



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with George E.
Downing, 1973 March 22

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with George E. Downing on March 22, 1973. The interview took place in Providence, Rhode Island, and was conducted by Robert F. Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The Archives of American Art has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

GEORGE E. BROWNING: I'll say anything that you tell me to say now.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Well, I'd like, uh, first if you could discuss something of your childhood and early education. You can just begin at the beginning and—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh. Well, what about starting in college?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sure.

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Is that early enough?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Fine, yeah, the University of Chicago.

GEORGE E. BROWNING: The University of Chicago. I was going to be a doctor of medicine. In fact, I was admitted to Rush Medical College at the University of Chicago, but I took a course in art with Walter Sargent who came from the part around here, and decided that, uh, this is where I was—this is what interested me. So in my senior year in college, I quit being a premed and majored in art.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did he teach you Walter Sargent? What was—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well he was—he was very much interested in color. He wrote a book on color. I mean in the summers, he used to come to Scituate, Massachusetts, and he was a very interesting painter. He was a friend of my family at the University of Chicago so that, um—[00:02:06]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Your father was on the faculty there?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: He was on the faculty at the University of Chicago.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was he in there?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, he was a biologist.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. With the—you had this one course then with Walker Sargent—Walter Sargent. Were there—what else would—did your education in art then consist?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, as a matter of fact, I graduated from the University of Chicago as a major in French. Because while I was in college my father had a sabbatical leave, and we spent a year in France and so that French was what I had most of at the time I graduated from the university. Um—

ROBERT F. BROWN: But when you did graduate, you were determined to do something in art?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Yeah, well, after I graduated, I then had a year of graduate work in art at the University of Chicago, and then—well, as a matter of fact, I gave a—the year following, I gave a course in art history, history of Italian painting [laughs] at the university. I alternated for a couple of years teaching a semester or teaching a quarter at the University of Chicago and studying for a semester at Harvard.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I see. What—when you taught, say, the course in Italian painting, did you—was it based on, at that point, people like Berenson, or how was the instruction?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Berenson, Frank Jewett Mather. [00:04:01] I think the summer before I gave the course, I spent in Cambridge, Mass, with the Fogg Museum, the museum of fine arts, getting ready to—well, obviously, I told them a lot more—a lot more than I knew when the time for the course came., but this was the—this was the

start.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But when you were in Cambridge, did you work those summers with—under someone who was there such Pope or—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: No, not at that point because they were away. Oh, one great event that summer was Mr. Sargent's coming around. He and I had lunch with Denman Ross. He had worked with Denman Ross. And that—of course, Denman Ross was one the great, great people at Harvard.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes. What was he like, how do you remember him seeing?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: A most genial kind of person. Uh, I worked with his book really more than with him. I can't remember the name of the—I mean the book on color. And then, of course later when I was doing graduate work at Harvard, I had worked with Arthur Pope who was his successor at Harvard. [00:06:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Was Pope easy to work with?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh, he's a delightful person. I remember that—well, he—did you ever hear of the tone solid?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh, he used to lecture to his graduate students on the tone solid. He would stand leaning against the door to the Fogg lecture room or leaning against the edge of the door, and he could lecture on the tone solid even in his sleep. [They laugh.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did his lecturing have some of—an effect of being rote or did he approach with—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: I—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —enthusiasm?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, I think he was bored stiff with lecturing, but where he was really, really good was if you brought something to show him. And he—I mean, he could—he could pin down the quality of something that you showed him in 30 seconds.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What would you bring him then?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, I mean in those days, I remember we used to go up and down Huntington, Avenue, those shops, and sometimes you find, oh, a drawing or a print for practically nothing. Of course, they all—all of them in the Harvard faculty did this in a certain sense. I suppose you could say that they were—they were amateur in the real sense of the word, start of the 18th century and since. [00:08:06] I mean there was a lot of this, this perdition still going on.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mean these were men who were [clears throat] somewhat masters of a number of things? They were—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, I mean, I think as things stood in those days, they were real masters, but they had very wide-ranging interests.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. What was their attitude to art? Did they like it? Did they express their likes and dislikes?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh, these were all—this was all Harvard faculty in fine arts. Oh, oh, well—

ROBERT F. BROWN: But, I mean, did they express enthusiasm—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh, yes, indeed. We used to—I remember arguing with our—I mean my wife and my great friend, Chandler Post who used to—well, he used to liken El Greco to Matisse or Matisse to El Greco. He didn't like El Greco very much because he thought Velasquez was a lot better, and we used to go up after class to argue that El Greco and Matisse had nothing to do with each other. I mean neither of them did paintings that looked like Velasquez, but this was about the only thing they had in common but—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Would he accept this kind of direct criticism?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh, oh, yes. Oh, yes, indeed. He'd jump right back. [00:10:02] But—well, I've been to New York with Chandler Post along with some other students, and we'd have a great time, and he took us in

everywhere—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, or many private collections?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Private collections. Of course, Paul Sachs did this normally. I mean, he had a museum class but—well through him, the class had entrées to anywhere that he wanted to take us. We went down to see the Wagner collection for instance when it was still in the Wagner house. The Wagners weren't there, but, oh, when we—I mean they'd sent out servants—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes. And so you would prowl around as you pleased, huh?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Prowled around as we pleased. They would give us lunch, and I remember when we came in, there was a—[laughs]—they had a pipe organ that played with a roll like the old player pianos, and when the butler saw us coming, why, he turned on the pipe organ, which played "The Rosary" while [they laugh] we looked at Donatello. [They laugh.] But—

ROBERT F. BROWN: And then he'd move to something else as you looked at a different style? [Laughs.]

GEORGE E. BROWNING: I can't remember whether—

the music went on. It may have been Paul Sachs said that we really didn't need that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, now did Sachs, did you go—would you hover around Sachs and he would—you would have a dialogue in front—with the various things or was he mainly lecturing or—[00:12:06]

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Not very much, no. I mean we were—mostly turning us loose. I think the point was to get us in front of these magnificent things and let us look for we'd talk about them when we got back to—got back to Cambridge and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Now, would you have made notes on or sketches from them or—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, um, I think not particularly. Of course, Paul Sachs had the ability of going into a gallery and memorizing the order in which the pictures appeared on the wall so that he—but he really insisted that the class put it back to whatever it was doing because there was no amateurish monkey business. But—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was stressed in the course by Sachs? Was it connoisseurship or—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Connoisseurship. Of course, this was a course for people wanting to do museum work. Matter of fact, I didn't take the course for the credit, but I went along for, well, the great deal that was there to go along for. But I think for a while, the museum jobs in the country were filled to a very important extent by students who had worked with Paul Sachs. [00:14:13]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were these museum-oriented fellow students, were they the largest group of students at the Fogg or were they—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: No, I don't think so. I think that most of the people taking—most of the graduate students taking art history courses were going to teach art history.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Could you discuss or describe some of your fellow students, and what it was like, and your relation with them?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, of course, people worked very closely together. I remember—well, I'm not thinking very fast at this point.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But the general, the—you were able pretty well to work on your own. Did you come into the—this was, what, 1927, I guess, you began full time at Harvard. Did you come in with a definite specialization within art history that you wished to pursue?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: No, no. Of course, in those days, your Ph.D. exam, the main exam was an oral exam. [00:16:00] And the faculty was permitted to ask you any kind of a question about any work of art so that I mean you really didn't specialize from the beginning, and that came when you wrote your thesis and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were most people heading toward a Ph.D. who were in the graduate program? Was this a necessary thing that teach art history?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Not so much in those days. I think that—well, I suppose it was probably in the '30s

when your Ph.D. became your union car. But I see, um—well, in the late '20s and in the early '30s, the courses in art history were being started. I mean in so many colleges and universities, there were all kinds of jobs so that you—of course, this—well, I think I put down on that sheet there that my first years of graduate study were financed by the Carnegie Corporation. [00:18:04] And this Carnegie program was to get people started in graduate study in art history.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why do you suppose there was this interest in the late '20s in art history? Was it certain persuasive people in this country? Was it, say, the great collectors, and they had their effect? Was it—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: It may very well have been. I mean I pin it down in the late '20s because it—well, it happened that my first year of graduate study was—I mean my scholarship, first scholarship for graduate study was—I was one of the original group who got these scholarships. I wouldn't know really what—why it started on at this time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, about that time because—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —it was virtually brand new at that time, wasn't it?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Yeah, yeah. At that time, there were really two places where you could do graduate work in art history—Harvard was one and Princeton the other.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Could you distinguish between the two then? What was the feeling about one vis-à-vis the other?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: I think they were—they were both tops. [00:20:01] Of course, at Princeton, there was great emphasis on medieval art because—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Charles Rufus Morey.

GEORGE E. BROWNING: —Charles Rufus Morey, yeah, taught there. At Harvard, there wasn't this—I mean, well, perhaps you could say that the range of interest of the Harvard faculty was greater. Of course, Arthur Kingsley Porter was the medievalist at Harvard, and he would certainly stack up with Morey. But on the other hand, Harvard also—well, Chandler Rathfon Post, the specialist in Spanish art, Paul Sachs the museum, of course Langdon Warner is in Oriental art. Now, I maybe—I mean Princeton had people of this sort too.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were there courses at Harvard also involving the architect—schools of architecture as well?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, of course, architectural history was included. Of course Edgell was teaching there then and, well, Kingsley Porter's—well, he wrote his history of Medieval art, uh—*Medieval Architecture* at, I think, the age of 25 so that he started as an architectural historian and continued to be, although, his interest ranged from architecture to architectural sculpture. [00:22:14] And then—well, I mean if you were interested in the middle ages, well you had to know your way around the whole variety of—

ROBERT F. BROWN: These men were very traveled, weren't they, and they—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh yes, indeed.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And a great many of them, they weren't self-taught, at least had almost a tutorial early education before there was, say, a formal schooling in art history? Or have some of them actually had gone to, say, Germany and had some formal training in art history there, yes? Because the turn of the century, German would be about the only place, wasn't it, that—where these men could have had their training?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: I just don't know what their—the histories of their studies were—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did they stand out from later generations of art historians, would you say, in this country? Were they—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Stand out in—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Stand out as different on the—a good many of them were men of means, weren't they?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh, yes. Well, maybe the term amateur fits here in the sense that they didn't assume that if—that you were going to be a specialist in the—well, in the way that you're apt to be now for instance. [00:24:08]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was there much interest in contemporary art? I know at this time there's the student-sponsored Harvard Society for Contemporary Art at Harvard. Was there—were you involved at all in that or—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: I think that this came—I mean developed at Harvard after I was teaching down here. I think that modern art was looked at pretty much askance. Well, I mean the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston for instance, it doesn't—well, you got the impression from—if you went to Museum of Fine Arts that Boston thought Monet was quite a promising artist. They have a magnificent impressionist collection.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, the evidence. The board—were you aware at all of the—there were Boston artists at this time of great prestige locally. Were they men who ever came around and you were involved with or you got to know. I think Tarva [ph] was still alive, Vincent. These were men who would—you mentioned earlier the teacher who preferred Velasquez to, say, El Greco. I'd assume these men would too I think certainly painting—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh, I would think so. [00:26:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you—were you aware of them around there or—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: We—well, we certainly had no immediate contact with them. Of course, Arthur Pope was himself a beautiful watercolorist. But, as far as I was concerned, I don't know how much the senses makes. Since I was brought up in Chicago, I spent a lot of time at the art institute. I believe that the Birch Bartlett collection there at the art institute was probably one of the first major groups of pictures by 20th-century—well, late 19th-century and early 20th-century artists on public exhibition. Of course, the—well, the Seurat *Sunday Afternoon on [the Island of Los Angeles] Grande Jatte* was on the wall of the art institute.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you were familiar with this? As a boy, you—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh well, I mean I was familiar with it—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —had seen it?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: —as an undergraduate student at the University of Chicago, and Walter Sargent would lecture on the Birch Bartlett pictures. [00:28:03]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Favorably?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh, yes, yeah. I think he had mixed feelings about them, but at least, he insisted that we really look at them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you carry this interest in contemporary or American contemporary art over to your time at Harvard?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh, oh, yes, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Is that—what did you specialize in eventually then?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, it turned out that—I wrote the pieces on American etching, but this was not done until, oh, just after the Second World War, so that I didn't really have any specialties.

ROBERT F. BROWN: When you first taught—like you were an instructor at the University of Chicago from '27 to '31, did you, sort of, cover all fronts, and did the same happen then when you came to Brown in '32?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, at the University of Chicago, I think—um, the courses I remember was a course in Italian art in the one hand, a course in 19th-century painting on the other. I can remember lecturing one hour on Giotto and then next hour lecturing on [inaudible]. [00:30:02] Of course when I came Brown, why, I really was art history at Brown because the—when July came, it was a one-man art department, a man—I mean a painter, so I was brought in to teach art history. And then, well here, my first course was on all you need to know about art beginning to end taught in one semester. I think it was probably here that I got gradually especially interested in late 19th-century and 20th-century art.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you have a—when you first came here, you—in Chicago, you had not been the only person in art history—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —weren't you?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: There were—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Over here—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: I think there were three grants there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So, in some sense, a specialization in or at least division of the teaching of art history?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Yeah. Certainly, art history was not covered, quotes around that word, at the University of Chicago, but I remember a course in classical art. There was a course in Gothic architecture. [00:32:03] In fact, one summer at the University of Chicago, Clarence Ward from Oberlin came and taught Gothic architecture. I suppose that you'd say it was a somewhat catch-as-catch-can program in the sense that the courses were given that the people wanted to give.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And were these straight lectures that you gave?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Yeah, this—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Can you describe the schedule and the approach you took and the whole pattern of teaching then?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, yes, my art history courses were lecture courses. I also used to [inaudible] Walter Sargent teaching the color course. I think one very interesting thing was that there, it was assumed that an art department taught both, oh, what used to be called studio courses and art history courses. At Harvard, there was some studio work headed by Arthur Pope. This was probably—[coughs]—[00:34:00]—the studio work was, I suppose you could say, art-history oriented in the sense that what you examined was historical styles, and of course, the high point was what you call total visual effect. This was Vermeer, but you worked your way up to—look, I shouldn't say you worked your way up, but you looked at—I mean you examined the styles of great historical figures and tried to characterize this style, let's say Giotto's as opposed to this style, let's say Vermeer's.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I see. You mean characterizing your own paintings or in sketches?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Yeah. I mean, you had exercises to do. Well I guess the corny word would be that these courses at Harvard were not creative courses. I mean you're going to start out and paint your own pictures, and you painted like somebody else's. And I think the interesting, to me, very fundamental thing here was that this department had then got underway. Well, it had lived and died a couple of times, but when I came, it had been started off by a painter, so all of the assumption here was that art history and studio work were out of par. [00:36:22] That is, the studio work was not ancillary to art history.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. As it had been with the Fogg.

GEORGE E. BROWNING: As it had been with the Fogg. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In other words, they—one could learn to be a painter here at Brown?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Yeah, well, it—as an undergraduate course or student, you could take courses in painting. I mean, at first, it was pretty clear that there were ways to paint and ways that you didn't paint. Well, this would tie in with what you were asking a while ago about the New England painters who looked down their noses at modern art. But, as time went on, the student themselves knew more and more about modern art. I mean they had seen it and wanted to try it themselves.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were they—what were they like, the students when you came here in the beginning of the Depression, it was, in—[00:38:02]

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, they were—to begin with, in courses both in studio and art history in the early '30s, there would be, oh, 15 girls to one boy in the class, um, but well, by the time you got to the early '40s, this would no longer have been true.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why do you think? What happened that changed that do you think?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: I don't know.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did this—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: It—I suppose that if you got Brown students as opposed to Pembroke students—see in those days, why, there was this division. I mean Pembroke was the girl's school; Brown the men's school. If in art classes, you got men who wanted to take these classes no matter what, if they were—if they were interested themselves, they'd spread the word so that by the '40s, why, classes were equally divided. [00:40:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: What do you suppose these students through the '30s expected from art history or what do they—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, they hope for a pipe, the—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Right. The easy question.

GEORGE E. BROWNING: They didn't get it, and I suppose that this might be one reason why. Well, we all just tried to look at art history as a very important side of human history generally. I think that probably this—I mean, working at art history from this standpoint—in other words, how does art history relate to other phases of history, other contemporary or whatever artists you were studying—I think this attracted students more and more. I can remember giving, uh, a joint course with a very good friend, Sinclair Armstrong who was in the history department, and we gave a joint course on the Renaissance. [00:42:00] And we spent—well, probably, I would lecture for about a third of the course trying to relate art history to other sides of history that he was talking about.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Was this fairly unusual, never been done here before or elsewhere, or was it quite successful?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: I just don't know.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Would you consider it quite a success? You say there were increasing numbers of students attracted by it, and would they carry this on? Would you would have a program where they would write research papers?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, I suppose, I don't really know what research means here. I suppose the students still talk about researching a term paper, which means that you go and read a couple of books on the subject. But I think it got so that the relationship between art history and the other side of history was being taken to be a very informative approach for—well, it's a general education, and of course, the—well, the interest in general education underlay, well I could say, probably the whole Brown undergraduate curriculum. [00:44:20]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Were they fairly serious-minded your students?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh yeah, oh yeah, sure. No, by this time the idea that they could—they would get a pipe if they took an art course was pretty much completely gone. Of course, more and more, they seem to have gotten where—I mean the normal undergraduate students if they got [ph] in a big introductory course were very well informed. I can remember in the '40s when—this was probably the '50s when I suddenly realized that I didn't have to prove to the class that Matisse was a great painter. I mean they—

ROBERT F. BROWN: They accepted that, huh?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, they knew it when they got there, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was there a good deal of argumentation in your courses, the dialogue and the—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh yeah. Well, of course, in the big lecture courses, there was no chance for this, but—I don't know that you've heard of Wriston's IC courses? [00:46:04]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes, they were Identification and Criticism of Idea.

GEORGE E. BROWNING: That's right. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And they were on seminars, weren't they?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Yeah, they were really seminars and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes. How did that fit into the course—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, the art department had going, oh, I think, three IC courses at almost any time. I think these were limited to 10 or 12 students. So here's where the great—the specialty got going.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did this put the undergraduate education on a new level, do you think, or did it quite fundamentally alter the results you were getting from students?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: I don't know that—I don't know that it. Eventually, the university gave up the IC courses because, well, it's—the students wouldn't come with enough under their belts to be able to get much beyond that, what you might say, highly intelligent gossip. I think this—well, you think then, it doesn't—this kind of back

and forth—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes. [00:48:00]

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, I think program was very important in the sense that it opened up another kind of a course than a lecture course where you came and you put down what the professor said, and couldn't care less whether you agreed with it or not. And you pass it back and then this [inaudible] cliché that you realize. I think it was very important for making people think about what we meant by general education.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So much depended on the quality of the student preparation.

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Right, yes, yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I think probably some of the best student papers that I ever read were those for a big lecture course in modern painting where I asked students. Because, see, most of these students were not specialists in art, and I asked them to try to look at modern art from the standpoint of whatever they were most interested in, in the 20th-century art, and I got magnificent results from this kind of thing. [00:50:04] But that would be well along in the '50s and the early, early '60s.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you always—you seem to indicate that you always had an interest in the interrelation between various formal disciplines.

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh, yes, right, yeah, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You often found the best results in terms of student's performance came from just this—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —the students?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: —so it seemed to me perhaps because I was personally very much interested in this in the kind of—

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did you—you've just mentioned your course in modern painting, and you said earlier that your interest increasingly went toward 20th-century art. Could you discuss a bit your teaching, how did—what did you put into it, what approach did you use? Why perhaps did you eventually particularly settle on this as what you taught?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, I suppose, because if you start out with the pictures in front of you, rather than with your assumptions about what the pictures in front of you ought to look like. So, I mean, remember if you asked what's there to see rather what ought there be there to see, why probably 20th-century art is, at least for our time, a lot more challenging, you know? [00:52:04]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I see. You mean the older arts brought so many assumptions too as—and then you were fitting it into a history of style.

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Yeah, yeah. I mean if you ask—and this is off the top of my head, but if you did ask, um, why should—or what's the interest in the fact that Cubism happened when it did at not too different a time from Einstein's relativity, students with music, why—uh. If you asked different as they are and, uh, what ways of thinking—what general ways of thinking do they have in common, well either you—I mean you probably see more in Cubism for instance than if you didn't ask these questions. [Inaudible.] [00:54:01]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Possible then in your modern art course to bring things that had greater immediacy of the students in front of various areas of thought or events. Did you endorse the courses so that they were more or less fairly loosely structured, and you did set up a dialogue if not while you were lecturing, or did you formally lecture?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh, yes. This big course I'm talking about normally had 125, 150 students. You don't conduct a discussion with somebody because it's physically impossible. I think the best dialogues we used to have then where in what we call a undergraduate seminar where there wouldn't be more than 10 or 12 students. They couldn't get into a course like that unless they have enough background so that you—they weren't going to gossip. In there, we had some great times. These were conducted as discussions. It was being very, very carefully prepared these things, and the students had the—would do their homework.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. Did do eventually feel perhaps that the study of 20th-century art was maybe more important than studying earlier historical styles? [00:56:04] You've mentioned the immediacy it had for students.

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, in what sense would—

[Audio Break.]

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, all I can say is that it was most interesting to me from just this whole point of view that we've been talking about. I mean if you look at art history as—well, probably, I ought to say intellectual history, why, then 20th-century art is most challenging. And of course this can get very, very touchy, but—um. I mean in general, education for instance, I can't imagine giving any course in classical physics and never going beyond. I'd say in a sort of parallel fashion, if you're going to give a course in art history, you're not going to assume that you stop with the 17th and 18th century. [00:58:02] Not because modern art, I'd say, solves problems that weren't solved before because I don't suppose that you look at a work of art as, uh, making—you don't look at making a work of art as a way of solving general problems. It's a matter of solving visual problems certainly. But there, I suppose that the thing you look for is its consistency rather than its—what do you say—rightness or wrongness.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did you bring value judgments to bear and—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Not very much. I suppose you could say—I mean, I'd often put up pictures by—or put on the screen side-by-side pictures with different looks too by very different artists, but I don't think you ever ask the question is one better than the other. [01:00:00] I mean, is this one the way art should be and this one not? I think the question would be more how do their attitudes differ, and one maybe utterly consistent as may—the one beside it, but they're just based on different assumptions you could probably say.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So a great deal of your effort has to be put into making students understand the—so it used to be called the language of art. I mean be able to see as I move from one style to another and be able to look beyond—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Yeah, yeah. This would be a good way of putting it I think or—

ROBERT F. BROWN: And the vocabulary of the new generation.

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Or at least their new ways of—or different ways of using the language of art.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Was there always—here at Brown, was there interest, or was there any hostility ever to the teaching of contemporary art?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: No, no I think not. I think that—oh well, hostility on whose part? This would be my question.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

GEORGE E. BROWNING: No, I think that we were, um—I was expected to conduct a course in a way that we thought, well, effective. [01:02:06]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Of course, as—when you came here, they said they had a painter.

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And then however conservative or radical you might have been that he was here then there was—they're—the firstly concern—had involved with art here at Brown through an active creative person in the day. Perhaps they had that feeling from carrying on.

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Yeah, yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Through the years, was—did this intimacy between the teaching of studio art and art history continue?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh, yes. I would think that probably one of the reasons why the department here came along as far as the undergraduate students were concerned was that whatever work you got would be with townspeople. I can—when I came, our students could take studio work not only with Professor Taylor but also at the Rhode Island School of Design. They go down there for Brown credit. But as time went on, the demand for studio courses got to be such that there wasn't room for them at the Rhode Island School of Design meant that we had to hire more faculty. [01:04:20] And well, heck, it—there came a time when Brown was able to pay [laughs] more than the school of design so that—I'd guess it was [Barnaby] Barney Keeney who said that "I hear by the grapevine that the Brown faculty is better than the school of design faculty." Now, a generalization like that doesn't make much sense, but I mean—

ROBERT F. BROWN: The studio people did come to flourish here is what you're saying—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Right, yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Does it have—do you sense it had—being in a general educational atmosphere at Brown, does it have an appreciable effect upon the creative person as opposed to what you could observe at the Rhode Island School of Design, which is primarily a professional school? Did you—have you, over the years, detected differences upon the careers and outlook on the—of painters and sculptors?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Yeah, I just don't know. [01:06:00] I think you have to say here that, well, it depends upon what students you're talking about and what faculty you're talking about. Being in both places, there'll be a lot of students who were there because going to school was the thing to do. In both places, there were students who wanted to be working on what they were working on.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. The size made a difference in this, the numbers of artists and the art historians. Brown is much greater than it was, say, a decade ago or at least 20 years ago.

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh, yes. Oh, sure.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What effect has this had do you think?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Sure. How do you mean by—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, say, 20 years ago, perhaps one or two or three studio artists. Today you would say there are six or eight. Presumably, they're not quite so—well, they're not so—they're perhaps less knitted together you might assume as opposed 20 years ago when there were two or three who comprised that whole—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh, oh sure, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —in the university?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, I think you have to say that in a big faculty, so much bigger than it used to be, you're going to have a greater variety of points of view. And so some students are anxious to work with this man, other students anxious to work with that man.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You were, for many years, the chairman for 1949 to 1963, could you describe some of that role? [01:08:08]

GEORGE E. BROWNING: [Laughs.] [inaudible] what?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were there certain goals among—or were there certain different things you had to do as chairman that you've not been involved with before?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Not really because when I became chairman, the department was still small enough so that we all got together and talked things over. Of course, as you know with Brown, the title chairman is very important, but this—the chairman is not the head of the art department. I mean he's—he chairs the faculty meetings, and then of course, there are a lot of routine stuff that being the chairman is responsible for. I mean stuff that there's no point in discussing in the faculty meeting, I mean the routine. But, uh, well, I—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you sort of the lobbyist for art at Brown at that time? [01:10:04]

GEORGE E. BROWNING: I think everybody was lobbying for it, but of course one, thing the chairman does is talk directly to the administration. So in this sense—well, I remember when—Barney Keeney saying to the—at a chairman's meeting, "The job of a chairman is to get what his faculty wants," and so in this sense, why, the chairman is the lobbyist. Is that the kind of thing you—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You had a fairly direct line to the administration. Was there—what was then President Henry Wriston's attitude toward art?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh, he—I mean, he backed us all the way through. He was very conservative in his own case. But—well, this might make sense. When the Wriston Quadrangle was going up, this and the neo-Williamsburg style, which is—

ROBERT F. BROWN: As far as number of dormitories then.

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Right. I mean Redford was [inaudible]. This is what most people thought we ought to do. Because as the style of University Hall, well, anybody who thinks the Wriston Quadrangle looks like University Hall ought to take some more looks. [01:12:15] But I remember when the models for the Wriston Quadrangle were being shown, of course, the art department thought that this was not the kind of building to do

in whatever it was—the 1940s. Well, I wrote a letter to this effect to Wriston. He said, "I don't agree with you, but I want this letter"—xeroxed or whatever they did—mimeographed I guess is what you did then—"and sent to the corporation. Of course, the corporation at Brown has the—they run the places.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The trustees.

GEORGE E. BROWNING: So this is the kind of backing we got. I got one reply from one member of the corporation who said that as a loyal Brown man, University Hall was good enough for him. But, I mean, backing of this sort, we normally got.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. They would give you a full hearing.

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Yes, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But it sounds though visually, they were not very sensitive—[01:14:03]

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —[inaudible].

GEORGE E. BROWNING: —I suppose you'd say that they weren't interested in the kind of questions that we were interested in. The university building, this is background for—I mean, the look for the university building is background for all the things you had fun doing in college, you see. So that, for them, it wasn't important whether this is the kind of architecture that the in university in 1945 or [19]50, whatever it was, was building. They couldn't care less and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Was Keeney a different sort in relation to art at Brown?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, I would I say that Barney Keeney backed us just as vigorously as Wriston did. And, again, I mean art was not a central interest for him, but—

ROBERT F. BROWN: He was a historian though, wasn't he?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh yes, oh yeah, oh sure. Yeah, he was—oh, he was a medievalist then to begin with, or at least he taught medieval history here at Brown, brought here to teach medieval history. [01:16:01]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, you had—depending on the—did a great deal depend on the character of the president here at Brown? Was it a fairly tightly run place? You've mentioned these two men both of whom had—gave you considerable backing. If you had not had such presidents, would it have fundamentally altered the fate of art in Brown? Was there a great deal of—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: It certainly could have. I just don't know how to go at this. I suppose you probably could argue that both Wriston and Barney Keeney were very much focused on educational questions. And it maybe now that the job of being president of a university is so complex that perhaps it's impossible for these general questions to get the hearing that they once did. Does that—I don't know—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But at Brown as the administrative structure, is it—was it fairly hierarchical? Is it fairly autocratic or could it be? [01:18:00]

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, of course, the university is run by the corporation, but I think that the corporation normally goes along with recommendations from the faculty as far as being educational policy is concerned.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Over the years, what was the relationship with the—that you had on the your department with the Rhode Island School of Design? Is it quite close or is it—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh, yes, yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It figured in your planning or what your future goals and the like, the fact that there was the great art school down the street?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: No, I think I would start—I think I'd start that another way. I think that one of the greatest resources of the Brown art department is the museum of the school design. Of course, this is one of the great, small museums of the country. I think that probably you have to say that the—that the art department paid less attention to, let's say, professional education at the school of design than to the museum. [01:20:31] This is not very—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you have close relations with any personnel down there, some of the directors of the

museum and stuff?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh, yes. Well, I don't know if this is the case now or not, but when I was chairman, ex officio, I was a member of the board of trustees of the school of design. I served on the museum committee, and I think still Brown is always represented on the museum committee. As far as the board trustees goes, I just don't know.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was the work like? What was your impression overall? Is it a congenial one or was it—museum?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh sure, oh, absolutely. Of course, I think it's—[pauses] Of course, there again, it depends on the director but certainly Danny Robbins who now directs the Fogg in Harvard—well, he had more ideas prevalent about what people ought to have a chance to see than, I would say, anybody you could think of then. [01:22:07]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you know Alexander Dorner who's the director—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh, I see.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —in the '40s and the early '50s?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, yes, because—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was he like to work with?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: He was a magnificent person. We got to know each other just ex officio. Of course, he—I don't know whether—how much of this ought to be on the record.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, here, this is for you.

GEORGE E. BROWNING: [Laughs.] Well, of course, what doctor—he came from Hanover in Germany, and there if you're the director of a museum, why, you were the director. When he came here, I think he perhaps didn't understand that he wasn't the boss. So, eventually, he ceased to be the director, and at that point, became a member of the faculty at Brown, see, so the—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were his innovation at the museum quite startling at the time?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: It didn't seem so to us. I mean I think he thought of the place as—I think that he was not interested in, in separate, and you might say, precious objects as much as he was in putting the museum collection to use from a historical standpoint. [01:24:36] So as the—I mean he got into trouble by having big transparencies made that showed what the Acropolis of Athens looked like, and these were installed in the classical collections.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Whereas the trustees would prefer to that as the objects undersized?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Yeah. I mean—well, he came into conflict with the family. It was not so much the trustees as the family that had built up things in and billed, of course, magnificently.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Brown, on the other hand, could accommodate him at least on its faculty?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh, yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Of course, this was—this was all—I mean generally with Brown, it was a great admirer of Dorner, and I think it was through John Nicholas Brown that his move from the museum to Brown took place. [01:26:12]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Have you generally found Providence to be quite a—I won't say, unbeatable but quite a healthy place for the arts to either be studied or to be created in?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh, I think—well, I think it's—[laughs]—of course, we've been here since 1932 and wouldn't want to live anywhere else. You know I didn't think—well, as John Maxon who was another director of the museum that we were very close to once said, "Providence is a great provincial city. And people will listen to you here—or people here like to listen to a variety of other people in a way that perhaps just can't be the case in a much bigger city. And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: There's a better chance of you being heard too, isn't there?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: I think so, yeah, yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And there have been an awful lot of grand Yankees around. I mean they don't necessarily expect to believe what you tell them, but they want to

know what you have to tell them though.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And they have pretty hard and fast traditions of their own then? [01:28:02]

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, I—this is over-simple, but I would think that the tradition in Providence is that you don't have a hard and fast tradition.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was your impression coming from Chicago, having had some student years at Cambridge of course, but growing up in Chicago and coming to New England City?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: [Laughs.] See, I just don't know how to—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You see more stratified or—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: I suppose you probably have to say there that the Chicago that we knew was the University of Chicago. Whereas here, Brown never had a ring around it as far as Providence is concerned. I think one of the things that most impressed us was the wonderful town-gown relationship here. That is if you're around the Brown faculty, why, you were acceptable. [01:30:04] People were going to be interested in you so that a member of the Brown faculty would be foolish to social climb. I mean I'm sure if you tried to do so, why you'll get your face pushed right in. But I think one of the nicest things about the town-gown relationship was that the Brown faculty just, it never occurred to them that this was a place where you—there very important parties you got invited to, this kind of thing. This—there seems to be an awful lot of chitchat but—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well in your—from your teaching though, all these years, what would you like to have accomplished most of all, would you say? Are there particular things you hope you did?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, I suppose arriving at the point where the art department is a very strong department. [01:32:02]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What about student, the effect on students, who they are or what did you do then [ph] do you see has been accomplished there? You mentioned how over the years it became more, I guess we could say, sophisticated. But after they leave you, is there feedback as to then how—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: I just don't know what to say there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: There's really no one pattern or anything of the sort you think would be—

GEORGE E. BROWNING: I wouldn't think so. I wouldn't think so.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You've seen them pretty much as individuals, have you?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Well, I've been seeing some of them as individuals. I mean some you don't have a chance to see that way. But I think as you look back or as I look back that, well, one of the great things would be the number of people you did get to know as individuals. This is—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Is there a good deal, in certain cases, of continued acquaintance and friendship?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Oh, oh, yes, oh sure, right, yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Has this been one of the most rewarding things for you as a teacher?

GEORGE E. BROWNING: Yeah, I think so, I think so. Maybe this is the—another side of the town-gown business, I mean the variety of people of so many different ages that you count as very good friends. [01:34:21]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]