.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: ...in 1958. And Lake George in 1959, and then in Seattle in 1961. You were very much involved with the ACC during all those years as a Craftsman Trustee from the Northwest. And I believe that you were responsible for planning the conference in Seattle which took place in 1961. Is that right?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, I was a Craftsman Trustee from the Northwest at that time. The whole West Coast was considered one big area prior to that. They had a Craftsman Trustee based in San Francisco, but nothing that got up this far north, you see. And I kept feeling that this was one of the things that we should push. We began getting people to come here and hold conferences and join in with our own local groups. And they finally did decide that they could divide up the country into a few more spaces and they gave us the area of the Northwest as separate from the Southwest area. Then I was appointed or whatever-- I guess elected-- Craftsman Trustee from this area, which gave me a chance to get to some of those national meetings and talk with people. I was very much interested in what the Middle West had done. They had very active groups of designer craftsmen and we had developed that kind of a system up here. The meeting here, the program and all, was done by the ACC. But we had to sponsor the whole thing and get it set up so that it was workable. We did have a lot of people and they seemed to enjoy being out here in the Northwest; and, of course, a great many of them were rather surprised to see what we were doing. This is always the problem of getting people to know what's going on someplace else.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: As I recall, that conference had a title involving art and craft as a form of research.

RUTH PENINGTON: I don't remember that.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And we had a show at the Henry Gallery at that time by craftsmen on a national basis. And almost everything that was shown there, you could see at least some aspect of the work of art as an experiment. And one of Peter Voukos's very early works in which he combined wheelthrown forms and hand-formed pieces together with epoxy. I remember that that show was very controversial among the people who attended the conference. Also I remember that there were quite a few so-called fine artists on the panels and also art critics-- including Rudolf Arnheim. I can't think who the others were, but...

RUTH PENINGTON: I don't either.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: ...I remember there was a lot of controversial lecturing going on about what is art and what is craft.

RUTH PENINGTON: They're still arguing about it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yes, they are.

RUTH PENINGTON: They have not accepted it completely. Like at the University.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But it's making progress, wouldn't you say?

RUTH PENINGTON: I wonder.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I think it is.

RUTH PENINGTON: Get a little discouraged sometimes.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You've already mentioned about the ACC Designer Craftsman show that was sponsored by ACC in 1953 and traveled for a couple of years, and the importance of that in getting the work around the country.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. I think that was kind of an eye opener to a lot of people.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Also, while you were involved with ACC, what can you remember about their attempts to get a marketing program going?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, I know that they were trying to do this, but this came a little bit later. I think it more or less came from local efforts-- people in various communities who set up these summer crafts shows, you know, for sale and people who [made it]. And the big one that's there in-- what's the name of the place in upper New

York where they had one for so long? But ACC, of course, had America House going. And that was a part of it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Now the first one was in New York City, is that right? America House.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Then they did a branch, as I recall, in Sun Valley in 1959 and eventually one at Frederick & Nelson in Seattle...

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. They used to have that, didn't they.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: ...in 1964.

RUTH PENINGTON: Forgotten about that. It's a very difficult thing and I think that they probably weren't able to carry it through. Of course, a tremendous amount of support, you see, came from Mrs. Webb. And when the museum there was established, it took a lot of money.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: In New York City?

RUTH PENINGTON: In New York City. Beautiful shows were put on there. But it's like most of these things. It takes a person who's willing to spend the time and the money both, and has both to spend, which, of course, she did for years. This is where she put her efforts. Tremendous person.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You had a long period of service with ACC and in 1976, I believe, you were named Trustee Emeritus and later Fellow.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. When they started that fellowship business that was very nice. I appreciated that. There were only a few out of the whole country that were elected each year, but certainly it was an honor. I was pleased to have it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You've served with a lot of other organizations.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, I was thinking when we were talking about this: the local region of ACC had regional meetings, usually alternately with these national ones. And we had one that we put on ourselves that was really a tremendous thing. We were over in-- was it LaGrande, Oregon? But we'd had Shoji Hamada here as an instructor, and some of the very top people were over there. You got much better acquainted in this small group than you would in a national...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: In a national group.

RUTH PENINGTON: It was really a tremendous thing. So the regional things were really quite important. And we had something down in Portland.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I remember about Hamada being here at that time. It was in 1963. I went also to that conference-- drove him down-- and the delegates to the conference had decided in allegiance to him that they would do a demonstration of raku. Do you remember that?

RUTH PENINGTON: No.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So when we arrived, he got out of the car, and everyone was so proud of the raku demonstration that was about to begin in his honor. And he backed off. When they asked him to be first, he backed off very humbly and said at age, how old was he then, 70, that it would take him a lifetime to learn to do raku, and he didn't do it.

RUTH PENINGTON: I don't remember that little incident. He was a wonderful person to have and the thing that he had to offer to the whole group was personal and still stimulating for everyone there.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That was the year that he did a workshop at the University of Washington for six weeks and many people from here were involved in that workshop. You were involved...

RUTH PENINGTON: I remember when the firing was over-- he and his son, you know, worked on it and they had their own thing. They went into this private room and the next thing we heard were crashes and crashes and crashes of pots. They smashed all the ones that weren't up to their standard. And we stood on the outside and just cringed. We would have loved to have had any one of them.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You know, that's an amazing thing. Do you remember that very year, Patty Warashina and Fred Bauer worked with Hamada very closely, as did Harry Meyers. And, now this is interesting that you say that

Mr. Hamada smashed his pots that he didn't like, because at the Bellevue Fair that year or the year after, when Fred Bauer and Patty had a booth over there, Fred smashed up a lot of his own pots. I wonder if he had ever done that before or perhaps thought it was a good idea...

RUTH PENINGTON: I don't know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: ...because he had a great respect for Shoji Hamada.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. Well, he was [a] wonderful, wonderful man.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You were involved in a lot of other organizations in a service kind of way-- in fact you've been a founder of so many organizations I don't know that I know all of them. But a very important one, which you probably weren't a founder of because it started, I believe, years before you came to the university, would have been Lambda Rho Alumnae, The honorary...

RUTH PENINGTON: I think it started in 1917.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That's the year I was born and I remembered that, yes. What are some things you remember about the services that Lambda Rho did during all those years.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, it was a women's organization and their whole purpose, of course, was to promote the welfare of the artists and the arts.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And it was a School of Art honorary, wasn't it?

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. People were elected to it as they would be to any other honorary. And it's still going strong. People that are around now, sometimes it is more effective than others, but they really did keep things going. Were you at the Henry Gallery that early when they had the first craft show that was sponsored by Lambda Rho?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: No. I came in 1956 and it started in-- we were going to discuss that with the exhibitions...

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh, well, maybe I'm out of line here.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Let's talk about that with the exhibitions pretty soon.

RUTH PENINGTON: Because they had started that kind of thing through Lambda Rho-- that is, getting this Henry Gallery show going. During the Depression, I mentioned this earlier, they had set up workshops for people who didn't have jobs and wanted to keep their business going. And this ran straight through. One of the first exhibitions of contemporary painting came the year I was initiated into Lambda Rho which was in 1925, '26. Lambda Rho was one of the sponsors or groups involved and I was there because I was a pledge in this organization and was over helping serve tea. Paintings that had come from the Armory Show; it was the first time they had that sort of thing in the city. So Lambda Rho was involved in things of that kind. They had sales to make money, of course. One of the first shows of crafts from Scandinavia were things that they imported for a Christmas sale, if I remember. So they were involved in all kinds of things along the way. And they gave scholarships. They assisted with the Henry Gallery shows for so long.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And actually contributing funds...

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh yes, sure, scholarships right straight through...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Not only scholarships, but for awards and exhibitions and so forth.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Some other organizations that I know that you've been involved with were the Seattle Fashion Group and the Washington Arts and Crafts Association, whose purpose was to develop broader markets for craftsmen in the Northwest. You've been involved with the American Association of University Professors...

RUTH PENINGTON: Not very heavily.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: ...the Women's Research Group at the University of Washington.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. Those were the days when only men did research. There was a fine research group that was limited to men. And the women decided this was not right they were not allowed to join this, so they had made their own. This was going on before I came on the scene. But finally, towards the end, the men must have decided that maybe women did research too; and there were two or three of us women they admitted to their...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: To the men's group.

RUTH PENINGTON: And the next year it folded; the women's group kept on going.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So you're saying there was a Women's Research Group at the university as early as 1927 when you came there.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, I wasn't into it at that point. It was after I was on the faculty that I was a part of it. I don't know when it really got started.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But it was formed at least that early.

RUTH PENINGTON: Probably.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Another group is the Northwest Printmakers, and that would have been quite early, is that right?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, it was in the twenties, probably. I'm not sure just when it was, but it included people-- not just university people, but people in the community who were printmakers. And we worked with the Seattle Art Museum, had big shows up there, and international shows. It was always a hassle getting things in from foreign countries without having to pay duties, but we had some very fine shows.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Two other especially important organizations in the Northwest that you've been associated with (and I believe were a founder of each of them) would be Friends of the Crafts, founded in 1965, and earlier, the Northwest Designer Craftsmen, founded in 1954. Do you have any comments about the Northwest Designer Craftsmen?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, yes. It was kind of an outgrowth of seeing what craftsmen in the Middle West and Southwest and other places had been able to do by grouping themselves together, making a professional organization. I felt that this was something that we could use here. It included-- and still does, but not very many people from outside the Seattle area-- but it is intended to be the Northwest area with various representatives. It was a small group that started it and it's still going, all kinds of young people coming into it all the time. But they're working as a professional group. Not a teaching group necessarily, but production. One of the biggest things that they did, I think-- now were you working with the Bellevue group when we started?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I started working on Bellevue in 1951 and it started in '47 or '48.

RUTH PENINGTON: The thing that was a kind of a shock to the community, I think, and what really managed to put it on the map-- they took over one of those whole sections under the canopy that the Bellevue Summer Arts and Crafts Fair had. They gave us the whole thing and we used our own members and designed, planned, and built a complete exhibition space there and exhibited our own things. And it was really an eye opener to the community as to what's going on in this area.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And especially the installation would have been an eye opener because one of the great problems in a fair like the Bellevue Fair is that it's very, very difficult on a small budget to install works so they look decent. So not only from the standpoint of all the works that you included in that, but also the installation must have been...

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, yes. The men, of course, that were involved in furniture design and construction and things of that kind had the facilities and the equipment to build this thing. It was very simply designed. But everyone had craft things. We manned it ourselves; we did all that was necessary. But it was a short time. I mean the fair was only on, what, a week, wasn't it?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Three days, only three days.

RUTH PENINGTON: Three days. But of course we sold an awful lot of work and it really made an impression. And then we did have sales rooms here and there and we had good craftsmen. This was another thing that was very important, that it included the furniture designers who never got into the shows that went into the museums because they were too difficult to handle. It's hard to display, and things of that kind. So they had a chance to do their thing.

One of the things that the Designer Craftsmen did that I think was very important was when the Century 21 Fair was on. There was an exhibition sponsored by the fair people that was painting, sculpture, those things, but there was nothing that showed the crafts. Beautiful exhibitions of that sort of thing from Sweden and there were beautiful exhibitions from other places, but no American things. And our little group decided that this was something that we just really had to do something about. With the cooperation of the fair people, the NWDC got space that we could afford, and our group designed and installed a very elegant display space, staffed with our

people and showing the work of our group. I'm sure you remember that.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Very well. I remember the copper ceilings. Who designed that copper ceiling?

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh I don't remember who it was. The designing was a sort of a community thing, you know, and the furniture people got busy and did it. But it was a complete show, and it was an eye opener to people not only in our community but from away. People would come through-- of course all of us took our turn minding the shop-- and people would say, "Well, I never knew that they had this kind of thing in America." You know, it was just overwhelming for them, and for us, and it was the only thing that did this in the whole fair. It was supposed to be an international fair. Ours was the only thing that gave any space to American crafts.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Now that was a separate exhibition from the one called Adventures in Art.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, the Adventures in Art, as I remember was painting, sculpture...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: No.

RUTH PENINGTON: No?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Excuse me. There were several painting shows: the Northwest Painting Show; an American Painting Show; and an International Painting Show. Then there was an exhibition called Adventures in Art which did have some large-scale ceramics and fiber and so forth but only included a dozen or so American craftsmen.

RUTH PENINGTON: I can't remember that show. Maybe I was so busy minding shop in the other one that...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, that Adventures in Art emphasized national names and there was Lenore Tawney, Peter Voulkos, Henry Takemoto, various so-called craftsmen in the United States who worked on large-scale objects.

RUTH PENINGTON: I can't remember them as being there.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Lenore Tawney's Black River, for instance, was forty-five feet tall. But it did not include a very broad representation of craftsmen and it certainly did not include very many from the Northwest. So the show you're talking about did do that and included a lot of objects that were very different from the things that were in Adventures in Art.

RUTH PENINGTON: It's funny I can't remember that at all. I remember the painting shows and the sculpture show.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: It was over in the same building where the painting shows were and lasted for part of the fair-- six months, as I recall. This show that you're talking about that was sponsored by Northwest Designer Craftsmen-- didn't that go over to Northwest Crafts Center after the fair?

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. They took over some of the installation and some of the people kept their work there and went on through selling it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And they picked up the copper ceiling and took over there, too, as I recall.

RUTH PENINGTON: Took the copper ceiling. Brass.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Let's talk a bit about the Friends of the Crafts and then go on to the exhibitions. That started in 1965, and you were a co-founder of that.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, it was really a thing that Anne Hauberg had been working on for so long with friends that were interested in the same field. And it included people who were in the field, not just patrons. But it got off the ground because, again, it was filling a need. We didn't have that kind of thing going. The idea being, of course, that the craftsmen and the artists should not have to spend their time promoting all of this; they should spend their time making the things. So if there was somebody else coming along that would help do this other and spread the news, the information, this was a good idea. So, obviously, we chipped in and helped wherever necessary. The artists do know quite a little bit about the things they're doing, you know, sometimes more than the people who are talking about it. So it was a help. And I was a part of it. I acted on the board for a while.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: As I recall, Friends of the Crafts was able, eventually, to get a space downtown at 311-1/2 Occidental, up on the third floor. And the shows included not only craftsmen from the Northwest, but nationally known craftsmen and also some historical and some ethnic exhibitions.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. They had quite a variety of things going there while I was there. And then, of course, high rents and things of that kind began to get a little bit too much for them, which was unfortunate.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But it did have a...

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh, it had an impact.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I think it did. Very much.

Speaking about exhibitions, you mentioned that one of your earlier shows, I think, was one that Dr. Eugene Fuller at the Seattle Art Museum sponsored for crafts.

RUTH PENINGTON: For metalsmiths. I was asked -- he must have had a list of people-- and he asked me to come in and show.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And that must have been a new direction for the Seattle Art Museum? Oh, I know-- your pewter plate was your entry into that.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. That was one of them. I had several things. I can't remember what all was there, but the pewter plate I still have.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And you were thinking that could have been as early as 1940 or '45?

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes, I think it was. You know, the museum was not set up to show local things or even traveling things, because it was primarily the space where the jade collection and some of the other things were housed. And paintings-- they had many shows with paintings. So he did give one room to this at the time, and they organized it. I don't know how he decided on who was to be shown. But it turned out it was primarily people who I think either were trained as old-country craftsmen, or a few architects or designers who were amateur craftsmen in metal. And he knew about me so I was included.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I think that some of your first major national shows would have been at the Baltimore Museum of Art and the Cincinnati Museum in the late forties. Were both of those invitationals, do you recall?

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. Some of them were and some of them weren't. I can't remember which ones are which at this point. But then there were, of course, things like the Wichita show which was not an invitational; it was a competitive show.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So you had the opportunity to apply for entrance into those competitive shows, but you also were invited to a number.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. Well, I suppose the way that people normally get in is they go in for a competitive thing. This is why I think it's important to have open shows.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: It's a way to get started, isn't it?

RUTH PENINGTON: It's a way to get started; it's a way to get to know new people, find out who they are. Because the tendency is for museums and people who have the space and [mind] to bid on a sure thing. They pick somebody that's already established. And the person that's just getting going doesn't have much chance. So that's why I've regretted so much the fact that the Henry Gallery shows were dropped. They get a little difficult to show. The work of various craftsmen gets a little difficult to mount. It's much easier to take a bunch of paintings and hang them on the wall than it is to house all these strange shapes and objects that need different kinds of lighting and different kinds of construction. I remember the first one we had at the Henry Gallery involved some invitational. We had no woodworkers, furniture people, available right then, so we called in people we knew were doing these things. But there were enough weavers around and there were enough metalsmiths around so it could be competitive and you could issue invitations to come and let's see what you can do. So that's what started. But it got very big.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You mentioned that Lambda Rho Alumnae had really been instrumental in starting that annual competitive show at the Henry Gallery in two exhibitions in 1950 and 1951, which I believe you were quite responsible for assembling?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, I happened to be the president of the alum organization at that time. And also being on the faculty at the university, I felt that this was something our students should have access to, and that it was good for the craftsmen (of whom I hoped I was a part) and something that the alum or service organization could do. So the first show, we asked for space at the Henry Gallery and that was available for us, but we began by doing it ourselves. By we I mean Lambda Rho Alumnae at this point. The next, I think it was just the next year, the Seattle Weavers Guild, which had been organized for some time, and the Clay Club joined with Lambda

Rho in making this an open invitational Northwest show. At that time, the members of these organizations did all the work. That means issuing the invitations, getting all the publicity out, taking care of the things that came in, packing, unpacking, getting them out, getting the jury, doing everything. Getting it assembled, setting it up. It was kind of a shock to the then director of the Henry Gallery. He didn't know anything about all of these things. So we had quite an affair going. It lasted for quite a while on that basis. And they had very good records and very good help. And then eventually the Henry Gallery took over part of it and still used the other groups for part of the work.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That went from 1953-- well, those first two shows, which were sponsored by Lambda Rho Alumnae in '50 and '51; then with the three sponsors starting in 1953. And that went annually until 1965. Then it was biennial until 1977 at which time it was stopped. And, you know, I read an interesting letter of yours the other day to the director of the Henry Gallery at some time during the exhibitions when you discussed your ideas about jurying. Because of course the jurying is always a problem in a competitive exhibition. You had some very committed ideas about how this should be done. I don't know whether you remember much about the letter?

RUTH PENINGTON: I don't remember, but I do know I don't like the idea of slides. I think that's a very hard way to do it unless you can control the number of people you could issue invitations to. You've got such a mass of people to take care of, of course, I can see the point. But I think it's a mistake. And these objects that you have to see and feel. I have a perfectly nice bracelet that everybody admires that I submitted, and the jury didn't know that you could get it on your hand. So they were going to turn it down. Sometimes a jury isn't as knowledgeable as they might be, too. It's a hard thing to get jurors to cope with a whole show like that.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I think that one of the biggest problems today in jurying is that one of slides. And I think that artists do not realize how important it is to get good slides. Now, of course, it's also possible that a certain work of art cannot be photographed well because it's too ephemeral or...

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, it depends on the piece, but if it's a three-dimensional object, you have to...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: See the other side.

RUTH PENINGTON: ...you have to know what it's like all the way around. And in many of the cases just as the teapot that I was mentioning here: I've tried to lift it when it was full of coffee or whatever it was, a couple of quarts of water, and it was practically impossible to pick it up. The pot was so heavy, you know. I think that's something you have to know by trying the pot out.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: It's very important. And today, I think, one of the biggest problems is what you're talking about right now. Of course, economically, the slides work so much better.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, except that if you want a good slide for the most part you have to get a good professional person to do it. Sometimes you can get enough skill on your own hand, but the slides that are beautiful to look at are the things that are going to sell it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But you see, that's speaking about the economics of the artist getting good slides. I'm talking about the economics of the sponsoring organization...

RUTH PENINGTON: I know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: ...and the business of how much less costly it is to have a whole bunch of slides come in than a whole bunch of objects. And once started, a system like that is very hard to stop. I'm wondering if you have any ideas?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well I have the idea that I'm not sending anything that has to be done by slides. That's my response.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Which must mean that a lot of artists do not enter shows judged from slides.

RUTH PENINGTON: I've heard of a lot of them. They just don't send it. If they're people whose work is known, they're apt to be invited to things, you see. I guess it's six of one, half a dozen of the other. But I've seen beautiful slides of people's work.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That works not only with competitive shows, but also invitational shows. A lot of curators, rather than doing studio visits in another city far away, if they haven't the funds to be able to go there, they jury by slides for the invitational. It's a very difficult problem, I think, in getting the best work shown in museums.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well. There's a difficulty, I'm sensing, from talking with younger people as well as older ones who are maybe established, of having places to show on a competitive basis because new people just don't have

much of a chance. And that's too bad.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Would you want to make any comments about the importance of a university gallery from your own experience in the School of Art and the Henry Gallery?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, I'm in favor of it. I was very happy that this is what the Henry Gallery developed. Because when I first came there as a student, the Henry Gallery had just been built.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That's 1926.

RUTH PENINGTON: Uh huh. It had that nice pool in the middle of the big room where everybody was always tripping over it or backing into it. But the collection was there. It was donated to the university, and was built to house the collection of the donor. So that was all that was in it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Horace Henry's collection.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. And I can remember going down and sitting for it on Sundays, you know, working for a little more money on my expenses. So I would be there to check the people in. There were maybe two or three people would come in the day, you know. It was nothing, nobody came. It was there, they'd all seen it, and nobody wanted to see it again, apparently. So that didn't help very much. And the works of art were not-- there were some things that the painters were interested in showing... But I think that a gallery is really terribly valuable-- I mean at least an exhibition space of that kind-- to the students, not just for seeing their things, but for getting traveling exhibitions in and local things from various places. They have a chance to see it. Big museum can do it or not. I mean, in our situation they've done this to a certain extent with paintings, but not so much with others. They have a permanent collection and that's valuable to use, but it's not a study collection, which I think students need too. So it's one way of getting in and giving the students a chance to see their own work.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: It's also important for the students to see the faculty's work, I think.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yeah, whatever is there. No, I think it was a great loss-- taking the Henry Gallery away from the School of Art.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And I think that one of the great problems for a university museum from my own experience is that unless someone makes the decisions about what direction the museum should take, the demands on the space if it's a small museum are quite tremendous and almost overwhelming. I think it's very difficult for a director of such a museum to satisfy all the needs, especially when the community is infringing on it too.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. Well, I just somehow don't feel that in this situation, here in this community, that the university gallery would need to compete with big galleries for traveling shows that come in. I don't think we should try to do it. Well, that's apparently what they're trying to do today.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You mean trying to do the same types of things that another museum in a community might be doing?

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. I don't feel that that's necessary. But, of course, I'm not running it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, it is true that there are a lot of demands and it's very hard to meet them all without some philosophy, policy, laid down.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, that's what we had for a good many years. It was a part of the School of Art and whatever they were doing had some relationship to the needs of the students and faculty. A place for display of their own work, if you want, but at least a place to see other things. And there were so many traveling shows and things that came in. I would never have seen The Blue Four if it hadn't been down at the Henry Gallery, you know. And they were terribly important. They were educational for the community as well as the students. So, maybe they can't afford it. That seemed to be one of the things. The group that felt they should sponsor it wasn't interested in doing anything much for the university, I guess. I don't know. I wasn't a consultant.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: We've been talking about the universities and schools, and I'm wondering if you could tell me something about the establishment of your school. Is it called Fidalgo Summer School of Allied Arts at LaConner?

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. This was just for a short time.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, it was?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, it was about ten years, I guess. But it was kind of fun to set up and it was during a period of time when I could combine it with the university thing. We ran it through a university extension course so that the students coming in would have faculty advice from the university people. And it made a very pleasant place to work. It wasn't a long period of time. But at that particular point, it seemed to fill a need.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And so some of your students you had in the regular season from fall to spring would come there...

RUTH PENINGTON: Some of them.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: ...perhaps in the summer.

RUTH PENINGTON: Mostly they were other people. But they could do things on the basis of an extension course, you see. All people had to be okayed by the university faculty. They were-- what do I want to call it-- authorized by the university to give these courses. Some of it was similar to what they were doing down in Seattle. But they enjoyed a nice place to have a holiday and everybody worked hard.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: As I understand it, that building was on the Swinomish Slough?

RUTH PENINGTON: Channel. The difference between a slough and a channel-- you want to discuss that?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: What is it?

RUTH PENINGTON: Channel goes right straight through and out the other side; and a slough goes in and doesn't have any place to go.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I never knew that before. Well, I'll always remember it.

RUTH PENINGTON: This is the dividing live between the mainland and Fidalgo Island. It's the main channel.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And that's the one that runs by the buildings on the main street of LaConner.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. It's a pioneer community that was set up along the water before there were any roads across or anything of that sort. They went in by water.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And that was an old building from 1880.

RUTH PENINGTON: 1880? I don't know what it is. It's on the earliest records of Skagit County. It was there when they started making their first records, you know, when it was part of Whatcom County. I don't know how far back it goes. But right now I'm still struggling with the piling under the building.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, because you still own the building.

RUTH PENINGTON: Still own the building and those old pilings, some of them have been there that long, I think.

[Tape 3; side 1]

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And another thing that is north of Seattle is what I think of as your summer home, but it may not be a summer home, at Rosario.

RUTH PENINGTON: It was a home that I built for myself, being a single woman living at home with parents. I had a vacation place on Vashon and I sold that-- ferry strikes and things interfered-- and bought property on the Straits of Rosario. It's just at the head of the Strait of Juan de Fuca. I bought property there in 1937 after a very long search. I bought some property from a farmer who had this beautiful land as far as I was concerned. It was down over cliffs with virgin forest on the top part of it and down over cliffs to the water that went right out to the ocean, north of the Olympic Peninsula but on the mainland side. I bought it with the idea that this was the thing I couldn't hardly imagine I could have. But he wanted to sell because his cattle and his sheep got down over the hillside and trapped in the crevices and he had to go after them. So he was happy to sell and I was happy to buy it; it was a good bargain. And so a couple of years later I started building the house, which was just a summer cabin: a big living room, and kitchen, and eating space, and a bath, and dressing room.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You designed it.

RUTH PENINGTON: I designed it. And I helped build it. My father and I built it and some local neighbors helped put the stone fireplace up and I used it for a good many years just in that state. Eventually, it seemed it was a nice idea to have a bedroom, so I added a bedroom. And being on this rocky hillside, you didn't just dig another hole and start in, so the stairway went up the outside out of originally what was window space, up the rocks onto

a higher level. And the new part was built, again, right on the rock. About the time I decided I was going to retire I thought, well, I really would like a bigger house. In fact I'd like a living room that was big enough to take care of more than half a dozen people at the time and I need another bedroom, so it went on around. I was worried about, maybe I could put it on top of the present one. Well, finally, one of my architecture friends, when he was looking at the space, says well, why don't you just go on around the hillside. I always thought that was more expensive, but it turned out it wasn't any more expensive, so we built the rest of it on around. So it's a kind of an angle _____. You look south from it, so it gets lots of sunshine. It's a nice spot.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Who was the architect that advised you to go around the corner?

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh, I don't remember now. Maybe Perry Johansen or one of those boys. I don't know which one it was. But anyhow I was stewing around-- well, how can I get up there? Because I couldn't put a stairway up in one place because there was a great big boulder that had been left by a glacier at some time in the past and I didn't want to move it. And it did seem like it was more expensive to build on out rather than putting on top, you know. I mean that's what I'd always understood. But it didn't prove out to be that way.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You have spent a lot of time up there and do now, don't you?

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. It's a complete house and my studio is there. I lived in a house in Seattle a good many years where I had a studio space and workroom space. And about the same time that I retired, my father and I moved into this facility here, which is a retirement residence, and I don't have much space. I mean there wouldn't be any space to have a studio here in the apartment. So, the house-- that's what it does. It gives me my studio and gives me recreation and gives me room for other people besides myself. It's a marvelous spot.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: One thing I'd hoped we might do was discuss specific works of yours, although I get the idea from our earlier conversation that you feel the works should speak for themselves. So it might be a little hard for us to discuss them. But you have worked in silver and gold...

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: ...and pewter and I remember during the war I believe you worked in silverplate for instance.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, I can remember doing one piece or something that I had done in copper and then had silverplated. Maybe two pieces. I did a tray, as I remember.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Because of shortages?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, it cost, too. It's not too cheap to do it all in silver. But I prefer to work in the silver for the hollowware although I had done some in the pewter. It's interesting material, but if you can afford it, the silver's awfully nice.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Do you have any preferences? Do you feel happiest when you're working with certain kinds of form? Like, for instance, are you any happier when you're working on a hollowware piece than you are when you're working on jewelry or flatware?

RUTH PENINGTON: No. I don't think of it in those terms. I think of it in terms of a job that I have to do...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: A problem that has to be solved.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. Either for myself or somebody's a client and wants me to do something. Of course, then you have to consider what they want, not that I'm above making a fairly sketchy drawing to begin with. If they want that kind of thing. The nice thing about it, of course, is to have people say, "I like what you do and I've got this stone I'd like you to set," or "I'd like you to make a bracelet," or something of the kind and go ahead and do it. But naturally, I consult with them as it progresses. That's really the nice way to do it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Haven't you had a preference during most of your career for forging and fabricating rather than casting.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Do you have any comments about casting?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, I like to work with metal, and when you're casting you're working with another material and then you're just pouring it in.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So you don't really work with the metal.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, no, not really in forming the places. Of course you can do parts of it cast and parts of it formed, but I like to feel a metal moving and shaping with my hammers and the anvils. That's fun.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Also, perhaps it's really part of your philosophy that you do the piece from the beginning. And while in some terms you might say that with a cast piece you do have complete control over it because...

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh, sure.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: ...you start with the modeling and so forth. But there's something about the forging that seems more original.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, it's more alive, for one thing. It's like taking clay. It's...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: The casting is like one step removed-- like a print, perhaps.

RUTH PENINGTON: Possibly. I suppose on a print you have complete control of the plate which you're working from-- the block or whatever.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Except the finished product is one step removed from the original work.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. This is like a drawing, in other words.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You've done enameling. And I recall the plique-a-jour.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. Do you remember, was that plique-a-jour candlestick in the Henry Gallery when you were there?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Is that the one that went to the Cooper Union?

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. I was thinking about the display of things, you know, for the best effect. I don't remember why I had it there the first time. It might have been a competitive show or something, I can't remember. But it was in this case and it was pushed in back of the case, and it was plique-a-jour enamel which had to have light behind it in order to see what it's all about.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So did you storm in there and...

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, it was in the back corner and it wasn't getting light at all. It just was ignored. And that was all right. They had accepted it, whatever it was. But I had a chance then. I think there was a faculty show after that, I don't know how soon. But I said, "Look. That was not properly displayed before and I would like to put it into the faculty show and have it displayed so there's light behind it and through it." And it was done and it was picked up by the man who saw it from Cooper Union and purchased for their collection.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: He probably wouldn't have even noticed it without proper display.

RUTH PENINGTON: Never would have seen it before.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I think the first time it was displayed was in the earlier of the two one-man shows in 1962?

RUTH PENINGTON: No, I don't think so. I didn't have anything to do with where it went. And if it had been my own show, I'm sure I would have had some...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, I see.

RUTH PENINGTON: No, it might have been a competitive show or something of that kind. But it was put in the back of the case where it didn't get any light on it at all. That was one thing it had to have.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I think that not very many people around this area, at least, worked in plique-a-jour.

RUTH PENINGTON: Probably not. More of them do it now.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: How about gold granulation? You did that, did you not?

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh, I worked in it a bit, but not _____. It didn't interest me enough to try and keep on going with it. I know people that have done a good deal more, of course.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: One thing you've done is use a lot of what I call ethnic materials-- spindle whorls, amulets...

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh, yes, things like that. Sure. Whatever comes to hand.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: How do those things come to hand? Has that been mostly in travels?

RUTH PENINGTON: Mostly.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And you have traveled around the world a lot.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well you find them here and there, yes. Or somebody comes to you and sells you something or a client brings in something that you...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Which recalls to me we were talking about organizations a while ago. One organization that you were a founding member of and we didn't mention was the World Craft Council.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, I guess so, because I was there at the time it was started. Anybody that came to it was a founding member.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And that was started at the time you were a Craftsman Trustee of the ACC. And because of your association with World Craft Council, you made a number of trips to conferences.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yeah. The most recent one was the one held in Vienna a couple years ago.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And then you went to Peru and probably picked up some of your ethnic materials there, is that right?

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. Wherever you get near a museum or a shop...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: The other found objects-- the unpolished Northwest beach pebbles, those you did perhaps in the fifties.

RUTH PENINGTON: I think so. The material that comes onto this beach is very hard.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, at Rosario.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. And it's jasper and other things like that. Of course, it's polished down by water and sand action, so it's kind of a soft, satin finish. And they make beautiful forms, so long as they're possible to set them in size and shape and color you want. And I like them. But, I don't cut any of them. I haven't done anything with cutting stones. I do set cut stones, but...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But I think the use of those beach pebbles, unpolished, must have been a great part of your philosophy at that time.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, it was fun to find out how they could be done. I had made a cross pendant that used some of them and it was in some of the shows. And I made a number of things. And some of the spindle whorls are really fun to work with. You can set them in a different way than you would a regular stone. Pieces of shell _____

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And the use of all that material, of course, is far removed from the machine age.

RUTH PENINGTON: It certainly is. And you can't predict what you can find, either. You can't make them by the dozens. Each one's an individual thing.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You've also used semi-precious stones.

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh yes.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: What kinds of stones? Garnets?

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Opal?

RUTH PENINGTON: Opal, all kinds. I'm not a diamond setter, so if I have that kind of a stone, I take it to the craftsman who knows that business. But I can make the setting.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, I think that most of the stones you've used haven't had complex kinds of faceting on them, isn't that right.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, I kind of like the simple ones.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Simple. And large and monumental.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, some of them are small.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: How about the liturgical work? You've done quite a bit of that, haven't you?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, I guess so, yes. Pieces on commission, and sometimes I've done them on my own and then they've been sold, you know. It's nice to use things where you're using wood like ebony, or something of that kind. For a specific job, for a specific church, why that's another thing. Well, it's fun to do. It's fun to get commissions: people that see something you've done and like it and are sympathetic, you know.

Should I tell you the story of the feathers? There was one Henry Gallery show that I wanted to put a little ring in. And I visualized ahead of time that it was going to be a little crown of orange or red feathers, chicken feathers or something of the kind that would be perhaps half an inch long. And in the center of this, down at the bottom of a little tube, would be this red opal, Mexican opal, fire opal, with lots of sparkle. And I knew what kind of feathers I wanted, like Rhode Island Red chicken feathers or something of the kind. The kind that just curl over a little bit. My neighbors had had some chickens, but they had disappeared somehow or other; they didn't have them any more. But I went ahead and I made the little ring-- all of the sockets for setting the feathers and the stone was down in. It was all made, not for anybody in particular, so the size wasn't any big problem. But it was sitting there ready to go, but no feathers. And I searched and I didn't know where I was going to get them. So I said, "Dear Lord, I've done all I can do and now it's up to you." I got up the next morning and went out on the porch of my house up there, and there was a dead flicker. He'd run into the glass windows of my house and was dead as a doornail. And the flickers have beautiful red-orange feathers under their bellies and under their wings, so I ripped out what I needed and put it in the ring and it went into the show and got sold right away.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And that's the day you stopped being an agnostic.

RUTH PENINGTON: I believe in it. I've still got the rest of the feathers in case I need to use them for something. That's my tale.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I was thinking about you as an artist-teacher, and the advantages and disadvantages. I'm sure there must be some with each of those connected with that. Do you have any comments about that?

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh, well. No, I've enjoyed it. I don't know how the students have enjoyed it, but I've always enjoyed it. And of course the kind of studio courses that I've taught for the most part-- I did teach some lecture courses, but studio courses where you get acquainted with the students are lots of fun. They're nice people. At least I found they were. Some of them can't do the work too well, but that's not a problem.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: What I see is that you could never have done all you've done without a powerful physical constitution.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, I didn't have any family to cope with, any children to take care of.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, that's true, but I think that most artist-teachers-- one of their big problems is not having time to do either. And you did that plus all of this advocacy out in the field for craftsmen.

RUTH PENINGTON: I didn't maybe have the production line that some people have.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But it is true, of course, you didn't have a family and that does make some difference.

RUTH PENINGTON: I lived in a family, and I took my part in whatever was going on, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But somebody else did the cooking?

RUTH PENINGTON: No, not always. Well, it just happened my parents were rather long-lived and it got to a sort of exchange after you get to a certain age and your parents begin to need a little more help. Anyhow, we lived amicably, I guess. But I didn't have the responsibility of bringing up kids and things of that sort and that might [have--Ed.] had something to do with the amount of time I had to do it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You had a couple of very wonderful solo exhibitions at the Henry Gallery. One was in 1962, a retrospective, and one was in 1969 when you retired. The second one, in 1969, included the work of eight students.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yeah. That was fun.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Let's see now. Most of them, of course, were long gone at that time from the university.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, yes, they were out in the field working on their own. But the thing that seemed to me-- it padded the show a bit. Jewelry's small stuff, you know. It's kind of fun to have these other exhibits along with it, and people. And I thought they did nice things.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But speaking of padding the show, I don't remember how many pieces of yours were in that exhibition. I have a record of that someplace. But there were a lot of pieces...

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, I borrowed things back, of course, from owners.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: ...but the number was nothing compared to what you've produced during your life.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, you have to hang on to some of them.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Some names that come to mind from those eight students are...?

RUTH PENINGTON: Ramona Solberg was one.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Tell me what you think about Ramona Solberg and her work.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, she's made a big success of her career. She was one of these people that came back from the wars and started in her real career again. I can remember she was in one or two of my classes as a beginning design student.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: As an undergraduate?

RUTH PENINGTON: Yeah, as a freshman. Then, when she was about through with her second year, she went off to the wars. She enlisted in, I think it was the army, and was in during the whole period and was ready to be discharged when the war was over. And then she got the chance to re-enlist and go to Europe on some of that post-war activity. So she had a wonderful chance to get all kinds of experience there and she took time to travel all over the place. And, of course, when she came back to school she was on the GI Bill and could go right straight on through. And she had toured completely and had all that other experience when she was a beginning student. So, she came through and got her master's degree. But in the meantime, she'd go off to study some in Scandinavia or go to Mexico or someplace because she had this GI Bill, you see. It gave her all these other experiences. So she came back and got her master's degree, and then she went over and-- I've forgotten where she was teaching first.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: She went to Central Washington [then Central Washington College of Education, now Central Washington University--Ed.].

RUTH PENINGTON: She went to Central Washington, then, and she was there for a long time.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You know, she reminds me a great deal of you in one way: that she also has been an artist-teacher and an advocate for the crafts and very active out in the field.

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh yes. She was a Craftsman Trustee for the ACC the same as I was. She's done more work and more exhibiting and more writing about it than I ever continued to do. But she certainly has been successful in it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And her work has taken several different directions. One would be the inclusion of found objects, and some of it quite humorous, but also the use of a lot of...

RUTH PENINGTON: Beads.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: ...ethnic beads, yes. From her travels, no doubt. The massing of beads and so forth. Another student was Russell Day.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. You know, he came into an extension class first, I think. He's another one of these people that just has all kinds of ideas and ability and spent a good many years as the head of the art department at the junior college.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Everett Community College.

RUTH PENINGTON: Does beautiful things.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: He seemed to be a person who was a kind of experimenter.

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh, he does all kinds of things.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But I know he told me once that he's not too interested, really, in the craftsman aspects of it.

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh, I don't know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That's what he said. And I didn't know whether you would agree with that or not.

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh, he was a fine craftsman. He may mean that he wasn't interested in making lots of things for sale and going in for that side of it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Or technique for technique's sake.

RUTH PENINGTON: I don't know. But he certainly makes all kinds of things, you know. His house and his surroundings. He's always experimenting.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And he's now retired from Everett.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: What about William Crozier?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, he's still teaching down in Oregon. He was at Corvallis [Oregon State University--Ed.] on the faculty there.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And Judy Larson?

RUTH PENINGTON: Judy has done all kinds of fine things. She was teaching in Humboldt State College in California and was married. Her husband was at the time-- and I guess he still is-- on the wheel of getting up in the ranks in college teaching. So he kind of goes from one college to another as a better job opens up. So she's had to travel around and get started in her studios and get going on things. And she experiments with lots of things and gets into shows. It's been kind of hard on her; she couldn't settle down in any one place. She had to go to a new place and start all over again in a new building, making a new shop and things of that kind.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So that moving around does really limit you in ways.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, it's hard. It gives her a lot more to do. She couldn't just settle down in a shop in one place and produce. She certainly has a lot of skills and a lot of ability.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Don Tompkins is another one.

RUTH PENINGTON: Was he in that show?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: He was one of the eight.

RUTH PENINGTON: I can't remember. I've lost track of him.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: He died.

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh did he?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: He died recently of a heart attack.

RUTH PENINGTON: No, I hadn't heard that.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: He seemed to be an experimenter.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes, I think so. He did handsome things.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I notice the watch that you have on today, the band which you did. It's interesting that Don also did watches.

RUTH PENINGTON: He used to do some watches, didn't he?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: He did the whole watch, yes.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, he put them in different kinds of settings.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But he did a case for the watch, itself, as well as the...

RUTH PENINGTON: Did he?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Uh huh.

RUTH PENINGTON: I wasn't so sure about that. I know he worked with a watch man, but maybe it was a place it was just a matter of setting the works then. I don't know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I think that was it. Robert Morton was another one.

RUTH PENINGTON: He's been down at Portland, in the university teaching job.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, I can't remember. I think he made quite a lot of hollowware, as I recall.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes, he did more of that.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And Hellyn Pawula.

RUTH PENINGTON: She's working; she's at the college down south of town.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Highline Community College. I remember the work she did for her master's thesis which must have been done with you. She did a lot of very abstract expressionist-looking castings.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes, she did a lot of work with castings. She had never done very much with forging and that sort of thing. She'd done more with casting when she was down in the Southwest, which was where she learned it. And so she got both experiences. And then Anne Praczukowski-- was she in that show?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: No.

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh. She came along, and, of course, she's been doing a lot of very nice things, too. She liked to do repousse ' and things of that kind. Some of these people concentrated a little bit more on one direction or thing, I guess, than I've ever done. I can scatter my attention around from one thing to another.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Another one of the eight was Imogene Gieling.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes, she's a talented person, too.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I was interested to read the other day a comment of hers in one of the folders about that show, that she had begun to see jewelry as a way of making social comments. And I didn't remember ever seeing any work of hers like that.

RUTH PENINGTON: I wouldn't think of it on that basis.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You wouldn't. So it must have been short-lived.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, it could be. Of course, she worked very hard and finally got us into the California system. And I don't know what's happened to her.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: She still teaches at San Francisco State. Do you remember her moon specimens?

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes. She's done a lot.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Those were very romantic looking, I thought. Expressionist looking, in a way. Very, very elegant. And she did a lot of washing of the metal with other metals? What was it?

RUTH PENINGTON: She did lots of experimentation and electroforming and all those things she'd been working with.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Electroforming?

RUTH PENINGTON: Yes, she did that too. I haven't seen much of what she's doing in recent years. It's become a little more difficult to travel back and forth to San Francisco like we used to do. If they ever get gas costs down, I might go again. But she experimented a lot and she worked her way-- she started in partly at the university and now is up at San Francisco State. (As I was mentioning earlier about the university, Berkeley, by pushing all this out has given the people in the city colleges and surrounding ones a chance to develop.) And she recently worked very, very hard. She had to get an equivalency test of a Ph.D. in order to get her final promotion to professor. A very stiff sort of thing.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: At San Francisco State?

RUTH PENINGTON: Yeah, I guess she got that.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: How'd she do that?

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, she had to collect all kinds of material from shows, and slides...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Work that she had done earlier, you mean?

RUTH PENINGTON: Both early and later works. I don't exactly [know--Ed.] how, but it was a terrific thing that she had to do to convince them that she was doing research; or things that could count in the basis of a degree that she would have had in another field.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And, you know, I can't think of another artist whose work could be classified as research any more than hers.

RUTH PENINGTON: No, but they had to do some kind of an equivalency, see. She had to convince these people. It's always a problem of getting into the academic routine. If you get into a small school, especially, where the president or the top people are products of the state teachers' colleges where Ph.D.s or something of that kind is the only thing they know about that means that you've accomplished anything. Then they start trying to demand this from the artists and they don't know how to cope with it. It's very difficult for people going into smaller schools, the fact that they don't know what they're doing, the administrators.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: The administrator doesn't know what the artist is doing.

RUTH PENINGTON: No. So they go back to the old standby. If they've got a Ph.D. after their name, why then they must be okay. So the more Ph.D.s you have after the names of the people who are on your faculty, the higher rank you can get for your school and maybe the more money you get. So you come into a field where Ph.D. doesn't have anything to do with it, and they're lost.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: To try to translate that work of the artist into the intellectual...

RUTH PENINGTON: Equivalency.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: It's very difficult.

RUTH PENINGTON: This is what Tex [____--Ed.] was battling with.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You see, that was the emphasis of the conference of ACC in 1961...

RUTH PENINGTON: That you didn't need that.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: ...on research. They were trying very hard to educate a lot of people as to what the artist does go through and that it is the equivalent of learned academic research.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, I'm sure it's still at the place where the real artist-- the creative artist-- is just going to laugh at anybody that gets the job because they've got a Ph.D. doesn't mean they know anything at all. I think it's still that way.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: This has really been wonderful talking with you, and I've noticed we've had two long sessions and you are sitting there looking as fresh as you did when we started. And I thought about your father who lived here at Horizon House. You came here before you retired from the university?

RUTH PENINGTON: No, this is one of those places that's been so popular that you have to have your name in a long time. And I had applied because father and I could come in as a couple. One person is eligible, you see, and he was, of course. So it just happened that at the time I retired, there was a space available for me, or for us, and so we moved in. That was the year I retired.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That would be in 1969.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yeah. Or '70 or whenever it was. So, that was why we moved to this situation, because father was getting a little older and it was the problem of who was going to babysit, perhaps. You know, that kind of thing. And I thought I was still in a place where I needed to be mobile more than that. This is a very nice spot with our own apartment, but with the access to infirmary care and that kind of thing. So by the time he was nearly 104, why it had paid off.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And you spoke about how when you came here in 1969 or '70, you were at a point where you needed to be mobile. This is now fourteen years later and you obviously still need to be mobile.

RUTH PENINGTON: Yep.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And I think those genes are really working for you from your father.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, father certainly was active. I mean he was not senile or anything of that kind. Of course his physical stamina was giving up a little bit, but he knew what he was doing, even if he couldn't always do it. But I was so very happy because we had not only the apartment, which was our home, but I had my summer place and he used to go up there all the time when he was able. But then he had a place to stay here with care and a dining room if he wanted to use that. So I didn't have to stay around twenty-four hours a day. So that worked out very well. The moral: plan this out if you can ahead of time. Don't wait until it's too late.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That does sound as if it worked out well. And you're still making jewelry, of course.

RUTH PENINGTON: Not as much as I wish, but I am still doing it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And having commissions.

RUTH PENINGTON: Uh huh. And I've branched out a time or two to do some things on a volunteer basis such as designing a sixteen-by-twenty window for the wall of the church-- stained glass window-- and supervising its installation, and then going back to doing murals once in a while.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And in your spare time helping the people here at Horizon House on the committee on their art, is that right?

RUTH PENINGTON: Oh, well, I was asked to be their decoration [chairman].

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I see.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, you know, you have to be a part of the community. There's lots of nice people here.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So I guess we'd better sign off so that you can get busy at your commissions.

RUTH PENINGTON: Well, I have to go and get some food. I'm getting hungry.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: All right. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

[Following is an addendum to the tape, written out by Ruth Penington after the interview and read at Ruth's request by LaMar Harrington at the end of the tape. The subject is "On the Work Of Art."]

"No matter its medium, a work of art is: In itself, it is the expression of its creator-- a human being. Depending on the skill and the clarity of vision of the artist, it is self-explanatory and self-sufficient. It is a statement which needs no interpretation in another medium. Its form and content have become one. Now, for the other side of the coin, or "it's all Greek to me," the beholder of the work of art must do his or her homework, too, if he seriously seeks the meaning of the work of art confronting him. He must approach it with an informed sensitivity and an open mind, a willingness and eagerness to let this particular statement present its own vision. The real work of art is not about something, it simply is." By Ruth Penington, February 14, 1983. This closes the tape and the interview.

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