



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Frederic C.
Knight, 1976 Dec. 9

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

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Frederic C. Knight on December 9, 1976. The interview took place in Canaan, New York, 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

ROBERT BROWN: This is an interview with Frederic C. Knight in Canaan, New York and the date is December 9, 1976. Perhaps we can begin, if you could say something of your childhood, your earliest years.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well, I was born in Philadelphia but my early years were spent in Scranton, Pennsylvania, to which my parents had moved when I was a very young child. I began drawing very early and this soon became noticed, and at 15, I was awarded first prize in a citywide competition in the public schools of Scranton.

ROBERT BROWN: Your parents, did they have something to do with in the arts as well, or you were the exception?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: They were both talented but they never did anything with it, they were talented, I understand, as children, both my mother and my father.

ROBERT BROWN: This citywide competition—

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Is this still on?

ROBERT BROWN: Yes it is.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Oh, I'm sorry.

ROBERT BROWN: The citywide competition, was that organized through the schools in Scranton?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: It was organized by the school board I suppose, and the city of Scranton, and all the schools in Scranton participated in it. [00:02:00] Several individuals, including the superintendent of art in the public schools of Scranton, interested themselves in obtaining a scholarship at the Pennsylvania Museum of Industrial Art in Philadelphia for me.

ROBERT BROWN: Is that the same—is that a museum that still exists?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: It is not a museum it's a school, it still exists, yes. As a result, I receive a four-year full scholarship to the school, awarded by Governor Brumbaugh. I have that letter by the way.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh you do? You were quite precocious then.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: I was very precocious, yeah, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have a large ego?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well, I keep forgetting that you are—I would say that it was my chief interest, my principal preoccupation, and I was always drawing. I had a room in the house always, to myself, where I could go and work, as a child.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you paint at all?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: No. I didn't get started in painting until very much later.

ROBERT BROWN: Until somewhat later.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: There at the school, there were three major courses of study: design, illustration, and the normal course leading to teaching. I chose the course in illustration and at the end of four years, was awarded the first prize for drawing and the prize for general excellence. The next few years were spent in earning a living at advertising art. [00:04:00] During this period I became quite well known for illustrations reproduced in the

national magazines. I could show you a lot of them.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, I think we did look at some of those and they were pretty prominent advertisements weren't they?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes, yes, they were full-page ads most of them.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you do this, were you formally connected with an advertising agency?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well, I was for a while yes and in fact, I had two or three such connections but usually I freelanced. During most of the time that I did advertising work, it was on a freelance basis.

ROBERT BROWN: This was in the early '20s wasn't it?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes. It started really, in 1919, at the time I graduated from the school.

ROBERT BROWN: Could I ask about the school a moment? Was the curriculum there very set, was it a fairly rigid one?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well the program was, I would say pretty comprehensive for that kind of school, it was really a craft school, not a school of painting, painting was not taught there. There were two major schools in Philadelphia; one was my school, that is the Pennsylvania Museum School of Industrial Art and the other was the academy, the Philadelphia Academy, and if you were studying painting you went to the academy. I didn't know much about the academy at that time.

ROBERT BROWN: You wouldn't have had much connection with their students.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: No, I would not have. [00:06:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Did you enjoy the advertising work, the illustrations?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Much of it I did, I think, and I did a great deal of it for a few years, but as a I think I can say a little later in our talk, as soon as I became interested in painting there was conflict, and I would give up advertising for a while and paint, and then I had to go back to advertising to earn a living and so forth. Of course this sort of thing is true of a great many painters of the past and even of today, earn a living at something, maybe some form of commercial art. To go back, Renoir and Matisse, both in their early years, had to do that. It was said, I remember, by one of the critics in the *New York Times*, if the major painters at the end of the 19th century had not been independent, had independent incomes, we would never have heard of them probably. Cézanne and Seurat and Degas and others, never had to earn a living you see, they could give their whole, all their energies and their lives to their painting. [00:08:00]

ROBERT BROWN: In those days was there much more prestige attached to being a painter than to being, say an advertising artist?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Are you referring to—

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, was there more prestige in your days would you say?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well it might have. Yes there was.

ROBERT BROWN: There was? But your main reason was, you wanted to be able to work just on your own, is that right, or did prestige enter in?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: No. May I say a little about that later on, a little later? In 1921, I married Dorothy Bell Sanders of Philadelphia and in 1923, we went to Woodstock, New York, where I spent the summer months in a painting class at the Woodstock School of Painting and it was here that I began to paint. We stayed on through the fall and winter and then in the spring went to Philadelphia, where I continued advertising work.

ROBERT BROWN: Was she an artist herself?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: No, no, she was not. By the way, her middle name, Bell, I should say a word about that. Alexander Graham Bell was her godfather, that's where the Bell comes from, the family, we're tied up with all of that.

ROBERT BROWN: Who were the teachers at Woodstock? [Phone rings.]

[Audio Break.]

FREDERIC KNIGHT: About the teachers there, there were three teachers in that school, they were Andrew Dasburg, Henry Lee McFee, and Charles Rosen. [00:10:04] I enrolled in Andrew Dasburg's class but I can't say I studied with him. I don't consider him a teacher.

ROBERT BROWN: You soon noted that he wasn't a very good teacher?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Definitely, that he was not a teacher. That can be said of many painters of the time. He would come in once or twice a week and sit around and chat and then go off, and I never had a criticism from him. I don't think, I can't remember any others who really had a criticism all summer, until the end of the summer, when I was just on my own, somehow getting along, and he suddenly stopped at my place and said, "Say Knight, you're certainly pulling things together aren't you?" I can't say that I owe that to him at all. The thing that was most helpful to me and to others I think, at the time, was the Saturday morning talks. On Saturday mornings these men alternated, talking about painting, and I got a lot out of that.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it McFee? You told me earlier McFee was quite interested. [00:12:00]

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes, McFee was very much interested in my work. He told his friends that of the young painters there at Woodstock, I was the one who had a sense of form and he was very much impressed with that and he began telling other painters in a comparatively short time, I was being invited to exhibitions and I was just starting at the time you see. Well, during that period of my life, I was constantly thinking about painting and talking with others, my contemporaries, about painting, but in the class I learned nothing.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you exhibit in Woodstock?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: In Woodstock and I began to be invited to exhibitions, national exhibitions, national exhibitions.

ROBERT BROWN: In Woodstock, George Bellows was your neighbor wasn't he?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You've mentioned that a couple of times.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes, that was in the summer, well in the summer of '23. The summer of '23, and then the fall and winter of '23 and four. I knew Bellows very well. He used to come over and beg a cigarette once in a while, he was not supposed to be smoking you see, and of course I was a youngster and he was a famous American artist. [00:14:20] He was really a grand person and was generally liked in Woodstock. He was not thought so highly of as a painter by us young painters but as a man, he was very polite and respected.

ROBERT BROWN: Did he ask you to tell you what you thought of his work?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: As a matter of fact, he invited me over to his studio one day, he'd just finished something, and it was a figure, a woman, seated at the piano, I don't remember who she was. Bellows, of course I think was an important graphic artist. He was never really very much of a painter as painters think of painting at that time; his color sense was very defective.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you mean he would get kind of colors that did one another in?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well, he thought in terms of black and white really and color was something to add to it. [00:16:01] I thought at the time, that his paintings were colored black and whites, and the color often was really very bad to someone who had any sense of color, and when he asked me what he thought of it he said, "Now Knight, I want you to tell me exactly what you think of it," and well, that was an embarrassing position to me, for me to be in, but I wasn't going to say flattering things when I thought it was poor, the color was very poor. On the other hand, I wasn't going to say anything as drastic as that. I said something like well, "Don't you think that color is a little off, George?" Everybody called him George. He said, "Well, others have said that and I think you're right." I think he said Gene said something, that means Gene Speicher. He said, "I'll tell you what I'm going to do, I'm going to throw a red glaze over that and that will fix it." He said, "But you know, people say I'm not a great colorist, well maybe I'm not," he said. This was the kind of thing that he was capable of in his talk. [00:18:03] If you could turn that off.

[Audio Break.]

FREDERIC KNIGHT: He said well maybe I'm not, but he said I think the great colorists, for instance, were effeminate, and he used that term. For instance, Renoir, of course I didn't think as he did concerning Renoir and others. I was fortunate at the time, I think, to get to know the painters in Woodstock, and this was very helpful.

ROBERT BROWN: Is this a place where you felt very productive, the nice location, the environment?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: The thing is I was just starting in painting and consequently, I wouldn't say it was very productive. I was struggling and earning a living, advertising at the same time and it was difficult. In the fall of 1924, I was one of a group invited to attend a series of talks at the Barnes Foundation.

ROBERT BROWN: Right, in Philadelphia.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: In Marion, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Philadelphia. [00:20:00] After the talks, we were free to roam the galleries of this magnificent collection; this was, without a doubt, the single most important experience of the early years.

ROBERT BROWN: Why was it?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well, as a young man just beginning really, in painting, to suddenly have all this opened up to him, there were perhaps 150 Cézannes there, for instance, 200 Renoirs, and Van Gogh, and Seurat, and later Picasso, many others. It was, without a doubt, the finest collection of post-impressionist painting and contemporary painting of that time in America, perhaps in the world. You see, at the time that Barnes began to collect, there was a Russian, Chokin, and that was the only other collection which compared with it. I still am convinced that it is by far, the most important collection that I know of in this country.

ROBERT BROWN: Compared say, with the collection, the Clarks at Williamstown.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Oh that doesn't compare at all. In Williamstown, you see there were two brothers, Clark, and the man who left the collection to Williamstown Museum, of course he was a great lover of Renoir and Degas, but insignificant. [00:22:11] Are I remember, there was only one small Cézanne. He had very conservative tastes and on the other hand, a large part of that collection is very inferior; a great deal of French painting, by second and third rate French painters that you never heard of, that I never heard of either.

ROBERT BROWN: But the Barnes Collection, who particularly was exciting to you at that time?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Cézanne.

ROBERT BROWN: Why do you think, what was there in his work?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Cézanne was, I would say, the most exciting because of his power of expression and his use of color to express form and in particular, particularly, his landscapes are very exciting to me. By comparison, I've found Renoir less exciting, but he was so different, one can't compare them really. [00:24:00] We went, as a group, to the Barnes Collection, through the fall and winter of '24 and ['2]5, and I was present at the founding ceremonies. Barnes of course, was somewhat eccentric. Much of the art world was shut out, you know that I suppose.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

FREDERIC KNIGHT: I have no criticism of the place at all at that time. The museum was new, the walls were fresh, white, and the canvases, the pictures were displayed with plenty of space between them and hung in, I thought, a very skillful and tasteful way and I have since had the privilege of going back to the Barnes Museum, I've taken students there through the years.

ROBERT BROWN: This was a time when for you, you still had to work sometimes in advertising art to make money.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: That's right, that's right, and that continued until 1929. [00:26:00] In 1925, after a concentrated period of work in advertising art, in order to save money and to make possible a trip abroad, we did go abroad in 1925, in the fall of '25. We were away for 15 months, in France and Italy, going to museums and chateaus. We had an apartment in Paris for six months, the summer of 1926 and I did painting over there. Of course I was free to paint, I didn't have to think for the period, of anything else, and it was a wonderful, of course, experience.

ROBERT BROWN: What sort of paintings were you doing then?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well, I was influenced by the great French painters, I would say particularly by Cézanne and Matisse; they and Picasso of course was a very influential painter to us all Americans who went over there.

ROBERT BROWN: In what ways were Matisse and Picasso influential on your work? [00:28:00]

FREDERIC KNIGHT: That's a little hard to answer. The thing is that Matisse was a great colorist of course, but not only that. His influence upon me, if I may say so, was largely spiritual, it was the spirit of the man that moved me, that inspired me, whereas I couldn't say that about Picasso at all. Picasso was a painter of power and

one could not help feel that and admire that, but Matisse was, I think a unique personality and it was his point of view toward life, his philosophy, his approach to painting that influenced me, not the work itself. I have never imitated really, anybody, I never imitated Cézanne, nor Matisse. Really, I can say that I never really studied the techniques of either.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you seek out some of these people, did you meet any of the painters in France?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: No. I was moving around too much to begin with.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you study, did you go to any formal courses at all while you were there?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well that's another thing that I could briefly refer to. [00:30:00] I entered the class—

[Audio Break.]

FREDERIC KNIGHT: —from America, whom I had known over here, a painter, a young woman, had entered Lhote's class and was enthusiastic about him and because of this, I decided to enter the class myself, and I paid, as was required, I paid a month's tuition, and it so happened that on the first day that I was there, Lhote surprised the class. It was not his day. I think he was accustomed to go about twice a week and to criticize the work, but he came on this day, when he was not expected, and started at the other end of the room. It was a fairly large class and the students were arranged in a semicircle, and he asked for the student's palette and brushes, and then he commenced working on the student's work and talking all the time. At that time, I was new to Paris and I knew very little French, and I couldn't tell what he was saying but I got the sense of it, and he was a very dapper little man and very clever and in no time at all he transformed this thing and made an André Lhote of it, and then he went on to the next one and asked for brushes and palette and proceeded to do the same thing. [00:32:06] I think he might have gotten through half the class at the end of the afternoon. He didn't come to me, to the side of the room where I was, he left perhaps early, and I was so appalled and what I'd just seen and heard, it wasn't what I wanted at all, and I went to the monitor and I said that I decided I didn't want to stay and I would like to have my money back, and he said oh no, I wouldn't get my money back, nothing would be returned, I had paid a month in advance and they would keep the money, and I walked out and never went back. Now of course that kind of thing in teaching is well known and there are many painters who have done that, but it was my first experience with it, I'd never seen or heard anything like it before. [00:33:30] When I was in Paris, I did go to the Grande Chaumière, to the so called *croquis* class, sketch class, where there were models and where you paid so many francs for the afternoon for instance, and that was wonderful. There was no teacher and you were free to come and go as you liked, and I did a great deal of work there and got a great deal out of it. [00:34:05]

ROBERT BROWN: At that point, were you doing a lot of studying of figure?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well of course that, I suppose for a while was my major interest. I drew the figure a great deal, always had, and I began to paint the figure, but I also did landscapes and still lifes.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have many friends among your contemporary American painters of the time?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well, I think I suggested in Woodstock, I met a number of painters but you see, I was just beginning. I had only begun to paint a year before.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: I felt very new to all this experience and it was only later, when we came back to this country, that I began to meet more painters, but over there at that time, in the South of France, where we had rented a villa, I met two or three painters. Marsden Hartley was one of the early American painters, he was one of the Stieglitz Group, I met him in the South of France and I remember sitting at a café with another American painter and talking, and that was all very interesting to me, to be able to do that, to meet older men and talk about painting. [00:36:19]

ROBERT BROWN: Was Hartley very articulate about what he was doing?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Oh yes, he was articulate, you know his work very well. Something I was going to say—oh, during that summer in Paris, it was a lot of fun to sit at the cafes and watch people go by and meet various people, painters and others, and I used to see Hemingway. I never met him but I used to see him walking down the street with others, his contemporaries, Ezra Pound for instance, I saw both of them about at that time.

ROBERT BROWN: When did you return, in 1927 or so?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Nineteen twenty-seven, in January, late January of 1927.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you go back to Philadelphia or Woodstock?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: I think I should say that when I went abroad, I was not thinking so much of French painting, it was the great Italians that I wanted to see, particularly Giotto, Masaccio and Piero della Francesca. [00:38:06] We were in Italy for six weeks and of course I saw a great deal of painting of the pre-Renaissance and the Renaissance, and all that was a tremendous experience to me, very inspiring. When we came back from our trip abroad, we came back because we were broke, and so I had to get to work again, in advertising. This situation continued until 1929, painting when I could find time and otherwise, doing advertising work. In 1929 I threw it all over and I can't tell you how we managed but we did.

ROBERT BROWN: You had the strong support of your wife.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes I did. We went to Woodstock. Meanwhile, I had become a member of the Babcock Gallery and while there of course, I exhibited regularly at the Babcock Gallery and I was invited more and more, to the big exhibitions around the country.

ROBERT BROWN: The Babcock Gallery is quite common I think.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes it was, it was one of the important galleries dealing exclusively in American painting, but it was primarily a gallery which dealt in 19th-century American painting and it had to have paintings by young painters in its galleries, and so there was a group of young painters at the Babcock Gallery, but we shared with the 19th century painters, the space and time of the gallery. [00:40:48] The dealer was primarily, I would say, interested in 19th century painting.

ROBERT BROWN: Was he a good dealer to have?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: I think when I look back on it that he was but eventually, when I began to teach, he didn't sell anything, and this was true of the works of the group as a whole. In fact since then, I've found others retired from the gallery for the same reason. I was then teaching, so I didn't have to rely upon that for a living you see, and I decided that I would go on painting on my own, without a gallery, and just teach. The teaching left plenty of time for painting.

ROBERT BROWN: When did you begin teaching?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: In 1943, I was offered a position at the Newcomb School of Art in New Orleans, that was the Women's School of Tulane University. [00:42:18]

ROBERT BROWN: So you were actually on your own as an artist for a number of years before you taught.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes I was, oh yes, definitely. I had become rather well known and I was offered this job because I was known as a painter.

ROBERT BROWN: During the early '30s did you have steady exhibits around the country?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes. Well, I would have to go back a little. American Group was formed in 1931, and I became president of American Group and we had regular exhibits. The various members began to be invited to outside exhibitions.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it founded by a group of artists?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Why did you all form it?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well, as a matter of fact, McFee at that time, wanted me to go into Ren's, which was the only gallery, which was a new gallery at that time, comparatively new, and which was the only gallery dealing exclusively in contemporary American painting. The Babcock Gallery, although it was an all American painting, it was 19th century and contemporary. But I had already been invited to become a member of this young group, which had its own gallery at the Barbizon-Plaza Hotel, a good size gallery, handsome gallery, and it had already been formed before I was invited. [00:44:09] There were only four or five members at the time and I was invited to come in and I thought about it and somehow, rightly or wrongly, I made that decision instead of going to Ren, and then we gradually became a larger group. Later, a few years later, I was elected president of the group. The '30s were a very exciting and very active period among artists and artist organizations and it was during that period that the various societies got together and decided to form what was called the Artist Coordination Committee. Each organization sent its member, representing their society to the group and all together oh, there were eight or ten societies. There was an American group, there was the American Society of Painters, Sculptors, Engravers, Sculptors Guild, National Academy; they were all prominent groups, and I was selected to

be chairman.

ROBERT BROWN: Of this coalition.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes. [00:46:00]

ROBERT BROWN: What was the main reason for this coalition for that?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: It had come to be felt among artists, and this became more and more so during this period, that the artists needed to band together in their interests, professional interests, because they were invited, here and there for instance, to exhibitions, and then although their work was noticed sometimes and sometimes not, hardly anybody ever got anything else out of it. There was this idea which was put forth at the time by societies and taken up in the Artist Coordination Committee, of having a rental fee in which this rental fee would be demanded of all those who organized big exhibitions. These exhibitions couldn't go on without the support of artists as a group and we decided that we deserved something for it. [00:48:00]

[Audio Break.]

FREDERIC KNIGHT: —some controversy about this. Museums, I think as a group, were opposed to it and there was a lot of opposition to it. It remained in effect for some time, I don't remember just how long.

ROBERT BROWN: Was that his main lobbying, was economic wasn't it?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes, definitely.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it fairly amicable, the relations among those areas?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes. We were really, as I might say at that time, the artists in the metropolitan area were in a sense, a kind of family. We saw each other a great deal at meetings and otherwise, and I don't think anything like that has existed since that time.

ROBERT BROWN: Some of the groups were more conservative than yours though weren't they?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: The National Academy of course but the National Academy recognized this as important to its members, and of course we were a committee, we were a fairly large committee, and so when there was any decision to be made as to policy, it was the majority of the committee which decided.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have some success in getting this rental fee paid by museums and others?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: I don't remember that. As a matter of fact, I came upon a note recently from the Berkshire Museum. [00:50:11] I had had a picture there, I hadn't known about it really or had forgotten about it, saying they were enclosing my fee, the rental fee of \$25 it happened to be. One of the things we did at that time was to promote various exhibitions. For instance, there was an exhibition on housing called *Roofs for*—

ROBERT BROWN: *Forty million*.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: —*Forty Million*, and that was a big success.

ROBERT BROWN: The Artists Coalition called it that.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes that's right. And then there was the World's Fair. Now there was not to be any exhibition of art at the World's Fair, La Guardia was against it and he fought it, and finally he capitulated because we made so much of it. And we got—he had this cultural committee, an art committee, and they finally capitulated and agreed to have a large exhibition of contemporary American art at the World's Fair, that's how it was done.

ROBERT BROWN: Why were they against having it in the beginning?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: I think La Guardia felt that he may have been very conservative for that matter and he may not have liked some of the—what he thought was modern art, I don't remember that, but I think that he thought there were other more important things to deal with than art in the World's Fair. [00:52:11]

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Was the *Roofs for Forty Million*, who did that involve among your group? Was that architectural display mainly?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: No. It involved painters, sculptors, graphic artists and many of the artists painted subjects which had to do with the idea. In fact, during the '30s, I might have said that before, perhaps a cheaper occupation among painters and sculptors was the American scene, and the social problems came in there, the

subject matter dealt with the question of housing and so on.

ROBERT BROWN: So most of you had that. Did you paint things that had those overtones as well?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes, yes I did.

ROBERT BROWN: It was pretty brutal then, was it, the salt, the picture of society during the Depression.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well there were pictures which might be described that way.

ROBERT BROWN: But in your perception of the time.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Gropper for instance, dealt graphically with the subject more than some of us did.
[00:54:02]

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned the so called regionalists who, until recently, were the best known people at that time.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Oh yes, yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you come up with that sort of artist, were you thinking about people like Grant Wood.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: And Benton.

ROBERT BROWN: Benton, and Curry.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Painters, I would say that painters in general didn't like the work of Benton, Wood and Curry. They became very well-known but their work was not accepted by painters.

ROBERT BROWN: Why do you think, it wasn't very good painting?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Because it wasn't good painting. There was one man who is more or less thought of as being in that group, who was I think, superior.

[Audio Break.]

FREDERIC KNIGHT: He was accepted by the painters.

ROBERT BROWN: Did the Mexican muralists make much of a stir with you and your colleagues?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes that's true, that's true. I personally was not a follower or a great admirer of—

ROBERT BROWN: Rivera.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Rivera.

ROBERT BROWN: Orozco.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Orozco. But I recognize them as important men, the most important men of their time in Mexico and I saw them paint in New York, because Rivera was doing murals for Rockefeller Center, I think, but I was not influenced by them at all. [00:56:09] Of course I had been involved in the painting of a mural for the Treasury Department and naturally, I was interested in watching the painters work.

ROBERT BROWN: That's the one in the post office, the Johnson City.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Johnson City, that's right.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you enjoy doing that?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes, I enjoyed doing it, but I would say that when I came back to painting, easel painting, I found that for me apparently, I was happier with easel painting than I ever was with mural painting. I was not one of those who went on in that direction, who continued in that direction. There are those who did and those who didn't, most of the painters did not I think.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you have any direct political involvement? You were also on the executive committee of the Artists Congress.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: That's right.

ROBERT BROWN: That was quite a politically oriented group wasn't it?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well, at that time there was a trend among certain groups which I was aware of and which Mavis was aware of, without being interested ourselves in it. [00:58:00] Stuart Davis was—I don't suppose that Stuart Davis was ever a member of the party for instance, the Communist Party, I doubt that, but I knew him very well and he was against war and fascism, so weren't we all, so would intelligent people be today I think.

ROBERT BROWN: Sure.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: That's why. And although I thought that those who came under that influence were dupes, and so I never was interested in that.

ROBERT BROWN: It was apparent to you then that they were being manipulated by Russia?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: I don't know whether manipulate, whether the word manipulate is quite right. Of course at that time, the communists were the group which fought hardest or seemed to fight hardest to improve society, were conscious of social problems and needs and so forth, and of course as young painters of goodwill, many of us agreed, they were working for good ends you know but not necessarily to the extent of joining them in some of their activities. [01:00:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Well did the Artists Congress develop pretty smoothly or was there a lot of controversy within it?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: No. Practically anybody who was anything in New York City at the time was a member of Artists Congress, it was not, as is sometimes thought, a communist group, it had nothing to do with that.

ROBERT BROWN: It was a big umbrella group then.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yeah, that's right.

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned Stuart Davis, was he a particular friend of yours during those years?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes he was.

ROBERT BROWN: What was he like then?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: He was the chairman of the Artists Congress, of course a very important painter, and I think he was a grand person. I never had any reason to feel differently about Stuart Davis. Incidentally, I might tell you this, that later I had a seat in the hospital, I've told you about that, and when I got out, it was some time before I was myself again physically, I required months of recuperation, and then I decided to separate myself from organizational responsibility as I had had it, and just to get back to painting, and I didn't think it would be noticed particularly at the time and I was surprised when Stuart Davis brought the matter up, he said, "You were a leader." I never thought of myself as a leader but I was, you know, because I was interested and I had a certain drive to bring about the things that I was interested in. [01:02:00] I suppose that's why I was selected as chairman.

ROBERT BROWN: So after that, after your illness, you didn't go back.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: No, as a matter of fact, I have tended, since that time, to try to keep out of involvement, because I had to earn a living meanwhile, teaching for instance. I needed all the time I could get for painting, so from that time on I stayed out of organizational responsibility more or less. I should say I think, that I liked to teach and apparently, I had a real talent for it, so that when I came to make a break from the Newcomb School of Art, they begged me to stay, and I don't know whether I told you or not. The director said, and these are his words, "You've given us the best teaching job we've ever had and we'll do anything to keep you." It wasn't a question of money and so on. And at Columbia, I found again, a certain satisfaction in teaching and I went ahead with my teaching and became particularly known as a teacher of drawing, I had drawing and painting classes. [01:04:03] Well, there were many good painters who were teaching painting but there wasn't anybody who could draw.

[END OF TRACK AAA_knight76_8056_m.]

ROBERT BROWN: Side two, December 9, 1976. You were talking about the Newcomb School of Art.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Oh yes. I had taught before going there, once. I had taught for a year at the school from which I graduated, taught drawing, but of course that was something else, that was a very different kind of school. It was a school, a highly organized school, but Newcomb, first of all, was a surprise, very refreshing, because unlike schools like the Art Students League and the Woodstock School of Painting, where there was no

program at all, those places are very loosely put together and they depend upon the individual teachers for instance, to give the class any character. I had not been attached to any school or had experience in any school like Newcomb in this respect. Is it going?

ROBERT BROWN: It is going.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: There was a program, a definite program, which was designed to provide the student with the beginnings, and then to go on gradually, to more advanced work. For instance, a student was not allowed to begin to paint until his third year. [00:02:02] He was not allowed, she I should say, it was when I was there it was entirely a women's school. Later, I think it became well, in a sense coeducational, but in the beginning, the design courses and art appreciation, and a concentration on various studies which provided them with a preparation for drawing and painting. They were not allowed to enter the life class in their first year, they could only enter the life class as beginners in their second year and go on then, to the third year, and only begin painting after they'd had at least a year of life and two other years of the various studies, color theory and so on, design. Well, the school when I was there, was under the direction of Robin Field, F-I-E-L-D, an Englishman, but he was a product of Harvard and he had taught at Harvard, history I think. He was a great admirer of the Bauhaus and he tried to make Newcomb sort of—pattern it more or less after that as much as he could, with the kind of situation that he had there. [00:04:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Which was what, rather conservative?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Conservative. There were southern belles, society, and the idea was, and it was his idea too, and he was, I would say rather brutal about this, that he wasn't going to put up there at the school, with any nonsense about becoming painters, becoming artists, full-fledged artists, they were there to learn something and learn these things, be exposed to them, but they wanted to become artists, it meant years. So then this I didn't agree with at all, he tended to discourage the students from taking their work at all seriously and that I didn't like, but because it was a school with a program, the kind of program I've just suggested, I thought it was excellent. The students were intelligent young people, attractive young people, and some of them were very talented. I have stacks of beautiful drawings that I did in my classes.

ROBERT BROWN: You found that they compared favorably with the quality of students you'd seen say, at the Art Students League?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: No comparison. In drawing, the work that I've seen of the Art Students League and elsewhere, well, come to think of it I'll make an exception, Nicolaïdes.

ROBERT BROWN: Kimon Nicolaïdes. [00:06:03]

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Kimon Nicolaïdes was an exception. I haven't seen the drawings that were done in his class but I imagine that some of them were excellent, because I think he was an excellent teacher. Well, Stephen, my son, was a little boy, and he was going to school there and not at all happy there, he didn't want to go back, each year he didn't want to go back, because down there all the southern kids called him the Yankee and he didn't like that. He wasn't really at home with them and well, I had to consider that seriously. Also, when the invitation came from Columbia, I had to consider the importance of getting back to New York professionally and getting back into the world of painting.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: My Newcomb experience was on the whole very constructive I think.

ROBERT BROWN: They really wanted you to stay on there.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Definitely. As I say, he begged me to stay and I told him I think, but he said we'll get you a promotion, we'll get you more money and if you'll agree to stay, we'll do everything we can for you because you've given us the best teaching job we've ever had. That meant a lot to me of course.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: My considering who my—whose place I took there, what's his name? [00:08:16] I think it isn't necessary to go any further with that. At Columbia at that time, there was an opening and I received a letter for a friend, letting me know that there was going to be an opening and would I be interested. I had to think about that and I decided that it would be a good thing to do. Well, of course there were other people, other members, other painters who knew this and who wanted it, and I was asked to go up to Columbia to meet Mangraviti, who was sort of running the department, and I knew one or two others who were interested and I was very delighted when I got word that the staff had voted for me, that's the way I was told.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you know several of your colleagues?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well, I knew, you probably know, Ralph Mayer and George Picken, I knew them, but they knew other painters too, who were interested and they were friends of others who had friends who were interested. [00:10:05] One of those who was interested was a cousin of one of the staff and a very good man too.

ROBERT BROWN: You came there quite confident in your teaching didn't you?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yeah. Yes, I knew what I could do and well, of course I was at Columbia for 18 years and then retired in 1964.

ROBERT BROWN: Was it by and large a pretty good experience?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes. When I went, first went to Columbia, it was a department. Then, largely through the ambition enterprise of Mangraviti, who wanted a school there. There was a lot of pressure in the university to make it an art school and eventually, it became an art school with a BFA degree and required five years in the university instead of a four year course, it was a five year course. Then, as a school, of course we could plan to have a program and I took part in that by the way, I was one of the committee who drew up the program. [00:12:00] Then, I think it was excellent during that period and we had excellent talent from all over the country.

ROBERT BROWN: This is the early 1950s, late '40s?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes in the '50s, in the '50s. I can't remember just what year, it might have been '51 or so, we became a school, and it was about '58 that it was abolished. Now, you may know something about that. It wasn't because of any criticism of the school or any failure to produce good work and good students, because I think particularly considering that we had just a few years, excellent work was done and the results were excellent. Barzun.

ROBERT BROWN: Jacques Barzun.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: He was against an art school in the university and he was against any art schools, whether painting or sculpture or music or any of the arts, he didn't believe in it. Well, of course I think Barzun was a dilatant, he was generally thought of as a dilatant and there was a lot of animosity toward him because of his point of view, but when he became powerful enough, he became dean of faculties, he did it, all the art schools were abolished, including music, the theater, painting and sculpture, and then it was something else.

ROBERT BROWN: How did he change it?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well, they were no longer required to take preparatory courses.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes. [00:14:04]

FREDERIC KNIGHT: They could just take any course you see and so on. The work as a whole deteriorated.

ROBERT BROWN: You could have them coming into fairly advanced courses without much preparation at all.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes, definitely, but we had something to say about that, that a beginning would not be allowed to enter the advanced class in painting for instance, he would have to go to the elementary class. But, he wouldn't have had any of the preparation, design, color theory and even perspective, for instance, they didn't know anything about perspective some of them, not that it's so important as it used to be.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you believe that a student needs a year or two also, to develop facility, before the student gets into advanced drawing or painting or sculpture, just a general facility that it takes a year or two to develop?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well, the facility I think comes along with a general growth.

ROBERT BROWN: That is what I'm trying to say.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: I'm sorry?

ROBERT BROWN: That may be what I'm trying to say.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: I mean anything less than that is facile and doesn't mean very much. It's the conviction that brings the real facility, the real command you know, and that comes only with experience, with knowledge and experience, and a real facility of the kind gradually comes but I think it's very gradual. [00:16:05] Students, the trend was not in that direction, to encourage facility, but to go deeper. Art, after all, involves the whole person,

the mind, the spirit, more than anything else the feeling. So, the development of all this, even in just one thing, drawing for instance, you can't draw without training the whole person; thinking, seeing, thinking and feeling, and exercises are given to force, in a sense, the student to feel.

ROBERT BROWN: Could you do an instance, how you set that up?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes I can. Well I can go back in this, to something we did at Newcomb for instance. Nicolaïdes, this is one of the good things about Nicolaïdes, has gone into this too. You have to have a model first of all. I don't believe in learning to draw from a still life, for instance. [00:18:00] You have to have something live to draw, and you have a good model and a student studies, let's say first of all longer poses, learns something about the structure. You can't do anything with a figure if he doesn't understand something about structure. Well, that's what the long poses are for. Then, you get to the point where you introduce shorter poses, to force the student to concentrate more and to grasp more intensely, what is happening, what's going on there, interpret that in drawing, and a still later. For instance, the so called action poses, one minute, two minutes, or the model takes a pose which suggests an action and the class just watch and concentrate on what is happening, and then the model stops, gets down, and then the student can draw for maybe one minute, two minutes. He has to put down what he has saw and felt, you see, in that time. In Newcomb, something we did in Newcomb, where the students would form groups, say two or three or even four, and decide among themselves, an action they were going to portray or express, maybe somebody pulling somebody out, rescuing somebody from drowning, they'd be pulling and that kind of thing, and they really act it out, I mean, they put themselves into it you see, while the class watched. [00:20:24] Then other members of the class would—and then the class would draw you see, and because they had studied this so intensely, they knew pretty much what was involved there, is there feelings here that are involved. Now this is a very different thing from the stupid copying that you see in most classes, just copying of surface.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean for still lifes too.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well of course still life is important but I think to teach drawing, the study of drawing, a model is very important.

ROBERT BROWN: Is that because it's something to do with special about the human form or is it because, fellow humans?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: As I say, it has to do with the fact that here is a living person who moves and can do all sorts of things that of course you don't find in a still life. [00:22:03] The instructor intelligently studies the figure and points things out and draws for them perhaps and describes the structure. Now, suppose a student should be required to do some outside work, drawing a dog for instance, or a horse. Now, that student wouldn't necessarily have to study the anatomy of the horse, he would get certain things without knowing the anatomy, but he would look for one of the things that he has found in the figure you see.

ROBERT BROWN: Your latter years at Columbia, were they a bit frustrating because the program had been curtailed?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: One could say frustrating, that's true, but another term would be disappointing, disappointing, having seen what we could do with the school, then to have it much less. You couldn't get a degree for instance, they weren't encouraged to go on to that kind of study, and they could just as soon as could go somewhere else where they can get a degree, and a BFA degree is important, you know why of course.

ROBERT BROWN: For the teaching?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: The teaching. I was in charge of the department for a year and summer school for several years and I used to get letters from all over the country, asking if we had a student who was equipped to take a certain class you know, and they required students with at least a BFA degree. [00:24:32] We didn't have of course, anything higher than that because as far as I know it doesn't exist in any school, only in art history and art appreciation.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you resent the fact that they wouldn't take—didn't you have some talented students or very good potential teachers who could have done a good job without a BFA, without having the degree?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well, the thing is the classes, the courses, preparatory courses, were no longer required you see, for them, and certain courses were even dropped.

ROBERT BROWN: So in general, the preparation wasn't even very clear overall.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: That's right.

ROBERT BROWN: Did most of your colleagues resent this, or resist it?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Oh yes, oh yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Since your retirement, what did you set out to do after you retired, devote yourself to painting?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Devote myself entirely to painting of course. [00:26:00] Unfortunately, before I retired, the year before I retired my wife died and she was a wonderful person and had been, in the beginning, she was an inspiration to me because of her beauty and spirit, that had always meant a lot to me. She died in 1963 and I retired in '64, and I sold our place that we had in the country in Dutchess County here because I couldn't think of going on with that big place all alone. I didn't know I would be married or what you know, and I wasn't married for several years again, and so I began to look around for another place, a smaller place, and I came up here to Columbia County finally. I thought of Woodstock and I went over there too. Does that answer your question?

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, yeah. Woodstock was pretty wholly changed by that time.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Oh my heavens, I didn't recognize the place, could hardly find my way around.

ROBERT BROWN: There were only really, not that many artists in the '20s were there, compared to—

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well, when I was in Woodstock, really, when I think back on all this, I think that how wonderfully lucky I was in a way, to be in Woodstock at the best of all times in Woodstock and so on.

ROBERT BROWN: Well, do you find now, that you can spend a good deal of your time painting?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Oh that's what I do, that's my only interests, but of course naturally, I have other things to do, I have chores to do, but that's only natural. [00:28:03]

ROBERT BROWN: Well now when you devote yourself to painting, maybe we can begin talking a bit about it, what is your primary intention would you say, when you set yourself to painting?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: The philosophy behind this?

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah, what is it really, that you think, probably unconscious but you perhaps can explain it anyway.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well, sure, that's quite a big question of course. Of course so much has happened and there are many ways of looking at painting, many kinds of painting today, as compared with years ago. I have written about this elsewhere, but I can say that my point of view, my interest, has remained the same I should say, from the beginning, and I was very surprised to find out the other day in reading Matisse in this book here, that he had said the same thing. I felt encouraged that Matisse also, that he expressed in there, very much my own convictions. For instance, Cézanne was the greatest influence in his life, the life of the painter and he himself says this. I can't say that Cézanne has been the greatest influence, but one of the greatest. [00:30:04] Another is Matisse. I think both of those men, in their makeup, in their natures and in their work, personified certain qualities that I've always associated with art. Now today, I question whether that's so for instance, that there are people who just go into painting to get attention for instance, and do things to get attention, do crazy things just to get attention. Now that, when I began to paint, that would have been incomprehensible. When I began to paint, I understood, we understood that it was something that you couldn't count on for a living and there are very great examples of this. Cézanne not only did not make a living at it, he didn't have to, he was the son of a banker. Van Gogh never sold anything in his life except at the end, when his brother sold one picture of his. Now this was a situation when I was beginning, you see, there wasn't this kind of thing that we have today, of all kinds of shenanigans going on. [00:32:00] It was the big motivation, I mean this, I say this earnestly, with the deepest conviction, the big motivation was spiritual, to get at the essence of things, of what you're interested in, in life. For instance, when I paint a landscape, go out to paint, study for a landscape and go ahead with painting a landscape, it's something that I saw and felt very powerfully or I wouldn't be doing it you see. I see and feel all sorts of things in the visual world that have to do with what I call spiritual. Now that doesn't mean anything light, you know, the very essence of things is what I mean, and that's what this meant, that's what modern art was about, at its beginnings; to get through an intense effort, into the meaning of things, the spirit of things, and not just be content with copying the outside of things you see. That's what it was all about and it still is what it's about as far as I'm concerned. Of course, in the early days, I think that what is thought of today as the decorative was not so important. It has become more important and I think that doesn't mean that the thing can't be great, but in those days I think we didn't consider it the decorative thing. [00:34:16]

ROBERT BROWN: And yet you put a lot of stress probably on composition didn't you?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Oh surely.

ROBERT BROWN: But that's a different thing?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes, that's a different thing that has to do with well, design for instance, I think of it as design, as the all important element. It is the ultimate expression for me, of all the means and the language, in order to arrive at a goal, to achieve a purpose. This landscape here for instance.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes, the one in the center.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes, the one in the center. Now, I came upon this subject.

ROBERT BROWN: It's here in New York.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: No, no, it's in Arizona.

ROBERT BROWN: The middle one is in Arizona.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well all three, all three, yeah, they were all three in the same area, as subjects. I saw this tremendous thing going on there, drama, I think there's a drama going on there, and this is what's happening in nature, it's drama and there are all sorts of things happening and you try to get hold of it and express it through the language of painting. I think of design as being the word which most expresses that, that is it means for me, the composition, but it means also the color, because every element is part of the design, because design is the total expression of the thing the artist is concerned with you see, that's the way I feel. But you know, it is popularly supposed to be something applied, but it isn't that at all, in fine art.

ROBERT BROWN: Is form part of design?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Oh, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You stressed earlier that form is perhaps the most important.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well I think for me, form I suppose has always been a natural way for me to see things, I see things in terms of form, since very early in my life. For instance, I'd say McFee recognized this, and I hadn't thought of putting it that way at the time, and myself, but he recognized that and I realized it was so. Form, in my own work development, I think has come probably first, I mean color second. Now, I don't mean to say that I consider form more important than color, but with me personally, it was natural that I should feel in terms of form. [00:38:10] Matisse, whom I admire very greatly, is color, not form, he says so. With Cézanne, I think it was first of all form.

ROBERT BROWN: His form holds something together, the design together? Is form to you about—

FREDERIC KNIGHT: No, the design I think is what holds the form together.

ROBERT BROWN: What is the role of color in your work?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well, color has become more and more important to me and I wanted to go on more and more with color. Someone was in the studio not too long ago, a man and his wife, and as a matter of fact, it was the director of the Berkshire Museum, and his wife, that came over, and I've been showing them things. She said at the end, something about the outstanding quality of my work she thought was color. I didn't feel that at all, in the past I haven't felt that, but it's becoming more and more important. [00:40:00] Of course I would like to do this again, this is the second one. You didn't notice one underneath, in the room, underneath?

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: It's the same subject but it's done differently.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes. Well this, as I look at these of Arizona, the color stands out on its own more than if I look at these still lifes over here, now behind us, which I think are of a somewhat earlier time. There, there's certainly brilliant color but it's all knitted together through common tonality? It's one form leading into another, it seems much more studied here, a little more dramatic kind of not really accidental but the placement of form in these very recent landscapes of Arizona.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: The earlier work, earlier than anything you see around here, was largely tonal. This still life represented a breaking away from that more than any other thing. That was painted in 1950.

ROBERT BROWN: The still life in the center. What is the title?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: *A Jug From Provence.*

ROBERT BROWN: *A Jug From Provence.*

FREDERIC KNIGHT: The still life is *A Jug From Provence.*

ROBERT BROWN: At that point, that represented a great breaking away from formality, toward—

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well of course I had been working in that direction for some time but that represented a particular break. [00:42:00] Painters don't necessarily take one direction, at a certain time there's a break and they go in a certain direction, and then they might go back again. Now what about Picasso? Picasso will do, or has done, a thing largely abstract, say a still life, a powerful, beautiful still life, and then he'll go back to doing something tonal, because you know, a painter is not just one thing, he's many things and has perhaps, a rather complicated personality, and one thing, he expresses one side of his personality, or even a period. He may attempt to do one kind of thing more than another and so on.

ROBERT BROWN: Well also about 1950, you had been, until that point primarily a figure painter you've said, it was at that point that you went into landscapes and still lifes.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: That's right. I painted the figure all through the '30s and into the '40s, largely without landscape or still life. This middle one here was, I would say, one of my first still lifes really, and then for years I wanted to paint nothing else.

ROBERT BROWN: Why was that at that time do you think?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well I can tell you something about it. [00:44:02] For instance, in a still life you have first of all, you're not painting a portrait, you're not obliged to do something that's going to please somebody else, it's going to be exactly like the person, the sitter. You don't have that kind of pressure. On the other hand, and this is one reason why I started into it, I felt the need of getting into the freedom with other forms, other shapes, and having other opportunity of using color more freely than you would well, in another kind of subject, even with landscape for instance, so I think there's more opportunity in a still life, for a painter to get into color. That's the way I feel about it.

ROBERT BROWN: You've described figure, let's get to the figure for a moment. In terms of drawing, as you think of the great thing for a student to work with, the human figure, do you apply—how do you apply this to painting as well, to your paintings, for the years in which you painted from a figure? What was the search or what was the fulfillment you got out of that?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well let me see.

ROBERT BROWN: For two or three decades.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Let me see. I had for years, I had been interested in the great painters of course, of the past, and back to the Renaissance and even before the Renaissance. In all the great painting in the past, the figure was the major subject and there was a monumentality about the great figure painting that I knew. [00:46:11] I was very moved by that and I strove to get the monumentality that I saw in the figure, in that form, into my work you see, because that, I think I should say, I think that the monumental has been very important to me and remains important to me. Now, there are painters who don't feel that way. For instance, I know someone, a painter for whom—Klee, Paul Klee. He's the greatest you know. Well for me he's not the greatest, he could never be, because I go in another direction you see, and I feel differently. I don't think this man that I've just mentioned, I won't mention his name, has that in his work at all. He doesn't have any feeling for form, not serious feeling for the form or the monumental, and Klee, because of the element of play for instance, and—what's the word I want? [00:48:00] Which was very important too, has been very important to a great many people in modern painting, Miró, for instance too. Now it happens not to have that effect on me, I don't care very much for it. I recognize that they're important in their way but other things are more important to me.

ROBERT BROWN: What does the monumental mean to you?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Oh well that's something that's very difficult to—let me say this, for instance very early, when I went abroad, before I went abroad, I knew all these painters of the past, of the Renaissance for instance, but I was not primarily interested in the great painters of the Renaissance. Masaccio, Giotto, and Piero della Francesca were to me more pure and they expressed, oh, the qualities that meant more to me than anything that a Tintoretto or a Veronese could do for instance. I find in Michelangelo, the monumental of course. It's a term that is very difficult to describe and to discuss concerning one's own work, because in a way it's a qualitative thing. [00:50:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Do you feel in general, that you've developed a great deal? Are you rather pleased or proud of this career that you blindly fully jumped into in 1929, you know by great risk?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Oh, look, it was the only thing that I could—I don't know whether I've shown you reproductions of advertising art have I?

ROBERT BROWN: Yes I have, you've mentioned that, deadlines all that.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Well the thing is, this was what I'd always been working toward, always wanted to do. Now, I went to art school when I was a boy really, I was in my teens. I didn't know at that time, what I was going to do. I went to a school where you learned about art supposedly, at the academy you were supposedly learning about art. As you struggle and work to express yourself if you're an artist, you come to understand, to feel what is happening in yourself and look at what you have to do, what you're working toward, and some things are for you and some things are not. [00:52:04] Oh, I was going to say when I went abroad, I mentioned Masaccio and Giotto and Piero della Francesca, now they as artists, gave me a tremendous lift, you see. Now, the Renaissance, the high Renaissance, didn't do that, not quite in the same way. The high Renaissance was very impressive but it was also, by comparison, much less for me, much less intense than Giotto, Masaccio and Piero della Francesca. With them, I don't like to say this really, I don't mean—if I say so, I should explain what I mean. I don't mean that the end of the Renaissance, they were in a sense doing a kind of commercial art, but in a sense, I think that was true. For instance, the other men I mentioned very much grew out of a religious thing, they were very much concerned with expressing that in their work you see. In the Renaissance, painting becomes something much more complex and the great men were able to go, to do things that the earlier men were not, but at the expense of giving up, of losing something which was very important. [00:54:17]

ROBERT BROWN: The later artists were much more, painting more artificially do you think, the requirements of a patron.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yeah, that's right, for instance nobility and the church, particularly when they relied upon nobility as patrons, they can turn out all these extravagant things.

ROBERT BROWN: Well as a painter today, what do you think your role is? I don't know if it's too strong to say but what is your justification?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yeah, that's what we were coming to.

ROBERT BROWN: Those men had patrons, they were just—

FREDERIC KNIGHT: And of course portraits, a manner of portrait painting comes in here too.

ROBERT BROWN: For you, what has been, do you think, your justification and what's inside?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: I think the best I can do is to, through painting, to express what I have felt about the visual world largely, because that has always and remains tremendously moving to me. Now, not everybody feels that and so I tried my best to express that with all of me as I have, and I find that I'm more and more able to do this. [00:56:12] That's where your satisfaction comes in you see? In the last, for instance the last few months, it has been a very happy experience to take up things I had struggled with and bring them to fruition.

ROBERT BROWN: Yeah.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Of course you know the work of Ryder.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Albert Ryder. Well he would spend years on a thing and Matisse, I think one of the things about Matisse that impresses people is the apparent facility. Well that really came from mastery and it was not the kind of facility that was superficial. On the contrary, he would—I don't really know this or not. Do you know the book?

ROBERT BROWN: I don't know precisely?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Do you know the Barnes book? Not the Barnes book.

ROBERT BROWN: Barr.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Barr. Where he takes a certain subject, a nude for instance, he did 22 versions of it, not satisfied with any one of them, and so he kept going on. Now at the end, I personally find myself less pleased with the last one more than others, but that's what he was—what he had to do.

ROBERT BROWN: But you too pursue things, you too will pursue things.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes that's the idea. Now here, he talks about how he has struggled with certain things, a still life for instance, a small still life that he worked on for three months. Well when you see the finished thing you think how could he possibly have spent three months on it, it looks as though it had been done in a day.
[00:58:16]

ROBERT BROWN: So you're very pleased with where you're at and what you're doing now.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: I'm very pleased with what I'm doing now, yes. Let's see, I have been working on landscapes and still life, chiefly landscapes and still life, but I want to do more with the figure again.

ROBERT BROWN: You do?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Do you think the figure for you is perhaps one of the chief if not the chief painting expression?

FREDERIC KNIGHT: No, I don't feel that, I don't feel that. I feel that I can express myself through landscape particularly at this time and maybe again through still life, but I'm not feeling that way about still life at the moment, it's landscapes.

ROBERT BROWN: Figure, you simply want to get back into.

FREDERIC KNIGHT: Yes, I want to get back to it because I feel that I can do much more the figure than I did, and I want the opportunity to go ahead with that. That's difficult up here, New York or Boston, I think offer opportunities that you don't find in the country. In the country it's landscape.

ROBERT BROWN: Sure.

[END OF TRACK AAA_knight76_8057_m.]